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## Detroit Free Press Tom Walsh column [Detroit Free Press]

Sept. 09--Bob Knowing, recipient of the 2011 Eleanor Josaitis Global Citizenship Award from the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, shared a few no-nonsense thoughts with me about fixing Detroit's struggling public schools.

His timing was good, because this week barely half of Detroit's eligible public school students were on hand for the start of classes, despite an attendance campaign by DPS emergency manager Roy Roberts and local pastors.

And Knowing has some education and leadership bona fides, as the founding CEO in 2003 of the NYC Leadership Academy, a key pillar of New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's vaunted school reform effort.

I asked Knowing, also ex-CEO of several telecom companies and a long-standing adviser and speaker at the U-M business school, whether he had ever been asked to look at Detroit's schools.

Yes, he said, he met with DPS administrators in 2004 or 2005, and hosted a delegation from Michigan to look at the New York initiatives.

"The problems in Detroit are identical" to those of other major urban school systems, he said, "and the solution to education is all about leadership."

What has to happen?

"Number one," he said, "you've got to get the business community fully behind the school system, uncompromised. That has to be the seed capital, because there is no more money -- there's not like a hidden bucket somewhere of money under the bed.

"So the private sector has to come together, because it can bring not only money, but also the relationships and the foundations."

In New York, Knowing and Bloomberg's team raised \$100 million from businesses and

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foundations to set up the nonprofit NYC Leadership Academy and its Aspiring Principals Program to train and mentor school principals, independent of the city schools bureaucracy.

Next, he said, the school principal is paramount in driving change: "You've got to have a change agenda that focuses on principal leadership. The greatest thing you can do in any school is to give them a great principal, who will get the best out of teachers and create an environment where learning occurs.

"It has nothing to do with the curriculum. We had over 70 reading initiatives in New York. We killed them all and said, 'You've got two flavors, vanilla and chocolate.' "

Lastly, he said, the system needs support from each post of "a three-legged stool: private-sector business, parents and political oversight." And the political piece needs to be all about dismantling the bureaucracy.

On Thursday, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan was in town, making hopeful noises about a Detroit system he said was arguably the nation's worst two years ago.

But is meaningful progress really under way, at a time when Detroit, more than ever, needs to upgrade the knowledge and skills of its people to attract and retain job-creating companies?

Is the business community fully engaged? Did the Principals Academy operated under former Superintendent Ken Burnley have any lasting impact? Does anyone believe we have the political oversight thing figured out?

If Knowing offered Detroit this as a multiple choice test, would the answer be "none of the above"?

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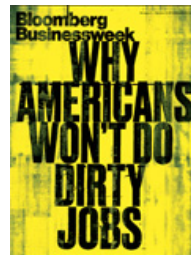
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