



IPS Rebuilding Stronger Plan Passes with Unanimous Vote: Educator Barnes' Perspective

November 19, 2022 by Educator Barnes

Join us for this three-perspective series. Indy K12 writers David McGuire, Andrew Pillow, and Educator Barnes provide their perspectives and thoughts about the recently approved IPS Rebuilding Stronger plan.

Thursday, November 17, IPS approved its Rebuilding Stronger plan. This plan will include sweeping changes to the district. Many Indianapolis residents feel the only certainty in IPS is change. For now, I agree. However, if this plan is successful, I believe there could be some stability.

Before community input was sought and before this plan was approved, IPS acknowledged its failure to educate Black & Latino students and committed to doing better. A district cannot make this acknowledgment without implementing some changes to ensure this failure will not continue in the future.

I was an employee who was a teacher leader in IPS for three school years. One of my frustrations was that all students didn't have access to all the opportunities they deserved. Under the approved plan, all middle school students will have access to Algebra I, band, orchestra, and world language. There should have never been a time when this was not an option for middle school students. To help make this a reality, IPS is moving away from the K-8 model.

I don't have a strong thought for or against the K-8 model, but I do believe regardless of whether a school district does K-5, 6-8, & 9-12 or K-8 & 9-12, the district should pick a structure and make it system-wide. Over the years, happening at the same time in IPS, you could find PreK-8, K-8, K-6, & K-5 schools. These inconsistencies resulted in an inconsistent middle school experience in the district.

Then, you have the innovation schools. Originally, URBAN ACT Academy (UAA), which operates in Washington Irving School 14, and SUPER School, which operates in Frederick Douglass School 19, were slated to merge with other schools. After pushback, IPS abandoned plans to merge CFI 2 and UAA in School 14. SUPER School and Paul Miller School 114 will still merge under the approved plan.

Some of the pushback to the UAA & CFI merger was rooted in gentrification. I know the neighborhood around School 14 well. My father and his siblings attended that school, and I attended School 14 for kindergarten. Over time, houses have drastically changed. People have moved in and remodeled them, giving them a more modern look with bold colors and architecture. It is understandable why some would question why the district initially wanted to shift CFI 2 into the School 14 space, especially since some believe that CFI 2 caters to gentrifiers.

In complete transparency, not only did I attend school at School 14, I have a contract with UAA that is currently operating in this space. However, before the plan was approved, I decided not to extend my contract past this current semester. As I don't want my current or future clients to believe they will end up in an Indy K12 piece, I will continue my analysis of UAA's future based on public information anyone can obtain and not based on any personal insights I have due to my contract. All my clients are aware of my other roles, and know, at times, I might need to at least, share basic facts through my role at Indy K12.

Let's get back to the subject of these innovation schools. I assert they do not have enough oversight from IPS. I hope if IPS continues partnering with charter organizations, they will be more involved in helping support and address issues. Currently, the innovation model seems to be:

1. This school is failing; let's make it an innovation school.
2. Darn, the students are performing worse.
3. Ooh, this might not have been a good idea.
4. Let's close this school, or let's hand it over to another charter network.

At some point, there needs to be more done between steps one and two and steps two and three. I also believe that IPS should insist that their innovation partners hire certified teachers. No child deserves an education where non-certified teachers are trying out teaching on students.

It has yet to be seen what the best model for a school like School 14 is, where the student population has a high transient rate. IPS should take back School 14 and not push off the responsibility to another charter operation that could just end up being kicked out, as IPS wants to end both UAA and SUPER School innovation agreements at the end of the school year.

David McGuire mentioned in his piece in this series that some previously closed schools would be reopened. I strongly believe that any school building that remains open should be in the best physical condition. My education consulting work takes me into schools across the state. Walking inside some IPS school buildings, I feel like I stepped decades back in time.

What is also important to note is that some organizations that have partnered with IPS have expressed issues with the plan, in particular The Mind Trust, an organization that supports the creation of charter schools. One issue the organization has is it believes that IPS is trying to

prevent charter schools from buying the district's vacant buildings for \$1 which is part of state law.

TMT released a statement emphasizing the organization does not support the plan. Part of the statement said, "Taken as a whole, The Mind Trust believes the Rebuilding Stronger plan will exacerbate racial disparities within IPS, not reduce them. For this reason, we cannot support it."

I push back and question the actions of TMT that have exacerbated racial disparities. I also push back at Black people who constantly trash TMT behind its back but play nice in its face. Any time I question the actions of TMT, some Black educator or Black community leader contacts me offline and says they don't like TMT, but we (Black folks) can't upset the organization. Where is that Civil Rights marching, protesting, and pushing back energy? Some damn TMT purse strings should not have us avoiding saying what we need to say, pushing back on pat-on-back data TMT provides. Their pat-on-the-back data gives mad Washington Twp vibes. Every time Washington Twp gets called to the carpet, they throw out points of pride instead of sitting with the pushback. I will say that WT is getting a little better with receiving feedback.

However, TMT leader Brandon Brown has the audacity to repeatedly throw shade at WT when TMT has the same pat-on-the-back energy. Miss me with that. At least the Superintendent of WT children actually attends school in the district. How many TMT employees send their children to the charter and innovation schools they push onto everyone else? If an experimental model isn't good for your children, why should it be pushed upon anyone else's children?

I am glad IPS didn't cave to pressure from its partners.

Every year I served in IPS as a teacher leader, my position changed due to restructuring. That is what caused me to leave the district. Overall, I enjoyed my time in the district and have a strong connections with many current employees. Had I returned the following year, I would have had a fourth role. Four roles in four years is exhausting. You never feel like you can put your roots down. One prediction I made when I left was that these changes would keep happening. Although I do support the plan, I hope for the IPS staff, students, and families, that IPS has fewer sweeping changes in the future.