

Leading During a Time of Uncertainty

By Shawnta S. Barnes – September 22, 2017



Shawnta S. Barnes, Dr. Lewis Ferebee IPS Superintendent & Katharina Shepler at the inaugural Teacher Leader Kick-off Dinner

Last month on August 23 at Ivy Tech Community College Culinary and Conference Center, Indianapolis Public Schools held their inaugural Teacher Leader Kick-off Dinner and I was one of the teacher leaders invited. I have felt the pressure that comes with being a teacher leader and the weight of this pressure has grown since Tuesday, September 19.

Immediately following the school day on Tuesday, September 19, representatives from Indianapolis Public Schools human resources department informed high school staff they would have to reapply to the district if they would like to continue as high school staff for next school year. Staff in specialized roles such as International Baccalaureate, Career and Technical Education or Life Skills are exempt and do not have to reapply. This announcement came less than 24 hours after the Board of School Commissioners approved closing John Marshall Middle School (formerly a high school) and Broad Ripple High School and converting Arlington Community High School and Northwest Community High School into middle schools leaving the district with four remaining high schools: Arsenal Technical High School, Crispus Attucks Medical Magnet High School, George Washington Community High School, and Shortridge High School. I was sitting in one of those meetings since I work at Crispus Attucks. Before I could process the meeting, people were contacting me with their outrage, concern, and support.

Three school years ago, I left my position as an elementary English language learner teacher in MSD of Washington Township, the district where I currently reside and my children attend school, to accept an elementary literacy coach position in IPS. When I arrived to IPS, it was clear the district had a mission to elevate teachers as leaders. I took advantage of those opportunities.

My first year in the district, I was a Change Agent and I worked on a project to enact change in my school. The following school year, I was invited back as a Change Agent Mentor. I was tasked with supporting new and returning Change Agents. I also began taking classes at Marian University to obtain a school administration license through a partnership between IPS and Marian to create a pipeline of school leaders for the district.

In February of last school year, my second year in the district, I received a gut punch, one that would test the leadership skills I was learning in my Marian classes and putting into practice as a Change Agent Mentor. I learned I was being

displaced from my elementary school. My literacy coach position was eliminated and replaced with the Opportunity Culture (OC) position Multi-Classroom Leader (MCL). I was displaced because this particular MCL position was designed for a person to coach teachers in both literacy and math in addition to working with students; OC gives principals the flexibility to design the roles which means an OC position at one school may look differently at another school. I have a P-12 reading license, but not an elementary license so I could not apply for the role.

I had embedded myself into the culture of the school, brought a K-2 STEM Challenge Club through The STEM Connection and a learning garden through The Kitchen Community. I was invested and wanted to stay, but that option was taken away. Any time people brought up negative comments about my displacement, I tried my best to be upbeat and positive. Although leaving Wendell Phillips was bittersweet, I was proud I left a learning garden behind (gardening is something I am passionate about) and built strong relationships with the teachers I coached. The teacher who took the MCL position that replaced my job was a teacher I coached, so I left a leader too.

Before I worked as an elementary English language learner teacher, I served as a middle school English teacher for eight years. I decided to return to secondary after my displacement and I accepted a 9th/10th grade English/language arts MCL position at Crispus Attucks, a school my grandmother graduated from in 1936 when it was the only high school black students could attend. I was proud to accept a job there, but then the negativity, in the form of criticism, came again. "Shawnta, you're a hypocrite. Why would you take one of those Opportunity Culture positions after Opportunity Culture forced you out of a job?" I was told I was stupid to go back to secondary now when the district was about to make drastic changes and I was also told I was just chasing money because the Opportunity Culture roles came with a significant stipend. Honestly, I thought about leaving IPS. Not only did I think about it, I interviewed outside of the district and was offered a job that would have paid more than my current position, but money doesn't trump family; it was about choosing the best job that fit my family dynamic and Attucks was it even though I knew that displacement could again be my reality.

Seven months after I was displaced in IPS, I was told I was getting displaced again. It sucks. The uncertainty is not comfortable, but I can't get caught up in my

feelings. I teach for part of the day and coach teachers for the other part of the day and I have my colleagues and 90 students counting on me. I need to bring stability when I am in front of my students. I can't bring my anxiety and my fears about what's next to the classroom. My students already have enough on their plates. They have to decide which high school to attend next year. I was one of the staff members that gave students the presentation about the district's new choice model where they select their high school based on the career pathway it offers.

In the middle of one presentation, a student said, "Mrs. Barnes, which school are you going to be at next year? I want to be at that school." I replied, "Mrs. Barnes will be here for you whether we are at the same school or not." I meant every word. Younger me, might have vented a bit about my situation. Today, as a teacher leader, who now has a school administration license, I don't know what's next for me yet. I know I refuse to get caught up in the negativity because it will show up in the classroom. That is what leaders do and it's hard.

I encourage my fellow IPS colleagues to keep our students in the forefront of their minds. When my dad found out I was being displaced again he gave me this advice:

Shawnta, if you can't deal with being shuffled about leave IPS. Don't worry about what people have to say. You have to do what best for you, Jermaine (my husband) and the boys. If want to stay in IPS, even with the uncertainty, then stay. Regardless of what you decide, do you your job well this school year. Don't start slacking because you are frustrated. Do your best so even if you leave, no one will be able to discount your work.

Although I am considered a teacher leader in IPS, each teacher in front of students is a leader and we have to lead our students in the right direction even when we can't see the road ahead for ourselves.