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Daniel Howes

Company finds tools to educate children



When something works in Detroit public education, there is one thing to do: Replicate it, quickly.

Later this summer, in a bid to jump-start University Prep Science & Math Middle School, 162 sixth- and seventh-graders are expected to arrive for the first day of class on the 11th floor of Compuware Corp. headquarters. The Campus Martius icon shows how "big business" can help educate Metro Detroit kids without treading the political minefield of Detroit Public Schools.

The lesson: Don't like the metastasizing mess that is DPS? Find a way around it.

"Absolutely, I think it's a gutsy thing to do," Margaret Trimer-Hartley, superintendent of U-Prep Science & Math, says of Compuware. "It's courageous and it's correct. The game for youth, especially urban youth, is won or lost in middle school. It's powerful, what the public-private partnership has brought to the table."

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Like giving a year's head start to a school modeled after the University Prep Academy, which graduated 98 percent of this year's senior class and 95 percent of the class of '07 -- compared with a DPS graduation rate of roughly 25 percent, among the nation's worst.

Or leveraging the relationships and purchasing expertise of a \$1.2 billion computer software and services company to help U-Prep Science & Math cut a deal with Dell Corp. for 50 computers and Microsoft Corp. for software licenses.

Or providing the school with IT know-how to establish and maintain its computer network. Or accessing Compuware staffers, who can mentor would-be designers and engineers on the basics of resume building and job interviewing. Or speaking Chinese and Spanish with middle-schoolers beginning their study of foreign languages.

"This will be an opportunity for our employees to do mentoring with students ... and it will be an opportunity for students to get exposure to corporate life," says Denise Starr, chief administrative officer at Compuware. "It's not a political thing. It shouldn't be. It's for the kids. It's a school."

Simple concept, that, however lost it appears to be on a Detroit Schools hierarchy -- administration, school board, teachers union -- warring over territory, casting blame and failing another generation of Detroit kids. Again.

Financed by the Thompson Educational Foundation, U-Prep has 2,000 families on its waiting list, Trimer-Hartley says, and all 162 seats in its science and math middle school are full, with 65 on the waiting list. Science & Math, set to move a year from now to a 60,000-square-foot space funded by a \$15 million grant from Thompson, will be attached to the Detroit Science Center, have capacity for 486 middle-schoolers and be the first step toward a U-Prep Science & Math high school by 2010.

But Compuware will be the public charter school's home for the first year, a powerful reminder that business can play a crucial role in facilitating the education of Detroiters -- 20 percent of the students will hail from the suburbs -- without dictating the curriculum.

"The obvious reason to do it now is our kids in Detroit all need more good schools, and they need them sooner rather than later," says Trimer-Hartley. "So why wait? We've proven we can graduate them. We've proven we can send them to college. Now we have to step up the rigor of our program."

And U-Prep Science & Math is the next step, with a helping hand from Compuware.

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