

# The Mind Trust

## Launching Pad for Education Innovation

By Rebecca Patrick

**B**ostonian Earl Phalen wasn't so sure about the prospects of starting his pilot education program in Indianapolis, but the opportunity to be an entrepreneur and have fellowship dollars to grow his business caught his attention. Upon interviewing with The Mind Trust organization, whose goal is to improve public education by empowering qualified individuals to develop or expand transforming initiatives, Phalen was impressed. A little later on, the sentiment was excitement as he was awarded one of the inaugural two-year fellowships (complete with salary and stipend) from among several hundred applicants.

The intention behind each fellowship is that it will be a launching pad for a self-sustaining venture after two years. Phalen's inventive program, Summer Advantage USA, provides high quality summer learning to students from kindergarten through the eighth grade.

Now in the last year of his fellowship, Phalen still marvels at how committed The Mind Trust leaders and members of Indiana's education community were from the get-go.

"I've taken nonprofit organizations into five states, in diverse parts of the country, and I've never seen or never been part of a group like The Mind Trust. Many groups say, 'Hey, however you want us to help you, we will help you. This is the first group that actually meant that.'

"I never have had such access and such open doors as I felt in that first literally three or four days in which we had about 26 meetings with leaders from the state. I said, 'Wow, this really could be something,'" he recalls.

**Earl Phalen, a Harvard law school classmate of President Obama, began his fellowship after 17 years developing out-of-school programs in urban communities through Building Educated Leaders for Life, which he co-founded.**

### Educational dream vacation

Right off the bat, Phalen's Summer Advantage "received nearly a million dollar grant from the Indiana Department of Education in a tough economic time, when 96% of nonprofits never grow over the million dollar revenue mark," he reports.

Last year, Phalen's program operated at three sites in Decatur Township in Indianapolis, with approximately 850 students enrolled.

"The research shows that most children lose three months of reading, writing and math skills during the summer. Children who participate in our program gain three months of reading, writing and math skills – not to mention that they grow through the enrichment programs. We have art, music and drama in the afternoon, so it's academics in the morning and then enrichment," Phalen offers.

There are two adults per classroom: one teacher and one college-age mentor. On Fridays, there are inspirational guest speakers, and then it's a field trip or a service project.

"The scholars (students) grow academically; they grow emotionally. There's a healthy breakfast and lunch, and then there is afternoon recess and physical education; they grow physically. So it's really a holistic program.

"The results were three months of reading, writing and math skills gained, so that's really a six-month turnaround for each child. We're gearing up now to make sure that every

year more and more scholars can have access to this experience, and that the summer months don't go to waste," Phalen stresses.

Each fellow is assigned a Mind Trust board member who is designated their champion – a resource to provide guidance. For Phalen, it's Bill Shrewsberry, president and CEO of Shrewsberry & Associates LLC consulting firm and chairman of former Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson's charter school board.

"He really helped think through the politics of Indiana and understanding who we should



connect with, who we should share our vision with and who would be really excited about supporting us,” Phalen shares.

Shrewsbury, who has been with The Mind Trust from its start in 2006, was drawn to Phalen’s Summer Advantage concept during his interview presentation.

“Friends who were teachers would often tell me about kids returning after summer vacation; it’s a tough time for many students already in the normal term. But then when they take 2 to 3 months off for the summer break, it takes them a month to just get reoriented and sort of make up for lost ground. Often, many students’ parents don’t do anything (to continue learning) in the summer. Earl’s program seemed like a great idea, and after the first year, it proved itself,” he states.

Going forward, Phalen wants to expand Summer Advantage to serve over 25,000 children in Indiana. He also wants to partner with whomever it takes – parents, educators, you name it – to ensure the summer months aren’t wasted for students.

“There’s no reason to have an agrarian calendar for our children anymore; they just don’t need the three months off in the summertime. To really change the system of education, to ensure shorter breaks and more learning time for children – that would be the second outcome we are hoping to achieve,” Phalen asserts.

“The only reason I am able to set aggressive service goals and aggressive system change goals is because of partners like The Mind Trust and the Department of Education. It’s pretty exciting to be in a state that’s so committed to and really open to things that work for children.”

## Funding, fellowships and reform

Currently, The Mind Trust has six fellows in total, in addition to a \$3 million venture fund.

“We wanted to give people more opportunities to innovate, which was the original thinking behind the fellowships, but we thought there were also some fantastic and highly successful programs that were already up and operating, and we should get those programs to expand to Indianapolis,” says David Harris, president and CEO of The Mind Trust.

To date, the group has invested to bring four nationally heralded groups to the Circle City: Teach for America, The New Teacher Project, College Summit and Diploma Plus, a Gates Foundation-funded high school model.

“Our big focus now is going to be growing that fund so we can expand those programs throughout the county, and hopefully at some point beyond that. We’re really looking to scale up those programs,” Harris declares.

Regarding the fellowship program, Harris is thrilled with the interest in it – not just from the state but throughout the world.

“For this last application cycle – when we awarded two fellowships in December – we had 405 people apply from 44 states and 20 countries ... just a tremendous amount of interest,” he notes.

“There are so many talented people, like Earl, who are looking for opportunities to innovate within the public education space. It’s not a lack of available talent, it’s a lack of opportunity. School districts do not incubate new innovations very often –



**Students in Summer Advantage USA (top) receive a boost in academics and the arts. The Mind Trust President and CEO David Harris (left) and fellow Earl Phalen (fourth from left) congratulate the winning team of MBA students who competed in a case assignment involving the fellowship program.**

or basically ever. Public education has just done a lousy job of cultivating talent and an even lousier job of giving talented people freedom to innovate.”

He continues, “So we are very much focused on the human capital side of education and drawing people into the sector that have the capacity to do anything but are choosing to apply their talents to public education.”

Harris, who founded The Mind Trust with Mayor Peterson after their successful charter school initiative, says the best part is that these innovators’ ideas are coming to life right here in Central Indiana.

“We not only have the opportunity to have some nationally prominent organizations working here (thanks to the venture fund), but to be the launch pad for some of what we think are going to be the most important emerging education reform efforts. Not just a couple of them, but as the years pass, we are going to have a pretty significant percentage of the most promising education reform ventures in the country.”

## Expanding the scope

All six fellowship models are intended to be national and some of them are already operating outside of Indiana.

According to Harris, “a cornerstone of our analysis about whether to award a scholarship is if this is something that is a fundamental departure from the status quo.” A look at two of the other entrepreneurial programs:

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- **Teach Plus, Dr. Celine Coggins** – Focused on helping highly effective early career teachers in the profession by training them in policy and advocacy so they can be part of conversations at the bargaining table with the district. They can advocate for policies – like merit pay – that are going to help retain high-performing teachers. Coggins was awarded a \$4 million grant from The Gates Foundation to help support her work. “Right now, there are too few opportunities for teachers to be involved in those kinds of conversations. They tend to be done at the state level, with teachers’ unions and state policymakers,” Harris explains.
- **Seton Education Partners, Stephanie Saroki** – Intent on making sure that students in Catholic schools that are closing because of financial reasons have an opportunity to continue to have a high-quality education by helping those financially failing schools convert to charter schools (by working with the archdioceses). “This is not intended to convert successful, economically viable Catholic schools into charters but those that were going to close anyway because of financial reasons. That’s a big problem all across the country, including here in Indianapolis,” Harris contends.

Over the next 5 to 10 years, The Mind Trust wants to “concentrate as much of the fellowship work as possible on many different types of reforms and grow them – the ones that

are proving they can actually move the needle in public education and are doing something fundamentally different,” Harris describes.

“The hope is that if we can break the mold for entrepreneurial education work in a city like Indianapolis, we can see systemic change and reform.”

No one wants to see that more than Shrewsbury.

“I believe we can’t do enough in enriching education for students. We can’t continue by saying that what we’ve always done works. There has to be new ideas that address students in a different manner – whether that’s in summer school, the way we teach or the period of time we teach,” he surmises.

“The Mind Trust really has broken new ground and is at least opening some minds as to what we can and should be doing with education.”

### INFORMATION LINK

**Resources:** David Harris, The Mind Trust, at [www.themindtrust.org](http://www.themindtrust.org)

Earl Phalen, Summer Advantage USA, at [www.summeradvantage.org](http://www.summeradvantage.org)

Bill Shrewsbury, Shrewsbury & Associates, at [www.shrewsusa.com](http://www.shrewsusa.com)

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