



INDY'S ALTERNATIVE VOICE

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**We don't need parent trigger laws or only teacher-led reforms:  
We need a new coalition of solidarity among urban teachers and parents**

“If reform is to reach deeply into classrooms, it might well require a new coalition of teachers and parents to create a fresh agenda that supersedes corporate interests. Such a parent-teacher alliance can be the strongest force shaping the future of public education in history.”

~ Dorothy Shipps, *School reform, corporate style*

According to Prof. Edward Olivos in his book, *The Power of Parents*, working class, poor, and minority parents are not blind to the injustices found throughout the history of the public school system. Many sense the public system is not failing, but is doing exactly what it was created to do. Thus, many realize they too must participate actively in the struggle for educational justice.

What is lacking, Edward Olivos asserts, is a culture of collaboration and solidarity between them and the educators who serve their children that will reshape the destiny and transform the school system to meet their needs and highlight their strengths. For Olivos, educators have been distanced and suspicious of urban parents for far too long. This kept teachers from understanding the power these parents possess as agents of change and social transformation.

There is a need to transform the public schools so that they meet the needs of all children, particularly those who have historically been neglected. Understanding the importance and role of working class, poor, and minority parents play in their children's lives, Olivos has developed a transformational paradigm of parental empowerment using a participatory and problem-solving approach. In his model, parents do more than support their child's/children's school. Parents 1) are empowered, 2) create a cultural democracy, and 3) are action researchers and agents of transformative change in their school, their community, and the entire school district.

This is transformational public education: parents as those who pose problems and seek solutions which foster inclusion, voice, and representation in shared decision-making about public education at all levels from the classroom to district offices.

**What is authentic parental engagement?**

Olivos joins many others who believe parents hold a fundamental interest in having the schools succeed: the academic and social success of their children. Therefore, he exposes the limited ways parents have been asked to participate in their children's school(s). All too often urban parents have been invited into schools using models and approaches which have been contradictory to authentic involvement. True empowerment happens as urban parents are invited into the schools with the understanding that they and the educators who serve their children are *social equals* (Fine, 1993). Each has the responsibility and power to transform the public schools.

If this does not happen, Olivos believes the public school system will continue to confront what is quite possibly this nation's greatest contradiction, the inability to close the educational achievement gap between specific social groups. In doing so, Americans may have to: “At some

point...come to grips with the fact that we are not a nation of opportunity for all but a nation built upon stories of opportunity for all” (Duncan-Andrde & Morrell, 2008).

### **Parent trigger laws**

There is no question that children who need help should get it now, yet are the answers parent trigger laws? According to [Caroline Grannan](#) there have been no successful parent triggers anywhere. Only two parent triggers have been attempted, both in Southern California. In fact, *Washington Post* columnist Valerie Strauss (“The Answer Sheet” 08.20.12) noted in Florida earlier this year, an effort to pass a parent trigger law [died after](#) not a single major parent organization, including the PTA, endorsed it for fear it would lead to the takeover of public schools by for-profit charter management companies (EMO).

We can’t let parent trigger laws enable for-profit EMOs like Charter School USA to infiltrate urban districts like IPS and take their earnings back to Florida instead of investing them in the neighborhood surrounding the school. For-profit EMOs could become corrupted when driven by their bottom line, and when they have no stake in the communities they claim to serve. The business model is good for making and selling “widgets,” but running a public school as a business compromises the process.

In addition, one-way teacher efforts such as the current Missouri HOME WORKS! program, which trains and organizes teachers to visit parents in their homes in order to gain their support (Mathews, 2012), are limited. At this stage of the game, such efforts are simply not enough. This is not parent and teachers working for district-wide reform or on neighborhood social justice issues. What is needed are:

- teachers forming an IPS chapter of [Teachers For Social Justice](#),
- local teachers reviewing how Teaching for Change goes about organizing teachers to work with parents. (See: “Tellin’ stories” approach [www.teachingforchange.org/](http://www.teachingforchange.org/)), and
- 1vfrIPS teachers supporting/joining Parent Power ([www.facebook.com/pages/Parent-Power-Indianapolis](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Parent-Power-Indianapolis)) an organization that is reaching out to teachers to work together in the type of “coalition of solidarity” suggested by Dorothy Shipps.

### **What to do?**

Teachers, parents, students, administrators, and community members have the knowledge and experience necessary to create excellent, equitable public schools. All that’s needed is the support and funding necessary to make these visions a reality. This can be done by parents and teachers organizing as activists to challenge and remove the structures of inequality which constitute the foundation of public schooling in the United States.

Therefore, be it proposed that both IPS teachers and parents/grandparents/guardians support the transformational paradigm of parental involvement suggested by Prof Olivos. In this model 1) poor, working class and minor parents with students in IPS, 2) the teachers that teach their children, and 3) the urban communities where schools are located can all work together to generate the conditions that will create a equitable and democratic schooling experience in society. The Education-Community Action Team (E-CAT) has endorsed the Local School Council concept as an example of this model. See: <http://tinyurl.com/LocalSchoolCouncils>.

For teachers who work in the IPS communities, Olivos suggests that their engagement with these urban parents should, therefore, become a liberating act of humanization and transformation. One cannot merely stand idly by watching a low income and minority parent struggle alone to protect the future of the children in a United States school system that has a history of being domineering and exploitative.

Thus, educators, teachers and administrators must step forward and carve out ways of authentically and dramatically engaging working class, poor, and minority parents in a matter that will once and for all end the dehumanizing relationship that belittles those whom society has deemed disposable.

### **The barriers to parent/teacher activism must be recognized and overcome**

- compared to the business/corporate world, civic/community groups and teacher unions have fewer organizational resources and must spend extra time and energy to join broader coalitions
- a history of top down school control, cross-class insensitivities, and mutual finger-pointing make it difficult for parents, community members, and teachers to trust one another
- schools and teachers must move to change the definition of parent participation in the education process, to not just include the academic achievement of individual students, but also to view parents as co-activists in long-lasting, social-transformation of the school district and the community.
- the use mandated high stakes standardized tests must be challenged. The history of standardized tests show they were a part of the eugenics movement and are discriminatory, actually perpetuating educational injustices (Stoskopf, 2000).
- both teachers and parent(s)/grandparent(s)/family relative(s)/guardian(s) fail to see and treat each other as *social equals* (Fine, 1993).

These barriers must be removed by educators and parents who understand the importance of building a political community of advocates and activists which will transform not only their neighborhood schools, but society.

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“We don't need parent trigger laws or only teacher-led reforms: We need a new coalition of solidarity among urban teachers and urban parents” is a compilation of ideas and quotes from the book, *The Power of Parents: A Critical Perspective of Bicultural Parent Involvement in Public Schools* by Edward Olivos.

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