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The Kansas City School District works to erase a tragic history

By RICK MONTGOMERY
The Kansas City Star

It's 1991 and Stanley Peeples II has entered a new world. Central High School — the core of Kansas City. He can't believe this.

Stanley and his classmates are looking at a row of desks with robotic arms stretching out, able to pick up blocks. Downstairs there is an Olympic-size pool with underwater windows. It's the first day at this $32 million school, Stanley can choose either the "Classical Greek" or "Computers Unlimited" track, and the front foyer alone — man, fresh! Marble floor and Greek columns.

Back in sixth grade, Stanley shivered in class for a month because the boiler broke. In junior high, Nancy Reagan made a visit to address the plight of drug-infested, gang-haunted schools.

But this place — yeah, tight!

It's too bad, in this magnificent magnet school, that test scores and graduation rates will never climb out of the dumps.

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He is only 30, but Airick Leonard West knows the tragic history of the school district he wants to help save.

He knows the saga of the lawsuit that took flight before he was born. How it led to the most ambitious school-desegregation plan a court ever crafted. How $2 billion in taxes, imposed by a judge, produced lavish new buildings across the Kansas City School District, yet never turned around lowly achievement.

He knows, as we all do now, that money doesn't teach kids.

"We can't change the past. But it is our obligation to know the lessons of that past," says West, the Board of Education president, leaning forward in a chair, his voice serious, unwavering.

"We need to draw from those lessons the wisdom to move forward."

But "forward" today is moving in the opposite direction.

Instead of building facilities decked out to impress baby grand pianists, world-class fencers and lovers of Latin, the district is closing 40 percent of its schools in a mission to better serve the students who struggle to remain.

Urban educators nationwide will be watching all summer as an uncommonly united school board and a team recruited by Superintendent John Covington try to steer the district — now down to 17,000 students — through its second wholesale transformation in a quarter-century.

"I've more hope for Kansas City now than I've had in many years, " says Anne L. Bryant, executive director of the National School Boards Association. "This was a long time coming — you're shifting from a capital-intensive budget to a human-intensive budget. That's how you get better education."

The irony, not lost on West, is that the older fellow seated three chairs to his right, board member Arthur A. Benson II, was a huge player in the last transformation.

For two decades as attorney for the plaintiff schoolchildren in the desegregation case, Benson promised that magnet schools would enhance learning for all students by luring more white ones into class — even as residents of all colors were moving out.

Benson, who is white, voices no regrets. And 15 years to the month after the U.S. Supreme Court rejected the formula that funded that spending spree, leaving the district too overbuilt and overstaffed to sustain on its own, he now supports Covington's "rightsizing" effort.

"I don't see any conversion on my part. More like one long continuum" to provide the area's most at-risk kids the

schooling they deserve, Benson says — and the schooling that the city desperately needs.

For the goal to become reality, experts say, district leaders need to take a magic eraser to a lifetime of images not directly related to the classroom. Like revolving-door superintendents. And phantom contractors.

To do this, it's important to understand that practically everyone is to blame for these failing schools. Absent parents. Pregnant teens. People who abandoned the district.

Flip back a few pages in the district's history and note that 1969 is the last year that local voters, who even today are mostly older and white, approved a school bond issue. (It also happened to be the last year that white students outnumbered black.)

Many blame past school boards, and outsiders, for micromanaging administrators to the point of picking up the phone and not hanging up until certain folks got jobs. Some making threats.

"The big they," former assistant superintendent Cheri Shannon calls this group.

Others blame an overly critical media, or long-gone superintendents nailed by the media, for, well, faking a back injury or living outside the district.

From Liberty to Lenexa, "you don't even have to say more than the words 'Kansas City School District' to trigger an emotional reaction," says William Worley, a local historian and author.

"Rightly or wrongly, the school district has provided that scapegoat many people need for everything that bothers them about the city," he says. "To have such a clearly challenged school district, in the minds of so many who've left the city, it justifies leaving.

