



Friday, September 26, 2008

## LOCAL VOICES: The Power Of A Promise

### Robert Sklar

Editor

Friday, September 26, 2008



Education in its purest form is the essential ingredient if our region, particularly Detroit, is to possess the kind of competitive workforce that spurs job creation. But the Detroit Public Schools are in a crisis state. They have myriad challenges, from money shortages to deteriorating infrastructure to a loss of students. Some of these lost students go to other districts or charter schools; others just never finish their high school education.

The most strategic way to assist Detroit and the region is by improving and expanding educational opportunities for Detroit youth. Unlike the challenges we face in the Jewish community, where many of our kids take their educations and move to more appealing urban hotspots, most young adults who graduate from a Detroit high school and earn a degree will return to the region and potentially contribute to its turnaround. Currently, about 30 percent of the district's 4,000 graduates each year attend college, the vast majority in Michigan.

Dr. Nat  
Pernick

Historically, the Jewish community values learning and knowledge. Given the diaspora's expanse, education, by necessity, remains transportable; we Jews have taken our books and Torah and created new communities almost everywhere.

When Jewish Detroiters ask how they can personally help Detroit and the region that the city is bound at the municipal hip with, the Jewish News cites an investment in some way in Wayne State University. With the 1998 closing of Sinai Hospital of Detroit, we see WSU as the Jewish community's most significant investment in the future of Michigan's largest city and this region's municipal anchor.

### **A Promising Conduit**

The Detroit College Promise, launched this year, could be another way for the Jewish community to travel onward and upward from Hastings Street to Seven Mile Road to Northwestern Highway and other points north and west. We get it when it comes to education. Resources to help capable Detroit students attend college are a natural fit for Jewish Detroit, which extends far beyond the city borders.

The Detroit College Promise is a promise of hope and excitement. It seeks to transform Detroit into a center of brainpower with a high percentage of college graduates. It aims to improve Detroit Public Schools by encouraging parents and students to embrace a college track and by motivating nonresidents with college aspirations for their kids to move into Detroit and enlist its public schools. The net effect would be a stronger regional economy triggered in part by deliverance on the Promise.

As an entity, the Promise is a nonprofit organization modeled after the successful 2-year-old Kalamazoo Promise, which has increased public school enrollment in that western Michigan city. Detroit College Promise founder Nat Pernick vows to provide his first college tuition scholarships to the Detroit Public Schools graduating class of 2010.

Pernick's Promise, when fully funded, will be extended to every Detroit Public Schools graduate who completes a simple one-page application. The only scholarship requirement beyond actually graduating is at least four years of continuous enrollment and city of Detroit residency. That core requirement means no student entering Detroit Public Schools after the ninth grade is eligible; the time for Detroit or suburban families to act if they are interested in the Promise is now. There are no limits on income or grades.

### **A Successful Model**

The Kalamazoo Promise, funded anonymously to the tune of \$200 million, is a windfall for Kalamazoo public school students. An evaluation of that Promise found that a third of students surveyed said they attend school more often and work harder; 87 percent of students surveyed said they plan to tap into the Promise to enroll in a community college or university. Forty-five state institutions of higher education currently qualify as Promise-eligible. The dropout rate is down and the graduation rate is up.

So the Detroit College Promise shouldn't be pooh-poohed as a pipedream. It has real promise based on such a program's record in Kalamazoo. Specifically, it is likely to increase Detroit Public Schools' enrollment and shockingly low graduation rate of 32 percent (the worst in the nation among large cities). Students from families who move into the city as a result of the Promise are certainly likely to graduate.

I applaud Nat Pernick, a Bingham Farms pathologist and attorney by profession and a humanitarian at heart. A member of Bloomfield Township's Temple Beth El, which has roots that go back to 1850 in Detroit, Pernick is doing what others only dream of.

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

He's right, of course.

The economic vitality of the region will never reach its full potential without a vigorous central city. And one of the keys to unlocking that vigor, in addition to cleaning up political corruption, is an educated base of young families. Jews have a great awareness of education's importance; no one questions that. But we can do more to help others develop this appreciation of its value.

