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# **The Underlying Problem with Education in Indianapolis Public Schools: How an Impoverished Social Environment has Led to the Decline of Public Schools in Indianapolis**

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## **Abstract:**

The author argues that the failing public school system in the city of Indianapolis is due in large part to the negative social environment that children in Indianapolis face. The author argues that an environment of crime and poverty contributes to the lack of success of the public school system in Indianapolis. The author further argues that if the public school system in Indianapolis is going to improve, an effort must be made to address the social environments of many students in Indianapolis. Finally, the author

argues that none of the proposals by the city of Indianapolis have addressed the said issues.



## **Introduction**

Indianapolis is a lively city in the heartland of the United States. It is home to many prominent businesses and has many tourist attractions that make for a diverse economy. Like many large cities, however, it has its share of problems. Among them is the

education system that ranks near the bottom in the country. Contributing to this problem is the issue of poverty and crime in Indianapolis, which affects residents' ability to get a good education. If education is to improve, the social environment must also be addressed. As I will show, the problem with education in Indianapolis has more to do with an underprivileged social environment that lacks the educational resources than poor standardized test scores. Finally, I will show how none of the proposed solutions by Indianapolis Public Schools addresses the problem.

### **A Two-fold Problem in Indianapolis: Education and Poverty**

Indianapolis Public School System (IPS) is among the worst in the nation and has one of the lowest graduation rates in the country. Only 39% of students who enter high school in Indianapolis graduate (Gewertz 2006, 1). The school system is also plagued with poor facilities and students who come from underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds. This combination makes academic success highly elusive. There is an estimated 5,000 to 7,500 homeless youths in Indianapolis, many of whom are orphans (Lucas 2008, 1). These students are unlikely to succeed academically because they lack a place to study, or a supportive family who emphasizes the value of an education (Ibid.). Many of these children have had many experiences in their lives that make academics difficult, including having been victims of violent crime and/or having witnessed violent crime (Ibid.).

Additionally, as Barbara Lucas notes, homeless students are far more likely to have mental health problems, behavioral problems, and problems in their physical and mental development (Lucas 2008, 2-3). These effects significantly hinder the chances one has of being successful academically. Mental health problems make studying more difficult and have a detrimental effect on attention span. Students with behavioral problems can make learning stressful, and can be distracting to other students. When teachers are forced to interrupt class to deal with students who are difficult, it takes away from the learning experience of other students. Overall, the odds of homeless students succeeding academically are poor. Nearly half of homeless students in Indianapolis dropped out, or were expelled and did not return (Ibid., 3).

To complicate matters, there are few shelters in Indianapolis or anywhere in the state that will take minors who are unaccompanied by an adult, and the few that exist are legally restrained in the amount of help that they can provide. It is a crime for a minor to be living on his or her own under the age of eighteen, unless he or she has been legally emancipated (Lucas 2008, 5). Many of these youths do not seek out help due to fear of being turned in, which also means that many may not ever go to school for fear of being considered a runaway and being legally punished. However, many of these students are not simply runaways; they are youths who are trying to escape difficult situations at home. Some are even forced out and have no adult around to give them the support that they need to succeed academically (Ibid.). The laws in Indiana do not offer much support to homeless students. In fact there are only two shelters in Marion County that are even allowed to help students who are illegally living on their own (Ibid.).

It is nearly as difficult for those who are impoverished to succeed as it is for those who are homeless. There are many similarities between the situations of homeless students and of impoverished students still living at home. Both are likely to experience violence and/or be victims of it, have aggressive behavior and abuse drugs or alcohol, lack a suitable place to study, and have physical and mental development problems such as learning disabilities (Anderson, Howland and Smiley, 2008, 91). For those who actually do live at home, life can be as difficult as it is for the orphaned student due to the lack of support they may get from their families and from their environment. Many students who live in poverty in Indianapolis have parents who are not educated enough to assist in their child's academics. Many have had negative experiences in their own academics and are not prepared to help their children. Minorities, especially Hispanic people, historically have the most trouble. Many come from different countries and do not understand how the educational system in the U.S. works or know how to be advocates for their children because many of their parents are not educated themselves (Ibid.). The lack of a strong support network means that children will more likely than not lack the skills required to be effective in school. Having parents who have had negative experiences in school themselves may serve to undermine the child's attitude and send the wrong message about the need to attain an education. They may not see education as important or may view it in a negative light due to their parents' own attitudes about education (Ibid.).

