

Recommendation: Convert IPS Schools Wendell Phillips and Washington Irving into Innovation Schools

By Shawnta S. Barnes - November 14, 2017



Wendell Phillips Elementary school #63

Last week, I received numerous notifications on my cell phone from my former colleagues or teachers friends who knew I worked at Wendell Phillips School #63 during the previous two school years as the literacy coach. They reached out to tell me school staff and parents were informed that IPS plans to recommend innovation for Wendell Phillips for next school year.

In 2014, legislation was passed to allow Indiana school districts to create innovation schools. Innovation schools are part of the district, but operate independently within it. According to IPS' [website](#) there are four innovation paths:

- launch as a new innovation school
- launch as an innovation charter school
- restart an existing chronically underperforming school as an innovation school
- convert an existing school to an innovation school

The most aggressive innovation pathway, which has divided our local community, is restarting a chronically underperforming school as an innovation school. This is the path that will be recommended to the IPS Board of School Commissioners for Washington Irving School #14 and Wendell Phillips School #63.

Last school year, Wendell Phillips was considered as a school to restart this school year. I spoke to parents at the meeting held last school year in place of my principal to explain to everything the school was doing to make improvements. There's nothing harder than looking a group of parents in the face and saying we are improving, but not fast enough and this is why restart may be in our future. It was one of the toughest crowds I have ever addressed.

When a school votes to become innovation, there has not been as much pushback because the teachers and parents want it. When a school is restarted, the district partners with another organization, a charter school, and normally all staff is displaced. One of the most vocal groups against innovation is the [IPS Community Coalition](#). On their [webpage](#) (which is a page on the website of the Indianapolis Education Association, IPS' teacher union) they state, "We are fighting for the schools that all IPS students deserve." The problem is they disagree about the process taken by IPS to create those schools they believe IPS students deserve. I have attended numerous school board meetings where a coalition member will say, "We need to slow down." I ask, "For how long?" How many years should we wait? How many unprepared students should we overlook?"

I attended Washington Irving as a kindergartener and my father also attended that school, so my family has lived in that community and I also worked at Wendell Phillips during the last two school years. The families in these schools and communities are not faceless to me. I know them and I care about them. I want the best for them. Waiting around is not best for them. The same people spending so much time writing rhetoric on Facebook, could use that energy to help underperforming schools.

Underperforming schools need volunteers. They need the community supporting them. They need people to show up. I wonder how involved some of the people spending time debating IPS' decisions have been in the underperforming schools in IPS, but I can tell you (because I have seen it with my own eyes) that IPS School Board President Mary Ann Sullivan has been volunteering to help kids read consistently at Wendell Phillips.

If you ask me how I feel right at this moment, I feel disappointed in myself. I was the literacy coach for grades K-6 my first year at Wendell Phillips and grades K-2 during my second year at the school. I wonder what else I could have done to make a difference. If you have never worked in a school that is considered failing, you don't understand the pressure the teachers are under and the frustration they feel when they have given their all and it wasn't enough to raise scores to the level needed.

One of my former colleagues said, "If restart is recommended, you can consider it a done deal. The board won't vote against it." I agree this is true. My hope is that all of the teachers aren't displaced in the process. There are teachers who have worked at these schools for years. They know the families and the community. I agree with my fellow Indy/Ed blogger Andrew Pillow, that schools that are labeled as 'bad' have good teachers too. The teachers I had the honor to coach are open to doing what is best for kids. I also understand if any staff member from Washington Irving or Wendell Phillips decides not apply to the organization that will restart the school. Working in an underperforming school can be taxing mentally. If I had not been displaced at the end of last year, I would still be in the trenches with my former colleagues. Many of them returned this year knowing that restart was a strong possibility for next school year because they love the community and the families.

Click [here](#) to review the PowerPoint “Innovation Restart Recommendations and Partner Selection Process” by Alessia Johnson, Innovation Officer that has been uploaded to the IPS’ board meeting materials and policies portal online.

Indy/Ed will follow up with updates as more information becomes available.