

Is it White Flight or Class Flight?

By Shawnta S. Barnes – March 24, 2018



Shawnta S. Barnes, in 1st grade, pictured with her younger sisters shortly after her family moved into a home that was within the boundaries of desegregation busing.

Recently, I came across the article, “White Flight’ Remains a Reality.” Based on Census Data, the author states, “Whites continue to leave neighborhoods with significant levels of non-white residential growth.” I assert middle and upper-class black people move when neighborhoods become too black and brown too especially if those families are in poverty and in Indianapolis the flight disruption happens in layers.

Indianapolis is an interesting city. Within Indianapolis' boundaries, there are eleven school districts: Indianapolis Public Schools, two incorporated town districts, Speedways Schools and Beech Grove Schools, and eight Township schools. According to an article published in *Chalkbeat Indiana*, "10 districts surround Indianapolis Public Schools. That's by design: State lawmakers wanted to avoid local backlash, so they chose not to merge school districts when Indianapolis and Marion County unified in 1970 under "Unigov.""

This is hard to explain to relatives in other cities or states. When I tell a relative that my boys attend Washington Township Schools, a response I'll often hear is, "I thought you lived in Indy, not the suburbs." Then, I explain that I do live in Indy, but there are 11 schools districts and Indianapolis Public Schools is not the only school district in Indy. The only explanation I can give is the truth. We have 11 school districts because of racism. The townships were mostly white in 1970 and they didn't want to integrate into one big school district.

Then, integration was forced in Indianapolis through the desegregation busing where students from some neighborhoods within Indianapolis Public Schools were bused out to the townships and my husband and I were counted in that number. When the townships started to become more diverse, white families began to move out of the townships and left Indy for the suburbs. A few years ago, the desegregation busing was completely phased out, but the damage is long lasting and I feel complicit.

When my husband and I were bused out to Lawrence Township, we rode on the bus for over 30 minutes right by cornfields. Over time, the view outside the bus window started to change and new homes were being built. After the "white flight," there was the "minority flight." Some black and brown families who could afford to leave moved out of the boundaries of IPS and into the new subdivisions that were being built in the various township districts that were forced to accept students bused from IPS. My mother-in-law and my parents could have moved but chose to stay. As my father put it, "I have always lived in IPS and I don't need to move now. There are good people in our neighborhood."

Even though my husband and I lived within IPS our whole lives while we attended school, when we were house hunting IPS was not a choice. Our top choice was Lawrence Township and tied for second was Pike Township and Washington Township.

When your family sends you off to college and you return and don't want to live in the neighborhood, you face hell from some family members. We faced hell because as one family member said, "Ya'll did the unthinkable." The unthinkable was choosing not to buy the family home. My grandmother owned a home on Arsenal Ave. My uncle became the next owner and he wanted to sell the home to us, but because the house was in IPS we said no. The lecture we received about playing into the hands of people who were gentrifying the city is one that sticks with me to this day. My family members were right and that's exactly what happened. My uncle sold the home and then it was flipped and resold for more money than it was purchased from him.

This is my 12th year as an educator and this school year and the previous two school years, I have been employed by IPS...and it isn't the easiest truth to admit that I work in a district where I wouldn't buy a house.

Among our black professional friends, we are split into two groups, those of us that live within the township boundaries and those of us that left Indy and moved into the suburbs. Even though most of us lived within IPS' boundaries as kids, none of us choose to live there today. This is why I feel complicit. Part of me wonders how our neighborhoods would be different if those of us who went to college and are now working as professionals would have stayed in our neighborhoods.

I'm not convinced that the 'flight' is solely a race issue; it is also a class issue. I'm not scared to go into my old neighborhood, but I am fully aware of certain activities that take place. I'm also not naïve; I am fully aware this sort of criminal behavior is taking place in the townships and even in the suburbs. Maybe in our search to find a better life, we are ignoring that we could have had a good life if we would have stayed put or stayed in those more diverse neighborhoods. Even as I ponder this thought and conclude

this piece, I still don't see myself selling my house and moving into IPS' boundaries anytime soon.