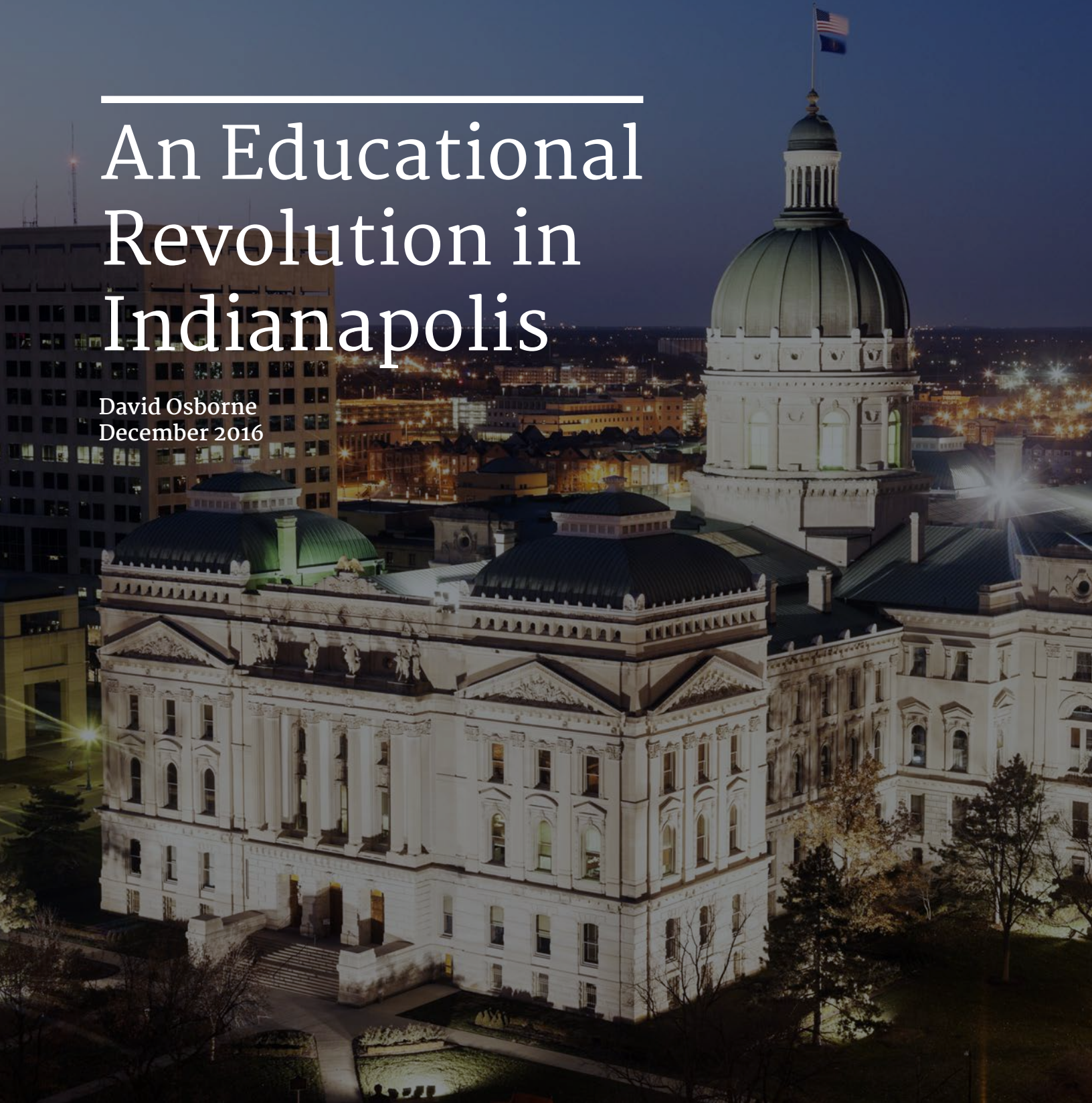


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# An Educational Revolution in Indianapolis

David Osborne  
December 2016





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## INTRODUCTION

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Our urban school systems struggle because so many of their students live in poverty, but they also struggle because they were designed a hundred years ago, for an industrial society.

In an increasing number of cities, they are being replaced by 21st century systems, in which the central administration does not operate all schools and employ all teachers. Instead, it steers the system but contracts with others to row—to operate many of the schools. The steering body, usually an elected school board and appointed superintendent but sometimes a mayor or appointed board, uses charters and contracts to open schools that meet emerging student needs. If they work, it expands them and replicates them. If they don't work, it replaces them. Every year, it replaces the worst performers, replicates the best, and develops new models to meet new needs.

The result is continuous improvement. This new formula—autonomy, accountability, diversity of school designs, and parental choice—is simply more effective than the centralized, bureaucratic approach we inherited from the 20th century. Cities that embrace it, by expanding charter schools but also by treating more district schools like charters, are transforming the

lives of their students. New Orleans, which has 92 percent of its students in charter schools, is the fastest improving city in America.<sup>1</sup>

Washington, D.C., with 46 percent in charters, is close on its heels.<sup>2</sup> Denver, Memphis, Cleveland, Newark, and Camden, New Jersey, are all moving in the same direction.

Thirty districts belong to a network of “portfolio districts”—so called because they manage a portfolio of traditional and charter schools—which share what they have learned about what works and what doesn’t.

Indianapolis has recently emerged as one of the leaders. It is sometimes said that cities other than millennial hotspots such as Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., New Orleans, and Denver cannot attract the talent necessary to build a large, vibrant charter school sector. But, for the past decade, Indianapolis has given the lie to that argument. It has the only mayor in the country who authorizes charter schools, thanks to Democratic Mayor Bart Peterson’s efforts to push through the state’s charter law in 2001.

