



INDIANAPOLIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS IS DEDICATED TO 'REBUILDING STRONGER'

By Alpha Garrett, Public Information Manager, Indianapolis Public Schools

“Sometimes we don’t choose the moment – the moment chooses us.”



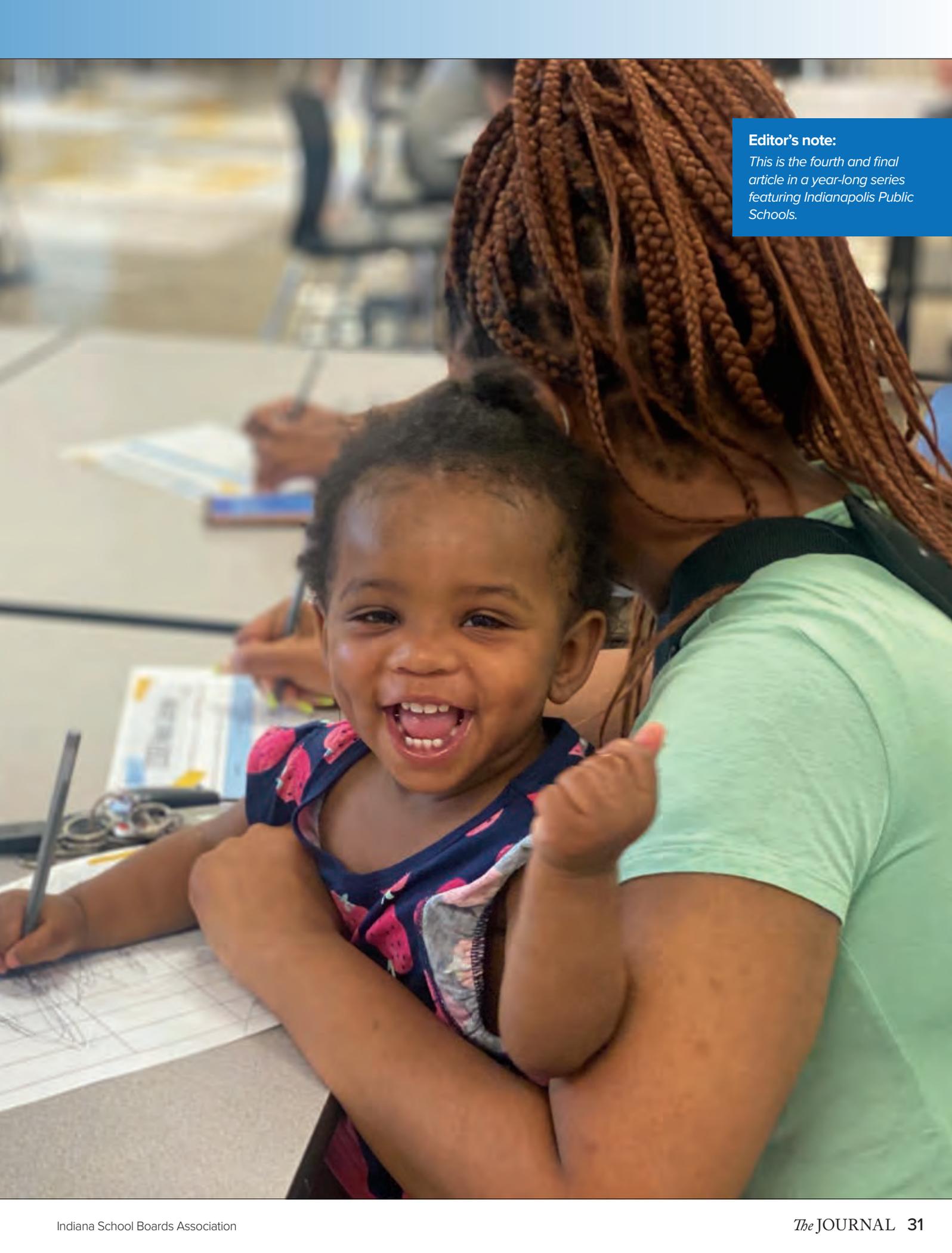
Alpha Garrett

Dr. Aleesia Johnson, Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) superintendent, delivered this statement during her 2021 State of the District address on September 22, where she highlighted some of the district’s triumphs during the COVID-19 pandemic, and also laid out some of its current and future challenges.

Like many districts across the country, IPS is working under a variety of obstacles: from financial constraints to equity barriers to COVID (including learning loss and PPE and other expenses), and declines in enrollment.

But instead of leading through the lens of a deficit mindset, the superintendent of the state’s largest school district has her sights set positively and optimistically on the future.

