

Why This Teacher Leader is Leaving IPS

By Shawnta S. Barnes - June 23, 2018



At the end of the 2017-18 school year, I finished my 12th year as an educator and I finished my 3rd school year in Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS). I will not be returning next school year. IPS created teacher leader positions to give educators the opportunity to lead without transitioning to administration. These roles are also part of IPS' teacher retention strategy. Teacher leaders have the opportunity to earn a stipend ranging from \$5,000-\$18,600.

2015-2016 School Year

When I told people I was leaving an A-rated township school to serve as a literacy coach in an F-rated IPS school, people said I was crazy and that it was a bad career move. The other reason people said I was crazy was because I had to take a \$5,000 pay cut. I'm a risk taker. I knew there was no guarantee that I would be able to obtain a teacher leader position, but I believed I had the ability. During my first year in IPS, I was a K-6 Literacy Coach and served in a teacher leader role as a Change Agent; this role came with a \$5,000 stipend.

Since my school was a failing school, it was labeled a transformation zone school. We had additional district support and we had to implement opportunity culture during the 2016-17 school year. The opportunity culture model creates additional teacher leader roles. Originally, my principal had planned for me to become our school's K-6 Literacy Multi-classroom leader and then he was going to hire a K-6 Math Multi-classroom leader until he realized he couldn't afford it.

I came to IPS during my 10th year as an educator after IPS lifted the pay freeze they had for years which meant I had a higher salary than a 10-year educator who had only worked in IPS their entire career. This particular MCL position would have required me to receive the \$18,600 stipend on top of my salary due to the number of teachers I would have supported. My principal didn't want to displace me. Although I had four licenses at the time (I have five now), I didn't have an elementary or math license so I couldn't coach math. To solve this problem, my role was changed to K-2 Literacy Coach for the 2016-17 school year and I also obtained a new teacher leader role as a Change Agent Mentor; this position also came with a \$5,000 stipend.

My principal then created a 3-4 Math/Literacy MCL position, a 5-6 Math/Literacy MCL position, and a K-2 Math Coach position. I was part of the interview committee and we filled all of the roles and then something unexpected happened.

2016-17 School Year

During the second day of summer professional development, the person hired for the 3-4 MCL role quit. The person we hired as the K-2 Math Coach

became the 3-4 MCL. During the 2016-17 school year, the K-2 Math Coach position was vacant the entire year and K-2 teachers received little math support. To ensure K-2 teachers received support during the 2017-18 school year, my K-2 Literacy Coach position needed to be eliminated and replaced with a K-2 Math/Literacy MCL position.

I had encouraged a few teachers I coached to apply for the K-2 MCL position. One teacher was on the fence about it, so I offered to look at the application with her to show her she was qualified. After looking at the application, I decided to complete one to put my name in the pool. Apparently, the applications were ranked and another building administrator told me I was placed in the top group and that I should expect someone to pick me up. This administrator couldn't take me because his MCL position opening didn't match any of my licenses. I ended up being selected as a high school 9th/10th Grade English/Language Arts MCL, my third job title and teacher leader role in the district. This role came with an \$11,000 stipend.

2017-18 School Year

The summer before the school year began, IPS announced they were eliminating three high school campuses and going from seven high schools to four. Although I was going to be at a high school campus that was going to remain open, I believed there was going to be a big shake-up. My gut feeling was confirmed when IPS announced that all high school employees (except teachers with specialty certifications) would have to reapply for their jobs for the 2018-19 school year. I couldn't reapply for my job, my teacher leader MCL position that was newly created for the 2017-18 school because it was decided that my school would not have opportunity culture teacher leader roles the following school year. This was September 2017 and I was only a little over a month into my new role. *Do you know how hard it is to coach teachers when they don't understand why your position was created in the first place and then they learn your position is going away when the school year ends?*

I fought an uphill battle this past school year externally and internally. Externally, people didn't understand why my role was needed and

internally, I was frustrated because I had three different job titles in three school years. I wanted to improve my craft each year. *How can you improve in a role, when you only have one year in the position?* At least during my first two years in IPS, my role was structured. I knew what was expected of me, but last year, I lived in the “other duties as assigned” part of my job description.

I was only supposed to teach one section of ninth grade. Although I was the 9th/10th grade MCL, I was told my focus would be 9th grade English teachers because we were piloting a ninth-grade academy. When school began, I was told I had to teach three classes instead of one. This allowed the English department to be fully staffed; it hadn't been fully staffed for years. Most students had a long-term sub for English at least once or twice during their time at the school. I didn't want students to have a long-term sub so this made sense. What didn't make sense is me teaching a 9th-grade lesson to 11th graders and finding out from them that it was an 11th grade class on the first day of school. I wasn't able to log in to see my schedule; I only knew the times when I had class. I couldn't use any of the 9th-grade lesson plans I planned over the summer with these 11th graders. I was playing catch-up during the entire year. I taught one class of English 10, and two classes of remedial English 11, and my coaching focus was 9th grade English.