"Why? Well, because people left — it's absolutely circular."

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It's 1956. *The Rev. Earl T. Sturgess is pounding a sign into his front lawn that reads, "Not for sale — neither my home nor my moral convictions."*

Many of his white neighbors along the 3300 to 3700 blocks of Benton Boulevard do the same. The area has become home to some black newcomers, their kids free to move into formerly all-white schools. Sturgess, a Presbyterian, is fine with that.

But real estate agents want residents to get nervous and sell.

Sturgess and a band of neighbors aren't caving to this "blockbusting," which is largely guided by redlining by the school board.

But their resolve won't last. In a few years, they will all move south or west.

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How we all got to this place is a story easy to tune out in these times, in a city that extends to, count them, 15 public school systems and now boasts a constellation of charter schools.

So deep in the district's past are quarrels that go to race, neglect, patronage, turnover and squandered opportunities, they rumble in our atmosphere like traffic noise.

Lawyer and activist Clinton Adams, one of the school board's fiercest critics over the years, personifies as well as anybody the district's bare-knuckled hostilities. While worried that Covington may be moving too fast, Adams says he is happy that "nobody is trying to integrate the district these days."

"They all see the need to *improve academic achievement*. It's the same thing I was saying 20 years ago."

Hopes seem high that this summer may usher in an era of accountability, hard but defensible decisions, prudent purse strings and a sharp focus on student success.

In March came what West calls an overdue "cathartic moment" — the bold decision to chop $50 million and keep two dozen schools from reopening in August. Some 285 teachers — and more than 700 jobs total — will be cut.

Covington's moves, however unwelcome by the neighborhoods hit by closures, have drawn civic applause and global attention.

"What made it unique was that these decisions had been delayed for so long, so many buildings had to go at once," says Jack Jennings of the Center on Education Policy, a think tank.

"The danger now is turmoil at the beginning of the school year. Covington has got to improve education in the

remaining schools … but, traditionally, these big-city districts just have trouble getting organized even in a normal year."

By lopping off waste, renegotiating every contract and funneling resources to curriculum and teacher training — in ways yet to be ironed out — the district intends to undo its place in the nation's memory as the "Waterloo" of court-ordered racial integration, as Time magazine declared in 1996.

Or "the poster child for how money can fail," as put by University of Colorado political scientist and author Joshua M. Dunn.

"That's sort of Kansas City's claim to fame on the policy radar," echoes Tulane University sociologist Kevin Fox Gotham, "and that kind of attention from people who follow urban education is going to continue."

The district has its institutional jewels, including Lincoln College Preparatory Academy, which ranks among the highest-performing public schools in Missouri. Parents praise the learning at the Foreign Language Academy, Border Star Montessori and the Afrikan Centered Education Collegium Campus.

Even at Central, decreed "academically deficient" by the state, journalist Joe Miller in his 2006 book "Cross-X" chronicled the successes of an award-winning debate team driven by the high expectations of teacher Jane Rinehart.

The bright spots prove what groups such as the Council of the Great City Schools know: Individual schools and programs can turn around.

Strong principals, committed instructors and consistency in curriculums have raised performance and reduced dropout rates, even in the most impoverished places. It has happened in selected schools in the slums of New York and in Chicago, Charlotte, N.C., and San Francisco.

But what has not been discovered, says University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Education dean Wanda Blanchett, is the trick for turning around entire districts.

And it is this whole, complex story of the Kansas City School District — out there detailed in white papers, books and court files — that looms as the largest cloud over its chances to turn anything around.

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It's 1981 *and Tom Kipp is tired.*

He's the silver-haired principal at Southwest High School on Wornall Road — alma mater to a Nobel laureate, famed writers, opera and ballet stars, space researchers. There are three men in his office, from district headquarters, expressing disappointment in the school's recent achievement scores and reports of low morale.

