

Can Indy's past predict our kids' future?

The Mind Trust in Indianapolis has remarkably similar goals to Cincinnati's Accelerate Great Schools.

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Learning lessons

Cincinnati even took CEO from Indianapolis

INDIANAPOLIS – It's 9 a.m., and a group of scholars are hunched over laptops at Phalen Leadership Academy. They wear headphones too big for their kindergarten-sized heads as they work through reading games.



In a first-grade classroom off to the right, scholars are broken down into smaller groups.

Some are circled around a teacher, taking turns as she times them reading 25 sight words in 60 seconds. A boy named Freddy

makes it through the entire list, and there are high-fives all around. "Nice! You got them all today!" the teacher says.

Outside, there's a picture of each scholar holding a chalkboard sign: "First day of 1st grade. Class of 2026."

This is the first of what will eventually be 10 George and Veronica Phalen Leadership Academies in Indianapolis, charter schools serving 9,000 students in grades K-8. The schools were sparked by The Mind Trust, an educational nonprofit, and they are perhaps the best glimpse into what might happen in Cincinnati when business and education leaders kick off their [recently announced, \\$25 million initiative](#), Accelerate Great Schools.

In fact, Cincinnati's accelerator even took its CEO from Indianapolis, [bringing in Patrick Herrel](#), who, until now, was The Mind Trust's vice president of recruitment and selection.

During the past eight years, The Mind Trust has raised roughly \$46 million for educational initiatives, spending more than \$4 million of that on charter schools and \$5.5 million to bring Teach For America, College Summit, Stand for Children and The New Teacher Project to Indianapolis.

"We've seen great schools being launched, and we've seen kids going to college that would not have gone to college," said Mind Trust founder and CEO David Harris. "We've fundamentally changed the ecosystem of our community."

The Mind Trust started with less than \$1 million compared to the proposed \$25 million in Cincinnati, Harris said, but the overarching goals are remarkably similar: Attract talent and ideas to the area, launch new schools and engage the community in education reform.

The 'scholar' model

Promoting self-worth and esteem

Everyone is a "scholar" at Phalen Academy, not a student, a child or a kiddo. It's part of the effort to change how Phalen students see themselves, said founder Earl Martin Phalen. He wants them to think about what it means to be a scholar and to view themselves as he sees them: smart and full of potential.

Phalen takes his students, even those in kindergarten, on three college visits a year. He wants them to get familiar with being on campus, cementing the idea in their minds that they belong at college, and they will go and graduate.

Phalen schools have two teachers per classroom. The school year is longer – 190 days versus the traditional 180, plus a 25-day summer camp – and the school day is longer, too. That better aligns with working parents' schedules, Phalen said, but more importantly, it ensures time for art, gym, music and Spanish classes.

Phalen Academy is too young to have a state report card – a point of contention for those who say there's no proof the model works – but this past year, only 5 percent of incoming students tested kindergarten-ready, meaning the vast majority couldn't, for example, count to 10, Phalen said. By the end of the year, more than 90 percent of that same class was on track for first grade, he said.

"Belief is a powerful thing," he said. "They start to say, 'I am smart.'"



Shirley Bengework, a teaching assistant and retired teacher, works with Chad Gough and Mareona Long, during reading groups at George and Veronica Phalen Leadership Academy in Indianapolis Thursday, May 13, 2015. Phalen's school year is longer at 200 days, compared to the traditional school year at 180 days. (Photo: The Enquirer/Meg Vogel)

Another chance

Can charters work in Ohio?

In 2001, Indianapolis became the first city in the nation to give the mayor power to authorize charter schools. Democrat Bart Peterson was in office at the time, and Harris was tapped to run the new charter-school office. The Mind Trust was launched in 2006 as an outgrowth of that effort, Harris said. It started with a much heavier interest on attracting programs and talent to Indy and only recently started trying to launch new schools.

Critics say The Mind Trust is only interested in making money. Harris counters that it's a nonprofit that invests in other nonprofits. In some of the communities, though, there's skepticism. Worse, the skepticism seems highest in communities where The Mind Trust feels it could make the most difference, Harris said.

In 2011, the Center for Research on Education Outcomes released a report on Indiana charter schools. The report examined schools from 2004 to 2008, and overall, students at charter schools performed "significantly better compared to their traditional public school peers," the report states.

CREDO released its Ohio report in 2014, finding the opposite. "On average," the report states, "students in Ohio charter schools perform worse in both reading and mathematics."

During a national charter-school conference in Denver this year, Ohio's system was ridiculed as one of the worst in the nation.

