

[Indy Opportunities](#) » [About Us](#) » [Blog](#) [Sign Up](#)

Blog

[YP Perspectives: Indy's Public Education Scene](#)

Posted by [Emily Neitzel](#) on Sep 30, 2015 in [YP Perspectives](#) | [No Comments](#)

In preparation for Indy's [upcoming local elections](#), IndyHub's running YP Perspectives: The 2015 Indy Election Series. These articles explore important community issues that will be directly impacted by this election. We serve as a platform for these conversations. We care that you vote-not how you vote.

Whether we're talking about economic opportunity and job readiness, poverty, crime, or attracting more families in Indianapolis, education is on the minds of Indianapolis leaders and residents.

Let's be clear that there are quality public schools and education options in Indianapolis. However, it's clear that Indy's struggling schools are the ones that tend to get the most attention. This article focuses on those schools by exploring some of the problems that students and teachers face in the most underserved areas and what the mayor can do to support them.

Even though the city and the mayor have a big interest in making sure young residents get a quality education, the major decisions aren't really under their control. Decisions about testing, curricula, and funding are made at the Statehouse and carried out by the State Department of Education (DOE).

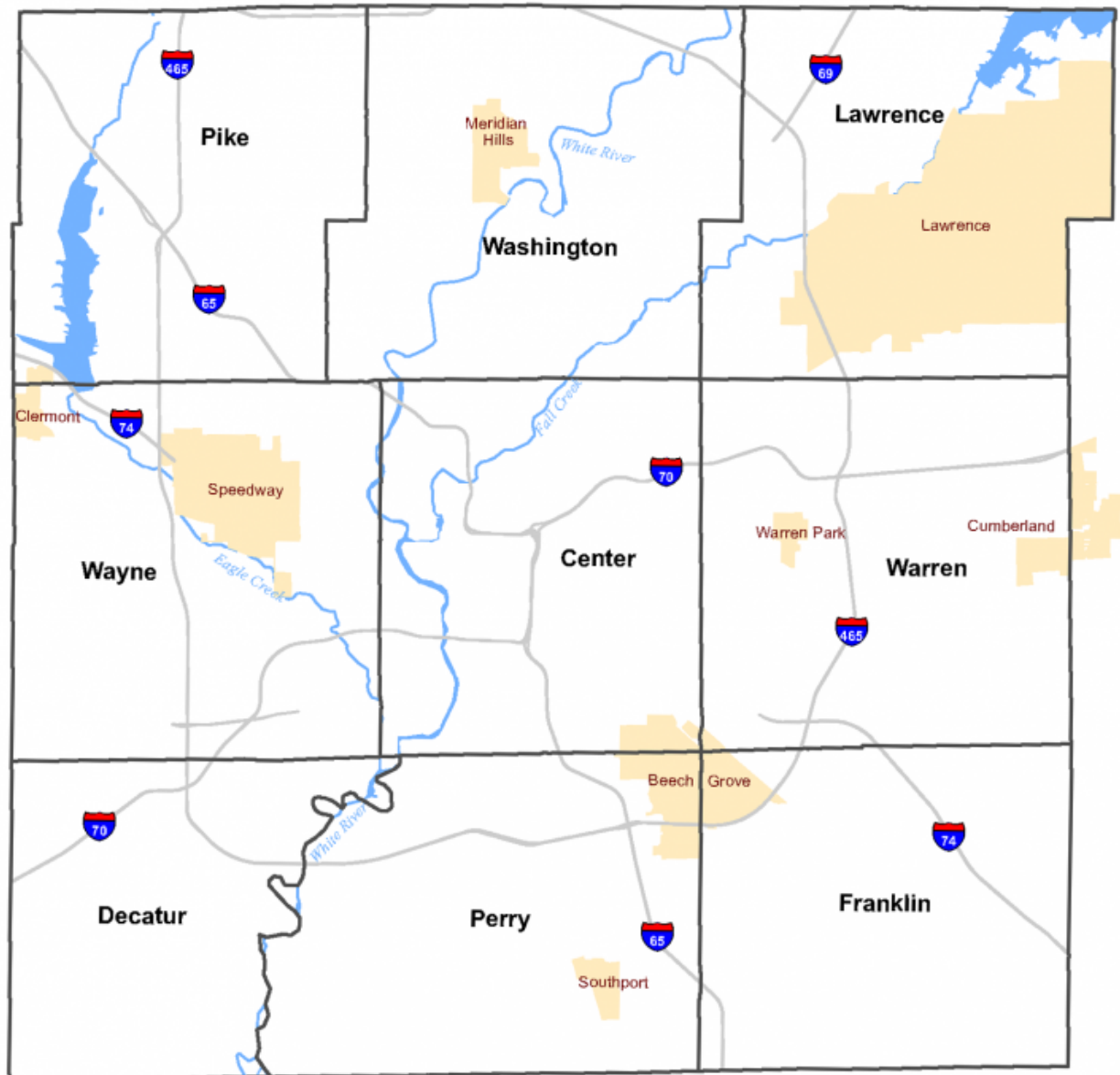
The majority of [school funding](#) has moved away from local property taxes to state funding in recent years. Furthermore, local districts control their own schools' policies and teacher salaries.