Kipp started there as a health teacher in 1956, and in his 10 years as principal, eroding district finances have required him to give about 20 teachers the ax. Minority enrollment, mostly bused in, has climbed from 2 percent to about 60 percent, but overall attendance is down. He has had to eliminate calculus and advanced placement classes — little wonder students aren't scoring so high.

He is thinking, if you don't want me here, give me a transfer. He's 55 but feels older, putting in 70-hour weeks. One of his sons recently asked, "Dad … are you sick?"

He will take a vice principal position elsewhere.

For its first 56 years, Southwest had only Kipp and two previous principals. Thereafter, new principals would come and go for the rest of the decade.

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Asked why success in these schools should even matter to residents outside the district, Mayor Mark Funkhouser recalls the morning that CNN, The Associated Press and MSNBC called with the same urgent question: How could any major city shut down half its public schools?

It had not occurred to the outsiders — nor to anyone who might Google "Kansas City School District" when considering taking a job at, say, Cerner Corp. — that the term applies to a relatively modest chunk of geography on a multicolored map.

Funkhouser riffles through pages of city-produced data. What do *you* think accounts for the city missing out on 70,000 jobs dating back to 1995, when its rate of employment growth is compared to the U.S. average? And who, he asks, will pay for the infrastructure needed on the outskirts to sustain all those who won't reside in the hollowed-out heart of the metro?

He throws up his hands: “We’re losing a family from the district, on average, every 12 hours! And we know that. It’s a disaster unfolding under our noses, killing us financially, environmentally and in every other way.”

One of the killers has been that the district’s boundaries were more or less cemented in place by an act of the Missouri legislature during white flight of the 1950s.

Unlike most other urban areas, the city proper could and did expand, but restrictions on school annexation kept the district from doing anything but shrink.

In Kansas City proper, the student population in public schools today stands at about 75,000 — a number rivaling those attending *only* the Kansas City district 45 years ago.

When classes open this fall, Kansas City could drop below the top five districts in the metro area in enrollment.

Beyond the decline in numbers, the competency of those who remain — and graduate — matters.

Studies and surveys have attempted, with mixed results, to quantify what seems self-evident — that effective public schools produce the kinds of workers and customers whom businesses seek. The National Center for Education Statistics found that high-school dropouts were three times as likely to receive public assistance than high school graduates not attending college.

It is unclear, however widely discussed, the degree to which public elementary and secondary education dictates where companies locate. Many surveys put stronger emphasis on what universities offer. But no real estate agent would dispute that public kindergarten through 12th grades have been dictating where *families* locate.

“When they arrive here, many have already been warned by their work colleagues to stay out of the Kansas City district,” says Stacey Johnson-Cosby, for 13 years selling homes across the metro for Reece & Nichols. “Once that decision is made, you’re not likely to change minds.”

Credit the district, also, for some distant history that most Kansas City students never learn in school. “The Troost wall,” as some scholars know it.

By sociologist Gotham’s account, published in his book “Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development,” district officials “explicitly used Troost Avenue as a major school boundary line” after the U.S. high court in 1954 ruled unconstitutional “separate but equal” school facilities.

Before that, the Missouri constitution had not just allowed for segregated schools. It required them.

All blacks in Kansas City who attended secondary school before 1955 found their way to Lincoln High School. Many moved in from suburbs that had closed black schools or never opened them.

After the wall began to rise, the tax base withered east of Troost. Real estate agents profited from moving blacks in and moving whites out.

(The carefully plotted boundaries of Central High allowed its African-American enrollment to jump from zero to 90 percent in seven years. Paseo High School followed — 88 percent black by 1969. But west of Troost, Southwest High stayed mostly white until the late 1970s.)

Voters rejected 19 straight bond campaigns. Teachers struck in 1974 and 1977.

“I lost 100 of my best students each strike,” Kipp recalled later. “Both black and white parents … pulled them out because they couldn’t see their kids losing 30 or 40 days of school.”

