



Mayor pursuing more charter, private schools

March 27, 2007

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Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick said Monday that he has been in private conversations for months with educators and community leaders about establishing more charter and private schools across the city.

"We've been meeting quietly so no one would think we were doing something" yet, Kilpatrick said at the University Preparatory Academy charter school. UPA operates three schools in the city, and Kilpatrick said he wants to help Superintendent Doug Ross open four more.

"I'm going to try to help Doug find some places to do that," the mayor said. "There are others who want to open up schools. I'm also talking to some of the private schools to open up satellite places in Detroit."

The mayor's ambitions and planning were news to the president of the Detroit school board and teachers union. A charter school expansion likely would further drain students from the Detroit Public Schools. The Detroit Federation of Teachers successfully has blocked past charter-school expansion plans.

The mayor, who joined UPA ninth-graders kicking off a campaign to help rebuild Detroit, repeated the philosophy that he unveiled in his State of the City speech two weeks ago: that Detroit needs to view the education of its children in total, not just through the Detroit Public Schools. He also decried how education and city issues are tackled separately.

"I tried to take over the schools, and there was a vote, and they voted no. ... It's the craziest thing," Kilpatrick said. "So I can't make decisions about what happens to schools. I didn't make decisions on what schools to close. They didn't even tell me about it."

"It's a really bad situation. We have a new housing community going right up next to a school that was being closed. I had to ... run over to the school system and say, 'Please leave this school open because we have 1,500 houses going up around it.' So we have a really deformed process in the city of Detroit right now."

The district's board voted Friday against closing any schools, despite the district running a deficit and losing a tenth of its student body last year. The mayor said he's looking at what

works in all schools -- public, private and parochial.

"There's a lot that we need to do with education," Kilpatrick said. "You can't continue to build a city if you don't have places for people to go to school."

Jimmy Womack, the school board president, said he wasn't surprised by the mayor's efforts but plans to focus on current students.

"If you're going to build a thousand homes, you're going to build a thousand homes. But we no longer can enjoy the luxury of having neighborhood schools. ...We're not going to leave open failing schools with the expectation of growth. We have to educate the children that we have."

Detroit Federation of Teachers President Virginia Cantrell said she wasn't aware of the mayor's talks but that the union was committed to the district that educates all children, not those it can select or choose not to be bothered with.

The mayor did not say with whom he's been talking about new schools. Charter schools, which get tax dollars comparable to public schools, require the backing of a university, community college or other educational entity. There would be no obstacles other than zoning to a private school opening a satellite campus in the city.

The mayor said he also wants to focus education on what the city's needs are.

"Yes we need new schools," he said. "We need career prep schools. Everybody is not going to be a teacher or a lawyer.

"Right now, we have 3,000 vacant nursing positions in the city of Detroit. We need nurses bad," he said. "We've got 5,000 nurses that come from Canada every day. ... I love Canada, but I think those should be jobs for Detroiters. So what are we doing in our schools to prepare people for future jobs?"

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