



Indy Town Hall: School Choice is the Black Choice

By Shawnta S. Barnes – December 16, 2018

On Monday, November 26, *The 74* launched Keeping It 100, a publication focused on amplifying the voices of people of color about education issues facing children of color. This launch came a week before *The 74* and Roland Martin kicked off School Choice is the Black Choice Town Hall series. On Sunday, December 2, at Central Library, Indianapolis was the first city to participate in this series.

At *Indy K12*, our focus is calling out education issues facing children of color, especially black children. All of the writers of our publication are black; so of course, we were all in attendance at this event. Moreover, this event brought out many of the movers and shakers in our community. Some of the people I saw people in attendance were people from the NAACP, the Indiana Department of Education Cultural Competency Advisory Council, IPS Community Coalition, the Mind Trust, Stand for Children, university instructors, and parents who children attend private schools, charter schools, Indianapolis Public Schools, and township schools.

Although I am glad these people gave up part of their Sunday evening to listen to a discussion about education and black children, the most important person I wanted in attendance was my husband. I attend a lot of education events solo or with my children because my husband is working. Since free child care was offered (and if you are having an event, I strongly urge you to remove this barrier of attendance), we were able to sit and listen uninterrupted during this town hall. After we left, we discussed some of the issues that stood out to us. Below are some conclusions we made.

Black school leaders aren't necessarily doing a better job of keeping black kids in the classroom.

In his opening remarks, Roland Martin stated, "We have to confront charter schools that are expelling kids at a higher rate." Since he opened with that remark, I expected to hear him address it during the town hall especially since I saw Tindley Accelerated Schools CEO Kelly Marshall on the panel. Tindley is known for two things in Indy, high academic achievement and high suspension rates.

First, Martin tackled academics. About the Tindley charter network of schools, Marshall shared, "Tindley is doing very well at the secondary level." I wish Martin would have pushed back and asked, "What about the primary level?" I know time was limited; since it was, Martin told the panel, "Moving forward, very well and good job means nothing to me." To which Marshall replied, "100% of our seniors have graduated since Tindley has opened its doors." Isn't it easy to have a 100% graduation rate when you suspend students until they move to another school?

Then, Martin moved on to discipline. "Are those students staying in your schools who have discipline issues? Are you working with them, or are they being expelled?" Marshall responded, "In transparency, Tindley has a very high suspension rate, very high. "What does that mean?" Martin retorted. Marshall replied, "Meaning we are suspending, I would say, twice that of the traditional public schools." Earlier in the evening, Marshall told the audience that the various

Tindley campuses had 90% plus black students. As a black parent, why would I want to pull my black sons out of their current school to have them potentially suspended twice as much than at their current school? That's why our sons will never attend a Tindley school.

CFI should not be replicated.

In full disclosure, I was offered a job by a Center for Inquiry (CFI) school once, and two additional times, they reached out to me about a position. The fact that I would interview for a job at a CFI school does mean I believe they have a good model. During the town hall, Roland Martin made a good point. He suggested that good schools should be replicated. He asked Aleesia Johnson, who was recently named the interim Superintendent of Indianapolis Public Schools but was the Deputy Superintendent of Academics at the time of this event, which IPS schools were doing well and should be replicated. She mentioned CFI to which people audibly disagreed in the audience.

There are four CFI campuses. Here are the campuses and their data.

CFI Campus	Number of Black Students in the School's Population	2017-18 Accountability Grade
CFI School 2	41 out of 439 (9.3%)	C
CFI School 27	162 out of 480 (33.8%)	C
CFI School 70	113 out of 371 (30.5%)	B
CFI School 84	22 out of 438 (5%)	A

According to this data from [IDOE Compass](#), there are 338 black children attending a CFI school; that is 19.6% of their student population. Half of their schools currently have an average grade. Only CFI School 84 has maintained an A rating consistently, but when you look back at the previous grades of School 27, which serves the most black students out of all of its campuses, you will find one C and three Ds. This is one reason I assert CFI should not be replicated. First, they have to improve the schools they already replicated.

