

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is an Opportunity School?

Today's public school landscape is confusing; the labels "traditional district," "magnet," and "charter" schools don't mean much to the public, and none connotes quality. They are legal designations.

An Opportunity School is a unified designation for **all** high-quality public schools within Indianapolis Public School (IPS) boundaries, whether they're traditional, magnet, or public charter. The designation sends a strong signal that the only thing that matters is educational excellence — no matter what kind of school it is.

We call this new kind of school an OPPORTUNITY SCHOOL because that's exactly what it offers: a unique opportunity to transform IPS, the lives of our children, and our city's future.

Like other high-performing urban schools across the country, Opportunity Schools, whether traditional district, magnet, or public charter, would have autonomy over staffing, budgets, culture, and curriculum as long as they continue to meet very high standards. Over time, all schools in IPS would become Opportunity Schools.

- Excellent existing schools would become Opportunity Schools immediately following a planning year.
- Staffs in schools with strong potential would be given support to improve and seek Opportunity status.
- Newly incubated schools that meet a high-quality bar or existing schools with strong new leadership teams would become Opportunity Schools.

Why do we need such a bold plan for IPS?

Every Indianapolis student needs and deserves an excellent education. The facts speak for themselves; for decades IPS has failed to provide that education.

- Six of the seven schools that the Indiana Department of Education has identified for takeover due to chronically low performance are in IPS.
- Only 45% of students met state standards on both the math and English language arts portions of the ISTEP+ in 2010–11.¹
- And only 58% of students graduated, trailing the state by more than 26 percentage points.²

¹ Indiana Department of Education. "ISTEP+ Spring 2011 results." Retrieved July 25, 2011, from www.doe.in.gov/assessment/2011/index.html

² Indiana Department of Education. "DOE Compass: Indianapolis Public Schools — Graduates." Retrieved Sept. 29, 2011, from compass.doe.in.gov/compass/Dashboard.aspx?view=CORP&val=5385&desc=CORP&atab=2

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Indianapolis cannot afford these results any longer. Opportunity Schools provide the best hope of changing this picture and transforming lives. By giving all schools in IPS the conditions for success and uniting them under this banner of quality, IPS can create a system of Opportunity Schools that are all high performing.

How long would it take to transform all IPS schools into Opportunity Schools?

The goal would be to create a system where all IPS schools would be good enough to be Opportunity Schools within six to eight years. We believe it is likely that a handful of schools would be strong enough to qualify as Opportunity Schools immediately. We estimate that each year up to 10 new schools could be incubated to replace poor-performing schools. And a few existing schools with strong potential may improve enough each year to become Opportunity Schools. But the overall timeline would depend on how successfully IPS incubates great new schools, turns around struggling schools, and recruits highly effective school leaders and teachers.

Would neighborhood schools be shut down?

No. The focus of this plan would be to ensure that there are excellent schools in every neighborhood in the city. Struggling neighborhood schools would be given support to improve. If they continue to be low-performing they would be replaced with a higher-performing school in the same school building. Schools are the anchors of our neighborhoods. This plan aims to ensure that each neighborhood school building has a high-performing school program within its walls.

How would parents know what's happening to their neighborhood school?

First, parents would be a part of every conversation with IPS about their neighborhood schools and any new programs IPS would bring to their area. Second, all neighborhood schools would become schools of choice, meaning that they would stay open only if they enroll enough students. As schools of choice, they would have a real incentive both to create quality programs and to provide extensive outreach to ensure parents know about their neighborhood options. Third, all Opportunity School would have school boards or school councils that would help govern and support the schools. Parents would be key members of those boards.

What would happen to current IPS teachers?

Under this plan, IPS teachers would finally have the conditions they are seeking — professional respect, the opportunity to work closely with like-minded colleagues, and the encouragement to innovate in their classrooms. There would be no shortage of work for excellent teachers, now and forever. Many current teachers in high-performing schools would likely stay right where they are. Great teachers in struggling schools would have the chance to improve school performance, and some could even choose to help start new Opportunity Schools. Since school leaders would have the flexibility to hire their own teams, teachers would be able to seek out and apply for positions at the schools that best fit their skills and interests.

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Would Opportunity Schools offer traditional public school services such as food service and transportation?

Yes. The only difference in this plan would be that Opportunity Schools would not be forced to receive services from the central office, they would now have the freedom to select the service providers that best meet their needs.

Would Opportunity Schools provide special education?

