

Broad Ripple Closure Community Meeting: Were They Heard?

By Shawnta S. Barnes - July 19, 2017



On September 18, 2017, the Board of School Commissioners for Indianapolis Public Schools will decide whether to accept or reject the school closure recommendations. The recommendations include converting Arlington Community High School and Northwest Community High School into middle schools beginning the 2018-19 school year and closing John Marshall Community

High School, which will be converted into a middle school for one year during the 2017-18 school year, and Broad Ripple High School for the Arts and Humanities at the end of the 2017-18 school year.

IPS decided to hold community meetings during July and August to hear feedback from the community about their recommendations. The first meeting took place Tuesday, July 18th at 5:30 p.m. in Broad Ripple's auditorium. Upon entering, attendees received the handout "A Quick Reference Guide to the New IPS High School Experience." When the meeting began, the audience was informed speakers who had signed up in advance would be given three minutes to voice their concerns and they were also informed the district representatives nor the school board would respond to any questions asked during public comment during this meeting.

Below are some of the public comments:

Kent Springer, Broad Ripple Village Association –

It is essential this building is continued to be used for educational purposes...We want to work with IPS to find a scholastic partner for the facility.

IPS parent –

Choice is not meaningful if it means that poor families have to get on a bus in order to go to a great school. Choice, first and foremost, should be about having a great school in a neighborhood, making sure all schools serve the needs for all students.

Broad Ripple Alum –

If you close too many schools you will give people a reason to leave. They've gone to Carmel. They've gone to Greenwood.

Broad Ripple Alum, class of 1990 –

I would hope and pray that many more generations to come, who are also musically inclined, can come here to this wonderful institution to learn how to

be be better well rounded individuals...I would hate for the lights to go dark. I would hate to see this rocket crash and burn.

Mr. Anderson, Broad Ripple Alum, Class of 2013 –

If you guys choose to close Broad Ripple, you are going to close down a tradition. My dad, my aunts and uncles went here. You have had more professionals come out of Broad Ripple than any other IPS school here. I would say don't close down Broad Ripple, but find ways to improve enrollment here.

One of the most passionate speeches, which garnered audible support from the crowd, was given by a former IPS teacher, who spoke on behalf of the teachers and students that will be directly affected by the potential changes.

Charity Scott, former John Marshall Community High School and Key Learning Teacher –

I am both an alumna and former teacher in IPS and I have a few immediate concerns about transitioning to this “reinvention” before I make a few comments about what the programs may look like after. At the last action session, one of the commissioners asked Dr. LeGrand if there would be professional development for teachers so that they can help with the transition, her response was, “That’s a good idea.” That should have been one of the first items decided by the district leadership—how to get teachers on board! Teachers are your largest and most effective resource when it comes to making changes like this one.

Additionally, veteran teachers create and perpetuate school culture and stability. How are you trying to retain veteran teachers, especially in these schools that are transitioning/closing? These changes are causing even more teachers to look elsewhere for employment, and the jobs are indeed out there! And it’s not just teachers in the shifting schools that need retaining; they are teachers throughout the district.

And finally, making this huge shift will rip the stability out from under the feet of too many already vulnerable children, and I am highly skeptical as to the ability of the district to coordinate an organized and smooth transition. So

here is my suggestion: if each school must be closed to save the measly seven million dollars a year in the almost half a billion dollar budget, then close one school each year over the next four years. Transition the students at each school one at a time to ensure minimal violent gang clashes and student dropouts. And if these transitions cannot be done over four years, why not? Are the most vulnerable in our district expendable?

This is not the first time IPS has been reinvented in this way. In 1992 a “select schools” plan was initiated by Superintendent Gilbert—it is very similar to this “choice” model and it did not generate improvements.

I had taught a few years at John Marshall Community High School, and I left my time teaching there understanding this: poverty, leads to desperation of resources, which leads to violence, which leads to trauma. Which then leads to further desperation, violence, and trauma. And so the cycle continues. The stability or lack thereof of students’ home lives is what children bring into the classroom and it is directly tied to family and community economics.

