



Opinion: Aleesia Johnson Can Move IPS in the Right Direction

By Educator Barnes – June 22, 2019

Alessia Johnson was named the 33rd superintendent of Indianapolis Public Schools, and she is the first black woman to hold this position in the district. Johnson's selection was the worse kept secret. Despite, two other finalists being interviewed publically with Johnson on Tuesday, June 18, I fully expected the school board to choose Johnson, and I believe she is up to the task to lead the district.

I worked in Indianapolis Public Schools for three school years until my multi-classroom leader role at the high school level was eliminated, and I returned to a previous district. During my time in IPS, I was able to get to know Aleesia Johnson. I have heard her present at several schools. I even participated in a presentation she gave at Wendell Phillips because my principal was unable to be present. I also had the opportunity to interview her for Indy K12 during my innovation restart series. Based on these numerous interactions and conversations, I found her to be genuine and thoughtful. Even at meetings where people were irate, she always kept her composure, listened to what was said, and provided a response. Also, if you run into her outside of district events, she will speak to you. I can't say the same of some people who rise to district roles. This is the type of leadership IPS needs. People need to be heard, and people deserve a response.

Although Johnson had tough competition, I knew she would be selected. Dr. Devon Horton, who is currently the chief of schools of Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Kentucky, reminded stakeholders of Dr. Ferebee. It seemed that he might use IPS as a stepping stone to a big and better district. As I watched the interviews and live-tweeted, he appeared to be the most nervous of the three candidates. Dr. Young, assistant superintendent of Pike township, had the most experience in regards to a superintendent's role, as Alessia Johnson only served as a deputy superintendent for one year. He was a strong contender but was a bit unfocused during the interview. At one point he said, "Can you repeat the question? I went on a tangent there." This was not the only time he needed a question repeated. He has extensive traditional public school experience which is a plus; however, his response to an innovation schools question was weak. He said, "I'm not pro or anti charter/innovation schools." That was simply a nonresponse. How can you lead a school district with innovation schools and not have a stance about it? I found this response disappointing. What Dr. Young brought to the table is the issue some naysayers have with Johnson.

Johnson's was a principal of a charter school. The fact that she was the district's innovation officer before becoming the deputy superintendent makes some stakeholders believe she is going to carry out Dr. Ferebee's plan for the district. Yes, I believe it would be great if she also brought an extensive traditional public school background along with her charter school background to the district. As an educator that has worked in public charter schools and traditional public schools, I know there are valuable experiences in both school types. Even without this experience, I still believe she can do the job. Also, it is insulting to suggest this intelligent black woman would just blindly follow the plans of her predecessor instead of creating her own plan and shaping her own vision for the district.

Johnson has a hard road ahead. Being a superintendent is a tough role. There are groups who do not like her. What I find disappointing about some of the naysayers were they were quick to point out all the faults with Johnson but did not say much about the potential pitfalls of other candidates. You can't be out here saying you are helping families when you won't provide a full picture to the people you are supposedly helping.

Indianapolis Public Schools has many areas of growth, and hopefully, during Aleesia Johnson's time at the helm of the district, IPS will start improving and families will return to the district.