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# IPS School Closures: Teachers Devastated; Families Look for Other Options

By Shawnta S. Barnes – July 7, 2017



“They’re making the announcement today.” I was sitting in a room in Oldenburg Hall on Marian University’s campus with fellow Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) teachers and academic coaches. Many of us already have our master’s, so this was the last class we needed to take in addition to passing the school administration licensing exam to earn our school administrator’s license.

Our professor had done a great job of helping us understand research methods and statistics and (believe it or not) made the course sort of fun. Despite his efforts, on this day, we were distracted because the announcement of the high schools that would be closed by IPS loomed in the background. Around noon, we knew. Our professor was about to have us take a lunch break, when a classmate stated, "It's Arlington, Northwest and Broad Ripple." Immediately, we went online to read any available information. A pall of sadness filled the room as we read the details from various sources.

- IPS decided that the 2017-2018 school year would be the last year the Arlington and Northwest campuses would operate as high schools. Beginning the 2018-19 school year, these campuses would be converted into middle schools.
- At the end of the 2017-18 school year, four buildings: Broad Ripple High School, John Marshall High School, Forest Manor, and the Facilities Maintenance Department Building will be closed and sold.
- John Marshall High School seemed to be a shock to some in the community. This current high school was not included on the list of high schools that were discussed at the community meetings because the district said it was converting it into a middle school for the 2017-18 school year.
- Although Forest Manor, which is currently used as a professional development facility and contains offices for some IPS staff, is slated to close, it could reopen as KIPP Indy High School. KIPP Indy which currently serves grades K-8 and is already part of IPS' innovation network is looking to expand and add a high school. On page 41 of their high school charter application submitted to the mayor's office of education innovation, Forest Manor was listed as the first choice for the location of the high school.

Another point of contention in the community was the fact that IPS added three innovation high schools to the district's portfolio: Herron High School, Riverside High School, and Purdue Polytechnic High School before announcing the three high school campuses it was eliminating.

Although our class was from 9 a.m.-4 p.m., our professor felt it was best to dismiss for the day at lunch so we could process the news. I did not have an opportunity to do so because each person I encountered once I left Marian's campus wanted to discuss the closures with me.

I needed to pick up a few items, so I stopped at Meijer. While shopping, I ran into my uncle. My dad and his siblings attended IPS schools. My uncle attended Arsenal Tech. “Shawnta, they are dismantling our community. Parents aren’t going to send their kids to school for one year more year knowing their school is going to close at the end of the year. Why did they bring in three more high schools and eliminate three high schools?” My quick run to the grocery store turned into a twenty-minute speech from my uncle about IPS’ decision.

From the grocery store, I went to pick up my children from summer camp. Before leaving with my children, I had the opportunity to listen to the summer camp director’s viewpoint. “So they are not actually closing three high school buildings? They are going to turn Northwest into a middle school and mix all those kids together. I think they need to have a plan for mixing kids from various neighborhoods together. This might not go well.”

After I arrived home, my phone rang and it was one of those mass phone calls. This call, from Dr. Ferebee IPS Superintendent, went to IPS staff and families detailing IPS’ decision. Shortly after I listened to the call, I was texted a link to a video of IUPUI professor Jim Scheurich giving a speech during a school board meeting about how he felt the school board was bought by Stand for Children Indiana and The Mind Trust and his thoughts about how the school board was pushing an agenda to dismantle the school district.

About an hour later, I received an email from IPS Human Resources.

*In the coming weeks and months, the IPS School Board will make important decisions about our high school options. With rigorous and expanded course offerings, career pathways, and increased college and career guidance, IPS is working towards the vision of operating premier urban high schools. As we align our resources to support this vision, we recognize that you may have questions about what this means for your position and your career with IPS.*

*First, we continue to be excited that you will be part of our team for the 2017-2018 school year! And, while we anticipate consolidating our secondary students on a fewer number of campuses, we will continue to need talented teachers and teacher leaders to serve all of our students. We will provide you*

*with regular updates over the course of Fall 2017 regarding what to expect in our high school transition.*

*While we don't anticipate any significant changes in staff, we recognize that you may have additional questions. As questions come up, please don't hesitate to reach out to our team.*

I asked a few IPS elementary educators if they had received this email, but they said they did not which led me to believe this was sent only to high school staff which I will be next year as am I switching roles from elementary literacy coach and moving back into the secondary world as a multi-classroom leader of 9th & 10th grade English/language arts at Crispus Attucks Medical Magnet High School this upcoming school year.

Later that evening, after I read pro, con, and neutral articles and comments on social media, I had the opportunity to speak to a Broad Ripple teacher and alum who was devastated about the closure. "As a teacher and alum, I feel disheartened and angry. A few families have already started pulling their children out to go to different schools. Most of them expressed shock and anger. I am concerned about how smoothly the year will go considering the students know it is their last year as Rockets. I also wonder how it will impact staff morale." I hope the remaining staff bands together during Broad Ripple's last year, especially since the entire administrative team, the principal, and both assistant principals, resigned, after the end of the school year before the school closure announcement was made.

Then, I spoke to the Indianapolis Education Association President Rhondalyn Cornett and asked, "What are your thoughts about these changes?" She responded, "What we do in IEA is all about the children. I'm worried about how this will affect them once their school closes. Will they attend another IPS school, transfer to a charter school, or drop out of school altogether? I'm also concerned about the teachers. Will IPS rift teachers? What will be the process for transferring to another school? In the past when changes happened, teachers did not receive the information they needed. Now Dr. Ferebee wants to start a transition team. I want teachers on this team, in particular teachers who have been through school closings and displacements before in IPS because they will ask the right questions."

I support being fiscally responsible and yes having multiple buildings open that are under capacity does not make sense, but what happened for the high school numbers to drop to 5,000 and what will the district do differently to ensure the number don't further decline during this transition? Finances have to be in order to operate schools, but schools are not just about the money; it is about the children. Tina Ahlgren, former IPS teacher of the year, IPS resident and parent, and instructional coach at Arlington Community High School shared concerns about the potential instability based on two prior experiences, one with program relocation and one with school closure at the school board meeting that took place after the school closure announcement. When staff morale is low and high turnover takes place, our students suffer.

Keeping these children in mind, I reflect back to the community meeting I attended and wrote about in, "Let's Not Rush This High School Closure Thing." I interviewed a Broad Ripple student who said, "I don't want my school to close. What they are doing – well it's causing us to lose hope." I don't want students to lose hope. I don't want families to lose hope and I don't want IPS staff to lose hope. IPS has released a timeline for their new high school experience that will begin the 2018-19 school year where the four remaining high school campuses will offer multiple college and career options. I wonder how many IPS families will exit the district before these options are implemented.

In the midst of the news, I was asked the question I knew was coming, "Don't you wish you would have just stayed in the township schools?" My answer is a resounding no. Don't get me wrong, working in two townships, Wayne and Washington, was an excellent experience and made me the educator I am today and I thank those districts for that. I'm not the only Indy educator who made the township to IPS switch and there is one reason – the children. IPS families and students deserve effective educators and this is why, for now, I choose to stay. For those who choose to walk away, no judgement. When I coach teachers I tell them, "I am coaching you to be the best educator you can be whether you stay or go." I tell teachers this because a school, a district has to be the right fit for the teacher to be the best educator for his or her students. I just hope and pray for the students' sake that on the other side of this change outcomes improve for IPS students.