

Columnists | Detroit Promise inspires spinoffs | The Detroit News

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Laura Berman



In Kalamazoo, a small group of anonymous donors, their names widely rumored but never proved, have funded a uniquely successful scholarship.

That's the "Kalamazoo Promise," which guarantees a four-year college education to high school graduates in Kalamazoo Public Schools, a plan that's becoming increasingly embraceable. Gov. Rick Snyder has pledged to implement a similar program for Detroit schools, one that could offer scholarships for even 2012 graduates.

And last week, during a visit to Detroit, Arne Duncan, the U.S. education secretary, called the Kalamazoo Promise "the best economic development tool" available. If Detroit school kids could be guaranteed four-year scholarships, that would be "absolutely amazing," he said.

That's what Dr. Nat Pernick thought four years ago: Frustrated by the Detroit school system's graduation rate, he launched "The Detroit College Promise." The nonprofit organization has for three years funded partial scholarships for Detroit Public Schools graduates. Students must register, fill out paperwork and complete high school in the district.

In its first year, the program gave awards to six students at Cody High School. This year, 115 students received awards.

But Pernick has struggled to create the kind of elite club of mega-donors that has made the Kalamazoo Promise possible. His ultimate goal of \$10,000 scholarships by 2015 — using earnings from his pathology website and other donations — still seems ambitious. The 2011 grads won \$500 scholarships, along with hands-on help finding other grants, scholarships and financial aid to pay their way through college.

Pernick, a pathologist, attorney and computer specialist who attended 14 years of college and graduate school, backed his beliefs with commitment, energy and dollars.

But as the idea heats up politically, with rhetoric from Washington and Lansing, Pernick's "Promise" isn't getting any nods, winks or callbacks from Lansing.

"The governor is talking about starting something that we've already done," says Pernick, who has registered the names "Detroit College Promise" and "Detroit Promise" scholarship, and is concerned about the potential for confusion.

The governor's spokeswoman, Sara Wurfel, told me a nonprofit entity had been formed, the Michigan Educational Excellence Foundation, and commitments from major donors are in hand to fund scholarships for two years of college or training.

Steve Wasko, spokesman for Detroit Public Schools, says the new program could be available for 2012 Detroit school graduates as early as next spring. He also says, "We love Dr. Pernick." In other words, there are new promises of scholarship promises afoot.

But nobody — other than Nat Pernick — is likely to call them that.

lberman@detnews.com

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