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## Midwest Group Serves as Magnet for Innovation



*Programs supported by the Mind Trust have included a summer curriculum for kids and established efforts such as Teach for America.*

By Ben Gose

Many of the innovators in the nonprofit world start in, or flock to, coastal cities like Boston, New York, Washington, and Seattle. Midsize Midwestern cities often struggle to attract nonprofit entrepreneurs, even years after their charities have hit it big. Ohio, for example, has yet to attract a single Teach for America chapter, despite years of trying by cities like Cincinnati and Cleveland.

David Harris, who led an award-winning effort to build a network of charter schools in Indianapolis a decade ago, has firsthand experience with this problem. His early charter schools were outperforming Indianapolis's public schools, but he had trouble recruiting "A-list" charter-school management organizations to come to Indianapolis and make even greater improvements.

"It became clear that we lacked the human capital to drive change," Mr. Harris says.

To spur innovation, Mr. Harris founded the Mind Trust, a charity that serves as a venture-capital fund for education in Indianapolis. Over the past five years, the organization has lured to Indianapolis fast-growing education charities that historically have often overlooked Midwestern cities, including College Summit, the New Teacher Project, and Teach for America. The Mind Trust also provides two-year fellowships to education entrepreneurs, including Earl Martin Phalen, whose Summer Advantage enrichment program started in Indianapolis last year and will soon move to other cities.

“What the Mind Trust is doing in Indianapolis is a model,” says Terry Ryan, vice president for Ohio programs and policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, which supports efforts to improve education nationally and in Ohio.

“A lot of the midsize Midwestern cities are really struggling to launch serious school-reform efforts. That’s why when David says we’re having a meeting, I go.”



*David Harris wants to attract efforts to improve the schools to his hometown of Indianapolis.*

## **No Big-City Sizzle**

And he’s not the only one. In the past few years, foundations and education activists in other cities have pushed Mr. Harris to franchise the Mind Trust and take it to new cities.

Instead, the Mind Trust in June created a membership network that includes mayors’ offices, education-overhaul groups, and private foundations that want to accelerate educational improvements by bringing entrepreneurial organizations to their communities.

The network, called CEE-Trust (CEE stands for Cities for Entrepreneurial Education), has members from 12 cities and two states and is supported by a total of \$330,000 in grants from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Joyce Foundation.

Margo Quiriconi, director of research and policy efforts in education at the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, in Kansas City, Mo., says midsize urban areas without a “handpicked superintendent” like Joel Klein in New York City or Michelle Rhee in Washington—or the big-city sizzle that immediately attracts education entrepreneurs—need to have one organization that takes the lead to push education improvements forward.

“We’re Sisyphus here,” Ms. Quiriconi says. “The same is true in Memphis with the Hyde Family Foundations.”

Both Kauffman and Hyde, which successfully pushed to bring Teach for America to their home cities, are members of the CEE-Trust network.

The diverse membership reflects a view that it is not necessarily the structure of the organization but rather the talents and connections of the leader that make the difference in spurring improvements and innovation.

“The question is,” says Jason Kloth, executive director of Teach for America in Indianapolis, “are there more people out there like David?”

### **Impressive Beginnings**

Mr. Harris, who is 40, grew up in Indianapolis, where he attended both public and private schools. He practiced law in the city for a few years, before Bart Peterson, who was the mayor of Indianapolis, tapped him in 2000 to oversee the city’s nascent charter-school effort. In 2006 the city’s charter-school program won Harvard University’s Innovations in American Government Award, which recognizes excellence and creativity in government.

When Mr. Harris left that year to start the Mind Trust, the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation, with assets of \$275-million, made a grant to get the charity off the ground. The foundation remains the Mind Trust’s most generous backer and has now awarded the charity a total of \$4.6-million, including a grant last year that will cover operating expenses through 2013.

The Mind Trust also has assembled an impressive board that includes Mr. Peterson; Ariela Rozman, chief executive of the New Teacher Project, which recruits and trains teachers; Eugene White, superintendent of Indianapolis Public Schools; and Jane Pauley, the former television anchorwoman.

Ms. Pauley, who grew up in Indianapolis and whose son teaches at a charter school, learned about the Mind Trust at a dinner party, visited the charity a month later, and subsequently joined the board.

