

November 2, 2009

<http://detroitnews.com/article/20091102/OPINION01/911020307>

New effort should help create quality high schools in Metro Detroit

Compelled by the profound void of 21st century high schools in Detroit and its older suburbs, Michigan's top foundations will spend millions to rapidly develop such schools.

Lead by the Kellogg and Skillman Foundations, a handful of local foundations are committing more than \$11 million this fall to what they are calling a "high school accelerator" that will develop high-quality, Knowledge Economy local high schools.

The effort is the first broadly based philanthropic effort to build schools not only for urban children but also for teens in inner-ring suburbs where many parents struggle to find exceptional open enrollment high schools.

Michigan Future Inc., an Ann Arbor-based nonprofit, will manage the High School Accelerator program. Its leader, Lou Glazer, says the program will create 11 new high schools within five years, starting in 2010.

His team has larger ambitions: opening 24 more high schools over an additional four years for a total cost of about \$50 million.

"We will need national funders to scale up to the level where we want to be," Glazer says.

There is no doubt of the need for such an effort. Michigan students' comparative test scores have remained stagnant in recent years, and are being outpaced by those in other states.

What's unique about the school accelerator is that it actively addressed local education deficits without getting tangled in ideology-driven debates.

It will fund the creation of any kind of school -- charter, private or traditional public -- as long as it meets the core characteristics of high-performing schools, such as performance-based teacher hiring.

"We want to build an alternative system around quality, not around governance," says Glazer. "The real choice should be between high quality and low quality."

The focus will be on building highly talented teachers and principals. Glazer hopes to work with the state's top education schools to develop that human capital.

The Accelerator Program should put the Detroit Federation of Teachers on notice. Glazer's team would be open to funding exceptional new high schools for the Detroit Public Schools -- but only if new schools could meet its selection criteria.

The teachers union would need to agree to clear bureaucratic obstacles to innovation and allow leaders to staff their schools with the best-performing teachers, not the ones with most seniority.

Detroit Public Schools' Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb needs such funding support to rebuild the district and better compete with charter schools.

Yet the union remains staunchly opposed to changes in seniority -- a sticking point that will drag out negotiations for another month. The union's resistance to real contract modernization threatens to continue to sabotage its own students and schools.

The new High School Accelerator should be both welcomed and supported.

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