

Chicago Tribune

Could You Build a Better School?

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By Chicago Tribune Editorial Board

If you could build a school from the ground up, what would you do? How would you design it? What would you teach?

Indianapolis is in the midst of a fascinating competition under the guise of something called the Innovation School Fellowship. It's a competition. The call went out — give us your ideas to build a better school — and 63 individuals and groups responded with proposals.

As many as three winners will be selected this week and here's the prize: a paid fellowship to spend a year completing the design of their school.

With the goal that at the end of the year, the fellows will open and run their schools.

The Indianapolis Public Schools partnered on this with a nonprofit education reform group called The Mind Trust. The Indiana General Assembly passed a law allowing the school system to operate Innovation Network Schools. The new schools will have significant autonomy, somewhat similar to charter schools.

The proposals have come from teachers, principals, entrepreneurs, a local athlete, a former State Department intelligence analyst, a former newspaper editor.

The innovation schools will be public schools — part of the Indianapolis Public Schools system — but will be free to develop their own curriculum, hire their own principals and staff and structure their school days free of many of the mandates on public schools. They will have to meet specific learning standards set by The Mind Trust and Indiana Public Schools.

They will replace underused or poorly performing schools in Indianapolis.

This sounds like a perfect idea for Chicago.

Last fall, the Tribune Editorial Board launched our New Plan of Chicago project — with a request for proposals from readers on how to promote a safer, more productive, better educated city.

More than 1,000 readers and organizations have submitted proposals to us. We've spent the last eight months seeding some of those ideas on our editorial pages. We've been tremendously impressed by the breadth of ideas and the enthusiasm for community-driven answers.

Chicago Public Schools should partner with one or more Chicago-based foundations to sponsor a competition modeled after Indianapolis' Innovation School Fellowship.

It's a shame that, in Chicago, alternative models such as charter schools are viewed by many people as a drain on traditional schools rather than an opportunity for students.

This tension was enhanced when Chicago Public Schools closed some 50 underperforming and underutilized elementary schools last year, then later announced approval of a handful of new charter schools.

So why not a real competition for new schools? Invite Chicagoans, and people across the nation, to propose new schools — with the prospect that the people who make the best proposals will get to run new schools. It would be an opportunity for, say, the leaders of the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization who are pushing CPS to save and revamp Dyett High School.

It would be an opportunity for Chicagoans to be heard on the future of their schools.

Let's acknowledge that the Innovation School Fellowship program didn't come without controversy. A teachers union called the bill creating the innovation network an assault on teachers. Democrats in the Indiana legislature said it was disrespectful to the teaching profession.

And yet, teachers and other educators and people from many walks of life have jumped at the opportunity to be part of this.

Chicago, give it a try.

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