

TO: IPS parents and concerned IPS district residents

FROM: Parent Power and Indianapolis Chapter of Parents Across America

TOPIC: Preserving the public good of public education in an era of privatization and standardization

DATE: The Spring IPS semester of 2014

*It is impossible for the Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) to engage with IPS parents/guardians/grandparents and families at the highest levels without opening IPS to public ownership, and thus the real participation of parents and the community in determining their own district's destiny. Hence, the district's work with parents must be understood as one of the most significant democratic acts all stakeholders, and teachers, in particular, can perform. Parents together with teachers must create a political community to challenge the undemocratic structures of schooling. This validates the fact that it is the parent as taxpayer who pays the wages of all public school employees; and, not only is the person who is the parent or guardian of the child in a public school, she/he is the constituent who votes in or out school boards and the state superintendent. Parents are thus the very foundation of our public schools, yet in most cases they are consistently at the bottom of the school system's power structure. Appreciating the role of parents and the authentic democratic power they inherently possess offers IPS the most honest and viable parental support of public education.*

Summary: Parents of all colors whose home culture represents the dominant culture (European American middle-class language, norms, and values) function well in parent-school relationships. Treated as social equals by the school staff, middle and upper middle-class parents experience 2-way conversations where they are listened to, welcomed to participate in decision-making processes, and so have historically influenced school policy. However, bi-cultural parents of all colors whose home culture does not represent the status quo are not treated as social equals and experience 1-way communication with their schools. Urban schools undervalue the perspectives of these parents, and so do not consult them. This results in having educational decisions imposed on these parents. Thus, the non-engagement of bi-cultural parents isn't from disinterest, but is resistance toward educators who don't value their genuine input and offer only empty opportunities to engage in school life.

### *Parent Power Indianapolis Talking Points*

- 1. No parent/s wants their child/ren to fail in school.**
- 2. Our public schools have a public/civic purpose, not a private purpose.**
- 3. The problem is not parents; it's a crisis in democracy.**
- 4. Fundamental district change is necessary for creating a model of parent involvement which encourages true dialogue and cooperative decision-making.**
- 5. Parents, teachers, and school staff must treat each other as social equals.**
- 6. Parental engagement becomes an issue when the home culture of the family is different from the school's culture.**
- 7. America's economic system guarantees that bi-cultural parents are over worked and underpaid with little time to volunteer or meet with teachers.**
- 8. All forms of parental involvement are not equal.**
- 9. Bi-cultural parents are involved in the paradox of being expected to participate in school on the one hand and on the other hand not being too involved such that they change the system or become part of the school district's power structure.**
- 10. Bi-cultural parental disengagement results from the subordination and exclusion by those in power (i.e. school administrators, teachers, and those representing the dominant culture). This situation mirrors the lower (socio-economic, political, and cultural) status of bi-cultural parents in our larger society.**
- 11. The Local School Council model is a vastly superior "choice" for involving parents.**
- 12. In many cases, it is the school principal who is the main barrier to parental participation.**
- 13. Bi-cultural parents need concrete skills and education about what Lisa Delpit calls "the rules of the game."**

**14. To look out for their own self-interests, bi-cultural parents will create a Parent University independent of their public schools and other outside interests.**

**15. Parents must be viewed and enabled as activists.**

*“Organizing for parent involvement is like bringing the ocean to a boil.” ~ Don Davies*

*“Bicultural parents must begin to understand their roles within the socioeconomic and historic context from which their subordination and their children’s academic failure arise if they are to contribute to the transformation of their school system.” ~ Edward Olivos*

**1. No parent/s wants their child/ren to fail in school.**

Parents are involved and do care about the education on their child/ren. Lack of parental involvement is not due to the assumption bi-cultural parents don’t engage because they’re either disinterested or even incapable. This comes from the view that they don’t have the cultural skills needed to be involved. These deficit notions lack any systematic analysis of how parents are viewed, or the subordinate roles required of them in many schools which limit how they participate.

By saying parents don’t care or are deficient, society can ignore the disingenuous manner in which bi-cultural parents are often treated by dismissing their concerns, coercing their participation, or restricting participation to trivial matters like answering the phone or making copies. This also keeps districts from realizing the incredible power and force held by bi-cultural parents if they were only to receive the preparation and opportunity to participate and contribute in meaningful ways.