Ohio's charter model has issues – most notably a lack of oversight and accountability – but there are still great Ohio charters doing a great job educating students, said Chad Aldis, Thomas B. Fordham Institute vice president for policy and advocacy. Fordham is a charter-school sponsor and a co-researcher on the CREDO report.

Bottom line: If the bad schools are going to open in Cincinnati regardless, Aldis said, why not bring in some proven models to compete?

"If there are people who have figured this out, we'd be silly not to do what we could to try to get them to serve kids in our community," he said. "To me, the best thing the accelerator brings to Cincinnati is the focus on creating high-quality seats of any type, agnostic to governance, so every student in the city has access to one."

The accelerator will need a highly selective vetting process with a focus on three questions for any new school, Aldis said: Is it needed? Does it have a strong record of success? Is it financially viable under Ohio's funding model?



A two-year fellowship

A bilingual charter

Mariama Carson has a countdown in her head: 435 days until her new school opens. Carson, 40, spent 17 years as a teacher and principal for a traditional public school before she landed a Mind Trust fellowship, quit her job and started work on a dual-language charter school.

The Mind Trust's two-year Education Entrepreneur Fellowship gives fellows such as Carson a \$90,000 a year salary, plus benefits, and a \$20,000 startup stipend. More than 3,600 people from 48 states and 36 countries have applied for the fellowship. Eight, including Carson, were chosen.

Carson used to think charter schools were "the dark side," but that opinion was based on myth versus fact, she said. The more she learned about charter schools, the more she realized the model lines up with her own educational values and beliefs.

Global Preparatory Academy will open on Aug. 1, 2016. It will serve half native-English speakers, half native-Spanish. The teachers will be half and half, too, Carson said, and the school will be founded around authentic Hispanic culture.

Like Phalen Academy, Carson's school will feature an extended school day and year, and her goal is to serve economically disadvantaged students. Her students will all end up bilingual and bi-literate, she said.

Carson has an 8-year-old daughter, and Global Preparatory Academy is the school she wanted for her daughter that didn't exist. Her daughter will be too old to attend – the school will start as a K-2 model and slowly add grades until it reaches K-8 – but it's still a dream come true, Carson said.

"The first year is going to be the hardest year," she said. Once she gets that first class of students, though, "I believe their cousins, their friends, everyone will be there after that. ... We're the first dual-language charter school in the state, but I don't think we'll be the last."



*"Forgiveness" is the word of the week at George and Veronica Phalen Leadership Academy in Indianapolis Thursday, May 13, 2015. Each week scholars participate in activities to reflect on a new motivational word and what it means in their life. More than 90 percent of Phalen scholars are economically disadvantaged, and about 97 percent are African American.
(Photo: The Enquirer/Meg Vogel)*

Taking over a school

Voted down, then voted through

On Jan. 27, Indianapolis Public Schools approved an agreement with Phalen Academy, allowing Phalen to take over IPS' School 103 on Indy's east side. IPS will pay for everything – Phalen gets the building, salary money, student transportation, even snow removal for free. He runs the school, and IPS gets to claim the results.

The IPS school board voted 6-1 in favor of the agreement.

That school will be in addition to Phalen's 10 charters. It won't be a charter by definition, but in reality, Phalen said there will be little difference in how he'll run his charters and how he'll run his IPS school.

IPS board member Caitlin Hannon argues the partnership actually gives IPS more control. It's a contract, so while IPS will have less day-to-day say, if Phalen can't deliver results, he's out.

Historically, schools can "chronically under perform" for years, and no one does anything, Hannon said. This time, IPS is demanding better.

In general, IPS wants to move toward a model that allows more autonomy at its schools, said board member Mary Ann Sullivan. There are those who would disagree, "but, by and large, I think that most people know that IPS needs all of the help, collaboration and partnerships it can get," Sullivan said.

Gayle Cosby was the lone dissenter on the 103 vote. To her, it's simply too sweet a deal for Phalen. Why, she asked, should IPS foot the bill for someone else to run the school? Cosby argues that, given budget constraints, IPS can't make the same investment in all its schools.

"It's going to become a system of haves and have nots," Cosby said. "There's no way that we can sustain this type of funding."

"I guess they tried to buy my vote. They were not successful, if that was their goal." -Gayle Cosby

The 103 agreement was actually first on IPS' docket in December, and it was voted down. It was a tie vote – three to three, with one member absent – but Phalen needed a majority vote for approval.



First grade scholars work on their independent study work at George and Veronica Phalen Leadership Academy in Indianapolis Thursday, May 13, 2015. Phalen's "blended learning" curriculum mixes traditional teacher instruction with computer-based learning. (Photo: The Enquirer/Meg Vogel)

Then came the election. Cosby, Andrea Roof and Samantha Adair-White were the three nay votes in December. Roof and Adair-White were both up for re-election, and both lost their seats. Michael Brown, who was absent the night of the first vote, lost his seat to LaNier Echols, a charter school dean.

