

## CEO quietly quits school accelerator

*Cincinnati Enquirer* Hannah Sparling hsparring@enquirer.com Jan. 24, 2017



When it launched in 2015, Accelerate Great Schools promised to attack poverty in Cincinnati and smash the divide between the haves and have-nots in education.

About a year and a half later, the nonprofit's first CEO is gone, and the group hasn't given out a grant since last January.

The school accelerator was conceived and backed by some of Cincinnati's most powerful families and organizations, including the Farmer Family and Haile U.S. Bank foundations and the Cincinnati Business and Cincinnati Regional Business committees.

It had a lot of money and influence in its corner, and hopes were high for big, quick progress.

There was no press release or announcement about the leadership change. Patrick Herrel was the CEO. Then, he just wasn't. A new CEO, Brian Neal, from the Farmer Family Foundation, was officially instated in November.

"We were sort of surprised," said Michelle Dillingham, a Democratic city council candidate and head of the Cincinnati Educational Justice Coalition, which is wary of the school accelerator because of its openness to charter schools.

"We heard through the grapevine that there was a change," Dillingham said. Herrel could not be reached for comment for this story. When asked if he was forced out, Neal, the new CEO, said it was Herrel's decision to leave.

Neal said he is not aware of any tension between Herrel and his former bosses, and the accelerator's goals remain consistent with the work Herrel started.

"I don't have details on what happened before," Neal said, "but I do know that Patrick resigned for other opportunities."

### **A tempered approach: Herrel came to Cincinnati highly recommended in the summer of 2015**

He was on Forbes Magazine's 2012 list of 30 education leaders under 30 making a significant impact on the U.S. System. And, prior to moving here, he worked at The Mind Trust in Indianapolis, a group with similar goals to Cincinnati's accelerator.

He said repeatedly he was going to take it slowly and start his tenure by listening. His plan was to talk to people first, find the need, and then launch projects. But perhaps the ramp-up was a bit too slow?

The goal was to raise \$25 million to kick start quality education in Cincinnati, particularly for poor students who often don't have quality options. The accelerator would find good ideas and bring them to Cincinnati, or it would find what's already working here and replicate it.

### **Here's what it's done so far**

A year ago, in January 2016, the accelerator gave \$1.3 million for new programs at two Catholic schools in Cincinnati. The schools moved to a blended-learning approach, where students spend about half their time in a traditional classroom setting and the other half working online at their own pace.

At the same time, AGS announced a \$128,000 grant for a study on how to better develop principals and school leaders.

The school accelerator announced its first investments in January 2016.

Since then, though, the accelerator has been quiet. In fact, the latest blog post on its website is about those first two investments.

The accelerator is working now on a new charter school to ease overcrowding on the city's west side. That's supposed to be a partnership with Cincinnati Public Schools, but it hit a snag when CPS got a "poor" rating from the state as a charter-school sponsor. CPS is appealing that rating, but unless it wins, the district isn't allowed to sponsor any charter schools.

The goal was to have that new charter school up and running for the coming school year, Neal said, but "there's a number of things that need to work out perfectly for that to happen." Regardless, he said, it remains a top priority.

### **'The work is tough'**

Dillingham, with the justice coalition, is worried about education on a national level, where Betsy DeVos, a well-known charter school supporter, is in line to become the next U.S. Secretary of Education.

Dillingham fears that mindset will trickle down, and groups like the accelerator will push more money to charter schools locally. She's OK if the accelerator wants to give money to help traditional public schools; she's vehemently opposed to any new charters.

"When you go to their website, there's not a whole lot of information there," Dillingham said. "It's not really clear what they're doing, and that's true of private initiatives. They don't have to be transparent. That's their prerogative."

Neal knows about anti-charter sentiment locally, and he concedes there have been some bad actors in the charter sector. But, there are some great charter schools, too, he said, and those are the ones the accelerator wants to support.

He has a long resume of work in the education and nonprofit worlds. Progress is slow, yes, he said. But that's just how it goes.

He's happy with the work the accelerator is choosing. And, he's confident it will make a true, lasting, positive difference.

"I would like education fixed yesterday," he said, "but the work is tough. Education reform and ensuring all children have access to high-quality options – it's not an easy task."

<http://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/education/2017/01/24/ceo-quietly-quits-school-accelerator/96997612/>

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