

STABILITY IN THE STORM: THE HISTORY OF KANSAS

CITY KANSAS PUBLIC SCHOOLS 1902–1986

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by
Yolanda Kaye Thompson

B.S., University of Kansas, 1994
M.S., University of Kansas, 1999
M.A., University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2005

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Yolanda Kaye Thompson, Candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree
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ABSTRACT

The history of Kansas City Kansas Public Schools (KCKPS) is rich, and it is not as well-known as the history of Kansas City Public Schools in neighboring Missouri. KCKPS had its own unique journey that magnified the challenges it faced to integrate the district. This historical research study examines the history of KCKPS and how race relations and politics of the state, city, and county shaped the actions of district leadership and the conditions of the schools. This study explores the tenures of three superintendents: M. E. Pearson, F. L. Schlagle, and O. L. Plucker, whose years of service encompassed 1902 until 1986.

Historical research was used as a methodology in this study to give voice to those from the past and those who are living today who are a part of that past. The results of this research found the stability was not that of the district leadership, but of the Black community. The voices in this study gave insight into the institutional caring of the segregated schools they attended and the caring within the Black community that prepared them to be strong and proud of their history. This study provides an overview of the

evolution of schooling in Kansas City, Kansas, and how those in the community dealt with the racial and social challenges and changes in their neighborhoods.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies, have examined a dissertation titled “Stability in the Storm: The History of Kansas City Kansas Public Schools 1902–1986,” presented by Yolanda Kaye Thompson, candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

Supervisory Committee

Donna M. Davis, Ph.D., Committee Chair
Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Foundations

S. Marie McCarther, Ed.D.
Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Foundations

Loyce Caruthers, Ph.D.
Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Foundations

Jennifer Waddell, Ph.D.
Department of Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies

Bradley Poos, Ph.D.
Department of Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies

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“There are two things we should give our children: One is roots, and the other is wings.”

–Henry Ward Beecher

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CHAPTER 1

NO PLACE LIKE HOME...THE STATE OF KANSAS

An Introduction and Overview of Historical Research as a Methodology

Introduction

January 29 is Kansas Day, and on this day in 1861, the Kansas territory entered the Union as a free state. As an elementary school child on January 29, I would color or draw my pictures of all things that represent Kansas: the meadowlark, the sunflower, the state flag, waving wheat, and of course the Jayhawk. There were times we would sing, “Home on the Range” and review the state motto: “Ad Astra Per Aspera,” Latin for “to the stars through difficulties.” These images and lessons are seared in my mind as to who and what Kansas is. Indeed, the state motto suggests something noble and admirable, and I was a young Black girl in a predominately white school sitting at a table with crayons coloring in the pictures, learning what Kansas is, learning how Kansans persevere and are welcoming to all who enter the state. As I was coloring the pictures and attending a predominately white school, I was being called a “tar baby” by other students. I guess I was learning to persevere as a young Black child in elementary school in Kansas.

My kindergarten teacher was the first to introduce me to Kansas history. It was the mid-1970s, and she was my first educator outside of my home or church. This young Black woman fortified my educational foundation to continue learning (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Miss Beverly Hodges, 1976

Miss Beverly Hodges was my kindergarten teacher in 1976. She was tall, wore a short, cropped afro, and she was always impeccably dressed in suits and dresses with high heels. And even in high heels, she jumped rope with her students at recess. Her fingernails were long, painted, and well-manicured. I remember fondly the class lining up behind Miss Hodges as we followed her to other destinations on campus. All of the little girls wanted to walk like and be Miss Hodges. She was beautiful, patient, caring, and never too busy to assist any student with any concern. She understood and protected me in my first experience in a predominately white environment in Kansas City, Kansas public schools (KCKPS).

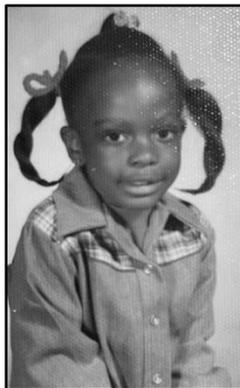


Figure 2. Yolanda Kaye Thompson, 1976

Long after high school, Miss Hodges' and my paths crossed often. I worked in a school with her husband, and later in my career, I taught her daughter. And even still she checks up on me. The same gentle woman who was my teacher in kindergarten is still watching and caring for me. My relationship with Miss Hodges, now Mrs. Manlove, is a good example of how Kansas City, Kansas, is a big, small town. As I advanced through KCKPS, I would have seven other Black teachers who would influence and impact my educational journey. Although all were important, none were as significant to my education experience as Ms. Hodges. She taught me the importance of showing others my intelligence unapologetically. As I look back, I realize that Ms. Hodges taught me what I could be, by modeling care, concern, and professionalism as a Black woman. She instilled a love of learning in me, and it is with that love of learning that I approached this project, looking back and learning from the past, and knowing how critical it is to bring voice to those who have been silenced for too long. It is in this spirit that I engaged in this work. My historical research is important because I wish to understand the past to give insight into the present conditions of Kansas City Kansas Public Schools. The saying, "those who fail to learn their history are doomed to repeat it," is not the full story. Those who do not know their history will not have the roots they need to survive successfully in the twenty-first century. Looking back has the power to stabilize people's lives.

Overview of the Topic and Methodology

The history of Kansas City Kansas Public Schools is rich, and it is not as well-known as the history of Kansas City Public Schools in neighboring Missouri. Indeed, because the school district on the Missouri side of the state line underwent a decades-long desegregation legal battle that gained national attention, much of the emphasis around schooling in Kansas

City centers on the struggles that the district continues to endure.¹ However, KCKPS had its own unique journey that magnified the challenges they faced to integrate the district. This historical research study examines the history of KCKPS and how race relations and politics of the state, city, and county shaped the actions of district leadership and the conditions of the schools. This study explores the tenures of three superintendents: M. E. Pearson, F. L. Schlagle, and O. L. Plucker, three superintendents who led the district from 1902 until 1986. This historical research investigates the practices and policies of KCKPS as these men's decisions influenced equity and inclusion in the district. This chronological study explores their tenures as they led the district through what some consider 84 years of stability in leadership. Indeed, in recent years the average tenure of a superintendent in the state of Kansas, according to Gibson (2016), is "5.2-5.8 years over a recent four-year span."² Thus, 84 years was quite remarkable. This record for KCKPS gives outsiders the sense that the district's stable leadership was to the benefit to the district and the community it serves. This study also provides a lens through which to explore race relations, equity, and inclusion in the district during those 84 years and their impact on the current policies and actions in the district.

Research Questions

The questions that guided this research are as follows:

- How was the Kansas City, Kansas School District formed?

¹ Donna M. Davis, "50 Years Beyond Brown Separate and Unequal in Kansas City, Missouri," *American Education History Journal* 31, no. 1 (2004): 7–12.

² Cory Lee Gibson, "Increasing Superintendent Longevity in Kansas," Ph.D. Diss. (University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, 2016), 2.

- How has the history of the state of Kansas influenced the development and progress of KCKPS?
- What social, racial, and political structures shaped the development of KCKPS?
- How did the leadership of the three superintendents who served from 1902 until 1986 reflect and shape the racial, social, and cultural landscape of KCKPS?

Historical research as a methodology gives voice to those from the past and those living today who are a part of that past; the voice of people is the centerpiece of historical research.³ When I taught history, I told my students information in the textbook was the perspective or voice of one—and was usually the voice of an old white American male, the voice of the victor. However, to get the full story, more perspectives need to be read and heard, particularly the voices of those who have been silenced and/or oppressed.⁴ According to Tyson, “oral history can illuminate the views of ordinary citizens and minorities.”⁵ Much of my research and interviews focus on Black people in the Kansas City, Kansas area. Some were students, parents, and employees of the district during the covered timeframe.

The voices of those who implemented district policies, those impacted by those policies, and those who bore witness during the 84 years of so-called stability are highlighted in this study. Primary and secondary sources give insight and fill in details about this time. Although the timeframe studied has passed, the implications of the actions taken have created

³ Anthony Brundage, *Going to the Sources: A Guide to Historical Research and Writing* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2018).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Thomas Tyson, “Rendering the Unfamiliar Intelligible: Discovering the Human Side of Accountings Past through Oral History Interviews,” *Accounting Historians Journal* 23, no. 2 (January 1996): 87–109, <https://doi.org/10.2308/0148-4184.23.2.87>.

a trajectory that has influenced later actions in the district. History is dynamic, according to Brundage, and what happened in the past is constantly influencing the present.⁶ “Oral history is a dynamic process that creates evidence about the past and allows undocumented perspectives to emerge, perhaps for the first time.”⁷ Oral histories or personal narratives of former employees, former students, community members, and community leaders are intertwined throughout the study. Their voices in their roles are critical to obtain perspective regarding race relations in the district during this period.

Growing up in the Kansas City, Kansas area and still having an active connection to it, I have listened to church members share their experiences growing up in a segregated city. Three women were interviewed together, because group interviews can spark memories with shared experiences, and the collective voice can be recorded.⁸ Two of the three women raised their children in Kansas City, Kansas as well and sent them to KCKPS. These women, who are in their seventies and eighties, have a collective voice that gives light and understanding to the present.⁹ Another strength or uniqueness about oral history is it is built around people¹⁰: what they did or said and how they reacted or responded to what they encountered in the past. It is a process of looking at the options or choices that were available to the participants during the timeframe.¹¹ Schwandt describes oral history:

This is a method of gathering and preserving historical information recorded through interviews with participants in past events and ways of life. Oral history aims to gain a more complete or unique understanding of the past as experienced both individually and collectively by soliciting memories, reminiscences, and testimony from specific informants or respondents.¹²

⁶ Brundage, *Going to the Sources*.

⁷ Tyson, “Rendering the Unfamiliar Intelligible.”

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Thomas A. Schwandt, *The Sage Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2007).

As the historian, I must be cognizant that I am telling the interviewees' stories, and not become subjective during the interviews.¹³ Tyson says that it is important that the historian enables the participants and not themselves to avoid creating a "scholarly form of fiction."¹⁴

Tyson also describes oral history as a creative process that "relies on hindsight, recollections, and interaction" to reconstruct the past.¹⁵ For example, my father shared with me and my sisters stories of some of his memories growing up in a segregated KCKPS. Some of the stories are warm, some hilarious, and others are unbelievable. One of those unbelievable stories is his account of when the superintendent would give an address to Sumner High School students. He remembers sitting in the school auditorium as then Superintendent Plucker shared with the Black students that they would be the best garbage collectors and domestics the city would ever have when they graduated. This account confirms a similar story in *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education*. Tyack provides the words of a young Black graduate speaking to his class in 1819 who stated: "Why should I strive hard, and acquire all the constituents of a man, if the prevailing genius of the land admit me not as such, or but in an inferior degree!"¹⁶

My father held the same sentiment some 150 years later, and this was not a good memory for him. But right after he shared that story, he remembered Sumner teachers, like English teacher Miss Rebecca Bloodworth, telling the students they could be anything they wanted to be and that they were being prepared for so much more.

¹³ Tyson, "Rendering the Unfamiliar Intelligible."

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ David Bruce Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974), 123.

Stories such as these give another perspective of the educational experiences of students in the district. Indeed, these stories show another side of “stability” in the district. Thus, while newspaper articles and other documents give one point of view, adding the voices of former students, former employees, and community members give my study depth and a clearer picture of the events that took place. Further, because there is no comprehensive history recorded for the school district, my research will fulfill a district need by chronicling 84 years of KCKPS.

Oral histories from community members who were students add yet another layer to the story being told through this research. Some of the community members are lifelong residents, and they were educated in the district, as were their children. Their points of view as former students and as parents are valuable. One of the community members is my father, Thomas Womack, who was born and raised in segregated Kansas City, Kansas in Wyandotte County. All of his school experiences from elementary to high school were in segregated schools in KCKPS. Although this was the case, his memories of his schooling are fond. He lived in the same community where he went to school, and because the city was segregated, he lived in the same community with his family, friends, and his teachers. However, the mention of Superintendents Schlagle or Plucker bring up feelings of discontent and at times anger. He made it clear to me his perception of district leadership was not in the best interest of Black students, and he provided specific stories to support his perceptions. He is just one example of the kind of community member I sought to interview. Others include community members who are significantly older than my father. Their educational experiences were under the leadership of Superintendent Schlagle. One such member is Mrs. Barbara Moten, who shared with me a memory similar to one my father shared with me. She attended

Sumner from 1949 to 1952, and she remembers Schlagle visiting Sumner for a program in which she participated. Mrs. Moten said Schlagle referred to the Black students as, “you people” that were being “well trained.” She said she felt insulted by his words. These are the kinds of stories that I wished to uncover through my research.

This historical researcher’s goal is to put pieces of the past together from sources collected.¹⁷ For the past to come together, it is necessary to gather oral histories. All recorded history started as oral history.¹⁸ The questions I asked and the stories that were told give what Ritchie calls a “bottom up” perspective.¹⁹ Recording the reminiscences of others who were directly and indirectly affected by the decisions made will add to the collection of documents, archives, newspaper articles, district documents, and superintendent documents to compose a full picture of the stability in the district and the community during this era.

I used specialty collections such as those found in the Kansas Room at the main Kansas City, Kansas Public Library. The Kansas Collection is a compilation of all that is Kansas, including Kansas City, Kansas, Wyandotte County, and KCKPS. The public library also has some archived board minutes and district reports. Some of the board minutes I accessed and reviewed are dated from May 15, 1911, to June 15, 1914. I also used documents stored at KCKPS central office archives, along with other documents to add to the layers of this study. I used artifacts from schools’ historical collections to gather different perspectives of the times.

¹⁷ Torou Elena, Akrivi Katifori, Costas Vassilakis, George Lepouras, and Constantin Halatsis, “Historical Research in Archives: User Methodology and Supporting Tools,” *International Journal on Digital Libraries* 11, no. 1 (2010): 25–36, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00799-010-0062-4>.

¹⁸ Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Procedures and Participants

For this research I had a total of 11 participants. Nine of the contributors were interviewed either in person or through Zoom meetings. I asked questions and used pictures and headlines from the timeframe studies to spark memories and stories from participants. One interview session was a group interview with three ladies whom I affectionately call the “Church Ladies,” and another interview was a husband and wife duo who interviewed together. In each of these cases, the questions and interaction helped to revive memories that created robust conversation and insight into the time period studied.

Each of the sessions was recorded and transcribed. After transcribing was completed, each participant was given a copy of the transcript for their review and approval to use their voices in the study. In one instance, the participant was selective of the stories and information I could use in the study. As the researcher, I respected the participant’s request and cut pieces from the transcript and resubmitted it to the interviewee, who gave final approval of the abbreviated transcript.

As I collected stories, I emailed questions to nine participants. Each of them responded in written form. I received their consent to use their words in the study, again allowing them to have control of what words and stories they wanted to share in the research.

Secondary Sources

Other sources that I used to give the study dimension are journal articles, newspapers, and information that may be found in databases. An example is *The Historical Journal of Wyandotte County*. This journal investigates, recalls, and recounts the establishment and settlement of Wyandotte County. In these chronicles are historical tidbits about the district written almost solely by former KCKPS teacher Nellie McGuinn. She collected stories and

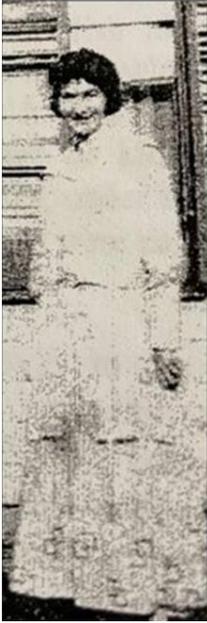


Figure 3. Nellie McGuinn, 1915 and 1965.

information about Wyandotte County and KCKPS at the request of Superintendent Frank L. Schlagle.²⁰

Portions of this historical journal cover the years 1891–1961. In one edition, the stories and a 1915 photo of Ms. McGuinn (see Figure 3) help to make meaning of the history that is recorded. The layering of primary sources with secondary sources provides a clearer picture of race relations in the community and how they influenced district leadership actions. Throughout this

research study, I relied on and referred to scholars who

have studied the histories of urban school districts throughout the country, such as David Tyack, Vanessa Siddle-Walker, and Gloria Ladson Billings. They provided historical context to how KCKPS fits within the larger picture of schooling in the United States during the years under review. As stated earlier, the overall purpose of this study was to scrutinize the so-called era of stability in KCKPS. I took a critical look at the leadership moves of the three superintendents during the 84 years that make up the period and used oral history interviews, document analysis, and archival research to tell the story of this time. Regarding terminology throughout the dissertation, when referring to groups of people, I use the term *Black* to refer to Black Americans, unless quoting sources which may use the terms *African-American* or *Negro*. I use the terms *Indigenous Peoples* or *Native Americans* interchangeably for style

²⁰ Nellie McGuinn and Patricia Adams, “The Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools 1891–1961, Part I,” *The Historical Journal of Wyandotte County* 2, no. 8 (2007), 338–44.

purposes and use the term *Indian* if quoting a source or if specifically referring to a tribe which itself uses that term.

