Under a big tent

Changing education at the CELLular level

Education reform is a popular – and polarizing – topic. Across the nation, everyone recognizes the problems. Low-performing schools. Too many students who fail to graduate from high school.

Too few third-graders who read at grade level. Too many college graduates unprepared for the specific demands of 21st century employers. Too little agreement on what works in education, let alone how to structure reform or how to pay for it.

Indiana, however, is different from other states when it comes to finding consensus on education reform, in part because of an oasis called the Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning (CELL) at the University of Indianapolis (UIndy).

CELL was created in 2001 with a $15 million grant from Lilly Endowment. Subsequent Endowment grants totaling $9 million have helped sustain its focus on results: making sure that children graduate from high school ready for success in postsecondary education or the workforce.

Tindley School student MiKalyn Robinson accompanies math teacher Nicole Durham (right) in leading an exercise that is part of a math problem-solving-through-writing session. The exercise is completed with a countdown session until all homework is in binders and binders are closed.
The center is not a think tank – although it does sponsor and conduct education research – and it doesn’t take on the politics of reform. CELL leadership describes the center’s style as “cutting-edge and action-oriented.” CELL has become the catalyst behind new movements in Indiana that state officials, business and community leaders, educators, parents and students have embraced.

“We find ourselves in a position that I sometimes get teased about by leaders of more partisan education groups,” confesses David Dresslar, CELL’s executive director. “CELL is the big tent. We have excellent relationships with Democrats, Republicans, charter schools and traditional schools.”

That “big tent” was on full display at the Indiana Convention Center in November during CELL’s seventh annual Indiana’s Future conference on education reform. A hallmark event for CELL, the conference welcomed more than 800 participants over two days to discuss hot-button topics such as school choice and teacher quality, as well as new CELL initiatives and technology use.

During the keynote session, Indiana Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Bennett and Nate Schnellenberger, executive director of the Indiana State Teachers Association, cordially shared a stage and panel discussion with Cummins executive Mark Gerstle and Wendy Robinson, superintendent of Fort Wayne Community Schools. The frank discussion was civil and never heated, although panelists agreed to disagree with each other on certain issues.

“It was important for us to get that conversation into the public arena, to make sure that everybody got a chance to be heard,” Dresslar says. “That panel represents everything we are trying to achieve because nothing is going to happen unless we get people talking to each other first.”

No one should underestimate the importance of the public conversations CELL initiates, according to David Harris, founder and CEO of The Mind Trust, an Indianapolis-based education reform group. “As a sector, education does not do a good job discussing key issues,” he says. “Divisions become so deep, and the rhetoric can build up. It’s hard to bring people together and push for change at the same time. CELL is one of the few places nationally that can do that, and they deserve a lot of credit. It’s not easy.”

Rob Smith, Eli Lilly and Company Foundation president, agrees. “The future of our community and state is dependent on improving the educational outcomes of our residents. Businesses must have access to an educated workforce, and their employees must have attractive educational options for their families,” he says. “We were pleased to be the title
Encouraging new models and methods

Beyond conferences and conversations, CELL has become a valued ally with schools and communities in 89 of Indiana’s 92 counties. **Over the past decade, CELL has developed** considerable expertise in two new educational approaches, New Tech high schools and Early College models. Employing a “strength in numbers” philosophy, CELL is helping nearly 40 schools throughout the state put one of these two models in place, making Indiana a national laboratory for learning how to do this well. It also has helped establish networks of these schools throughout the state so they can learn from each other’s experiences.

In 2011 CELL began working with six new Indiana high schools to implement the New Tech model. CELL serves as the Indiana intermediary for the California-headquartered New Tech Network, a national reform movement that focuses on project-based learning and encourages the use of new technologies in solving problems to teach 21st century workplace skills. The addition of these six schools will bring Indiana’s total to 24 certified New Tech high schools by 2012, far exceeding any other state in the nation. CELL also is bringing other Project-Based-Learning (PBL) methods to Indiana schools. PBL methods combine student inquiry and teacher instruction to present students with authentic problems or challenges that they likely will face in their workplaces. Classes emphasize critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity. CELL hosts an annual PBL Institute for more than 250 educators to help them develop the skills for successful implementation of the PBL method in their classrooms. It also leads the Indiana Middle School and Elementary PBL networks.
“These transformations are done with the theory that if we can change some schools, others will follow as the PBL schools grow and show success,” Dresslar says. “If we can work with people who have the vision, success will be contagious.”

**Adding distinction**

CELL’s impressive results with reform models are in keeping with the intentions of the grant that helped launch it in 2001. **Beginning in 1999, the Endowment invited** selected Indiana colleges and universities to develop bold new programs or projects that would achieve a status of distinction or excellence for their institutions and advance some strategic objective for Indiana. UIIndy proposed CELL as a way the university could build on the strength of its School of Education and its commitment of service to the community, says Beverley Pitts, who will complete her tenure as president of UIIndy in 2012.

