

National Charter School Week: IMSA

By Shawnta S. Barnes – May 11, 2018



According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, “There are 50 million public school students in the United States and charter schools serve nearly 3.2 million of those students in 43 states and D.C.” Indiana is home to a variety of charter schools and during the second and third year of my career in education, I worked at one, the Indiana Math and Science Academy (IMSA). In 2007, I accepted a job during the first year when this charter school was being established. It was a risk because it was a new school and I had limited knowledge about charter schools, but I’m glad it was part of my professional career.

The first campus opened on W. 38th Street in an old department store building as a 6-8 middle school. Today, this campus is known as IMSA-West and serves grades K-8. IMSA also has a second campus, IMSA-North, on Keystone Ave and this campus serves grades K-12. At one point, there was a southside location, but there weren't enough students to maintain three campuses.

Even though I was an English teacher, working at IMSA helped me grow a love of science. I also learned how to cross-curricular plan with colleagues in other content areas. During my time there, students attending the school came from the surrounding township school districts and from IPS. The common thread I heard from parents was the previous school failed their children or gave up on their children.

As a teacher in the second year of my career, I faced a challenge. I had to help these students learn, who were many times several grade levels behind. I also had to convince the families they could trust me as part of the educational team for their children. The two years I spent at IMSA made me a stronger educator. It's hard to motivate students who had teachers give up on them at previous schools and it's hard to close learning gaps, but I wasn't alone in this work. I was supported by phenomenal veterans educators: Keith Brown, Matt Rademacher, Elaine Taylor, Anita Singleton, and Teda Knight-Gavia and all of them still work for IMSA today. When reflecting on why he came to IMSA during the first year and why he remains today, Keith Brown, Economics/Government & History teacher, at IMSA-North shared, "I like the smaller classes which allow me to focus on students' academic needs and help them achieve their goals."

Some charter schools that opened around the same time as IMSA are now closed, but eleven years later, IMSA, across two campuses is still serving the Indianapolis community and building a love of science and math in its students. Some of my family members were even students at the school. One of my cousins had the opportunity to travel to Turkey when she was a student at IMSA-West.

Michael Dunn, Ed.S, Director of Curriculum & Instruction shared:

IMSA has continued to grow academically and has been recognized for its STEM-focused programming and award-winning robotics in addition to its safe and personalized learning environment. At IMSA-North, we have proudly seen 100% college acceptance of our HS seniors.

I also had the opportunity to reach out to two of my former 6th-grade students.

Jazmin Jones, former IMSA-West student:

I believe IMSA had its pros and cons. The pros were the small class sizes, college classes, ivy league mentorship program, and the various field trips they took us on during the school year. As far as the cons, the bus routes were altered frequently and there was not a wide selection of sports to participate in. But, other than, that it was a good/interesting experience.

Bianca Allen, former IMSA-West student:

As far as the school being a smaller atmosphere and the teachers being able to be more hands-on, it was great. That's exactly why I chose that school over a bigger public or township school. I was always quiet, so I wanted to be at a school that fit that. As far as sports and other things, I feel like they could have done more to make the sports experience better and I wish they would've had more of a variety in sport options and took sports more seriously.

As I look back, as a teacher I feel that I knew my students at IMSA well. The staff did home visits. During those visits, we were able to get to know the families and share tips on how the families could support their children's education. I had the opportunity to have clubs for African American literature and Greek Mythology. Because of these clubs, which many of my students signed up for, I was able to extend the learning I didn't have time to cover within the classroom. The best part was the field trips. Out of all the schools where I have been employed, I went on the most field trips with students at IMSA. These field trips, which continue today, give students multiple opportunities to apply the concepts they learn in the classroom. I wasn't surprised that my former students mentioned sports. It was the one

aspect that students missed from their former schools, but now I believe the sports programming is better than it was in year one and year two when I was there.

If you conduct a simple search about charter schools online, you will quickly find information judging families for choosing charter schools. No, every charter school will not work for every child. I have been able to keep in contact with educators and some of my former students from IMSA and I believe the focused curriculum, small class sizes, and opportunities to expand and extend learning is why my former colleagues stayed and why families still choose IMSA today.