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Science Center and school partner

Detroit museum to expand, get charter facility on site

Jennifer Mrozowski / The Detroit News

DETROIT -- The Detroit Science Center is poised to expand and get a face-lift in the next year and a half through a unique educational partnership that will see a science and math charter middle school located on its site.

Officials from the nonprofit, privately run science museum and the University Prep charter school system, a group of charter schools in Detroit, are working together to create the new University Prep Science and Math Middle School. The school, which promises to graduate at least 90 percent of students and send 90 percent to college, will open at another undisclosed site this fall while the new structure is built. An affiliated high school eventually will be added at an undetermined location.

Both sides say they will benefit from the arrangement, with the science center advancing its mission to be a premier destination for engineering education, and the new school offering its students unprecedented access to the center's docents, experts and engineers.

"It's going to be more than just a one-time field trip that schools and students are used to," said Principal Shawn Hill. "We're going to extend the learning in every way possible to the science center and really take advantage of the exhibits."

The 80,000-square-foot center expansion, which includes 60,000 square feet for the charter school, will incorporate a new museum entrance facing the Detroit Institute of Arts and a new cafeteria space, said center president and CEO Kevin Prihod.

Ground is expected to be broken this spring on the new addition and will nearly double the size of the 110,000-square-foot center.

The school will relocate to the museum in 2009 and will open with a mandatory camp that summer. At full capacity, the school will accommodate 486 students.

The concept of the school-museum partnership parallels one that Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick discussed last May, when he said the city needed more educational options, including theme-based charters that would collaborate with museums, businesses and other organizations.

The school will be chartered through Grand Valley State University and eventually accommodate grades 6-8 at the science center. It's being chartered under controversial legislation passed in 2003 to allow 15 additional urban charter high schools in Detroit, despite a statewide cap.

That legislation was approved after philanthropist Bob Thompson pledged \$200 million to create quality high schools in Detroit. He withdrew his offer after a firestorm of opposition.

The middle school is permissible under that law because it will eventually grow to include a high school at another site, according to Superintendent Margaret Trimer-Hartley.

University Prep Science and Math Middle School is expected to be the first to open under that legislation, and resistance to the school is already percolating among Detroit Public Schools' supporters.

If the school system, now at about 105,000 students, drops below 100,000, more charters could open in the city, meaning a loss of millions of dollars in state funding.

Detroit Federation of Teachers President Virginia Cantrell, who criticized the academic achievement of charters, said she plans to contact Gov. Jennifer Granholm to see whether the "loophole" that allowed the additional charter high schools can be closed.

"There should be no more charter schools than we already have," Cantrell said. "That legislation never should have passed."

Ed Richardson, director of the Charter Schools Office at Grand Valley State University, would not comment on the legislation.

James Canning, spokesman for the mayor, said the new school will add to Detroit's educational options, but he reiterated that Kilpatrick continues to work with and support Detroit Public Schools Superintendent Connie Calloway.

The mayor is "very pleased it's opening," he said. "This is an opportunity for another unique learning experience (in the city) tied to a dynamic institution like the science center."

While Thompson has financed capital projects for other schools in the University Prep charter system, a spokesman for the Thompson Educational Foundation said Thursday the organization does not comment on any project before groundbreaking.

The Detroit Science Center will pay to outfit its new spaces to the tune of about \$1 million, Prihod said. The four-level addition that houses the school and new museum space will expand the center to the north, eating up about a third of the parking lot, he said.

The incorporation of the new charter school comes as the Detroit Science Center revamps its mission, shifting from an emphasis on core science for elementary and lower middle schools students to one that stresses careers in engineering, Prihod said.

The center is adding a theater with moving seats and interactive features and building four new galleries, he said. Those galleries will focus on space and telecommunications; medical science; transportation; and future fuels.

"There was a time when the science center had table-top exhibits," he said. "Now the exhibits are much more entertainment. We're going to have a real gem here."

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