

**School on Wheels Corp.**  
**2004 Indiana Achievement Awards Application**  
**Category: Innovation Small**

**PART ONE – NARRATIVE**

**1. What is the mission of the organization?** The mission of School on Wheels Corp. is the enhancement and enrichment of educational opportunities for homeless children, from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. Our goal is to provide homeless children with the highest quality educational assistance and mentoring possible through the use of volunteer tutors.

**2. Present an overview of your organization: summarize history, long-term goals and current priorities of your nonprofit.** School on Wheels is the first and only agency in Indianapolis, Indiana to provide one-on-one tutoring and educational mentoring to homeless children. The organization is one of only two known programs in the country that provides these services exclusively to homeless children. School on Wheels was founded and incorporated as a 501(c)(3) organization in September 2001, and was modeled from a similar program of the same name in Los Angeles, California. The founder of the Indianapolis organization, Sally Bindley, was introduced to School on Wheels through a volunteer tutor in Los Angeles. Fascinated by the concept and its mission, Sally formed School on Wheels in Indianapolis. School on Wheels began tutoring services in October 2001 with two staff members and four volunteer tutors. During 2003, School on Wheels completed 638 hours of tutoring to over 300 unduplicated homeless children at five homeless facilities and one Indianapolis Public School (IPS) with 110 volunteers and a staff of five.

School on Wheels has the following long-term goals that are consistent with the organization's strategic plan: 1) to provide beneficial tutoring experiences and educational mentoring to all homeless children who desire it in the Indianapolis area; 2) to provide enriching tutoring experiences for volunteers who implement the program; and 3) to develop strategic educational and financial partnerships that will enable School on Wheels to fulfill its mission and remain a viable and sustainable entity well into the future.

Current priorities for the organization include 1) successful implementation of the three-year strategic plan that was developed and approved by the Board of Directors on October 31, 2003; 2) diversify funding channels that will enable long-term sustainability; and 3) continue to experience steady growth that will enable School on Wheels to expand its reach to more locations to reach more homeless children.

**3. General Fiscal Information:** General information and funding sources are included as page one of this application as instructed.

**4. Category Selection: Why did you choose this specific category (impact, innovation or sustainability) to compete for an Indiana Achievement Awards?** While we believe that School on Wheels has a tremendous impact on the lives of homeless children in Indianapolis, after careful study of the definitions for each category, we determined that our organization best fit in the *Innovation* category.

Webster defines innovation as “the introduction of something new.” Less than three years ago, in September 2001, Sally Bindley introduced something new to the city of Indianapolis. School on Wheels was founded as the first and only agency in Indianapolis to support the educational needs of the city’s homeless children. Partnerships have been formed with six facilities that cater to the needs of homeless families and it is now clear that the one-on-one tutoring and mentoring program for homeless children filled a huge void in the city.

There are several things that make School on Wheels distinctly different from other organizations serving the homeless. First of all, School on Wheels was formed solely to provide educational tutoring and mentoring to homeless children. Second, all services are provided at no cost to homeless shelters or families. Homeless children are matched with dedicated and committed volunteer tutors. To ensure that homeless children better “fit in” with their classmates, they are provided with a backpack filled with school supplies. Finally, all tutors are community volunteers.

While it has been clear that the Indianapolis homeless community has appreciated the innovation of School on Wheels, many others in the city support the organization’s initiatives as well. As an example, the City of Indianapolis has cited School on Wheels as the only organization focused on improving educational services to homeless children. Significant community collaborations from individuals, corporations, and foundations, through in-kind, financial, and volunteer support has further validated the innovation and need for School on Wheels’ services.

After determining the best 2004 Indiana Achievement Awards category for School on Wheels, Sally Bindley consulted with a representative from the Sycamore Foundation to confirm that *Innovation* was in fact the best category fit for the organization.

