

In May of 2015, the Mind Trust tries “Quality Seats” spiel in Ohio: Cincinnati full of doubts

\$25M for Cincinnati's poorest students - but is that a good thing?

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A group of Cincinnati business leaders, educators and philanthropists Tuesday announced a landmark \$25 million education "accelerator."

It's a public-private partnership meant to boost the number of high-quality schools open to Cincinnati's poorest students, and it involves some of Cincinnati's most venerable organizations: the Cincinnati Business and Cincinnati Regional Business committees, and the Farmer Family, Haile U.S. Bank and KnowledgeWorks foundations.

It also involves leaders from Cincinnati Public Schools, the Archdiocese of Cincinnati and charter schools.

In five years, the goal is to double the number of seats available at high-performing schools in Cincinnati, from about 5,000 to 10,000.

Five years after that, the goal is the double the number again, to 20,000 high-quality seats.

"You can change the direction for some of these kids," said Cintas CEO Scott Farmer. "There are ways you can break through that poverty ceiling."

The pot is \$25 million, but how will it be spent? It's subject to change, but preliminary breakdowns show:

- \$15 million will go toward creating new schools, likely charters. Those ideally will be partnerships with CPS or the archdiocese.
- \$5 million will go toward improving the "talent pipeline" for K-12 schools in Cincinnati. That means spending money to attract talented teachers and principals, and spending money to better train them once they're here.
- \$5 million will go toward operational costs, such as paying a CEO, a development executive and a community engagement expert.

The accelerator is meant to be in addition-to rather than in lieu of current projects. That said, there's a limited amount of money available, and there's no guarantee the accelerator won't draw funding that would have gone to other local initiatives.

Quality seats?

There are about 50,000 students in Cincinnati Public Schools' geographical territory. Of those, 61 percent attend a CPS school, 23 percent go to Catholic school and 16 percent a charter, according to data provided by the accelerator.

Looking at CPS and charter schools specifically – because Catholic data is nonpublic and thus more difficult to track – the accelerator estimates 5,500 students, 15 percent, are in "high quality" educational seats. The accelerator defines high quality as a school that earns an A or B in state ratings for student achievement and growth.

Thirty-nine percent of students are in medium-quality seats, and the rest are in low-quality. The accelerator dug into data on CPS and charter schools, and seven met the accelerator's definition of high-performing. Of those seven, two – Winton Hills Academy and the Hamilton County Math and Science Academy – serve predominantly economically disadvantaged students.

In Cincinnati, where the child poverty rate tops 50 percent, that's not good enough, said Atkins & Pearce CEO Jeb Head, part of the accelerator group.

"That is troubling," Head said. "Within our community, the economically disadvantaged students have limited access to the kinds of schools that would make the most difference. There's an element of fairness in our community that needs to be addressed."

Experimenting with our kids?

CPS loses about 8,000 students each year to charter schools. There's a ton of turnover – it's not the same 8,000 students every year, said Superintendent Mary Ronan – and it's terrible for the students and expensive for CPS.

But the hope, Ronan said, is that if the accelerator can bring in high-performing charter schools, they can knock some of Cincinnati's "fly-by-night" charters out of business.

Ultimately, it's not about district-versus-charter, Ronan said, it's about getting the best schools open for students.

"We are just delighted to have people who want to work with us," Ronan said. "We definitely struggle with our youngsters who live in poverty – how to make sure they do as well in life as every child out there, and that is our goal."

Not everyone is on board, though. Some – such as the Cincinnati Educational Justice Coalition's Michelle Dillingham – question the accelerator's motives and methods. In particular, Dillingham takes exception to the claim that Cincinnati has only 5,500 high-quality seats.

Then, she is troubled by the relationships between CPS Board of Education members and the accelerator. She suspects there's "internal disagreement" among board members about "how closely the district should really be working with this fund."

Finally, Dillingham thinks the accelerator is shading exactly what it plans to do and how it plans to do it.

"They say they only care about kids, but the first thing they're doing is trying to open another charter school?" she said. "What's the agenda? What's the motive?"

The justice coalition's mission is to support and improve the public school system, Dillingham said. CPS is on a great track with its community learning center model, and she doesn't see any reason to divert from that plan.

"We already know the charter experiment hasn't done so well in Ohio. Why continue to experiment on our kids?" she said. "If you want to be helpful, then plug into the model that's already there, which is the community learning center."

What's left to do?

Charles Wallner calls his the "gray" point of view. He's not in favor of the accelerator, and he's not opposed, but he's concerned about the process.

Wallner is part of the Faith Community Alliance of Greater Cincinnati, a nonprofit dedicated to sharing information and sparking community action. He's speaking for himself and not the FCA as a whole, but to him, there are too many unknowns about how the accelerator will work, and too much of the plan was formed behind closed doors.

Simply put, it's "arrogant," Wallner said – coming up with a plan and presenting it to the community rather than involving the community in the development process.

"But, it doesn't mean they're wrong," he said. "A lot of this could have been ironed out if they just met publicly with people. It's true they would have met opposition, but that's the chance you take in a democracy. That's the way a democracy works."

The accelerator has been in the planning stages for more than a year. The group still needs to hire a CEO – though they were planning to make an offer Tuesday – and come up with a name.

They also need to raise \$9.5 million more to hit the \$25 million goal.

Public schools have faced funding cuts year after year, said CPS board President Alex Kuhns. Budgets are tight, and "oftentimes, our schools, our children, our families are at the short end of the stick on that."

If a public-private partnership like the accelerator can help alleviate those losses, Kuhns is all-in, he said.

"At CPS, we're excited," he said, "because we feel that there's a great opportunity at our feet."