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Nolan Finley

Specialty charters could revive Detroit



For decades, the education story in Detroit has been all about families packing up their kids and leaving for suburban communities in search of better schools.

A school slated to open downtown this fall seeks to reverse the exodus by offering a rigorous math and science curriculum to rival any program available in the suburbs.

The new University Prep Science and Math Middle School is the latest effort by Plymouth philanthropist Bob Thompson and urban education pioneer Doug Ross to bring high-quality education choices to Detroit.

But the math and science school will differ from their existing K-12 campus in that its target enrollment isn't just city students looking to escape the failure of the Detroit Public Schools.

It's being marketed to both suburban and urban parents who are looking to challenge their children.

"We see this as a good choice for parents who want to prepare their children to study math or science at the very best universities," says Kevin Prihod, director of the Detroit Science Center, which will ultimately house the school and is intricately involved in shaping its curriculum.

"The children who come here will have the advantage of hands-on learning. They will be immersed in the center's displays and activities, working with staff engineers, docents and volunteers."

Margaret Trimer-Hartley, the school's superintendent, is recruiting students whose parents work at the Medical Center, Wayne State University, the Renaissance Center and other downtown offices and might consider dropping off their children on the way to work.

"So far, we've received applications from families in West Bloomfield, Rochester, Farmington Hills, Clinton Township and as far away as Ypsilanti," Trimer-Hartley says. "But we haven't forgotten Detroit. Detroit parents have been quite excited about this opportunity. We expect a really interesting and diverse mix of students, from all communities and all backgrounds. We expect the school to be a regional magnet."

The school will open in September in temporary quarters downtown while the 75,000-square-foot addition to the Science Center is being built. Ultimately, University Prep hopes the middle schoolers will feed into a high school backed by Detroit industrialist Dave Bing, who envisions a school along the Detroit River.

Specialized charter schools like this one could become a growth industry for Detroit. Schools that offer intense programs in art, language, medicine, foreign culture and other subjects could appeal to parents who want a different school experience.

Since the math and science school is a public charter, students will attend free, giving them a private school education at a public school price.

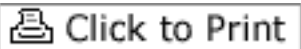
Good schools, as much as big new office buildings and glitzy hotels downtown, are essential to Detroit's comeback.

Schools that offer suburban parents an enticing reason to bring their children to Detroit, and Detroit parents an opportunity to keep their kids near home, can tear down one more barrier to the city's revival.

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