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## We Strap Roller Skates on Their Feet and Push Parents Out the Door

By [Shawnta S. Barnes](#) – June 23, 2017



At the recent [Citizen Education](#) Blogger Training and Media Meet-up, titled “A Discussion of Education, the Media, and Our Communities in Washington D.C.”, there was a panel discussion on education, poverty, racial justice, and the media.

Panelist Pat Brantley, CEO of Friendship Public Charter Schools, when speaking about parents exercising choice said, “Parents when they have access and true choice, they vote with their feet.” Panel moderator Chris Stewart challenged this notion when he responded, “Parents do vote with their feet, but some schools put roller skates on their feet and push them out the door.” How did our education system get to a point where we are discounting parents and pushing them out the door?

Schools are part of our communities, but many times parents feel school is a place where they have no voice and decisions are being made for and about their children without consulting them or listening to their viewpoint. My twin boys finished kindergarten this past school year. One of my sons had a difficult time adjusting mostly because his teacher was chronically absent and lacked cultural competency. One day, I took off of work and showed up unannounced at school to observe him in class. Once I arrived at the front desk and explained I wanted to observe, the secretary thanked me for being actively involved in my son’s education, had me get a visitor’s badge, and sent me to his classroom.

In a school where I previously worked, a teacher was constantly having difficulty with a student, and the student had also been suspended, but when the parent arrived at the school unannounced to observe him, she was turned away. She was told she had to have a background check completed first and then would have to schedule an appointment in advance. The explanation given to the teacher was, “We don’t know how these parents are going to act.” Can we always know how anyone is going to act when they walk into any other community establishment?

Some schools have reduced parent engagement. I worked at a school that the school district was considering restarting and of course there was a community meeting about it to get parent input. When were families notified? They were told the same day the meeting was scheduled to take place.

Some school officials put the blame on parents by claiming they don’t want to be involved. I can look at my own family’s experience and know that being involved doesn’t mean that you won’t feel pushed away and excluded by the school. Some years ago my father told me, “When the school needed money for another fundraiser they found our phone number, when they needed your mom to volunteer for classroom parties and bake cupcakes, they found our phone number,

but when your sister was cutting up at school, they didn't find our phone number until they wanted to give her harsh consequences. We were at the school a lot, and they couldn't even bother to keep us in the loop until they wanted to crack the hammer down. We couldn't help because we didn't know."

In conversations with many parents in the community, I know these incidents are becoming way too common. Parents have told me they have called the school or repeatedly emailed to speak to their child's teacher or another staff member and never received a return phone call or when they do finally get contacted by the school, it's mid-year and the parents get to hear about every incident that has taken place since the beginning of the school year.

Parents should be our partners in helping their children have a successful school experience. We have to genuinely want their involvement. Some parents last experience with school was when they attended, and it was not a good experience. Schools should help change the narrative. Parents pay taxes which help schools stay open, but those schools could be a place where they don't feel welcome or heard.

When families switch schools and use their power of choice, schools have to take a long look in the mirror and determine whether the family really had a choice to stay. Maybe the school just strapped roller skates on their feet and pushed them out the door.