

Neo-Liberalism Invades Indianapolis: A History and Discussion of the Mind Trust and Its Actions

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Neoliberalism in Indiana

Not surprisingly, the purchase of Indianapolis Public Schools began with ALEC, the American Legislative Exchange Council. The main person who brought ALEC to Indiana was Robert Behning, a member of the Indiana House of Representatives from 1992 to the present. His district is mainly south of the Indianapolis airport. He was ALEC State Chairman from 1996 to 2004, during which time he was also chair of the Education Committee for the Indiana House of Representatives.

In 2001, the Indiana legislature passed the state legislation establishing charters and vouchers in 2001, the model of which was taken from ALEC. In 2006, the Mind Trust, the main neoliberal organization, was established in Indianapolis, under the leadership of David Harris. David Harris had been the head of the Indianapolis Mayor's education office when Bart Peterson was the mayor of Indianapolis.

The Mind Trust brought in Stand for Children, which is a somewhat national organization, with a 501C4 headquartered in Oregon. They are in 13 cities in nine states: Phoenix, Denver, Chicago, Springfield (IL), Indianapolis, Baton Rouge (of course), Boston, Portland, Nashville, Memphis, Nashville, Dallas, and Seattle. In addition, the Indianapolis-based Mind Trust has allied and facilitated other local organizations, including branches of national organizations. These include Teach for America, Teach Plus, KIPP, Enroll Indy, Phalen Leadership Academies, College Summit, etc.

Starting in 2012, this Mind Trust network ran candidates for the school board, with all of their candidates winning. They spent \$50-70,000 on each whereas before this you could run and win a school board seat for \$3-5,000. This money was largely funneled as "dark money" through Stand for Children's 501C4 located in Oregon, some from the local white power elite and some from national conservative billionaires and other organizations. While they did not control all of the school board, they were able to get rid of the superintendent, Dr. White, and hire a new one, Dr. Lewis Ferebee, who has overwhelmingly followed the Mind Trust agenda.

With the next election in 2014, the Mind Trust candidates gained majority control of the school board. Since then the school board has been mostly silent in following the Mind Trust agenda, including opening 20 "innovation schools," which are charters within the district and based on an ALEC written state legislation that was passed by the Indiana State Legislature. While in 2016, a new board member, Elizabeth Gore, defeated the Mind Trust candidate, IPS now completely operates in terms of the Mind Trust agenda to destroy traditional schools, charterize the district, and eliminate the teachers' union.

The ten main methods of the Mind Trust:

1. Increasing integration of traditional public schools and charter schools, but with a favoring of charter schools.
2. Usually a single funding conduit to which national and local individuals and organizations can contribute for the individual, local Mind Trust initiatives.
3. Funding from local and national wealthy, white, conservative collaboration.
4. Huge infusion of new dollars into school board elections.
5. Development of a network of local organizations or affiliates that all collaborate closely on the same local agenda.
6. Teach for America and Teach Plus are integral parts of the Mind Trust “model” agenda almost everywhere.
7. Democrats for Education Reform. This is a cover for democrats to support Mind Trust initiatives.
9. Support for gentrification to attract young white folks to the city.
10. Business as best model for schooling.

The IPS Context

Closing schools

Starting in April of 2017, the IPS district and school board members began holding meetings to discuss a reinvention of high schools—closing and consolidation of the 7 down to 4 schools. To open one of the first meetings, they stated something like, “aren’t you all grateful for the leadership and changes made by Dr. Lewis Ferebee and his administration?” I doubt they were expecting a literally, resounding “NO!” from IPS teachers and others in the room. These community conversations were very well controlled and positively framed, which was quite the opposite of community sentiment. By the end of the meetings, it was clear the decision was made and input from the community was not wholeheartedly taken into consideration. In August of 2017, the board voted to close 3 high schools, converting two of them to middle schools. The most popular programs they placed in the smallest remaining high school buildings, also located in white middle class and/or gentrifying areas. At the same time they were deciding to close high schools, the board voted to open (or add) charter high schools as Innovation Network Schools to the district.

The new high schools were all relocated and placed in the center of the city, for the purpose of offering “choices” to the influx of white middle class families moving back to downtown and the near vicinity. The schools that were closed were located in primarily Black and Latinx communities against the continued negative community response. However, catering to the white middle class has not been solely reserved for the high schools. Traditional k-8 schools are also “transitioning” into popular programs under the guise of “choice,” while they are clearly being placed in areas which are or will soon be gentrified. Because of the major stakeholders involved in these decisions (such as real estate boards and universities), very little parent or community input is considered in these moves. In one particular situation, as a magnet school (located in a gentrifying area) was planning to expand into another gentrifying area against the concern and upset by

some parents, the principal of the school announced the decision before the school board had even voted on the expansion.