I was frustrated because I was always getting pulled away from my students and my teachers to help with other tasks or attend trainings. I tried my best to be a good coach even though it was tough to coach teachers who were also living in uncertainty about their job for the following school year. Multiple times during the year, my classes were split for days at a time. Not only did people not get why my role was created, they were also burdened with having to incorporate my students into their classroom while I was doing something else.

I felt isolated and on an island. Rarely did anyone come to give me feedback about how I was doing in the role and I was next door to one of our school's administrators. I was told by several colleagues that no one would probably stop by my room because I had excellent classroom management and was perceived to be a good teacher. I wanted feedback; I know I can always get better.

I had one mini-observation completed by administration on Sept 15 that lasted for about ten minutes. The other two evaluations I had was from a lady from Standards for Success. Standards for Success is the platform that houses our evaluations online. The first time she came was when all teachers were doing a make-up work day. We all had to do a make-up work day because there were too many students earning Ds and Fs in the building. I wasn't teaching and I told her that we were making up work. She said, "Don't worry; I already know." She watched me help a student with an assignment and wrote up a nice little evaluation. The second time she came, I wasn't teaching because my students were taking a test. Once again, she wrote up a nice evaluation. I had no long evaluations, just three minis and you are supposed to have four minis and two longs. The feedback was worthless to me because it didn't help me improve as an educator.

I could detail more, but I don't want to belabor the point that this wasn't an ideal role or what I had expected. I had to figure out whether I wanted to stay in IPS, switch to another district, or leave K-12 altogether. Depending on which day you talked to me, I would have a different response. What was certain was if I returned, it would be my fourth job title in four school years. I needed stability; I wanted to improve and you can't improve when your role changes every single year. I interviewed inside and outside of the district and was made multiple offers, including an offer from a highly coveted magnet school in IPS. I turned offers down because some school interview committees simply didn't convince me they were the best fit for me or just made me feel that they were just trying to diversify their staff for the sake of checking that box off of their to-do list.

On Thursday, May 31, my husband came to my school and helped me move my boxes, boxes I had packed all school year inside of my cabinet. I didn't see the point of unpacking since my position was a one year deal. Since I didn't accept a job in IPS and hadn't resigned, I got forced placed into position on Friday, June 1st...in my current school. I was told I would be the Reading Specialist, a newly created role for the 2018-19 school year. I laughed when I read the email. I just found it odd that human resources, not administration, would inform me that I was being assigned to a different role in my current school a few days before the school year ended. This email also stated, "This concludes our placement effort for you for the upcoming school year. If you

choose not to accept this assignment, you will need to provide notice of your intent to resign or retire.”

I learned I wasn't the only person forced placed into his or her current school. A few of those people who were forced placed had interviewed for their role, told they weren't selected, and then forced placed into their role again. *Who wants to stay at a school where your principal doesn't want you or where your principal doesn't even bother to tell you he or she wants you to stay?*

Resigning from IPS

I turned in my resignation letter on Friday, June 22, 2018 and it was hard. I going to miss all of the students, families, and teachers I served. I had written the letter weeks ago, but just couldn't seem to turn it in. If someone from administration would have told me they wanted me to be the Reading Specialist, I might have considered staying. As of this publication, I have no clue what this position would have entailed because no one ever spoke to me about it outside of the email I received from human resources. If I believed I would have some stability, I would stay. If I believed that next school year, if I had stayed at my school that I wouldn't live in “other duties as assigned,” I would stay.

I don't regret coming to IPS and it was not a bad career move. I have made invaluable relationships, had wonderful opportunities, and have grown as a leader, but you have to know when to move on and when to change course. It's time for me to make this move.

I was an IPS kid in kindergarten and first grade; I have little cousins currently in IPS. I want more than anything for IPS to succeed in improving all of its schools. To those who are returning or will be brand new to IPS, I wish you luck and hope you are up to the task because all Indianapolis students, especially IPS kids deserve the best.

So, what's next for me? I'll detail that in an upcoming article. Stay tuned!

Read the follow-up pieces: [Departing IPS Teacher Leader Answers Your Questions](#) and [It Isn't in My Blood to Walk Away from Education](#).

1 thought on “Why This Teacher Leader is Leaving IPS”



Pingnan Shi says:

[June 25, 2018 at 2:30 pm Edit](#)

Sorry to hear about your experience at IPS. I have taught at a private Christian K-12 school in 7 years, and I decided to leave because I can not teach my students in the best way I know. They (admin and school board) don't really care about the kids. I will start my own private school this fall in Fountain Square and try a different education model. I believe real education has to be done between teachers and students, others (including parents) have to pay supportive roles. Unfortunately, you can not do that in the current education model.
