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### **The problem is not parents; it's a crisis in democracy**

The recent article "The problem is parents" (March 13) requires an alternate view to the assumption parents don't participate in their children's schools because they're either disinterested or incapable. These deficit notions lack any systematic analysis of how parents are viewed and the subordinate roles required of them in many schools which limit how they participate.

It is relevant that in the article state Representative Phillip Hinkle questions: "How do we go about making parents totally responsible?" The article didn't mention a local group called Parent Power ([www.facebook.com/pages/Parent-Power-Indianapolis](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Parent-Power-Indianapolis)) who believe education is the parent's total responsibility. When I read the article, I interpret Hinkle's comments to refer to involvement where parents support school policies and instructional practices without question. Parent Power conversely defines parent responsibility as true dialogue and cooperative, genuine, and meaningful involvement in all school decisions as partners and critical friends whose questions and suggestions are expected. And, the result of that dialog makes for better school policy and instruction.

Hoosiers cannot forget those to whom Representative Hinkle refers are not only parents, but also citizens who vote in/out the school boards, and taxpayers who pay the wages of teachers, school officials and boards. In fact, doesn't it seem more appropriate in a democracy that these public school parents in the combined triple role of parent/citizen/taxpayer should be in charge? But, today they are not. They are not respected as such, and not being prepared for such responsibilities. Instead, they are at the bottom of our school governance hierarchy.

Hinkle wants total accountability without giving parents any real power to be accountable for. The problem is not parents. The problem is what parent involvement is and who should define it. The lack of real empowering parental involvement and total responsibility is actually a crisis in our democracy.

By complaining "the problem is parents," we ignore the disingenuous manner in which parents are often treated by dismissing their concerns, coercing their participation or limiting participation to trivial matters like answering the phone or making copies. This also keeps us from realizing the incredible power and force held by parents if they were only to receive the preparation and opportunity to participate and contribute in meaningful ways.

That's why I support the idea of parents as activists. Activism is needed to break a longstanding tradition of what our community has come to believe parents, particularly low income, are capable of understanding and entitled to do. Indeed parental support of student achievement is vital, but so is helping parents understand and promote their personal process of empowerment and efficacy.

It's impossible to make schools work without opening them to the real participation of parents in determining the destiny of public education. Hence, society'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. In this way, parents offer the most honest and powerful support of teachers.

Parents are in a position to demand culturally responsive curricula, qualified teachers, and trustworthy principals and administrators. Few parents are finding their voice in the dialog, and this is particularly true for low-income parents. Thus, to the extent we do not equip these parents with the tools for effective engagement we contradict the very democratic purpose of public education.

Jose M. Evans Councilor District 1 City of Indianapolis/Marion County