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Today it is innovating again: Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) is authorizing “innovation network schools”: district schools with performance contracts and full charter-style autonomy. Some are charters, some are startups, and some are existing IPS schools that have converted to

innovation network status. All have independent boards organized as 501(c)3 not-for-profit organizations; all are outside the teachers’ union contract; and all use IPS school buildings.

A Midwestern “flyover city,” Indianapolis deserves close attention from education reformers. Though other cities have their own versions of “innovation schools” or “pilot schools,” only Indianapolis has given them the full autonomy and accountability charters enjoy.

The city’s charters, which outperform IPS’s traditional public schools, now educate more than a third of all public school students in the district, while innovation network schools already educate another 10 percent. Within another year or two, those two sectors combined will surpass 50 percent.

#### **MAYORAL AUTHORIZING IN INDIANAPOLIS**

In 1999, when Bart Peterson ran for mayor, Indianapolis was a Rust Belt city that had lost much of its industrial base. A series of Republican mayors had pursued creative economic development efforts, but the city struggled to keep its middle class. Peterson knew he needed much stronger public schools to attract and keep residents, so he campaigned in support of a charter law. Teresa Lubbers, a Republican state senator, had introduced six previous charter school bills, all of which had failed. She came up with the idea of giving the mayor authorizing authority, so Peterson teamed up with her. The combination of a Democratic mayor of the state’s largest city and a Republican legislator finally broke the logjam.

Peterson put a young staffer, David Harris, in charge of his new charter office, and Harris put in place a rigorous process to approve charters. When Republican Greg Ballard defeated

Peterson after two terms, some were concerned that the political transition would undermine chartering. But the only Peterson staffers Ballard kept on were in the charter office. During his two terms, which ended in January 2016, he increased the number of charters from 16 to 39, while closing seven.<sup>3</sup>



**DAVID HARRIS**

His successor, Democrat Joe Hogsett, continued the bipartisan support. Today the mayor authorizes 35 schools on 40 campuses, with six more authorized to open in the fall of 2017. By last year they served about 13,600 students.<sup>4</sup> The Indiana Charter School Board also authorizes seven schools in the city,<sup>5</sup> while Ball State University authorizes two, one of which is a virtual (online) school, with students from all across the state.<sup>6</sup> Within the geographic boundaries of IPS—which covers most but not all of Indianapolis—about 14,000 students attended charters last year, compared to about 30,000 in non-chartered IPS schools. Another 2,339 attended six charter high schools for adults. Hence, K-12 charter students made up close to a third of all public school students within IPS's boundaries—or about 36 percent, if you count the adult charters.<sup>7</sup> To this day, no other mayor in America authorizes charters.

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The city council in Milwaukee has authorized about 10, and the mayor of Columbus has the authority to authorize but has not used it.

With the exception of a handful of schools, the charters in Indianapolis are homegrown—another fact that contradicts the view that cities lacking millennial appeal cannot build vibrant charter sectors. A key reason is The Mind Trust, founded in 2006 by Mayor Peterson and David Harris as a kind of venture capital outfit for the charter sector, to raise money and recruit talent. The Mind Trust convinced Teach For America (TFA), The New Teacher Project (now TNTP), and Stand for Children to come to Indianapolis, in part by raising money for them. Since then TFA has brought in more than 500 teachers and 39 school leaders (the latter through its Indianapolis Principal Fellowship);<sup>8</sup> TNTP's Indianapolis Teaching Fellows Program has trained 498 teachers;<sup>9</sup> and Stand for Children has worked to engage the community, to educate parents about school reform, and to spearhead fundraising for school board candidates. The Mind Trust has also raised millions of dollars and offered start-up space, grants, and other help to eight nonprofit organizations and 17 new schools, with more to come.<sup>10</sup>

In recent years Indiana's charter law has been ranked number one in the country by both the National Association of Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) and the National Association of Charter School Authorizers.

Last March NAPCS rated the state's charter sector—roughly half of which is in Indianapolis—the second healthiest in the nation, after D.C.'s.<sup>11</sup> And the mayor's office is highly regarded as an authorizer. It issues annual performance reports on each school, tracking 27 different measures, including qualitative evaluations. It does in-depth reviews when the charter is up for renewal every seven years and once in between. Since its founding, it has rejected many more applications

than it has accepted, and it has closed at least 10 schools—usually replacing them with a new school by a stronger operator.<sup>12</sup>

State legislation that passed in 2011 allowed private universities to begin authorizing charters, which led to rapid growth of low-quality schools. When authorizers with high standards moved to close failing charters, the schools sometimes hopped to a less discriminating authorizer. (More recent legislation has restricted authorizer hopping, requiring schools that lose their charter to wait a year before applying to a different authorizer.) The mayor's office, The Mind Trust, and others pushed hard for other authorizers to clean up their acts, and Ball State University, the largest, closed a dozen schools in three years, many of them in the city.<sup>13</sup> Today, Ahmed Young, who runs the mayor's charter office, says the state charter board, Ball State, and the Mayor's charter office try to align their work.

Charters receive roughly \$4,200 per student less than IPS schools each year, in large part because they do not get free buildings or local property tax money.<sup>14</sup> Yet, on average, mayor-sponsored charter schools outperform IPS schools. As schools of choice, they may have the advantage of more motivated parents, on average. But demographically, they serve a similar population: last year, both had about 79 percent students of color; 81 percent of charter students were low-income (qualifying for a free or reduced-price lunch), compared to 71 percent in IPS; 13 percent were classified as special education, compared to 17.5 percent in IPS; and 11.6 percent were English language learners, compared to 14.7 in IPS.<sup>15</sup>

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Like most states, Indiana debuted a new set of standards and a new test in 2015, so student proficiency rates dropped precipitously. The state then changed test vendors in 2016, and scores dropped a bit more. So there is no valid way to compare test scores after 2014. On the 2014 exams, 71.2 percent of students at the mayoral charters were proficient in English language arts (ELA), compared with 60.4 of IPS students. In math, the difference was 75.4 percent to 65.2 percent. (The same trends continued in 2015, but at lower score levels.<sup>16</sup>) According to the mayor's office, the charters outperformed neighborhood schools that students would have otherwise been assigned to by 17 percentage points in ELA and 16 percentage points in math.