### **5. General Description:**

**a. What is the purpose of the program, system or organization being nominated?** As its core program, School on Wheels operates a community-based volunteer tutoring program for homeless children. One-on-one tutoring is conducted through the use of volunteers and takes place at various homeless shelters that cater to homeless families in Indianapolis. While the focus of the tutoring sessions is educational, tutors serve as more than instructors; they become mentors for homeless children by serving as a consistent and devoted force. Although completion of school assignments may not be viewed as an appealing task for some children, the homeless child embraces the opportunity to work with a School on Wheels tutor. A one-hour session dedicated to solving story problems or practicing spelling words can be transformed into a highly anticipated event for a homeless child. These children are excited about the personal attention they receive each week. Tutors are encouraged to reflect on their own challenges and successes as a student and in their daily lives as a way to foster the mentoring relationship. An integral part of the School on Wheels program is to ensure that the children tutored have school supplies. We supply the homeless shelters with backpacks, school supplies and school uniforms throughout the school year.

The tutors do not assist the children or their families in any social service capacity. The homeless parent, while working through financial struggles and planning for the future, may not have the extra time to devote to assisting children with schoolwork. Therefore, tutors exist to

supplement the role of the parent by assisting the child with homework completion and encouraging positive study habits. In keeping with its mission, School on Wheels provides tutoring to homeless children only. A resource guide that highlights 23 programs offering free tutoring services is provided to the parents so that they may find academic assistance upon leaving the shelters.

Children living in homeless shelters often move from one school to another and fall behind in their class work. One-on-one tutoring is an effective way to help these children in their educational journey. By providing educational assistance and mentoring to homeless children, School on Wheels plays a significant role in breaking the cycle of homelessness. Tutors focus on the educational needs of these children and serve as mentors in what might be a detour on their educational journey. By offering a caring adult to encourage and applaud the educational endeavors of homeless children, School on Wheels is addressing one of the main factors leading to homelessness - lack of education.

***b. Identify both the problem the agency is working to alleviate and the intended audience for this program.*** At the end of the school day, most children will step off a bus and head into their homes, except for the 4,500 children in Indianapolis who are homeless each year. Many of these children live in shelters. Due to their transient nature, it is not uncommon for them to fall behind in their class work, leaving them without a positive learning experience. Statistics on the homeless population in Indianapolis are startling. The average age of a homeless person in this city is nine years old. Children make up 30% of the city's homeless population. IPS #14 serves the largest amount of homeless children and reported student turnover rates of 110% from the beginning to the end of the 2002-2003 school year. The difficulties faced by homeless children and youth in obtaining a sound education are numerous. Due to their transient nature, homeless children are twice as likely to repeat a grade in school and twice as likely to have learning disabilities. (Source: 2003 survey conducted by Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention, "CHIP".) Clearly, there is a homeless problem in Indianapolis. School on Wheels was formed to enhance the education of homeless children during a time of crisis in their lives. School on Wheels' target audience is all children ages 4 to 18 who reside in a homeless shelter as well as children who attend IPS #14 and are identified by the Homeless Coordinator. The median age for a child currently tutored is eight years old. All children served meet the Housing and Urban Development definition of low income.

***6. Strategic Plan: Tell how the program or system you have nominated advanced the strategic plan of your organization.*** School on Wheels' first strategic plan was completed in October 2003 and encompasses the three-year period from 2004 to 2006. As the organization moved beyond its start-up stage, it became apparent that the time was right to analyze the operations of the first two years and look forward to the future as a sustainable organization. The essence of the plan involved focusing on controlled growth of the organization and designing measurable goals that would allow leadership of both the tutoring program and agency management. The following actions have been implemented that promote the strategic plan:

- hiring a full-time Program Manager to recruit, train, and retain qualified volunteer tutors
- developing and implementing a major gifts campaign that targets individual donors
- developing a measurable objective to assess the impact of tutoring services on homeless children and their parent(s)