**The challenge**

In Indiana – as in many other states – alarm bells about the state of education have been ringing for a long time.

**Only one-third of Indiana’s public school** fourth-grade students scored “at” or “above” proficiency on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading exam, according to the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE). The department also reported in 2011 that nearly half (49 percent) of all Indiana schools failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress, the measure by which schools, districts and states are held accountable for student performance under Title I of the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

While nearly 83 percent of Indiana’s students aspire to attend a four-year, two-year or vocational or technical school, only about half of them actually go to college, and 40 percent of those who do never complete a degree, according to a 2010 issue brief by the Indiana Youth Institute. According to the Indiana Commission for Higher Education (ICHE), 25 percent of Indiana students need remediation when they begin to attend a public, four-year university. The rate for community college students...
is 67 percent. ICHE also reports that less than 10 percent of Hoosier college students who have to take remedial courses graduate on time.

According to ICHE, nearly two-thirds of all new jobs require at least some postsecondary education, and the U.S. Department of Labor indicates that 90 percent of the fastest-growing jobs by 2015 will require at least a two-year college degree. But the Lumina Foundation reports that, according to 2008 Census data, only 33 percent of Indiana’s nearly 3.4 million working-age adults have at least a two-year college degree. Unless significant progress is made in improving these educational outcomes, Indiana’s future prosperity is in jeopardy.
earned enough college credits at Tindley to enter college at the sophomore level. College credits are provided at no extra cost to families.

“More than just saving money on college tuition, Early College exposes students to the high expectations that they will find in college, equipping them for success from day one once they get to campus,” says Marcus Robinson, founder of Tindley and CEO of EdPower, the charter school operator launched in the wake of Tindley’s success.

“The best is when a student comes back and tells us, ‘I was ready’ for the rigors of college.”

Tindley was created in 2004 through the efforts and financial support of local leaders with ties to the business community and the Greater Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce. According to Robinson, the support of these leaders has been critical to the school’s success. “Because of their passionate belief in the potential of our students and the transformative role education can play in their lives, they have been very generous in their gifts and service to Tindley,” says Robinson. CELL also provided support for Tindley through funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and additional assistance when the school adopted the Early College model.

“CELL connected us to the national Early College movement,” says Robinson. “Tindley was the first, so it has been great to be part of a growing network of schools. Not every Early College high school has adopted the same format, however. CELL hasn’t prescribed how to adopt a certain reform. They let us be who we need to be.”

At Tindley, college is not an abstract concept. The school was the first of four in Indiana to adopt the Early College model that CELL hopes to expand. Eleventh- and 12th-grade students in Tindley’s Early College Program can take college-level classes taught by adjunct faculty from Anderson University. If students receive a B or higher in the class, they are eligible to receive college credit. Transferability of credits differs among schools, but some Tindley graduates have

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Jahi Coffer goes over the to-take list as items pile up in the hands of Cantron Quarles between classes at Tindley School, where 500 students aim for college. Tindley has benefited from CELL’s “big tent” approach to education reform.
Tindley. It’s not unusual to see a student singing – literally – the blues in a math class, calling out the formula for solving a problem with classmates clapping along. “It’s awesome here for kids and students,” Douglas says.

**Preparing principals and STEM teachers**

Douglas and, by extension, Tindley have yet another CELL connection. Douglas is one of more than 100 new school leaders who have graduated from UIndy’s principal-preparation program called Inspiring Leadership in Education through Application and Dialogue (iLead). With assistance from CELL, prospective principals committed to serving in high-need schools are eligible for scholarships. iLead is just one way CELL has added more new professionals to Indiana’s education pipeline.

**In 2009 Indiana became the first state in the nation to implement the Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellowship Program.** With two grants totaling $15 million, the Endowment has been the principal funder for this program, which prepares career changers and top-ranked recent graduates to teach science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in high-need urban and rural high schools. Through the program, selected universities offer the fellows intense, one-year programs leading to a master of arts in teaching degree.

In part due to the presence of CELL, UIndy was the only private school in the state chosen to host the program, a collaborative effort between its School of Education and its College of Arts and Sciences with support from CELL. At UIndy, Woodrow Wilson fellows are steeped in Early College and New Tech models and PBL methods. Other institutions offering Woodrow Wilson fellowships are Ball State University, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) and Purdue University.

### Promoting sustainable impact

**Indiana was named “Education Reform Idol 2011” in a contest sponsored by the e-bulletin Education Gadfly at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, thanks to new laws enacted by the Indiana legislature and new regulations and policies of IDOE.**

“It’s too early to tell to what extent the reforms that helped Indiana win that title will result in higher achievement. While there is general agreement that educational reform is needed, the devil is in the details. Some of the recent reforms are controversial,” says Dresslar.

“The chances for positive, sustained impact increase if as many stakeholders as possible align their efforts,” he adds. “CELL hopes to encourage such alignment by lifting up and helping to execute the best practices in education reform from around the country and by continuing to encourage constructive conversations among interested parties with differing perspectives.”