The Sunflower State: Kansas

Kansas conjures thoughts of ruby slippers, wide open plains, cattle drives, cowboys, and a vast sea of wheat. What is less commonly considered is Kansas' history and significance concerning early legal decisions about race in the United States or how its founding forced the country to address the anti-slavery versus pro-slavery question. Kansas was a determining factor in other race decisions after the Civil War. From its inception, it has been associated with race relations in the United States.²¹ Kansas shaped the likes of abolitionist John Brown and his followers. The town of Nicodemus, “the oldest and only remaining Black settlement west of the Mississippi River”²² was founded in 1877.²³ And the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* that overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* and made it illegal to segregate students by race in public schools. Kansas has caused the nation to pivot more than once to change its laws.

But “race relations in the Sunflower state have been far from peaceful.”²⁴ Giving the appearance of being free of racial problems and concerns,²⁵ Kansas has been inconsistent in its race relations; it has been known for Indian genocide, school segregation, the only state to legally evict the Klan, and censoring the film *Birth of a Nation*.²⁶ These contradictions and confusion affected the state and its race relations. “How could ‘the free state’ that opened its

²¹ “Race Relations in the Sunflower State,” accessed June 7, 2021, https://www.kshs.org/publicat/history/2002autumn_leiker.pdf.

²² “Kansas: Nicodemus National Historic Site,” National Parks Service (U.S. Department of the Interior), accessed September 1, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/nico/index.htm>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Leiker, “Race Relations in the Sunflower State.”

²⁶ Ibid.

doors to fugitive slaves and freedom simultaneously be a land of Jim Crow and Indian removal?”²⁷ According to Peavler, “the state was a “paradox” because Kansans’ racial attitudes were “neither consistent nor monolithic.”²⁸ Kansas history about race is, to say the least, complex, inconsistent, and oxymoronic.²⁹ This section of my research focuses on the state of Kansas, and more specifically the Kansas City, Kansas area and how the unique history of this region has influenced the founding and the journey of Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools.

Kansas’ journey towards statehood was fraught with controversy. From its beginning as a territory, Kansas was a microcosm of issues concerning slavery that were argued in Congress and in all parts of the United States. For example, during one session of Congress in 1856, one congressman attacked another because of his views on the topic of slavery.

On May 22, 1856, Preston Smith Brooks, a South Carolinian congressman, assaulted a seated Charles Sumner, antislavery senator from Massachusetts, in the Senate chamber. Brooks rained blows on Sumner’s head and shoulders with his cane while Representative Laurence M. Keitt, a secessionist colleague from South Carolina, kept others at bay. Brooks later described the caning in a letter to his brother, “I struck him with my cane and gave him about 30 first rate stripes with a gutta perch cane.... Every lick went where I intended.”³⁰

Senator Preston Smith Brooks violently caned Senator Charles Sumner for his speech, “*The Crime Against Kansas*.” Senator Sumner’s speech described the Kansas-Nebraska Act as a ploy to allow slavery in the new territories and states of Kansas and Nebraska. The following excerpt is a portion of Sumner’s passionate oration.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ David J. Peavler, “Drawing the Color Line in Kansas City,” accessed April 17, 2021, https://www.kshs.org/publicat/history/2005autumn_peavler.pdf, 188.

²⁹ Leiker, “Race Relations in the Sunflower State.”

³⁰ Manisha Sinha, “The Caning of Charles Sumner: Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 233–62, accessed September 2, 2021, https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=afroam_faculty_pubs.

It belongs to me now, in the first place, to expose the CRIME AGAINST KANSAS, in its origin and extent. Logically, this is the beginning of the argument. I say crime, and deliberately adopt this strongest term, as better than any other denoting the consummate transgression.³¹

The foundation of this dispute was the Kansas-Nebraska Act proposed by Senator Stephen Douglass of Illinois. This new act repealed the Missouri Compromise. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 reinstated popular sovereignty, which permitted people to move into the Kansas Territory to vote but not to settle.³² With the passage of this act, that is just what happened. People from other states and territories rushed to Kansas to cast illegal votes on whether Kansas would be a free state or a slave state. The passing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act split the Democratic party and “inspired the formation of the republican party.” and Republicans opposed the expansion or extension of slavery into new territories.³³ Consequently, with all of the conflict and battles about slavery, the state earned the unfortunate nickname of Bleeding Kansas in 1856.

“Bleeding Kansas describes the period of repeated outbreaks of violent guerrilla warfare between pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces following the creation of the new territory of Kansas in 1854.”³⁴ Pro-slavery advocates or “border ruffians” and free-staters, also known as “Jayhawkers,” moved into Kansas to vote their choice. Neighboring Missouri, a slave state, did not want a free state on its border negatively impacting its finances and production connected to slavery. Therefore, “Kansas became a battle ground over the future

³¹ “Crime Against Kansas—Charles Sumner 1856,” Emerson Kent.com: History for the Relaxed Historian, Famous Speeches in History, 2016, http://www.emersonkent.com/speeches/the_crime_against_kansas.htm

³² Susan D. Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas: A History* (Kansas City, Kansas: The City, 1982).

³³ History.com Editors, “Bleeding Kansas,” History.com, October 27, 2009, <https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/bleeding-kansas>.

³⁴ Ibid.

of slavery in the United States.”³⁵ In March 1855 enough pro-slavery supporters were able to vote into law pro-slavery legislation. Although 6,307 votes were cast, there were only 2,905 residents qualified to vote in the territory.³⁶ Even though the majority of the votes were cast illegally, pro-slavery advocates achieved the victory.³⁷ The egregious outcome of a pro-slavery victory got the attention of the president of the United States, Franklin Pierce. President Pierce acknowledged the pro-slavery legislation as the official legislation in the territory.³⁸ Pro-slavery advocate David Atchison, a Missouri congressman, was instrumental in getting people from Missouri to vote in Kansas for slavery. It is interesting to note that Atchison, a Missourian, has a city in Kansas named after him—the city of Atchison, Kansas.

Through all of the unrest, it is important to know Kansas was home to Blacks, Latinx peoples, Indigenous peoples, and Asians, none of whom would have been considered valuable citizens. Kansans opposed slavery, not because it was wrong, but because it “degraded the labor of white men.”³⁹ And at the same time, Kansas prohibited freed Black men and slaves from the territory before statehood. As stated earlier, Kansas is also known for the genocide of Indigenous peoples. “The defeat and demise of Indians was preordained...for a more just and civilized society to be built.”⁴⁰ The state that fought to enter the union as a free state has a history that is a paradox concerning race.

From its beginnings, Kansas was home to several groups of Native Americans. The Wyandot Indians, from Ohio, purchased land from the Delaware tribe and were instrumental

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Leiker, “Race Relations in the Sunflower State,” 220.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 218.

in settling the Kansas City area when they arrived in 1843⁴¹; they were the last group of Indians to hold land in Wyandotte County. The Kansas Historical Society noted, “The Wyandots came from Ohio in 1843. They were a civilized people and the institutions which they established were as good or better than those of the white frontiersmen.”⁴² They owned land, and three Wyandot Indians were stockholders of the land along with four others.⁴³ In addition to the Native tribes and settlers, other groups explored this new territory around the same area in Kansas City, Kansas.

In 1804 Lewis and Clark, commissioned by President Thomas Jefferson, travelled through the area to gather reconnaissance and geographic data.⁴⁴ The first permanent white settlers arrived and created a home for themselves in 1812. By 1832 missionaries built the first church, and according to an account by Dr. F.W. Blackmar, they were considered the second group of settlers to settle in the vicinity.⁴⁵ Soon more people from other states and territories came to Wyandotte County for opportunities, financial and otherwise. Thousands travelled through Wyandotte County to get to California in hopes of attaining wealth during the Gold Rush.⁴⁶ As people passed through, some stayed and established businesses and prospered, thereby solidifying the area as a stable settlement. The Chouteau trading post and other business institutions in the region flourished.⁴⁷ As the businesses grew, the city formed.

⁴¹ Kansas Historical Society, February 2010, modified September 2018, “Wyandotte County, Kansas,” <https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/wyandotte-county-kansas/15359>.

⁴² “Geology of Wyandotte County,” KU Geological Survey, February 25, 2014, accessed February 28, 2022, http://www.kgs.ku.edu/General/Geology/Wyandotte/02_geog.html.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ History.com Editors, “Lewis and Clark Expedition,” November 9, 2009, updated March 16, 2021, <https://www.history.com/topics/westward-expansion/lewis-and-clark>.

⁴⁵ “Geology of Wyandotte County.”

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

These settlers established homes, started families, and founded schools to educate their children. Cutler stated:

The city limits are also the limits of the school district, which contains about 300 acres of land, 5,000 people, and nearly 500 school children; seven teachers are employed. The first building was built in 1871; in 1879 it was enlarged.⁴⁸

Kansas City, Kansas was created by several areas that merged with Wyandotte. The Kansas Geological Survey notes:

Several other towns have merged with Wyandotte to form the present Kansas City. Armstrong, an early settlement on the north side of the Kansas river and south of Wyandotte, was soon absorbed by the latter. Quindaro was north of Wyandotte. Armourdale, north of Kansas river, still has its identity, as to a greater degree have Argentine and Rosedale south of the river. The business districts of these last two are quite distinct from that of Kansas City proper. Rosedale was the last city to be annexed, the merger taking place 1922.⁴⁹

With the movement and growth, industries developed that helped the citizens of the area and their families survive and thrive. As the city grew, it became known for industries in meat packing, flour milling, soap manufacturing, structural steel, repair and construction of railroad cars, oil refining, druggists' preparations, and ice cream manufacturing, which were all profitable industries beginning in the late 1800s.⁵⁰ The Geology of Wyandotte County stated that by 1927, the manufactured output of Kansas City, Kansas was 44% of that of the entire state of Kansas.⁵¹ These statistics are evidence that Kansas was an economic force and a significant economic player in the nation.⁵²

⁴⁸ "Wyandotte County, Part 12," William G. Cutler's History of the State of Kansas, Kansas Collection Books, n.d., <http://kancoll.org/books/cutler/wyandotte/wyandotte-co-p12.html>.

⁴⁹ "Geology of Wyandotte County."

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

Kansas City, Kansas started as one of several townships in the early history of the area. As time progressed and townships grew, they consolidated into one city. The early cities that consolidated in 1886 were Wyandott City, Quindaro City, Kansas City, Kansas, and Armourdale City.⁵³ This section of the study gives some details about each of these cities, their attributes, and how they contributed to the character of Kansas City, Kansas.

The Founding of Kansas City, Kansas

The Wyandot Indian Nation established Wyandott City, which merged with other cities in the Kansas City area along with settlements to the west and southwest to form Wyandotte County.⁵⁴ This indigenous tribe settled in Kansas after being forced out of Ohio in 1830 as a result of United States' Indian removal policies.⁵⁵ Before moving to Kansas, this tribe had established what white settlers would have considered a sophisticated way of life in Ohio. For instance, the Wyandot intermarried with Europeans or whites, and some of the tribe even converted to Christianity and joined the Methodist Episcopal church. These indigenous peoples adopted white settlers into their tribe so by the time they moved to Kansas, there were few who were full-blooded Wyandot Indians. They were educated and experienced businessmen.⁵⁶ Because of their experiences with whites, they desired to settle in Indian territory near white settlements to re-establish the lifestyle they had in Ohio.⁵⁷ Approximately 664 Wyandots settled in the state of Kansas because of the government-forced relocation.⁵⁸

⁵³ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

⁵⁴ "Geology of Wyandotte County."

⁵⁵ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

A review of the Wyandot immigrants reflects that they were heavily assimilated with many being of part or whole European stock. Several had been captured as children and raised into the tribe. Many of the tribe were literate and still others were well educated for the time. There were members who were experienced businessmen and several had been members of the Bar in Ohio.⁵⁹

The land the Wyandots purchased was surrounded by “intensely pro-slavery settlements” such as Parkville, Westport, and Thomas Johnson’s Shawnee Methodist Mission.⁶⁰ These neighboring settlements were concerned about the possibility that Kansas could enter the Union as a free state, and more importantly, they were worried that slaves would take advantage of having a free western settlement—Quindaro—nearby.

The city of Quindaro was named after Quindaro Brown Gutherie, the daughter of Chief Adam Brown.⁶¹ The Wyandot word Quindaro means *bundle of sticks* or *strength through union*.⁶² This Nation of people worked together and flourished in Quindaro, even while the areas around them were arguing the slavery issue.

Within a short span of time, after acquiring their new lands from the Delaware, the Wyandot built houses and barns, cultivated farmlands, planted orchards and opened roads and trails. They also brought the great wealth of their culture to this area.⁶³

The land the Wyandots purchased had been a part of the Delaware Nation Reserve.⁶⁴

Quindaro was located on the south side of the Missouri River across from Parkville, a port city in a slave state. I will explain the significance of this later in the chapter. Established in 1829, Quindaro was a part of the Indian removal resettlement. Wyandots were the third

⁵⁹ Loren L. Taylor, *The Historic Communities of Wyandotte County* (Wyandotte County, Kansas: Wyandotte County Historical Society and Museum, 2005), 235.

⁶⁰ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

⁶¹ Nellie McGuinn and Patricia Adams, “The Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools, 1891–1961, Part I.”

⁶² Taylor, *The Historic Communities of Wyandotte County*.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

major “Immigrant Tribe” to obtain land in Wyandotte County. The Shawnee and the Delaware were the other two Indian nations that had settled in the area.⁶⁵

The town of Quindaro was one of a number of Kansas territorial riverports founded in the mid-1850s following passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which established Kansas and Nebraska Territories and opened those territories for settlement.⁶⁶

The news of this free city attracted free Blacks and escaped slaves from Parkville and Weston, both in neighboring Missouri.⁶⁷ Quindaro became a part of the underground railroad in defiance of the Dred Scott decision in 1857.⁶⁸ The Supreme Court ruled in *Dred Scott v. John F.A. Sandford* that Black Americans “were not and could never be citizens of the United States.”⁶⁹ This decision deepened the divide between pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces, which in turn added fuel to the fire and placed Blacks in more dangerous situations in slavery and in freedom.

The location of Quindaro and Wyandott City made them safe destinations for freed Blacks and escaped slaves. In May of 1858, those pro-slavery citizens who lived in Parkville, just across the river, complained that Quindaro was “enticing” slaves to run away.⁷⁰ With the development of free townships in Kansas, slave bounty hunters would raid Kansas communities to recapture runaways. Therefore, escapees and freed Blacks who remained lived together in towns and communities for protection. This was the beginning of a permanent Black community in Wyandotte County.⁷¹ As a result, in 1858, Quindaro approved Negro suffrage in municipal elections.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 290.

⁶⁷ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

⁶⁸ Taylor, *The Historic Communities of Wyandotte County*.

⁶⁹ “Dred Scott Decision,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, accessed September 12, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Dred-Scott-decision>.

⁷⁰ Taylor, *The Historic Communities of Wyandotte County*.

⁷¹ Ibid.

It should be noted that the Wyandots were a tolerant society in accepting members of other races into their society. As example, they gave refuge to a band of escaped slaves from Kentucky and allowed them to form a small community called Negrotown on their land and under their protection.⁷²

This seemed quite progressive for the time, but the Wyandots had contradictions concerning race. Some members of the Wyandots were members of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Slavery impacted the congregation, and its Wyandot members had to take sides regarding the subject. Although this free settlement voted to approve Negro suffrage, they also voted to have separate or segregated school systems.⁷³ This is one of the earliest mentions of a school system in the Kansas City, Kansas area, and it was segregated. The indigenous people and white settlers, who did not believe in slavery, were both abolitionists and segregationists. In spite of their segregationist attitudes and the creation of separate schools by race, Blacks who lived in Quindaro had opportunities to live in relative peace.

