

## IPS Chooses Struggling School 103 As Phalen 'Innovation' School

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F-rated School 103 will become a Phalen Leadership Academy School next year.

Scott Elliott / Chalkbeat Indiana

A long-struggling Indianapolis Public Schools elementary on the city's Far Eastside will next year be transformed into a Phalen Leadership Academy under a deal between the district and the charter school group.

IPS announced Tuesday that School 103, also called Francis Scott Key, was selected for the district's first compact with an outside group to independently manage a school inside its boundaries. The school has been graded an F by the state for four straight years and just 15 percent of students passed the ISTEP last year. The district's average pass rate is more than three times that.

IPS in January approved a request from Phalen Leadership Academy's Earl Martin Phalen and Marlon Llewellyn — winners of The Mind Trust's innovation school fellowship — to turn around the chronically failing school using a model that's worked in their Indianapolis charter school. But the school wasn't chosen until now.



“We’re humbled by the size of the responsibility,” Phalen said. “It’s in one of our tougher communities. We’re really excited ... to give children an education and a pathway to improve their lives and their future.”

IPS Superintendent Lewis Ferebee did not immediately respond to a request for comment about why he chose the school for the partnership.

The school has received extra supports over the past year since Ferebee labeled it as one of the district’s priority buildings because of students’ declining grades on state tests. And the school board voted last week against renewing the contract for school’s former principal, Shelia Burlock, along with a host of other administrators.

Parent Trisha Gunn, who has four children that attend School 103, described the school as “rowdy” and said she believes it’s in need of a complete overhaul. She said she hasn’t been impressed with the school leadership or teachers.

“They can call us when our kids are hitting another student, but they can’t call us and let us know what their grades are,” Gunn said. “I was devastated when I found out they had a 15 percent passing rate.”

Gunn, who said she was considering pulling her kids out of IPS before she heard about the Phalen partnership, said she hopes new leadership improves the learning environment. Gunn last year graduated from advocacy group Stand for Children’s parent engagement course.

“Those teachers need guidance,” Gunn said. “I think they need someone to come in and say, ‘You’re not doing this on your own and we’re here to help.’ All those teachers fall back on that one principal who’s in charge of that school.”

Phalen said from state test scores alone it is clear that the school, which has 324 students from preschool to sixth grade, is in need of a massive intervention. The school’s passing rate on the ISTEP has fallen 15 percent in two years.

“I know that well more than 15 percent of the children there have the capacity to master both sides of the ISTEP exam,” Phalen said. “We feel confident that we’ll be able to



create a culture ... that is nurturing, loving, warm and fun but also has high standards and high expectations.”

The group also hopes to forge partnerships with other community social services groups.

“It will be a great thing for that neighborhood,” said The Mind Trust President David Harris. “We all know what a high-quality school can do for a community, for attracting families and businesses. This will have reverberations for this community beyond just the students.”

Llewellyn will take over the school next year as its principal. He formerly worked in IPS, followed by stints at Fountain Square Academy charter school and working for Tindley Schools, a charter school group, as a dean at Arlington High School, a former IPS school it manages in state takeover.

Teachers at the school were told on Tuesday that the school would be reconstituted. Phalen said teachers can either request a transfer to teach at other IPS schools or apply to Phalen Leadership Academy. Teachers at the school next year will not be part of the union since Phalen is a charter school network.

The Phalen school model relies on a longer school day and “blended learning,” a process by which students do some lessons by computer on their own and some teacher-led lessons.” Phalen Leadership Academy’s Indianapolis charter school, which opened in 2013, has not yet earned an A to F grade under the state’s accountability system.

That model costs money. Last year some board members scoffed at the group’s proposal to spend about \$14,000 per child. Board member Sam Odle questioned whether the model would require extra support from philanthropy on top of what IPS receives from state and federal sources. IPS received \$7,058 per student from the state this year.

Phalen said he is in the process of negotiating a contract with IPS to finalize how to pay for the school model.



“We have not finalized the funding piece, but we’re in conversations and are optimistic and positive that we’ll find a way to put together the right agreement,” Phalen said.

The partnership between IPS and Phalen is the result of a state law signed last year called Public Law 1321 which allows compacts between the district and charter schools or other groups to operate schools inside the district. The schools are run independently but are accountable to IPS.

Stand for Children, an advocacy group that pushes for change at IPS and the state level, praised the partnership. Executive director Justin Ohlemiller said he hopes it’s a signal of more change to come at IPS.

“This is a huge first step that IPS deserves a lot of credit for,” Ohlemiller said. “Our membership is interested in seeing that one school becomes several in the next couple of years.”