

Tully: Once a Ball State linebacker, now an education leader

After years of disheartening battles between traditional schools and education-reform advocates, a new partnership is a welcome development. It's one that puts students ahead of turf wars and egos.

March 20, 2015 by Matthew Tully

Marlon Llewellyn is an imposing, burly 39-year-old father of two who played linebacker at Ball State University in the late 1990s and who looks like he still could.

On Tuesday night, Llewellyn took his position under bright florescent lights at the front of an elementary school cafeteria on the Far Eastside. About 15 parents were there, some with their kids and others without. But every IPS School 103 parent in the room had the type of concerned look that often comes when radical change hits a school.

Llewellyn cracked a joke, which didn't do much to lighten the mood, and then launched into his sales pitch. He was there to explain the changes that lie ahead for one of the state's most troubled schools. As he began, Llewellyn almost looked as if he were back on the football field, with the parents staring him down like the opposition.

That was not what he wanted. And he made that clear.

"We are here to serve you," Llewellyn said. "We believe in every one of you. I know you get up every morning and get your child to school, and you entrust us with doing what it takes to serve them in the way they deserve. We will be here for them. If it takes me being here till 10 o'clock every night, I'll do it."

In a few months, Llewellyn will be the new principal at this sprawling elementary school, which sits amid some of the city's most ravaged neighborhoods and suffers from crushing academic problems. It's a school where only one out of every seven students passed state tests in both math and language last year, and which has received the state's lowest rating four years in a row.

Come August, the school will be [the first test of a new state law](#) that paved the way for school districts to turn over the management of particularly low-performing schools to outside organizations. In this case, IPS selected Phalen Leadership Academies to take over School 103, and PLA picked Llewellyn, a veteran teacher and administrator at district and charter schools in Chicago and Indianapolis, to be its man on the ground.



Marlon Llewellyn will be the principal of IPS School 103 after IPS transfers management of the school to Phalen Leadership Academies.

(Photo: Matthew Tully / Indy Star)

“We have a lot of work to do,” the Jamaica-born educator told parents and students Tuesday night. “But we will work harder than anybody else in the city. I guarantee that.”

After years of disheartening battles between traditional schools and education-reform advocates, this partnership is a welcome development. It’s one that puts students ahead of turf wars and egos. But it’s not without controversy. Critics have lobbed bombs at the partnership, and many remain skeptical of anything touching on education reform.

What gives me hope is that Phalen Leadership Academies is led by Earl Martin Phalen, a Harvard and Yale graduate who launched his Summer Advantage program in Indianapolis several years ago and has since helped thousands of low-income children make academic gains during the summer. Phalen’s second-year charter near 23rd and Illinois streets is a thriving and inspiring school that has shown promising early academic results. Giving him an even larger role in the city’s education landscape is a win for Indianapolis.

School 103, also called Francis Scott Key Elementary, won’t be a charter, but it will bring the tenets of Phalen’s charter school: Longer school days and years; a curriculum that uses both computer-based and teacher-led learning; two educators in each classroom; an intense focus on student achievement and parental engagement; and sharp attention to character, behavior, enrichment programs and confidence-building.

“It won’t be easy,” Phalen told me recently, referring to the high rates of violence, poverty and food insecurity that have rocked the neighborhoods around School 103. “All those things can be obstacles, yet we believe that if we are blessed enough to put together the right team we can make a difference. We need to attract people who think like firefighters: people who are running into the building when everyone else is running out.”

Uncertainty, though, is creating challenges. Phalen and Llewellyn, [backed by The Mind Trust](#), a local nonprofit education organization, are still in the final, delicate stages of negotiating the hand-off from IPS. The new staff is being built from scratch; current employees can reapply but there is no guarantee of a job, and the school’s teachers will not be unionized. One IPS board member recently labeled the partnership reckless, and Llewellyn has struggled to combat persistent rumors that the school is closing.

But none of that dampened the incoming principal’s optimistic spirit Tuesday. Time and again, he spoke of his love of children and his belief that the school’s students could do better. By the end of the night, the seriousness had faded a bit and some of the parents were laughing at Llewellyn’s jokes.

Still, questions remained.

One mother asked if the school would continue to have support systems for students with special needs. Another asked if teachers would continue to be state-certified. Yet another asked if transportation would be provided.



In response, Llewellyn promised that such basics would remain. What will change, he said, is that the school will work harder to build relationships with families, to individualize instruction, and to reverse results that are dooming many students to educational failure.

“This is a community school and we welcome every scholar back here,” he said. “All scholars — I repeat, all scholars — are welcome at 103. There will be a school here next year. There will be a great school here.”

Llewellyn, [who led Ball State in tackles his junior year](#), is now playing offense, rushing straight at a challenge as big as any he’s faced. “It going to take a lot of grit,” he said. “And it’s going to take the Far Eastside community coming together.”

It won’t be easy. But it’s wonderful to see that years of bitter education battles have given way, at least in this one situation, to a partnership that could improve the lives of some of the city’s most vulnerable children.

You can reach me at matthew.tully@indystar.com or at [Twitter.com/matthewltully](https://twitter.com/matthewltully).

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