Wyandot tribal leaders established the city of Wyandott, and like Quindaro, it prospered. They created the first local government, school system, legal system, economic base, and religious foundation in the area.⁷⁴ And Wyandott City, like its neighbor Quindaro, was a haven for free Blacks and escaped slaves. The government of this unofficial Native American town was formed in June of 1856 by the Wyandot tribe, thereby showing their experience and knowledge of leadership.⁷⁵ By 1858 the population was 1,259.⁷⁶

This city, even with its government and other institutions, quickly acquired a reputation of being a “whiskey town,” and due to rowdy behavior, the Wyandot established a

⁷² Ibid., 235.

⁷³ Adams, “Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools Timeline Part 1.”

⁷⁴ McGuinn and Adams, “The Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools, 1891–1961, Part I.”

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Taylor, *The Historic Communities of Wyandotte County*.

court system to deal with violators. An example was the notorious tavern called the “six-mile house.” According to the reference in the Loren L. Taylor chronology from *The Wyandott City Gazette*, “thirteen unpunished murders in the county” occurred in the vicinity of the six-mile house. An increase in the number of drinking establishments and poor behavior after drinking prompted the formation of the Wyandott City Temperance Society.⁷⁷ In addition to the temperance society, laws and regulations were created to address the increase in crime in the city.⁷⁸ There were also crimes that crossed the lines of intolerance. Specifically, Wyandots’ churches were being burned in the area.⁷⁹

Quindaro and Wyandott City were part of the foundation of Kansas City, Kansas. Although a part of the same area, they were very different, and each of them added to the culture and climate that would become Kansas City, Kansas. Quindaro, with its progressive perspective of freedom for all and supporting free Blacks and escaped slaves, juxtaposed against the almost stereotypical cowboy town in the movies with saloons and outlaws, created the backdrop of Wyandott City. In both cases, their contributions are important to the history of the area.

These two cities are part of the foundation of Kansas City, Kansas that welcomed indigenous peoples, free Blacks, and escaped slaves. They established homes, communities, businesses, and farms, and they were able to support themselves. Historical descriptions give each of them unique characteristics: Quindaro—a stop on the underground railroad—and Wyandott—a place to get a drink and have a good time. These two cities are a part of the fabric of what became Kansas City, Kansas and eventually the home of KCKPS.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Armourdale City

The state of Kansas is known for its farmland, and there were farms within the boundaries of Kansas City, Kansas. At the end of the Civil War, Armourdale, located north of the Kansas river,⁸⁰ was productive farmland. By the late 1860s, railroads were being established in the area, and Armourdale became integral to the railroad in the Kansas City area.⁸¹ Because of the railroads, Armourdale became an industrial area. “What was to become Armourdale was a natural crossroads to the south and west from Wyandott City.”⁸² Armourdale’s story is about the growth of industry in the Kansas City area. Some businesses in Missouri moved across the river to set up in Armourdale.⁸³

Several industries established their businesses in Armourdale, including the Armourdale Brick Yard,⁸⁴ whose services were needed for the construction of packing houses. The Kansas Desiccating and Refining Company of Armourdale was in the business of dead animals, and they located their stockyards in the area.⁸⁵ Some other businesses that settled in the area were the Armourdale Foundry, the Armourdale Agricultural Implement Factory, Beaton & Co., which “sold dry good, notions, boots, shoes, hats, etc.,” William B. Douglas Company, Frank D. Heilman Co. Hardware Store, and the Chance Bros. Park.⁸⁶ Armourdale became a thriving city as industry continued to grow.

Wyandott City and Kansas City, Kansas considered Armourdale City a rival. In the early 1880’s, the leaders of Wyandott and Kansas City, Kansas were carefully watching the powerful interests that were involved in the formation of this new rival city situated within the same county. Both became concerned for their own potential growth. The rapid growth of industry and population into the Armourdale area gave

⁸⁰ “Geology of Wyandotte County.”

⁸¹ Loren L. Taylor, *The Historic Communities of Wyandotte County*.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 325.

ample evidence of a powerful rival developing. By 1882, the population had grown from a small number of farm holders to over 1,200 inhabitants.⁸⁷

With the population growth, a new government was founded in the area. The area had its first election May 5, 1882, in which a mayor and other city officials were elected.⁸⁸ They also set up a school system for their children. There was even a small Black community living in the area and a “‘colored school’ was opened... in the western portion of the town.”⁸⁹ Each of the early cities had diversity within its boundaries.

Black Americans in Kansas City, Kansas

The first record of a Black person of African descent in the Kansas City, Kansas area was a woman named Dorcas, who was brought into the region from Missouri in 1847 by a Wyandot.⁹⁰ William Walker, Jr., who was a member of the Wyandot Nation, purchased his Black companion for \$350.00 at a Missouri slave auction.⁹¹ This instigated discord in the Wyandot community, because they were abolitionists, and Walker was obviously pro-slavery. Walker’s action of purchasing a slave and bringing her back to the community split the local Methodist church, causing people to choose sides.⁹² The division was so deep that church congregations reflected either abolitionist views or pro-slavery views.

Although the first recorded history of a Black person in Kansas City, Kansas was controversial, Blacks in Kansas City, Kansas have a rich history. For example, free Black farmers were living in the area before 1860.⁹³ These agriculturalists farmed in the same community as white farmers. Not only were there free Blacks farmers, there were also farm

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² “Geology of Wyandotte County.”

⁹³ Taylor, *The Historic Communities of Wyandotte County*.

laborers who worked for white farmers, who paid fair wages.⁹⁴ These were some of the factors that enticed others to move to the area to settle. Blacks from Ohio, Virginia, Missouri, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, and Kentucky moved to the Kansas City metropolitan area.⁹⁵ “By 1859 there were a growing number of free African-Americans⁹⁶ living in Wyandott City.”⁹⁷ This movement or migration of large numbers of Black people occurred between 1857 and 1860, before the Exoduster movement, when freed Blacks left the south after the Civil War because northern troops no longer provided protection for them. According to Greenbaum (1982),

Kansas City, Kansas developed differently because of early free state activities and the Exodus. As a result, the city provided the setting for the unusually early development of a large, diversified Afro-American community.⁹⁸

After the Civil War, Blacks were left to take care of themselves, and they were more than capable of doing so. However, the threats of domestic terrorism from the Ku Klux Klan was more than they bargained for with their freedom. So, to avoid the terrors by night and the harassment by day, many Blacks packed up and moved to other parts of the country. Kansas was one of those destinations, and Kansas City, Kansas was a popular locale. According to Kansas City, Kansas history, in this significant migration, Black people moved to the plains states with the image of “Free Kansas” in their minds.⁹⁹

Before and during this time, there were no places in the new communities that were heavily concentrated with Blacks. When Black families and individuals settled in Wyandott,

⁹⁴ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Throughout this study, the author uses the term Black. However, in some of the resources the terms Negro and African American may be used.

⁹⁷ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*. 260.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 28–9.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

they settled near white families all across the town.¹⁰⁰ This is similar to the Wyandots, who chose to live near white settlements to reestablish the way of life they were accustomed to in Ohio. This is also evidence of relative racial harmony in the area, even though there were border wars in other parts of the state.

Kansas City, Kansas and the Civil War

Although there was relative racial harmony in the early Kansas City, Kansas area, there were other parts of the state where lives were lost due to disputes between pro-slavery factions and anti-slavery groups before the Civil War started.¹⁰¹ These disputes grew into larger violent exchanges in Lawrence, Kansas in late 1855 and early 1856, when pro-slavery groups stormed and destroyed property in the city.¹⁰² These bloody battles were people's response to the possibility of Kansas entering the Union as a free state. On January 29, 1861, Kansas entered the Union as a free state and on April 12, 1861, the Civil War began.

When the war started, several phenomena occurred as a result: More slaves escaped to Wyandotte County,¹⁰³ and Black males from both the Wyandott and Quindaro townships enlisted in the Union army¹⁰⁴—so much so that beginning in 1862, the majority of the Black regiments were escaped slaves from Missouri.¹⁰⁵ There were enough enlistees to form three Black units from Kansas and enough indigenous people to create three regiments of Native-American troops.¹⁰⁶ These recorded additions to the Union army increased the number of

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ History.com Editors, "Bleeding Kansas."

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Taylor, *The Historic Communities of Wyandotte County*.

¹⁰⁴ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Taylor, *The Historic Communities of Wyandotte County*.

men from Kansas who enlisted to fight: “Kansas contributed more men per capita to the Civil War than any other state in the Union.”¹⁰⁷

When the war started and progressed, Quindaro’s population decreased drastically because as men joined the military, they sent their families to Wyandott or to other states for safety. “Once the Civil War began in April 1861, much of Quindaro’s remaining population began to disappear.”¹⁰⁸ In contrast, the war had the opposite effect on Wyandott City. When the war started, the city experienced growth.

In the meantime, Quindaro was used as a base for the Second Kansas Calvary.¹⁰⁹ Soldiers moved into the homes of those who had left the city, and they basically trampled Quindaro to the ground with their harsh living. On March 6, 1862, the state repealed the town’s charter, officially ending the Quindaro Township.¹¹⁰ Although it was the official ending and whites were leaving the city, escaped slaves and free Blacks from Platte County in Missouri settled in and near the abandoned area.¹¹¹ During this time in 1865, the Black population went from 30 to 429.¹¹² Recent historical accounts of Quindaro would have one believe that Quindaro turned into an all-Black settlement quickly after its founding; however Loren L. Taylor mentions the pace being much slower than that: “Contrary to some reports, the transition from the white frontier town to the black refugee settlement was gradual rather than discontinuous or abrupt, and was never total.”¹¹³ Although it was the official end of the Quindaro Township, it was not the official end of Quindaro. Black residents lived in the area

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 263.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 304.

¹⁰⁹ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Taylor, *The Historic Communities of Wyandotte County*.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 306.

and eventually would build and settle the area, establishing churches and schools to meet the needs of the community.

Choices and Changes

Throughout the early history of Kansas City, Kansas until right after the Civil War, several significant changes shaped the history of the place and the people. On January 31, 1855, the Wyandot Nation signed a treaty with the United States dissolving their tribal status.¹¹⁴ The signing of this treaty resulted in the Wyandots gaining citizenship and losing their land as a community.

In January 1855, the Wyandott Nation entered into a treaty with the government whereby a majority of them became citizens of the United States, and their lands were divided in severalty.¹¹⁵

With this action, individual members of the tribe followed government processes and procedures to obtain—or should I say *retain*—land allotments to live on.

I have given information about Quindaro City, Wyandott City, and Kansas City; however, during their growth and development, other towns, cities, and hamlets were established in the area. Together these areas totaled more than twenty-five separate communities that had representatives from more than twenty-three distinct ethnicities which became Wyandotte County. Organized on January 29, 1859, Wyandotte County was established in the Kansas territory (see Figures 4 and 5).¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 266.

¹¹⁶ “Research,” Kansas Historical Society, accessed December 29, 2021, <https://www.kshs.org/p/research/19385>.



Figure 4. "Bird's Eye View" Map of Wyandotte Co., Kansas, 1869



Figure 5. Map of Eastern Wyandotte County, circa 1885

Early Schools, School Systems, and Segregation

Kansas City, Kansas education actually began with the Wyandots' system that they brought with them from Ohio.¹¹⁷ According to records, this system began in 1819,¹¹⁸ and in 1844 John Armstrong, an early Kansas City, Kansas settler, opened a free school.¹¹⁹

The first schoolhouse was erected by the Wyandot Nation in 1844, and John M. Armstrong opened a school there in July of that year.¹²⁰

Soon after, in 1857, a school was started in Quindaro.¹²¹ Like all schools in the United States during this time, it was for white children only. Thus, the settlement that was founded by abolitionists started a school that did not include students of color. The mayor at this time, Alfred Gray, urged the local governing council in 1858 to establish a school for Black children.¹²²

In 1858, two schools were built. According to records, \$2,000 was spent to build a school for white children, and \$500 was spent to build a school for Black children.¹²³ Thus, the beginning of public education in Kansas City, Kansas started with inequality and inequity. Further, the salary for a teacher who taught white children was \$700, and the teacher of Black children earned \$500 less.¹²⁴

There were those who believed white children and Black children deserved to be educated together. Bertia Carpenter, a white female educator, was one of those people. She started a private school in Quindaro in 1859 that served Blacks and whites.¹²⁵

¹¹⁷ McGuinn and Adams, "The Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools, 1891–1961, Part I."

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

¹²⁰ Taylor, *The Historic Communities of Wyandotte County*.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Taylor, *Historic Communities of Wyandotte County*, 300.

Ms. Carpenter’s name is not important to this study, but I think it is important to note that Ms. Carpenter’s mother was a friend of Susan B. Anthony, famed historical leader for women’s rights and anti-slavery movement.¹²⁶ But again, it is critical to understand that this was a private school, and the public school was segregated.

This recorded beginning of public education in Kansas City, Kansas was rooted in segregation that continued to grow. Indeed, during these nearly 100 years, it was evident that a dual system of education would become the norm. For example, between the years of 1859 and 1961, according to McGuinn, there were 18 schools “that were either built as or became schools for African-American students.”¹²⁷

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Kansas City, Kansas experienced growth through the Civil War. Free Blacks and escaped slaves moved to the area to settle. Around 1862 a school for the children of escaped slaves was founded by a Presbyterian minister from Pennsylvania.¹²⁸ After the war ended, the school continued to grow.¹²⁹ As a result, in January of 1872, a school, the “Colored Normal School of Quindaro,” as it was called,¹³⁰ was created to train Black teachers. Although segregation, inequalities, and inequities existed, the Black communities continued to educate their children. White communities were growing as well, and therefore, it was necessary to officially establish a school district in the Kansas City, Kansas area. “The 1st school district was organized in 1867 in the city of Wyandott.”¹³¹

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Nellie McGuinn, and Patricia Adams, “African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859–1961), Part 1 of 7,” *The Historical Journal of Wyandotte County* 2, no. 10 (2008): 561–4.

¹²⁸ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ “Research,” Kansas Historical Society.

Putting this into perspective, state law at that time allowed but did not require or mandate segregated schools in Kansas.¹³² The existence of segregated schools in the United States resulted in non-whites fighting for equality in public schooling. In the late 1870s free Blacks, called Exodusters, traveled from the south and settled in northern states.¹³³ With this movement, Kansas became home to many of the Exodusters, and in Wyandotte County alone, the Black population had grown to 2,120 by 1870,¹³⁴ seventy times more than the number who had lived in the area in 1860.¹³⁵ The majority lived near or in Wyandotte County. There were even Black families that revived Quindaro.¹³⁶ The exponential increase in the Black population during this time caused white Kansans to insist—and even demand—segregated schools. This prompted Black families in Kansas to fight even harder for equality in public schools.¹³⁷

By 1875, Wyandotte County had over 15 different races and cultures represented,¹³⁸ and the state of Kansas was experiencing more growth in Black American communities. By 1878, 40,000 Blacks had settled in Kansas.¹³⁹ This growth continued in other northern states because the U.S. military presence in the south had been removed by President Hayes. When the military left southern states, domestic terrorism ensued. The Ku Klux Klan began in the south, making life more than challenging for Blacks who remained. Because of this, and coupled with sharecropping and crop failures, Blacks left the south in droves.¹⁴⁰ Again,

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ “Research,” Kansas Historical Society.

¹³⁸ Loren L. Taylor, *The Consolidated Ethnic History of Wyandotte County* (Kansas City, Kansas: Kansas City, Kansas Ethnic Council, 2000).

¹³⁹ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

Kansas was the destination of many of them. The image and advertising of “Free Kansas” was enticing to many Blacks who wanted to leave the south.¹⁴¹ Thousands moved to Wyandotte County. The county became overwhelmed, which caused churches to offer support and assist the movement of Blacks to other parts of the state.¹⁴²

More people required more schools. By 1880, of the 2,627 school-age children, Black and white, in the Kansas City, Kansas area, 1,000 of them were attending two schools in the district.¹⁴³ As mentioned previously, Kansas law allowed but did not require segregation in schools. The statute, passed by the legislature in 1879, permitted segregation at the elementary level in cities with populations greater than 15,000.¹⁴⁴

In 1879 the Kansas legislature passed a statute specifically allowing first class cities (those with populations of 15,000 or more) to operate separate primary schools.¹⁴⁵

Some ethnic churches started and sustained their own schools so their children could continue to learn about their culture and build an “ethnic closeness and cohesion.”¹⁴⁶ Prior to 1886, there was one elementary school for Black children.¹⁴⁷ Two additional elementary schools were built for Black children to accommodate population growth.¹⁴⁸ There was also the “Colored School of Quindaro” which had its own school board and was originally its own district.¹⁴⁹ In these neighborhood schools, families were involved with the school and each other.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Nellie McGuinn and Patricia Adams, “African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859–1961), Part 2 of 7,” *The Historical Journal of Wyandotte County Special Sesquicentennial Edition* 2, no. 13 (2008): 1005–8.

¹⁴⁴ Peavler, “Drawing the Color Line in Kansas City.”

¹⁴⁵ “Research,” Kansas Historical Society.

¹⁴⁶ Taylor, *The Consolidated Ethnic History of Wyandotte County*.

¹⁴⁷ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

In spite of the disadvantages that were conferred by the dual system, parent involvement introduced a measure of pride and a sense of self-determination in the crucial task of educating their children.¹⁵⁰

For example, the families of the Black schools had parent groups for support. The school was a center for education, but they assisted students and their families by collecting food and clothing. They even started hot lunch programs for students by making soup in the boiler room.¹⁵¹ The parents and teachers went above and beyond to instill the importance of education to the children and the community.¹⁵² These schools and programs were started as a result of segregation. The Black community was making the best of the “injustices of the larger society.”¹⁵³ The segregated schools and school districts reflected the cities and communities they served.

In 1885 there were significant concentrations of Black families in certain parts of the city; for example, 68% of the population in the northeast part of the city was Black.¹⁵⁴ By 1886 Blacks made up 24% of the total population of 20,000; this was larger than other cities in the nation. By comparison, the Black populations in Detroit, Philadelphia, and Chicago were all under 10% of their total populations during this time.¹⁵⁵

Although Blacks were able to have decent lives in Kansas City, Kansas, they still experienced discrimination.¹⁵⁶ However, even within the segregated system, within their own communities, they were able to pursue an education, establish churches, own property, move

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 64.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

freely about town, and hold jobs.¹⁵⁷ Even with racist policies enacted, Blacks felt they had opportunities and options in Kansas City, Kansas.¹⁵⁸

With the disputes concerning slavery, it is not surprising that the legal battle for school integration exploded in the state some ninety years after the end of the Civil War. *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* continued the “story” of Kansas when the Supreme Court declared segregation in schools unconstitutional on May 17, 1954. This monumental case changed public education in the United States by requiring schools to integrate. One would think with the case having roots in Kansas, the state would be among the first to integrate their public schools; however, this was not the case, and certainly not in KCKPS. The railroad and meat packing industries brought both Blacks and whites to Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kansas. They provided thousands of jobs for unskilled laborers.¹⁵⁹ These industries were integrated to complete a job or to reach a goal. But outside of the places of business, the city was segregated, and the schools mirrored the city.

Currently, the largest school district in the city is KCKPS. It is a diverse district that serves 24,000 students from pre-school through 12th grade.¹⁶⁰ The students bring with them over 63 different languages. Demographically, Latinx students are the largest ethnic group in the district at 51% of the overall enrollment. Black students make up 27% of the student population. Eleven percent of students in the district are white and 7% are Asian. Students attend 10 pre-schools, 28 elementary schools, seven middle schools, four comprehensive

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools, August 17, 2020, <https://KCKPS.org>.

high schools, one magnet high school, three alternative school options, and three social emotional/behavior sites.¹⁶¹

Conclusion

As the city grew, it consolidated with other cities and evolved. During the evolution, urban characteristics became a part of the city. Currently Kansas City, Kansas is an urban emergent city—one that has some characteristics of an urban area and the concerns that come with it. In this case the part of Kansas City, Kansas that encompasses Wyandotte County is urban emergent and includes the public school district that shares its name. Milner describes urban emergent schools as “[those] which are typically located in large cities but not as large as the major cities identified in the urban intensive category.”¹⁶² Kansas City, Kansas, and more specifically, Wyandotte County in Kansas City, Kansas, has high poverty that is on a smaller scale than that of larger cities such as New York or Chicago, but the challenges that come with high poverty communities are prevalent.¹⁶³

The first chapter of this study detailed the founding of the state and the city to give a point of reference for Chapters 2 through 4. From 1902 to 1986, KCKPS had three superintendents, and this is a point of pride.¹⁶⁴ However, the 1902–1986 timeframe included some of the most tumultuous times in our nation’s history. And while some would refer to this time period as an era of leadership stability, one of the questions I address is *precisely who benefitted* from the this so-called stability? With this in mind, my study investigated the

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶²H. Richard Milner, “But What Is Urban Education?” *Urban Education* 47, no. 3 (2012): <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085912447516>, 559.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ “History of the KCKs Public Schools Beginning July 1, 1844, Part I–Part IV” [PowerPoint Presentation], (Kansas City, Kansas: KCKPS, n.d).

terms of the three superintendents and how they responded to the changes in the nation and the state as they led the district. I also explored the actions and policies of the district during this time to determine exactly who experienced stability, who benefitted from it, and who did not. Chapter 2 explores the first 30 years of the so-called stable era under the superintendency of Matthew Edgar Pearson, better known in KCKPS as M. E. Pearson, and examines the events that occurred while Pearson was superintendent.

CHAPTER 2

1902–1932: SEPARATING THE RACES IN KCKPS

The history of public schooling for Black students in Kansas City, Kansas dates as far back as 1886.¹ As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Black population increased significantly between 1880 and 1890 from 4,576 to 6,935.² By this time there were Black communities within the city that had their own identities and locations. There was Juniper, was farthest east on the north side of the city and near the river. Rattlebone Hollow, which was west of Juniper, also had some German and Slavic immigrants in the community. The Third Ward between what was then Seventh and Tenth Streets on the north side of State Avenue, was west of the first two communities mentioned. Hogg Town was another Black community named after a family of brothers.³ Those who lived in this area needed to have means to get into the city to work because it was the farthest west. The farther out families lived from the city, the more difficult it was for them to get into the city for jobs and for school. Patricia Adams describes conditions of some streets in Kansas City, Kansas during rain in the late 1800s:

In rainy weather the mud made the street almost impassable, and children arrived in the morning shoes lost in the mire and clothing bedraggled....Then youngsters might roll down the muddy bank and land in an unfilled portion of the ravine twenty or thirty feet below.”⁴

¹ W. W. Boone, *A History of Black Education in Kansas City, Kansas: Readin', 'Riting, 'Rithmetic* (Kansas City, Kansas: Kansas City Kansas Community College, 1986).

² Susan D. Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas: A History* (Kansas City, Kansas: The City, 1982).

³ Loren L. Taylor, *The Historic Communities of Wyandotte County* (Wyandotte County, Kansas: Wyandotte County Historical Society and Museum, 2005).

⁴ Patricia Adams, “Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools Timeline Part 1 Introduction and Schools Organized/Built/Opened 1844–1871,” *The Historical Journal of Wyandotte County* 1, no. 12 (2004): 517–32.

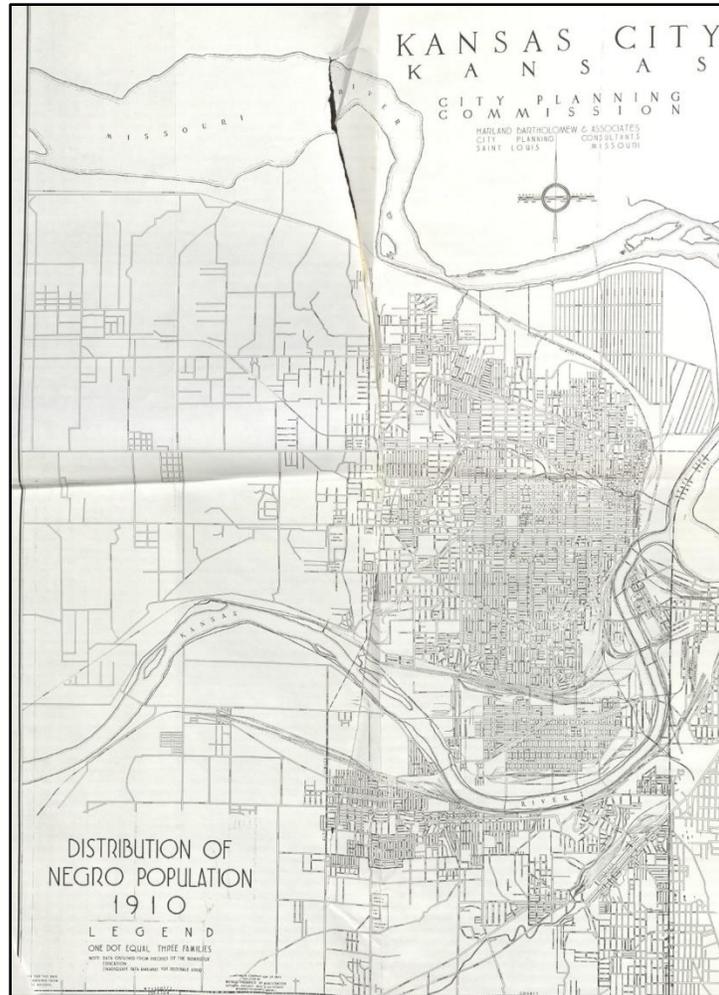


Figure 6. Distribution of Negro Population 1910, Kansas City, Kansas

And, of course, there was Quindaro, the community that was farthest north, with the distinction of having been founded by abolitionists, former slaves, and free Blacks.⁵ With the increase in the Black population, there was a need for schools to educate the children of Black families, and during the early years of the district there were thirteen elementary schools and three secondary schools for Black students.

⁵ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

To understand the founding and growth of KCKPS, it is important to look at the racial history of education in the state and in the Kansas City, Kansas area in the late 1800s. As mentioned earlier, the residents of Quindaro voted to have segregated schools, and that policy was instituted throughout Kansas City, Kansas.

The schools would be free and accessible for ages five to twenty-one, but no black or mulatto would be permitted to attend. School taxes assessed in the property of black or mulatto must be used for the education of black or mulatto.⁶

Therefore, Black communities had separate schools to educate adults and children.

According to Patricia Adams, the *Commercial Gazette* ran a story on November 12, 1863 about a night school for Black citizens in Wyandotte County, referring to the school as a “Colored School” for adults:⁷

Colored School. Mr. Daniel Higley will open a School for the colored population on the corner of fourth street and Kansas Avenue, on Monday next, 23rd inst. The adult colored people will have the benefit of a night school.

In addition, in 1871 the Wood School had 500 students; some were Black, and these students were required to have classes in another building.⁸

Some strides were made by Blacks in the community regarding the educational system. For example, in 1872 Black Civil War veteran, Corrvine Patterson, was elected to the school board (see Figure 7).⁹

⁶Nellie McGuinn and Patricia Adams, “The Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools, 1891–1961, Part II,” *The Historical Journal of Wyandotte County* 2, no. 9 (2007): 495–9.

⁷ Patricia Adams, “Historical Overview of the Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools,” *The Historical Journal of Wyandotte County* 2, no. 3 (2005): 149–54.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.



Figure 7. Corrvine Patterson, circa 1872

And in the late 1880s, Black students from other districts and the western portions of the district had to travel to attend Black schools in KCKPS because there were no Black schools in their districts.¹⁰ Beginning in the late 1800s, Black communities requested schools for their students to attend. The school board responded by repeating the previous practice of separating Black students and white students. In 1885 the school board rented space from a Black church until Douglass Elementary was completed.¹¹ Some in the Black community preferred segregation to the point that they made sure Blacks remained segregated. For example, in 1893 a Black man went before the board and testified that two of the students in a local white school were indeed Black. In response to this information, the two Black students were quickly excluded from the school.¹²

The history of Black education is only part of the story of race separation in KCKPS during the late 1800s and early 1900s. There were also Latinx cultures living in the area, and

¹⁰ Boone, *A History of Black Education in Kansas City, Kansas*.

¹¹ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

¹² Adams, "Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools Timeline Part 1."

their presence in the school district forced the leadership further to determine how to offer education to the children of these families. I provide some information about Latinx students in the district to give context to this study; however, the voices of Black students, parents, and educators are the focus. In any case, with the growth of the railroad and packing house industries in the city, Mexican families moved to the area for employment. “Between 1900 and 1910 Mexican railroad workers and packing house workers appeared in the Rosedale, Armourdale and Turner areas.”¹³ Mexican families moving into the city wanted their children to attend local schools. And, as with Black students, the district was forced to address school facilities and the instruction these students would need. Before the district could fully respond to their needs, Mexican families started sending their students to local schools. This caused white families in the city to protest.

Correspondence between the Consulate of Mexico, M. E. Pearson (see Figure 8), the KCKPS school board, and the attorney general of the state of Kansas in 1924 and 1925 reveals the segregation of Mexican children in KCKPS. In several letters, Beningno Cantu, the Consul of Mexico, located in Kansas City, Missouri, asked for an investigation and information about Mexican children being segregated in different schools and different classrooms throughout the district.¹⁴ The letters spoke specifically of four Mexican students who were in harm’s way when parents and students protested their attending schools with white children.¹⁵ This back and forth gives insight into the feelings of the school board and

¹³ Loren L. Taylor, *The Consolidated Ethnic History of Wyandotte County* (Kansas City, Kansas: Kansas City, Kansas Ethnic Council, 2000).

¹⁴ Rubén Donato and Jarrod Hanson, “‘In These Towns, Mexicans Are Classified as Negroes’: The Politics of Unofficial Segregation in the Kansas Public Schools, 1915–1935,” *American Educational Research Journal* 54, Supplement 1(April 2017): 53S–74S.

¹⁵ Beningno Cantu, Consulado de Mexico, Letter to M. L. Pearson, September 24, 1924; M. L. Pearson Letter to B. Cantu, October 10, 1924, response to the Mexican Consulate; Beningno Cantu Letter to M. L. Pearson, October 16, 1924, Mexican consulate reaching out to M. E. Pearson again because he had not received a

Superintendent Pearson by their excuses and explanations as to why the Mexican students could not attend school with white children. In one letter, the Consul of Mexico says that

M. E. Pearson stated:

The trouble dates back seven years when complaints from patrons in the Emerson School caused the building of the Clara Barton School for Mexican children. Since then it has grown until last spring an agreement was reached with the Mexican Consulate in Kansas City, Mo., that separate schools be provided up to the fifth grade, because the children in these grades were retarded by their lack of English. The Board has kept that agreement. In cases of higher grades pupils the Board has never told the pupils they could not attend the grades with the native Americans.¹⁶

Segregation of Mexican students from white students was practiced by local school officials because of the influence of white communities.¹⁷ Therefore, in some cases schools were established for Mexican children and in others, rooms in other schools were established for Mexican children. The Clara Barton School and the old Major Hudson school were for the education of Mexican children. As students got older, the district also had high schools for Mexican children—even though segregation at the high school level was not legal in Kansas—until there were requests from the citizens of Kansas City, Kansas and a tragic incident occurred involving the death of a high school student, detailed later in this chapter.

response to the first letter; Beningno Cantu Letter to Kirkwood at the *Kansas City Star*, October 21, 1924; M. L. Pearson Letter to Hon. C. B. Griffith, November 28, 1924. Pearson was responding to the Office of the Attorney General in the State of Kansas concerning four Mexican children not being able to attend schools in KCKPS safely.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Donato and Hanson, “In These Towns, Mexicans Are Classified as Negroes.”



Figure 8. M. E. Pearson, Superintendent, 1902-1932

A City Divided and Segregation

In 1879 a statute was introduced in the state that permitted segregation at the elementary level in cities that had a population of more than 15,000 residents.¹⁸ When Pearson took leadership in 1902, Black and white students attended high school together because the city fit the criteria outlined in the statute; thus elementary schools were segregated, but high schools were not. Nevertheless, there were fewer students, Black and white, who attended high school. A student going to high school during this era was like a student attending college now. Students during this time period were able to get solid employment to contribute to their needs or the needs of their family with or without a high school diploma. Therefore, student enrollment in high school was less than the enrollment during the elementary years.¹⁹ Tyack states:

¹⁸ David J. Peavler, "Drawing the Color Line in Kansas City," accessed April 17, 2021, https://www.kshs.org/publicat/history/2005autumn_peavler.pdf, 188.

¹⁹ David Bruce Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974).

