



Mind Trust awards \$1M to two charters to expand school models

J.K. Wall
June 23, 2012

In its first attempt to fund the growth of successful charter schools, The Mind Trust stayed fairly close to home.

The Indianapolis-based education reform group will announce June 25 that it is awarding \$1 million apiece to Indianapolis-based Christel House Academy and Boston-based Phalen Leadership Academies to launch new charter schools in Indianapolis.

Christel House, one of the first charter schools in Indiana, also has generated one of the best records in the state at helping low-income students show consistent growth on standardized tests. The school, which is backed by Indianapolis philanthropist Christel DeHaan, plans to open a second K-12 charter school by 2014, then launch multiple dropout recovery schools for adults.

Phalen Leadership Academies plans to create a full-year version of the five-week Summer Advantage program founded in Indianapolis by Boston-based education entrepreneur Earl Martin Phalen. He developed Summer Advantage during a two-year fellowship with The Mind Trust. Phalen hopes to launch six schools in Indianapolis by 2019.

“What we really wanted was the country’s best talent,” said Mind Trust CEO David Harris. He added that DeHaan and Phalen, as well as their teams, certainly fit the bill: “These are two people who have extraordinary records of accomplishment in the education reform space.”



First-grader I'zayah Anderson listens to his teacher at Christel House Academy charter school. (IBJ photo/Perry Reichanadter)

The two grants are the highest-profile part of a charter school incubator The Mind Trust launched in October 2011 with \$4.85 million in financial support from the Eli Lilly and Company Foundation, the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, Indianapolis native Jane Pauley and the city of Indianapolis.

Supporting The Mind Trust’s charter school incubator is a key part of Indianapolis Mayor Greg Ballard’s goal of launching 20 charter schools in Indianapolis over the next five years.

The Mind Trust received 35 applications, which it narrowed to five finalists. In addition to the two winners, those finalists were the San Francisco-based KIPP Foundation, Arizona-based Carpe Diem Schools and Los Angeles-based Citizens of the World.



The Mind Trust plans to accept more applications through early November and award two or three more \$1 million grants in February 2013.

KIPP, which hopes to expand from one Indianapolis charter school to five in the next few years, said it would apply for the second round of grants.

“It’s both disappointing and encouraging,” Emily Pelino, KIPP’s executive director for the Indianapolis region, said of missing out on the first Mind Trust grants. “We were all super-excited about making it that far.”

In addition, California-based Rocketship Education, which did not apply for the first round, said it would in the second round. It plans to launch five charter schools in Indianapolis beginning in 2015.

Carpe Diem, which has been approved to open six charter schools in Indianapolis, said it would not apply for that second round.

Kevin Hall, president of the Colorado-based Charter School Growth Fund, said he would not expect the local ties of Christel House and Phalen Leadership to cause charter school operators from other locales to conclude the city is closed to outsiders.

He said strong local support for home-grown charter schools is often key to attracting outside operators—because outsiders want to see an “ecosystem” of charter schools they can plug in to. Helping outsiders do exactly that is one of the goals of Mind Trust’s charter school incubator.



DeHaan

“How are the guys who are pretty good here, how are they being treated? Those kinds of things are pretty good indicators for people [from outside the city],” Hall said.

Overcoming obstacles

Christel House is one of the first four charter schools that opened in Indiana after the Legislature approved the concept in 2001.

Its founder, DeHaan, helped start Resort Condominiums International, which she sold in 1996 for a personal gain of \$550 million.

Since the school opened behind an old Kmart on the south side of Indianapolis, its 560 students have shown significant growth on state standardized tests every year. And that’s even with 90 percent of the students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches—the measure of poverty used in Indiana schools.

Carey Dahncke, Christel House’s principal, said one key to Christel House’s success has been having its teachers, administrators and two full-time social workers engage with students’ parents.

Christel House staff receive calls from parents to figure out how to get their child to school even after moving



to a new apartment or a hotel. Parents call who have trouble buying food or even during domestic disputes.

Dahncke said Christel House staff have to strike a balance between helping real needs and enabling poor choices, but that helping bring stability into students' home lives helps them at school.

“A traditional educator would typically think that’s outside their control,” Dahncke said, also noting that Christel House teachers try each year to make a personal visit to 40 percent of their students’ homes. Dahncke himself also makes one-on-one home visits.

That personal involvement has helped Christel House keep its student turnover low—a key factor in helping students show learning growth from year to year.

Christel House’s reputation has helped it build up a waiting list of 300 students, which prompted it to consider starting a new school. It will use the Mind Trust grant initially to start a training program for a new school principal. The money also will help it buy or build a new school.

“We had been bouncing around ideas of expansion. We knew we really ought to be doing something. But our hang-up has been facilities and leadership,” Dahncke said.

Making summer count

Phalen Leadership has no record running schools. But Summer Advantage has put up impressive results, showing that its students gain two months of learning each summer, compared with a three-month loss of knowledge for their peers.



Phalen

Phalen’s first foray into education came in 1992 when he co-founded an after-school program in Boston called BELL, or Building Educated Leaders for Life. It has grown from 20 students in its first year to more than 15,000 now coast to coast.

In 2008, Phalen stepped down as BELL’s CEO, but the next year took over as CEO of Reach Out and Read, a national reading program in hospitals. That same year, he started Summer Advantage in Indianapolis and has since expanded it to 15 school districts here, serving 5,000 students.

Phalen’s “great strength is his ability to bring a team of people around him,” said Patrick Herrel, Mind Trust’s vice president of education initiatives.

And his team is spread all over. While Phalen lives in Boston, his chief operating officer, Terra Smith, lives in Washington, D.C., and his national development director, Johnny Jin, lives in Los Angeles.

“These are mission-driven people. These aren’t people you have to look over your shoulder and say, ‘Hey, are you watching Dr. Phil?’” Phalen said. “In that environment, and with that type of wiring, it’s a really successful model.”



Having a few staff people organize an army of parents and partnerships with other organizations has been key to making Summer Advantage successful. Now, Phalen plans to use the same strategy in his charter schools. And he expects Mind Trust's charter school incubator will help make those connections.

"Poverty, joblessness, violence will never be addressed by one organization," Phalen said. But with his network approach, Phalen is determined to address the challenges. "The notion that a child's family income is correlated to their intelligence and their ability to perform is one we don't accept."