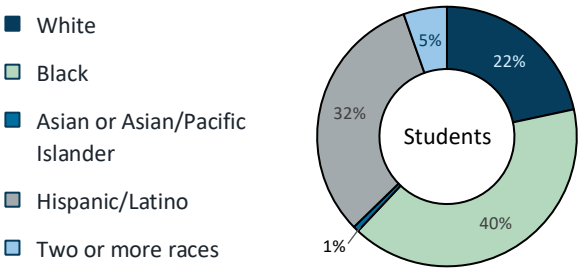
BRIDGES COLLABORATIVE MEMBER PROFILE

Enroll Indy

Organization type: "Weaving" community organization that manages a unified enrollment system for families and students attending public or charter school within Indianapolis.

Location: Indianapolis, Indiana

Population



Indianapolis serves **22,958** students.

Size

Schools participating in the unified enrollment system are managed by the **Indianapolis Public School District** or one of three charter authorization partners—the **Indianapolis Mayor's Office**, the **City of Indianapolis**, and **Ball State University**.

Year Founded

2015

Desegregation/Integration Focus

Enroll Indy operates with the guiding theory that if families have equitable access to a diversity of school choices and if school systems have access to data that highlight enrollment opportunity gaps, stakeholders at all levels of the school system will be incentivized and empowered to move toward desegregation. Enroll Indy's **unified enrollment system** addresses the challenges of segregation at three levels of the school system: district/charter school management organization, school, and family/student. This multilevel focus allows consideration of what each stakeholder group **needs and wants**, builds cross-stakeholder buy-in, and incentivizes full participation in the enrollment system:

Family/student: Enroll Indy provides equal access to accurate and timely school information for all families and students, with an emphasis on **100% participation** in the enrollment lottery at key transition points (entrance into kindergarten, the sixth grade, and the ninth grade).

School: Enroll Indy provides **real-time enrollment data** so that schools can make accurate plans, including staffing, transportation, and resource expenditure plans.

District/organizational: Enroll Indy manages **all student enrollment processes** across a diverse set of district and charter school management organizations.

How did the program start?

Enroll Indy was founded to address teacher attrition in Indianapolis schools, a challenge highlighted by a report in 2013 (see Enroll Indy Founding Reports sidebar). The study findings linked high teacher mobility to unpredictable school enrollment estimates. Data management practices between district public schools and charter networks were inconsistent, which led to teachers being reassigned at high rates to match changing and unpredictable real-time enrollment totals. The report recommended that Indianapolis public and charter schools centralize enrollment across organizations: "*The ability of the district to accurately project student enrollment is hampered by the fact that a large charter sector serves the same population of students independently from the district. If a joint office managed enrollment for both district and charter schools, both district and charter schools would have more accurate, real-time information on enrollment numbers, and therefore more accurate, real-time staffing needs. This would allow the district to strategically manage the churn"* (TeachPlus, 2013).

Enroll Indy Founding Reports

TeachPlus. (2013). Musical chairs: Teacher churn and its impact on Indianapolis Public Schools.

Institute for Innovation in School Choice. (2015). A current state assessment of public school enrollment in Indianapolis.

In 2015, Enroll Indy was founded with funding from The Mind Trust provided for the purpose of launching and managing a unified enrollment system at the city level. The enrollment system serves district and charter schools and some independent schools. Enroll Indy's approach to unified enrollment is designed to

- empower families to make active school enrollment choices by providing timely information and targeted supports, with a focus on three key transition points: entrance into kindergarten, the sixth grade, and the ninth grade;
- provide equal access to quality school choices for all Indianapolis families by actively identifying and addressing enrollment opportunity gaps;
- streamline student and family access to a diverse and multi-system set of public, charter, and independent schools through one shared system and application;
- fix enrollment data inconsistencies to improve staff and resource planning; and
- provide a partnership structure for organizations that are historically "competitors" for student enrollment.

Enroll Indy's desegregation efforts focus on using an equitable school choice model to drive school demographic change. The theory is that if families historically shut out of the highest quality schools are given equitable access to school information and lottery-based enrollment seats, those top schools will become more diverse. Further, the resulting change in demographics in the top schools will trickle down to other schools as families denied their first choice turn to other options. Additionally, sharing accurate and comprehensive school information on school operations theoretically will broaden the group of school options that families consider. Families frequently rely on word of mouth or on school data, such as test scores, that do not show the complexity of a school community, which tends to perpetuate entrenched patterns of enrollment. But families have

individual preferences and make choices based on different considerations—proximity to home or transportation, access to specialty programs, before- or afterschool care, presence of friends, and the nature of the school community. Enroll Indy's services make these preferences central to guide families toward broadening their school choices.