Whatever the class origins of individual students, it is clear that most schoolmen before 1900 regarded the high school as a minority institution designed for the bright child whose parents were willing and able to forego her or his labor.²⁰

Consequently, before 1905, all high school aged students, Black and white, attended Kansas City, Kansas High School. The earliest recorded racial tension was in 1890 at graduation when a white student refused to sit next to a Black student at the ceremony.²¹ The situation was resolved when another white student agreed to exchange seats with the student who protested. A few years later, in 1904, segregation at the secondary level became law. “Until 1904, the high school in Kansas City, Kansas had been racially integrated.”²²

In 1904, not long after Pearson became superintendent, he added kindergarten to schools and segregated high school students by race. On April 12, 1904, a tragic incident occurred in the community. A white male student, Roy Martin, who attended Kansas City, Kansas High School, was shot to death by an 18-year-old Black male, Louis Gregory, who was not a student.²³ The death of Roy Martin sparked protests and fighting in the school. Although there had been no previous concerns or strife in the school between Black and white students, parents of white students and local white community members pressed the matter with the school board and the state to segregate the students by race. White students who attended the school started petitions and blocked the entrance of the school so Black students could not enter. In an article about the white students’ actions, Peavler stated, “Mayor T.B. Gilbert, Principal W.C. McCroskey, and Superintendent M. E. Pearson also were on hand, not to discipline the students or call them to their classes, but rather to counsel

²⁰ Ibid., 58.

²¹ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

²² Ibid.

²³ Peavler, “Drawing the Color Line in Kansas City.”

moderation in their display.”²⁴ The same message of moderation was also asked of the Black community in relation to this event.²⁵

After the incident, a lynch mob went to the Wyandotte County jail to get Louis Gregory, the shooter. At the same time, Black preachers and veterans with weapons surrounded the jail prepared to battle. A local Black preacher, Reverend George McNeal, led the group that surrounded the jail. “Reverend McNeal reportedly made the following pronouncement: “The first man to cross this line is eating breakfast in Hell in the morning.” As these words were spoken, his troops readied their rifles.”²⁶

The lynch mob subsided. According to Greenbaum, the majority of the mob was from Missouri.²⁷ This event caused a rift in the community and within the high school. “Negro children attended this school with the whites without incident from 1886 until 1904...this incident was used as a pretext to launch an agitation to separate the races in high school.”²⁸ Thus, after this incident, white students and community members pushed the notion of segregating students in the high school. Consequently, to avoid concerns, students were racially divided by separating the school day in half-day shifts.²⁹

McGuinn and Adams add that Kansas governor Hoch was against the high school separating by race in Kansas City, Kansas. The governor claimed he believed in racial equality. So, he had stipulations regarding the separation of the races in high schools. He

²⁴ Ibid., 192.

²⁵ “Negro Students Kept Out,” *Kansas City Star*, April 13, 1904, p. 1.

²⁶ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*, 66.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *In Commemoration of Dunbar Elementary School: A Compilation of People and Events Surrounding the Children of the Northeast Area*, Kansas City, Kansas: Dunbar Elementary School, 1971.

²⁹ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

advocated that both school facilities be equal, and until a second school was built, whites would attend school in the morning and Blacks would attend in the afternoon.

White citizens insisted there be segregated schools at all levels; therefore the final decision made by Pearson and the school board was to create a separate high school for Black students.³⁰ According to an article in the April 13, 1904 issue of the *Kansas City Star*, there had been discussions about separating the races at the high school level before the shooting, but no action had been taken.

The tragedy aggravated racial tensions and revived cries from some whites to separate students by race. The High school temporarily banned blacks from attending, even though the black youth involved had not been a student and the incident had occurred in a city park.”³¹

In the same year, 1904, Dunbar Elementary School was founded for Black elementary aged students. This new school gave Black students in the Rattlebone community a place for learning.³² Until then it was difficult for some Black students to travel to other schools because they were distant from their homes. Additionally, in 1904 Douglass Elementary was expanded to accommodate the increased enrollment of Black elementary aged students.³³ There was no dispute or concern about these schools expanding and opening, because law required elementary-aged students be segregated by race.

Meanwhile, the white community in Kansas City, Kansas pushed to have the state laws changed to allow segregation at the high school level.³⁴ In February 1905, a law was

³⁰ Wilma F. Bonner, *The Sumner Story: Capturing Our History, Preserving Our Legacy* (New York, New York: Morgan James Publishing, 2011).

³¹ Nellie McGuinn and Patricia Adams, “African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859–1961), Part 5 of 7,” *The Historical Journal of Wyandotte County* 3, no. 3 (2010): 85–9.

³² Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

³³ Boone, *A History of Black Education in Kansas City, Kansas*.

³⁴ Peavler, “Drawing the Color Line in Kansas City.”

passed granting KCKPS an exemption from the state law that prohibited racial segregation at the high school level.³⁵

The State Legislature of 1905 was asked by the people of Kansas City, Kansas to pass a special law for Kansas City, Kansas only, which would permit the separation of the races in all of the public schools. This was promptly done by a “rush” legislation and the Kansas Supreme Court passed on constitutionality of the new law in February, 1905.³⁶

The community’s reaction and the exemption given by the state prompted Pearson and the school board to create a high school for Black students in the district. This was not a smooth process. When the school board passed a resolution on February 6, 1905 naming the new high school Manual Training School,³⁷ the Black community protested this decision.³⁸ They wanted more for their students than manual training. In June of 1905 they were successful in their efforts to change the name to Sumner High School in honor of Charles Sumner, an abolitionist senator.

From the inception of Sumner, black educators had uppermost in mind the welfare of students and their futures. Consequently, they protested against the Kansas Board of Education (BOE) and insisted that a college-preparatory education be the school’s major focus; the BOE wanted the school to specialize in vocational and manual training.³⁹

The Black community succeeded in getting a college preparatory curriculum with some manual training added.

Mr. Pearson saw to it that a good school was built for the colored. A colored speaker many years later summed up the feelings of the Negroes when he said: “Sumner is a child not of our own volition, but rather the offspring of the race antipathy of a bygone period. It was a blessing in disguise. The bud had a bitter taste, but sweet indeed is the flower.”⁴⁰

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Boone, *A History of Black Education in Kansas City, Kansas*.

³⁷ Bonner, *The Sumner Story*.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ McGuinn and Adams, “African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859–1961), Part 5 of 7,” 88.

In the fall of 1905, Sumner opened with 80 students and four teachers (see Figures 9 and 10).



Figure 9. Sumner Faculty, Early 1900s



Figure 10. Sumner Students, 1906

Sumner was the only Black high school in the state of Kansas, and some of the most gifted Black teachers were on the faculty. In 1926–1927, 41% of the Sumner staff held a master’s degree. This increased in the 1934–1935 school year, when 61% of the staff held a master’s degree.⁴¹ Although it was well received by the Black community, the transition from an integrated high school to a segregated high school had some challenges. On September 12, 1905, a Black student, Mamie Richardson, who believed Blacks should be allowed to continue their education at Kansas City, Kansas High School, was not allowed to do so. Because she was denied admittance, a lawsuit was filed on October 11, 1905, against KCKPS school board on the subject of the segregation of races in the school district at the high school level. The complainant was Mamie Richardson.⁴² She believed that there was a difference in how the white students were being taught and how Black students were being taught. She argued the education was not equal.

According to McGuinn and Adams,

And now comes this suit in the supreme court attacking the law on the ground that the conveniences offered by the board of education for the education and instruction of colored children separate from the white children are not adequate and show there is a discrimination against the colored children.⁴³

The actions of Pearson in this situation show the white community had power of their voices to make the changes in school policy locally and at the state level. There was no other district in the state of Kansas that had segregated schools at the high school level during this time. In my research I did not find evidence of Pearson protesting this decision. Regardless of his action and inaction, Sumner High School became a premier Black school in the state.

⁴¹ Bonner, *The Sumner Story*.

⁴² McGuinn and Adams, “African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859–1961), Part 5 of 7.”

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 86.

Growing Diversity in the City

Demographics were changing in the community in the early 1900s. In an article in the *Historical Journal of Wyandott County*, McGuinn and Adams mention that an interpreter was needed for the Fifth ward in the community “where there was a large foreign population.”⁴⁴ In *The Consolidated Ethnic History of Wyandotte County* by Loren Taylor, there is a listing of the following ethnic communities in Kansas City, Kansas (see Figure 11).

African American	Italian	Russian
Belgian	Jewish	Scandinavian
Croatian	Lithuanian	Scottish
English	Mexican	Serbian
Germanic	Native American	Slovenian
Irish	Polish	Slovak
		Welsh

Figure 11. Ethnic Communities in Kansas City, Kansas⁴⁵

These diverse groups of people were moving into and settling in the city, bringing with them their culture and their language. Although diverse, the majority of these cultures were white and European. Kansas City, Kansas welcomed immigrants to the city during the early 20th century, and district schools “Americanized and taught them English,” meaning they taught immigrant children how to be “American.”⁴⁶ With the growing population and enrollment, according to board documents from the early 1900s, Pearson had to make decisions regarding school facilities and space for more students. In those board minutes (July 3, 1911–August 31, 1911) there is mention of several building projects and additions

⁴⁴Nellie McGuinn and Patricia Adams, “African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859–1961), Part 6 of 7,” *The Historical Journal of Wyandotte County* 3, no. 4 (2011): 130.

⁴⁵ Taylor, *The Consolidated Ethnic History of Wyandotte County*.

⁴⁶ Donato and Hanson, “In These Towns, Mexicans Are Classified as Negroes.”

and re-appropriation of buildings.⁴⁷ In planning spaces for learning, Pearson, as superintendent of schools, had to consider the health and well-being of students while they attended classes. Boone details schools being renovated to add electricity and plumbing; at the turn of the century, many schools had no electricity or indoor plumbing.⁴⁸ Students used outhouses and water buckets with dippers.

As enrollment in the district increased, the addition of white children to local schools brought little to no protest. They were taught English and taught how to be American. However, those moving into the city who were not members of white races and cultures had to attend special schools set up for their race—more specifically Black schools and Mexican schools.

The National Climate and the City

During Pearson's tenure, Theodore Roosevelt was president of the United States, and Black newspapers throughout the country commented on his "Negro Policy."⁴⁹ Political moves made by Roosevelt caused Black communities in the country to distrust his leadership. The issue was that Roosevelt had filled a position previously held by a Black man with a white man who confessed that he had participated in more than one lynching while in South Carolina.⁵⁰ The article in the *American Citizen*, a Black newspaper, expressed there was no concern that the selected man was white, but the problem was that he had participated in lynching in his past. The decision made by the president to appoint someone with this past impacted the climate of Black communities in the nation. The United States was already

⁴⁷ KCKPS School Board Minutes, July 3–August 31, 1911, Kansas City, Kansas.

⁴⁸ Boone, *A History of Black Education in Kansas City, Kansas*.

⁴⁹ "Roosevelt's Negro Policy," *American Citizen*, January 3, 1902, p. 1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

racially charged, and this choice by the president added kindling to the fire. Black citizens of Kansas may not have been discussing the president's appointment, but they were concerned with the educational choices made for their children.

Although the climate was tense throughout the nation regarding equal rights for Black Americans, communities of color worked diligently to provide sound educational experiences for their children. Dunbar Elementary in KCKPS is an example of this commitment to their children's education.

In 1907 there was much movement in the district about the location of educational facilities for Black students.⁵¹ In March of 1907, a building was planned for a Black elementary school in the eastern part of the city. According to the book, *In Commemoration of Dunbar Elementary School: A Compilation of People and Events Surrounding the Children of the Northeast Area*,⁵² White residents protested about a Black school being too close to their neighborhood, and the district made the decision to change the location.⁵³ Again, here was evidence that when white citizens complained, the district made or changed plans to appease them. Black parents also wanted quality schools for their children and stated their demands. "The area parents protested the school was too small, and the school was increased."⁵⁴ For example, on May 4, 1908, the school board established a school for Black elementary children that fulfilled a need for the area but was inadequate at the start to hold the enrollment.⁵⁵ The school was overcrowded before students even started attending. In

⁵¹ McGuinn and Adams, "African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859–1961), Part 6 of 7."

⁵² *In Commemoration of Dunbar Elementary School*. This resource is a celebratory informational book that details the history of Dunbar Elementary School.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

these instances when Blacks protested, the request was accomplished, but not immediately; nor did it adequately fulfill the need.

In 1909 the Quindaro township consolidated with Kansas City, Kansas, which added more students and more schools to the district.⁵⁶ However, the schools in the newly added area were for white children only (see Figure 12).



Figure 12. Eighth Grade Class, Old Quindaro School, 1919

Originally there were no schools for Black children north of Quindaro, because the majority of the citizens were white.⁵⁷ Black students in Quindaro and north of Quindaro had to travel to get to the nearest school they could attend. Therefore, Black students in Quindaro attended

⁵⁶ Adams, "Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools Timeline Part 1."

⁵⁷ *In Commemoration of Dunbar Elementary School.*

Vernon School and Western University, even though they were not a part of KCKPS.⁵⁸ These two institutions had been founded by and for Black people. Before Quindaro was annexed by Kansas City, Kansas in 1862, Vernon was originally the “Colored School of Quindaro” and had an all-Black board. Western University fulfilled the adult education need in the area. These two institutions welcomed local Black students.

Black families in Kansas City, Kansas were not the only families that faced school location challenges for their children’s education. Black families in neighboring communities such as Shawnee Mission, Kansas had to send their students to KCKPS because there were no Black schools in the areas where they lived.

There were Black families who lived in Shawnee Mission, Kansas whose children attended the Kansas City, Kansas schools; also there were Black families living in the White Church area (western section of Kansas City, Kansas) who also had to attend schools in Kansas City, Kansas.⁵⁹

Black students, no matter where they lived, could only attend schools for Black children. Students came from White Church, Edwardsville, and Shawnee Mission to attend Black schools in KCKPS. Neighboring districts did not offer schooling options for non-white students, and requiring them to attend schools in KCKPS made the region more racially divided. This action also added to the enrollment in the Black schools in the district that would cause crowding issues down the line. This is discussed later in this study.

District Growth

In 1910 Kansas City, Kansas annexed the city of Argentine, and their local school district consolidated with KCKPS.⁶⁰ With the addition of Argentine, Mexican children

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Boone, *A History of Black Education in Kansas City, Kansas*, 5.

⁶⁰ Adams, “Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools Timeline Part 1.”

became students of KCKPS. There were no policies addressing Mexican children in KCKPS or separate schools for Mexican children, so they attended school with white children from 1909 to 1924.⁶¹ With the annexation of Argentine in 1910 and other school districts by KCKPS, the district increased to forty schools and more than 5,000 students.⁶² With these additions the district now had three high schools; Argentine, Sumner, and Kansas City Kansas High School.⁶³ Formal education had become more popular in Kansas City, Kansas in the early 1900s. Many citizens enrolled in schools and programs. In 1911, night school was offered to adult citizens, and classes were held in two of the local high schools. Of course, Sumner was the location to accommodate Black citizens in night school.⁶⁴

The October 14, 1915, issue of the *Kansas City Globe* stated:

The intelligent negro recognized his educational handicap and so welcomes the night school with enthusiasm. Nearly 500 of them have enrolled at the Sumner night school and practically all of them are adults. The classes range from the beginning classes in reading, writing and arithmetic up to a university extension course in Spanish. The manual training, typewriting, shorthand, cooking and sewing classes are filled to their full capacity. A class of about 20 young men is in training to take the civil service examinations for some of the various positions offered by the government. The Sumner night school is an interesting study and a visit is worth the while for anyone interested in educational matters.⁶⁵

Annexing by the city and the district also increased diversity in schools beyond white and Black students. Members of other white European cultures in the district attended night school classes. Patricia Adams, in the *Historical Journal of Wyandotte County*, states, “A large enthusiastic class of foreigners has been taught to read and write the English

⁶¹ Donato and Hanson, “In These Towns, Mexicans Are Classified as Negroes.”

⁶² Adams, “Historical Overview of the Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools.”

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ “School News,” *The Kansas City Globe*, October 14, 1915, p. 4, <https://kansashistoricalopencontent.newspapers.com/image/58513288>.

language.”⁶⁶ The idea that local citizens were referred to as foreigners is evidence that some were viewed as different. Actions by Pearson proved that he did not consider them equal.

The enrollment in 1911 was one hundred and thirty-three, with six teachers employed. Tuition in these night schools was free to pupils under twenty-one years of age; twenty-one years of age and over were charged one dollar per month. Classes were organized in arithmetic, English, bookkeeping, penmanship, stenography, typewriting, Latin, German, French, manual training, sewing, physics and mechanical drawing. A large, enthusiastic class of foreigners has been taught to read and write the English language.⁶⁷

School District Business, 1911–1914

In the 1911 school board minutes, it is evident the district was growing into a business, and Pearson and the board put systems in place to address the daily operation of KCKPS. A June 12, 1911 item in the board minutes mentions that secret societies in Kansas City Kansas High School were forbidden. There is no mention as to the nature of the secret society or its purpose. However, it is clear that if the practices continued, disciplinary actions would be applied. Outside of this interesting entry, there is no other mention of the secret society, and the remainder of the board minutes are about the business of the district.

