

Matthew Tully

For Mind Trust, star power

Jane Pauley first heard about The Mind Trust this spring during a dinner party focused on education issues in Washington. By the end of the dinner, she wanted to know more.

The former "Today" show host was intrigued by the nonprofit group's work to bring innovative education programs to public schools. She was interested in the organization's mission to become a home for education entrepreneurs. She was particularly struck after learning The Mind Trust was based in her hometown.

"Here is one of the most exciting and most innovative programs in education, and it is happening in Indianapolis," the 1968 Warren Central High School graduate said.

Her interest in the group led to a meeting at The Mind Trust and, ultimately, to an offer to join the board of directors. Eager to help tackle her city's dismal graduation rate, she quickly accepted the offer.

She wants to remind people that not so long ago, a high school education in a big city was quite a treasure. But in too many places, that is no longer the case.

The good news, she said, is that with so much room for improvement, "Indianapolis is positioned to leverage its current status to demonstrate how quickly improvement can come when one makes quality education and teacher preparation and school accountability a priority."

Can it happen?

The Mind Trust is certainly helping by luring leading education groups to town. One group, Teach for America, puts top recent college graduates into the classroom. Another, College Summit, works to increase the number of students from tough backgrounds and low-income areas who make it to college.

The Mind Trust also awards entrepreneurial fellowships as part of its mission to bring the best, freshest ideas in education to the city. This summer, I wrote about one fellowship recipient, Earl Martin Phalen. The Harvard and Yale graduate created a program called **Summer Advantage USA** that seeks to stop the tendency of students from low-income areas to fall further behind academically each summer.

Phalen took his program to elementary school students in Decatur Township Schools and to an Indianapolis charter school this summer.

The results?

According to tests given to roughly 700 children who took part in the five-week program, students experienced three months' worth of improvement in their reading skills.

It's the type of innovation and success that The Mind Trust has brought to Indianapolis. It explains why the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation recently gave the group a \$2.1 million grant.

"I don't believe Indianapolis understands what it has there," Pauley said of The Mind Trust. "It is such an opportunity."

Although she has long lived in New York, Pauley said the passing years have resparked an interest in her hometown. Earlier this year, she came to town to promote a health center in Warren Township named for her. She now plans to visit a couple of times a year to work on Mind Trust issues.

Pauley, who has a son who works at a charter school in Boston, served in the past on the board of another education group aimed at addressing problems in New York City schools. But she does not sell herself as an education policy expert. Rather, she is simply concerned with the stories she has read about Indiana's graduation rate, and wants to help.

The children of Indianapolis deserve better, she said, recalling the opportunities her own high school years here provided.

"I owe my career to Warren Township Schools," Pauley said. "You can draw a direct line between my joining the debate team at age 15 and my appearing on the 'Today' show 10 years later at the age of 25."

Indianapolis has changed since then -- for the better in many ways. But the state of the city's schools is its greatest failing. While so much of the story is disappointing, there are signs of promise.

"What I love about the new conversation about education reform is it's about excellence," Pauley said.

And The Mind Trust is leading that conversation.