

LA to open half billion dollar school...WHY?

By **Rebekah Rast**

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Washington —

“If you build it, he will come.”—The Voice.

Though the voice who spoke this quote intended it for the farmer in Field of Dreams, hoping to inspire him to build a baseball field, it seems some school districts nationwide are taking this quote as their own — applying its message well beyond a baseball field.

Come September, thousands of kindergarten through 12th graders will flood through the doors of the newly built Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools in Los Angeles.

The education will be as standard as any other public school education. However, the aesthetics will not.

Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools is known as the “Taj Mahal” of public schools. Built from the former Ambassador Hotel, where the Democratic presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1968, the architects of the school held back no luxuries while staying true to the site’s acclaimed fame.

The complex holds 4,200 students within its art-covered walls and also houses a marble memorial depicting the school’s name sake.

A state-of-the-art swimming pool and public park enhance the complex as well.

Yes. This is a public school.

Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools is significant for another reason — its price tag. It is now the most expensive public school ever built, costing \$578 million.

“Spending this kind of money on a school is outrageous,” says Bill Wilson, president of Americans for Limited Government (ALG). “The public school system doesn’t need a half-billion-dollar building to help students succeed; it needs proper educators and better management of the resources it has.”

Why was such an elaborate, expensive public school built?

The advocates of the school say it will be a more pleasing and hospitable environment for learning. The only problem is Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) has one of the highest dropout rates of the nation. For 2007, **the graduation rate was only 40.6 percent** — well below the **national average of 68.8 percent**.

Maybe that’s why this new complex was built. Teachers in the district have hopes that a brand new school with state-of-the-art technology in classrooms will help students want to learn.

Unfortunately, there is no evidence to back that up.

“There are no connections between facilities and students’ success beyond a safe and well-functioning building,” says Adam B. Schaeffer, Cato Institute’s policy analyst for the Center for Educational Freedom.

Pouring money into school complexes isn’t a new idea. **New York City has a \$235 million campus and New Brunswick, N.J., opened a \$185 million high school in January.**

In fact, Schaeffer says, from 1999 to 2008 public school spending on infrastructure increased by 445 percent, while student enrollment during that same period increased by only 7 percent.

With no proof that there is a connection between how much money a district, state or the federal government spends on K-12 education and the success rates of students, why are these lavish schools being constructed?

“They have money so they spend it,” Schaeffer says. “Bond revenue is easy to borrow and pay back later.”

Furthermore, most taxpayers have no idea how much of their money goes to K-12 education. In a report written by Schaeffer titled **They Spend WHAT? The Real Cost of Public Schools**, he writes that about \$1 out of every \$4 of taxpayer money goes to fund education.

“Public K-12 education consumes a larger chunk of each state and local taxpayer dollar than any other expense. More than one out of four tax dollars collected goes to the government-run K-12 education system,” the report states.

Aside from fancy schools, how much is it costing taxpayers to send children to public schools?

In the 2007-08 school year, **LAUSD had 693,680 students enrolled and calculated an average per pupil cost of \$11,357.** This number is astonishing, as the median cost for a private school in Los Angeles is **estimated at around \$8,300.**

Los Angeles, with its highfalutin flair for school architecture, still doesn’t compare to what other areas spend. **Washington, D.C., states it spends \$17,542 per pupil** and the **graduation rate for all students in the District of Columbia for 2007 was only 59.5 percent**, again, below the national average.

It’s as if students aren’t convinced to stay in school and graduate just because they are in a brand new school with art-adorned walls and a beautifully manicured park.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Utah State spends one of the least amounts on public education. Jordan School District in Sandy, Utah, spends about **\$5,111 per pupil.** The district’s 2007 **graduate rate was 79.3 percent**, well above the national average.

It seems the students who attended public school within the Jordan District didn't need to attend the "Taj Mahal" to receive a good education and succeed.

"It's all about the environment you're in," Schaeffer says. "As long as it's safe and out of the weather, it doesn't matter what it looks like."

Wilson agrees, and adds, "Schools are built for children so they have a place to learn. They should not be built for the sole purpose of being a showpiece for the neighborhood or city," he says. "Nor should they cost millions of dollars to build. A classroom is still a classroom."

Taxpayers have every right to know how much they are paying into the public education system. Even though these swanky, elaborate schools aren't costing them yet, local and state governments have to pay off the debts at some point.

The "Taj Mahal" in Los Angeles costs about \$137,600 for every student that it will house, Schaeffer says.

If you are going to be spending that much on a public education, you might be better off sending your child to Harvard.

Elaborate and fancy public schools might look nice on the outside, but when you get inside, it is still a school. School districts can continue to build half-billion-dollar schools, but that doesn't mean students are going to be excited to learn, improve or graduate.

The root of America's education problem isn't the school buildings.

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