Superintendent Pearson recommended to the school board in 1911 adding more kindergarten classes to accommodate increasing city growth as well as other business items to address the expansion and security of the district.⁶⁸ In a move that indicated he wished the district to adopt a more business-like approach, Pearson recommended the board approve a special police officer to look after school properties during summer vacation,⁶⁹ thereby implementing plans to protect district properties. Changes such as this one increased the

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ KCKPS School Board Minutes, July 3, 1911.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

amount of money the district spent. Some of these expenditures were for more personnel. Agenda items from the July 3, 1911 minutes included teacher salaries. Teachers earned anywhere from \$75 per month to \$90 per month, with high school teachers earning \$90.⁷⁰

Facilities, growth, and education were topics of discussion during board meetings. District properties in the early 1900s were heated with coal and oil.⁷¹ Entries in the July 3, 1911 board minutes show that the board purchased these items so that schools were warm and safe learning environments for students. During the same board meeting there were appointments for new positions in many departments to help run the district: buildings and grounds, finance and accounts, janitors and engineers, library and supplementary reading, purchasing and supplies, and teachers and rules.⁷² These improvements were necessary to take on the expanding district. The July 17, 1911, board minutes noted the approval of the annexation of district two as a part of KCKPS.⁷³ Annexation of another district increased the number of students and the need for more teachers and services. The 1911–1912 school year enrollment was 25,000, according to a board report by Pearson on August 21, 1911.⁷⁴ In the same board meeting, the board approved the purchase of land to be used for a school site and “Supt of Schools Pearson recommended that supplementary readers be purchased.”⁷⁵

It appeared Pearson and the school board had a good working relationship that allowed them to move forward with few disruptions. For instance, in the September 5, 1911 minutes was this entry: “Supt Pearson extended invitation to board to be present at teachers’

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ KCKPS Board Minutes, July 17, 1911.

⁷⁴ KCKPS Board Minutes, August 21, 1911.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

institute Sept. 9, 1911.”⁷⁶ In April of 1912 more building projects were proposed to the board to accommodate the expanding district, as well as the rehiring of architects. The bustling KCKPS in the early 1900s seemed to be running smoothly. The school board was pleased with Pearson’s leadership, and they approved to retain him as superintendent for the 1912–1913 school year.⁷⁷ They approved his \$3,500 salary in August of the same year.⁷⁸

A developing theme of Pearson’s early years was expansion. Because of his decision to separate students by race, more facilities and teachers were needed. The May 27, 1912 board minutes noted Black teachers were added to the Black schools; 11 teachers were added to Sumner, 19 added to Douglass, one added to Grant, three added to Lincoln, and nine added to Stowe.⁷⁹ More teachers meant more money was needed to pay salaries; however, Black teachers were not paid equally for the same work. An approved salary schedule in the May 27, 1912 minutes shows teachers at Kansas City, Kansas High School were paid more than those at Sumner.⁸⁰ For example, a first-year teacher at Kansas City Kansas High School was paid between \$235 and \$240 per month, while a first-year teacher at Sumner was paid between \$160 and \$170 per month. Figure 13 shows the school board’s approved teacher salaries.

⁷⁶ KCKPS Board Minutes, September 5, 1911.

⁷⁷ KCKPS Board Minutes, April 1, 1912.

⁷⁸ KCKPS Board Minutes, August 5, 1912.

⁷⁹ KCKPS Board Minutes, May 27, 1912.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

N. C. H. High School				Summer High School			
	120-132	141	156	J. M. Margules	160-176	190	210
	105-115	125	145	J. C. [unclear]	140-150	156	180
J. [unclear]	135-140	145	150	R. W. [unclear]	125-140	150	156
J. [unclear]	175-188	200	(10 mod)	J. [unclear]	135-140	150	156
J. [unclear]	175-188	200	(10 mod)	W. A. Jackson	130-125		
E. A. Wade	155-167	178	190 3rd yr	J. P. [unclear]	110-120	125	
Baldwin Ward	155-167	178	190	E. H. [unclear]	100-110	120	125
A. S. [unclear]	155-167	178	190	Minnie [unclear]	95-105	115	125
A. M. [unclear]	145-155	156			95-105	115	125

Figure 13. Discrepancies in Pay for Teachers at Sumner and Kansas City Kansas High Schools⁸¹

This discrepancy in teacher pay shows that students were not the only district members whose race mattered. The May 20, 1912 board minutes noted that a manual training teacher earned \$100, a Kansas City Kansas High School teacher earned \$115, and the Sumner teacher earned \$90.⁸² Even though there were more teachers at Sumner with advanced degrees, they were paid less than others doing the same work.

As the city became more diverse, groups of citizens separated themselves along racial and ethnic lines. These actions are evidence the city was deeply segregated, and when it appeared those lines might become blurred, citizens reacted. For example, in 1913, there were rumors about having to vacate white students from schools because of their proximity to Black communities. White citizens were concerned that their property values would drop because of the rumor.⁸³ Whether it was a rumor or not, white citizens in Kansas City, Kansas did not want Black communities near where they lived, nor did they want Black children going to school with their children. Therefore, Black families settled in the northeast part of Kansas City, Kansas. The more Black families moved in, the more white families moved out. “As the Northeast section of Kansas City, Kansas became predominately filled with Black families, the schools that were for white students were quickly converted into schools for

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ McGuinn and Adams, “African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859–1961), Part 6 of 7.”

Black students.”⁸⁴ One such school was Grant Elementary, originally named Everett School, that was attended by white students until 1923. According to W. W. Boone, “many children of the White dignitaries, judges, bankers and attorneys attended this school.”⁸⁵ Growth of the Black population in the eastern portion of the city caused white flight and hence left this school to be used for educating Black students.⁸⁶ With more Black students in schools, Pearson had to address an equality issue. He had established kindergarten classes in white schools and “a board committee recommended that if a kindergarten for colored children was established, the best location was in the lecture room of the Methodist Church at 8th and State. As funds were low, the proposition was laid aside.”⁸⁷ The district had limited funds and recommended Black kindergarten classes meet in a local church.⁸⁸ This is just one example of the district—and specifically Pearson—not planning or preparing for the needs of Black education facilities in the city.

During Pearson’s tenure, the district boomed and became more diverse. McGuinn and Adams noted there was a request for interpreters to be sent to one part of the district due to the aforementioned “large foreign population.”⁸⁹ With each shift or change in district demographics, the public, or more specifically the parents of white students, had the voice and the power to make decisions in their students’ best interests. There were times when parents of non-white children were also vocal and started petitions for different facilities for non-white students in the district, as evidenced by the creation of Sumner High School.

⁸⁴ Boone, *A History of Black Education in Kansas City, Kansas*.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ McGuinn and Adams, “African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859–1961), Part 6 of 7.”

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Because of these racial separations, there were several lawsuits against the district by non-white citizens, and from 1881 to 1949, eleven cases by Black families were brought before courts in the state of Kansas regarding race. None of the cases were decided in favor of the Black families.⁹⁰

Educational Facilities

The educational facilities within the district were also a point of contention between white and non-white families. The May 1912 board minutes record complaints from white parents about the poor condition of Hawthorne Elementary School. They demanded improvements in lighting and indoor restrooms for the building.⁹¹ In 1914 the Mercantile Club (which later became the Chamber of Commerce) brought before the board their concerns about school facilities being poorly maintained by the district. This group gave their recommendations to the board to improve the school buildings.⁹² There was no mention as to which schools, but we can assume that it did not include Black schools. According to the 1971 Dunbar PTA commemorative book, historically Black residents requested a “decent” school for their children from the school board. Further, “The Board of Education made arrangements for renting and repairing a building for a school”⁹³ for that community until they were able to provide a permanent facility. Black families made the best of the facilities they were offered. As they continued to fight for better educational learning environments, they expected excellence from the teachers and their students.

⁹⁰ Cheryl Brown Henderson, “Early Civil Rights Cases,” Kansas Historical Society, January 2016.

⁹¹ KCKPS Board Minutes, May 20, 1912.

⁹² McGuinn and Adams, “African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859-1961), Part 6 of 7.”

⁹³ *In Commemoration of Dunbar Elementary School*, 9.

Curriculum

The curriculums offered in school were rigorous and competitive for the students in the early 1900s.

One of the ironies of segregated schools was the level of ethnic solidarity they engendered. All Afro-Americans shared this common circumstance, and strong bonds developed between teachers and students, and between parents and teachers. School-related activities were a significant part of the social life of the community, and issues concerning conditions in the schools were a persistent focus of community mobilization.⁹⁴

Consequently, Sumner, the foremost Black high school, was one of the schools the Black community fought for and supported to get a rigorous curriculum. Originally, the KCKPS Board of Education wanted Sumner to specialize in a vocational manual training curriculum; however, Black educators and the Black community protested and were victorious in the creation of a rigorous college preparatory curriculum, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. The board did succeed, however, in requiring some vocational technical courses in the graduation requirements. The other two high schools, Kansas City, Kansas High School and Argentine High School, did not have the same requirement.⁹⁵ Eighteen credits were required for graduation. These requirements had gender stipulations. For instance, boys were required to take at least three courses in shop or auto, and girls were required to take at least three years of sewing and cooking.⁹⁶ By 1940, Sumner had created four curriculum tracks: college preparatory, general arts, commercial arts, and general course

⁹⁴ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*, 61.

⁹⁵ Bonner, *The Sumner Story*.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

or normal training.⁹⁷ Sumner earned a reputation of excellence and was accepted into the North Central Association of Secondary Schools.⁹⁸

A Tri-racial System

The Mexican population was facing similar actions from the community, the school board, and Superintendent Pearson regarding school attendance in KCKPS. Beginning in 1915, the Mexican population in the state became more visible.⁹⁹ In KCKPS the enrollment of Mexican children increased, which brought about opposition by white families to the children being a part of the school system. There were protests by parents of white children because Mexican students were attending school with their children. Mexican parents filed lawsuits because their children were being barred from attending school with white children.¹⁰⁰ “School and civic officials sought to prevent the entry of additional Mexican children in the public school system.”¹⁰¹ The Mexican population continued to grow until 1935.¹⁰² Pearson and the school board responded to this demographic addition by creating separate spaces for Mexican children to attend school, creating separate schools and separate rooms in schools for Mexican children so white children would not have to be in learning spaces with them.¹⁰³ This separation appeased white families and community members in the district. By separating Black students, white students, and Mexican students, Pearson, in response to pressure by these parents, created a tri-racial system of education in KCKPS.¹⁰⁴ The experiences of Mexican American students in the district should also be explored in

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

⁹⁹ Donato and Hanson, ““In these Towns, Mexicans Are Classified as Negroes.””

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

depth. For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that Pearson also segregated these students.

Health and Social Concerns in the City

The years 1916–1919 were fraught with illness and war. In 1916 a measles epidemic interfered with school operations and attendance.¹⁰⁵ The *Kansas City Star* reported a teacher died, and special houses were set up for the ill so they could receive medical care.¹⁰⁶

Advocate, an historic Black paper, reported on April 20, 1917 about the measles epidemic:

“There is a large number of children of which many are school children who have either the measles or scarlet fever. There seems to be an epidemic of these two contagious diseases, but we hear of none being fatal.”¹⁰⁷ This is evidence that the measles did have an impact on schools and communities. The information seems to have been written in a way to calm the community, sharing that there had been no fatalities. But even with no fatalities, schools were closed for seven weeks due to Spanish Influenza.¹⁰⁸ Both the measles and the flu caused the district to think about health needs in schools, and due to these two epidemics, the district made changes to school operations. According to McGuinn and Adams, the war magnified weaknesses in systems, more particularly health systems.¹⁰⁹ She further states, “From the close of World War I in 1919 and extending into the 1920s, before the depression there was a time of great change in education.”¹¹⁰ KCKPS added free dental examinations to the educational system, including having students practice brushing their teeth; it also added

¹⁰⁵ McGuinn and Adams, “African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859–1961), Part 6 of 7.”

¹⁰⁶ “The Number of Measles Cases Grows,” *Kansas City Star*, January 31, 1917.

¹⁰⁷ *Advocate*, April 20, 1917, p. 2.

¹⁰⁸ McGuinn and Adams, “African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859–1961), Part 6 of 7.”

¹⁰⁹ Adams, “Historical Overview of the Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools.”

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

programs to encourage students to learn and practice good health habits. The school board hired school nurses, and student weight checks, open air rooms for potential TB victims, and organized playground games were added. Soap and towels became required standards in schools, and common drinking cups were abolished.¹¹¹ One example of the open-air room was on the top floor at Kealing, a Black elementary school; it was employed for underweight children as a TB precaution. “At one time it was believed that these children were tuberculin or were suspected of having tuberculosis. However, this type of discrimination enraged many Black parents in the community and the ‘open-air’ room lasted only a few years.”¹¹²

The year 1923 also saw a measles epidemic in the city. The March 31, 1923 issue of the *Kansas City Kansan* reported 21 cases of measles in one elementary school, 21 cases in another, and 50 more cases reported in other schools across the district.¹¹³ Medical officials over local health were concerned that the cases were not being reported properly, and therefore they were not able to get a handle on the crisis sooner.

World War I and KCKPS

The year 1917 brought the United States into World War I. Woodrow Wilson as president did his best to keep the U.S. out of the war in Europe, but the sinking of the *Lusitania* and the Zimmerman telegram¹¹⁴ caused the U.S. to officially enter the war. Kansas City, Kansas is nowhere near Europe, but the war still changed operations in the district. The January 12, 1917 issue of *Advocate* printed an article about cadet training in the Kansas City, Kansas high schools (see Figure 14).

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Boone, *A History of Black Education in Kansas City, Kansas*.

¹¹³ “Measles Epidemic Grows,” *Kansas City Kansan*, March 31, 1923.

¹¹⁴ Germany sent this telegram, which was intercepted by the U.S., to the Mexican government asking them to attack the United States from the south.

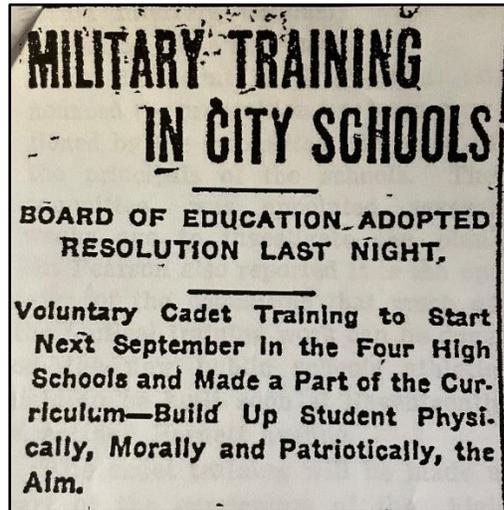


Figure 14. Military Training in City Schools, *Advocate*, January 12, 1917

An article in the January 12, 1917 *Advocate* reported about the board meeting the previous night. At the meeting, Pearson stated, “The cadet training will be made a part of the curriculum of the high schools and credit will be given....We expect to formulate plans for the entire proposition within a short time.”¹¹⁵ This curriculum was added to high schools and prepared students for military service as the war called some citizens to active duty in the military. That same article stated:

the course is intended to build the high school students into a better physical and moral state is the claim of the board. Emphasis will be laid on this point rather than on the actual training of soldiers.¹¹⁶

Employment in the district was also impacted by the United States’ entry into the war. In fact, Frank Leslie Schlagle, the superintendent who would follow Pearson, was called from his duties as assistant principal of Central Junior High School during this time to join

¹¹⁵ “Military Training in City Schools,” *Advocate*, January 12, 1917.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

the U.S. Navy.¹¹⁷ The war changed the trajectory of the city while the business of educating students continued.

