

Matthew Tully: An idea, a dream, a new school - Earl Martin Phalen's latest mission

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By Matthew Tully



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Earl Martin Phalen / Star file

There's an old warehouse near 23rd and Illinois streets that is on the verge of what could be, and likely will be, an inspiring education story.

The 63,000-square-foot building, which sits amid a hard-hit neighborhood and until recently had been a vacant eyesore, is in the final stages of being transformed into the George and Veronica Phalen Leadership Academy, the most recent addition to the city's network of charter schools. There are many other charters and many other schools in the city, many doing wonderful things, but this one is particularly special. It's special because of the man behind it.

That would be Earl Martin Phalen, a Harvard and Yale educated 46-year-old from Boston who, backed by The Mind Trust, first came to Indianapolis five years ago to help the city address the crushing summer learning-loss problem that harms so many children of poverty. Phalen rightly believes that all kids are capable of achieving great things and that, regardless of their zip code, "they deserve to go to a school with high

expectations and a rigorous academic environment that challenges them — a place that supports their potential, their imaginations and their dreams.”

The new school will be just that, and it is essentially an extension of Phalen’s Summer Advantage program, which has brought young students into Indiana schools for five weeks each summer, providing an intensive academic curriculum in a caring environment filled with top teachers. The program not only kept the summer learning loss at bay for its students but also has routinely moved them months ahead in reading and math.

That’s how you close the achievement gap. That’s how you convince skeptics that different ways of thinking and acting can reverse generations of heartbreaking academic failure in America’s cities.

Now, the man who led that effort is opening his first school.

“It’s very emotional,” Phalen said as we walked around the school Wednesday evening, just five days before the start of classes. “It was a dream. It was an idea. And now it’s here. I have to say, it’s humbling. I’m humbled by the number of people who have helped get us to this point, and, more than anything, I’m humbled by the responsibility.”

That, of course, would be the responsibility he’s taken on to help shape the education, social development and future of what initially will be 300 children in kindergarten, first and second grades. The plan is to grow to 1,000 students as new grades are added annually, and to ultimately serve 10,000 students in 10 schools opened over the next 12 years. The effort was backed initially by a \$1 million Mind Trust grant and, Phalen hopes, will be part of a broader education rebirth in the city.

“There’s so much momentum in Indianapolis,” Phalen said. “Because of its size and the [energy ↗](#) behind education, I truly believe this city is poised to be the one urban city where a majority of children succeed.”

And, he added, “I don’t mean 51 percent passing and succeeding. I mean 80 or 90 percent passing standardized tests. I mean 80 or 90 percent of black males graduating. We can get there.”

The new school will be part of that effort. The first steps involved hiring the best possible staff — teachers chosen not by seniority or contract rules but by their passion and

performance during a grueling interview process. Principal Jeremy Baugh, meanwhile, previously ran Mill Creek West Elementary in Hendricks County, where his team dramatically improved student achievement. It won't be [easy](#) to replicate that success in a neighborhood with many more challenges, Phalen acknowledged. But effort won't be a problem.

"They're going to be exhausted many nights," he said of the staff. "But they'll know without a doubt that they'll be surrounded, in every classroom, by people who are running and working just as hard as they are."

On Wednesday night, dozens of parents came to the school for an orientation meeting, hearing about the school's goals, rules and plans.

"I'm so excited to be in a partnership with all of you," kindergarten teacher Jessica Surface told the parents, underscoring a pillar of the school's philosophy. "We're really in this together."

By the time the school opens Monday, two years of planning will have occurred. Phalen and others visited 57 schools around the country — district, charter and private — looking for the best ideas. They developed a blended education model that will pair close work with teachers with the use of technology to drive home lessons.

Along with academics, the school will focus intently on the social and behavioral development of students. The school year will be 225 days — 45 more than most schools — and the school day will be longer, a full eight hours. That will allow for both a rigorous curriculum and enrichment programs such as art, debate and music.

The 12-year, 10-school plan is an ambitious one that will require Phalen to raise roughly \$2.5 million per school from donors, as charters receive fewer public dollars than district schools. But what a benefit to the community. This first school not only offers families a new option but also replaces an eyesore with a \$5 million building renovation that adds a community park and will infuse the neighborhood daily with staff and parents who can shop at area businesses.

And it's hard to exaggerate the benefit of education leaders such as Phalen entering the local schools scene.

Claire Fiddian-Green, a top education aide to Gov. Mike Pence, said Phalen has the ability to inspire people with his words but also brings with him strong organizational skills and a proven track record as an academic leader who can improve outcomes.

“I have a lot of hope and faith that he is going to have a terrific school,” she said.

She’s not alone. Cherie Phillips carried a nonstop smile as she and her 4-year-old son, VaShon, toured the new school recently. Phillips heard about the school months ago and spent hours reading online about its mission and Phalen’s background. She was sold.

“I fell in love with this school before I ever stepped foot in it,” she said. “I believe in what (Phalen) is doing.”

Phalen’s personal story is compelling. In foster care until he was 2 years old, at a time when a solid majority of black males in foster care in Massachusetts would eventually end up in prison, he was adopted into a large family and thrived academically and in every other way. He made his way to Yale [University](#) and Harvard Law School and then began the first of many efforts to improve the lives of children in poverty. He grabs you with his compelling personality, but he sells you with his deep belief in high expectations.

“We’re going to hold ourselves accountable for outcomes,” he said. “I can’t guarantee what will happen. But I promise that we will be committed every day to doing what’s best for the children who come here.”

That school is named after his parents — he calls them “two of the greatest people to ever walk the earth” and says they raised him with a love for and appreciation of the wonders that education can provide. That background explains why Phalen has found himself so emotional of late, as the first day of the school year approaches.

“Education is my calling and my purpose in life,” he said. “It’s a blessing to be able to make your passion your job and your life’s work.”

He’s indeed fortunate to be able to do so. And the city is fortunate to have him.