That election was the most expensive in IPS' recent history. Newly elected members Echols, Sullivan and Kelly Bentley together raised nearly \$200,000, according to reports from Chalkbeat Indiana, which covers education in the area. By contrast, the losing candidates together had about \$41,000.

Missing from those reports? Accounts of how much outside interest groups spent on the race, such as Stand For Children, a major player nationwide in education-related policy and elections. Stand For Children endorsed Sullivan, Bentley and Echols and ran independent campaigns on their behalfs, sending out mailers and hiring workers to promote the three at the polls, according to Chalkbeat. By law, Stand For Children was not required to disclose how much it spent.

Cosby herself was the beneficiary of some pretty big campaign donations – about \$78,000 worth, she said – but if she runs for re-election, she won't seek the same kinds of support. She recently [launched a blog](#) about her IPS experiences. She has the same beliefs now she did when she first ran, she wrote in a March 24 post, but she is "no longer as naive about how this game called politics works."

"I guess they tried to buy my vote," she wrote. "They were not successful, if that was their goal."

Quadrupling quality seats

Cross-sectional partnerships

Cincinnati's Accelerate Great Schools aims to nearly double the number of seats at high-performing schools in five years, from about 5,500 to 10,000.

Five years after that, the goal is to double the number again, to 20,000 high-quality seats. The accelerator is meant to be in-addition-to rather than in-lieu-of current projects, and the fund's leaders tout collaboration among the accelerator, Cincinnati Public Schools and The Archdiocese of Cincinnati.



During a meeting with The Enquirer's editorial board, CPS Board of Education president Alex Kuhns said he welcomes any partnership with the accelerator that can help alleviate the impact of funding cuts on CPS students.

That said, CPS is in no way basing its future on the accelerator, said board member Melanie Bates. If the accelerator can help CPS, great. If not, CPS will carry on with its current plans to expand quality seats. "The accelerator isn't driving us," Bates said.

Bates also takes issue with the accelerator's data. CPS won't have its own report until early June, but Bates is confident the number of quality seats at CPS alone is much higher than 5,500.

"There was no consultation with Cincinnati Public on these numbers," she said. "I would welcome any group of citizens who would come forward and help our district, but I want good information out and not bad information to further a cause."

Critics in Cincinnati say the accelerator is part of a long-term plan to privatize public education, and the same theory exists in Indianapolis. It's special interest groups with plenty of money, and "they have bought school boards all across the country, not just Indianapolis," said Doug Martin, author of "Hoosier School Heist."

Eventually, there will be a charter school on every corner, and the traditional public system will crumple due to lack of funding, Martin said. He thinks the battle is already lost, though, because there aren't too many people on his side. It won't be a quick takeover, but it will happen, he said.

"There's no question about it, because there's no fight against it," he said. "School privatization is going to happen."

'Killinois Street'

A question of equity

Phalen Academy is housed in an old Cadillac dealership on North Illinois Street. The windows are high and arching, letting in lots of natural light. The floor plan is open, and everything is bright, clean and freshly painted.

It's a beautiful school, but it sort of belies the neighborhood outside. Around Indianapolis, Illinois Street has earned the moniker "Killinois Street," Phalen said. It's a neighborhood full of violence, persistent poverty and a sense of hopelessness. People think "there is just no pathway out of here."



The Academy entrance is lined with photographs. On one wall, there are shots of Phalen's family: his parents, George and Veronica, for whom the school is named, and his giant, extended, multi-race family. Phalen was in a foster home for the first couple years of his life before George and Veronica adopted him, he said.

On another wall are pictures of black American heroes, such as Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and Rosa Parks. Ninety seven percent of Phalen Academy students are black, so the photographs are an inspiration and a reminder of what's possible.

"All children really have just tremendous, innate, God-given potential," Phalen said. "Some are in schools, families and environments that help them thrive, and some children are in environments that hardly give them a chance. ... We want to give our kids a chance."

Phalen is well aware of the criticism, particularly surrounding his partnership with IPS' School 103, but he makes the same argument for his school that Cosby makes against: It's a question of equity. School 103 has been in trouble for years, Phalen said. His results won't be perfect or immediate, but it's time for something different.

"What do you think the current future of children in that school is?" he asked. "For a decade, that school has been as bad as it is. Children deserve better. ... If you're opposed to that, OK, but I think we're giving children at 103 and families at 103 access to hope."

<http://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2015/05/23/school-accelerator-can-indys-past-predict-future/27785233/>