Is parental involvement "bait & switch"?

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of (our public schools) but (the parents) themselves; and if (school staff) think them not enlightened enough to (share in school related decisions) with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion.   ~paraphrased from Thomas Jefferson

Problem: There exists a cultural gap between parents and teachers

<u>The familiarity gap between parents and educators</u>
Most urban teachers do not live in the neighborhood/community where they work. Due to many reasons, teachers don't actually feel comfortable around parents. Historically, all meetings are at school and never in neighborhoods where families live. Parents/guardians are seen as clients, not partners. Traditionally, educators limit the definition of participation to what is convenient and beneficial for them. The very middle-class values teachers model as the goal of education, not only prevent an understanding of and respect for ethnic/working class cultures, but gives opportunity and reason to talk about parents behind their back--making fun of their language, dress and hair styles, child-rearing approaches, diet, living circumstances, cars they drive, values, sense of humor, or pastimes.

Problem: Many parents and community members feel inadequate about their ability to make important school-related decisions

<u>Benefits of parental and community involvement in schools</u>
Research has shown when parents and the community are involved in education, students perform better. Also, when parents and the community are actively involved in a school or a program within a school, it results in improved relationships between the school and the parent/community (Khan, 1996). Other research (Beecher, 1984) shows parents and community members develop more positive attitudes about school and school personnel, help gather support in the community for the school, become even more active in community affairs, develop increased self-confidence as activist, and enroll in other educational programs.

<u>Parental involvement: Holistic education</u>

> Schools can be institutions for involving the community in decision-making concerning school policies and programs. The mounting pressure has been for making school more democratic and curriculum more relevant. The underlying assumption of this view is greater community involvement will result in better education for students (Levin, 1982).

This has culminated in a change in the attitudes parents and the community have toward what schools are for, expressed via greater emphasis on basic academics and using of "community" together with the right of parents to choose schools and to sit on their governing bodies.

> The issue of parental involvement and community participations in school decision-making is much larger than improving math and reading scores. It is central to our democracy and that parents and citizens participate in governing public institutions. We can no longer look at school, parents, and community as three separate entities (Henderson, 1989).

<u>How Marion County schools can remove barriers: From clients to partners</u>
Traditionally, parents and community members who have been associated with public schools have been viewed as *clients*. The client concept implies that parents and community members

are dependent on an expert's opinions, passive recipient of services, in need of redirection, and peripheral in decision-making.

On the other hand, *partners* suggests that parents and community members are active and central in decision-making and its implementation, have equal strengths and equivalent expertise, are reciprocal in contributing and receiving services, and sharing responsibility as well as accountability with education professionals.

Other barriers and their removal
Research (Liontos, 1991) provides evidence that parents and community members associate some of the barriers to authentic involvement to themselves. These may include feelings of inadequacy, failure, and poor self-worth, as well as past negative experiences with school as students as well as parents or adults. Some community members consider schools as "institutionalized authority" hence seeing schools as beyond questioning and criticism—"Those folks have been to college. They must know what they are doing."

There are also clear interactions and correlations between race, class, educational level and a parent or community person perceptions and their participation in school activities of various sorts (Carr & Wilson, 1997).

Research reveals that although school administrators support the general idea of parental involvement they consider involvement worthwhile only if it relates to the parent's children rather than to the broader issues related to the school at large. *They do not support parental and community involvement in school policy decisions such as hiring and firing of teachers and principals or in determination of priorities for the school budget.* But, why?

Khan (1996) notes:
- it requires a major deviation from standard operating procedures and introduces a strong element of risk into an institution that tries to avoid uncertainty and resists change.
- the regular flow of decision making may be interrupted, and there is a risk that community members will achieve too much power or create conflict in an institution that seeks stable internal and external relationships.
- any activity involved in sharing power beyond the current repertoire of school activities such as answering the phone, fund raising, or helping out in classrooms would require training and experience on the part of teachers and administration
- it poses a threat to school administrators' undivided authority and ability to manage change, and also to teachers' professional autonomy. School personnel see running a school as their job, what they were trained to do, thus not a job for "amateurs."

This situation creates an unfortunate cycle that in the long run benefits no one—the schools, citizens, or children. Nationally, many communities and school officials view genuine parental and community involvement in school decisions as problematic suggesting such things be left to the experts. This discourages community members from gaining needed experiences. In turn, school officials and educators perceive this inexperience and/or a lack of training on the part of parents and community members to make decisions as a barrier to involving them in shared school decision-making.

A public school's democratic purpose

School must serve their public function, this is making democracy work through a process of sharing power, proving a democratic vision and working together with parents and community to create a multicultural and multiracial democracy.

Segue*:* Systems theorists and systematic change advocates are particularly interested in authentic parental and community participation in school decisions because it is seen as the primary path to substantive change owned by the entire community. Also, stakeholder participation is most closely aligned with the values of user-designed schools which are fundamental to systemic change (Carr & Wilson, 1997). Yet, there is no guarantee that intentional or inadvertent barriers, that are inherent is the institution of public schools, can be removed.

It is thus important for educators to begin to unravel the mysteries of authentic parental and community involvement and to mandate policies that will insure future barriers will not exist. This becomes increasing important with the advent of programs that seek to gain community shared ownership and designership.

Suggested solutions: Employing strategies for seeking out, inviting in, and retaining historically disenfranchised groups in school-related decision making is basic to the allover concept if Marion County schools are to live up to their civic duties by acting as a fundamental change agent by helping parents, community, and schools work together for students.

- Educators must mandate ongoing training for parents and community members, who sense their own inadequacies, to provide them with the sufficient knowledge and skills to prepare them to share power and make the important decisions in school related areas such as board responsibilities, school design, school climate, scheduling, hiring staff, budget decisions, facility management, curriculum design and textbook choices, assessment, time tables and deadlines, public relations, and running meetings.

- Let the parents create the meeting's agenda. Also, try meeting at McDonalds, churches, Boys/Girls Clubs, community organizations, park community centers, or libraries in the neighborhoods of parents/guardian: Stop just meeting at the school! Move around.

- Plans must also be mandated to orient teachers and administrators to work with parents and community persons in partnership with confidence and team spirit rather than apprehension and mistrust that "outsiders are trying to tell them how to do their job."

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This pamphlet is a compilation of ideas and quotes by John Harris Loflin from the above references.   john@bl-pi.org   © 2005 Black & Latino Policy Institute