



WHY RACE MATTERS

IPS Continues to Dismantle Systemic Racism in Education

By Alpha Garrett, Public Information Manager for Indianapolis Public Schools



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Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS), like many school districts across this country, is a major focal point in the daily conversation about the COVID-19 pandemic and how to manage the multitude of challenges that we all face. And like many institutions around the world, IPS is also addressing the evergreen conversation surrounding race and equity among the IPS family and community.

As these two crises converged over the summer of 2020, IPS Board of School Commissioners and district leaders continued its years long mission to tackle and develop strategic actions to close the opportunity gap for students of color. Included in the IPS Strategic Plan 2025 – a roadmap for where IPS plans to be in the next five years – district leaders have charged the administration, students, families and community partners to hold each other accountable in four key priorities:

- Increase Access to Rigorous and Relevant Instruction
- Promote Racial Equity
- Foster Authentic Engagement
- Operate and Fund Strategically

Realizing that the foundation of the four priorities is based in the belief and knowledge that all students are equal, leadership approved the 1619 Racial Equity Policy and Black Lives Matter Resolution; ensuring that all students receive the best the district has to offer.

"Both the policy and the resolution aim to curtail racism and biases, and their negative effects on students, parents and staff," said Andrew Strope, IPS Chief of Strategy and Planning. "They also will work to eliminate the





As part of the district's Strategic Plan 2025, IPS is dedicated to increasing access to rigorous and relevant instruction.

Editor's note:

This is the first article in a year-long series featuring Indianapolis Public Schools.

policies, practices, attitudes and cultural messages so that student outcomes can no longer be predicted by race or ethnicity."

Through the racial equity policy, along with the district-led racial equity initiative, IPS will implement several measures, including:

- Creating the infrastructure for all IPS staff members to have access to robust professional learning experiences around racial equity.
- Activating and responding accordingly to support the district's most vulnerable communities, especially in the event of an unprecedented crisis (e.g., global pandemic).
- Intentionally ensuring that all students have access to high quality, culturally relevant curriculums and instructional materials.

The decisions and policies of 2020 come nearly 100 years after the inception of the State of Indiana's largest school district. The foundation of IPS' history is rooted in the segregationist policies set forth by civic organizations like the White Supremacy League, White People's Protective League and the Capital Avenue Protective Association as early as 1920. The Black population during this formative decade grew to more than 11% of the city's total; one of the highest Black populations of northern cities.

City leaders, however, fearing the high numbers of Black students in predominantly white high schools, created a school for Blacks in 1922: Crispus Attucks High School. Leaders forced all Black students to attend the school based on the supposed spread of tuberculosis infections in the Black community. The



Concerned about the large number of Black students enrolling in IPS schools at the time, Indianapolis city leaders created the segregated Crispus Attucks High School – an all-black school – in the 1920s.

Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce, the IPS Board and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), supported the decision and suppressed and diverted any protests to oppose segregation. Ultimately, the then governor of Indiana, mayor of Indianapolis and five members of the school board became either members of or were backed by the KKK.

It wasn't until the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, the subsequent U.S. Department of Justice lawsuit in 1968, and a federal court ruling in 1971 ordering a supervised busing program that allowed for a more diverse student body throughout the district.

During the 1960s, a newly minted teacher named Patricia Brown (now Dr. Patricia Payne) began her career at IPS at Florence Fay School 21. The larger concerns the district faced stemmed from simple yet complex issues in the classroom; especially a classroom of all Black students.

"It became glaringly apparent that none of the textbooks reflected the students I was teaching! Everyone was white, as was the information and perspectives," said Payne, who now serves as the director of the IPS Racial Equity Office. "Even the Dick and Jane readers, including Dick, Jane, baby Sally, Mother and Father were all white. Only Spot, the dog, had a trace of black."

With the support of other Black teachers, the slow and arduous work of building environments conducive for Black students began. After more than a decade, and with the help of



the Indianapolis Education Association, the IPS Board approved a resolution for the teaching of Black History in Grades K-12, the development of a Black History curriculum, and the infusion of Black History throughout the entire curriculum in 1979. In 1987, the Office of Multicultural Education opened and the Crispus Attucks Museum of African/African American History was designed and opened its doors on the campus of Crispus Attucks High School in 1998.

In 2015, the Office of Multicultural Education evolved into the IPS Racial Equity Office and the district embarked on a racial equity initiative by partnering with the Racial Equity Institute. As a result, staff were able to receive the training and guidance needed to continue the journey of challenging and shifting our knowledge, attitude, mindset, belief system and instruction.

To date, more than 4,500 staff members and 1,500 community partners have participated in this transformational experience. The two-day training is required for all IPS staff members. Equity Teams, formed in schools and departments, partner with the District Equity Team to continue the work together following the training. This includes developing measurable goals, engaging in



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– Dr. Patricia Payne, *Director of the IPS Racial Equity Office*



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— Aleesia Johnson, *Superintendent, Indianapolis Public Schools*



In addition to making strides with racial equity, IPS is committed in the belief that all students deserve the highest quality facilities.

The curriculum at IPS includes a variety of options and methods, like Learning Gardens. Many district schools have these gardens, which are used as outdoor classrooms as well as places where students plant a variety of items (i.e. food, plants and more).

disaggregated academic and discipline data, and understanding racism in all its forms, including how, when and where it occurs at all levels of the school district and school community, even without intent.

As the district continues to attend to the mental and social “space” for students to succeed, it has also undergone a variety of assessments to address the needs of the physical space – the school buildings and other facilities that serve students. IPS is committed in the belief that all students deserve the highest quality facilities in which to learn and play and the recent assessments revealed opportunities for improvement in many buildings throughout the district. Studies show that the quality of school facilities can have a major impact on the education that children receive and whether they succeed in school. Research, court decisions, and states have long recognized that disparities in access to basic school facilities can lead to differences in educational outcomes.

Students in low property-wealth areas of the state are typically educated in outdated, no-frills facilities that do no more than meet minimal state standards for being warm, safe and dry. They often do not have access to state-of-the-art facilities that do more to enhance learning. This creates an opportunity gap that limits the success they can have in the competitive environments of college and careers. These inequities don't just occur from one side of the state to the other. They occur within the same county.

“Our nation's, state's and city's relationship with systemic racism – including housing, economic access and



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At IPS, students are focused on the district's 3Es: **Enrollment** in a college or university, **Enlistment** into the military or **Employed** at the livable wage.

school segregation – has resulted in investments in school facilities being unequally distributed, with the greatest need for improvements in schools serving high shares of students in poverty, which, in turn, are often located in communities of color,” said IPS Superintendent Aleesia Johnson. “Funding for school facilities primarily come from local property taxes, the leading explanation for why we observe greater needs among disadvantaged schools.”

Even with the many strides made, there is still a lot of work to be done in bringing equity to every corner of the district, especially as it pertains to students of color. The work being done through the IPS Racial Equity Office and adjoining initiatives, such as the facilities assessment, addresses the disparities throughout schools in the district. Although these are two major endeavors, they are but touchpoints on the full spectrum of diversity and equity initiatives at IPS.

Indianapolis Public Schools is one of the few districts in the country confronting the pervasive and complex issue of systemic racism. Most importantly, Superintendent Johnson and the IPS Board of School Commissioners are modeling the racial equity mindset through action and policy so that the disparities in student achievement and discipline will be permanently interrupted in the coming future. 



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- Dr. James Hanna, Superintendent
Rossville Consolidated Schools

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- Scot D. Croner, PhD, Superintendent
Wa-Nee Community Schools

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