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Detroit's amazing school success story

By [Phil Power](#) - June 14, 2007

So you think all politicians only think of what's best for themselves? Okay.

Now let's meet a man who turns 65 this week, one of the brightest members of his generation. He's had a big-time Michigan political career: State senator; Department of Commerce director; assistant secretary of labor; candidate for governor.

And then he chucked all that to run a charter school in Detroit. His name is Doug Ross, and let him take the story from there.

"I lost the 1998 Democratic gubernatorial primary to Geoffrey Fieger," actually finishing third behind East Lansing's Larry Owen.

Once the votes were in, "I got to talking with Bill Beckham, who was the head of the Skillman Foundation, about how disgraceful the Detroit schools were." For a quarter of a century, 70 percent of high school students had failed to finish.

"So since I had time on my hands, I agreed to go around the country looking at what urban schools actually worked.

"We decided that the problem in Detroit was an obsolete learning organization, not bad people. So we decided to lift one of the successful school designs from cities around the country, start a school to see if it could work in Detroit, and hope the Detroit Public Schools would, in turn, lift that design to improve the entire system."

That's the story behind University Preparatory Academy, which Ross founded in 1999. Last Saturday, it graduated 128 seniors, more than 90 per cent of those who started there as freshmen. And nearly 100 per cent of the graduates are going on to college.

If Detroit Public Schools could copy that model, the city would be a far better place. And as far as I'm concerned, while Ross is Jewish, he's also Michigan's top candidate for immediate sainthood.

By using passion, smarts, a big heart and vast energy, he has conclusively demonstrated that it's possible to take a bunch of inner-city kids and get them to perform at academic levels nobody would have believed. He is a man who indeed knows the Detroit schools.

Ross graduated from the University of Michigan and taught for a year and a half in the Detroit public schools, at McMichael Middle School and at Northeastern High. But then he was fired, "because I looked like a potentially troublesome person."

I've known Doug for a long time, and he always was among the smartest, most creative, articulate and all-round energetic people around. But I never expected him to dedicate a decade of his life to helping a bunch of Detroit kids ... nor to succeed so enormously.

What's his secret?

"You start with two core beliefs," Ross says. "First, as an urban public school, you have absolutely to accept responsibility for developing college- ready graduates, regardless of what kind of background of educational deficits those kids bring with them.

"Second, you have to do whatever it takes to help a student succeed, not just nine-to-five but whatever is necessary, whether it's evenings, trips to court, funerals, whatever."

"You then move on to operating principles. You have to have a deep knowledge of each child - academically, emotionally and socially - and have the flexibility to respond to that knowledge."

University Prep does that by making the fundamental leaning unit the "advisory," a group of 16 pupils who stay together with the same advisor as an extended family through their entire school career. And "you have to organize the school so as to individualize learning. A ninth grader who reads at the fifth grade level is only going to deepen his self-doubts if he's faced with a ninth grade book."

Ross started University Prep on the theory that if it worked, it would be a shining beacon and model other schools could copy.

So far, he's succeed in meeting the achievement targets set out by his financial backer, Bob Thompson, the Plymouth-based former asphalt-paving titan (and another a proper candidate for canonization.) With Thompson's backing, Ross is starting up several more schools in Detroit, hoping that the model will gradually spread.

Frankly, I'm pessimistic about getting the Detroit Public Schools to voluntarily come

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along. Ross says that the requirements for his model to succeed - educational and budget decisions and hiring and firing - must rest in the hands of the individual school principals.

I doubt the centralized and bureaucratic culture of DPS would tolerate local decision-making. Nor do I believe the Detroit Federation of Teachers will tolerate someone else making personnel decisions.

But I would like it very much if I have to write a column in a few years saying, "okay, I was wrong." What is clear is that Doug Ross is succeeding in one of the hardest and most centrally important tasks in all of Michigan. He deserves every one of the plaudits he's been getting in recent weeks. And while I'm sure the angels in Heaven would be pleased to greet Doug Ross and Bob Thompson as they ascend to the cherubim, I hope they don't do so any time soon.

Right now, we very much need both of them here.

Phil Power is a longtime observer of politics, economics and education issues in Michigan. He would be pleased to hear from readers at ppower@hcnnet.com. Phil Power is president of the Center for Michigan. However, these opinions and others expressed in Phil Power's columns are individual opinions and do not in any way represent official policy positions of the Center for Michigan.

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