

Crafting Policy Takes Time, but Nothing Will Change Unless You Get Involved in the Process

By Shawnta S. Barnes - February 1, 2018



Educators Shawnta S. Barnes and Pennie Gregory at the Indiana State Capitol building to deliver testimony for HB 1421 School discipline

A little over a week ago, I wrote: “More Educators of Color Need to be Involved in Education Policy.” I would be a hypocrite to make this call to action and not rise to my own call. On Monday, January 29, 2018, I spent several hours at the state capitol building in hopes of delivering testimony to the House Education Committee in favor of House Bill 1421 School Discipline.

Although I had been inside of the statehouse a few times, this was the first time I had ever witnessed part of the legislative session. There were four bills on the schedule to be heard and House Education Chair Robert Behning informed us HB 1421 would be heard last. After listening to Indiana representatives debate, consider testimony and vote on the first three bills, I was hopeful when Rep. Gregory Porter, the co-author of HB 1421 with Rep. Behning, gave the synopsis of the bill. Then, JanNae Hanger President of The Children’s Policy and Law Initiative of Indiana was called first to give testimony, but after her testimony, Rep. Behning had to call a recess because there was another meeting they needed to attend. There were 28 people present to testify for HB 1421 and 27 of us, including myself, did not have the opportunity to deliver our testimony.

After sitting there for hours and not getting to speak, I was frustrated because I knew I couldn’t come back when the session resumed the following day at 8:30 a.m. Educators schedules aren’t flexible. I submitted my testimony electronically and later learned that JauNae Hanger read my testimony when the session resumed on Tuesday. Of course, I wanted to look my representatives in the eyes while delivering my testimony, but I glad they were able to hear it. Most importantly, the bill passed out of the House 8 to 5. This bill isn’t a law yet, but this is an important step forward. Below, you can read my testimony.

House Bill 1421 – School Discipline Testimony

Hello Rep. Behning. I’m here today to speak in favor of House Bill 1421, the school discipline bill. As a black educator and parent of two black boys who are first graders in our state, I am gravely concerned about the disproportionate rate of discipline and expulsion among students of color in Indiana. In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education released data showing Indiana as one of

eleven states with higher gaps than the nation between the suspension rates of black male and female students versus their white counterparts. Indiana was also one of five states that reported higher suspension rates for every racial/ethnic group. This is an injustice to students across the Hoosier state and it must not be ignored any longer.

Zero tolerance rules do not solve the cause of misbehavior and can affect students negatively. As a student in Indiana from K-12, I was only absent for seven days of school, two in first grade for my grandfather's funeral and five in eighth grade as a result of a suspension for defending myself in a fight initiated by a student who had bullied me the entire year. The assistant principal said to me, "Shawnta, I know you are a smart student and a good kid. I know you were defending yourself, but the school rules are clear and I have to suspend you for five days." I lost five days of learning and my middle school perfect attendance award. When we returned to school after the suspension, that punishment did not change the other student's behavior towards me. As a result, I kept to myself and rarely spoke to other students because I wanted to avoid receiving any other consequences.

Now, as a parent, both of my black sons have been suspended from preschool at one point in time. They entered preschool with many skills including how to read basic books. They were bored and not interested in completing work they already knew which led to outbursts. Instead of finding engaging work for them on their level or helping them learn the structure of school, they were suspended. Staying at home didn't help them work through this issue in the classroom and it did not give their teachers an opportunity to learn how to best coach them to acclimate to the school environment.

Finally, as an educator, with nine years of experience teaching in the classroom and three years of experience coaching teachers outside of the classroom, I want to ensure not only that this bill passes, but that it passes with a definition of a positive discipline and a definition of exclusion. It is important that exclusion is not only defined as in school suspension (ISS) or out of school suspension (OSS), but that the bill also keeps the language that exclusion is also any, "involuntary transfer that removes a student from the student's regular classroom." As a classroom teacher, who worked in a school where we were told we had to lower our exclusion rates which only meant ISS and OSS rates,

students were excluded in other ways and poor behavior did not improve. Instead of assigning a student ISS or OSS the student's parents would be called and he or she went home early, or the student sat in the office with the school secretary or school counselor or the student was sent to another teacher's classroom. As a teacher who was known for having good classroom management, I have had up to six additional students in my classroom at one time because they couldn't behave in their classroom. The worst part is my colleagues who constantly sent students out never learned how to build relationships with those students to improve their behavior and the students missed instruction widening their academic gaps.

As a former student who was wronged by zero tolerance, a parent whose black sons were suspended in preschool, and as a black educator dealing with students' discipline issues, I implore you to strongly consider the educational gaps that will continue in this state between black and white students if this bill isn't passed and disproportionate discipline isn't addressed appropriately in Indiana.