



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Principal of PLA@103 Shares How One Student’s Journey Demonstrates the Importance of Collaboration, Caring Educators, and High Quality Education

Indianapolis, INDIANA – Working in the field of education can be both a tremendously challenging and incredibly joyful path. I have cried three times in my career as a school leader. Twice, I cried when faced with heartbreaking events that affected my students. Earlier this month, for the first time, I cried tears of joy.

I am the Principal at the “Phalen Leadership Academies at School #103,” or “PLA@103.” This past fall, the Phalen Leadership Academies (PLA), a nonprofit organization that operates high quality public schools, was selected by Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) to take leadership of IPS School #103. This partnership allows the school to remain part of the IPS district while PLA is able to put in place changes at the school to create a high quality learning environment for our children.

It was when I first came on board as the school’s new leader that I met a first-grader named George. He was a very memorable student. I recall specifically how “Little Spike Lee,” as our Founder and CEO Earl Martin Phalen called him, would frequently ask to use my iPad to film life around the school. Touching moments like these were rare, however, as George was in trouble for misbehavior constantly. At six years old, George had the most suspensions for misbehavior of any child in our entire school.

Throughout the year, our staff tried every method we knew to show George that we truly cared about him and wanted him to excel in school. It became clear, however, that we needed to take a special approach to help him. As a last resort, I approached one of our teachers who led a homeroom class of fourth and fifth-grade students, Mr. Wayne Major. I asked him if he had a student in his class who he could partner George with, a “peer mentor” who could both bond with George and model correct behavior for him.

Instead, the entire class embraced George as one of their own! He was able to regularly visit Mr. Major’s class over the course of the year, and our scholars took responsibility for helping George to both improve his behavior and to work on his academic skills. Over time, I saw his attitude and behavior slowly begin to change. While before he had only interacted with his classmates in aggressive and angry ways, he was soon able to politely approach an older student to help him read or work on flash cards to improve his vocabulary. He began to have far fewer confrontations with other students and was spending much more time at school.

Two weeks ago, the students in Mr. Major’s class were occupied with standardized testing, and so George could not be in the class during that time. Instead, he spent two to three hours with me each morning while Mr. Major’s class took the ISTEP exam. The change in him was immediately noticeable – George quietly read, colored, and practiced his flash cards. Every single time someone from Mr. Major’s class walked by, George said “hello” to them, even if he had already greeted them several times that day.



That Friday, Mr. Major's class prepared to say goodbye to George, as he was moving to a special program for other scholars like him. Every scholar had something encouraging to say to George. "You make people smile," one scholar said. "You get smarter every day!" another scholar shared. I truly think this was more praise than George had received at home or at school in his entire life. At the end, the whole class embraced for a group hug. Through the commotion, I heard George quietly say "I'm not going to cry." I, on the other hand, cried freely. For the first time, I saw a student who was joyful, innocent, curious, and creative – a child who, I think, felt loved.

George's story is the story of so many of our scholars at PLA@103. Many of our students walked through our doors earlier this year filled with anger and sadness. Many "acted out" in school because they had very stressful home lives, or out of frustration that they were not learning as quickly as they wanted. For many, they acted out simply because they had always attended a school where their misbehavior was tolerated or accepted.

PLA's partnership with IPS enabled us to begin to create real change for the students at School #103. Over the past year, we have been able to transform the culture at School #103 into one that encourages all children to excel, both behaviorally and academically. We have been able to reach out to and closely involve parents, so many of whom now attend school events or volunteer. And, we have been able to hire caring educators who simply do not give in or give up when faced with student misbehavior. With dedication, time, and love, our educators aim to help every child both demonstrate good behavior and excel academically.

George was one of the most challenging students to serve at our school, and yet the changes I have seen in him already have been remarkable. His story represents a clear example of just how powerful it is when we go the extra mile to truly connect with children and help them develop into their best selves.

*-Agnes Aleobua
Principal, PLA@103*

About the Phalen Leadership Academies

The Phalen Leadership Academies (PLA) is a nonprofit network of public charter schools that has been approved to ultimately serve over 10,000 students (called "scholars") annually across Indiana. Last year, 100% of PLA's third-grade scholars passed the state IREAD-3 examination, demonstrating proficiency on the standardized reading exam. For more information about PLA, visit www.phalenacademies.org.