



How 4 educators plan to turn around Indianapolis Public Schools

June 17, 2014

Eric Weddle, eric.weddle@indystar.com

It's an eclectic bunch.

A native city educator, a former counter-terrorism analyst, a charter school operator and an academic dean are under the spotlight now as they set out to design new teaching models in a bid to turn around three failing Indianapolis schools.

The Mind Trust, an educational reform organization, announced the four Thursday as its inaugural Innovation School fellows. The program leverages a new law that allows Indianapolis Public Schools to create autonomous schools within the district at academically troubled and underused buildings.

For the next year or two, the fellows will confer with experts, travel to other schools, meet with the community and design a staffing structure that will support nontraditional methods of teaching. Then, they will reconstitute an IPS neighborhood school to launch the new vision.

Nine of these schools are expected to be opened across IPS by 2017-18.

Mayor Greg Ballard, whose office backed the plan along with IPS Superintendent Lewis Ferebee, said the fellows can help cement Indianapolis as a national leader in education reform.

"These innovative new school concepts, when implemented, will help prepare our children for future success in life and make Indianapolis an even more attractive place to live," he said in a statement.

The fellows are: Lauren Franklin, the IPS principal who turned around Francis W. Parker Montessori School from an F to an A state accountability grade; Heather Tsavaris, a former U.S. State Department senior intelligence analyst from Ohio; and the local team of Earl Martin Phalen, founder of George and Veronica Phalen Leadership Academy, and Marlon Llewellyn, an Arlington High School administrator.

Here's what the fellows want to do:

- Franklin, a 15-year IPS educator, will spend two-years planning the launch of a Montessori-inspired school for K-12 students. The focus, she said, is a holistic approach to addressing students needs so they can be successful. She wants to find a way to ensure students get a minimum 10 hours of sleep a night, eat three nutritious meals and are exposed to the arts.

"As wonderful as my current school is, I still see that there are students who are not successful," she said. "I feel like a true educator is not satisfied until 100 percent of the students are successful."

- Phalen and Llewellyn would design the second George and Veronica Phalen Leadership Academy, a school for K-6 students that combines online learning and classroom instruction and emphasizes parent involvement and student behavior. Two teachers oversee each classroom during a school day that's longer than at other IPS schools. The first academy opened in Indianapolis last year.

"We have got to change kids' lives, we've got to make the impact," said Llewellyn, dean of scholars at Arlington High School, a former IPS school under state control and operated by Tindley Accelerated Schools.

- Tsavaris, Mansfield, Ohio, spent 10 years with the U.S. State Department, coming across people who became empowered through entrepreneurship and others who found acceptance in terrorist organizations. Tsavaris began to see entrepreneurship as a way to build up knowledge and self-worth.

After leaving the State Department, she returned to Mansfield and taught entrepreneurship.

For the next two years, Tsavaris wants to design a middle school that focuses on problem-solving and the entrepreneurial spirit.

"I see this as not just bringing an entrepreneurship mindset to the kids but the parents, the grandparents and the community," she said.

Call Star reporter Eric Weddle at (317) 444-6222. Follow him on Twitter: @ericweddle.