



CENTER FOR URBAN AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

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School Reform and the Mind Trust Proposal: Another Look at the Evidence

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The Center for Urban and Multicultural Education (CUME) appreciates that in publicizing their plan for remaking Indianapolis Public Schools, the Mind Trust, a local non-profit that fosters educational entrepreneurship, has stimulated a public dialogue about what education should look like in central Indianapolis. We agree that this discussion is needed and important as part of widespread effort to engage educators, children, and citizens in the conversation about public education's role in our community. At CUME, our founding mission centers on scholarly engagement in the nation's long-standing debate about the role and function of public education in our nation's cities, among its diverse communities, and in Indianapolis in particular. While we applaud the Mind Trust's concern for improving public education in central Indianapolis, and agree with some of their aims in transforming the Indianapolis Public School district, several concerns have emerged regarding the premises of the plan and the implications for our children and our city. A thoughtful response requires *another look at the evidence*. We feel a broader review of the evidence provides a more nuanced picture of the outcomes and unintended consequences of the reforms proposed by the Mind Trust where they have been implemented elsewhere, and that possible negative impacts—most notably in terms of equity for all students—must be fully considered before such drastic changes in how our children are educated are implemented.

In the following, we provide a broader, more inclusive review of the research and evidence pertaining to the Mind Trust proposal for Indianapolis Public Schools. First, we review the available evidence pertaining to school reform efforts in the two cities that the Mind Trust cites as the models for their plan: New Orleans and New York City. Second, we review the literature and evidence pertaining to some of the key aspects of the plan, such as mayoral control, alternative teacher certification, expansion of charter school options, and the role of education management organizations.

The Center for Urban and Multicultural Education (CUME) is the research arm of the Indiana University School of Education at IUPUI. CUME's mission is to create connections between research, theory and practice with the ultimate aim of improving the quality of education from early childhood through graduate school levels. Find out more at <http://education.iupui.edu/cume/> For questions or comments on this document, please contact John Houser at jhouser@iupui.edu or 317-278-3100.

Outcomes in Similar Reform Efforts

The Mind Trust proposal notes that their plan is based on the market-based reforms recently implemented in New Orleans and New York City, stating that efforts in these cities “mirror our proposed approaches” (p. 36). The Mind Trust presents some outcome data on these two districts in their proposal (pp. 33-34) and in separate appendices. However, upon closer inspection, the data presented do not provide a full and accurate portrayal of outcomes in these schools.

New Orleans

The Mind Trust proposal lays out some impressive numbers pertaining to school outcomes in New Orleans. However, a closer look reveals problems in drawing strong conclusions from these numbers. Part of the review of outcomes in New Orleans tracked gains from 2005 to 2010 but did not acknowledge the radical shift in demographics in the city after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Residents in areas that received greater flood damage, who were more likely to be poor and African American, have returned to the city at a slower rate than the general population (Fussell, Sastry, & VanLandingham, 2010). Thus, the population of New Orleans has become wealthier, older, and more White and Latino since Hurricane Katrina (www.census.gov), making before and after comparisons problematic and perhaps misleading. Furthermore, a significant portion of achievement gains in New Orleans are associated with questionable data reporting and cut-off measures. The school performance measure is highly biased by factors such as student poverty (DiCarlo, 2012), and the cutoff of what constitutes a failing school has been moved multiple times since 2005 (Buras, 2012), making year-to-year comparisons unreliable.

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Issues of equity pertaining to access and educational quality have been raised regarding reforms in New Orleans, particularly for children who are poor, belong to a racial or ethnic minority, or have a disability. For instance, a study of the New Orleans schools by Nikki Wolf (2011) found that students with disabilities were disproportionately educated in traditional rather than charter schools (10% vs. 6%). Her findings suggested that children with disabilities were overtly and discreetly dissuaded from enrolling in charter schools in post-Katrina New Orleans. The author suggested that these schools have specific academic and financial motivators for not serving these students. Wolf also found many charter schools did not have the special education expertise or infrastructure to adequately serve children with disabilities. A survey of 415 students in six New Orleans schools found that White students were much more likely than their Asian-American and African-American counterparts to report having teachers who were prepared and put considerable effort into helping students. Further, substantially fewer students from Vietnamese-speaking and low income households reported their parents were knowledgeable about school choices in New Orleans than their English-speaking and higher income counterparts (Cohen & Poon, 2011). A survey of 24 principals, 228 teachers, and 149 parents of children in New Orleans schools (Steele, Vernez, Gottfried, & Schwam-Baird, 2011) found few differences between charters and traditional schools in terms of leadership and instructional practice, though principals and teachers in traditional public schools did report more problems with student