Spotlight on the flexible power of intermediaries

Enroll Indy has an interesting position in the landscape of public school desegregation initiatives. First, the organization has a clearly demarcated role: designing, launching, and managing a unified enrollment system. Second, as an intermediary organization, Enroll Indy is both an insider initiative managed in part by the school authorizers and an outsider organization serving as an external contractor and community liaison. The organization thus works closely with stakeholders at all levels to carry out its mission. At the systems level, it connects public and charter education organizations—organizations that have competed for student enrollment in the past—to a unified enrollment process with a collaborative management structure. At the school level, it not only provides leaders with the accurate enrollment data for planning but also highlights specific demographic gaps or areas where school values (e.g., diversity and inclusion) are not reflected in the school enrollment data. Finally, staff work directly with families and students to help them achieve their educational priorities while focusing on providing equitable access to quality schools to all families. School desegregation can inspire strong and sometimes divisive feelings, and thus addressing school desegregation requires a united approach from a multilevel group of stakeholders. Enroll Indy's clearly defined scope of influence, its "guide from the side" facilitative role, and its multilevel strategic focus can function as a model for other cities working to advance their desegregation priorities.

Management structure

Enroll Indy is managed by a nonprofit board that includes representatives from the Indianapolis School District, two charter school authorizing agencies, a charter school representative, and an at-large community representative. Because of this management structure, Enroll Indy does not have the power to make direct changes to district, charter management organization, or school policies. However, Enroll Indy is well designed to foster collaboration between historic competitors that have a shared incentive to partner and participate.

The four participating school authorization and management organizations—the Indianapolis School District, Indianapolis Mayor's Office, City of Indianapolis, and Ball State University—pay Enroll Indy a per-pupil fee for participating students, which is key for the organization's ongoing financial sustainability. In exchange, Enroll Indy manages the application process for all participating schools, provides community and family support as requested, reports data to participating management organizations, and monitors school participation in the enrollment lottery to ensure that all schools are engaging in legal recruitment and selection practices. In addition, Enroll Indy maintains an individual memorandum of understanding with each participating school.

Unified enrollment lottery implementation

Enroll Indy manages the unified enrollment system for all participating charter and public schools using online enrollment and the OneMatch application. Each year, the team implements a two-round

enrollment lottery in which new students and students in transition years (entering kindergarten, the sixth grade, or the ninth grade) fill out an enrollment form where they list their top three school choices. Enroll Indy works with families to share information and help them navigate the system and with schools to distribute enrollment data in real time.

What factors support desegregation?

Structures that support partner buy-in

Enroll Indy is structured to ensure that a set of mutually invested partnerships define, manage, and advocate for the organization's priorities, including equitable access to quality schools. As Patrick McAlister, current Enroll Indy board member and the director of the City of Indianapolis's Office of Education Innovation, shared, *"[The board] has been a common place where entities that have a shared set of values, but maybe different approaches to policy could come … the reason we were able to kind of stand the organization up and get everybody to participate was that we all have a shared commitment to this as entities and as organizations."*

A focus on what stakeholders want and need

Enroll Indy staff and board members strive to meet stakeholders "where they are." A shared vision of what equitable school enrollment looks like is essential, but stakeholders also need to see that the system is taking their wants and needs into account. At the systems level, Enroll Indy provides a valuable service to schools and school management organizations by managing a high-quality and equity-focused unified enrollment system. For families and students, Enroll Indy provides both systemic strategies (e.g., use of the OneMatch school application) and direct counseling services. At every stage, from outreach to school selection, Enroll Indy prioritizes strategies that ensure equitable access to information and enrollment practices. The operating theory is that if families, schools, and systems leaders can each see the value for themselves of having equitable enrollment strategies, they are more likely to buy into a collective vision for community-wide change.

System change efforts centered around areas of impact

Two Enroll Indy board members emphasized that creating a coordinated enrollment system like Enroll Indy's system is not a light lift, especially if the objective is to provide Enroll Indy's level of family support and outreach. The organization takes a tactical approach to using its human and financial resources to meet its commitment to equitable access and desegregation. Examples of recent successes include a multiyear outreach effort focused on eighth graders and a "golden ticket" policy for students in schools that are closing. In Indianapolis, there is no automatically assigned school after eighth grade—every student must make a high school selection. After intensive outreach on the part of Enroll Indy, 90% of eighth graders participated in the school selection lottery, with no difference between racial or income-based subgroups. In the second example, students currently attending schools that are marked for closure get a "golden ticket" in the lottery that increases the weight given to their applications. This policy has allowed students from closing schools to enroll in one of their preferred schools more easily, in partial compensation for experiencing the trauma of a school closure.

What are the challenges to desegregation?