Their median growth percentile, which measures students' rates of progress, was about five percentage points higher in both subjects, and their graduation rate was 80.3 percent, compared to 71.5 percent at IPS.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps because the mayor's office closes failing schools, its charters have also shown more rapid improvement. In 2013, only 35 percent of them received an A or B rating from the state; by 2015, 65 percent did. At IPS, only 37 percent received an A or B in 2015.<sup>18</sup>

In 2012, Stanford University's Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) released a study of charter performance in Indiana. It compared charter students to students in traditional public schools who had similar demographics, poverty levels, and prior test scores.

Compared to those counterparts, it concluded, “Charter students in Indianapolis gain an additional two months in reading and nearly three months in math,” every year. Those in mayoral charters did even better: two months in reading and 3.6 months in math.<sup>19</sup> In 2015 CREDO published a report on 41 urban regions, including Indianapolis, which showed similar results.<sup>20</sup>

Mayoral authorizing has turned out to be a surprisingly stable and effective strategy, enduring through three mayors from both parties. David Harris believes it is the best authorizing model, because the authorizer is accountable to the families served by the schools.<sup>21</sup> “They can be thrown out of office in the next election by dissatisfied parents if they hand out charters to subpar operators,” he says. “Because of this, mayors have a powerful incentive to rigorously review charter applications and shut down underperforming schools. Under a mayoral authorizer, bad charters won’t be allowed to fail with impunity—either the school or its authorizer will pay a price.”<sup>22</sup>

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Given Indianapolis’s success, it is extraordinary that no other mayor is authorizing charters. Most mayors understand that keeping a middle class in their city is critical to its health and that decent schools are the best way to keep that population. Perhaps the explanation lies in the power many teachers’ unions exercise in state legislatures, which must change the rules to allow mayoral authorizing. Still, other mayors would be wise to seek chartering authority.

## **THE NEXT BREAKTHROUGH: INNOVATION NETWORK SCHOOLS**

The rise of charters has put enormous competitive pressure on Indianapolis Public Schools, where nearly half of schools were still rated D or F by the state in 2015.<sup>23</sup> Fifty years ago, IPS had more than 100,000 students; today, it has only about 30,000.<sup>24</sup> On top of the 14,000 in K-12 charters, more than 3,400 students within IPS boundaries used state-funded vouchers to attend private schools last year.<sup>25</sup>

Until the arrival of a new superintendent in 2013, the district was hostile to charters. Then-Superintendent Eugene White knew he had to do something to keep families in IPS schools, so he expanded magnet programs aggressively. He encouraged them to develop unique academic programs, and he let them hire their own teaching staffs. Unfortunately, the magnets have drawn more white, middle-class families than the rest of the IPS schools, raising suspicion in the African-American community about a two-tier system.

Two things happened that changed the course of history in IPS. First, The Mind Trust released a 150-page report, *Creating Opportunity Schools: A Bold Plan to Transform Indianapolis Public Schools*, in December 2011. It called for a switch from an elected school board to an appointed one, with three members appointed by the mayor and two by the City Council. More important, it urged that, over time, *all* Indianapolis public schools be converted to “opportunity schools,” which would essentially be treated like charters. They would have a seven-year performance contract with the district that would guarantee the kind of autonomy charters had—over hiring, curriculum, school design, and how they spent their money. If they failed to perform as promised, they would be closed and replaced by a stronger

school operator. They would all be schools of choice; every family in Indianapolis would choose its school.

The report generated an enormous amount of attention and controversy. Superintendent White rejected it, and the new mayor, Greg Ballard, chose not to pursue it. But “it really stimulated a conversation about what needed to happen in the district that had never happened before,” says Harris. Putting out an actual vision for what the district should look like, he believes, inspired people to think about things differently.

An informal group of elected officials, business people, and community activists tried to convince the state legislature to allow mayoral appointment of the school board but failed. So, with Stand for Children playing a central role, they turned their attention to electing reformers to the school board. “We had candid conversations with current board members and asked them not to run again, that it was time for a change in leadership,” says Sam Odle, a former health care executive who ran and won a seat in 2012. “Those incumbents all stood down. They knew they were going to be running against candidates that were well funded and had the support of the business community. One of them had been on the board for 30 years. I think they recognized the winds were shifting.”

The reformers won all four seats that were up in 2012, creating a majority on the seven-member board. The new board bought out Superintendent White’s contract and hired Dr. Lewis Ferebee, who had been an elementary school teacher, an administrator, and a deputy superintendent in North Carolina.

To understand why Indianapolis is creating charter-like district schools, it helps to

understand his background. At 25, Ferebee says, he was a middle school assistant principal in Creedmore, N.C., when a “radical superintendent” asked him to become principal of the district’s worst elementary school. “He gave me the keys and said, ‘Lewis, you have carte blanche authority. If anybody comes to you about a decision you made, have them come to me. This is so important that I don’t want anything to get in your way.’”



**LEWIS FEREBEE**

“And I believe that was why I was successful. At the end of the day, if principals feel handcuffed, if teachers feel handcuffed, you’re stifling their creativity. Your best teachers are your most innovative and creative teachers, and they know their learners. So, when you don’t give them the full opportunity to make informed decisions about what they know, you’re limiting the opportunity for them to be successful.”

Ferebee also discovered that empowering teachers “was the best recruiting tool I had. I had teachers helping me recruit other teachers to my building, because they were excited. From that I learned the power of teacher leadership, so now I’m just anointing and empowering teachers to be leaders among themselves, and then I sit back and watch this amazing work of teachers getting better as they’re developing other teachers.”

“What I learned was you can raise salaries—we can do some of that—but I think there’s something to be said for creating leadership

opportunities and for agility and autonomy in schools. That is where teachers feel most valued and most respected.”