**2. Our public schools have a civic purpose, not a private purpose.**

IPS must build public trust by making our district schools public enterprises for democracy. The primary role of public education is not to create workers, but to educate for the practice of freedom and responsible citizenship. This is why IPS parents must become aware of current national programs and initiatives which aim to impose a private agenda corporate purpose in the guise via parents transparency

**3. The problem is not parents; it’s a crisis in democracy.**

IPS must re-conceptualize public education as a critical, lively public sphere engaged in the everyday practice of the “self rule” ethos of American-style democracy. Each IPS school must be a site for engaging critical democratic participation and self-determination. Valid parental involvement requires not only an IPS commitment to organizing parents, but to restructuring schools and communities toward inventing rich visions of educational democracies which appreciate diversity and where difference is a “taken for granted” attribute of every IPS child.

By organizing as a political body, bi-cultural parents can be among the most appropriate agents to benefit from a radical interruption and transformation of the public sphere--which is public education. It is a win-win situation: parental involvement will not only democratize public education, but will transform public life.

**4. Fundamental IPS district change is necessary for creating a model of parent involvement that encourages true dialogue and cooperative decision-making.**

Although schools/districts say they want participation, they actually limit involvement. The problem is what parent involvement is and who should define it. When engagement is defined on district terms, bi-cultural parental action is welcomed or considered useful when it remains congruent with the aims set by school authorities; schools want parents’ volunteer time, but not their ideas. This leads to situations where political and school leaders can afford to undervalue the perspectives of parents. They know that since most bi-cultural parents lack power and cultural capital, there’s simply nothing the parents can do about it.

By not seeking input or feedback, by having 1-way conversations with bi-cultural parents, schools can ignore any accountability to the bi-cultural community.

Thus, IPS must create alternative paradigms for viewing how parent actions are conceptualized and actualized. By embracing important critiques and expansions on existing models through multicultural and critical lenses,

the various backgrounds of parents can be seen as assets and not barriers, and the uneven economic and socio-political factors involved in parent-school engagement are directly addressed.

#### **5. IPS parents, teachers, and school staff must treat each other as social equals.**

Historically, parents do not enter school-based actions as social equals with teachers or district/school administrators. Why? School success is defined in terms of the dominant middle-class culture which represents the majority of Americans. With some exceptions, the history and current face of public schooling suggest explicit exclusion of bi-cultural families. The families feel and are typically treated as "less" than the professionals, particularly if they are from in low-income neighborhoods.

IPS cannot expect the genuine participation of bi-cultural families if these parents sense they are not treated equally as citizen peers with all school employees.

#### **6. Parental engagement becomes an issue when the home culture of the family is different from the school's culture.**

Parents from urban working-class Black, Latino, and white families arrive at school with cultural backgrounds and practices different from the dominant culture and so come to be excluded from the public school system. Bi-cultural parents are not allowed to participate fully in the institution of school because of their racial, linguistic, cultural, and economic differences with the school culture and larger society. In other words, as long as education is based on a subtractive model of success--students must (subtract) leave their culture at home for entrance into the main-stream--such a deficit model will be a major cause of poor parent-school relationships.

#### **7. The country's economic system guarantees that bicultural parents are over worked and underpaid with little time to volunteer or meet with teachers.**

As well, the lack of education and low professional standing due to the type/level of work many urban parents do affords them little esteem in the eyes of school/district administrators and teachers.

#### **8. All forms of parental involvement are not equal.**

Parental actions can range from an authoritarian perspective, where the administrators and school system dictate the nature and extent of involvement, to a fully democratic model, where parents are equals in their public school system because it provides them an opportunity to voice their views and have decision-making roles, and finally to a cultural democracy: parents as action researchers and agents of change who lead school, district, and community transformation. It is this spectrum that serves as a springboard for a model of transformative parental involvement.

