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I Was the Only Black Teacher, And I Quit My First Job After Six Months



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by Shawnta S. Barnes



Why would a teacher [submit her resignation](#) for her first teaching job out of college in February of that school year?

The answer is racism, mistreatment, and oppression. I was the only Black teacher in my building when I was employed by Brownsburg Community School Corporation. It was one of the worst years of my career. This is why I am not surprised that [Black students have shared that they, too, have been mistreated](#). Those students and their parents are demanding change. I am choosing to share my story in hopes that it will also help to bring forth that change.

During my senior year at Purdue University, I was sitting in one of my last education classes working on a group project when the professor asked me to come up front to speak to her. She wanted to confirm I was from Indianapolis and had planned on returning home after graduation. After my confirmation, she told me about a job posting in Brownsburg. In particular, she received information that Brownsburg was becoming more diverse, and the school district was looking for candidates of color. I applied, was asked to interview, completed the lesson plan task, was interviewed and was offered a job.

I was married on August 5, 2006, and started my first teaching job on August 7. Little did I know the anguish and pain that school year would bring. The first blow was having my job assignment changed. I was offered my first job by Rick Doss, who was the principal of Brownsburg East Middle School at the time. Now, he is the director of secondary education in Washington Township where my sons attend school. I was informed that I was being switched to Brownsburg West Middle School (BWMS). When I asked why I was told that I was employed by the school district and not the school.

I decided to let it go. I still had a job. Some of my friends who had also graduated from Purdue were still not employed. I decided to count my blessings instead. The principal of BWMS at that time was Julie Pappas. [pullquote]I found out quickly that she was not happy to have me at her school. She wasn't the only person who mistreated me.[/pullquote]

When I came to school before the year started to obtain my teaching supplies and my new employee gift bag from the school secretary, she mispronounced my first name. Of course, I corrected her. She mumbled, "You people always have ..." and I interjected, "Excuse me?" My guess is that the rest of that sentence was "difficult names." For the rest of the school year, she seemed genuinely annoyed by my presence anytime I asked her for anything. All I did was tell her how to say my name correctly.

In that new teacher package was a purple Brownsburg t-shirt. I was glad to receive it because there were days you could wear jeans as a teacher as long as you were also wearing school spirit wear. The first time I wore the t-shirt, Mrs. Pappas, the principal, came to my room. I thought nothing of it. I just assumed it was an observation. She left a document on my desk. It

was a written reprimand for being out of dress code. She also left a post-it note to refer me to a certain page of the staff handbook so I could see the violation. On spirit day, you were only allowed to wear jeans if your school spirit shirt had a collar; you couldn't wear a t-shirt. That's why I was written up. [pullquote position="right"]She did not come to my class to observe me at all; it was only to write me up.[/pullquote] I had not seen her the entire day, so I still don't know how she knew what I was wearing ... but I have my suspicions. I felt defeated; I'm a rule follower, and it was an honest mistake.

I was isolated. I was seen as only an affirmative action hire who had stolen the job from some deserving White candidate. Even if I was wronged, I was still treated as if I caused the problem. For example, there was a fire drill one day. My class was in a line outside waiting for the call to return inside. A male student walked up to me and asked me a question about my nipples.

The students, who were within earshot, were shocked. I told the student to go to the end of the line and not to speak to me like that. I wrote a referral and then was interrogated. I was asked if I did anything to make the student say this. I was asked if I heard it correctly. I was asked if I was sure the student was speaking to me. After interrogating me and interviewing students, I was finally believed.

The student did get suspended but the parents were upset about the punishment. I had ruined their child's immaculate record. [pullquote]Not only did I have non-supportive administrators and colleagues, but the group of parents who disliked me was also growing as well.[/pullquote]

Those parents were vocal. I was accused of indoctrinating their children with my beliefs. One of my crimes was having students read about why some Indigenous people do not celebrate Thanksgiving, but instead, have a day of mourning. We read the "[Suppressed Speech of Wamsutta \(Frank B\) James, Wampanoag](#)." Then, we compared that speech to the Thanksgiving history with which they were most familiar. Parents complained, and I was in the principal's office—again.

Then, the principal would show up to my class, only to pick apart every lesson I taught. I did another project where we read different versions of Cinderella from around the world. We analyzed the cultural differences and then determined what makes a story a fairytale. Then, students had to write their own fairytale and incorporate their culture or family values. The principal told me my project was a waste of time and I was not challenging my students enough. [pullquote position="right"]She made it clear that she didn't think I was a good teacher.[/pullquote]

I also had my students read "[Tears of a Tiger](#)" by Sharon Draper. And I had more complaints. This time I was accused of promoting unsafe behavior and not having the ability to pick good novels for students to read.