Across the city, schools began to put up with broken toilets, rats, boilers so faulty that some classrooms froze while students down the hall baked. Federal monitors threatened to cut off funding if the schools did not integrate.

In 1977, the school board, envisioning a huge busing plan across the metro, sued 18 suburban school districts in Missouri and Kansas, both of the states, and federal agencies.

By 1984, U.S. District Judge Russell G. Clark had determined enough was enough. He flipped the suit around, making students the plaintiffs and the district a defendant, but the state of Missouri would pay about three-quarters of the costs to improve the schools.

Infamously, he would order increases in local property and earnings taxes to cover the district’s bill.

But he took suburban districts off the hook and made the program voluntary — a move that many scholars believe doomed the magnet schools to come.

Clark acknowledged as much in an interview before his death in 2003.

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It is 1994. *Al Hunley, who oversees the district's inventory lists, is mumbling in bed: "There is no way we lost a baby grand."*

Earlier that day, Missouri Attorney General Jay Nixon held a news conference in which he accused the district of being unable to account for millions of dollars of public property, including an $8,000 baby grand piano.

More than $200,000 worth of purchased computer equipment is "lost," Nixon charged, and criminal investigators are poised to look into it.

The next day, the piano is found where it is supposed to be — in the auditorium of Paseo High. Turns out inventory lists between two schools that share the auditorium got mixed up. Most of the other equipment ultimately is tracked down as well, but the record-keeping is a mess.

The episode speaks to the rancor between the district and a state under court orders to pay for the district's desegregation.

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The district's latest bid to right itself has given new online life to a 2000 study by the Cato Institute.

The paper rips into the court-ordered "Kansas City experiment" that built a kingdom of new and renovated schools to replace those rotting. Seventeen fresh structures arose, and the experiment did all that education experts at the time advocated.

It raised teacher pay by 40 percent, reduced class sizes, set one of the highest per-pupil expenditures in the country — and "none of it worked," author Paul Ciotti concluded.

Test scores at the high-school level would not budge despite more than a decade of tax increases ordered by Clark.

"At one time the Kansas City experiment was going to be a progressive light unto the educational nation," Ciotti wrote. "Instead, it became the most expensive desegregation plan in the nation and, in terms of achievement-bang-for-the-educational-buck, the biggest failure, too."

Benson, elected to the school board in 2008, disagrees that the plan was a bust: It delivered safer, cleaner buildings that could not have been built otherwise.

And when the courts eventually excused the state from paying for the plan, Missouri allowed the district to keep a local levy double the rate voters had last approved back in 1969.

Authors such as Dunn, academics such as UCLA professor Gary Orfield and local civic leaders who remember the experiment cite many reasons for its inability to boost overall achievement.

But one factor resonates today as the new transformation rolls out.

"The board and the superintendent," says Orfield, "just never got their act together."

Top bosses continued to come and go (to date, 26 superintendents since 1969).

Just as important, the end goal of teaching kids seemed to be lost. Black parents protested that their children could not get accepted into the most popular magnets because of targets set for admitting middle-class whites. Many questioned why it was deemed so important for whites to even be in classes.

New textbooks and supplies were ordered but sat around for weeks. Magnets or no, most students chose to go to schools with their neighborhood friends.

Here and elsewhere, the pull of traditional schools returned.

The U.S. Supreme Court in 1995 delivered the death blow in a 5-4 ruling, owing to the arrival of Justice Clarence Thomas. The court found that the Kansas City plan had improperly sought an "interdistrict" remedy by luring students and teachers from the suburbs.

But Thomas' opinion went further: "Racial isolation itself is not a harm," and he chastised Clark for his "experiment with the education of (the district's) black youth."

Normally not one to agree with Thomas' conservative views, the black activist Adams in this case sent him a letter of thanks.

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It's 1999, *and Assistant Superintendent Cheri Shannon is in her office when Benjamin Demps Jr., the new head of*

the district, walks in holding a letter.