Second, I'm not convinced that plopping the CFI model onto a failing school will automatically work. I got to know Aleesia Johnson when I was a literacy coach at Wendell Phillips. It was a failing school that is now a restart innovation school. I even interviewed her for my [innovation restart series](#) and attended a few innovation restart events where she spoke. Based on these interactions with her, I believe she genuinely cares about Indianapolis' children. No matter how nasty or irate attendees were, she held her composure, heard them out, and offered the best answers she could give.

I know for a fact that some educators want to work at a CFI school because they want to get away from those struggling students, who are typically black, in other IPS schools. I know that a former Wendell Phillips teacher was hired at a CFI school. I also know CFI hired a teacher who was pushed out a township school because of inappropriate comments toward and about students and teachers of color. Schools are really good at passing the trash, and some teachers are looking to work at an 'easy' school instead of improving their craft. Improving failing schools takes more than the right model; it also takes the right teachers. Not all teachers have the skill or the desire to work with all students.

One of the questions I was asked in a CFI interview was, "Do you believe all students can learn?" I have never been asked that question in an interview. My response was to look quizzically and say, "There is only one acceptable answer to this question. Yes." We all know that saying, "Yes" and believing it is two separate issues. Until all CFI campuses become more diverse and maintain at least a B rating, I do not believe we should replicate this model in any other IPS school. They need to prove they can do better with the black children they are currently serving.

And yes, I'm aware that my strong statement will probably burn any other possible job opportunities at a CFI campus, but being an advocate for black children means speaking tough truths. We have enough black people in our community keeping their mouths shut because they are only concerned about themselves.

Even college education people don't understand innovation in Indianapolis.

During this event, a lot of side conversations happened in the audience when Roland Martin tried to get an understanding of the innovation school network within Indianapolis Public Schools. Check out this dialogue between Alessia Johnson and Roland Martin.

Roland Martin: What is an innovation network school?

Aleesia Johnson: In 2014, our state legislature passed a law...that said we could restart a school that was underperforming chronically with an external partner, so we did that. The first ones launched in 2015. You could launch as a school that was within the district and also as a school that has a charter. The district does not authorize charter schools. In Indianapolis, those charters are authorized through the mayor's office.

Martin: So you have innovation schools that work with external partners, but you don't call those charter schools?

Johnson: Some of them have charters and some of those don't.

Martin: I'm just trying to figure out why ya'll making this so hard.

After this exchange, my husband turned to me and said, "I'm confused." My husband knows more than most people about innovation in IPS because I worked at a school that is now an innovation restart school. However, he didn't realize there were different variations of the innovation model, nor did he understand why there were four different innovation pathways. After the event, my husband said, "Roland probably got on the plane and said, 'What the hell is going on in Indy?'"

I don't find anything wrong with using innovative ideas and models. But if college educated people can't understand the models, how are families supposed to understand the models and pick a good school for their black children?

Township schools need to do a better job of engaging black families.

In the article "[Indianapolis Consolidated Everything But Its Schools – Leaving 11 Different Districts Where Black Children Are Often Left Behind](#)," I wrote, "We have charter schools; we have a large school voucher program, which allows impoverished children to attend private schools, and we have school districts like the MSD of Washington Township and the MSD of Wayne that let out-of-boundary students attend their schools." Part of choice in Indianapolis is the fact there are eleven school districts within Indianapolis, but the only one represented during the town hall panel was Indianapolis Public Schools. The Superintendents of the MSD of Lawrence Township and the MSD of Washington Township are black. In Lawrence Township, 45.2% of their students are black, and in Washington Township, 40.2% of their students are black. Why weren't these Indianapolis school districts or any of the other districts outside of Indianapolis Public Schools represented at the event?

What resonated with me most is when Martin said:

Also, I don't play the game of teachers suck and charters are great, or all traditional schools are horrible and charters are the silver bullet. That's a lie. The reality is if a traditional school is working, I'm down with it. If a charter is working, I'm down with it. I'm down with magnet schools, home schools, online schools, technical schools. If it is successfully educating our children, I have no problem with it. If it is failing, I will not accept it.

Too many schools, regardless of type, are failing black children in Indianapolis. I hope this event is a catalyst for change. We have to move beyond writing and talking about it; we have to roll up our sleeves and get to work.