

Tully: A marriage between two great Eastside schools

Matthew Tully 7:01 a.m. EDT March 25, 2016

Two Far Eastside schools undergoing inspiring transformations are attempting to team up. The goal is simple: To better serve the children who walk through the front door each morning.



(Photo: Matthew Tully)

I probably should have guessed that the leaders at two of my favorite schools, two schools that are helping students overcome so many challenges, would eventually bump into each other. That bump happened a few months ago and it looks like it could end up being, as they say, the beginning of a beautiful relationship.

The two schools are on the far Eastside, tucked amid some of the city's most troubled neighborhoods and filled with kids who in many cases have faced the kind of heartbreaking obstacles that no child should face.

One is IPS School 93, an elementary in the midst of a transformation thanks to a group of dedicated school leaders, teachers and families. The other is the Phalen Leadership Academy School 103, an almost-unthinkable collaboration, in this divisive era in education, between a charter operator and the school district.

I've written in the past about both the schools and the leaders who run them. Each school, in its own way, is tackling the immense challenges many children of poverty face. Each has improved the academic and behavioral cultures in its building. Each is inspiring.

At 93, near 34th Street and Shadeland Avenue, a group of leaders has brought in the Project Restore model they created several years ago in a desperate and ultimately successful attempt to turn around IPS School 99. It relies on increased emphasis on behavior, teacher support, parental engagement and, in the most productive and helpful way I've ever seen, frequent testing.

Earl Martin Phalen recently took over IPS School 103, near 38th Street and Post Road. Since then, the charter school leader has implemented a plan that involves more community engagement, strong expectations for parents and students, role models, two educators in every classroom, and resources that provide students and even families with the additional help they often need.

Both schools are wonderful examples of what can happen — and what is happening in many cases — in schools that for so long were allowed to deteriorate.

After leaders at School 93 met with Phalen and his team last fall they began to discuss a collaboration. Already improving in the first full year under the Project Restore model, leaders at 93 saw the potential to go further by teaming up with Phalen under the state's new Innovation Schools law.

“We had a really good program with great results,” Principal Nicole Fama told me on a recent school day. “(Phalen) had a really good business plan and a school with great results.”

Teaming up, she said, will allow the School 93 leaders to focus on what they do best — improving student performance — while Phalen, a prodigious fundraiser who was first lured to Indiana by The Mind Trust, supports them with new resources, management skills, and all of the other behind-the-scenes operations and demands that go into a school. The goal is to keep the Project Restore model in its current form but to learn from Phalen.

The two schools agreed to partner and launch 93 in the 2016-17 school year as a new IPS innovation school, which allows outside operators with solid models to oversee district schools, providing them with autonomy. The IPS board is still considering the plan and may vote on it in April. The idea has led to both support and caution.

“We’re busting up the status quo,” school leader Tammy Laughner said. “And that makes some people nervous.”

But given the team’s track record of turning around failing schools it should make everyone excited, not nervous.

The biggest benefit: After years of fighting annually to keep their program alive, the collaboration would give School 93 educators the long-term stability they’ve been seeking.

Under the agreement, the school would break away from IPS control. There would no longer be collective bargaining, but Phalen has guaranteed that no salaries will be reduced and the group is working to secure benefits that are at least as good as those they now have. Most important, the school would win new freedoms and flexibility to address the challenges their students face.

On a recent Tuesday, the School 93 administrative team interviewed teachers who had applied to stay at the school after it breaks from IPS oversight. How many teachers at the school applied? Every one of them. Spend time in the building and it’s easy to see why.

“Our goal with every teacher is to give them their voice back, to give them the freedom to teach,” Laughner said. “We always tell our teachers that we are not here to change them. We are here to support the work they do.”

The Project Restore model relies on heavy but targeted testing and strict adherence to key principles surrounding student behavior, expectations and growth. Yet, teachers tell me they feel they have more freedom at School 93. Results matter more than the petty issues they’ve been judged on at some schools, and a bedrock principle is that school leaders must remove roadblocks that prevent teachers from teaching.

Still, it’s not an easy decision to leave a district that has long employed you for something new.

“It’s scary,” sixth-grade teacher Jacqueline Thompson told the school leaders during her interview last Tuesday. “There’s a security in what you know, and this is a leap. But I have trust in you. I’m happy working in this building, and there was a long time I wasn’t happy.”

Thompson left another IPS school last year after 16 years. She was attracted by the energy and philosophy at 93, and in less than a year her classroom has experienced a solid improvement in math and reading scores. After feeling micromanaged for so long, she said she now feels a sense of camaraderie and respect.

“You filled a void for me that I’ve been trying to fill for years,” she said. “I don’t want to lose that.”

Neither do many of the families School 93 serves. Scores of them signed petitions or attended recent IPS board meetings to support the merger with Phalen. Many of those parents had petitioned in years past to bring the Project Restore model to the school.

“You fought to get the program here,” Fama, the school’s principal, told some recently. “In order to keep it going, we now have to take the next step.”

That next step is a marriage between two inspiring school models. All that is needed now is the district’s blessing.

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