

Detroit Free Press: Detroit schools can again be great

BY ELI BROAD

April 12, 2009

As a proud Detroit native and graduate of Central High School, I remember well when Detroit's public schools were great. Without a doubt, Detroit's public schools played an important role in setting me on track to get into Michigan State University and to be successful throughout my life.

I have been saddened to witness the district's deterioration in recent years. I would like to see that quality return. With the right leadership and focus, Detroit Public Schools can overcome its current challenges and provide city students with world-class schools. As a long-time philanthropist involved in urban education reform, I think Detroit can.

Detroit now has the opportunity to join the ranks of New Orleans and other city school systems nationwide -- from Boston to Chicago to New York City to Washington, D.C. -- that have successfully turned around after producing abysmal student outcomes.

In every one of these cities, real changes for students happened only after mayors or governors took over and put in place strong leaders who had a serious desire to rebuild.

In every one of these cities, new leaders took advantage of best practices that are proven to work for students nationwide, including challenging academic standards, longer school days, and public charter schools -- practices for which President Barack Obama has expressed his strong support. And in every one of these cities, leaders based every decision on student interests, rather than adult politics.

The challenges DPS faces are significant. However, school districts in places like New Orleans have survived far worse calamities and have gone on to make unprecedented student gains. To make this vision a reality in Detroit, a significant transformation of the system as we know it today -- both operationally and instructionally -- will be necessary. This will require putting smart financial controls in place, strategically targeting resources toward students and teachers, and securing sustainable leadership district-wide.

Detroit is fortunate to have emergency financial manager Robert Bobb's leadership at this critical time. His 35 years of experience efficiently and effectively running city government will make a big difference in the district. He is a breath of fresh air.

Bobb is also the first person who actually has the authority to transform the district from a tired bureaucracy into a high-performing public enterprise. And by appointing outside experts to do a thorough financial review and determine how to get much more money into classroom, he is starting in the right place: bringing integrity back to the system.

For all these reasons, my foundation is proud to provide up to \$450,000 to support Bobb's efforts to dramatically improve the fiscal integrity and stability of the district. We hope to

see similar commitments from the local philanthropic community. In addition, we hope the state Legislature moves forward quickly to confirm Bobb and back his efforts, and that the two mayoral candidates personally commit to taking on this important work.

If DPS receives stable leadership at the mayoral level and moves forward strategically, keeping student interests front and center, we are willing to continue to be supportive to ensure that Detroit students, for generations to come, once again have great schools.

Eli Broad is the founder of the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation.