



WORLD & NATION

Kansas City Proves Money Isn't the Answer : Schools: The \$1.6 billion spent hasn't reversed the downward trend because good teachers were not the priority.

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PAUL CIOTTI IS A LOS ANGELES WRITER. AN EXTENDED VERSION OF THIS ARTICLE APPEARS IN REPORT CARD, AN EDUCATION WATCHDOG PUBLICATION OF BY THE LOS ANGELES-BASED CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF POPULAR CULTURE

As the nation's governors gather in New York for yet another education summit today, a tragic tale from Kansas City, Mo., should remind them that spending more money may be the wrong approach to improving our nation's schools.

Judge Russell Clark, senior judge of the U.S. District Court in Missouri, has been called "King George" and the "poster child of the imperial judiciary" by his critics. This is because in 1985, Clark took over the Kansas City public schools, unilaterally doubling property taxes and seizing part of the state treasury, all in the name of "integrating the system" and "build[ing] a quality education program." To attract white suburban students to the district, Clark invited the district planners to go out and "dream"--build, buy, order, train, whatever they needed to reverse the downward trend of Kansas City's inner-city schools.

But despite spending \$1.6 billion in 10 years, the Kansas City Municipal School District has a greater percentage of minority students (77%) than before the plan started; the black-white test score gap hasn't changed at all and dropout rates are more than 55% and rising. "They had as much money as any school district will ever get," says Harvard sociologist Gary Orfield, who directed a study of the district. "It didn't do very much."

Under Clark's desegregation plan, the district didn't just tear down decaying old schools and replace them with new shells. Among the amenities in the new magnet schools were an Olympic-size swimming pool with an underwater viewing room, a robotics lab, professional quality recording, television and animation studios, theaters, a planetarium, arboretum, zoo, a mock court with a judge's chamber and jury deliberation room and a model United Nations with simultaneous language translation.

Missouri taxpayers were appalled and angry. At one point, complained state Atty. Gen. Jay Nixon, the district couldn't account for 23,000 items, including TV sets, CD players, bookcases, office furniture and (temporarily) a baby grand piano. The district spent \$40,000 for a display case for a high school that had no trophies. Nixon charged that 44% of the entire state budget for elementary and secondary education was going to just the 9% of the state's students who lived in Kansas City and St. Louis.

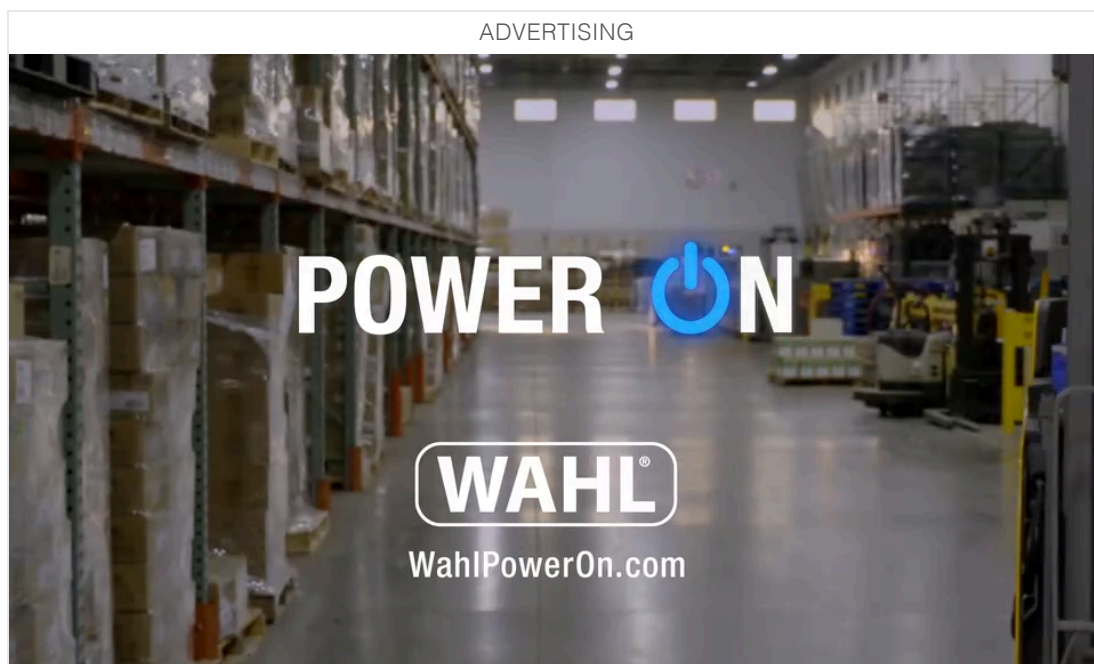
Unfortunately, in the one area where hardheaded determination might actually have made a difference in the lives of the students--quality of instruction--Clark had deferred to professional educators, who had created the problem in the first place. During Kansas City's long slow decline, the district accumulated a lot of less-than-adequate teachers and a badly bloated bureaucracy. It was a matter of racial politics. "Race is the first and foremost consideration in almost anything to do with the district," said former school board president Sue Fulson. Firing people was politically impossible.

A school district less rife with racial politics would have had a permanent administrator with the vision and ability to do something about the problem. But once the desegregation money started rolling in, it was easier to concentrate on new buildings, equipment and business plans than on tackling the things that really make the difference--appointing qualified principals, supervising instructional practices, developing a curriculum, hiring good teachers and firing bad ones.

For years, educators have loudly maintained that what inner-city schools really needed was more money. But Kansas City, a small district of only 37,000 students, got all the

money any district could ever want--hundreds of millions of dollars a year for an entire decade. It still didn't work. The black-white gap, which started in the first grade and steadily grew until high school when black students on average were three full academic years behind their white classmates, remained unchanged.

Clark, who has spent more than 19 years on this case, maintains that the desegregation plan is on track--it just needs more time: "I have always said it would take a full generation to turn the test scores of black students around."



Clark's problem, however, is that he has no more time. In June 1995, the U.S. Supreme Court told Clark to quit using the district's low test scores as an excuse to retain control, to quit trying to integrate the schools with the unproved theory of "desegregative attractiveness" and to find a way to return the district to local control. Unfortunately, he has built so many new schools that there's no way they can all be supported on the existing tax base.

Clark would have avoided this Catch-22 if he had realized at the outset the true ingredients for school reform: strong principals with the ability to hire good teachers and fire bad ones and a voucher plan that would allow students to escape the worst public schools and attend private ones instead. Gov. Pete Wilson, who has proposed an

“opportunity scholarship” plan to allow students to leave California’s worst schools, is on the right track. Would-be “education governors” might want to take note.

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