Prohibition and KCKPS

Pearson's superintendency also encompassed the era of prohibition—the age of speakeasies and liquor raids. Although Kansas City, Kansas was not a large city, there were still issues concerning illegal activity, such as drinking, within the city limits. The August 21, 1919, issue of the *Kansas City Kansan* contained a story about a large liquor raid in Kansas City, Kansas. Under the headline, “Uncover A Booze Cache, Officers seize Liquor Valued at \$20,000 in a Kansas City, Kas., Residence. —A Mighty Load,” the story continued: “It is asserted that Butler has been making regular trips to Oklahoma since the dry wave began July 1.”¹¹⁸ The city was a microcosm of other issues that were in the nation. Illegal alcohol was not the only issue impacting the city; racism was plaguing the city as well. In Leiker's essay, he notes, “Kansas is not just a conservative state, but a racist one.”¹¹⁹ It would appear the moves of the state during this time dictated the moves of the city. The July 16, 1921 issue of the *Kansas City Kansan* carried a Cicero Sapp comic strip that illustrated this point (see Figure 15).

¹¹⁷ “Education Gained When Schlagle Quit Law,” *Kansas City Kansan*, September 8, 1957.

¹¹⁸ “Uncover a Booze Cache,” *Kansas City Kansan*, August 21, 1919.

¹¹⁹ James N. Leiker, “Race Relations in the Sunflower State,” *Kansas History* (2002): 214–36.



Figure 15. Cicero Sapp Comic Strip, Kansas City, Kansas, 1921¹²⁰

In this comic strip, the younger man is interested in the older man's daughter. The older man tells him to disguise himself as a "messenger boy" and the older man will have his daughter answer the door so the younger man can propose. The younger one dresses as a messenger in blackface and gets the door slammed in his face. The older man is shocked to see what the younger man did. The idea that this comic strip, which made use of blackface as a joke, was considered appropriate gives insight into the city during the 1920s.

Was Pearson Progressive?

Greenbaum speaks of Blacks considering Pearson fair and progressive throughout all of these societal challenges.¹²¹ This included his actions regarding training for teachers, who were needed to cover classrooms in the still growing district. The need was so great that federal commissioners increased the minimum wage to \$1,500.¹²² In 1919 Pearson initiated a teachers' training class to prepare those enrolled to be teachers in the district.¹²³ "Four white girls and five colored made up the 1919 Teachers' Training Class, and Mr. Pearson would

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

¹²² Nellie McGuinn and Patricia Adams, "African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859–1961), Part 6 of 7."

¹²³ Ibid.

need over sixty new teachers.”¹²⁴ By 1920, the district had 52 schools: 45 elementary, one junior high, and three high schools.¹²⁵

As more students enrolled in schools, it became necessary for educational facilities to be updated. In 1920, Dunbar North was established for Black elementary students.¹²⁶ The original Dunbar had been established in the early 1900s, as mentioned earlier in this study. Even though it was an elementary school, it had manual training for its Black students.¹²⁷ The addition of this school to the district corroborates board minutes and news articles about the district’s building plans. According to the June 8, 1921, *Kansas City Kansan*, a budget of \$1,850,000 was approved for new buildings and school improvements. The commissioner of health and sanitation gave recommendations to the board concerning schools needing better facilities for students to wash.¹²⁸

Part of the building program was a junior high school for Black students. Up to 1922, there was no Black junior high school, and junior high school students had to attend half-day sessions at Sumner until a school was built for them.¹²⁹ Meanwhile, the district annexed the Rosedale school district and added more schools and students in 1922.¹³⁰ There were two schools in the annexation that “were discontinued as white schools and given over to the accommodation of African-American children.”¹³¹

The year 1921 also brought another progressive idea from Pearson. The February 13, 1921, issue of the *Kansas City Kansan* reported that Pearson implemented a Junior College

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Adams, “Historical Overview of the Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools.”

¹²⁶ Boone, *A History of Black Education in Kansas City, Kansas*.

¹²⁷ *In Commemoration of Dunbar Elementary School*.

¹²⁸ “Consider School Needs,” *Kansas City Kansan*, June 8, 1921.

¹²⁹ *In Commemoration of Dunbar Elementary School*.

¹³⁰ Adams, “Historical Overview of the Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools.”

¹³¹ Ibid.

for the city.¹³² With this idea, Pearson supported students who had the desire to go further in their education but did not have the means, either financially or logistically because of a lack of transportation. Previously, students who wanted to pursue college had to leave Kansas City, Kansas. However, with a local junior college, students could remain in the city and at home as they continued their education. The article does not specifically mention junior college being an option for Black students, but it is interesting to note under Pearson's leadership the idea of public education evolved.

Pearson and the board addressed growth and continued to give both white and Black communities the learning facilities they needed. There was, however, a discrepancy in the speed with which the district responded to each community. The Black community had to voice their concerns more than the white community did in order to receive what they needed.

There was a faction of the city that was not pleased with the growing diversity in the district. The Ku Klux Klan had a strong influence in Kansas City, Kansas and found its way into some of the district's business. In 1922 Pearson planned to have a racially integrated parade in the district. His plans did not come to fruition because the Klan "convinced him to cancel his plans."¹³³ "In the end, DeVirda H. Burcham, an Exalted Cyclops in Wyandotte Klan No. 5, led a contingent of unrobed Klansman to the superintendent's house, where they peacefully and duly persuaded him to cancel the 'mixed parade.'"¹³⁴ According to Rives, Pearson later denied the visit from the Klan had anything to do with him cancelling the

¹³² "Junior High Holds Unique Place in Nation's Schools," *Kansas City Kansan*, February 13, 1921.

¹³³ Tim Rives, *The Ku Klux Klan in Kansas City, Kansas* (Charleston, South Carolina: The History Press, 2019).

¹³⁴ Loren L. Taylor, *A Historical Overview of Wyandotte County and Its Historic Sites* (Wyandotte County, Kansas: Wyandotte County Historical Society and Museum, 2018.)

integrated program.¹³⁵ The idea that Pearson was visited by the Klan because of his plans to have an integrated parade brings up the question, how else did the Klan influence district operations during Pearson's leadership? In the same year, the Klan also demanded the board fire a dance teacher because he was teaching a dance to students. Reverend George Durham, the spokesman for 300 Klan members, demanded the school board fire the teacher at Argentine High School. "Some of this dancing has been called folk dancing, but what do you call it when I saw a group of young folks in our high school playing jazz music and waltzing to it?"¹³⁶

In 1923 members of Wyandotte Klan No. 5 exerted their influence with the closing of Wilson High School in a neighboring district. Wilson High School did not have funding to continue operations, and parents were given the option of sending their students to Piper Rural or Kansas City, Kansas High School.¹³⁷ When this news was released, Wilson High School received monetary support from Wyandotte Klan No. 5. The Klan stated that they donated funds so the good work the school was doing could continue.¹³⁸ One might wonder, what was the "good work" of Wilson High School? Why did the Klan feel they needed to support it?

As can be seen from the instances noted above, the issues the district faced were beginning to become more transparent due to more media coverage from local papers and more people in the area. Press coverage exposed the Klan's intimidation of Pearson by showing its influence on him by the local order of the Klan in Kansas City, Kansas.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Rives, *The Ku Klux Klan in Kansas City, Kansas*.

¹³⁷ "Wilson H.S. Parents to Discuss Closing," *Kansas City Kansan*, January 24, 1923.

¹³⁸ "Parents Contribute to Save Wilson H.S.," *Kansas City Kansan*, January 30, 1923.

¹³⁹ Rives, *The Ku Klux Klan in Kansas City, Kansas*.

According to an article in the *Kansas City Kansan*, in 1923, more land was purchased to accommodate district growth. “The purchase of additional property, one piece of which will benefit the high school and the other the proposed Northeast Junior high, was approved last night by the board of education.”¹⁴⁰ Three thousand dollars was allotted for the high school, and \$1,750 was allotted for the Northeast Junior High athletic field.¹⁴¹ In 1925 Northeast Junior High School was completed in the northeast portion of the district, and it was overcrowded from the beginning.¹⁴² Northeast was the only junior high school in KCKPS with a membership charter for National Junior Honor Society and the first junior high in the city to have a chapter of Future Teachers of America.¹⁴³ The year 1923 brought about “white flight” when more Black families move closer to white neighborhoods. When the Black population began to spread toward Everett, a white elementary school, the name was changed to Grant,¹⁴⁴ and it became a Black school.¹⁴⁵ White citizens moved to western portions of the city and left more areas in the eastern part of the city for the Black community.¹⁴⁶

Preparing the Next Superintendent

In 1924 Pearson proposed a new position to the school board—Assistant Superintendent.¹⁴⁷ He suggested during a board meeting that F. L. Schlagle be named the

¹⁴⁰ “Board of Education to Buy Two Tracts,” *Kansas City Kansan*, February 6, 1923.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Boone, *A History of Black Education in Kansas City, Kansas*.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Grant Elementary School was named after Bishop Abraham Grant, an African Methodist Episcopal bishop; Boone, *A History of Black Education in Kansas City, Kansas*.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ McGuinn and Adams, “African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859–1961), Part 6 of 7.”

¹⁴⁷ Gary K. Murrell, “Bell of Success Still Rings for Retired Schoolmaster.” *The Kansas City Star*, September 6, 1973, p. 4W.

assistant superintendent, and Schlagle accepted. This decision by Pearson and the board gave Pearson time to train Schlagle on the inner workings of the district. Although Pearson remained superintendent for eight more years, he had selected his successor. The history of the district during this time became more riddled with lawsuits concerning racial inequality. Mexican families were adding to the already existing cases against the district.¹⁴⁸ The climate for Mexican children in the district became hostile, with white parents forcing Mexican children out of the schools, which brought further attention to the tri-racial system in the district.¹⁴⁹ Along with the addition of an assistant superintendent, Pearson also appointed a supervisor for “colored” schools, Sherman D. Scruggs.¹⁵⁰ Pearson believed this position was needed because there were more Black schools as Black families moved into the eastern portion and part of the southeastern portion of the city. This sent a clear message that there were two systems based on race in KCKPS. The Eugene Field School, intended for white children, shifted to a Black school in 1926, and the name was changed to Kealing Elementary School¹⁵¹ as white families moved out of the area.¹⁵² As Pearson’s tenure came to an end, white flight became more prevalent in the district, and more schools were being reestablished for Black students.

Summary

M. E. Pearson was dedicated to expanding the district. He initiated and implemented kindergartens in the district that helped to prepare students for learning and addressed the

¹⁴⁸ Donato and Hanson, ““In These Towns, Mexicans Are Classified as Negroes.””

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ McGuinn and Adams, “African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859–1961), Part 6 of 7.”

¹⁵¹ Kealing School was named in honor of Dr. H. T. Kealing, a former president of Western University in Kansas City, Kansas; Boone, *A History of Black Education in Kansas City, Kansas*.

¹⁵² Boone, *A History of Black Education in Kansas City, Kansas*.

growth of the city. He also initiated the junior high school concept in the district in 1916.¹⁵³ Junior high schools focused instruction on preteen to early teenage years in grades seven, eight, and nine, “That year the first such facility west of Rochester, NY opened in Kansas City, Kansas.”¹⁵⁴ He built schools, consolidated districts, annexed districts, and introduced a junior college to the KCKPS system. Pearson’s thinking and actions concerning education were progressive for the times. But he was also responsible for creating and sustaining a racially segregated school system. Knowing that Pearson had to contend with the KKK, we have to wonder if he made some of the decisions about race because of his fear of this racist group. Or if he also held some racist beliefs and was thus okay with the separate system of education that he perpetuated and oversaw. If he was indeed progressive, he was unwilling to challenge the Klan in any meaningful way. So, while there was tremendous growth in the district under his tenure, this growth was not distributed equitably, and in the end, a system of racial oppression endured.

His successor, F. L. Schlagle, was at the table for some of Pearson’s decisions and actions. To be sure, Schlagle was either a student, building employee, or Assistant Superintendent when Pearson was superintendent. Pearson’s resignation letter is included in the 1931–1932 Wyandotte High School yearbook. In that letter he mentioned the growth and progressiveness of the district (see Figure 16). He seems proud of his accomplishments, but we cannot ignore the reality that he was at the very least complicit in and complacent about overseeing a district with great racial disparity.

¹⁵³ Murrell, “Bell of Success Still Rings for Retired Schoolmaster.”

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

Mr. Pearson's Resignation

I ARRIVED in Kansas City, Kansas, September, 1886. I served as teacher, principal, and supervisor for a period of sixteen years. I was elected superintendent of schools in 1909. On August 1, 1932, I will have spent thirty years at the head of the school system. This makes total service in Kansas City, Kansas, forty-six years; total teaching experience, forty-seven years. I was 24 years old when I commenced in Kansas City, Kansas, 40 years old when I was elected superintendent, and will be 70 when my term closes. There were fifty-six teachers in 1886, 182 in 1909, and approximately 700 in 1932.

It has been a beautiful road from 1886 to 1932—a great opportunity. I have worked hard, with much enjoyment, and great inspiration. I have felt that the responsibilities were so great and the duties so binding through all these years that I did not dare prove untrue. I have made mistakes and have fallen short in many of my ideals. However, I feel that I may presume to consider myself successful beyond many who have served in like capacity. I find that I am outstanding in the United States, by reason of the fact that I am almost, if not quite, the ranking superintendent, in the point of service. No superintendent of schools has had better support and finer cooperation than I have had. I have enjoyed the good will of the patrons of the schools, and all have been most kind to me. It is with admiration, appreciation, and esteem that I speak of the present Board of Education. They have held, to such a marked degree, the confidence of all the people. I have loved the children and have had abiding faith in the teachers. I believe the hearts of the people of this city are right toward the education of their children. The Parent-Teachers associations have been towers of strength. I hope my successor may have the fine support and the sympathetic understanding that I have enjoyed.

I consider the condition of the schools, materially and educationally, to be very fine. Perhaps this is true in a greater sense, at the present time, than ever before in the history of the city. I consider it the proper time and a good time for me to lay down my work as superintendent. So much have I enjoyed my work and so much have I loved all the fine associations brought to me by the school program that it is not without a great struggle with myself that I have forced myself to see my duty. I shall always be interested, and shall view each progressive measure of the Board of Education or the teachers with great interest and satisfaction. I shall continue to reside in this city, and shall become one of the great supporters of the schools. My successor shall have my kindest wishes. On ceasing to be superintendent, my greatest desire is to become a school booster.

I believe in this Board of Education and wish to thank each one, individually, for all his courtesies and kindnesses. If it were possible to have all the many other members who have worked with me present in this room, I would be glad to thank them, too. I have not agreed with all. I have not endorsed every action; however, all have been very kind.

I, therefore, this thirty-first of December, present this as my resignation, to take effect August 1, 1932.

Yours most respectfully,

M. E. Pearson

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Figure 16. M. E. Pearson's Resignation Letter, August 1, 1932

CHAPTER 3

1932–1962: TURMOIL AND PSEUDO DESEGREGATION

Introduction and Overview

This chapter covers the leadership of Frank Leslie Schlagle, better known as F. L. Schlagle (1932–1962). During the years Schlagle was superintendent, the nation was dealing with the turmoil of World War II and other international conflicts. These events, along with the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, influenced the actions and decisions of district leadership.