Yes. Schools would be responsible for providing high-quality special education to all eligible students. Schools could also choose to participate in a voluntary “special education cooperative” to better leverage and coordinate services by pooling resources to purchase shared staff, services, and tools they could not afford individually. During the transition years, the IPS central office would continue to provide support for special education services and could help arrange for a cooperative. After the transition, schools could choose to work with IPS, join the cooperative, or simply provide special education internally. The point would be to allow the schools to decide what works best for their students.

How would IPS decide where to locate Opportunity Schools?

IPS would place Opportunity Schools where they are most needed — in neighborhoods that have the most children and fewest excellent schools. That way, every neighborhood, not just a lucky few, ultimately would be served by one or more high-performing Opportunity Schools. Over time, all school buildings in IPS would house Opportunity Schools.

Would IPS provide transportation to Opportunity Schools?

Yes. IPS would provide funding to ensure that schools could provide transportation to any IPS student who enrolls, no matter where in the district they live.

How would Opportunity School enrollment work?

IPS would manage a central enrollment process that would make it easier for all parents within IPS boundaries to find the best school for their child. During the enrollment process, IPS would provide all families with detailed information about their different school options. Families would then “shop” for the schools that best fit their needs and submit up to five school preferences to IPS. The district would then match students to schools based on their preferences. Current students could automatically re-enroll in their school until they graduate. And in families with more than one child, the younger sibling(s) would be able to enroll in the same school as his or her older sibling.

What would happen to students not in an Opportunity School?

All schools would be given more autonomy and resources right away. Non-Opportunity Schools would be given more support to improve, and new schools would be incubated each year to provide even more high-quality options to students. Over time, all students would be enrolled in Opportunity Schools.

THE MIND TRUST / CREATING OPPORTUNITY SCHOOLS: A BOLD PLAN TO TRANSFORM IPS / FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How would schools become Opportunity Schools?

- Existing schools with strong performance (traditional, magnet, public charter) could apply to IPS to become Opportunity Schools immediately.
- Struggling schools would become Opportunity Schools when existing leadership teams are replaced by strong leadership teams and staff.
- If existing leadership teams turn struggling schools around, they could become Opportunity Schools.
- Talented leaders could launch brand new schools that could apply to become Opportunity Schools.

Which current schools would be good enough to be Opportunity Schools?

Until exact criteria have been developed, it would be hard to say. Nine IPS schools and 10 Indianapolis public charter schools already receive “A’s” in the state’s accountability system and thus would be good candidates for Opportunity School status. During the planning year, IPS would develop a detailed set of criteria and processes for determining which existing schools could become Opportunity Schools.

What input would the community have in this process?

Community members would have multiple opportunities to be involved. First, we anticipate a broad community outreach effort to get input on the plan in the coming months. If the community supports the plan, there would be many new ways for community members to engage with their local public schools. Opportunity Schools would have local governing boards on which community members could serve. In addition, it would be likely that leaders of Opportunity Schools would use their extra funds to partner with many of the community-based organizations that provide the wraparound health and social services that students need. The possibilities for additional community engagement would be limitless.

Is this plan about creating all public charter schools?

No. The goal is to create all excellent schools. We don’t care if these Opportunity Schools are traditional district schools, magnet schools, or public charter schools. The common denominator should be quality, period. The way to get quality is by systematically creating the conditions for success: autonomy, accountability, and choice. Indianapolis, like other cities, has some great charters and some lousy charters, some great traditional schools and lousy traditional schools. Our plan would be to replace the lousy programs with great programs — all schools, all neighborhoods.

What would be the mayor’s role?

The mayor would appoint three members of a five-member IPS school board (the City-County Council would appoint the other two), which would hire the school superintendent. The school superintendent would run the district.

What would be the role of the school board during and after this transition?

THE MIND TRUST / CREATING OPPORTUNITY SCHOOLS: A BOLD PLAN TO TRANSFORM IPS / FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

The plan recommends the creation of a new school board, a majority of the members appointed by the mayor and the others appointed by the City-County Council. Like the current board, the new board would be responsible for overall governance of IPS. But it would carry out this responsibility by creating the conditions that allow principals and teachers to provide a great education for every child. As more funding and authority shift to Opportunity Schools and the democratic, bottom-up, community-based boards that govern them, the new board should be able to focus on what matters most — making it possible for Opportunity Schools to open and thrive and holding them accountable for results.

What would happen to the IPS schools that the state has singled out for chronic failure?

Like every IPS school, they would have a chance to become Opportunity Schools — if they are good enough. If they qualified as Opportunity Schools, we believe they could earn back control from the state. If not, the priority would be to create and recruit higher-quality programs to teach our children and replace failing programs as soon as possible.

