

An Innovative Promise

The cause is noble: to turn around Detroit and its public schools by providing college scholarships to city residents enrolled in the beleaguered school system. Certainly, a good education is one of the keys to rejuvenating the city and kindling the kind of economic dynamic in the region that brings more jobs and real hope.



Robert Sklar
Editor

The hitch is the poor state of the Detroit Public Schools: a falling tax base, crime-laden grounds, tired teaching tools. The graduation and dropout rates are among the worst in the nation. Some of the lost students are good students who chose to transfer to other districts or to private or charter schools.

Enter Detroit College Promise (DCP). Like its model, the highly successful, 3-year-old Kalamazoo Promise, DCP is a nonprofit. DCP

founder Nat Pernick seeks to achieve similar success by lifting public school enrollment, promoting a college-preparatory school track and motivating nonresidents with college dreams for their kids to move into Detroit and embrace its public schools.

"We started last year by offering scholarships to all graduating seniors at Cody High School, and we now offer at least two scholarships at 10 Detroit public high schools," Dr. Pernick told the *JN* last week in an online interview. "We plan to have at least some scholarships at all Detroit public high schools within 1-2 years."

The plan then is to extend some scholarships at all Detroit public high schools and ultimately boost the college scholarship amount to cover full tuition. The maximum award will be based on years of continuous Detroit Public Schools enrollment and Detroit residency — in keeping with the spirit of the Kalamazoo Promise. There are no limits on income or grades. A responsible board oversees DCP. All money raised will go toward tuition and required fees; it will be sent directly to colleges. Each gift of \$2,000 supports one student in Detroit College Promise at \$500 per year for four years.

Inspired Leader

Don't downplay Pernick's resolve. Listen when he says DCP may well transform Detroit into a center of brainpower with a significant percentage of college graduates.

The pathologist and attorney by profession is a caring soul. He grasps that the best way to raise Detroit and the region is by elevating the educational opportunities for our central-city kids. His findings indicate that most Detroit Public Schools graduates who go on to earn a degree return to the region and have the capacity to contribute to its turnaround. Currently, about 30 percent of the district's 4,000 graduates each year attend college, the vast majority in Michigan.

Education is revered in the Jewish community. Some degree winners return home while others move to more appealing

urban hotspots. For most, their education mattered. When I wrote about the power of Pernick's promise last year, I noted how resources to help capable Detroit students attend college are a natural fit for Detroit Jewry, which extends far beyond the city borders.

Jewish Focus

Beyond the scholarship thrust of Detroit College Promise, Pernick has a personal interest in widening Detroit's Jewish residential presence. "Like many others," he said, "my parents were born in Detroit, graduated from Central High School and lived a great deal of their lives in Detroit."

He's a Huntington Woods resident, but wants his children and, one day, his grandchildren to have a viable option to live in Detroit. "Providing these scholarships is one way to make Detroit more attractive to our young adults," he said.

"Whether or not we live or work in Detroit today," he added perceptively, "our lives will improve as Detroit itself becomes more economically prosperous."

Pernick is busy strategizing about how to up that Jewish presence. His inquisitive mind churns out ideas.

"Perhaps we could offer housing subsidies as was done for part of Oak Park and Southfield in the past [through Federation's Neighborhood Project]," he said. "Perhaps we could strengthen the Downtown Synagogue or other remaining Jewish institutions in Detroit. Perhaps Chabad would be interested, with some support, in establishing a presence in Detroit since it often locates in nontraditional areas."

Let's not overlook Wayne State University: Jewish students are becoming more aware of and engaged in Jewish and Zionist causes; Hillel of Metro Detroit is a student rallying point; there's a strong Jewish alumni base; and Jewish names adorn many of the campus buildings.



Dr. Nat Pernick: He's certainly passionate about Detroit.

residents who believe education is the sole responsibility of schools, not parents. Even as we enrich our day and synagogue schools, Jewish Detroit must remain an influential force when it comes to public school support. □

For details on Detroit College Promise's \$2 million scholarship drive, go to www.DetroitCollegePromise.org. Please share your thoughts online: thejewishnews.com/community. Go to Local News.



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30301 Northwestern | Suite 100
Farmington Hills, MI 48334
248.538.6611 v/tty | Fax: 248.538.6615
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www.jarc.org/donate