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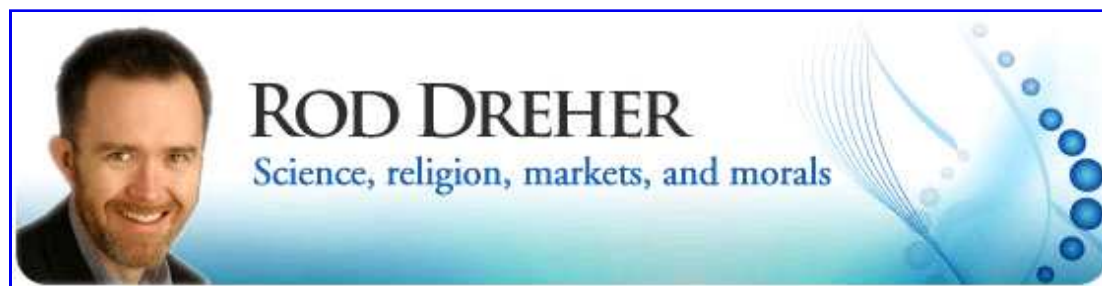
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Why did Kansas City's public schools fail?

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The Kansas City school board finally got around to doing what ought to have been done years ago: [close about half of the city's public schools](#). It's quite a shock to the city, and understandably so; to lose half your schools in a stroke is an astonishing blow. But this has been a long time coming. Twelve years ago (!), it was plain that the extravagantly expensive, court-ordered desegregation plan that was supposed to fix the KC school quagmire had failed. At the time, [the Cato Institute said](#):

In 1985 a federal district judge took partial control over the troubled Kansas City, Missouri, School District (KCMSD) on the grounds that it was an unconstitutionally segregated district with dilapidated facilities and students who performed poorly. In an effort to bring the district into compliance with his liberal interpretation of federal law, the judge ordered the state and district to spend nearly \$2 billion over the next 12 years to build new schools, integrate classrooms, and bring student test scores up to national norms.

It didn't work. When the judge, in March 1997, finally agreed to let the state stop making desegregation payments to the district after 1999, there was little to show for all the money spent. Although the students enjoyed perhaps the best school facilities in the country, the percentage of black students in the largely black district had continued to increase, black students' achievement hadn't improved at all, and the black-white achievement gap was unchanged.(1)

The situation in Kansas City was both a major embarrassment and an ideological setback for supporters of increased funding for public schools. From the beginning, the designers of the district's desegregation and education plan openly touted it as a controlled experiment that, once and for all, would test two radically different philosophies of education. For decades critics of public schools had been saying, "You can't solve educational problems by throwing money at them." Educators and advocates of public schools, on the other hand, had always responded by saying, "No one's ever tried."

In Kansas City they did try. A sympathetic federal judge invited district educators literally to "dream"--forget about cost, let their imaginations soar, put together a list of everything they might possibly need to increase the achievement of inner-city blacks--and he, using the extraordinarily broad powers granted judges in school desegregation cases, would find a way to pay for it.

By the time the judge took himself off the case in the spring of 1997, it was clear to nearly everyone, including the judge, that the experiment hadn't worked. Even so, some advocates of increased spending on public schools were still arguing that Kansas City's only problem was that it never got enough money or had enough time. But money was never the issue in Kansas City. The KCMSD got more money per pupil than any of 280 other major school districts in the country, and it got it for more than a decade. The real issues went way beyond mere funding. Unfortunately, given the current structure of public education in America, they were a lot more intractable, too.

As the Cato report explains by way of background, the KC public schools were falling to pieces in the wake of white flight to suburban schools in the 1960s and 1970s. The judge who ordered the massively expensive deseg program figured that if enough money was poured into KC schools, whites would drive or bus their kids in from the suburbs to get a better quality education, the predominantly black schools would achieve racial balance, and middle-class whites would help poor urban black kids to succeed academically. That was the theory. The school district spent a staggering \$2 billion to build new schools, improve the ones they had, hire first-rate teachers, get the student-teacher ratio down, and so forth. Read the paper to see that incredible facilities and educational amenities KC public school kids had available to them.

It was a complete disaster. The district couldn't manage its affairs. Parents hated the insanely complicated magnet school busing system. Poisonous racial politics paralyzed the school board. The school system became a cesspit of patronage, especially racial. Desperate black kids didn't get the

help they needed, while the system wasted money on white kids who never showed up. All of this was driven by the idea that desegregation was the key to educational achievement. From the report:

Some people in the black community regarded the white reluctance to attend school in the KCMSD as further proof of white racism--"You can't just build a \$6 million school facility, call it a magnet, offer some romantic courses and think all the white students are going to come," said Kansas City mayor Emanuel Cleaver. But to others the problem wasn't so much racism as hard-nosed parental realism. What suburban white parents really wanted were schools that would enable their children to compete effectively and successfully in the marketplace. The real reason whites wouldn't send their children to school in Kansas City was quite simple--the KCMSD couldn't offer white students as good an education as they were already getting in their neighborhood suburban schools.

[The Cato report](#) -- remember, this came out 12 years ago, and the school board is only now getting around to facing reality -- blames ideology and bureaucracy chiefly for this failure, but only in the short postscript, from a well-funded but failing California district, do we get to one of the core problems, but something we don't talk about openly in our society: the social failure of the families and communities from which the impoverished children come.

No matter how much money you spend, no matter how much you impose standardized testing, no matter how well-intentioned you are, you simply cannot expect broad improvement in learning from kids who, through no fault of their own, come out of a dysfunctional culture of family breakdown. But no judge and no legislature can force people to do right by their kids and live by the kind of self-discipline and habits that make for stable families and communities. Why should it surprise anybody that middle-class suburban parents *of whatever race* don't have faith that their kids are going to be well-educated in schools where teachers, however capable, are having to teach kids who come to the schools so broken by their family environments that they need intense remediation?

A few years back, we had a black member of the Dallas school board come to an election meeting with the News editorial board, and say that there's only so much educational progress one can expect from kids of the sort that go to Dallas public schools. That remark ticked us board members off, because it sounded like excuse-making, and the "soft bigotry of low expectations" on the part of an elected school official who seemed to be accepting mediocrity. I've wondered since then, though, if that man was saying something that was more true than we wanted to believe -- that no amount of money, testing, or reform measures can adequately compensate for a failed culture.

If that's true, it's incredibly depressing, because it says that the way out of this morass is not easy, or quick, and that it ultimately has relatively little to do with educational policy at all. But if that's true, we need to know it, if only so we can quit wasting time and money on the wrong strategies.

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