F. L. Schlagle

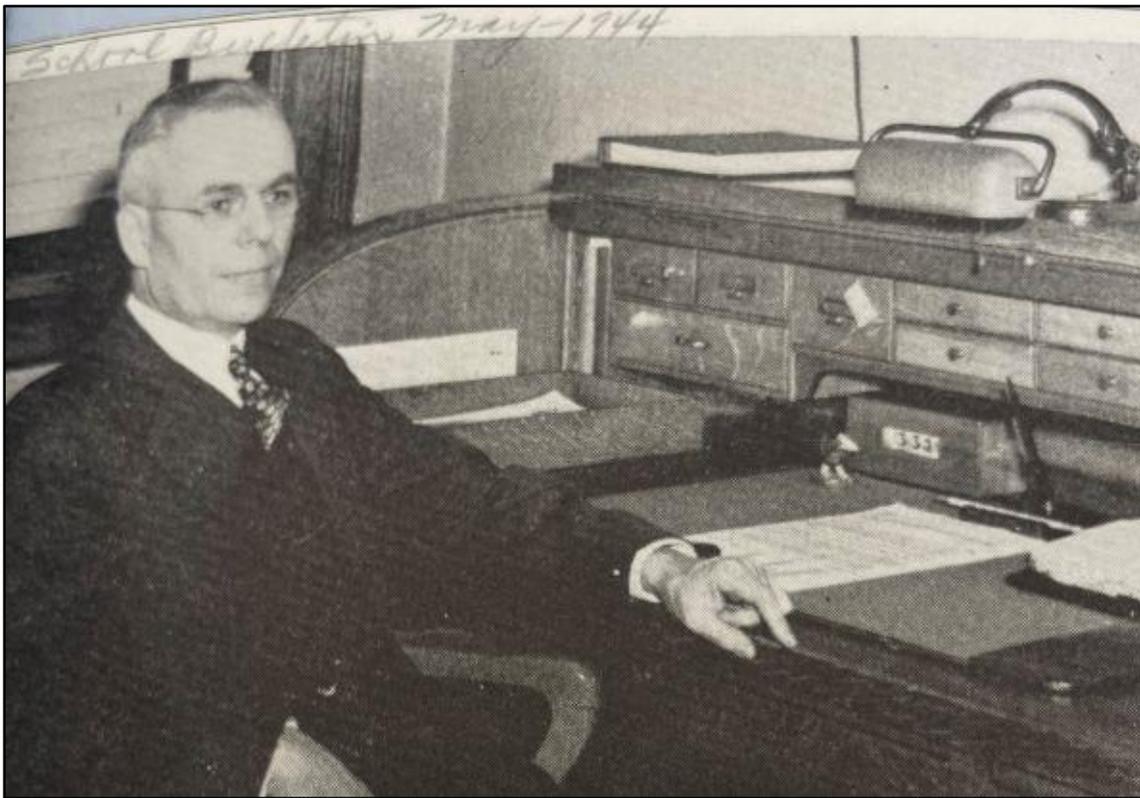


Figure 17. F. L. Schlagle, May 1944

Early Life and Work

Frank L. Schlagle was born in 1892 in Linwood, Kansas. He entered high school at the age of 11 and graduated at the age of 16.¹ He accepted his first teaching position in 1909 at the age of 17. However, teaching was his means to finance his college aspirations of becoming a lawyer. The first 17 years of Schlagle's life reveal his drive. In the early 1900s it was not the norm for young people to attend high school and go to college. As mentioned earlier, high school attendance was considered unusual, let alone college, except for a bright student. For Schlagle to do both at such a young age was extraordinary. As a young high school graduate from Wyandotte High School in KCKPS, Schlagle was a product of the district he would lead.

In a 1973 *Kansas City Star* article highlighting Schlagle after his retirement, Schlagle was asked about the accomplishments of which he was most proud. He stated, "If I had to list the changes of lasting impact, the desegregation of the district's schools in 1951 would be at the head."² Knowing the district did not fully integrate until 1978, one has to ask: What did Schlagle consider the point of pride? Documents exist that reveal his successor, O. L. Plucker, was responsible for desegregation and integration plans that had to be submitted to fulfill court requirements.³

Documents revealed that Schlagle's desegregation plan was anchored by words and not policy—more specifically, semantics. On paper there were no longer Black schools and white schools, and in 1954, policy allowed all students to attend their attendance area

¹ Nancy Jack, "Schlagle Career Began at 16," *The Kansas City Kansan*, March 1962, p. 10A.

² Murrell, "Bell of Success Still Rings for Retired Schoolmaster."

³ O. L. Plucker, "Four Decades of Segregation Desegregation Integration and Repopulation in Unified School District 500, Kansas City, Kansas," *History and Personal Observations*, 1–47.

schools. Nevertheless, neighborhoods and communities were divided by race, and attendance area schools reflected the neighborhoods they served. Although the plan was implemented before the 1954 ruling, there was no plan to enforce or force desegregation and integration. However, to balance enrollment at school sites, Schlagle moved school boundary lines. Interestingly, when the boundary lines were adjusted, Black students were directed back into all Black schools. Only a few were able to enroll in white school to integrate them. So again, while it appeared on paper that Schlagle had a desegregation policy and plan, ultimately, schools remained segregated because boundaries were redrawn, and same race neighborhoods had remained stable.

The Black community held protests, and some Black families filed lawsuits against the KCKPS school board and Schlagle about the lack of progress in desegregating and integrating the district. Headlines in the local papers, the *Kansas City Star*, and the *Kansas City Kansan*, reflected the unrest in the community surrounding schools and race. There were also headlines in local papers that refer to picket lines, protests, sit-ins, and lawsuits concerning segregation in the district and the questionable school boundary lines: “Pickets Resume Protest on School Issue;” “Parents Complete Case in Race Suit;” “School Board Denies Charge;” “Schlagle Defends School Area Lines;” and “Negroes Again Try to Enroll.” These are some of the headlines and stories that provide context and insight into KCKPS and its attempts to address the issue of school segregation. In the article, “Pickets Resume Protest on School Issue,” two quotes exemplify the climate. The first is from Carl Randolph, President of the Northwest District Citizens’ Committee—a group active and instrumental in establishing protests and demonstrations in the city. Randolph said the object of picketing was, “the removal of “Supt. Of Schools F.L. Schlagle and the School Board.” The last quote

in the article is from Schlagle, who said, “We’re sick and tired of the whole thing. Somebody has got to stand up to them.”⁴ However, other articles suggest a more positive picture, and Schlagle is viewed through rose-colored lenses. The 1950s and early 1960s articles in the *Kansas City Kansan* about the district under the leadership of Schlagle are like those of Pearson; that is, there was more news and information regarding bonds and tax increases for construction projects as well as the Cold War and science curriculum than there was about desegregation plans and education. There were accolades and stories that honored Schlagle. “Bell of Success Still Rings for Retired Schoolmaster”; “Schlagle Career Began at 16”; “Education Gained When F. L. Schlagle Quit Law”; and “Award to F. L. Schlagle.” These headlines elevated Schlagle as a gift to education. After reading some of his biographical information, it is evident he was ambitious and intelligent and had dedication to the field of public education. However, did his actions positively affected equity or even equality in the district?

This chapter includes voices of Black citizens who grew up in Kansas City, Kansas and went to school in KCKPS and who still live in the greater Kansas City metropolitan area. The oral histories benefit the study as they fill in information and feelings that are not found in articles and historical documents. Examining desegregation plans under Schlagle shows the impression they left on the community. Schlagle had already worked closely with Pearson as his assistant superintendent; as a result, as superintendent, he had a hand in shaping the district.

⁴ “Pickets Resume Protest on School Issue,” *Kansas City Kansan*, November 12, 1961.

Schlagle the Man

Frank Leslie Schlagle was born on November 18, 1892, in Linwood, Kansas.⁵ He started high school at the age of eleven and graduated at the age of 16 from Wyandotte High School in KCKPS.⁶ His early years show his focus and ambition as a student. After high school his original plans were to attend college and law school. To finance his plan of becoming a lawyer, he accepted his first teaching position in 1909.⁷ In 1916 he earned his bachelor's degree from Kansas State Teachers College in Emporia, Kansas, and in 1923 he earned his master's degree from the Teacher College at Columbia University.⁸ During his early teaching and college years, Schlagle continued to advance in the field of education. In 1911 and 1915 he was appointed principal of an elementary school. In 1916 Pearson appointed him as the assistant principal of Central Junior High School, a new educational concept in KCKPS.⁹ By this time, Europe was in the middle of World War I (WWI), and in 1918 Schlagle left his work as a junior high assistant principal and joined the U.S. Navy,¹⁰ where he excelled during his training. The October 24, 1918 issue of the *Kansas City Star* mentions that Schlagle graduated at the head of his naval training class at Great Lakes Training Station.¹¹ At the age of 25, Schlagle was commissioned as an ensign in the navy and order to Annapolis.¹²

When Schlagle returned from WWI in 1919, he became principal of Argentine High School, where he created the first Parent Teacher Association (PTA) in Kansas. Argentine

⁵ "Education Gained When F.L. Schlagle Quit Law," *Kansas City Kansan*, September 8, 1957.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Promotion for Kansas Side Man," *Kansas City Star*, October 24, 1918.

¹² Ibid.

also had the first school newspaper in the city.¹³ According to the *Kansas City Star* 1973 article, “it was at Argentine that Schlagle proved an able organizer in social and curricular matters.”¹⁴ In 1924 he was appointed assistant superintendent of schools by Pearson. Eight years later, at the age of 40, he would become superintendent of KCKPS.¹⁵ To continue with his lofty goals, early in his superintendency, Schlagle wrote a letter in 1934 to the renowned Frank Lloyd Wright about designing schools for KCKPS. Mr. Wright rejected the opportunity while discouraging and insulting Schlagle in his response letter (see Figure 18).¹⁶

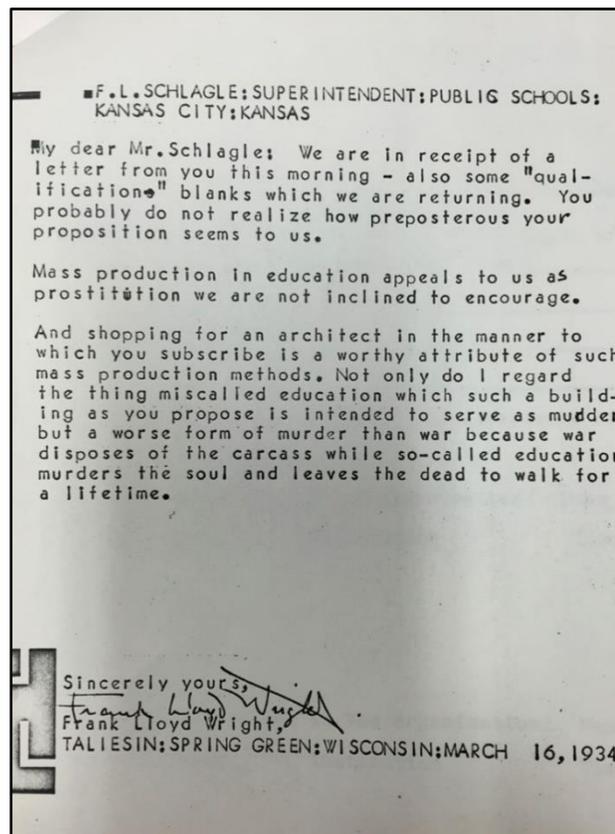


Figure 18. Frank Lloyd Wright Letter to F. L. Schlagle, March 16, 1934

¹³ Murrell, “Bell of Success Still Rings for Retired Schoolmaster.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Letter to Schlagle from Frank Lloyd Wright, March 16, 1934.

Mr. Wright did not hold back his thoughts concerning education and what he felt education did to the spirit.

Continuation of Separation

In the 1920s Pearson and the school board were in the middle of litigation about Mexican children attending schools in the district—more specifically, separating Mexican children by room and building. In the transcripts of those legal battles, Mr. Pearson explained and confirmed that students were separated in the schools. In 1938 Schlagle said the following about Mexican children in KCKPS: “Mexicans have no business moving or living away from the Mexican school. We would rather pay their transportation to the Mexican school than let them attend any other school in the city.”¹⁷ Schlagle was said to have shared these words with a Mexican Methodist minister. Schlagle continued to separate students in the district by race and voiced his views publicly, as evidenced by the quote. Early in Schlagle’s superintendency, city demographics were shifting; more Black families were moving into other portions of the city, causing white families to move out. In 1939, as Black families moved into the attendance area, the white Longfellow school¹⁸ was renamed Dunbar South, after Black American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, and it became a Black school.¹⁹ The business of separating the races that was started by Pearson continued under Schlagle’s leadership.

¹⁷ Rubén Donato, and Jarrod Hanson, “‘In These Towns, Mexicans Are Classified as Negroes’: The Politics of Unofficial Segregation in the Kansas Public Schools, 1915–1935,” *American Educational Research Journal* 54, Supplement 1 (April 2017): 53S-74S.

¹⁸ W. W. Boone, *A History of Black Education in Kansas City, Kansas: Readin’, Riting, Rithmetic* (Kansas City, Kansas: Kansas City Kansas Community College, 1986).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Meanwhile, WWII was underway. The June 27, 1945, issue of the *Kansas City Star* notes. “Twenty-six members of the teaching staff are on leave of absence, serving in the armed forces.”²⁰ According to newspaper accounts from the 1940s, Schlagle was considered a national expert in the field of education. During the war, he became a national voice regarding education reform as the president of the National Education Association. He served two terms as president of the NEA from 1944 to 1946.²¹ He spoke about education being the solution to end wars.

Today we are in a period of transition made up of political, economic, racial and cultural aspirations of the people of the world, Schlagle said. “The conflict is one of ideologies and the chief ingredient in any prescription to be compounded as a permanent remedy must be education. Never before in the history of the world have schools been of such importance.”²²

In this speech he mentioned those returning from the war would need continued education, adult war workers would need to be educated, and those boys and girls who worked in the war factories would need to be educated.²³ The ambition he had in his early years was a part of his thinking and leadership style. He advocated for education to be expanded and extended to those returning from the war. In the 1940s he “served as a consultant on education to the American delegation to the 1945 San Francisco conference that led to the formation of the United Nations.”²⁴

He was involved in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), where he met in London with only thirteen other educators to

²⁰ “Name a School Staff,” *Kansas City Star*, June 27, 1945.

²¹ Ibid.

²² “Peace Key in Learning,” *Kansas City Star*, April 19, 1945.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Murrell, “Bell of Success Still Rings for Retired Schoolmaster.”

discuss world education concerns.²⁵ He considered being elected in 1946 as president of the world conference on the teaching profession as one of his most worthy achievements.²⁶ In 1947, Schlagle was mentioned in the Black newspaper, the *Plaindealer*, as he was asked to speak on educational matters to the Beta Lambda Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha.²⁷ That same year, the *Plaindealer* noted that the daughter of Booker T. Washington visited Sumner High School²⁸ to celebrate the Booker T. Washington fund.

“The Pod” within the Storm: The 1950s

The 1950s brought about changes in the United States that impacted communities. Across the United States school districts were racially segregated, as was KCKPS. The idea of desegregation was a topic of debate in KCKPS before 1954. In a letter from the office of the attorney general in Topeka, Schlagle was asked to consider his thoughts if separate but equal was overturned by the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision (see Figure 19).²⁹ In my research, I did not find a response to Mr. Fatzer’s letter.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “F. L. Schlagle Speaks to Alphas,” *Plaindealer*, April 18, 1947.

²⁸ Nellie McGuinn, and Patricia Adams, “African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859–1961), Part 7 of 7,” *The Historical Journal of Wyandotte County* 3, no. 5 (2011): 173–4.

²⁹ Harold R. Fatzer, Letter to F. L. Schlagle, October 13, 1953.

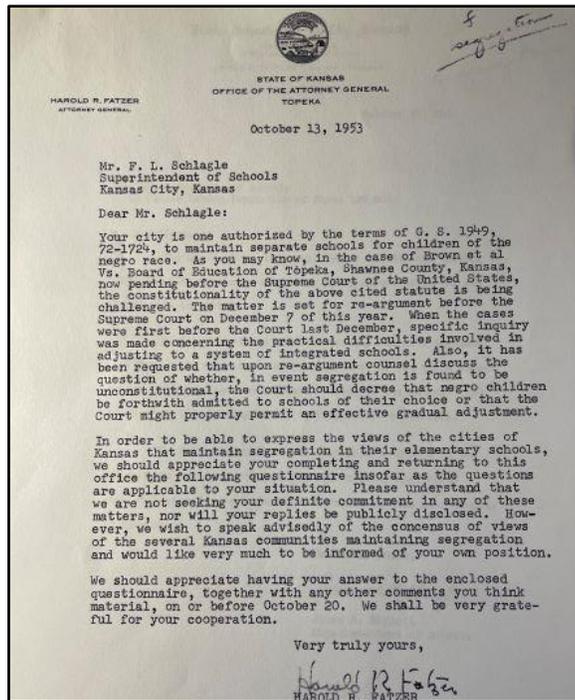


Figure 19. Harold Fatzer Letter to F. L. Schlagle, October 13, 1953

Topeka, Kansas is a one-hour drive on I-70 west from Kansas City, Kansas. On May 17, 1954, the case of *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* received the ruling from the United States Supreme Court that school segregation was unconstitutional. When the decision came from the courts, the KCKPS school board was meeting. Then-board president Frank Rushton gave the following statement to the *Kansas City Star*.

“As I understand it,” Rushton said, “the Supreme Court will hold hearings next fall to determine how and when the change in operation of public schools throughout the country shall be brought about. We of course, will do as the court directs. We feel that interpretation of the court’s directives should come to us through the attorney general of our state.”³⁰

³⁰ “Bar to School Segregation,” *Kansas City Star*, May 17, 1954.

This statement by the board president made it clear that KCKPS would make no immediate moves to desegregate the district. This lack of movement toward desegregation has been corroborated by interviews and oral history shared with me by the study’s interviewees. These graduates of the KCKPS system—Mrs. Barbara Moten, