

Tully: Two moms, one dream for a struggling IPS school

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Amid the state's many bitter education debates two moms talk about their simple dreams for their children, and about their hope that an IPS school on the verge of a turnaround attempt can succeed.



Photo: Matthew Tully

There's probably no better way to understand what's really important about the direction of school policy in Indiana than by thinking about it from a parent's perspective. Think about what any parent wants for their child and that should at least help push aside concerns about politics and factions, egos and agendas, and all the other nonsense that has distracted the education debates of late.

Just sit down with a parent. Any parent. And listen.

Listen to a parent like Marshekka Vertner, a 30-year-old single mom with three children who attend one of the most troubled schools in the city. Even those of us who worry about relying too much on tests to judge a school can't deny the devastating reality at IPS' Joyce Kilmer School 69.

Almost every child in the school, which sits at 34th Street and Keystone Avenue, comes from a home of poverty and not even 15 percent passed state standardized tests last year. A solid majority of third-graders are not reading at grade level and the school has been rated as an F school for several years running.

But Vertner said all that doesn't tell the full story. The full story is in the behavioral problems she has seen as a parent volunteer. The kids she has seen cussing at teachers. The heavy rotation of principals in recent years, and the lack of consistency in the school's classrooms because of teacher shortages.

"It's going to tear them down," she said, of her children. "The culture of the school isn't going to help them. I don't ask for much. This is just about them being able to get a good quality education."

A good quality education. So simple, so critical, and so elusive in far too many schools. Schools where teachers lack the support and resources they need. Schools that without question are failing to meet the challenges that so many children bring to school with them. Schools that don't have the spirit of urgency their students need.

"They should have a feeling of security in school," Vertner said, referring both to behavior issues and teacher mobility. "It should feel like family."

It doesn't. And, so, Vertner and another School 69 mom, Charron Perry, met with me Tuesday afternoon to talk about their hopes for the school. In a positive move, IPS has identified the school as one of its potential "innovation restart" schools — schools that have failed for so long that IPS can partner with outside groups to run them.

The program is already working at School 103, where education entrepreneur Earl Martin Phalen is leading an inspiring academic and behavioral turnaround of what had been an similarly troubled school. The IPS board could vote in the coming weeks to hand operations of School 69 over to Kindezi Academy, an nonprofit created by former leaders at Enlace Academy, a wonderful charter school that serves a largely Latino student population on the Westside.

If you want to see why a dramatic change is needed just talk to Perry, 37, whose second-grade son is struggling mightily at School 69. He's in need of extra help because of a learning disability but she said the overwhelmed and understaffed school has simply not been able to offer the attention and consistency he needs. Excited by Kindezi's model, which includes two educators in every classroom, she looked at me across a table Tuesday and said something heartbreaking:

"I am worried my son is off track to graduate," she said. "I'm scared."

The parent in me can only imagine the pain that comes with saying something like that. Or with worrying that your child's troubles are not being met with the urgency and wraparound services they deserve.

"How are they supposed to know what structure means if there are changes all the time in the school?" Perry asked. She told me her son's classroom had five different teachers last year, and occasionally the room was managed by a staffer and not a teacher. "For him to already have a learning disability and then to have this — how do you recover?"

You recover, perhaps, by demanding a change. By refusing to accept the status quo. By believing in the power of students and teachers to overcome great obstacles if they are given a fair chance. And by urging everyone working on the education question in Indiana to point their priorities in the right direction.

That means not massaging state reports before they are issued out of concerns about public relations, but encouraging honest conversations about where our schools truly stand. That means not ducking important debates because it's an election year, but showing the leadership Hoosiers deserve. That means not turning every discussion into a war about personalities and special interests, but rather about the children our schools serve.

And here's an idea. Listen. Just listen to a mom.

"The reason we have to keep pushing is because they deserve the education that everyone else gets," Perry said. "They should be matching up to kids in other districts. They should be able to meet the standards. We want our kids to go to college, too. We want them to go further in life, too."

Vertner talked about the gunshots that sometimes pierce the nights in her neighborhood and her strategic work to make sure her children have enough in the house so that they don't risk playing outside. She gets scared when she hears about the latest shooting or the latest teenagers losing their way. She tells her children that the path away from poverty and crime and so many other problems is through education.

Through a good education.

<http://www.indystar.com/story/opinion/columnists/matthew-tully/2016/02/19/tully-two-moms-one-dream-struggling-ips-school/80614460/>

Right now, though, they're not getting that. And even though Vertner's kids are doing OK, she worries about the eventual educational cost to more years like this one. That's why she is urging IPS to move forward with a turnaround.

"It's going to be a challenge," she said. But it's a challenge worth taking on.

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