

MOVING FORWARD

Promise

Indy's approach to school innovation holds promise for Rochester

Justin Murphy Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

Indianapolis' Innovation Network Schools are unique in the United States and have drawn a great deal of interest, and funding, from those interested in school reform. The details are complicated but the concept is simple: Innovation schools are essentially charter schools embedded in the district.

Indianapolis' 16 innovation schools sit somewhere between the completely independent charter school at one end, and the public school at the other.

"It really marries the autonomy of charter schools with the resources and scale of a school district," said Brandon Brown. He is the CEO of The Mind Trust, a nonprofit agency that has been instrumental in driving school reform in Indianapolis.

"In the past, there was a very adversarial relationship (where) the two

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A student celebrates receiving an award for exemplary behavior during recess at Thomas Gregg Neighborhood School in Indianapolis. Thomas Gregg is an innovation district school. MAX SCHULTE, @MAXROCPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Earl Martin Phalen, founder of the Earl Martin Phalen Leadership Academies, a nonprofit network of 10 public schools in Indianapolis. MAX SCHULTE, @MAXROCPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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sectors wouldn't even sit in a room together. Now they're launching schools together."

Like charter schools, innovation schools use non-unionized staff and can hire and fire employees at will. They're controlled by their own boards of directors or an umbrella nonprofit agency, not the district, and have full autonomy in structuring their school day, curriculum and pedagogy.

They often rely on private funding and must prove good results to achieve renewal every several years.

Like traditional public schools, though, they rely on Indianapolis Public Schools for back-office support as well as transportation, food service and, in some cases, special education and building aid. Enrollment and placement for all public schools in Indianapolis, including the innovation schools, is done through one centralized process.

Crucially, innovation schools' performance counts toward the district for state accountability purposes.

Live data, not standardized testing

A good example of Indianapolis' amorphous school reform setting is Phalen Leadership Academy at School 93, a closed-and-reopened district school on a few green acres ensconced in the city's far east side, a wide-open industrial district.

It outperformed its academic growth goals in 2016-17, elevating from an F grade to an A, and believes it will outperform them again this year.

Principal Nicole Fama and school namesake Earl Martin Phalen say the keys to turnaround include regular testing, discipline and accountability.

Recess is a privilege, Fama said, as are some field trips and out-of-school activities. Classrooms have boards showing which students are expected to advance to the next grade and which will be held back, and students' work is posted on the walls, even if it has a nearfailing grade. Suspension rates are falling but still high, and disproportionate for black students and those with disabilities.

Sixth-grader Janiyah Jones said the steady rules and expectations have established enough order for students to succeed.

"At (my old school), it's a drama center," she said. "Most of the teachers had an attitude with all the students. They just taught us and hoped we knew it. ... At this school they set boundaries for the kids. We know what's right and wrong."

Phalen has nine other schools in Indianapolis and will open another 10 there and elsewhere in 2018-19. He does not have any training in education but says energy and attitude are the key.

"Most superintendents are politicians; they're not educators," he said. "The things they do are what politicians do. They worry about financial malfeasance; they worry about risk. ... When it comes to prioritizing choices (that are) right for children, I don't see that type of leadership happening in most school districts."

For many administrators, he continued, “it’s just a numbers game or an HR problem, not a passion. You can’t teach people who have been in a bureaucracy passion.” Dietra Vaden had two children in the former School 93 just as it was closing and Phalen’s program was coming in. She decided to give it a shot. Now, even though she’s moved out of its neighborhood draw zone, she still drives her children to school there every day.

“These are great people; I like the testing; I like the curriculum they have,” she said. “I said, ‘Let’s give it a chance,’ and it worked out. My kids are honor roll students.”

16 years in the making

It took many years for Indianapolis to develop the strategy, from the election of a pro-reform mayor in 1999 to two pivotal pieces of state legislation, including the law enabling innovation schools in 2014. The first innovation agreements were signed in the spring of 2015.

“At the end of the day, we’re focused on making sure all the schools we have are high-quality schools; we’re sort of agnostic to type,” said Aleesia Johnson, the district deputy superintendent. She started her career in a national charter school network and then became the district’s innovation officer officer. Each innovation school signs a contract with the district that lays out the terms of their relationship and also sets benchmarks for academic performance. Just like charter schools, innovation schools could be closed if they fail to deliver on their promises.

The most recent district report on innovation schools shows guarded optimism. It notes that proficiency levels vary across the schools, but that student growth has remained constant or improved in schools with multiple years of data. Enrollment is up in former district schools that closed and reopened as innovation schools.

Even the greatest advocates for innovation schools say it’s too soon to declare victory.

“We’ve seen a really promising start,” Brandon Brown of The Mind Trust said. But “it’s not fair to expect that school’s proficiency to jump from 3 percent to 90 percent in one year. ... We want to see gradual proficiency increases that let us know that most kids are hitting the bar.”

Children as ‘guinea pigs’

The Indianapolis school board and district administration are firmly on the side of school reform, but significant opposition remains in the community.

Much of it is channeled by the IPS Community Coalition, a group of more than 200 parents who see innovation schools as a threat to local control and traditional public education.