In an effort to combat this problem, IPS initiated a "Liaison" program, which was implemented to help at-risk families understand the educational system and its importance, and to encourage parents' involvement in the education of their children. The primary duty of the liaisons was to help explain the education system and to help parents advocate for their children by attending conferences with the parents and teachers (Anderson, Howland and Smiley, 2008, 86-87). However, the problem with this program was that it only employed two liaisons to serve the entire district. There was one African American Liaison that would help those in the district who were African American, and one Latino Liaison who served those who were Latino. African Americans and Latinos make up sixty-eight percent of the district, fifty-eight percent African American and ten-percent Latino (Ibid., 88). To make matters worse, grant funding for the program eventually ran out and the district experienced budget cuts (Ibid., 92). The district still retained the Liaisons despite the cuts, but it lacked the funding to employ enough liaisons to serve all of those in the district.

The city's ability to allocate the funds to fix the underprivileged social environments of students is not the only problem. Many of these same economically-disadvantaged students attend some of the poorest schools in the city (Penner 2004, 182). Many of these schools, like Brookside Elementary in downtown Indianapolis, are not only below average in terms of curriculum and student performance, but are also in very poor physical shape because they are underfunded. Studies have shown that the physical condition of the learning environment has an effect on academic performance, behavior, and attitude (Ibid.). In effect, poor facilities reduce student morale. The school is often very hot during the summer, making the classroom very uncomfortable.

The school also only has one restroom for boys and girls, which is located in the basement of a three-story building. Often, teachers must lead their entire class down the three flights of stairs for restroom breaks. This arduous process takes away valuable teaching time. The school building is also not handicap accessible, and is in violation of many health and safety codes (Ibid.). Brookside Elementary is very much in need of funding in order to fix these deficiencies, but as of this writing there are no plans to allocate the funds to address these issues. Milbert Penner cites the case of the *State of Ohio v Derolph, 1997*, which ruled that inadequate funding for school facilities prevents inner-city students from obtaining an education on par with students of suburban schools, which are generally better-funded (Ibid.). As shown, inadequate facilities significantly impede the learning process. The threat of danger and unsanitary conditions contribute to lower student morale, which can cause more behavioral problems such as fights, adding to the stress on teachers, students, and the system overall (Ibid., 183).

### Proposed Solutions and Failed Results

There have been many proposals by local, state, and even the federal government to fix problems with schools in urban areas like Indianapolis. Most of the solutions, however, only deal directly with education itself, for example, reforming curriculum standards and increasing funding. Few solutions, with the exception of the aforementioned liaison program, have been proposed to deal with the social and environmental structures of students who come from urban cities like Indianapolis. To address the problem with IPS, one needs to look deeper at the underlying problem. The home lives of students, which are not conducive to success, and the lack of support that lower-income students have dramatically affect their ability to succeed. Few politicians and school boards have explored the problem in this way.

On its website, IPS has listed a number of objectives aimed at improving the performance of the schools, none of which address the social environment of the student. The primary focus of these initiatives is on professional development, designed to create more effective teaching methods. The school board also proposed several initiatives, including the adoption of a marketing campaign focused on recruiting students and retaining teachers, as well as reducing operating expenses by the district (Indianapolis Public Schools.edu 2009). The multipronged marketing plan was designed to attract affluent parents to the district in hopes of improving the school corporation through increased tax revenues. The plan to better train teachers includes a plan to replace them with substitute teachers in order to allow the regular teachers to be retrained in hopes that it will lead to better quality of teaching, which will lead to better scores on state standardized tests (Ibid.). Like other initiatives, this does not take into account the effect that the social environment with a lack of resources has on students and their ability to perform.

