



Why a Black Academic Excellence Plan is Needed

April 26, 2022 by Educator Barnes

Last Thursday, I participated in a press conference held by the Indiana NAACP. I was proud to be part of the press conference because I knew what was being shared was of value to our community. The media attended. Some asked questions and some did not. Later, I began reading the comment section for some of the articles once they were posted on Facebook. In one of the first comments I read, a person had expressed disgust for a press conference focused on race. Furthermore, the person questioned why there was even a need for a press

conference about Black students. Although I resisted the urge to retort back to this person on Facebook, I know this person was not the only person who had concerns. I want to explain why this plan is needed in Indiana and needed across the United States.

Indiana third graders take IREAD-3 to determine if students can read. In 2019, 74.20% of Black third graders passed the test, but only 24.70% of Black students in grades 3-8 passed the E/LA section of ILEARN and 26.40% of Black 10th graders passed ISTEP+. Some pushback is around the fact that this data covers three different tests and three different groups of Black students. That is a fair pushback. Maybe the 74.20% of third-graders who passed IREAD will pass ILEARN at the same rate. However, “maybe” is not good enough bar to measure success. It is not acceptable to take a wait-and-see approach before we take action. This is one huge problem in education. We are not proactive enough and instead are constantly in reactive mode. When it comes to the educational well-being of children, it is unacceptable to allow failure to occur before we take action.

With this knowledge in mind, the Indiana NAACP education committee decided to take action. I am one of the many people who worked together on the Indiana Black Academic Excellence Plan. My dad died on January 2, 2021. After his death, I excused myself from many commitments. However, the work on this plan was not a commitment that I could walk away from. The stakes were too high, and my dad was a huge advocate of education. As an educator, I know Black students are not receiving the education they deserve. At some point, you have to stop talking about the problem and instead start providing solutions. This plan aims to do that.

Unfortunately, some people see this plan as a tool of division. “What about all children?” My response to that is: Are all children consistently at the bottom of the scale for academic achievement? Being an educator is my calling. I didn’t attend Purdue University to become an English teacher to only help the Black kids. I wanted to help all students. However, many universities do not prepare preservice teachers to adequately teach all students. Many times, the students that are left behind are Black kids.

Yes, the strategies in the plan can be used for the benefit of all students. For example, one action we are trying to accomplish is lowering the age of school attendance. In Indiana, the compulsory school attendance age is seven. Even though a huge majority of families do send their children to kindergarten, it is not mandatory which allows students to slip through the cracks. Along these same lines, we want full-day preschool offered for all students. So, why do we need a Black excellence plan to say this if it benefits all kids? It is simple. With full-day

preschool, all students will benefit, but without it, Black students will be disproportionately impacted academically.

What is divisive is people being upset that people are working together to help Black students. People are out here really mad about this. Those people should ask themselves why they hate Black children because only hatred would lead people to resist this plan.

Many of us who worked on this plan were also part of the IDOE Cultural Competency Advisory Council. I served on the council for the last three years of Dr. McCormick's term. Transparently, I almost quit. At one meeting I inquired about what had been produced to tangibly show that this council was needed and matters. I wanted to be sure we weren't there to just talk. One tangible action we did was compile resources for the IDOE Cultural Competency page. One of the roadblocks we ran into while doing the work was having resources for schools to use. When school leaders actually want to improve the skills of their teachers, they need tangible resources or they will not be able to improve in the way that they need.

Once Dr. Jenner became the education secretary and the IDOE website was updated, the page with all the resources we compiled that were used by educators and parents disappeared. If you go to <https://www.doe.in.gov/school-improvement/cultural-competency>, you will receive a message telling that says, "The Indiana Department of Education website has moved." At this point, most of the webpages automatically reroute, but you cannot reroute to a page that no longer exists.

Also, under Dr. Jenner, the IDOE Cultural Competency Council ceased meeting. When members of IDOE were questioned about the meetings no longer happening, they gave vague responses that sum up to "we are moving in a different direction." When you try to nail down what the direction is, there are no explicit supports to address the dismal achievement of Black students. We cannot wait around for the folks at IDOE to help Black kids.

Other tactics members of IDOE have used is reminding people that Governor Holcomb created a Chief Equity, Inclusion, & Opportunity Officer. This is the first time Indiana has had a position like this. Karrah A. Herring, J.D., a Black Hoosier woman, is the first person to take on this role. Last year, Herring was interviewed by IndyStar, and she shared the article on her LinkedIn. Although I am not connected to her on that platform, her post popped up in my feed from people who I am connected to who are also connected to her.

Two parts of the IndyStar [article](#) stood out to me:

“Herring says she’s not a diversity expert and describes making the move into the DEI space from the world of legal compliance and strategic communications as ‘a weird leap.’”

“Herring says the most disheartening part of the job is meeting with people who look like her and listening as they dismiss her arrival as another state initiative that won’t make a difference.”

After reading the article, I tagged her and wrote a message to her asking how her work will intersect with the needed work at IDOE.



Karrah A. Herring, J.D. • 2nd

Chief Equity, Inclusion & Opportunity Officer at State of Indiana

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Tell your own story, or they will inaccurately portray you and your work. Thanks for accurately portraying our work and quoting me correctly. That’s rare.



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Karrah A. Herring, J.D., I am glad to hear about your work. I'm curious to know how your work intersects with IDOE. For the last three years of Dr. McCormick's tenure, I was one of the members of the IDOE Cultural Competency Advisory Council. We were told we would learn more about how our work would continue under Dr. Jenner once you started your work. I have and other members have followed up numerous times and have been given no direct answer. Unless I can't find it, our page on the IDOE website that provided resources to schools is now gone. I would love for someone to get back with members of this advisory council to let us know how we can continue our much needed work.

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I was told to complete a form on the state's website, and I did. Then, wait for it, her office referred me back to IDOE. I even got to talk to Dr. Jenner's chief of staff on the phone. I left that phone call with no concrete answers.

We cannot wait for a state leader to work through a "weird leap" or hope that the IDOE will come around and finally give us concrete answers and put concrete strategies into place for Black students. Many of us who worked on the plan are Black. These Black students are our kids, our grandkids, our nieces, our nephews, our neighbors, and the list goes on. We cannot and will not wait around as the Indiana school system continues to pump out Black children

who are not academically proficient. To the naysayers: If you are not bringing tangible solutions to the table to help Black children, get out of our way and sit down somewhere.

My fervent hope is that the work of the Indiana NAACP alongside community members is used as a model across the United States to change the tide and improve academic outcomes for Black students in America.