As an elementary principal, Ferebee saw a lot of his graduates fall back academically in middle school. So he asked the superintendent if he could run the middle school. When he turned it around, the superintendent asked him to supervise all middle schools in the district. Then a new superintendent came in and made him regional superintendent of a feeder pattern of elementary, middle, and high schools that were all struggling. “We outperformed the district in terms of growth,” he says. “We were beginning to create a pipeline in that neighborhood.”

When Durham, N.C., hired the district’s chief of staff to be its superintendent, he brought Ferebee along as his chief of staff and asked him to turn around all the low performing schools. Again, Ferebee empowered his principals and teachers.

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He and his partners from Duke University were telling their story at a National Association of School Boards meeting when some board members from Indianapolis heard them. The next thing he knew they were inviting him to Indianapolis for an interview.

“I didn’t realize, until I got here, the real thick dividing line between traditional public schools and charters, the contentious relationship,” he says. “It was almost as if we were in the same boat with the same mission and the same goals, but there was this huge wall and barrier.” There was “a lot of finger pointing” between IPS and

the mayor’s office, and “no collaboration.” IPS was “struggling with underutilized facilities, and charter schools were being incubated in old grocery stores and old factories. The whole financial model of that division didn’t make sense to me. We’re still talking about public schools.”

Ferebee also found an unusual degree of centralization at IPS: principals didn’t even select their assistant principals and teachers. On his listening tour, principals told him their schools weren’t as successful as they could be because they didn’t have enough autonomy. So he began to empower them.

He quickly forged a relationship with the mayor’s charter office. He and Jason Kloth, then deputy mayor for education, began to brainstorm. Clearly, The Mind Trust’s vision informed their conversations, because they came up with a similar idea, though they changed the name to “innovation network schools.” With Ferebee’s help, the mayor’s office wrote legislation giving IPS authority to create such autonomous schools to replace failing schools, to convert existing IPS schools to innovation schools, even to bring charters in to run innovation schools in IPS buildings.

The state teachers union opposed the bill and attacked Ferebee when he testified about it. But, in Indiana, a right-to-work state, the union has fewer members and less power than in other states. In 2014 the legislature passed it, and, in 2015, it added new features and extended the same authority to the state’s other school districts. When the 2014 elections brought three more reformers onto the board, Ferebee had strong local support for the idea.

Innovation network schools are exempt from the same laws and regulations charters are



exempt from, and they operate outside IPS's union contracts. They have five- to seven-year contracts with the district, which are much like charters. If the school fails to fulfill the terms of its contract, the district can end the contract or refuse to renew it, but otherwise it cannot interfere with the school's autonomy.

**Innovation network schools are exempt from the same laws and regulations charters are exempt from, and they operate outside IPS's union contracts.**

The principal and teachers are not IPS employees; they work for the nonprofit 501(c)3 corporation. The nonprofit board hires and fires the principal, sets the budget and pay scale, and chooses the school design. All the schools operate in IPS buildings, and IPS handles special education for those that are not also charters.

There are four types of innovation network schools:

1. New startups, some of which are also charter schools.
2. Charter schools that choose to become innovation schools and are housed in district school buildings.
3. Failing schools the district restarts as innovation schools, often partnering with an outside operator.
4. Existing IPS schools that choose to convert to innovation status.

The new schools tend to build up a grade or two at a time. Some of the restarts (type 3) take on the entire student body, while others phase in a grade or two per year.

All but the second type serve as neighborhood schools, not schools of choice. Ferebee believes in public school choice—indeed, he wrote his doctoral dissertation on the topic. But he also wants students whose parents don't take the trouble to choose to have access to quality schools. He's trying to create a system that will provide both. In addition, he adds, "I believe there is a symbiotic relationship between a neighborhood and a school." When a school is abandoned, the neighborhood tends to go downhill. He wants innovation schools to have the opposite effect: to revive neighborhoods.

When charter schools become innovation schools, they pay rent to IPS, but at very low rates. Different innovation schools have negotiated different agreements with IPS, but most get free or reduced-price bus transportation for students who need it, free utilities, custodial, maintenance, special education, and information technology services, student meals, a nurse, and a social worker. These advantages add up to an average of about \$2,000 per student, according to David Harris—enough to make becoming an innovation school more attractive than just opening a new charter school. "Just having a facility that exists is a \$2.5 million fundraising difference," says Earl Martin Phalen, who opened a charter school and then an innovation school in the city.

Though the statewide teachers union opposed the original legislation, the local union has not interfered with implementation. Ferebee and his staff try to communicate with union leaders regularly, so no one gets blindsided, says Aleesia Johnson, Ferebee's innovation officer. She points out that union leaders know that, if IPS doesn't try to turn around failing schools, the state may take them over.

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Union leaders were present when IPS leaders talked with the first two schools that wanted to convert to innovation status. In both cases, an overwhelming majority of the teachers supported conversion, including the union representatives—even though it meant leaving union membership and tenure behind. “These are the high performing schools,” says Brandon Brown, who ran Mayor Ballard’s charter office and is now at The Mind Trust, “and most of the teachers probably feel pretty confident—and rightfully so—that their situation is going to be fine.”

The Mind Trust proposed that it “incubate” innovation schools, by providing grants to leaders to support them through a planning year or two, and Ferebee agreed. The Mind Trust incubated one of the five innovation schools launched in 2015, three of which were already existing charters, and all four that opened in 2016. Of those launched in 2015, the one restart best illustrates what IPS is trying to do.