### **Building A Team**

Pernick operates PathologyOutlines.com Inc. Under contract with the state, he has been a special assistant attorney general for Frank Kelley, Jennifer Granholm and Mike Cox. His Promise partners include the Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce, Detroit-based Communities in Schools, which helps prepare students for college, and the Northwestern High School Success Project. Among Promise board members are four other Jews: his sister, Margo Pernick, executive director of the Detroit-based Jewish Fund; Lora Weingarden, a Wayne County assistant prosecutor; David Sabbath, finance director for the Detroit law firm of Garen Lucow Miller, P.C.; and Alvin Levett, retired budget director for Eastern Michigan University.

Take it from Nat Pernick: "The Jewish community knows the importance of parental involvement in making our schools the best they can be. Unfortunately, many Detroit residents believe education is the sole responsibility of schools, not parents. We have a moral responsibility to try to convince them otherwise."

We sure do. Public education was a hallmark of the Jewish immigrant experience in America and a springboard to professional and business success for our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. Even as we enhance the quality and reach of our day, synagogue and supplemental schools, the Jewish community must remain a force to be reckoned with when it comes to public school support.

A vibrant urban core will offer the added bonus of attracting young professionals, who often prefer an urban environment. An appealing Detroit, with an upgraded school system and free college tuition, is bound to make more young families city dwellers with the ability to influence friends.

### **Layers Of Giving**

The Detroit College Promise is seeking pledges along two tiers: 1,000 or more pledges of \$20 or more to generate grassroots backing as well as larger pledges from the business and nonprofit community to seed initial funding and a \$50 million perpetual endowment. For example, a \$5,000 gift will fund, on average, one scholarship to a community college.

All money raised will go toward tuition and mandatory fees and be sent directly to colleges. Pernick initially will cover all administrative costs. The scholarship benefit grows the longer students attend Detroit Public Schools, ranging from 65 percent of tuition and mandatory fees after four years of enrollment to 100 percent after 13 years.

To begin the program in a pilot high school and have a portfolio of 100 scholarships to award, \$500,000 is needed; so far, \$42,000 has been raised, including a \$25,000 donation from Pernick. Tax-exempt status is pending; Internal Revenue Service approval should increase the flow of support.

A \$2 million annual budget ultimately will be needed to fund 400 students at a time -100 new students a year who will be recipients for four years. As more students move from community colleges or go straight into more expensive colleges, Promise fundraising and partnerships will feel the effects; but the Kalamazoo Promise shows that philanthropic enthusiasm builds.

## The Fisher Influence

I love Nat Pernick's recollection of why he undertook such an ambitious program. Not surprisingly, his inspiration in part was Franklin philanthropist Max Fisher, the patriarch of Detroit Jewry who died in 2005.

"Several years ago," Pernick said, "I attended the dedication of the Max M. Fisher Music Center at Orchestra Hall in Detroit. Mr. Fisher's son-in-law, Peter Cummings, told the story of how this great center came to be. Apparently, Mr. Cummings had a very modest proposal for the site and presented it to his father-in-law. In response, Max Fisher paused, looked at Peter and responded, 'You're not thinking big enough.' Similarly, if we want to have a great impact on the city of Detroit, we have to think big."

The city and school district have declined together yet could revive together - but that's strictly theory right now. In theory, though, the Promise has powerful sea legs to negotiate the swamps of despair in search of better times in Detroit.

Many suburbanites talk up improving our central city. Nat Pernick is among the few actually stepping up and trying something radical, but very tangible, in pursuit of that goal.

This Rosh Hashanah, in the spirit of significant new pursuits, I pray that Pernick's vision for bettering Detroit by giving the ultimate gift - one of knowledge - finds the impetus it needs in the Jewish community.

L'shanah tovah tikateivu. May you and yours be inscribed in the book of life this new year.

Shabbat shalom as well!

For more information, log on to: [www.DetroitCollegePromise.org](http://www.DetroitCollegePromise.org).

## Related Links