

THE NEED TO DISMANTLE INEQUITIES

in K-12 Public Education

By Aleesia Johnson, IPS Superintendent and Michael O'Connor, IPS Board of School Commissioners



Aleesia Johnson



Michael O'Connor

George Floyd was laid to rest on June 10. The very next day, his brother, Philonise Floyd, courageously testified before Congress and asked what a Black man's life is worth.

The question of the worth of a Black life should trouble us all. And as Superintendent of Indianapolis Public Schools and Board President of the District, respectively, we want to make this question front and center in how we talk about schools. The resources this district, this state, and this country choose to prioritize, the decisions we make about our budget, and how hard we fight to dismantle an inequitable system, are a reflection of what lives we truly value.

At IPS, 72% of our students are students of color, and 42% are Black. From birth to graduation, we see the way our most fundamental systems value their lives differently every single day. Black infants are more than twice as likely than white babies to die before their first birthday. Black and Latinx children are 2-3 times more likely to live in poverty than White children. And, heartbreakingly, Black children make up 13.1% of all youth in Indiana, but a staggering 32.8% of youth in state prisons.

Just look at a map of coronavirus cases – and deaths – in Indiana: most are concentrated in our urban district here in Indianapolis. Zoom in further to see that the most impacted areas of our city are the communities with more families of color. That's in keeping with national patterns, where Black families are being hit the hardest everywhere.

Our district was established in 1853. The first Black female superintendent was appointed exactly a year ago. 167 years. That's how long it took. So, while the decision was heralded and celebrated as yet another barrier broken, we should instead be asking what took so long for the Black girls we serve to be able to finally see themselves reflected in our leader.

All of this connects to the groundswell of anger and protest we're seeing here and across the country. It begins with the murder of Black men with impunity over and over again. It is generations of anger, grief

and frustration about growing up in a system designed to be inequitable. It's about years of moving way too slowly – and how often it seems like we are moving backwards. It is about seeing every day the way our world is built to most advantage those who have privilege already. It's about how rarely we lift up and value Black voices.

This inequitable system was in place long before coronavirus started, and now the shift to distance learning only seeks to exacerbate it even more – unless we act boldly and move urgently. You see, school provides so much more than a classroom and books. We are often the sole place our students can seek meals, mental counseling and health care, and even access to a computer or working wifi.

Sixty-five percent of students in IPS qualify for free and reduced-price meals because of low income levels. So when schools shut down, the first thing we had to do – before even figuring out virtual curriculum – was to figure out how to keep them fed. From the beginning of school closures to the end of the school year, IPS alone served 423,346 meals.

Once food was in place, we had to next tackle infrastructure for learning. IPS had 6,000 students taking high school coursework that needed the right technology for digital learning essentially overnight. Of these, at least half did not have access to a device with a keyboard that they could use for school work. About 30% did not have access to a reliable internet connection.

But before we could focus on how to secure and pay for technology, we first had to figure out who were those students who needed it. More than 100 IPS staff members spent their time calling all of our high school families to determine which of them needed laptops, and to confirm reliable, safe addresses for them. These phone calls took place in at least five languages – English, Spanish, French, Swahili and Arabic – to ensure we were able to communicate with all our families.

Reaching our families – families who are regularly impacted by housing and financial instability – was no easy task. After two full days of this phone banking, we made contact with only 40% of our families. Many families have disconnected lines or nonworking numbers – a problem made worse by people losing their jobs and income. Many others are still working because they are essential

workers and are not available to answer their phones. And then there are the 5% of IPS's students who are homeless, meaning we needed to coordinate with caseworkers at the shelters where they live, many of which are closed.

The challenges don't stop there. Internet access is the most fundamental inequity facing our community, and not something we alone can fix. In a world where education cannot happen without the internet, we need a comprehensive community solution to provide reliable, affordable access to everyone.

All of the work we need to do comes with a price tag, and we need lots of help paying for it, especially with recession looming. And we need collaboration across all teams to fight for it. Federal, state and local government support is critical, but the reality is that gaps still remain. And, as we said, the way we prioritize and spend as a district and as a state will send a clear message about what lives we value.

We need our Board to commit to raising up the inequities, making them visible, and committing to doing things in a totally new way. We need bold changes, not tinkering. We need to make decisions about whether just not letting these gaps widen is enough – or whether we are going to use this moment so that we don't have these gaps to begin with when the next crisis hits.

We need to tackle institutional racism throughout our schools and administrative offices. To understand the factors that led it to take 167 to have a Black woman running our district.

We need a commitment to solve internet access for the entire city going forward. And to ensure no kid goes to bed hungry just because there wasn't school that day.

What we need is a newfound and genuine commitment to focus help, attention and resources on those in greatest need. To look at our fellow citizens and genuinely believe that “liberty and justice for all” is more than just a patriotic phrase. It will require us to collaborate and to sustain that commitment beyond a single, intense moment, into the months and years ahead.

We are raising our hands to lead IPS schools into that challenge. Will you join us as you lead your districts forward? 🍀

For more about the IPS Equity Fund we've launched to provide critical funding for our district, please visit: www.ipsfund.org.

What we need is a newfound and genuine commitment to focus help, attention and resources on those in greatest need. To look at our fellow citizens and genuinely believe that “liberty and justice for all” is more than just a patriotic phrase.