**EARL MARTIN PHALEN**

#### **THE PHALEN LEADERSHIP ACADEMY**

Francis Scott Key Elementary School 103 had been rated F by the state for five years. In its neighborhood, nearly of third of residents had annual household incomes of less than \$10,000.<sup>26</sup> The school was one of the most

transient and violent in the city: in its final year, 73 fights erupted, more than in any of IPS’s other elementary schools. Enrollment had fallen from 527 to 341, and only 11 students passed the state ISTEP exams.<sup>27</sup> “Every single classroom was chaotic,” says Earl Martin Phalen, whose Phalen Leadership Academies (PLA) was asked by the district to take it over and turn it around. “Literally 13 of our sixth graders, on the pretest, were at kindergarten or first grade levels. They couldn’t spell their names.”

Phalen played basketball at Yale, then graduated from Harvard Law School in 1993, two years after Barack Obama. He usually sports two earrings and a three-piece suit, but that’s not what makes him so unusual. Earl spent his first two years in an orphanage, then was adopted by white parents in Norwood, Massachusetts, a very white suburb of Boston.

His adoptive mother’s parents were immigrants from Ireland, Phalen says. When they went into Boston to look for jobs, they ran into a lot of signs that said “No Irish Need Apply.” “During the civil rights movement, my mom said to my dad, ‘I want to be a freedom rider,’” he explains. “My dad said, ‘We’ve got seven kids under nine; you’re not going to be a freedom rider.’ She read an article in the *Boston Globe* that said 70 percent of the black boys in foster care would end up in prison by the time they were 21. So she said, ‘Let’s adopt an African-American boy.’”

His parents gave him the middle name of Martin in honor of Martin Luther King. And they didn’t stop adopting with Earl. “Now the family has 42 grandchildren and great grandchildren,” he says with a grin. “Eleven of them are black.”

At Harvard Law School, he started an after-school tutoring program, which evolved into a summer tutoring program and grew from 20 kids

to 15,000 in multiple states. In 2009, he applied for a Mind Trust fellowship to bring his Summer Advantage program to Indianapolis, where it eventually served 5,000 kids a summer.

Then Harris asked him to start a charter school. “If we can do 10 schools and serve 10,000 kids, we’ll do this,” he and his two partners decided. The Indiana Charter School Board gave him a charter for 10 schools, and he named them the George and Veronica Phalen Leadership Academies, out of gratitude to his parents. The first one now includes pre-kindergarten through fourth grade; year by year, it will grow to eighth grade. Last year 89 percent of the students were African American and 78 percent qualified for a free or reduced-price lunch. At the end of the second year, 100 percent of third graders passed the state’s IREAD exam. Even before then, IPS and The Mind Trust selected him as a fellow to restart a failing IPS school, with all the students, as an innovation network school.

“We knew it had to be done well, because, if it wasn’t, the notion of innovation schools would take a severe hit,” Phalen says. “It was sooner than we wanted to do a turnaround, and everybody said turnaround is tougher than a charter. The risk is that you’re taking on the whole school, and you have to believe that you can get third graders and fourth graders and fifth graders who’ve been in a chaotic environment for five, six, and seven years to actually behave up to your expectations. But we had done summer programs with kids from seven different gangs, and we put them on one campus. So I wasn’t scared about being able to set the culture. We can set culture.”

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**graders and fourth graders and fifth graders who’ve been in a chaotic environment for five, six, and seven years to actually behave up to your expectations.**

Francis Scott Key had 53 teachers. Phalen says he told them kids were going to grow 1.5 years per year, academically, and they didn’t believe it. So he didn’t hire any of them—“Because they didn’t have the fundamental belief in the kids they were serving.” He and principal Agnes Aleobua hired 42 new staff members and had the dingy old school renovated, with new desks, carpeting over the old tile, and bright new paint on the walls. They assigned a teacher and an assistant to most classrooms—then let two of them go within the first few months. “We cannot waste a year of a child’s life while a teacher tries to figure out if they want to do this,” Phalen explained.<sup>28</sup>

Phalen had learned from his summer program and his charter school how important it was to engage children’s parents. “We built a process that was scientifically proven to increase parental engagement,” he says. “It’s not rocket science; it’s just common sense. We have all our teachers call home prior to the start of the program and say, ‘Your son’s going to be in my class; what are his interests? What does he like to read? And, by the way, here are my goals for the classroom; what do you want to get out of the class this year, for your child? And here’s my email; you’re welcome any time in our class.’”

“And we send a progress report every four weeks, so you can’t say, ‘I didn’t know.’ You know what homework is being done, how behavior is, and you have to sign it. Eighty percent of our parents sign it.”

“We also have All-Pro Dads. Dads come in with their kids, for breakfast. At the last one, we had 67 dads out of 300 families. They start by saying, “My name is \_\_\_\_, my son is \_\_\_\_, and I’m very proud of him because...” Tony Dungy, the former Indianapolis Colts coach, built the curriculum. “It creates a special community and vulnerability. It’s built to help dads talk to their kids more. If you’re a single mom you can come and do the same. But it’s mostly men.”

“We had 267 families of 400 come to an event at 103. Just by showing that care and concern, we got that turnout—and people told us they wouldn’t be engaged. We hired parent advocates. Their goal is to get to know the parents, build a relationship, visit the house, spend time with them. Get them hooked up with programs they qualify for.” Enrollment jumped 17 percent in the first year, another 15 percent in 2016.<sup>29</sup>

After six months, Phalen told me, “We’ve got the culture straightened out; now, we need to get the academic piece fixed.” By the time state testing rolled around, the percentage of third graders who passed IREAD (a reading test for third graders that has not changed) had doubled, from 30 to 61 percent.

While Phalen reinvents the school, the Glick Philanthropies have launched a comprehensive effort to turn the broader neighborhood around, called the Far Eastside Success Initiative, in partnership with the United Way of Central Indiana, Central Indiana Community Foundation, and IPS. It will involve housing, free pre-school, college scholarships, a food pantry, adult education and training programs, and health care and public safety initiatives.

