

Parents Should Be Empowered to Stand UP and Advocate for Their Children

By Shawnta S. Barnes - November 28, 2017



Since 2011, Stand for Children has been serving families in Indiana. Their mission is to ensure every child has access to a high-quality education regardless of zip code. They carry out this mission through family engagement, advocacy, and policy work. I first learned about this organization after I accepted a position as literacy coach at Wendell Phillips School #63. After school, some Wendell Phillips parents were attending Stand University for Parents (Stand UP). Ashley Thomas, Stand for Children Indiana Family Engagement and Organizing Specialist, was leading the

classes. These classes taught parents about the education system, helped them advocate for their children and gave them strategies to support their children at home.

I recently had the opportunity to talk to Ms. Thomas and learn about how she became involved with Stand for Children and how it ultimately changed her children's lives.

Changing My Children's School

I got involved in Stand years ago. At the time, my son was in kindergarten at George H. Fisher School #93. I got a call about Stand UP classes at my son's school. I learned so much information. I didn't know how much I didn't know. One of the things parents in the classes learned was that our kids' school was failing and had a grade of F for the last four years. The teachers came and helped with the workshop. They had conversations with parents throughout the workshop which allowed us to build a true relationship with them including the principal.

Through those workshops, I was able to help support and make sure Project Restore came to 93. Project Restore was a homegrown program created by IPS teachers Tammy Laughner and Dan Kriech. The program was first implemented at school 99 and it helped move the school from a grade of F to a grade of A. It was also implemented at school 88. We have now been a Project Restore school for three years. Our first year with Project Restore was a little rocky because we had a new principal; all parts of the program weren't being honored, but we moved from F to C after that first year. Our second year with Project Restore, we had a new principal Nicole Fama. She was a dean at 99 when Project Restore initially rolled out. Now, we are an A school. Our I-STEP scores aren't where we want them to be, but we are moving in the right direction because our children have grown academically and the culture of the school has changed.

Empowering Other Parents & the Community

After helping get Project Restore at my children's school, Stand took a chance on me. Now, I teach the classes where I learned education advocacy. I had

never taught a class a day in my life. I never knew that I would be able to teach and facilitate workshops on this level to so many parents. We hold our workshops in IPS schools, community centers or anywhere we are invited. Even though the only schools classes are held have been IPS schools, many times the principals of those schools open the classes up to the public. We have had charter parents and private school parents complete classes. We have had people who don't have kids and community elders who come because they want families to know they support their children and they want to know what they can do to help.

Every time something happens in our community such as crime or violence, we talk about it without addressing the root cause. An educational system that's not performing on the level that kids need is a contributing factor to a child having a higher chance of dropping out of school, not doing anything after high school or not going to college. When you are dealing with schools in high crime areas, that are predominantly African American and Latino and predominantly low income – these are schools that other folks on the outside don't believe in. They don't believe our kids can do it, but our kids can. Everyone blames the parents when children aren't successful, but what are they doing to help them? We need to give parents the tools to help them shape and change the narrative. Stand UP is one of the solutions.

Advocating for Policy Changes

Helping parents advocate at their children's school is just the beginning. We also help parents advocate on a larger scale. As a parent, I had the opportunity to speak at former Mayor Greg Ballard's rally around supporting the Pre-K pilot expansion. Earlier this year, I spoke in front of the state senate about expanding preschool statewide. Most recently, parents I have worked with have been vocal about policy around teacher residency. Many of their children have had a rotating door of teachers – four teachers in one year where three are long-term subs and only one is a licensed teacher. Parents are advocating for teachers who want to teach in urban schools to be trained and coached under experienced, highly-qualified urban educators.

It is amazing to watch a parent speak for the first time in front of policy makers. Stand has made parents aware these meetings exist and that they can

actually attend them and address the lawmakers. We let them know they can speak and tell their story in front of legislators about a bill that is going to potentially affect their children. Our parents are nervous. They worry about what to wear and how to speak. We tell them to just tell their story because their voices are the voices lawmakers don't hear often, but they are the voices they should hear every day.

Continuing to Stand in the Face of Negativity

Affecting change isn't easy. Those who prefer the status quo say negative things about Stand. But no other organization is stepping up to make sure that parents are not intimidated by the education process. No one else is helping parents understand that cursing someone out is not an effective way to bring change. I was personally going down that route until I attended Stand UP.

It is easy to be a social-media warrior and share information online, but our parents need people who are willing to get out and take action and help parents build up their schools. My son's school 93 is on the east side. I could have easily walked away and enrolled him in the neighboring district Lawrence Township. The closest Lawrence Township school was a C school, which was better than the F school my child was attending at the time. I could have used my power of choice and sent my child to that school, but what about the other children in my neighborhood? What about parents who could not transport their children to another school?

Instead, I decided to stay and fight. They say you can't teach an old dog new tricks, but parents want to learn. They want to know what it takes to make their neighborhood school a great school. Now, I can say my neighborhood school is an A school and I want that for other parents.

How to Get Involved

If you would like to learn more about Stand for Children Indiana or their Stand UP classes, email Info@stand.org or call (317) 759-2640.