“I can’t have the honor of leading this incredible IPS community day in and day out and not be optimistic,” said Johnson. “And because we have a moment that may never come again,



Editor's note:

This is the fourth and final article in a year-long series featuring Indianapolis Public Schools.



“THERE’S AN **OPPORTUNITY HERE TO IMAGINE** WHAT KINDS OF SCHOOL MODELS – NEW OR EXISTING – THAT WE WANT TO SEE ACROSS OUR DISTRICT IN ORDER TO **ENSURE ACCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS**. AND WE HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO CREATE THAT VISION **TOGETHER.**”

– Alesia Johnson, *Superintendent, Indianapolis Public Schools*

a moment that happens when the lines of need and opportunity cross, I refuse to miss it.”

That moment, according to Johnson, is “an intersection of one-time funds (COVID federal relief funds), urgent needs and commitments not to go back to an old, not great normal after this pandemic.”

Using Johnson’s State of the District speech, let’s set the stage for this pivotal moment.

TRIUMPHS – CELEBRATING OUR WINS

Nationwide, the pandemic has hurt schools, but Johnson acknowledges how the district has “taken care of kids and families during the pandemic by opening our schools safely for our children. These are astonishingly complicated undertakings,” she said.

While many only see the outcome, there are unseen details (including people) that helped to make this a reality.

“Behind those unseen details are magnificent people – starting

with our principals and teachers, who have remained available, nimble and innovative in altering teaching and learning,” said Johnson. “And so many staff, at the school and central levels, who’ve dealt with everything from devices to ventilation to protective equipment and meals to meet the needs of our students.”

Triumphs, however, are never devoid of challenges and obstacles.

THE CHALLENGES – OVERCOMING OUR OBSTACLES

In her State of the District address, Johnson, who was named superintendent in June 2019, focused on economic mobility, equity and enrollment as some of IPS’ challenges.

Economic mobility

Economic mobility – the ability to rise from where you started in life – is worse here than almost any other city in the Midwest,

and among the worst in our country. According to a report this year from IUPUI, children from low-income households who grew up in Indianapolis in the 1980s went on to earn an average of \$27,000 a year – the same as their parents did.

“For our kids to have good choices, they have to be ready, with the skills that will make them designers and leaders, readers and innovators, critical thinkers and decision-makers. They have to be prepared for the path they’ve chosen – whether that’s college, or some other kind of training for a rewarding career. But only some of our students leave our schools ready in those ways,” said Johnson.

The district aspires for every student in its high schools to complete a Future Ready Pathway that will set them up for real-world success. Today, however, only a third of IPS students graduate having completed a pathway that gives them that preparation.

“But, starting next school year, 100 percent of our freshmen will choose one and get started. That’s just one example of how we can build a different future for our students,” said Johnson.

Equity

Similarly, IPS has fantastic programs that set students on a path to college, and professional careers, like International Baccalaureate and Reggio Emilia.

“However, when we examine who most benefits from these models, what we find is that while almost three-quarters of IPS’s K-8 students identify as students of color, only 41% of students in these programs identify as students of color,” said Johnson. “There’s an opportunity here to imagine what kinds of school models – new or existing – that we want to see across our district in order to ensure access for all students. And we have the opportunity to create that vision together.”

According to Johnson, you can look at the academic data from IPS, and quite frankly, across our state, and see how these racial disparities play out in the outcomes. Those disparities existed before anyone had heard of COVID-19, which has both revealed and deepened inequities.

Enrollment & Proficiency Gaps

Over the past year, as we all navigated COVID, student attendance (whether in-person or virtual) dropped by 10 percent.

Student learning suffered badly too – the

number of students at the lowest level of proficiency grew by 18 percent in math and 12 percent in English Language Arts. Proficiency gaps grew for Black, Latino, low-income, and English Language Learner students. Referrals for mental health supports have increased by 12 percent so far this year.

“I will not sugar-coat this – those are big impacts on our kids’ learning and well-being,” said Johnson.

IPS could maintain the status quo, especially as it continues to navigate through a global pandemic, and not tackle these challenges now. But as a visionary, Johnson sees this as an opportunity – the right time – to move in ways to change the future of the district.

THE RIGHT TIMING – NOW

Johnson says there are three main reasons now is the time to move.

The **first reason** is IPS’ iron-clad commitment not to go back to the old, pre-pandemic normal.