Gene B. Glick was a builder who constructed many of the homes and apartments in the

neighborhood, beginning in the 1950s. His family says it is prepared to make a 20-year investment in the area, which also houses a high school. Already it has purchased an apartment complex he built and invested \$5 million in improving it. It has given PLA 103 more than \$1 million over the first two years to help with renovation, staff recruitment and training, parent advocates, and pre-school. And, at the high school, it has invested \$40,000 in college scholarships and \$60,000 to support a restorative justice discipline program.<sup>30</sup>

**Glick Philanthropies has given PLA 103 more than \$1 millions over the first two years to help with renovation, staff recruitment and training, parent advocates and pre-school.**

This year Phalen took a second innovation school under its wing, but on a slightly different basis. School 93 is run by a group of teachers who call themselves Project Restore. This is “an incredible group of teachers who, eight years ago, were at another school,” he says, and said, “You guys keep handing us down all these initiatives; you don’t have any idea what works or doesn’t work because your feet have been so far from the ground. Let us run the school.” The principal, who believed in distributed leadership, agreed. So the group of teachers put together seven principles. “It’s nothing revolutionary,” Phalen says: weekly tests; guides for what should be taught every week; showcasing results; coaching teachers; recognition for good teachers; and so on. “With the exact same teachers, they took the school from an F rated school to an A rated school in one year. So the superintendent, Dr. White, said, ‘Why don’t you try that again?’” They turned that school from an F to a B in one year, and an A the next year.

Ferebee encouraged them to bring their model to school 93, which they moved from an F to a C in their first year, 2014-15.<sup>31</sup> When they decided to pursue innovation network status, through a Mind Trust Educator Empowerment Grant, they didn't want to spend time building a 501(c)3 organization and a board. "They were passionate about teaching, improving teaching and learning—not administration, not starting a 501(c)3," Phalen says. So they joined his organization, under his board. "We will be overseeing school 93 and 103, but we will be accountable to the IPS school board."

### GLOBAL PREPARATORY ACADEMY

Another interesting restart is the first dual-language immersion school to be chartered in Indiana—a K-2 school that will gradually grow to be K-8. Called Global Prep Academy, it was launched in August 2016 by Mariama Carson, a former teacher and principal in Pike Township, one of ten other districts within Indianapolis's borders. It offers instruction in both English and Spanish, to native speakers of both languages.



**MARIAMA CARSON**

As she grew up in Indianapolis, Carson always wanted to be a teacher. Her schools in Pike Township were high-poverty schools, with an increasing number of Spanish speakers. She became passionate about dual-language immersion, because, when Spanish speakers began showing up in her classrooms back in 2002, her high school and college Spanish was not enough. She went to Cuernavaca, Mexico, for a six-week immersion program during the

summer, then returned every other year to brush up. "That's why the passion for immersion as the way to learn another language," she says. "It's sink or swim, make it happen."

As a principal, Carson raised her school's test scores, improving its state rating from a D to a B. But she grew frustrated. "I could make incremental progress, not drastic progress," she says. But, if the district would let her do what she wanted—a dual-language immersion school—"we could blow the doors off. But the district said, no, we're not doing that."

Her sister worked at The Mind Trust, so she approached David Harris, said she thought she might want to teach in a charter school. "He said, 'No, you need to create a charter school,'" she laughs. The Mind Trust gave her an Education Entrepreneur Fellowship, paying her for two years to create her school. She returned to Mexico for six weeks and also traveled to visit outstanding dual-language immersion schools around the United States. The Mind Trust helped her recruit a board and create a back office support system, and she began to recruit teachers, an assistant principal, and a dual-language coach.

Originally, she intended to create an independent charter school, but, when the innovation path opened, it was financially more attractive. So her school is both a charter, authorized by the mayor's office, and an innovation network school, located in an IPS building. "I thought I would never again work inside a district," she says, "but I think this way of working inside a district will work for us."

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**So her school is both a charter, authorized by the mayor's office, and an innovation network school, located in an IPS building.**

The school she is replacing was one of the worst in IPS. Only one teacher applied to stay, and Carson hired her as an assistant in the behavior room. "Kids are easy to change," Carson says; "it's adults that are hard." She had to recruit teachers worldwide, to get 50 percent native Spanish speakers. One came from Spain, another from Mexico.

In the neighborhood, she says, a third of the homes are abandoned, a third are rented, and a third are owned. "Failure is what they know. They keep asking, 'What are you going to do when you fail? How long before you fail?'" At the first six parent meetings, before the school opened, only 23 people showed up. So she held a family movie night, a magic show, an outdoor movie, and a block party with carnival games.

Then she began doing home visits, as she did in Pike Township—where she says they were frowned upon. Enrollment rose by 20 percent.<sup>32</sup>

She's confident that what worked in Pike Township will work in her new school. "The heart and soul of our program is hands-on learning and experiential learning," she says. The teaching is project based, so kids do explorations within each unit. They develop expertise on a topic, and, every 12 weeks, they do a presentation to showcase what they've learned. The need to present gives them a reason to learn, as well as teaching them how to speak in front of a group.

There are six interdisciplinary units of study, on topics such as family, science, money, and "who am I?" "That's how I've always taught," she says. "There's tons of research: when you make

connections for kids, it has more meaning and it sticks with them."

**There are six interdisciplinary units of study, on topics such as family, science, money, and "who am I?"**

Kids have an English teacher in the morning and a Spanish teacher in the afternoon, or vice versa. So every student has two teachers. With both English and Spanish speakers in the classroom, she says, "Kids help each other a lot. That's why the two-way language immersion is so powerful."

The school will run year-round, with seven weeks off in the summer, two in the fall, two in the winter, and two in the spring—10 more days than a normal IPS school. Any child not at grade level will stay for an additional week during the spring and fall breaks, to work in a small group.