How would IPS get all the talented educators needed to create and manage Opportunity Schools?

This plan is focused on creating the conditions that would attract and retain great teachers and school leaders in Indianapolis. By providing educators with unprecedented autonomy and dramatically more resources, while holding them accountable for student learning, Indianapolis would become one of the nation's top education talent magnets.

The plan would offer many benefits for top educators:

- Principals and teachers would have far more control over school operations, from staffing to curriculum;
- Up to \$12,000 per student would go directly to the school (vs. \$6,600 now);
- A New School Incubation Fund, with up to \$7.5 million a year, would be used to recruit great leaders to launch new schools in Indianapolis;
- A Talent Development Fund, with up to \$2.5 million a year, would help grow new generations of school leaders and teachers;
- And school leaders would have the opportunity to pay great teachers more, as well.

Why include universal access to prekindergarten in a plan about IPS?

Numerous studies have shown that high-quality preschool and prekindergarten can help boost a child's learning for the rest of his or her life. Nationally, every \$1 invested in high-quality prekindergarten saves taxpayers up to \$7 in reduced costs for remedial and special education, welfare, and related costs. Research by Nobel Prize-winning University of Chicago economist James Heckman shows that the public receives \$48,000 in benefits for each at-risk child who enrolls in even a half day of public preschool. Numerous researchers, including Heckman, also conclude

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that students who attend high-quality prekindergarten programs are less likely to drop out of school or repeat grades, and they are more likely to enroll in college.

By shrinking the size of the central office, IPS could free up the resources to provide all IPS 4-year-olds access to the high-quality early learning they need to succeed later in school.

Would you have to raise taxes to do all of this?

No. We could pay for the transformation with existing funding, without an extra dime of new taxes. Drastically reducing the size of the central office so that it only would be providing a targeted set of functions would yield about \$43 million in annual savings that would support the transformation.

In addition, we could shift another \$163 million a year currently controlled by the central office to schools by allowing them to decide how they want to pay for key services such as transportation, school lunch, janitorial services, and school safety programs. After all, they're in a much better position to know what their students need.

The plan's analysis of IPS' 2012 proposed budget identified a total of more than \$206 million in existing funds that could be redirected. Even after using more than \$18 million of that funding for three targeted initiatives (universal prekindergarten, a New School Incubation Fund, and a Talent Development Fund), schools would control an additional \$188 million compared to now.

These estimates are conservative. Given the experiences of other urban districts, a fine-grained analysis of all IPS budgets and expenditures likely would identify even greater cost savings from cutting central office waste and inefficiency.

What would the new central office do?

The new, much smaller central office would have four main roles:

1. Setting standards, authorizing high-quality Opportunity Schools, and holding schools accountable;
2. Coordinating key citywide services such as enrollment/choice programs, talent development, the special education cooperative, and some special programs that mostly function outside the normal school context (e.g., adult education and federally funded programs for very specialized populations such as delinquent youth);
3. Fulfilling obligations (such as repaying debts); and
4. Offering a limited number of services, such as transportation and building maintenance during the transition.

In addition, the plan would include nearly \$14 million for universal prekindergarten, which the new central office would oversee.

THE MIND TRUST / CREATING OPPORTUNITY SCHOOLS: A BOLD PLAN TO TRANSFORM IPS / FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

In contrast, schools would receive the majority of funding and responsibility for teaching and learning, human resources, finance, and many of the major federal programs such as Title I, IDEA (special education), and Title II (teacher quality).

Why would only IPS schools be changing? Why not other schools in Marion County?

With a few exceptions, IPS schools are the lowest-performing in the county — and the state — and have been for generations. So there is a special urgency to do something about IPS. But this plan would provide a model for other school districts, in Marion County and across the country.

Hasn't IPS made progress recently? Why would we have to make such drastic changes?

IPS has made some progress in the past few years, but it remains far behind the county and state averages, and it isn't anywhere close to its own 2010 goals for student performance. At its current rate of performance, it would take IPS more than 21 years to achieve its 2010 target graduation rate. It's not fair to ask students to wait that long for dramatic change.

Who would benefit from this plan?

Everyone. Students would be better prepared for college, careers, and life. Teachers would have more freedom to innovate around curriculum and instruction and have the potential to earn higher pay. Principals would have the autonomy to build their own teams, reward great educators, and develop an achievement-driven school culture. Parents would have many more quality school choices. And with better schools in every neighborhood, Indianapolis residents would have higher property values and more accountability for how their tax dollars are spent.