“The pandemic hurt us. But it’s also forced us to learn new approaches,” said Johnson. “One of our principals, Andrea Hunley, said it so well in a New York Times interview:

‘This is my 10th year as a school administrator, and I have never felt such a high level of energy around transforming education. We had to cope through the pandemic. We had to adjust all these different practices. And I feel from teachers, from parents, from the kids: We’re not going back to the way that things used to be.’

Second is the extraordinary, but brief, infusion of federal COVID recovery funds. These funds won’t support long-term expenditures, like new positions or pay raises, because they disappear after three years. But they allow IPS to begin



considering shifts in its offerings, systems and facilities that have long been out of reach.

Emergency Federal funds for IPS district schools total \$213 million, and the last of those dollars must be spent by September 2024.

“We’re investing immediately in accelerating learning. We’re continuing to ensure every student access to a device and the internet. We’re making our buildings safer to deal with COVID, and bringing on more nurses,” said Johnson. “But at the same time, we’re not going to miss the chance to put these funds toward changes that matter for the long-term.”

The **third reason** is that IPS has to make systemic, structural changes now, because the district’s long-term budget isn’t sustainable. This isn’t new, but it’s a problem the district has to face.

Over the past several years, IPS has done some things that were unarguably vital, but that increased the district’s costs: built supports for high-need students; invested in high-quality

curriculum; and given raises to staff (which also allows IPS to remain competitive).

Then there’s the issue of equitable state funding.

“Funding from the state hasn’t kept up, because much larger increases have gone to districts with significantly less poverty, a truly regressive pattern that confuses equality with equity, which we’re continuing to fight,” said Johnson.

“Statewide, total tuition support has increased 21% since 2013–14, while the IPS share has grown only 6%. Our citizens generously approved a funding referendum a couple of years ago – but that met only part of the need. We’ve made reductions at the central office, and we’ve recognized savings over time in areas like transportation, energy management, and staffing.”

Ultimately, IPS’ finances are headed in the wrong direction.

“The literal bottom line is, if we change nothing, we’ll go into the red in 2028,” said Johnson. “While that may sound like a long way away, it’s not.”



Grit
Inspire
Respect
Collaboration



We inspire through exceptional execution in design

George Link, AIA, LEED®, AP
 Sarah Schuler, AIA
(812) 423-7729
vpsarch.com

We design more than a building. We design transformational experiences through innovative partnerships to foster emotional connections to an environmentally optimized place.

f in

“IT’S TIME TO **REINVENT, REBUILD, REDESIGN** – RETHINKING THE SHAPE OF OUR DISTRICT, HOW WE SPEND RESOURCES, HOW WE BUILD ANEW AND USE AND IMPROVE THE BUILDINGS WE HAVE, HOW WE MAKE SURE **EXCELLENT OFFERINGS EXIST FOR ALL OF OUR STUDENTS** IN ALL OF OUR NEIGHBORHOODS.”

– Aleesia Johnson, Superintendent, Indianapolis Public Schools

IPS has continued to prove its ability to shift and change throughout the course of this pandemic. “But the time to make structural changes is now, while we have time for a thoughtful conversation that involves our whole community,” she said.

REBUILDING STRONGER – THE COMMUNITY

Johnson’s vision for a stronger IPS includes a district that celebrates the diversity and the possibility of all district children; offers a family of schools that doesn’t sort, but offers choices; and one in which each building is safe and warm in every sense.

“The kind of building that shows children we think they, and their learning, matter. A place where students see themselves represented in what’s displayed on the walls and in their classrooms. A place where they are seen and valued and loved,” said Johnson. “With classes and unexpected offerings that are challenging in the best sense, pushing their minds to go further. Learning through meaningful projects or collaborative learning with their peers.”

Johnson and the IPS Board of School Commissioners understand that for real sustainable change to happen, the entire IPS community has to be involved.

The engagement of parents, students, staff, community partners and anyone interested in improving the lives of IPS students started Sept. 27 with the first of a series of in-person and virtual Community Conversations scheduled throughout the city.

IPS is currently in the “dreaming and scheming” phase of the “Rebuilding Stronger” process. These conversations are part of a year-long initiative to make decisions with the voices of the IPS community at the center.

After hearing from the community, district leadership will share potential designs for action, near the turn of the year, and then come together around a more complete “Rebuilding Stronger” plan before this time next year.

At every step, IPS will remain transparent and provide ongoing opportunities for engagement by all.

“It’s time to reinvent, rebuild, redesign – rethinking the shape of our district, how we spend resources, how we build anew and use and improve the buildings we have, how we make sure excellent offerings exist for all of our students in all of our neighborhoods,” said Johnson.

To join this conversation, be part of the process, and learn more about “Rebuilding Stronger,” visit www.myips.org. 🗳️