- investing in curriculum and educational materials to supplement the students' coursework

### ***7. Partnerships and Replication:***

***a. Identify partners who were instrumental in implementing and sustaining this nominated project.*** Before founding School on Wheels, Sally Bindley identified the need in Indianapolis and immediately established a relationship with CHIP, who was in the process of forming the Blueprint to End Homelessness. The Blueprint identified School on Wheels as providing a necessary service to the city's homelessness. CHIP's endorsement enabled School on Wheels to pursue partnerships with homeless providers and begin tutoring operations. School on Wheels can attribute much of its success to the generosity of corporate partners who aid the organization in achieving its mission. Bindley Capital Partners provides office space and office equipment (fax, telephones, computers, copy machine) to School on Wheels at no cost to the organization. By covering these overhead costs for School on Wheels since its founding, the organization has been able to funnel its resources into enhancing services and expanding the program. CHIP, Kite Companies, Katz Sapper & Miller, Central Indiana Community Foundation, and Fifth Third Bank provided School on Wheels with initial board members. School on Wheels currently has partnerships established with the following homeless service providers where the tutoring program takes place: Dayspring Center, Interfaith Hospitality Network, Holy Family Shelter, Holy Family Childcare Center, Salvation Army, and IPS #14. Partners that provide volunteers to School on Wheels include: Cathedral High School, Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School, Key Learning Community, University of Indianapolis, Marian College, IUPUI, Bank One, Eli Lilly and Company, Pearson Educational, Safeco Insurance, and United Way.

***b. What is the future of this program?*** School on Wheels is proud of its successes in its two and one half year history and feels confident that it has a bright future of providing quality educational tutoring and mentoring for homeless children. After being cited as the only organization to provide educational services to homeless children in the "Blueprint to End Homelessness" sponsored by CHIP and the City of Indianapolis, word quickly spread and School on Wheels became a more recognized name in the homeless community. As a result, the demand for School on Wheels services grew more rapidly than anticipated. At this time, several of the locations have waiting lists for tutoring services so the organization is unable to offer tutoring services to all children who need it. In addition, there are other emergency homeless shelters, transitional housing facilities, childcare centers, and domestic violence shelters in Indianapolis requesting services. School on Wheels intends to partner with these providers in the future. School on Wheels will continue to operate as long as there is a demonstrated need in the community.

***c. What should be in place for this nominated program to be successfully replicated by another?*** Successful replication of School on Wheels would entail several factors. As with any start-up nonprofit organization, 501(c)(3) status must be secured, a well outlined business plan must be developed, and a committed group of individuals must be selected to serve as the founding Board of Directors. Also a detailed fundraising plan must be developed that identifies potential funding sources from various streams (individuals, foundations, corporations, and government). Identifying the needs of the homeless community and the commitment of homeless providers to make it work are essential, as well as a plan for identifying the recruitment, training, and retention of dedicated volunteer tutors. School on Wheels has received

a variety of inquiries from individuals across the country (Chicago, Boston, South Bend, New Jersey, and Michigan) that are interested in replicating the program. School on Wheels would be happy to share its business plan and knowledge of start-up to enable other cities to establish similar programs. Although modeled after a similar organization in California of the same name, School on Wheels is a separate entity and maintains its own identity, 501(c)(3) status, management, board governance, funding, program design and delivery, and vision.

**8. *Statement by the program's leadership: Address lessons learned by the leadership worth sharing with others.*** School on Wheels began as an idea and transformed into a viable organization very quickly. Significant lessons learned by Sally Bindley, Founder and Executive Director are shared here.