Once the decision was made to close the high schools, IPS did convene a Parent Advisory Council. The goal of this council was to review district-level plans for high school transitions to offer recommended enhancements; engage in issue identification and solution planning to attenuate adverse impacts of the transition on stakeholder groups; serve as advocates and ambassadors for positive change in the district; and communicate necessary updates as specified, to community stakeholders. The desired outcomes of the community-wide perspective is proactively and systematically included throughout the high school transition process; proposed legacy preservation models are drafted in collaboration with experts, reflecting input from all stakeholder groups, for consideration by the Administration and Board of School Commissioners; and accurate and timely communication regarding the high school transition process is disseminated throughout the IPS high school alumni communities and community at large. All this is to say this group met a few times, and conversations were often dominated by white, affluent parents whose children attended the most desirable IPS schools. And in my perspective, these parents were clearly concerned about the “types” of students that would be attending the schools under the new choice model. Out of these concerns, white parents talked about more of a “police presence” needed in schools, and again, were concerned how “these” students would adjust with the “mixing” of schools. Once the transportation changes became public (which we discuss later), parents were irate about the changes in the school start/end times and were very vocal they were not going to focus on anything else. As a result, a few experts were brought in to discuss the transportation options, but ultimately the group disbanded and parents were referred to the community transportation meetings. The group never met again and never had any real input our say in shaping the transition to innovation high schools.

Innovation conversions/add-ons

In 2013 Indiana state legislators passed a law to allow Innovation Network Schools, the insertion of charter programs into public school districts. The first such schools added to Indianapolis Public School district were started in 2014. After just three years there are now 20 Innovation Network Schools in a district of 88 total schools. These schools are graded on a different state grading scale, therefore their A grades are only graded on growth as all other schools’ A grades would include total performance on standardized tests. Previously established charter schools have joined the district in addition to charter programs taking over struggling IPS schools, as IPS schools choosing to become innovation schools. The process of including public voice in the expansion of these programs is not very robust. Organizations like Stand for Children are very active in pressuring parents and teachers to support to these changes.

Matchbook Learning is a national charter program that has literally failed in 3 states and no longer allowed to operate in those states, the school board agreed to have this organization take over a struggling schools under the guise of

personalized learning—actually meaning sticking kids in front of computers for the majority of the day.

Super School 19 was controversially converted to an Innovation school. The principal had only been in the school a few months and decided to spend all their energy to convert to innovation. Teachers who had been at the school for years were against it, parents wanted the teachers to remain at the school—the school and district administration knew huge percentages of teachers would leave the school if converted to innovation. The board voted to do so any way.

One pre-established charter school, Herron High School, joined the district as a high school at the same time the IPS board voted to close existing high schools. Herron it turned out was having financial difficulties the year prior to joining as an Innovation Network School. They also were able to open another high school within IPS, Riverside High School. Mitch Daniels, former Indiana governor and current president of Purdue University, was able to open Purdue Polytechnic High School as an innovation school during this same period.

With the implementation of innovation schools comes instability and stress amongst teachers. When schools are considered “F” or failing traditional schools, the pattern has been to convert these schools into one of the “choice” school options (usually innovation). As a result, teachers are keenly aware of their options and realize when these schools convert they are not necessarily guaranteed a job. Thus, some teachers begin looking for jobs in the middle of the school year and find jobs in other districts. The consequences of the lack of support and stability for IPS teachers are empty classrooms where students have no consistency or stability in their education.

Referenda

In November of 2017, the school board had two referenda approvals on their agenda. Prior to the board agenda being released, any mention of a possible IPS referendum was only hearsay. They approved the referenda proposed for almost 1 billion dollars over 8 years, with very little actual information on changes in teachers/staff pay and where capital projects would specifically take place. After push back from the community and the Realtors group coming out against the referenda, the IPS board voted to reduce the amounts being asked. After further community push back, the IPS board voted to push the referenda vote until November instead of May. Further debate caused the IPS board to approve the Indy Chamber of Commerce to step in and spend 3 months analyzing IPS finances in order to determine how much the district actually needs to request. They prosed hugely devastating cuts to district spending, including closing 20 schools, and moving all high school transportation to Indy Go public transportation—which does not have capacity for all 5,000 high school students. They proposed that \$100M in total of an operations referendum request was the ideal number. IPS School board approved \$315M, then after negotiations with the Indy Chamber lowered that number \$220M—without holding a public hearing.

At this point, there has been a lot of critique concerning the referenda and lack of transparency and lack of detailed plan for how the funds raised from the referenda will be spent. There is also a lack of clear explanations for the public about expenditure changes, including why IPS expenditures have consistently increased as enrollment at IPS schools has declined. There has also been a lack of a clear plan for improving chronically struggling schools before turning them over to charter partner to become innovation network schools.