## **THE FUTURE OF INNOVATION NETWORK SCHOOLS**

The Mind Trust is incubating seven innovation network schools, several of them founded by successful charters that have decided to replicate as innovation schools.<sup>33</sup> Earl Martin Phalen is creating a new middle school, built on its Phalen Leadership Academies (PLA) model. And Purdue University is developing the Purdue Polytechnic High School, to create a bridge for inner-city kids to the university. Using a project-based approach, it will focus on science, technology, and engineering. "We are really targeting those students who might be in that middle range, who today are not thinking about going to college or maybe aren't being prepared to go to college," says future head of school Scott Bess, who formerly ran Goodwill Education Initiatives, which oversees a charter high school and six charters for adult drop-outs in the city (and five more outside Indianapolis).<sup>34</sup>

According to Bess, his high school graduates who meet Purdue University's admissions criteria will be automatically accepted into the Purdue Polytechnic Institute, one of Purdue's 10 colleges, while others may pursue associate degrees or certifications in well-paid technical fields.<sup>35</sup>

As of today, about 10 percent of IPS students attend nine innovation network schools, five of which are also charter schools.<sup>36</sup> As these nine build out their grade levels and four or five more innovation schools launch next year, that percentage will increase. Another year or two of that and a full quarter of IPS's students will be in innovation schools.

**As of today, about 10 percent of IPS students attend nine innovation network schools, five of which are also charter schools.**

Meanwhile, Superintendent Ferebee has announced a three-year plan to close several existing IPS high schools. In his first three years, Ferebee estimates, IPS has weeded out 56 percent of its failing schools—one of the nation's most aggressive efforts to address failing schools.<sup>37</sup> "My philosophy is this," he says: "You can have a bad year, but we know those schools, and they exist all across the nation, where every year is a bad year. The outcomes and challenges of those situations are very steep to overcome for the students and their families. It's typically the neighborhood schools, where students are required to attend. That's a social justice issue, an equity issue. I am of the belief that we get students out of those situations by any means necessary."

There are constant problems that need to be worked out, acknowledges Aleesia Johnson,

a former KIPP principal who oversees the innovation network for Ferebee. Will there be enough money to support the growing number of innovation schools, for instance? As the first restart school, Phalen negotiated a generous deal, which included a 10 percent management fee, on the theory that much of the administrative work would be done by the school, not central headquarters. Later, Ferebee and Johnson realized how expensive that would be, with multiple schools, and quit offering it.

"But, if there's no management fee built in, how will the schools support the services that are needed to make sure the schools are great?" Phalen asks. "If you have a break-even deal today, just by the very nature of the cost of purchasing, you're going to be down by 1.5 percent a year; and, just by the nature of talent, if you want to retain people," you have to give them raises. "I'm seeing some upside-down deals," with fixed revenue streams for seven years and no management fees. "So I worry about this next class."

And what does IPS do with teachers the innovation schools don't want? The teachers' contract doesn't let the district lay people off if their school is closed and replaced by an innovation school. Most of them have found positions at other IPS schools, so far. But, when IPS gets to 20 innovation schools, what will it do with all those surplus teachers? Right now, if principals still have vacancies the first day of school, they are forced to take surplus teachers. Unless that policy is changed, the expansion of innovation schools could undermine other IPS schools.

Johnson has confidence that they'll figure it out. Dr. Ferebee, she says, has "created the mindset,

‘Figure out how we can do it.’ It’s never, ‘No, we can’t do that.’ It’s, “Oh, we’ve never done that, so let’s talk about it and figure out how to get it done”

“This is all so new,” she adds. “We believe we can be a proof point for the country, quite honestly, but we’re still new.”

### **OTHER INITIATIVES TO CREATE A PORTFOLIO SYSTEM**

Dr. Ferebee and the board are rolling out a series of other initiatives designed to create a portfolio of different kinds of schools. They have created a category of “autonomous schools,” which get more control over their budgets and hiring than traditional IPS schools but remain within the teachers union contract—which means they can’t extend their school day or year, among other things. In the first year, Ferebee chose six of the eight schools that applied for the new status, all of which already perform well, and five of which are magnet schools, which already had more autonomy than traditional schools.<sup>38</sup> He sees autonomous status in part as a transition for principals before they pursue innovation status. He won’t force autonomy on principals, he says, but he’ll give them all they want. His long-term goal, supported by the board, is to convert all IPS schools to autonomous or innovation schools.

**They have created a category of “autonomous schools,” which get more control over their budgets and hiring than traditional IPS schools but remain within the teachers union contract.**

IPS also has a contract with a school turnaround organization called Mass Insight to work with two failing high schools and their feeder middle and elementary schools, in what they call a

“Transformation Zone.” These schools were all at risk of state takeover, according to School Board President Mary Ann Sullivan. Ferebee has given them some degree of autonomy, and they are developing teacher leaders who teach part time and coach other teachers in their subject matter and grade levels, through a national initiative called the “Opportunity Culture,” run by Public Impact.

IPS is also planning a unified enrollment system for all public schools in the city, including the independent charters—as Denver, New Orleans, Washington D.C., and Newark have. Caitlin Hannon, a former school board member, is using a fellowship from The Mind Trust to develop the “Enroll Indy” system, with a proposed launch in November 2017.<sup>39</sup> The IPS board voted in November to move ahead with it. This will make it far easier for parents who want to choose the best schools for their children. They will no longer have to fill out multiple applications at charter and magnet schools. It will also increase the competitive pressure on schools, because everyone will know which ones are in demand and which aren’t.

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In 2017-18 IPS plans to shift to weighted student budgeting, in which most of the money allocated for children will follow them to the school, and the principal and staff will decide how to use it.

Students living in poverty will bring greater resources. And those running schools will have more room to line their spending up behind their educational strategies—whether blended



learning (using educational software), project-based learning, dual-language immersion, or any other strategy.

IPS is also working with the mayor's charter office and state charter board to develop a "common performance framework" by which all schools will be measured. Aleesia Johnson explains that not all schools will be held accountable for the same things, but there will be a common measuring stick. Her goal is to have a performance framework for IPS in place by 2017-18, while continuing to work on the cross-sector version.

