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## Ballard wants 'welcome mat' for charter school groups

By Scott Elliott

Mayor Greg Ballard wants to quickly increase the number of charter schools in Indianapolis -- a move that is in line with the state Department of Education's push for more school choice and likely will further erode enrollment in Indianapolis Public Schools.

Ballard's charter school vision is part of a five-point education plan he announced Wednesday to the Greater Indianapolis Progress Committee.

Ballard also vowed to make Indianapolis a center of school reform by offering new tax breaks for nonprofit groups that establish their headquarters here.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Bennett said the proposal would benefit not only students but quite possibly the city's economy by taking advantage of Indiana's growing reputation for education reform.

"It opens up our state and our city to a whole new sector of economic development," Bennett said. "The mayor is right on target to say, 'Let's capitalize on that.'"

The city also would team up with the Mind Trust, a local education reform nonprofit, to incubate quality charters, using up to \$2 million from his RebuildIndy program as startup funds to help attract five high-quality charter school organizations to open schools.

The goal is to attract high-quality education reform organizations here and to invite charter school operators with strong track records to open schools here.

"I want these people who aren't afraid to make change for our children," Ballard said. "I want to roll out the welcome mat to these groups, their employees and their families to call Indianapolis their home."

With Ballard's proposal the state could exceed even the most optimistic projections of education experts -- more than doubling the 63 charter schools operating today statewide.

"Things have changed dramatically in a short time frame," said Russ Simnick, president of the Indiana Public Charter Schools Association. "When you get the city, the state and nonprofits working together, I think we can bring a lot of good schools to Indianapolis."

Ballard's plan is a counterpoint to five guiding principles for education put out by Democratic mayoral candidate Melina Kennedy in May.

Kennedy quickly criticized Ballard's plan -- for what's missing.

She noted it leaves out the key component of expanding early childhood education and literacy programs -- something she has made the centerpiece of her education plan in campaign mailers and TV ads.

"When (Ballard's plan) fails to include the biggest issue our city faces on education, I can't take it seriously," Kennedy said. "It's six weeks before an election, when he's been in office for four years."

She also questioned whether Ballard's proposed tax break -- providing organizations with county income taxes paid by their employees to spend on their missions -- is legal.

But Ballard spokesman Marc Lotter cited a state law that allows the incentive in some circumstances. Under the law, the city can give an employer a collection of county income taxes that have been paid by its workers who live in Marion County -- as long as the employer moved from out of state or has been newly created. Jobs relocated within Indiana are not eligible for the incentive.

For education reform groups already operating in Indianapolis, Lotter said, details of how the city could still provide an incentive would need to be worked out with the City-County Council. He said one way would be for the council to allow a grant to each organization out of county income tax revenue.

In coming weeks, Ballard plans to send proposals to the council addressing the incentive and requesting up to \$2 million for the charter school incubator.

Were Ballard's plan for charters to succeed, he projected 20 new schools could serve up to 6,000 students. Most of those kids likely would come from IPS.

IPS Superintendent Eugene White questioned what he sees as Ballard's charter-first strategy to improve schools.

"If all that came from IPS, that would be a tremendous bite," he said. "I question what has made it so clear to him that charter schools are the silver bullets to all problems."

The district, he said, will be ready to compete with any new charters.

"We're gearing up to have the kind of quality program that would ensure we can compete," White said. "That's the only answer. We're going to let the marketplace decide where kids go to school."

But David Harris, chief executive officer of the Mind Trust, said the district itself is one of the major challenges to improving education.

"We've increased funding in IPS, for example, by 70 percent over the last 20 years, adjusted for inflation," he said. "The fact is we are not using our resources as efficiently as we can and we're not as collaborative of a partner as we'd like to see coming out of our districts. We need to think about how to improve that."

Costs to combat poverty are high, White said, and the district needs more support in those endeavors, not less.

"In spite of what David is saying, we still need additional dollars for early childhood education," he said. "We get kids with all levels of unreadiness coming in at kindergarten that we have to get ready for first grade."

It's clear, however, that charter schools remain at the forefront of education reform not just in Indiana or in Indianapolis, but across the nation.

David Dresslar, executive director of the Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning at the University of Indianapolis, noted that on Tuesday the House passed a bipartisan bill adding quality-control requirements to federal startup funds that benefit new charters. The vote: 365-54.

"Charter schools are no longer a partisan issue," Dresslar said. "We need to get past distinctions between traditional and charter public schools and concentrate on distinguishing between good schools and those that are not serving students well."