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June 3, 2007

Changing Michigan's schools

Learn from successful charter school program

This week, a Detroit high school will do the unthinkable for most big city and many suburban American schools: graduate more than 90 percent of its students. It is a feat that deserves to be cheered -- and replicated.

As Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick develops his ideas on creating more charter schools in the city -- due out in early July -- University Prep Academy serves as a model for the development of smart educational strategies.

University Prep's success is a vindication of philanthropist Bob Thompson's vision of charter schools as an answer to Detroit's profound need for better schools. Many Detroit leaders rejected his efforts to open University Prep Academy. Today, many of the same people are embracing charters.

This week, The Detroit News editorial page will explore what's behind the school's accomplishments. Policymakers should take notice.

That's because in Michigan, more than one-quarter of the state's high schoolers will not graduate with their peers this month. Some studies put Detroit's dropout rate as high as 78 percent.

University Prep is succeeding despite the profound challenges of inner-city poverty, family instability and hopelessness.

The key appears to be its leaders' willingness to do whatever it takes for its students to succeed. Opened in 2000, the school's design is based around the distinct needs of urban teenagers.

"To us, it was clear that Detroit's problem was not poor teachers or insincere administrators," says Doug Ross, one of University Prep's founders. "It was an obsolete way of organizing schools."

Most American high schools are still designed for the industrial era, Ross argues, with warehouse-like class scheduling, large classes and a lack of personalized attention, individualized curriculum, strong relationship-building and relevance to today's knowledge economy.

So University Prep's creators focused on filling those needs. To address some teens' high rates of family instability, they created "advisories" that provide daily support much like a family. Each advisory of one teacher and about 15 students meets daily for four consecutive years.

And when students need help outside school, they get it.

The school's teachers have mediated custody battles between parents; bailed out students from courtrooms; and taken in students to live with them when home life turned violent.

"Students call me at night, on the weekends," says Lori Johnson, a good-natured teacher whose cell phone rang almost every half-hour on a recent afternoon. "They call to ask questions about their homework, or tell me about the movie they just saw."

Thompson promised academy students' achievement would reach an average ACT score of 18 by 2007. Today, they are close, with an average score of 17.55. By comparison, the Detroit Public Schools' average

ACT score is 16.9.

Still, the school's academic rigor is nowhere near where it must be for its students to fairly compete for college slots with affluent schools such as Birmingham's Groves, its leaders concede.

Now, University Prep leaders are upping the ante by committing to reaching an average school ACT score of 24 by 2010.

Pay attention, state and city leaders: University Prep Academy is providing an effective, proven model for urban education from Detroit to Grand Rapids -- and a needed strategy for boosting the state's economic development. It deserves to be duplicated. Now.

First in a series.

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