discipline, parent involvement, and student transfers. While a significant proportion of students in both charter and traditional schools qualified for free or reduced lunch, reported median income was substantially higher among charter student households (approximately \$33,000) than traditional student households (approximately \$19,000). Parents of charter school students were more likely to cite curriculum, policies, or school performance as to why they chose their child's school, while most families who attended traditional schools reported that access to transportation, walkability, or a sense it was the only school available were important factors. These results suggest achievement differences between the schools may be driven by inequities in access, with access to charter schools being limited to families with more resources (i.e. transportation and income) and better information about school choices.

New York City

Similarly, a further exploration of the data used by the Mind Trust to demonstrate the success of New York City's reforms reveals problems as well. The large bulk of outcome data in New York City schools presented in the Mind Trust proposal focuses on standardized state test scores. The Mind Trust proposal included data up to 2009, showing progress from when Joel Klein took over as chancellor of city schools in 2002. However, in 2010, New York state acknowledged that tests had become too predictable (which were made public after they were administered and changed little year to year), thus making it too easy to teach to the test (Medina, 2010).

After tests were adjusted to compensate for this, scores plummeted, erasing virtually all the gains in passing rates obtained since Klein's appointment in 2002. Thus, the improvement in reported scores may have been largely driven by score inflation rather than an actual change in performance. As noted in New Orleans, these changes in standardized test cutoff scores over time make comparisons across time difficult and unreliable. Current performance data for New York can be found on the *New York Times* website (<http://projects.nytimes.com/new-york-schools-test-scores/new-york-city>).

New York was already outperforming other large cities in certain areas in 2002 before reforms were implemented, and New York City's gains have generally been at the same pace as those in other large cities, or slightly lower, from 2002 to 2011.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), sometimes referred to as the Nation's Report Card, is another standardized assessment of skills that has been administered to a representative sample of New York City 4th and 8th grade students since 2002. On the 2011 test, New York City performed better than other large cities in certain subareas, such as 4th grade reading (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011a, 2011b). However, New York was already outperforming other large cities in these areas in 2002 before reforms were implemented, and New York City's gains have generally been at the same pace as those in other large cities, or slightly lower, from 2002 to 2011.

In 2009, an 18 month study by researchers and journalists was completed with a focus on New York City's two primary reforms under Mr. Klein, the creation of 200 new small, specialized high schools and the expansion of high school choice (Hemphill & Nauer, 2009). They found these reforms did in fact expand opportunities for many high school students, reflected in higher graduation and attendance rates. However, these gains eroded over time as student-teacher ratios increased and schools enrolled greater numbers of students with disabilities as well as more

English language learners. While still higher than pre-reform levels overall, more than half of the small high schools saw significantly lower graduation rates in their second year cohorts relative to the initial percentage of graduates, and 127 of 158 new schools saw decreasing attendance rates from their initial levels. Bloom and Unterman (2012) similarly found those enrolled in the new small high schools had higher English test scores and graduation rates than those who attempted to enroll in them but were not picked in the lottery process. Hemphill and Nauer (2009) also found the policy of shutting down poorly performing large schools and sending their student body elsewhere had a harmful effect on thousands of students, particularly students who were new immigrants and students with disabilities, by moving them to schools that were ill-equipped to handle their needs. These shutdowns were also disruptive to neighboring schools that then saw massive swings in enrollment, sometimes pushing these neighboring schools into closure as well.

Similar to New Orleans, Hemphill and Nauer found that children of recent immigrants and children with disabilities were particularly disadvantaged in understanding and effectively utilizing the school choice system. These students were less likely to have adequate support in choosing and ranking schools, due to the fact that they are less likely to have access to adults who can navigate the system, as well as the lack of public information such as an up-to-date list of special education services provided at each school. Fruchner (2008) came to similar conclusions about inequitable access to quality schools in his analysis of New York City's educational reforms, noting in particular the challenges faced by English language learners in accessing the new small high schools, as well as finding that mayoral control in New York significantly restricted democratic input.