In spite of these limits, mayors in the past have managed to be involved in educational efforts in the city, and there are opportunities for the future mayor to work with the city-county council and

other local partners to lead in education.

What are the different public education options for families with children living in Indianapolis?

Traditional public schools include Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) and the eight township districts. IPS is the largest district by itself, but the township districts have over three fourths of the county's students, and these schools face [many of the same struggles](#) that IPS schools do.



STATS Indiana

Public magnet schools can offer special, focused programs of study. For example, [Lawrence](#)

[Township](#) has popular and successful Spanish-language immersion schools. Any family living within the district (or planning to move to the district) can [apply to a magnet school](#), and students are assigned by lottery.

Charter schools, which are public, are [not subject to the same rules](#) that determine curriculum and organization of traditional public schools. Any nonprofit can open a [charter school in Indianapolis](#). Though they have a lot of freedom to innovate, they still have to meet state testing requirements.

How do Indianapolis schools compare to the rest of the state's schools?

It's hard to compare schools' academic performance without taking into account the outside factors that impact student success. However, the State DOE measures schools and districts based on their ISTEP test grades and other data, and gives them an [A-F accountability rating](#).

Supporters of this method of evaluation say it makes it simple for parents to know how well their child's school is doing. Opponents believe it's an inaccurate and unfair measure that places stigma on students in schools with lower ratings.

The nine public school districts' [ratings](#) in 2014 varied widely, from "A" schools to "D." Magnet schools and schools in wealthier communities tended to receive higher ratings than their counterparts in underserved areas.



Brandon Brown, YP in Indy

About [half of the charter schools](#) that took the ISTEP test last year performed better than IPS schools, and half scored worse.

The locally-run charters typically scored better than those run by outside national organizations.

Brandon Brown, former Director of Charter Schools for Mayor Ballard, believes the locally-run charters perform well because:

“Successful charter schools establish key partnerships with community organizations and stakeholders. They have strong boards comprised of local community members who have a stake in the long-term success of education in Indianapolis.”

How is the mayor involved with charter schools?

The mayor's office is directly involved in education through city-sponsored charter schools. Since 2001, Indianapolis has been the only city in the US whose mayor can create and oversee charter schools.

The Mayor's Office of Education Innovation currently sponsors [38 charter schools](#) in the city. Since 2006, this office has [collaborated with a nonprofit](#) called The Mind Trust to charter more schools, attract talented teachers, and promote reform in Indianapolis Public Schools.

What are some of the challenges facing students and teachers in Indianapolis?

Many Indianapolis students face barriers to their academic success before they even get to the classroom. [Over 3,000 children](#) of school age in the county are homeless, and many others may live in unstable housing situations.

Over [75% of students](#) at IPS receive free or reduced-price lunches at school. At home, their families may not have access to the same resources that their counterparts in wealthier areas have.