Access to consolidated and accurate information on school quality

Families want their children to receive a good education. However, they often find it difficult to get accurate, nuanced, up-to-date information about school options at the local level, especially across school types (charter vs. public). When accurate information is not easily available, families who have more time and resources are privileged and more likely to successfully enroll in their children in top-performing schools. Information access is a complex issue, with no one solution, but Enroll Indy has developed a series of strategies to address it. The organization maintains a public "School Finder" website with cross-system information on all schools participating in the unified enrollment system. Families and students can go to the website and enter their school decision criteria; the website then delivers a set of school recommendations. Decision criteria can include school proximity to the home address, use of letter grades, the grade level required, and specialty focus areas.

If a family has more questions after receiving the list, they can follow the links to the state website, which has more information (e.g., historic information), or can call Enroll Indy directly to speak with an "enrollment specialist." An individual consultation can help a family dig into the nuances, including which schools have priorities for certain populations (e.g., families who qualify for free or reduced price lunch) and which schools have no data for their rating. If a family is still undecided after the individual consultation, Enroll Indy can connect the family with the school directly, arrange a tour, or share information on attending an open house. Enroll Indy can also provide direct support filling out the application, including translation services as needed.

The benefit of being a first-round respondent in the unified enrollment lottery

The enrollment lottery is scheduled each year in two rounds—one in January and one in April. As school seats are filled, those seats are removed from the lottery system. Since more families and students put the top-rated schools as one of their top three choices, seats at these schools are filled more quickly. Typically, top-rated school seats are mostly filled during the first lottery round. This means that families who participate in the first round are more likely to be enrolled in the top-performing schools.

As with access to information, inequality is also evident in families' participation in the first lottery round—more economically privileged families participate early. Bill, former executive director of Enroll Indy, says that *"[before Enroll Indy], parents often didn't know their options. Affluent parents were better able to figure out how to navigate the choices that did exist. So they found higher performing charters, or they found diverse by design charters. We want to make sure that the families that historically been excluded are experiencing almost aggressive outreach*." Enroll Indy focuses enrollment lottery outreach efforts on families and students who are less likely to enroll in the top-performing schools. The staff at Enroll Indy work hard to use "nontraditional" outreach methods and locations to meet families where they are. The staff send mailers, distribute flyers, and use "geofence" digital advertising targeted at local hot spots like churches, gas stations, hardware stores, and the state fair.

Individualized school-level priorities

At the school level, leaders must participate in the unified enrollment system but can set their own enrollment priorities to feed into the system. Enroll Indy and the board partners see this as an essential practice to ensure that schools buy into the enrollment system and have the autonomy to make decisions that are responsive to their community and staff. However, some of these individualized priorities can be barriers to desegregation. For example, the common practice of allowing sibling priority for enrollment seats helps perpetuate unequal representation. To address this issue, Enroll Indy provides a direct data reporting service to all participating schools. Schools get regular reports on their enrollment trends, allowing them to effectively plan for staffing, budget expenditures, and transportation. Enroll Indy uses their data-sharing position to take on a gentle advising role, especially in situations where a school has a publicly shared vision or mission that includes diversity goals. Enroll Indy staff can then use data to highlight areas where the school's enrollment practices may be misaligned with the its commitment to desegregation and diversity.

Dissatisfaction that can result from a more equitable system

Families do not always get their first choice, and Enroll Indy staff sometimes have to manage conversations with stakeholders who are unhappy with the system and their individual outcomes. Accepting an unsatisfactory outcome is especially difficult for families who have typically been privileged by the enrollment system and are not accustomed to not getting their priority choices. To address this issue, Enroll Indy has invested in empathic listening training for frontline staff so that they can manage difficult conversations with community members. This can be especially challenging for staff of color, and frontline staff have been empowered to share this burden with their colleagues. Bill, former executive director of Enroll Indy, explains that a staff member of color can say, *"'[Y]ou know ma'am … can you hold?'"* and then transfer the call to a white colleague. *"But then my white staff has to be able to meet offensive white people where they are and try to bring them along to a better place. … We had to do a lot of like, how do you listen to another white person say things that are offensive? And that bothers you and you don't want to be complicit in their racism, but you also need to move them from point A to Point B."*

Lessons learned/key takeaways

- Clearly define intermediary roles, responsibilities, and authority. Enroll Indy is not a school and not a housing organization, but it has carved out its place in the desegregation landscape.
- Engage diverse school and school management decision makers in coordinated leadership around desegregation priorities and actions. Making decisions together in partnership ensures shared accountability for desegregation priorities across schools and management entities.
- Provide open and individualized support to diverse stakeholders at every level of the system (school management organizations, schools, and families and students) as they align their values with their actions. When stakeholders can see the benefits of desegregation for their organization or themselves, they are more likely to accept the necessary systemic change.

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