In order to better instruct students in the class room, teachers need to understand the students' background and know how their environment affects their perceptions of the world. People who come from less fortunate backgrounds have judgments about the world that can cause them to process information differently than those from more privileged backgrounds, so teachers need to better understand how these students perceive their world in order

to help them acquire new knowledge (Galloway and Lasley 2010, 275). The IPS approach does not necessarily do this. The IPS approach is simply to replace current teachers with a new set of teachers so that they may be better trained in the common core courses of math and science and then to assess the students by using more standardized tests in the ISTEP format (Indianapolis Public Schools.edu 2009).

The initiatives of IPS do not recognize the underlying problem with education. They do not take into account the personal experiences of students and how those preconceptions affect the students. Scholars like Charles Galloway and Thomas Lasley argue that "when understandings and preconceptions are engaged, students can move to grasp the fuller meaning of new information" (Galloway and Lasley 2010, 275). Children struggle to understand new information when it contradicts what they have already learned. Teachers must know students on a more personalized level and engage them in order to better understand not only how they learn, but what they have already learned in order to develop their minds further. None of the aforementioned IPS proposals do this. Marketing to attract more affluent students to the district will not help those who live in poverty do better academically. Reducing operating expenses of the district will also not solve the problem. The lack of a supportive social environment affects the students' ability to study but also has an impact on them psychologically that can alter their attitude and hinder their ability to learn. The Indianapolis Public School system has yet to address this problem head on.

The environment that children grow up in has an effect on them socially and mentally, as well as on how they think and what they are able to accomplish. However, most legislative efforts by the government have not addressed the issue of improving students' environments. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA) of 2002 was meant to bridge the gap between city schools like those of Indianapolis and those of upper-class schools. The NCLBA attempted to do this by establishing a uniform curriculum for the entire country and holding all schools to the same standard (Hursh 2007, 295). However, it failed because it did not address the social issues that cause this achievement gap. Instead, the act actually punished the schools it was intending to help by making schools that under-achieve fire all of their staff or turn over operations to a private company, rather than providing funding to improve the social inequalities (Ibid., 275). Since the passage of the NCLBA, there has not been any law that has been passed that has attempted to address the social inequalities that affect education. Until the government in Indianapolis addresses some of the external social problems affecting education, there cannot be any expectation of significant success. School administrators in the IPS cannot view teaching and improving the social inequalities as two separate things. The latter affects the former (Woodside-Jiron and Gehsmann 2009, 60). It is not just a coincidence that students from Indianapolis are more likely to fail than their counterparts in suburban Marion County. Children in urban areas like Indianapolis are not born with a lack of mental capacity to succeed academically, but they are in a social environment that hinders their ability to succeed. One teacher in another inner-city school reflected:

It's a bigger social issue. The children for whom this is not working [often] have such wretched home lives outside of this building that they are just unavailable [for learning]. Until people start taking care of drugs, crime, and abuse, there will always be children who fail...I think if the government expects all children [to be] at standard, then they need to address the *whole child*. The whole child does not exist within the school doors (Ibid., 65).

The environment of drugs and crime is not helpful to students in achieving academic success. Coping with complex domestic issues, e.g. drugs and domestic violence, is difficult physically and mentally, and prevents one from being able to learn, much less perform well on standardized state tests like the ISTEP. In order to address poor scholastic performance and the inadequacies of education in the city of Indianapolis, the government must address the inability of the social urban environment to foster academic growth.

### Conclusion

There have been many attempts in Indianapolis and elsewhere in the country to fix education, but those efforts have ignored the underlying problem. The economic disadvantages of certain groups undermine education, because an underprivileged environment lacks the social structures that are necessary for success. Parents in poverty often lack education themselves to advocate for their children. This issue is further compounded because many of these parents have negative views of education due to their own academic experiences which they pass on to their children, affecting their mentality and ability to acquire new knowledge. Students in poverty can have challenging home lives as well as the difficult surroundings at school, which makes studying strenuous. The effects of crime on the streets and in

school serve as a distraction to the learning environment. Poor and inadequate facilities undermine the morale of students and further impede the learning process by catalyzing more behavioral problems, which takes time away from teaching. If the city of Indianapolis is to address the education problem in the city, it must also address the under-resourced social environment. The city should consider hiring more social workers to work as liaisons to improve the social environment of students.

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