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## Detroit kids get scholarship promise

By Sherri Begin

Business leaders are watching with interest a grassroots effort to fund college tuition for Detroit youths who graduate from the state's largest school district.

Bingham Farms business owner Nat Pernick has founded the **Detroit College Promise** in the hopes of raising an initial \$500,000 in pledges by this fall.

While that amount would equate to just one-tenth of the estimated cost of funding college tuition for graduating seniors' first year, it would signal community backing for the project and hopefully spark broader support, Pernick said.

It also would allow the nonprofit to begin accepting applications — already available on its Web site at [www.detroitcollegepromise.org](http://www.detroitcollegepromise.org) — from 2009 graduates of the district, to launch the program at specific high schools, if not in the district as a whole.

"Of course it's a daunting number, but you've got to start one step at a time," Pernick said.

Everyone in the region is affected by happenings in Detroit, he said. "We will ensure that our scholarship program is capable of meeting its financial obligations."

Pernick, a pathologist and owner of **Pathology Outlines.com Inc.** and a special assistant attorney general under contract with the state attorney general's office since 1990, is seeking a 501 (c) 3 nonprofit designation from the **Internal Revenue Service** so it can begin accepting donations for the scholarship program.

In the meantime, he's pledged \$25,000 from his company and collected \$10,000 in additional pledges, including \$5,000 from **Communities in Schools of Detroit Inc.**, a new partner in the effort.

Like its Kalamazoo affiliate, Communities in Schools plans to serve as the conduit between the Detroit College Promise and **Detroit Public Schools** to help prepare students for college by making sure they have tutors, mentors, equipment and anything else they need, said Charlie Anderson, director of Communities in Schools.

"We have been a proponent of this concept for a while, but nobody in Detroit has picked up the ball yet," Anderson said.

"When Nat contacted us last week, I said, 'let's talk because we need someone to take the lead on this.' That's one of the reasons I'm willing to put our reputation on the line to make this happen, if our discussions go well," he said.

The Detroit Public Schools did not provide numbers last week on the number of students who graduated from the district in 2008. But Anderson estimates that about 1,300 of 4,000 graduates each year

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go on to college, and about 1,000 of them attend a public university or college in Michigan.

At an average of about \$5,000 tuition per student per year, the program would need about \$5 million in funding each year or \$20 million to make a four-year tuition promise to those graduates.

If it's anything like the Kalamazoo Promise, over time the Detroit College Promise can be expected to double the number of high school graduates by decreasing the dropout rate, increase the percentage of graduates going on to college to 80 percent to 90 percent, and motivate more families to move into the city, Pernick said.

"Detroit has a generous business, nonprofit and philanthropic community, and we anticipate that financial support will grow as the program grows," he said.

Last week Pernick sent letters soliciting pledges to local business executives, Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, the governor's office and other elected officials and foundations, asking for personal donations from them.

The members of the Detroit Public Schools Board of Education had not yet received the letter as of late last week, according to board President Carla Scott's office.

But **AT&T Michigan** President Gail Torreano had.

"I think it's an interesting concept," she said.

The Kalamazoo Promise was ingenious, both for providing the financial means for graduates who need assistance to get to college and for the economic development aspect of keeping people living in the city and even drawing them there.

It would be great for Detroit to have a similar program, but "you can't just throw money at an issue; you've got to change the process," she said.

Torreano, a **United Way for Southeastern Michigan** board member and chairwoman of its Educational Preparedness Council, is chairing the **Greater Detroit Education Venture Fund** announced earlier this month by United Way to raise \$10 million to help low-performing high schools in the region improve their graduation rates. The **AT&T Foundation** has pledged \$1 million to the effort.

Torreano said she wasn't sure exactly what the formula is for improving the educational picture in Detroit. "But how can we afford not to look at (the Detroit College Promise)?"

Pernick also sent letters to **Wayne State University**, the **University of Michigan** and **Michigan State University** to see if he can negotiate tuition discounts, just as the **Detroit Regional Chamber** did for its Compact scholarship program established in 1989. That program was with public and private universities in the state to cover the costs of four-year scholarships for graduates of the district who met attendance and educational performance guidelines.

Between 150 and 175 graduates of the district take advantage of Compact scholarships each year, a number that hasn't increased for at least the past 10 years, said Greg Handel, senior director of workforce development at the chamber.

"I don't know that there's a real vigorous effort at the school level to help the kids understand here are what the standards are and here's how to meet them," he said.

But one of the positive things that's come out of the program is the finding that students who have met the program's standards succeed in college at the same rate — about 58 percent within six years — as others around the state, and outpace the state's African-American college graduation average of about 35 percent, Handel said.

The Compact program “is a mechanism for colleges to get students they know are academically prepared,” he said.

The chamber hasn't had significant discussions about funding a Detroit Promise, he said. But the chamber's early estimates on annual funding for it are closer to \$10 million.

“At this point it's very early on, we're watching to see if we can't be helpful,” Handel said.

“But on the other hand, we have something that does offer college to any kid who gets through DPS and is academically ready for it.”

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### **THE DETROIT COMPACT**

The **Detroit Regional Chamber** launched the **Detroit Compact Incentive Scholarship Program** with public universities, a number of private Michigan colleges and the **Detroit Public Schools** in 1989.

- Graduates with a 95 percent attendance rate, 3.0 or higher grade point average and a score of 21 or higher on the ACT qualify for a \$500 scholarship from the interest generated by a \$9 million endowment housed at the **Community Foundation for Southeastern Michigan**.
- Universities help students apply for all federal assistance they qualify for, excluding loans, and then cover the difference in the total cost, said Greg Handel, senior director of workforce development at the chamber.
- Aid is available for four years, provided the student maintains a 2.5 grade point average.

### **Detroit Promise board members**

- Brooke Franklin, a project director contracted by the **Detroit Regional Chamber**.
- Margo Pernick, founder Nat Pernick's sister, who is expected to join the **Jewish Fund** as executive director this week after serving as

grant officer of the **Kresge Foundation**.

- Alvin Levett, retired budget director for **Eastern Michigan University** and former assistant executive director of the **Detroit Jewish Community Center**.
- David Sabbath, director of finance at **Garan Lucow Miller P.C.**
- Lora Weingarden, assistant prosecutor for **Wayne County's Child Abuse Section**.

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