Research Pertaining to Components of the Mind Trust Plan

Mayoral control

The Mind Trust report offered mayoral control as an effective and essential component for addressing the challenges found in urban schools. However, research does not suggest mayoral control provides any inherent advantages relative to traditional school board control, and may be problematic for democratic aims. Hess (2008) provided a broad review of the research on mayoral control and found that while there are a few places that had early, positive experiences (Boston, Chicago, New York), there remains little research on the topic and papers that currently exist point to differing conclusions about its impact. Hess suggested that attention to this question should instead be directed toward assessing if plans for mayoral control are reasonable and how they fit within a larger plan of urban education reform. Francis Shen (2011), one of the authors in the Mind Trust proposal, looked at cities where mayoral control has taken place and found that mayoral takeover tends to be favored more in areas with higher educational achievement, and disfavored in areas with greater numbers of African Americans. Shen proposed that historically disenfranchised groups such as African Americans and those with less education particularly value those domains in which they have access to participatory democracy. With school boards being one of the few areas where they have a say, they are disinterested in giving up democratic control. This is consistent with other research that finds that centralizing governance into mayoral control may

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lead to reduced minority representation in elections and opportunity to participate in school decisions (Allen & Mintrom, 2010).

This finding regarding minority representation, democratic engagement and mayoral control is of particular concern in IPS, given that the proposal suggested turning over control of the district to the electorate of the entire city. Given that IPS is a district much smaller than the city of Indianapolis, eliminating the locally elected school board would forfeit democratic control from those who actually live in the district to a majority of people who do not. According to census data from SAVI (www.savi.org), IPS has a population of 296,715, while Marion County has an overall population of 903,393, indicating that over two-thirds of those eligible to vote on the mayor live outside of IPS. Further, the electorate within the IPS boundaries has historically voted quite differently than its township counterparts (for example, see Hinnefeld, 2011). Thus, mayoral control would likely lead to leadership unrepresentative of the district, which is counter to the democratic aims of school boards as well as mayoral control.

The Mind Trust does point out real vulnerabilities of the school board model, such as a disappointing lack of voter engagement and its impact on accountability. However, the recent shift of school board elections from the spring primary ballot to the general election ballot in the fall should increase voter participation, thus improving accountability and democratic representation, such as seen in other districts where such a switch has taken place (Allen & Plank, 2005).

High quality teachers

Alternative teacher certification models such as Teach for America have received significant attention in market-based education reform circles and were a key aspect of the Mind Trust proposal. CUME recently released reviews of the evidence on Teach for America (2009b) and alternative certification (2009c), both of which can be found on our website (<http://education.iupui.edu/cume/>). While the Mind Trust did provide some studies pertaining to Teach for America and other alternative certification programs, the report failed to include studies that show negative or mixed results for alternative certification programs. As we noted in our report on Teach for America:

While some urban and rural schools struggle to fill teaching positions with certified teachers in high need areas, bringing in TFA teachers for one or two years does not address the persistent challenges facing students and the schools as a whole.

Our review suggests that more, rather than less, supervised education coursework and training is associated with positive outcomes for students and teacher retention. It is encouraging and not surprising that TFA teachers who achieved certification performed commensurate to their certified peers after three years. However the high attrition rates in TFA coupled with inconclusive evidence of student achievement raise serious questions regarding the long-term benefits of the TFA program for urban and rural schools and communities. While some urban and rural schools struggle to fill teaching positions with certified teachers in high need areas, bringing in TFA teachers for one or two years does not address the persistent challenges facing students and the schools as a whole. Significant capital (human and financial) is consumed by cyclical hiring and replacing

beginning teachers who are more likely to leave the school than their certified counterparts.

A review by Heilig and Jez (2010) came to similar conclusions. Of note, the 2011 study by Steele and colleagues found that principals surveyed from both charter and traditional schools in New Orleans reported greater satisfaction with university trained teachers than those emerging from a Teach for America training program.