The most valuable lesson learned since the founding of School on Wheels, is the importance of staying true to the mission. After successfully implementing the tutoring program and receiving praises from homeless service providers, we became inundated with phone calls from other service providers asking for our one-on-one tutoring program. These organizations provided valuable services to the community, but were not focused on homeless children. School on Wheels was being asked to provide tutors for adult education and literacy programs, GED preparation, English as a second language, hospitalized children, and children who are low-income but not homeless. As a nonprofit organization, it is not uncommon to want to be everything to everyone, but it is essential for survival to stay true to the mission. When the program is accomplishing its goals, it is tempting to look into expanding the mission. However, this is the ideal time to analyze the program and not change the mission, but find ways to enhance it. By focusing on making the delivery of services more comprehensible, we can do one thing and do it well. We can't sustain ourselves if we fall outside of what we were formed to do.

Another notable lesson learned is that managing a nonprofit organization involves the same skills needed to run a small business. During the start-up phase and the organization's infancy, the Founder and Executive Director assumed many roles – that of lawyer, accountant, personnel manager, marketing and public relations specialist, event planner, and deliverer of social services. This can be rather intimidating for a social worker that simply followed her heart and wanted to help homeless children. The lack of resources led to the acquisition of new skills including 1) the authoring and filing of all legal documentation including filing for 501(c)(3) status, incorporating as a nonprofit organization, compiling bylaws and policies that govern the organization; 2) development of a solid business plan and strategic plan; 3) the completion and filing of tax returns; 4) managing the accounting functions of the organization including budget preparation, recording, management, and reporting of all financial transactions; 5) personnel decisions that include competing for quality employees in the workplace and providing competitive benefits; and 6) marketing and public relations efforts of telling the story, creating all publications and event planning in order to raise funds and awareness of the organization. In the end, these functions are essential to running a successful business whether the mission is manufacturing a consumer product or delivering a community service.

## **PART TWO – NARRATIVE – Innovation**

**2a. *Why do you consider this program or organization innovative?***

Educating the homeless children in Indianapolis is a huge challenge, and until School on Wheels came along, no one was doing it. Many acknowledged the need, but no provider had the financial and human resources to address it. Homeless providers are working to end homelessness and the contributing factors that impact the families they serve (employment, lack of affordable housing, mental illness, domestic violence, substance abuse). The shelters ensure the children are registered for and attend school, but it usually ends there. A few shelters had attempted to offer educational programming or homework clubs, but staffing and limited resources did not allow these programs to flourish. Understandably, Indianapolis Public Schools recognizes the challenges of educating Indianapolis homeless children and youth, which is why they have a staff person dedicated to assisting homeless families. With over 4,500 children becoming homeless each year, it is a big job. So what can be done? The answer is simple: form a nonprofit organization whose sole mission is enhancing the education of homeless children. School on Wheels has been incredibly innovative by doing just that and by utilizing community assets already in place to deliver the program. Community volunteers exist in Indianapolis. School on Wheels' job is to find those volunteers and recruit them to the cause. Homeless children are living in the shelters. School on Wheels partners with these shelters and provides educational tutoring and mentoring at no cost to the shelter or the families. The tutoring program is easily accessible to the families because School on Wheels provides the tutors for the children at their specific shelter and school. School on Wheels also staffs the program on-site at each location so as not to burden the shelter staff. The homeless children are attending school. School on Wheels works with IPS #14, which has the largest population of homeless children, to provide tutoring services as part of an after-school program. In addition, School on Wheels ensures that all homeless children residing in the shelters served are equipped with the necessary school supplies. School on Wheels went one step beyond all of this and found an innovative way to form a business with little or no overhead expenses and attracted quality staff members to manage it. School on Wheels was able to negotiate free office space, webpage design and hosting, which has allowed the program to expand quickly over the last three years and provided a savings of \$38,000 annually.

