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A lesson in Kalamazoo's 'Promise'

By Joseph Volk

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There is surely no longer any doubt that the future of the city of Milwaukee is inextricably linked with the viability and the success of the Milwaukee Public Schools. It is clear that if the city wants to preserve and attract jobs, have a vibrant economy, maintain stable property values, prepare an educated workforce and grow and prosper as opposed to stagnate and decline, we must educate our children.

We simply must fix MPS. We can no longer just accept low test scores, absenteeism, dismal graduation rates and the underperformance of one of our city's most important institutions.

As CEO of Community Advocates, a Milwaukee-based anti-poverty agency, I decided recently that the agency should become more involved in the education debate taking place in Milwaukee. Not having a long history of dealing with the education challenge facing the city, I decided to schedule a round of interviews with leaders in the nonprofit human service sector who have been involved with trying to improve the education of Milwaukee's children for decades.

The question I asked each one was, "What can we do to fix MPS?" To my surprise and horror, the almost universal answer was that nothing could be done to reform MPS - that the only option was to watch as the number of enrollees decline in concert with rising wage and benefit costs that cause the system to economically implode. One longtime education advocate suggested our only hope was to reform the choice and charter school movement.

I thought to myself, "Are we now going to try to reform the education movement which itself was supposed to be the education reform movement?"

The people I was talking to had been through the wars. They were the people for whom, in the past, anything was possible with enough protest and organizing. Yet they had thrown in the towel in regard to the possibility of reforming MPS. I think there must be another answer, another way forward.

That answer may be found in something called the Kalamazoo Promise Program that, since its inception in 2005, has begun to show remarkable results.

The question is whether the leadership of Milwaukee, both public and private, along with the community itself, can come together in a way unprecedented here. Can we be bold in our vision and our actions? Can we dream again that positive change is possible?

Simply put, the Kalamazoo Promise is a college scholarship program funded by three anonymous donors in Kalamazoo, Mich. But it is unlike any scholarship program in the United States in that it is not based on income, academic achievement or other merit indicators, but rather simply on place.

In outlining the terms of the scholarship program in 2005, Janice Brown, superintendent of Kalamazoo Public Schools, explained, "It's a very simple concept. Go to school at Kalamazoo Public Schools, graduate from KPS, and in your hands there will be a scholarship in the amount of tuition plus fees based on the number of years you have gone to KPS."

That's right; live in the city of Kalamazoo, go to the public school system and attend any public university in Michigan for free. No income guidelines, no essays to write, no need to participate in sports. Just fill out a one-page application form.

Attendance at KPS is easily checked. In fact, the entire Kalamazoo Promise program is administered by two people in donated office space.

The program is simple, but the aspiration is bold. The assumption behind the Promise is simple yet profound. By investing in the human capital of its young people, regardless of their academic performance or financial need, a community can enhance its economic competitiveness, strengthen its school district, improve its workforce and perhaps even increase its population, tax base and real estate values. The promise started in 2005. Has it worked?

Enrollment in KPS has increased 25% since 2005. The increase has been driven by both new students coming into the system as well as existing students actually staying in school and graduating. Because KPS receives state aid based on the number of students in the system, KPS has been able to avoid the kind of budget crisis seen in other school districts while building two new schools to accommodate the increase in enrollment.

Not only has enrollment in KPS increased, but the ethnic mix has stabilized. Since the Promise began, the percentage of African-American students has been stable. The number of both Hispanic and white students attending KPS has increased.

Dropout rates dropped abruptly, starting in the fall of 2005 with the beginning of the Promise.

There has been surprising improvement in student test scores and achievement between 2005 and 2008, with math and reading scores up one full grade level.

The introduction of the Promise has served as a catalyst for a climate of high and rising expectations within the school district and the engagement of a broad range of community institutions around the goal of student success. Parents have become increasingly involved in their children's education, insisting that the school district perform to a college readiness level.

As of October 2009, 83% of students eligible for the Promise program used it; 1,531 students have received scholarships and 1,103 are currently enrolled in college.

The success of the program in meeting its economic development goals has been harder to measure when pushing against the headwinds of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, but there are some signals that the Promise is starting to take hold.

While the economic distress due to the recession in Michigan is well-known, the indicators seem to suggest that Kalamazoo has been somewhat spared the worst of its surrounding neighbors' plight. The goals of the Promise yet to be realized include:

- Increased population, including a return of the middle class to the city.
- Increased real estate values and a corresponding larger tax base to pay for city services.
- More jobs and greater economic development.
- Positive workforce development trends. If indeed, access to a well-trained workforce is critical to business success, cities rich in workers with high human capital will be the most appealing to places for business to locate.

So it's clear that the future of Milwaukee depends largely on whether we succeed in educating our children. What is also clear is that much of Milwaukee's leadership does not believe that MPS in its current form can be reformed.

No new superintendent, no matter how well-meaning, will make this system work. Yet another reading curriculum will not change the low test scores, the absenteeism and dismal performance and low graduation rates.

The Milwaukee Promise? An impossible dream? Maybe. But there was a time in Milwaukee after decades of war and Depression when all seemed possible. A time of optimism and community resolve. It was a time when leaders dared to do what would be unthinkable today.

In 1951, Milwaukee built a baseball stadium at the cost of \$5 million with no professional baseball team to fill it. A few years later, the Braves moved to Milwaukee from Boston. A few years after that, Milwaukee was at the top of the baseball world, having won the World Series.


Can Milwaukee, its leaders and community recapture that boldness, that vision and the willingness to take the risks? Can Milwaukee become a shining example of a city that recognizes its problems and takes the actions necessary to solve them?

The well-being of the city we all care so deeply about may depend on it. Promise!

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