Marc Williams, YP in Indy

Marc Williams, a teacher who worked for three years at IPS and four years in Lawrence Township Schools, explains:

"We serve kids who show up not 100% available to learn. Because of hunger, family instability,

unsafe neighborhoods, their basic needs are not adequately met. The kids want to be available to learn but many of them have many other things to sort out beyond the school. Students are showing up with some challenges that schools aren't equipped to meet simply through teaching and learning."

This is one area where Williams would like to see the city take action. "The city could commit to doing something about food," he says, "And I'm not talking about free and reduced lunch at school. We need to address food access." He'd like to see the city work to bring more quality, affordable grocery stores to neighborhoods. Improving access to basic resources is just one way the city does have influence, and could tangibly improve the lives of students and their parents.

Chuck Brewer's plan to address food deserts and access in Indianapolis >>

There are also a large number of students in Indianapolis who are English language learners (ELL), whose teachers may not be trained in how best to work across languages and cultures. Since 2001, the number of ELL students in the county [went up by 239%](#), and more than half of the schools that had the largest increase statewide [were in Indianapolis](#).

Though IPS and other districts are stepping up their efforts to effectively serve these students, including [a plan to train all teachers in working with ELL students](#), working with teachers who may only speak English is still an extra hurdle that many Indianapolis students (and their parents) face.

How can the city help attract and retain talented teachers?

Teacher turnover is a problem for all schools, but particularly for districts like those in Indianapolis where many students already face more barriers to success.

There are a lot of national or state level programs that try to help with this issue that could be models for a local program. For example, the [Good Neighbor Next Door program](#) encourages teachers to live and work in designated areas for at least three years in exchange for 50% off the cost of a home.

Joe Hogsett's proposal to attract teachers to Indianapolis with free or reduced cost housing >>

Other [programs aimed at retaining teachers](#) focus on providing those early in their career with mentoring support from more experienced colleagues. The state's [Mentor and Assessment Program \(IMAP\)](#) is one such program that helps get new teachers through the challenges of their first two years with guidance.

Brown, the former Director of Charter Schools, would like to see the city expand [Innovation Network Schools](#). These are autonomous schools in IPS district that can be run independently or in cooperation with high-performing charter schools. They give teachers and staff more of a role in decision-making. Brown says, “They represent one avenue for great teachers to operate within environments that have the potential to unleash their innovative leadership.”

Is there anything else the city and the mayor can do to support students?

Another way for the mayor to be involved in education has been through public-private partnerships. In March, Mayor Ballard and a bipartisan majority from the City-County Council worked together to pass [a measure to provide free preschool](#) to children from low-income families in Marion County. City tax funding and donations from corporate and nonprofit organizations will help fund the program.

Both candidates for 2015 have proposed public-private cooperation to provide programs for students outside of the school day, including summer jobs for teenage students and mentoring programs. Both want to keep students engaged throughout the summer and contribute to career preparation.

(Check out [Joe Hogsett's plan](#) for summer jobs for teen students and for mentoring, and [Chuck Brewer's plan](#) for summer jobs for teen students.)

Brown says that the mayor should encourage collaboration between schools and education nonprofits in the city. “Harnessing organizations like [Teach Plus](#), a local education nonprofit that works with teams of teachers through its Turnaround Teacher Teams (T3) program to improve the performance of high-needs schools,” he explains, is one example.

Finally, the mayor's advocacy at the state level can create tangible changes to education in the city. For example, [Former Mayor Bart Peterson](#) provided a great deal of support for the state legislation that brought charters into existence in Indiana. Both candidates this year want to work with the Governor and the state legislature to increase preschool funding.

Williams, the former IPS and Lawrence teacher, thinks that preschool funding is an important step in the right direction. He would also like to see the next mayor lead by speaking up for a different approach to education at the state level.

As the city that is home to the state's largest school district and the most students, he believes that Indianapolis should be a leading voice at the statehouse. “We need to push away from preaching compliance and embrace creative, different styles of thinking,” he says. “We need more discussion about student-centered schools that are designed to support student engagement.”