A character dies after a car crash; the driver had been drinking. I picked this book because it was already purchased by the school. I thought it would be a great opportunity for students to read a novel written by a Black author. Someone before me had already purchased the novel set which is what my mentor teacher had to explain when I got push back.

However, my mentor did not support me when I chose not to use "[To Kill a Mockingbird](#)" later in the school year. We did not have assigned texts, but we did have a list of recommended books. She made it clear that the high ability English class always read that novel. She said I was depriving them of a classic and important text.

My dad, who had been a union representative for some time during my childhood at his job, suggested I reach out to the union representative for help. I agreed with my dad and decided to put my union dues to use. I feared the principal was trying to fire me. The union rep agreed that I was not being treated fairly. So she gave me a [copy of a chart](#) that showed salary comparisons between Brownsburg and other school districts and recommended that I find a different job.

I had only been married for a short time. My husband's salary was paying for all of our expenses. My salary was a non-issue. She had been vocal about the low pay in the district, so I wasn't surprised by her telling me that I could find a better-paying teaching job.

[pullquote]What disappointed me most was her solution to my mistreatment was for me to leave.[/pullquote]

My first semester was hell. I couldn't take it anymore. Not only did I want to quit BMWS, but I also wanted to leave the teaching profession altogether. In February, I submitted my resignation and informed my principal I would not be returning. After that, she stopped calling me to her office or coming to my classroom, until I started using my PTO. After that, she requested my presence in her office one last time to tell me that it would be in my best interest to not take off any more time.

I stopped using my PTO because I did not want to find out what that meant. I did feel bad about taking time off time because it wasn't fair to the students, but [pullquote position="right"]I was tired of being mistreated.[/pullquote] I was tired of being ignored. My team members did not speak to me unless they had to. The special education teacher would not push into my classroom even though she did with my other colleagues. I ate lunch alone in my classroom. The only people I talked to on most days were the students.

All of my students were white except for four. One female student was from the Middle East, and I also had one Black girl, one Black boy and one Latino boy. All four of those students were mistreated while I was there. They were called names and asked inappropriate questions. Only two incidents happened in my class. I addressed them immediately. Both of the

students' parents thanked me for doing something. One parent told me that other teachers ignored these issues.

I know I was the first Black teacher many of my students had. During the last month of school, I started taking down stuff on my classroom walls. I wanted to walk out of that building on the last day and never look back. The students noticed. They asked if I was leaving, and I confirmed their suspicions. Then, they asked why. I told them I had purchased a house and that my drive would be longer to Brownsburg. I told them I wanted to work closer to home. Although my drive time did increase, that was not the reason I left. I couldn't take it anymore.

I went home almost every day and went straight to bed after cooking my husband's dinner. I was depressed and was questioning my entire career choice. Was I cut out to be a teacher? I decided I was. I thought I should at least take another job before I threw in the towel. I decided I wouldn't work in the suburbs again, and I haven't since. I'm open to working in the suburbs now after completing my 14th year as an educator, but I doubt if I ever would again.

When the school year was almost over, I received the email below. I removed identifying information.



This email reminded me that I had made a difference. I forwarded that email to myself and printed out a copy to have in my next classroom. Each year since, I have collected notes I have received from parents, colleagues and students. Although that year was hard, [pullquote position="right"]I know I left a mark and made an impact.[/pullquote] My presence alone might have changed the narrative my students had about Black people.

I am sad that there are students of color who are still being mistreated—just like the few students of color I had years ago. I know Brownsburg Community Schools have hired more Black educators now, but this district can't hire its way out of this situation. There needs to be real change.

I share my truth today to set it free and let it go. I hope sharing my experience helps Brownsburg Community Schools to realize that how I was treated and my students of color were treated was not acceptable—and how students are still being treated is not acceptable. This school district must do better. I was there 14 years ago, and it doesn't seem like much has changed.

