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Ari Kaufman: Charter school success in the heartland

By ARI KAUFMAN

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One cold morning, I drove a dozen miles to the southeast corner of Marion County, Ind., on a business excursion. As a writer for the Indiana War Memorials Commission and a former Los Angeles schoolteacher, I was told that an elementary school had a 30-foot replica of the 285-foot Civil War Monument that has stood in downtown Indianapolis for more than a century. I also went to see how a middle-class, Middle America school of similar size compared with the inner-city Los Angeles Unified School district campus I toiled at for three long years.

Approaching the parking lot after passing subdivision homes, farms and large ball fields, I entered the school, mistakenly ignoring directly in front of me the recreated monument that I had come to view. My attention had been caught by the school's automatic doors, spotless interior, amiable staff and tie-wearing fifth-grade teacher who greeted me promptly with a smile.

Eventually, I got around to viewing the monument with him, discussed its 20-year history (it was built the same time the school opened) and the school's "Junior History program," which funds "only five after-school field trips per year." I explained to this assiduous teacher, who had brought his group of 30 friendly fifth-graders to the monument for a tour last month, that in L.A. I "only had three tours rejected by the district in my time." He chuckled embarrassingly.

This school is a charter school in a local township within the city's boundaries, and thus, not bound by the bureaucracy and size of Indianapolis Public Schools, a district with a similarly negative reputation as LAUSD.

I told him about my abridged teaching career, what had occurred and what I saw each day. This man, speaking quietly as a class of genteel students passed, said, "I could never handle that. My kids are angels. I am blessed."

Needless to say, this was a different world. But here I was, just 15 minutes from a Midwest center of urban decay. So, what accounted for this new world? The autonomy of charter schools. No wonder the teachers unions and school districts in major cities stand vehemently against this movement and school-choice-type programs.

Not only are so-called "progressive" urban districts from Indiana to California incredibly adept at perpetuating the underachieving status quo, so are the Democratic powers-that-be in these cities. They seemingly need each other's support. Based upon endless reading, writing, talking and observing, I have a thousand other theories, but this one has historic and factual legs: Politics run the educational world too often.

And if a Democrat, such as erstwhile Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson, who was recently upset in the most surprising election in Indiana history, attempts to buck the trend and assist students, he's bounced.

According to an insightful column in the Nov. 20 American Spectator by Indianapolis-based writer RiShawn Biddle, "Across the nation, Peterson was lauded by education reform wonks for breaking with the Democratic Party – and its support for the public education establishment – and becoming the only mayor in America to authorize charter schools." Unfortunately, not even receiving the "Innovations in American Government Award" from Harvard University's Kennedy School mattered in the end for the two-term mayor.

Of course, compared with LAUSD's educational woes, Indianapolis seems the hospitable heartland city most believe it to be.

As was reported Nov. 28, "Hammered by a barrage of negative publicity in recent months, Los Angeles Unified School District officials have quietly hired two consultants to help improve their public image."

Among the rationale for hiring consultants, at nearly \$200,000 per year for some individuals, to mend the district's tarnished image (and payroll system problems), LAUSD Superintendent David Brewer has turned the tables, fecklessly claiming that local newspapers, "love to focus on all the negative going on in the district."

Such maneuvering by LAUSD only provide more ammunition for education reformers.