“Says here the state might be taking away our provisional accreditation,” he says. “What’s that mean?”

Demps, just a few weeks into the job, is not an educator. He is a government administrator and former Air Force staff sergeant hired to dramatically shake things up.

Shannon replies: “It means we’re in big trouble.”

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Among those encouraged by the 2010 board’s direction is Bernard Taylor, who in 2001 became the district’s 22nd superintendent in 32 years. He took the job during the district’s bleakest hours, as the state of Missouri had yanked its accreditation and looked poised to take control of the schools.

Now enjoying his work as superintendent for Grand Rapids, Mich., schools, Taylor sums up his time here this way: “It was a mean-spirited experience. … It never was about educating children. It’s about how to mollify, placate, cater to organizations more concerned about adults. The contracts — who gets what?”

He credited Covington for staring down that history and “basically going for broke.”

“When I left (in 2006), we had 26,000 pupils. And now there’s 17,000? Nobody loses students like that,” says Taylor. “Nobody.”

Taylor, operating in what he calls “compliance mode,” stayed for a while — five years! — and helped the district get its provisional accreditation restored. Still, the lesson was clear: After $2 billion — all those hearings and monitoring and then returning the district from court to local control — the most glittering school facilities in the nation could not solve the problems of urban education.

“We forgot about the goal, the key, and that’s educating the kids,” says Crosby Kemper III, director of the Kansas City Public Library. “It was a massively failed social experiment … and it was imposed on the people.

“Now we get the opposite, which is very much a grassroots movement. That makes a huge difference.”

And it begins with West.

A soft-spoken neighborhood activist who passed through 11 school districts as a kid, he started researching the Kansas City school system after he acquired guardianship of a teen who attends high school.

“Look, we are all guilty of turning our backs on the young scholars of this district,” he says. “It took one of them living in my house before I got involved.

“People were frustrated, but people were not standing up.”

Then, in 2008, the year of Barack Obama, the atmosphere changed.

When West landed on the board that year, after several elections in which school board candidates had to be pried from the community to run unopposed, he offered to hold a “School Board School” to train future contenders. He expected to buy lunch for 20 people, tops. But the minute he sent a mass e-mail invitation, the replies started popping up on his laptop screen, with 30 RSVPs the first hour. Then 50, 80, on up to 120.

“People, perhaps as a result of the Obama election, seemed to gain this powerful sense that anything was possible,” West says. “And maybe the most implausible outcomes were possible if we reach our young scholars.

“We’ve come to a place where the board, the administration, parents, teachers, faith community, business community, neighborhoods are aligned in a way I haven’t seen before.”

This is about reconciling the past. OK, folks fled the district. West shrugs and says he understands. He knows people do what they think is best for their families.

So let’s be honest with ourselves, get serious about engaging with our kids — not “those kids,” he says — and write a new history.

Says Eugene Eubanks, who served on the court-appointed committee that monitored the desegregation plan: “We’ve shown we can build schools and close schools. What we haven’t done is demonstrate we can educate kids.”

The next chapter begins, as West would write it, with one question.

“Can we make this juggling act work?” he says. “I see us willing to stand … but with all these diverse groups, can we make it work?

"My belief, maybe naively, is yes. We can."

Coming later this summer
As the next school year approaches, The Star will present a series of stories on the Kansas City School District and the transformation that Superintendent John Covington envisions.

We'll take you behind the scenes with Covington and his team. We'll take you inside one elementary school to show you the challenges facing students, teachers and administrators.

We'll show you how students will learn in the district's revamped schools. We'll examine, among other things, how the district has spent millions of dollars over the years.

Look for the stories starting Sunday, Aug. 22.

Your community resource
Go to KansasCity.com for everything you need to know about the school district transformation. We're here to help you navigate the changes, with regular progress reports and links to the latest information.

To reach Rick Montgomery, call 816-234-4410 or send e-mail to rmontgomery@kcstar.com.

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