***b. List program results—using specific and measurable indicators—explain how you have measured performance.*** School on Wheels is proud of its accomplishments in the two and one half years since its founding including:

- completing 863 hours of one-on-one tutoring to homeless children
- providing one-on-one tutoring services to 423 unduplicated homeless children
- training 171 community volunteers to serve as tutors
- providing 205 backpacks fully-loaded with school supplies to homeless children
- expanded its program to six locations
- conducting a school uniform drive with several Catholic schools to donate new and gently used clothing for homeless children who attend IPS # 14 and are required to wear a school uniform – resulted in 357 articles of clothing
- raising over \$12,000 in first direct mail campaign
- raising over \$24,000 at first fundraising event
- implementing a web-based donor database system that tracks donor trends and currently holds 651 records of individual, corporate, foundation, and government funders
- increasing staff from two to five employees

School on Wheels conducts annual roundtable discussions and surveys with the locations where services take place. When the shelters were asked how the program could be improved, the overwhelming response has consistently been “bring us more tutors!” The benchmarks used to measure the program’s success have been evaluated very closely. It is often just as important to report on the number of one-hour tutoring sessions as it is to report on the number of children served. Although homeless families have limited time in the shelters, the tutors often work with the same child for several weeks. When this occurs, greater impact is made on the child’s education in the long run.

After a child is tutored for four consecutive weeks, a short survey is administered to both the parent and the child tutored to measure the impact the tutoring is having on the family. The surveys ascertain if the children have demonstrated an improvement in homework completion and if their grades in school have improved as a result of the one-on-one tutoring program. School on Wheels seeks to assess the impact made on the parents as well. The parents are asked what they have gained from the experience and if they are pleased with the results of the tutoring services. The surveys welcome additional comments for both parent and child. In 2003, 100% of children surveyed reported that School on Wheels tutoring had helped them in school and 95% of parents reported that the program had positively impacted their children.

School on Wheels is continually assessing the evaluation methods and searching for quantitative tools to measure the impact the program is having on the homeless children. The bottom line is that these children are completing homework assignments, demonstrating an improvement in grades, and are taking pride in their work.

***c. What obstacles have you overcome for this innovation? What assets did you rely on to achieve results?*** School on Wheels provides volunteer tutors to work with homeless children at no cost to the staff or the families. The dynamics of running a program off-site was a challenge initially. The homeless providers wanted the services and endorsed the program but it was not a top priority. The shelter staff was focused on providing food, clothing, housing, and financial assistance to the families and did not have additional resources to support the School on Wheels program. School on Wheels did not have paid staff on-site during all of the tutoring sessions and challenges arose- data was not being collected appropriately by the volunteers, children were not always available during scheduled tutoring times, parental permission slips were not consistently completed. How did we overcome this?

- 1) School on Wheels enhanced its relationship with the shelter staff by conducting roundtables with all partners to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the program. The Executive Director made regular visits to the shelters and customized the program to each specific shelter’s desires and needs.
- 2) Hired On-Site Volunteer Coordinators to facilitate and manage the program during tutoring sessions. Responsibilities include collecting accurate data on clients and assisting tutors with any issues that arise during the sessions.
- 3) Hired full-time Program Manager to recruit, train, and retain qualified volunteer tutors to deliver the services.

The addition of these two positions has resulted in greater tutor retention since the tutors can make the most of the time spent with the homeless children and not worry about the organization's reporting requirements.

In order to enhance the tutoring program and hire additional staff, School on Wheels relied on the support of others. Establishing successful relationships with notable funding partners such as The Indianapolis Foundation, Lilly Endowment, and the Hoover Family Foundation during its first year of operation enabled School on Wheels to attract additional funding sources that has greatly contributed to its success. The founding Board of Directors, although not comprised of prominent people, is a working board and one committed to the success of the organization. Directors represent the following sectors: law, accounting, education, small business management, child advocacy, and nonprofit management. Board experience and diversity assisted the organization in its innovation. To date, School on Wheels has not been the recipient of media attention. However, WTHR anchor Anne Ryder conducted an interview with Sally Bindley and will be featuring School on Wheels in an upcoming "Hope to Tell" segment that is scheduled to air in mid-February. School on Wheels will also be featured in an article in the March issue of *Indianapolis Woman*.