Transportation

During the community meetings for the high school consolidation and “All Choice Model” reinvention, community members asked what the impact on transportation would be—the district stated there would not be any significant impacts on transportation. The All Choice Model allows for high school students living anywhere in the district to be able to attend whichever IPS high school they chose to, the district would provide transportation of that student from anywhere in the district to their chosen high school. The board approved the high schools closures and reinvention in August on 2017. In March of 2018 the district proposed major changes to transportation that through all IPS parents into an uproar. Claiming it was a change in order to have high schools start later, board members advocated for the drastic changes. The superintendent and director of transportation had to contradict the board members by stating the transportation changes were necessary in order for the high school All Choice Model to be implemented.

The transportation model(s) put forward had later start times for high school students, earlier start times for elementary school students, and potentially longer walks for high school students to the bus stop. The plan met criticism from many parents, with some claiming there was little foresight in moving towards all choice options without fully working out issues such as transportation. Further, some parents pointed out in the plan that schools that were converted to innovation and/or charter schools that rely upon IPS transportation services got first choice on transportation times as opposed to traditional schools.

Powerful special interest groups

The Indianapolis mayor’s office during Bart Peterson’s term was given the power to authorize charter schools in 2000. The director of mayor’s charter school office, David Harris, went on to establish The Mind Trust in 2006. The Mind Trust has been integral in bringing organizations like Teach for America, Stand for Children, LISC and many other organizations to the city. They advocated for Innovation Network School legislation, legislation lobbied for by Stand for Children as well. Indianapolis Public School’s Office of Innovation works closely with The Mind Trust’s office in finding IPS public schools to convert/give over to charter organizations. The Mind Trust has an Innovation Network Fellowship, where they grant at least \$100,000 to individuals who want to start their own school. Almost all fellowships become Innovation Network Schools within the IPS district. Stand for Children is an integral part of this process. They pressure parents and teachers, under the guise of informing and gathering

community input, to give consent to an Innovation restart. They are very active in these situations of manufacturing consent. But in other forms of mobilizing parents, they are frequently inactive. As of September 2018, the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce will pay up to \$1M per year, for at least 3 years, to put 2-3 staff members in the IPS administration in order to help the district find efficiencies—they have vocalized their approval of Innovation Network Schools, citing that they are more efficient than traditional schools.

Local Resistance Efforts

Over the course of the past year, dedicated Indianapolis community members have worked collaboratively to form and maintain the IPS Community Coalition to challenge the neoliberal education reforms of choice and innovation unfolding as we speak. The IPSCC continues to actively communicate, via the IPS Community Coalition Facebook page, its mission and purpose, as well as providing a space for parents, teachers, and other local community to voice their concerns about the changing face of our public schools. Coalition members also continue to give public testimony at the IPS School Board meetings and offer critical perspectives, questions, and interrogate IPS district initiatives that are not readily transparent for the community or takes up issues of equity in schools or the district.

The IPSCC believes that the community is empowered through knowledge. Therefore, IPSCC currently hosts community forums to educate the public about the IPS school closings, the current referenda IPS is proposing, as well as informational meetings for parents to navigate the innovation/magnet/charter/choice process. This also includes educating the community on the changing enrollment processes for entrance into these choice schools. Coalition members are also committed to understanding the unique contexts and experiences of individual neighborhoods, and work to better situate the issues and concerns of families by attending school-based meetings throughout the district. Further, action groups continue to inform, collaborate, and network with entities all over the city that share concerns around innovation processes.

The IPSCC also works to inform their practices and the community with the most up to date research available. As current structures in the district are constantly changing, the coalition works to stay abreast of all current changes and transitions in the district pertaining to innovation, teacher retention, school enrollment procedures, etc. This also includes situating our current circumstances within national conversations and contexts that support public education. The IPS Community Coalition works closely with the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS), the Network for Public Education (NPE), and presents at national conferences that embrace community activism.

Finally, the future goals of the IPS Community Coalition are to involve more educators and students who are directly impacted by the IPS district innovation initiatives. Additionally, the coalition will fully support and campaign for a

school board seat in the upcoming election as the IPSCC works to elect someone who is committed to publicly funded, equitable, and democratically controlled public schools. Overall, the coalition first and foremost represents the interests of the community, and therefore, it is integral our work evolve, as do the needs of the community. This necessitates continuous pressure of transparency of district initiatives, and advocating for equitable public education opportunities for all students, which IPS is noticing and on some occasions, directly addressed. As neoliberalism continues to appropriate democratic ideals and masks segregationist and discriminatory educational opportunities, the IPS Community Coalition continues to resist corporatization and privatization and is fully committed to the collective and ongoing fight in taking back public schools.