And, finally, The Mind Trust, IPS, and the mayor's office are working on "Equity Reports," which will measure how public schools serve different types of students, by gender, race, poverty levels, and special education. They will be modeled after Washington D.C.'s Equity Reports, and they will cover all charter, innovation, autonomous, and traditional schools. If they follow D.C.'s format, they will give people information about schools' attendance rates, suspension and expulsion rates, midyear entries and departures, standardized test scores, and graduation rates, broken down by subgroup.

## CONCLUSION

If all these plans are realized, most public schools in Indianapolis will have the autonomy they need to succeed, parents will have many choices and good information with which to make those choices, and schools that lag behind will be regularly replaced by stronger models.

Like New Orleans and Washington D.C.'s charter sector—two of the fastest improving systems in the country—Indianapolis will have a self-renewing system, in which every school has incentives and the autonomy to continuously innovate and improve. That is the goal of

"portfolio" or "21st century" systems, in which the district and/or authorizers contract with operators rather than operating schools, give them autonomy, ask them to compete based upon their performance, close failures, and replicate successes.

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Indianapolis's charter sector is almost there already. It's too early to judge the performance of innovation network schools, but they are the most promising of the in-district autonomous schools around the country, because they start with true charter-like autonomy rather than waivers from rules, as in other cities. If IPS holds them accountable for performance, closes those that fail, and replicates those that succeed, they could change the district's performance dramatically. And, if they prove to be a viable alternative to independent charters, they might have enormous impact nationwide. In most places, it is far easier politically to create in-district innovation schools than independent charter schools. The risk is that the independent charter sector in Indianapolis will stop expanding, because charter operators can get such a better deal as IPS innovation schools.

Then, after the political winds shift or there is some kind of scandal at an innovation school, the board could try to nibble away at their autonomy. Each school has a contract, which will protect it for a few years. But a hostile

board could refuse to renew contracts or allow continued use of its buildings. It would take a change in state law to undermine independent charters, but to undermine innovation schools all it would take is a reversal of the school board majority.

Still, the current majority for reform is solid. Not many cities can boast bipartisan support for charters and a portfolio district, but that support is strong in Indianapolis. The Mind Trust has done an enormous amount, creating an entire network of non-profit organizations and schools. And the business community has been a steady source of support and funding.

With millennials being more geared to urban living, says Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Michael Huber, we realize “we can’t turn schools around fast enough in urban areas where millennials want to live.

It’s not by accident that companies like Eli Lilly—through their corporate foundation and other major corporate players—have been significant funders of this work. They’re concerned about their talent pipelines, their ability to recruit the best talent.”

Charters are no longer controversial; it has been a dozen years since they were a political issue. And less than half of public school teachers are members of the statewide or local union. The statewide union almost went bankrupt about five years ago, which limited its activities, and the local union is so weak it has done little to organize opposition to the local reforms.

There are a few headwinds, however. The local branch of the NAACP has long been anti-charter. Though it doesn’t have much of a following, its leaders, plus one outgoing school board member who opposes the innovation network and two

local professors, staged a series of forums this fall, called “Rise Up Indy Against The Mind Trust.” Other African-American organizations have supported reform, however.

A lot of her friends are against charter schools, says Mariama Carson. “They say, ‘Oh, they’re trying to privatize education.’ A lot of it is organizations like Stand for Children and white money that came into the elections. That’s why people are against it: they see it as outside white money.” In addition, she says, the teachers union spreads misinformation. “They lie to parents, and parents tend to believe their child’s teacher.”

“There’s a small set of voices,” Earl Martin Phalen adds, “that are saying, ‘When has a Republican administration in recent history done anything for poor black, Latino, and white folks? If you want me to believe that this charter thing, which is largely being led by Republicans, is for the good of blacks—I’ve lived long enough that I don’t think it’s for good intent.’ And then those who say, ‘I actually think we’re just the crumbs to the voucher program. They really want the voucher program, but they’ve got to have something that says, What about the poor folks?’”

“There were active KKK members on the IPS board back in the seventies, right? So the community says, ‘I don’t trust you guys at all. I’ve seen what you’ve done to our kids. I’ve seen what you’ve done to our schools. So I don’t trust you to do anything that’s right by our kids. Yes, our school may be in trouble, and 103 has been a nightmare for a decade, but I don’t trust this privatization, this Republican thing that’s going on.’ So they’ve been putting more political pressure on Dr. Ferebee to say, ‘Stop privatizing our schools; stop giving away our schools to charters. You don’t know, because you’re an

out-of-towner, Dr. Ferebee, what the history has been here, and this isn't going to be good for our kids at the end of it; there's some ulterior motive.' I think that has the potential to possibly slow down some of the things we've been trying to do, to be honest with you."

Anti-reform activists from two groups, Concerned Clergy and OurIPS, ran candidates for all four board seats up for re-election this November, but they fell far short. Reformers backed by Stand for Children, who support Ferebee, won three of the seats, and a former board president who falls somewhere between the two camps won the fourth.

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The key will be producing results, and the next few years will be critical. Indianapolis is fortunate to have a superintendent who knows—from his personal experience—the value of giving principals and schools autonomy and holding them accountable for results. He is a rare commodity in the world of superintendents. His presence, and the board that hired him, make Indianapolis a city to watch.

# Endnotes

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	2015-2016 (INCLUDING ADULT HS)	2015-2016 (EXCLUDING ADULT HS)
<b>INNOVATION NETWORK SCHOOLS (W/O A CHARTER)</b>	571	571
<b>INNOVATION NETWORK SCHOOLS (W/ A CHARTER)</b>	864	864
<b>INDEPENDENT CHARTER SCHOOLS</b>	13,869	11,530
<b>STATE TAKEOVER SCHOOLS</b>	1,623	1,623
<b>IPS</b>	29,012	29,012
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>45,939</b>	<b>43,600</b>

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