“For someone who appears as laid back as he does, David just gets it done,” Ms. Pauley says. “He works so efficiently, you can overlook how much he’s accomplished.”

### **Perfect Incubator**

The Mind Trust’s strategy has two main prongs. Mr. Harris says the “low-hanging fruit” involves persuading proven charities to start programs in Indianapolis.

Over the past five years, the Mind Trust has invested a total of more than \$3-million to attract the New Teacher Project; Teach for America, which recruits recent college graduates to teach for two years; College Summit, which works with high-school students to improve college-going rates; and Diploma Plus, which operates alternative high schools.

“We’ve seen a huge increase in the overall talent dedicated to education reform in our community over the past couple of years,” Mr. Harris says.

The Mind Trust's most unusual program is its fellowship program for education entrepreneurs. The fellowships provide a salary of \$90,000 per year for two years and cover another \$10,000 per year of start-up expenses. The charity has received more than 900 applications for the fellowships and selected six winners.

One fellow is Mr. Phalen, who nearly two decades ago co-founded BELL (Building Educated Leaders for Life), an after-school program and summer-enrichment program, and wanted a fresh start to focus only on summer programs.

The Mind Trust fellowship seemed like a perfect fit—with one exception. “I loved everything about it but the fact that it was in Indianapolis,” says the Boston resident.

As it turned out, the fellowship didn't require him to live in Indianapolis, only that he start a program in the city.

During a visit to Indianapolis in early 2009, Mr. Harris coordinated 31 meetings for Mr. Phalen over a few days. Mr. Phalen met with five school-district superintendents, two executives in the Indiana Department of Education, the Lilly Endowment, the Central Indiana Community Foundation, and editors at the *Indianapolis Star*, among others.

By April of 2009, Mr. Phalen had landed a \$1-million contract to provide summer programs for 1,000 kids in Indianapolis. This summer, his charity has expanded to some rural areas in Indiana and is serving 3,500 kids under a \$3-million contract.

Now, the city that he thought lacked “sex appeal” seems like the perfect spot for incubating a new idea.

“Quite frankly, because there aren't 1,000 other nonprofit groups doing the same thing, if you are really good at what you do, this city will line up to help you succeed,” Mr. Phalen says.

### **Some Successes**

Mr. Harris says the CEE-Trust will provide a platform for expansion for his fellows. Mr. Phalen, who attended a meeting of the organization in June, says he is talking to members from five more cities about starting Summer Advantage programs in 2011 or 2012. Another Mind Trust fellow, Celine Coggins, is the founder of Teach Plus, which trains teachers to become public-policy advocates.

The Joyce Foundation learned about Teach Plus through the Mind Trust and gave the charity a grant to take its program to Chicago. Last October the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation gave Teach Plus a \$4-million grant to expand its program to three new cities (making a total of six).

“That organization has really taken off in large part because of Mind Trust support,” says John Luczak, the Joyce Foundation's education program manager.

The Mind Trust will soon unveil a campaign called Grow What Works to persuade individuals and foundations to invest in the kind of groups it has brought to Indianapolis. Mr. Harris says he can't yet offer many details on the campaign, such as the local company that is supporting the effort. Among those participating is Teach for America, which eventually wants to bring in 100 new corps members per year (up from the current 75)—an effort that would increase the chapter's total annual costs to \$3-million or more. .

The Mind Trust's recruits can point to some successes. A pilot program by College Summit at Emmerich Manual High School led to a 50-percent increase in the number of students applying to college. Michael Anderson, the "teacher of the year" in Indianapolis Public Schools in 2010, joined the district through the New Teacher Project. A year ago, Summer Advantage improved the math and reading levels for its participants by about three months; most students lose progress during the summer.

Yet much work remains to be done in Indianapolis, which has 11 school districts. The biggest district, with 31,000 students, is Indianapolis Public Schools, which has graduation rates that range from 30 to 49 percent, depending on the study.

Mr. Harris calls those numbers "catastrophic" and understands his organization needs to make a more direct thrust into improving the district. In December the Mind Trust received a \$100,000 grant from Joyce to study the governance of the city's school districts. The study is not yet done, and Mr. Harris declines to talk about it in any detail.

"Clearly thousands and thousands of students are much better off as a result of this work," he says. "But is public education fundamentally different today than it was before? The answer to that is no. We need to radically accelerate the pace of change."