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New Detroit schools bring hope to the city

The Detroit News

Steadily, more high-quality educational choices are coming to Detroit's parents and their children. This development should be celebrated, not denigrated.

The announcement last week that the Detroit Science Center will sponsor a charter school built by Plymouth philanthropist Bob Thompson and operated by Doug Ross -- the team behind the successful University Prep Academy charter school system -- means that Detroit middle school students by this fall will be able to enroll in an intensive program of math and science equal to that anywhere in Metro Detroit.

The middle school will someday feed a math and science high school being planned for the Detroit riverfront, and aimed directly at supporting the new neighborhoods planned along the river.

Thompson and Ross are coming off a major success with U-Prep, which last spring graduated its first high school class. More than 95 percent of the students who started with the program graduated, and 90 percent of them are in college this fall.

The math and science school, using the same formula of providing students with the academic and emotional support in a family-like environment, hopes to equal those results.

On Friday, Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick told the Detroit Economic Club that work is moving forward on a graphics art school that will occupy the vacant Argonaut building south of the New Center.

General Motors Corp. owns the building and is giving it to the College for Creative Studies to be used for an innovative program that will start students in middle school and take them through college graduate programs in the same facility.

The concept is unlike anything tried before in the city. And it should encourage students with an interest in art and design with the preparation and motivation they need to succeed in

college.

If it works, the same approach could be tried with a variety of other academic fields, including engineering and health care.

As Kilpatrick told the Economic Club, the emergence of these alternative schools does not threaten the Detroit Public Schools. Under the determined leadership of new Superintendent Connie Calloway, the district has a chance to turn itself around.

But the city's children can't wait to see whether Calloway's plan works. They need more choices now.

The new schools announced last week will feed a demand in Detroit for programs that offer a more focused educational experience than currently available in the public schools.

If the schools work, they may even draw students back to the city from suburban districts.

That would help stabilize the city's middle class and make the new residential developments going up in Detroit more attractive.

The new charter schools, like the ones that came before them, are being met by protests. The Detroit Federation of Teachers president wants Gov. Jennifer Granholm to stop these kinds of schools. And there may be more lawsuits.

But the charter schools are just as important to the future of Detroit as the new office and apartment buildings going up downtown, and should be equally celebrated.

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