One approach is the Transformational Education Context Model (*Bicultural Parent Engagement*, p. 206)--a political action where parents from diverse backgrounds work to transform a system which has enabled their subordination and stratifies students. As above, the transformative approach falls on a continuum: *conformity* (i.e., schools telling parents what they can do at home to support teachers) on one end and *transformation* (represented by a school's cultural democracy) on the other. This model has 5 levels: Connectedness, Inclusion and Belongingness, Decision Making, Participatory Action Research, and Macro Civic Engagement. Parents and community are now prepared to be owners of the team (their schools), not just fans.

#### **9. Bi-cultural parents are involved in the paradox of being expected to participate in school, yet not being too involved so they change the system or become part of the district's power structure.**

Parents are resistant to participate in institutions, such as schools, which are alienating and unkind to them and their children. As well, parents who realize there are limits to their power disengage. Bi-cultural parents, in particular, express their power by resisting the policies imposed upon them by the dominant culture. They don't show up at meetings because it's a waste of time: they won't be treated as social equals, their involvement will be limited to basic volunteer actions, and they will be asked to endorse policy and practices without question in a 1-way conversation from school staff to them. This creates a vicious cycle because the dominant culture can point to their disengagement as representative of the lack of involvement of bi-cultural parents.

**10. Bi-cultural parental disengagement results from the subordination and exclusion by those in power (i.e. school administrators, teachers, and those representing the dominant culture). This situation mirrors the lower status of bi-cultural parents in our larger American society.**

The dominant political, cultural, and knowledge base of IPS as an institution results in unequal power relationships which work to the advantage of the school personnel as they exercise their power over low social-class parents, convincing them that their child's failure is not due to the school's or possibly the teacher's inadequacies, but due to the parents' failure to support the school's sincere efforts.

In other words, parents who have no political or socio-economic power in society also have no power at school. Parents who are well-educated with political and cultural capital experience 2-way conversations. The state of bi-cultural parent involvement in many schools reflects a larger American social and political reality where tensions due to differences in culture, power, and level of education cause conflict among individuals and/or various racial groups or classes.

This unequal power dynamic quiets the voices of parents. Bi-cultural parents thus express their power by disengaging--resisting the policies, roles, or curriculum imposed on them. As stated above, a vicious cycle forms: now the dominant culture can make disengagement an example of parents' lack of caring and involvement.

**11. The LSC model is a vastly superior "choice" for involving parents.**

School choice does not really exist when the priorities of thousands of parents to strengthen their local public schools, rather than write them off, are completely dismissed by policy makers. Local School Councils (LSC) are duly-elected, parent-majority bodies with real power--including hiring, evaluating, and firing their school's principal. LSCs oversee a school wide process of program and budget evaluation, planning, and monitoring that offers the kind of collaborative effort researchers say is needed to make local reform succeed. Authentic "parental empowerment" is the LSC model of elected parent-majority school governance. It is not school choice, vouchers, or parent trigger laws.

No Indy charter turns over governance to parents--once parents chose the charter, they are to simply support the school. They are not made a major lobbying group of critical friends who help hire/fire school staff, create school rules, suspension and expulsion policies, curriculum and budget decisions, or are trained to become co-directors/co-owners or eventually directors/owners of a democratically charter.

[www.indy.gov/eGov/Council/Documents/Local%20School%20Councils%20in%20IPS.pdf](http://www.indy.gov/eGov/Council/Documents/Local%20School%20Councils%20in%20IPS.pdf)

**12. In many cases, it is the school principal who is the main barrier to parental participation.**

Since it is the central office and/or the district superintendent who send a particular principal to a particular school, it is the central office administrator(s) or superintendent to whom the principal owes allegiance. When a school's parents or community have the authority to hire/fire the principal, the principal owes allegiance to that school's parents and community. And, now that principal has the kind of socio-political parental and community support many other principals can only hope for. See pp 93-97 in, *The Power of Parents*.

**13. Understand, parents need concrete skills and education about what Lisa Delpit calls "the rules of the game."**

Low-income parents need to not only become critically conscious of the system of power and exclusion to which they are subjected, but also how that system works, what they can do when the systems is unresponsive, and how they can own it. This will "demystify" and make the organizational structures of schooling as well as schooling policies and practices more "user friendly" for parents.