[Photo by BullRun, Adobe Stock–licensed.](#)

This post originally appeared on IndyK12 as "[Why This Black Teacher Quit Brownsburg Community School Corporation.](#)"

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Shawnta (Shawn-tay) S. Barnes, also known as Educator Barnes, is a married mother of identical twin boys. She navigates education from not only the educator's perspective but also the parent's perspective. She has been an educator for nearly two decades. Shawnta works with K-12 schools, universities, & education adjacent organizations through her education consulting business Blazing Brilliance. She is an adjunct college professor, supervises student teachers, Indy Kids Winning Editor-in-Chief, Brave Brothers Books Co-founder, & CEO, and Brazen Education Podcast host. She holds five education licenses: English/language arts 5-12, English to speakers of other languages P-12, library/media P-12, reading P-12, and school administration P-12, and she has held a job in every licensed area. Previously, she has served as a school administrator, English teacher, English learners teacher, literacy coach, and librarian. She won the 2019 Indiana Black Expo Excellence in Education Journalism Award. In 2023, she completed her doctorate in

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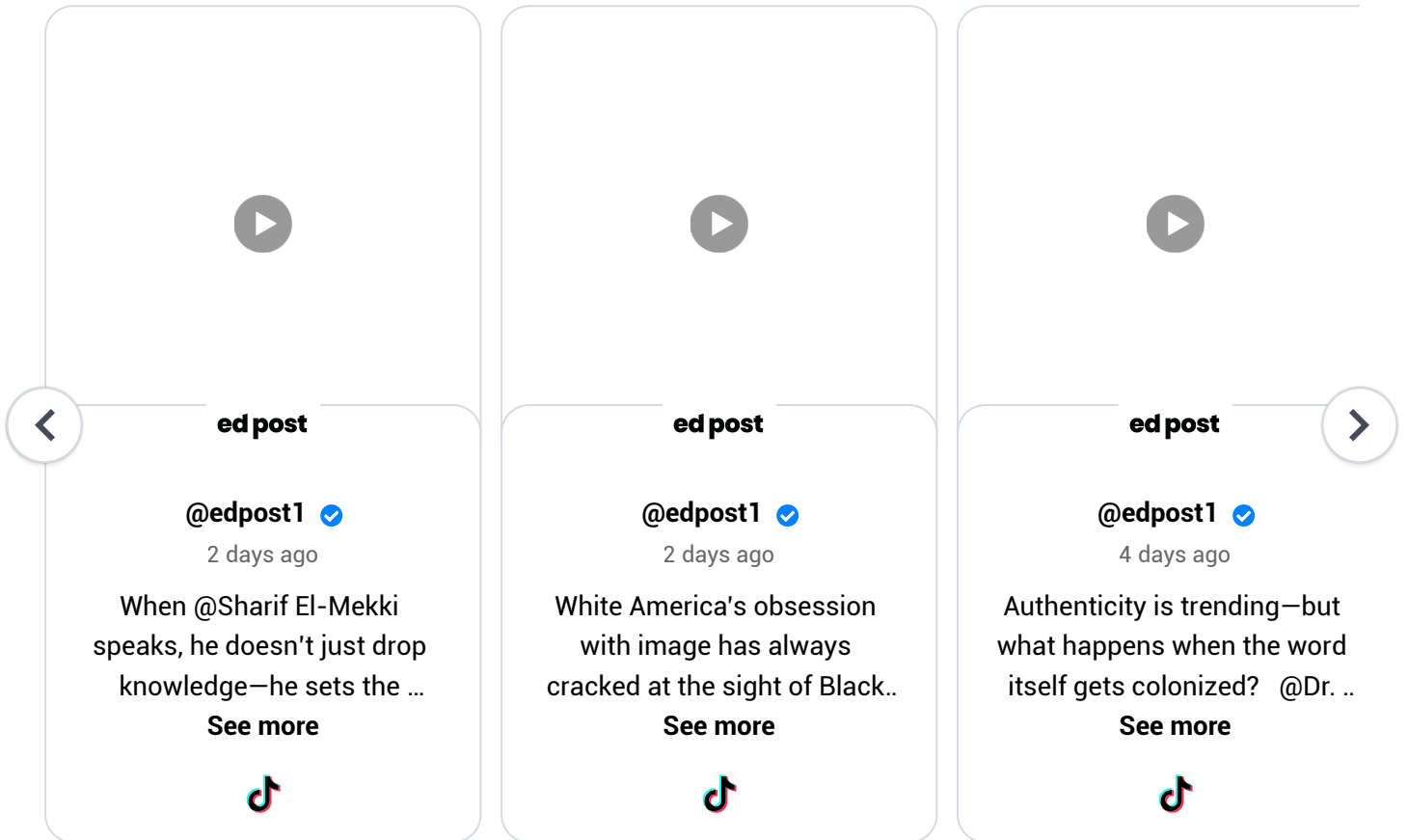
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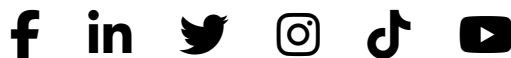
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