

## 53 Years Since “I Have A Dream” and We’re Still Being Excluded

By Shawnta S. Barnes – January 16, 2017



Every evening, we ask our boys to tell us something interesting they learned at school. On Friday, one of our sons shared he learned about a great man named Martin Luther King, Jr. When I inquired what he had specifically learned, my five-year-old son replied, “He wrote a long speech. He told people that black and white people should be able to eat at the same restaurant. He said black and white people are equal. But

Mommy, I don't know what black and white people being equal means." I explained to my son, that he, a black child, should be treated the same way as a white child or a child of any color. When I asked his twin brother what he had learned at school he just shrugged his shoulders. After much prompting, he told me he, too, learned about Dr. King, but he could not provide any specifics.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream Speech" in Washington D.C. he said, "One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land." My son who frequently shrugs his shoulders when I ask him what he has learned at school each day has felt like an exile at school. A few months into school year he told me he was afraid he was going to get kicked out of school forever. Why would a kindergartner who just began his education have this fear? He, along with many other black males in Indiana and across the nation, has been kicked out of class.

Although, we are years past Brown v. the Board of Education when separate schools were declared unconstitutional, our minority children are still being separated from their peers by being excluded from the classroom and suspended at disproportionate rates. Last year, the U.S. Department of Education released 2013-14 suspension data which revealed one in five black boys were suspended. In Indiana, the number was higher, one in four black boys.

If we look within our city, we have come a long way. In its beginnings, Crispus Attucks High School could only enroll black students due to segregation, but now it's a medical magnet school serving the diverse population of Indianapolis. Unfortunately, we have not come far enough. Just as Dr. King shared in 1963, "There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" There are people today still asking, "At what point will we be satisfied?"

We will not be satisfied until schools understand and acknowledge suspension and exclusionary practices are not only harmful to our black children, but to all students. We will not be satisfied until schools have real conversations about implicit bias in the classroom. We will not be satisfied until schools implement and maintain solutions to keep our kids in the classroom at the same rates as other students. The research has been done to show empathy, restorative justice, and teacher/student relationships are a few of the best practices to keep our black children and all children in the classroom. The Indiana Department of Education provided the handbook, "Alternatives to Suspensions and Expulsions" on its website, and yet, our suspensions rates are higher than national rates.

I have a shirt at home that has a picture of the faces of Dr. King and President Obama with the caption, "The Dreamer and the Dream." Although Dr. King's vision has become clearer since the Civil Rights Act was passed, the dream has not been fully realized just because President Obama was in office for eight years. Dr. King stated, "This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism." What was the point of us achieving the right for our children to be included inside of schools when they are excluded within the same system that is supposed to serve and teach them? With the transition of the nation's leadership taking place later this week, now is the time more than ever to continue to work to make Dr. King's dream a reality for the children of today and the children of tomorrow.