**14. In order to look out for their own self-interests, bi-cultural parents will create a Parent University independent of their school district and other local and national entities whose purpose is to use parents to support their agenda.**

Indeed, students need to be ready for schools, but schools need to be ready for the children of IPS bi-cultural families. Thus, a Parent University created and ran by bi-cultural parents would not just focus on "parenting

skills.” It would provide families and neighborhoods the tools and skills to effectively advocate for their children.

This citizen’s school would be where families would learn the rules of the game, how to become a part of school decision-making processes, and how to use parental voices--via democracy/shared decision-making--to transform IPS and the neighborhoods where IPS schools are located.

A Parent University, with an ethos of independence and self-determination, would assure that the district has parents who are not bamboozled into supporting hidden agendas camouflaged, controlled, and bankrolled by national corporate elites--plans which seek to replace democracy with the cold rapture of the market. Here, school and student success is determined by the broader benefits to society rather than financial profits and losses by those who are making a business out of teaching bi-cultural children--“privatizing” public education the way prisons are privatized.

### **15. Parents are viewed and enabled as activists.**

We must support the idea of parents as activists. Activism is needed to break a longstanding tradition of what Indianapolis has come to believe parents, particularly low income, are capable of understanding and entitled to do. Yes, bi-cultural parental support of student achievement is vital, but so is helping these parents understand and promote their personal process of empowerment and efficacy.

In an American democracy, parents have a right and responsibility to actively take authentic, engaged ownership of their own public schools and communities. Bi-cultural parents as activists become allies with the larger community especially in realizing the conditions in reform which lead to access, social justice, liberation and equitable schools for all students. Enabling bi-cultural parents to actively structure their own engagement on behalf of their children will contradict the depiction of these families as apathetic and uncaring when it comes to education. Bi-cultural parents want to author their own involvement, not just participate in the involvement sanctioned by the school or district. IPS and Indy’s neighborhoods must support the kind of empowerment which involves parents authentically at the ground level as activists for change in their local school, district, and state discussions about how to improve public education.

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**Terms:** Bi-Cultural Parent/s are individuals or social groups who live and “function” in 2 or more distinct socio-cultural environments of the society: 1) their primary culture (home culture) and 2) the dominant culture (middle-class European-based culture). For example, when home language used is different from the Standard English language used in the classroom.

### **About Parent Power [www.facebook.com/pages/Parent-Power-Indianapolis](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Parent-Power-Indianapolis)**

Goal: review curriculum, understand/access resources, and work to hold teachers, school administration, parents and elected officials accountable to the educational needs of all students.

Vision: move parents from *involvement to engagement to empowerment*. Parent Power wants parents to become informed decision makers in the process of educating their children by providing training in leadership, child advocacy, and work with legislation.

Purpose: a) to create parent leaders in all schools; b) to change and influence policy and legislation at the local, state, and federal levels; and, c.) to create situations where parents and students can empower themselves to take control over their education by creating equal opportunities for all children.

Parent Power is an affiliate of *Parents Across America* (PAA), a grassroots group connecting parents and activists from across the U.S. Started by activist parents, PAA works for national positive change, rather than remaining isolated in local battles. [www.parentsacrossamerica.org](http://www.parentsacrossamerica.org)

“Parent Power Talking Points IPS 2016” is compiled by Parent Power member [johnharrisloflin@yahoo.com](mailto:johnharrisloflin@yahoo.com)

## Resources

- *The Power of Parents: A Critical Perspective of Bicultural Parent Involvement in Public Schools*. New York: Peter Lang. 2006. Edward M. Olivos.
- “[Ap]parent Involvement: Reflections on Parents, Power, and Urban Public Schools.” Michelle Fine. *Teachers College Record*. Volume 94 Number 4, 1993, p. 682-729.
- A review of *The Power of Parents: A Critical Perspective of Bicultural Parent Involvement in Public Schools* by Edward Olivos. Reviewed by Francisco X. Gaytán. June 4, 2007. *Teachers College Record*.
- *Bicultural Parent Engagement: Advocacy and empowerment*. New York City: Teachers College. 2011. Edward Olivos, Oscar Jimenez-Castellanos, & Alberto Ochoa.