***b. Who is responsible for the innovation? How did you manage the innovation? How did leaders promote innovation?*** After establishing the need for the organization in March 2001, Sally Bindley spent six months laying the foundation for School on Wheels, which culminated in it receiving 501(c)(3) status in September 2001. After receiving a book on forming a nonprofit organization as a gift, Sally completed drafting and filing of all organizational documents with no outside legal or accounting assistance. Upon securing funding from an initial direct mail campaign, Sally decided to forego receiving compensation for her position as Executive Director in order to hire Janet Youngblood Hiatt as Director of Operations. Janet holds a Master of Public Affairs in Nonprofit Management and has a proven track record in fundraising and management of nonprofit agencies. Her goal in the first year of operation was to raise enough money to cover both the salaries of the organization's now two employees. She did that and more, successfully raising enough money to hire an additional staff member in August 2001 to focus on the organization's volunteer efforts. Angela Newberry, who is fluent in Spanish and holds a Master's Degree in Higher Education Administration, had the experience required to enhance the volunteer program and confirmed the organization's commitment to diversity.

Although the Executive Director sets the innovative tone for the organization, she is joined by a committed group of community volunteers that serve as the Board of Directors. The Board is a working board and one that is completely engaged in the organization and committed to the mission. The leaders of the organization have promoted innovation by constantly reaffirming the mission and focusing on the delivery of services at all Board meetings. At least one Board member serves as a tutor at all times so that the volunteer tutors are represented at meetings. This practice was initiated by the founding President and has been extremely successful. Likewise, all staff members serve as volunteer tutors. The leaders of School on Wheels are directly involved in the facilitation of the program.

***e. How did the culture of your organization encourage the innovation? What was in place in your environment so the innovation could occur naturally? Tell how your mission is reflected***

*in the innovation.* The energy and compassion of the leaders is contagious and serves as a motivating force for others. In order to implement the innovation and run a successful program, many people were recruited. The Board and staff asked everyone they knew for help and were successful with tutor recruiting, financial assistance, fundraising, and program development. The leaders were not afraid to ask for assistance, which resulted in having a CPA, who is also a volunteer tutor, donate and implement Quickbooks to streamline and enhance the fiscal management of the organization. The Board President arranged for the donation of a web-based donor database system that allowed the staff to develop a more thorough fundraising plan to target top donors. The Board secretary secured representatives from the International Special Events Society to assist School on Wheels with the planning and execution of the first fundraiser that netted over \$24,000.

Since the Executive Director is also the Founder and is fulfilling a lifelong dream of making a difference in her community, personalized attention is given to all that assist the organization with implementing its mission. Personal thank you notes, holiday cards, and appreciation receptions are part of the continuing efforts to demonstrate appreciation for the volunteer tutors who implement the program and the donors who fund it. A parent herself, Sally is focused on empowering the homeless parents to play a more active role in their child's education. She created a valuable resource guide for parents that provide tips for helping their child succeed in school. Sally enjoys talking to the parents, often drawing on her own experiences as a working mother, to engage them in the program. Because the organization is still young, programs tend to evolve as ideas are generated. Each volunteer tutor is required to be innovative, as School on Wheels does not have a set curriculum for tutoring sessions. The one-on-one tutoring program is in effect, tailored for each individual homeless child by the tutors themselves. Since the program could not operate without the volunteer tutors, a sense of ownership is instilled into every volunteer, which is apparent when they speak so favorably of their experiences with School on Wheels.

Staying true to the mission has been a focus for the Executive Director since the inception of School on Wheels. New and creative ways to address the educational needs of homeless children have been entertained and implemented over the past two years and have resulted in many enhancements to the program. The Executive Director is open to new ideas and new ways of thinking, which fosters innovation among the staff, Board, and volunteers. Imagine a place where creativity is strongly encouraged and novel views are welcomed with open arms. That is School on Wheels.