

Move the Conversation from School Type to School Success

By Shawnta S. Barnes – May 5, 2017



Spring 2006, I was in class at Purdue University. It was my last semester before graduation and we had work time in class to complete a project. Recalling I was from Indianapolis, my professor called me over to tell me about a potential opportunity in Brownsburg, IN located right outside of the west side of Indy. She informed me the demographics of Brownsburg schools were changing and they were looking for qualified diverse candidates to apply. I had not considered what type of school I wanted to work in; all I wanted was my first professional job. Later, I applied and was hired.

After the first month, I realized this was not the best fit for me. This realization did not stop me from trying to be the best teacher I could be during my first year in the classroom for my 8th grade English & American Studies students. In February, I turned in my resignation stating I was not returning the following school year. Parents were surprised I wanted to leave. One parent told me I would probably be the only non-white teacher her child would ever have in Brownsburg. Another parent wrote me a note:

Mrs. Barnes,

B--- told us you are leaving Brownsburg schools for another job. I wanted to thank you for helping him have such a great year. He has enjoyed your class and has spoken of you often. Best wishes in your new adventure.

Although I had some good memories in this suburban school district, I knew my calling was as an urban educator. My next job was at Indiana Math & Science Academy (IMSA), a charter school managed by Concept Schools on West 38th street. I began working there the first year it opened in Indianapolis. Now, this school is referred to as IMSA West since there is also a north and south location.



I enjoyed my time there. I grew as an educator and had the freedom to teach however I needed to help students learn. I appreciated the focus on math, science, and student interest clubs. Many times, in urban schools, especially underperforming ones which are typically filled with black and brown students, science, social studies, and the arts are the first to be removed from the curriculum and replaced with boring 'drill and kill' activities to help these students pass the standardized tests. I say, "How is that working for you?" Since many of those schools are still failing. Maybe it's time to learn from successful charters.

Even as an English teacher, I was involved in the science aspect of IMSA and I coached a science team that earned third place in the Science Olympiad at Purdue University. I also facilitated an African American literature club and a Mythology literature club because of student interest; all teachers at IMSA had to have a student interest club. My students also had the opportunity to have hands-on experiences off campus at least once a month. Experiences they probably would not have had if they did not attend this school. These activities helped students grow academically and build strong relationships with each other. The off-campus trips my students enjoyed most is when we went to Churchill Downs to learn about horse racing, visited various science museums, and when we went to Perfect North Slopes and learned how to ski and snowboard.



I did eventually leave IMSA, but it was not because of the school or the fact that it was a charter school. I wanted to obtain a master's degree and have children. By leaving IMSA and accepting a job in Wayne Township, I made \$13,000 more a year and was able to complete my Master's degree debt free and pay for infertility treatments that helped me have my two wonderful children. I loved working IMSA and I still stay in contact with former colleagues. Working there is the reason I know charter schools can work.

As I reflect upon National Charter School week, I wish the conversation would shift focus from whether students should attend a public traditional school versus a public charter school; the conversation should move from school type to school success. If a school is not successful, it should be closed regardless of school type and all schools should be closed based on the same criteria. There is a Chinese proverb that I have displayed on my desk, "The person who says it cannot be done should not interrupt the person who is doing it." If you do not have anything of value to add to the conversation of improving schools and supporting all schools who are helping students have a better future, then step aside and let the rest of us continue the work.