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Group plans DPS college aid

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A budding nonprofit organization hopes to provide full college scholarships to every Detroit Public Schools graduate, starting with a pilot program for the class of 2009 at one school to be announced this fall.

Organizers of the Detroit College Promise, modeled after the Kalamazoo Promise scholarship program, are seeking pledges from individuals and corporations to help fund the program and create an endowment, according to executive director Nat Pernick.

The scholarship, when fully funded, would be offered to every Detroit Public School high school graduate who has attended a school in the district for four consecutive years and completes a one-page application form, said Pernick, a Huntington Woods pathologist. The nonprofit organization, which has \$40,000 in pledges already, will need \$500,000 to fund the pilot program, Pernick said.

"We want to improve Detroit Public Schools, and we think motivating parents and students is a good way to do that," he said. "That's been the experience in Kalamazoo."

Pernick, who attended public schools and completed undergraduate and graduate studies at Wayne State University and legal and doctoral studies at the University of Michigan, said he believes that what happens to the struggling city's school system impacts the entire region. A scholarship program that helps more kids graduate could be a boon for the city, Detroit Public Schools and the region, he said.

If the results in Kalamazoo are any guide -- a group of anonymous donors funded an endowment to provide college tuition for every Kalamazoo public school student -- such a scholarship fund could bolster attendance in the struggling city schools and even draw people back to the city who hope to take advantage of full college tuition for their children.

"Most of us realize that the city of Detroit and Detroit Public Schools are close to a crisis, and they really need help," said Pernick, a third-generation Detroiters. "Even if we don't live in Detroit, we are all affected by it." Pernick's parents attended Detroit Public Schools' Central High.

To fully fund the program, Pernick said he would need about \$10 million a year or \$40 million over four years for one class. He estimates the organization would need an endowment of about \$1 billion to keep the fund going in perpetuity.

Raising that sort of money would be a feat. Forbes Magazine in 2007 said the 200 largest charities reported average gifts of \$203 million. The last charity on the list reported \$40 million in private gifts.

Pernick is hopeful the money could be raised.

"We are talking about a lot of money, but you've got to start somewhere," he said.

Jacarr Worthey, 17, who is going to be junior at the Detroit School of Arts, said he hopes the scholarship programs pans out. Worthey said he knows lots of students who would welcome the scholarship.

"Some parents don't have enough money to provide the experience for college," he said, adding such a scholarship would help him pay for college, too.

The concept of the scholarship was greeted with excitement at the district.

"This has the potential to be great news for our students, and we look forward to learning more about it from the organizers," said district spokesman Steve Wasko. "It's well-documented what an impact the Kalamazoo Promise has had, not only for the students and schools, but for the overall vitality of the community, as well."

All the money raised for the Detroit College Promise will be sent directly to colleges and universities, Pernick said. The organization won't accept donations until it achieves tax-exempt status but welcomes pledges. Pernick said the organization applied for that status this month.

Pernick's company, PathologyOutlines.com, is underwriting the initial expenses of the Detroit College Promise by providing staff, office space and other expenses, he said. The company also pledged \$25,000 for the scholarship fund.

Additional Facts

Scholarships for all

Who would qualify? Every Detroit Public School student who has attended high school for four consecutive years and lived in the city for at least four years.

How much would students get? That depends. The scholarship benefit increases the longer a student attends school in the district, ranging from 65 percent of tuition and mandatory fees for 4 years of attendance to 100 percent of tuition for 13 years. Students who want to apply will have to complete a one-page application.

Can I apply now? Not yet.

For information : Go to

www.detroitcollegepromise.com.

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