

August 21, 2009

Bringing big ideas to our schools

Something special is going on in a basement office on the east side of Downtown.

There, The Mind Trust, a nonprofit group that lures education entrepreneurs to the city, has quickly become one of the city's most important organizations. The group was founded in 2006 -- but if its early success is any indication, it will leave a mark on this city that will last for generations and, perhaps, help reshape education in Indianapolis.

In recent weeks, The Mind Trust has begun sorting through the applications for its next round of fellowships, which will be announced in November. Why does that matter? Because those fellows will come to Indianapolis, bringing with them another round of innovative programs.

"This is of enormous importance for Indianapolis," said David Harris, who runs The Mind Trust and co-founded it with former Mayor Bart Peterson. "Because this type of program doesn't exist elsewhere, some of the most talented and innovative leaders in the country, and even the world, are looking to Indianapolis as their pathway to innovation in the public education sector."

The Mind Trust recently put out a summary of this year's 405 applicants. It includes former officials from the White House and NASA, as well as Microsoft and Google. A former college president and people who have worked with groundbreaking education groups are on the list.

You might recall a recent column I wrote about Earl Martin Phalen, who was awarded one of The Mind Trust's fellowships last year. Phalen's fellowship resulted in a program called Summer Advantage USA, which provided learning programs for about 800 students this summer. His ultimate goal is to stop a tradition that sees low-income students fall further behind academically each summer.

Harris hopes to find more fellows like Phalen. In his pool of applications this year are proposals to increase technology use in the classroom and assist at-risk students. Some proposals are aimed at boosting teacher quality; others seek to help students get into college. The list goes on and on.

As do the ideas.

"As a country, we have not lacked for innovative ideas in education," Harris said. "What we have struggled with is engaging and empowering talented people to innovate within the public education space."

The Mind Trust offers fellows a \$90,000 annual salary for two years, a startup stipend and a lot of organizational support. Harris said the community -- from top business leaders to politicians to educators -- has embraced the fellows.

Much is written and said about the state of education in Marion County. We have a low graduation rate and, according to federal guideposts, many of our schools are failing. Political games too often get in the way of meaningful change.

But there's something very meaningful about an organization whose underlying goal is to bring big

ideas and inspiring people into the city's schools. Of course, the challenge for The Mind Trust is selecting three fellows from hundreds of impressive applicants and ideas.

What tips the scale, Harris said, is the person behind the idea.

"The people who have the best ideas are the people who have been consumed by whatever problem they are trying to address for a long time," he said. "They're not just randomly saying, 'Hey, here's an idea.' "

So how are fellows chosen?

"We're willing to take some risks," Harris said. "We're not looking for programs that will be fine. We're looking for programs that will break the mold. Ultimately, this is about entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurship is about taking risks."

Those risks could provide Indianapolis with big rewards.