Charter schools and educational management organizations

The “opportunity schools” model proposed by the Mind Trust would function much like the charter school model currently in place throughout the country. Thus, it is worth considering the research on this school model. A review of the literature by CUME (2009a) found that while some charters have been successful at supporting certain population subgroups, there are concerns with the success in supporting children with disabilities and English

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language learners. A recent meta-analysis of charter school studies (Betts & Tang, 2011) found some modest differences between charter and traditional schools in some academic areas. However, research suggests it matters less what a school “is” (i.e. charter vs. traditional), but rather what they “do” (e.g. longer school days), that contributes to differences in schools that see better scores /outcomes. For example, research by Hoxby and Murarka (2009) found charters that outperformed traditional schools are typically those that provided extensive services to students and families, and offered alternative configurations such as an extended school year.

There are real concerns regarding the “cropping out” of high-cost students run by for-profit entities or publicly supported charters. Lacireno-Paquet and colleagues (2002) found market-oriented charters in Washington, D.C. (e.g. those associated with for-profit companies) were more likely to “crop off” services to populations that are costly to educate (e.g. students with disabilities and English language learners). Miron and colleagues (2010) also noted possible “cropping” of high-cost students in charter schools run by education management organizations, as they were less likely to enroll children with disabilities and English language learners than their neighboring district. They also found schools run by for-profit education management organizations tend to be more racially and economically segregated than the districts they serve.

Conclusion

We agree with the Mind Trust that the time is ripe for our city to actively discuss what its citizens envision to be a high quality education and school system. Urban educational reform is a “wicked problem,” one in which many agree that there is a problem to be addressed, but cannot agree on common solutions or even the exact nature of the problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Thus, such dialogue is essential to discovering common understandings, frameworks, and possible new ways of doing things. We agree with the Mind Trust on some of their major goals, such as increased school autonomy and universal early childhood education. However, we have reservations regarding some of the other major aspects of their proposal, as they are not supported by research or evidence-based practice. We have aimed to provide a more nuanced picture of their outcomes. We must note that this review of the literature and possible concerns is

not comprehensive, but rather focused largely on the issues of equity and democratic engagement.

Considering other important aspects of the Mind Trust plan, such as broader issues of applying market-based models to education, the curricular impact of heavy reliance on testing, and assessing financial expense estimates, was beyond the scope of this review.

We are particularly concerned for the possible implications of this plan regarding issues of equity and democratic control. Our review of the research suggests that market-based educational reforms such as those proposed by the Mind Trust run the risk of further disenfranchising groups and individuals that are already underprivileged, such as students with disabilities,

English language learners, communities of color, and those from families with low educational attainment. For example, any plans for school reform in Indianapolis Public Schools must address concerns such as the district's high mobility rate, and the Mind Trust proposal does not offer any solutions for the lack of curricular cohesion that would be experienced by transient students moving between schools without a common curriculum. Similar to that reported in New Orleans and New York, we are concerned about the implications of a choice system for students who do not have access to a parent with the time, knowledge, and resources to navigate the intensive process of choosing the best school for their child. We also fear the proposed special education cooperatives may further exacerbate the concentration and segregation of students with disabilities from their peers who are not identified with disabilities.

As noted in a previous CUME report (2011) on recent reform efforts and examples of success in IPS, we feel the work of Charles Payne (2008) provides a strong, evidence-based framework for those engaging in the work of urban school reform: it considers the local context, provides ample time for the change process, and sets reasonable benchmarks for success. This framework allows for rigorous reform in our schools without jeopardizing equity for our most vulnerable students. In his book, Payne referred to the "Big Six" of effective school reform:

- Instructional time protected or extended
- Intellectually ambitious instruction
- Professional community (teachers collaborate, have a collective sense of responsibility)
- Academic press combined with social support
- Program coherence (i.e., institutional focus; "Are we all on the same page?"), and
- Teacher "quality" / diagnostic ability (p. 94).

These six characteristics support collaboration among all stakeholders and results in greater buy-in from teachers, administrators, and the community at large. As a result, they foster learning environments where students feel supported by and accountable to one another, as well as the community as a whole. Models such as full-service community schools and the focus on comprehensive strategies, such as those recommended by the Broader Bolder Approach to Education (www.boldapproach.org/), are promising initiatives that can support school improvement through addressing the broad and multifaceted needs of our students, families, and

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communities in central Indianapolis. Ensuring that all have equitable access to a meaningful education must be front and center for any effort to reform education in our city, and we look forward to engaging in any initiative where that can be further achieved.

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