So when I think back to my students at John Marshall especially in terms of “choice”; there were many students whose families chose for them to attend “choice” programs like magnet programs and charter schools—yet they had been kicked out because they could not fit into the mold of stability these “choice” programs require. Which begs the question: what “choice” is there really for the most vulnerable students who do not fit the mold of stability due to their emotional reactions to and expressions of trauma?

Will there be programs with the much needed smaller class sizes so that these students can get more one on one attention from teachers and staff? And so that teachers can better manage their students? Will they offer more guidance counselors, social workers, attendance personnel and deans to help students who are struggling to meet behavior expectations before they become completely disruptive to the sacred learning space that is the classroom? Or will teachers be required to continue practicing “restorative justice” a new fad that adds more responsibilities of social/emotional counseling on teachers thus taking them away from teaching.

If you really want to improve IPS, you must find a way to empower communities, and teachers. Do not do things to or for us—make decisions with us.

The comments listed above were given by people who had signed up in advance. A lawyer, MaryAnn Schlegel Ruegger, who is part of the Broad Ripple community and who has spoken at previous meetings, name was not on the public comment list although she said she followed the same online procedures to sign up as she had for previous meetings.

Board President Mary Ann Sullivan did permit Ms. Schlegel Ruegger to speak, but when she did, she did not speak for herself, but on behalf of members in the audience. She pointed out that she, a lawyer, knows how to navigate the system and sign up for a meeting, but many of the people who came did not know they had to sign-up. She implored the board to give those people in the audience an opportunity to speak and pointed out that the other ten school districts in Indy, who she believes has better parent engagement, does not have as stringent a policy to sign up to give public comment based on her review of their policies.

The Board President decided to be flexible and allow others in the audience to speak, but this seemed to be allowed because there was about 30 minutes remaining not because people did not know they had to sign up. Ms. Sullivan shared they have long work days before meetings and they need to know when their day will end.

In total, almost three dozen people gave public comment. I do think it was a good move for the board and district representatives to not respond to comments at this time. As an attendee of many of these meetings, I wonder when or if the district will respond. Yes, informing us about the new high school model is important, but addressing concerns that were not covered in the information currently released is also important. Many of the same concerns and questions have been shared at various meetings. I hope the district, at some point, addresses the following concerns:

- 1. What will be done to keep the history alive of the schools that are closing?** Two speakers referred to Wood High School, a previous IPS school

that was closed. Admittedly, I never even knew that school existed. Those speakers feared this would be the future of the closed schools.

2. **How will you retain staff from the closing schools and ensure they have the best job placement in the district if their school closes?** Although, Broad Ripple has been recommended for closure after the 2017-18 school year, there are teachers who are choosing to stay at the school for its possible last year and they were present at the meeting, some even crying in the audience. Not one spoke, not even after it was opened up to people not on the list. Will their concerns be heard and addressed?
3. **Will students currently in a magnet program be guaranteed a spot in their program if the program moves to another location?** One parent voiced concerns about there potentially not being enough spots.
4. **What is the plan if “reinventing high school” works?** What was clear from everyone is they want IPS to succeed and improve. If this happens, enrollment should rise. Where will those students go if the buildings are sold?

Three more community meetings have been scheduled. Make sure you sign up in advance to ensure your voice will be heard.

John Marshall Middle School

10101 E. 38th Street

Indianapolis, IN 46235

Thursday, July 20, 2017 at 5:30 PM

Click [here](#) to sign up to give public comment.

Arlington Community High School

4825 N. Arlington Avenue

Indianapolis, IN 46226

Tuesday, August 29, 2017 at 5:30 PM

Public comment sign up link is not available yet.

Northwest Community High School

5525 W. 34th Street

Indianapolis, IN 46224

Thursday, August 31, 2017 at 5:30 PM

Public comment sign up link is not available yet.