Their concerns include many common criticisms of charter schools and the national reform movement. Among their claims:

- Disproportionate numbers of students with disabilities and English language guage learners are left out of innovation schools.
- Students with behavioral problems are “counseled out,” or encouraged to leave, artificially inflating academic performance measures measures.
- The district starves some traditional schools of resources to push them toward innovation, and outside groups like The Mind Trust mislead parents into thinking it’s their only good option.
- Ideas for innovation schools are not properly vetted, and financial and operational oversight is lacking.

For instance, Wendell Phillips School 63 in Indianapolis is being handed over to an organization called Matchbook Learning, which has a decidedly mixed record of success elsewhere.

Another school was converted to innovation status over the vehement objections of some existing staff and parents.

“It’s almost as if they’re using these students at these schools as guinea pigs to test out these repackaged ideas about teaching poor students and students of color,” said Dountonia Batts, a leader of IPS Community Coalition.

‘Union busting’ Rhondalyn Cornett, president of the Indianapolis Educators Association, called the innovation schools concept an exercise in “union busting” and pointed to a disparity in the way innovation and traditional schools are graded by the state.

The latter get a grade from A to F based on a combination of student growth and proficiency; innovation schools are graded only on growth for three years, which has the effect of burnishing their appearance in the state’s shorthand quality metric.

“Their ‘B’ doesn’t look anything like our ‘B,’ ” Cornett said. “If we all had the same playing field it would look a lot different.”

Chrissy Smith, a parent in IPS Community Coalition, sends her own children to a high-performing non-innovation magnet school. She argued that magnet and other district schools can do all the same things as an innovation school, without the element of privatization.

In fact, that has largely been the experience at William Penn School 49, where Corye Franklin is principal. It lies to the north of West Morris Street, an informal dividing line of race and income; more than half of the students are Hispanic and there are five specialized programs, including one for children with behavioral and emotional problems.

Instead of applying for innovation status, Franklin has taken advantage of another Indianapolis Public Schools program called Opportunity Culture. He gave up one teacher position, instead dividing the salary into stipends for three other highly qualified teachers to serve part-time as coaches.

In Indianapolis, school leaders get an allocation of money from the central office each year rather than a final staffing and spending plan. Franklin has been smart about leveraging that money with community partners and has enough experience in the district to sidestep some pitfalls. Teachers at William Penn work together for a mix of students in each classroom that suits their teaching strengths. A teacher whom Franklin called “high-energy” had children rotating through boisterous small-group stations, not sitting still for long; another teacher in the same grade had the lights turned off and calming music in the background. As a result of those ideas and others, the school has gone from a D grade to a B. “The whole innovation network thing (diversifies) the portfolio as a district, but we take great pride in being a traditional neighborhood school, and it’s working,” he said. “And when you show you know what’s expected, you get a little more freedom.”

In turn, Aleesia Johnson, the IPS deputy superintendent, said the district is trying to give more freedom to principals in non-innovation schools as well, as long as they’re well qualified.

It’s a matter of trust

Sara Hasseld, a second-grade teacher at the innovation network’s Phalen Leadership Academy School 93, boasted that public education has “put food on my table every day of my life.” Her father was a top-ranking state teachers union executive in Indiana and Michigan and she has been a teacher for 22 years.

Now for the first time, she finds herself teaching without a collectively bargained contract. And while she recognizes that could be a problem in other schools, she said she trusts Phalen and the school leadership to treat her fairly.

“The kind of things my dad worked hard to put in place are no longer there,” she said. “It wasn’t the union’s choice not to have as much power. But because we have a trusting relationship with the administration, we feel confident in our working conditions.”

That gets to a significant difference between Indiana and New York — the presence here, and absence there, of a strong teachers union and labor laws.

A series of state laws passed in 2011 drastically curtailed collective bargaining rights and instead shifted Indiana toward a “right-to-work” model. As a result, even in the non-innovation William Penn School 49, only about 5 percent of faculty and staff belong to the union.

“The school district is able to give more autonomy to school leaders regardless of school type because they’re working within a ... right-to-work state that has limited the role of unions,” Brown said.

Even setting aside the considerable political clout of the Rochester Teachers Association and New York State United Teachers, statewide labor laws in New York are much less business-friendly.

“Their (Indianapolis’) political climate makes it easier,” said Bryan Hickman, CEO of the pro-charter school organization E3 Rochester and chairman of the board of trustees of Vertus Charter School. “But the big thing in Indianapolis is that the community has recognized the need. The mayor, the business community, the Legislature, everyone is saying: ‘We can’t let things continue on this negative path.’ In Rochester there’s still just a huge effort to protect the status quo.”

While Rochester lacks a reform framework like innovation schools, many of those elements are already present in some schools, notably East High School.

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Students from Thomas Gregg Neighborhood School on the east side of Indianapolis, at the end of their morning recess. The trophy is recognition for exemplary behavior during recess. MAX SCHULTE, @MAXROCPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Earl Martin Phalen, founder of the Earl Martin Phalen Leadership Academies, a nonprofit network of 10 public schools operating in Indianapolis including School 93 on the city's far east side. MAX SCHULTE, @MAXROCPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER