

CHARTER LEADERS OF COLOR **MATTER.**



Ma'at Lands

Executive Director & Founding School Leader,
Rooted School Indianapolis at Eastern Star Church

MY JOURNEY TO LEADERSHIP

I was born and raised on the eastside of Indianapolis at a time when there was still busing going on here, with the intended purposes of diversifying the racial make-up of schools. I lived in the inner city, but I was bused to suburban schools that afforded me great educational opportunities.

I attended an HBCU, Tennessee State University in Nashville, TN and majored in Biology with the goal of going to medical school. I completed two summer internships and figured out that medical school was not for me. Because I excelled in Biology, my sophomore year in college, I started tutoring students through a scholarship program That was the start of my passion for education. It brought me joy to see students learn and succeed. After college, I moved back to Indy after being accepted to Physical Therapy school, and yet again I found myself tutoring students in a GED program while completing my volunteer hours for physical therapy school. I started to have the thought of wanting to teach but felt like I would be a failure by changing again what I wanted to do nor would I have even known where to start.

The Indianapolis Teaching Fellows Program (now TNTP) was a new program that was starting in Indy. Before the start of PT school, I decided to apply. After being accepted, I decided to follow my heart and made the change to go in teaching. I taught Science for 5 years at the same high school my mother graduated from in the Indianapolis Public School system/ Teaching came naturally to me and I excelled early as a top teacher in the district with some of the highest scores on standardized testing for my students on the district and state level. I continued to grow in my technical skills and received my Masters in teaching and wanted to stay in the classroom. After a change in leadership at the school, my values and beliefs about children no longer aligned with the new school leadership and I left teaching. Temporarily, I went to support the community center where my mother was the CEO. I did not know at the time that I was being prepared for true reasoning for being there. I gained experience in running a pre-school, after school and a summer program to start. But a year later, our family would come to find that my mother was diagnosed with stage 3 cancer. I then moved into the Assistant Director role, responsible for all programming, partnerships, board and financial management. My mother died one year later, and I had to make a decision. Should I stay in the community service field or should I go back into education? I knew my mom would always want me to follow my heart, so I moved back into teaching.

I started teaching middle school and completed a leadership program where I completed my Building Level Administrator program. After completion of the program I started a Phd program in Organizational Leadership and moved to work at a start-up charter school and then eventually taking a leadership role as an Assistant Principal at a different charter school. Although I significantly increased my technical skills as a school leader there were just ways/habits/mindsets that I did not want to embody as a leader.

A SCHOOL ROOTED IN COMMUNITY

I never had a desire to be a school leader. I knew my lane and wanted to stay where I felt I executed best. Through my mentor, I met a guy named Jonathan Johnson who had started a Rooted School in New Orleans and there was an opportunity to participate in a fellowship through The Mind Trust to open a school here that was similar to Rooted New Orleans. I met with Jonathan to learn more about the school and his vision. As someone who believed in the mission of Rooted and what a school like that could do for students, I wanted to help in any way possible, but again it never crossed my mind to want to lead the school myself. A year had passed and I followed up with Jonathan to check in. After communicating with him, I decided to apply for the fellowship position. I knew this my opportunity to serve children and lead people the best way that I could. I experienced imposter syndrome though because I had never led a school. I thought, how could I lead a school yet alone build an entire school from nothing. After a 3-month process, I got accepted into the fellowship and moved to New Orleans to learn about Rooted School. I had not even applied yet for the charter and didn't even know if it was going to work but I believed that I needed to do this for our kids. While in New Orleans, I continued to grow as a leader, continued to build my skills. I learned about the school and model while writing the charter for Indy. At the end of the school year I went through the process of getting a charter and was approved. I moved back to Indianapolis and finished my fellowship year with The Mind Trust and Rooted School- Indianapolis opened fall of 2020.

Rooted School's north star is 228. That's how long it would take for African-Americans to accumulate the same amount of wealth whites have now if current policies remain in place. Our mission is to provide personal pathways to financial freedom for our students starting with the tech. There is a real "Opportunity Gap" in tech. Black employees are significantly under-represented in tech relative to their overall percentage of the US population and our students will continue to be left behind if we do not expose them to the technology as the tech industry may be key to putting a dent in the widening racial wealth gap. Many of these jobs don't require a 4-year degree. Unfortunately students of color and low-income students are unlikely to maintain proper skills and credentials for those jobs. Our goal is for our students to not only be consumers of tech but the producers of it. We're partnering with many different tech companies and universities to figure out what skills and certifications our students need when they graduate. Now our students are receiving certifications in front end and back end development, scrum master certification. Our goal is when students leave our school that they leave with a college acceptance letter to the school of their choice in one hand and job offer in the tech field to another. Our job is not to make the choice for them, but to provide them with the skills, access and opportunities needed to make their own choice.

Community has always been important for me. I knew if this school was to be successful that we would not be able to do this alone. The school is only one entity of the community. After being approved for our charter, we still did



CHARTER
LEADERS
OF COLOR
MATTER.

not have a home but knew we wanted to be on the eastside of Indianapolis. I was contacted by someone from Eastern Star Church (ESC) who saw an article and the paper and knew we did not have a home. As a member of ESC, one largest African American Churches with over 15,000 members in the state of Indiana, I knew the history of the work the ESC does in the community, specifically in education. Eastern Star ran a successful private school for years and has a history of supporting schools in the 46218 zipcode of Indianapolis which consists of 76% people of color, 31% poverty rate, 21% unemployment rate and only 14% of the people living in the area have a post-high school degree. After a meeting with the church pastor and other leaders of the church we realized how much our values aligned and created a partnership to serve our students together and Rooted School Indianapolis at Eastern Star Church was formed. We're located in Eastern Star facility on the eastside of Indy and are part of the Eastern Star Church ROCK (Renewing our Community for the Kingdom) initiative. They help support us to make sure we have what we need. We know schools sometimes are a one-stop shop and have to focus on a lot more than just the academics and the church comes alongside us to provide services to families. There is a Care Center for families who may need food, clothing, and other resources that allow families to meet their basic needs. We're blessed to be able to focus on the academic part and have other partners who help us fulfill our mission. Not only are we Rooted in Community in our location but this is even more special to me because it is like I am coming back home. Our school location is located 5 blocks from where I grew up and in the community where I now reside again.

I look at these students as an extension of me. My own niece attends my school. For our parents to take a chance and believe in me and my team, it means so much. Families have been willing to leave suburban schools and private schools to come to us. We are the only school in Indianapolis with emphasis on closing the tech digital divide and wealth gap. In addition, we offer a small school setting, personalized education, accelerated academics, by providing Pre-AP, Honors, AP and early and dual college enrollment, and a sense of community and family, Every student matters. Every student gets the help they need.

We have 10 staff, some of whom I worked with previously and recruited to join me. Representation matters to me and my staff represents the population of students we serve. A parent recently said to me, "My son is so excited. He's never had a black teacher." There's a sense of safety, support, and community you feel in our school. The trust from my parents, students and staff allows us to move exponentially faster than we would if we had to start brand new.

THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19

I absolutely didn't expect to start in a pandemic. I figured we'd be okay because we are a small, slow growth high school and I had the opportunity to plan and learn from what others experienced last Spring. Our planning team had to become innovative in how we were going to meet the needs of our students and staff. We were making changes up until the first day of school as we received updates from the health department and Department of Education, because we always had to keep safety in mind first.

On the academic side, some of our students were out of school for 7 months, so we had to figure out where students were and what they needed. We started testing students this past summer in order to get data on our



CHARTER
LEADERS
OF COLOR
MATTER.

students to best prepare for them. A majority of our students opted into summer school. This gave us the opportunity to start to support students early. Due to COVID-19, it was virtual but still impactful. There was a lot of unfinished teaching and learning that we needed to solve for. From talking to parents and students, I knew that we had to open and get our kids here in person. We made the decision to start school in person with the support of our parents and staff. Our families have offered us so much grace. We have weekly Town Hall meetings to keep parents informed and to problem solve. School is one of the safest places for our students and I am excited to be able to provide that safe place where our students succeed.

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In my leadership journey, I have felt like I've always had to prove my worth as a leader of color and as a female. I've been overlooked for positions, my voice has been silenced, and I was often put in a box by people despite oftentimes being the most educated and qualified by people in positional power who did not look like me. I knew I needed to create a space at my school where black people were celebrated for the skills they bring and not just tolerated as a person who was there to meet a quota or who could discipline black children well. I needed to create a space where excellence instruction mattered for our children, not just order in the classroom. One reason I became a leader was to be the voice for the voiceless and to advocate for those who did not have a seat at the table. Growth is one of our school's values. So my staff does not have to come to us already as being the best and having all the skills they need. I know I can provide them with the skills, training and experience to help them be successful.

I come from a family of 11 children: 6 girls and 5 boys. I have 22 nieces and nephews, all with different needs. I have always been an advocate for my nieces and nephews. If their parents had questions, concerns, or needed help navigating the school process, as an educator I was able to provide support. They have all attended different school systems in Indianapolis from the city schools, township, charter, and private schools. So, I have experience and understanding in some ways with these schools. One of my older nephews attended an affluent suburban school that was predominantly white, but he had no teachers of color and teachers did not know how to support him. They would often say "he is not a bad kid and is not a behavior problem, he just doesn't complete his work. class but not get work done. He struggled because he wasn't the self-motivated student. He was eventually "moved" to an alternative charter high school in the area. With the support of his family and teachers he ended up graduating high school at age 20. It was an emotional time for my family because we were so proud of him and at the same time sad because my mother was not there to see him graduate although we know she would be proud. To be able to see him graduate and talk at his graduation about my mother and grandmother who weren't able to see him graduate, I knew that I had to provide a space for students like my nephew. It was also the first time I saw my father cry. If he had stayed in his traditional public school, I don't know if he would have graduated. He is one of the reasons why I believe in school choice. Not all students have the same needs, and parents need choice to make sure that there is a space that meets the needs of their child. Rooted provides that option.

I lead knowing that any student here could be my nephew or niece. I've always advocated for all students. Every kid has the right to receive an education that paves the way to their freedom, a place where people care about them enough to set them up for success, hold them accountable, and provide them with the access and opportunity to



**CHARTER
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OF COLOR
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excel in whatever they choose to do. When they leave our school, they will have choices. They can choose to go to college or pursue a career in the tech field right after high school. As an Executive Director and School Leader, I have the freedom to make sure our students have what they need to be successful, despite the lack of resources that charter schools receive. I have seen the impact charters have had on my family and other children. It is my reasonable service. Charter Schools serve a large vulnerable population of students with less and leaders of color in my opinion sometimes receive less support and have less access. We must continue to support leaders of color who serve our students and our making a difference. This work I do is my reasonable service in fulfilling my mission in leaving the world better than I found it.



Rooted School Indy

Location	Indianapolis, IN
Year Opened	2020
Student enrollment	60
Grades served	9th grade, growing to 12th
Website	www.rootedschoolindy.org

Student Demographics

Black/African-American	93%	Homeless Students	5%
Caucasian/White	1%	FRPM/FRPL %	74%
Two or more races	6%	Students with Disabilities	22%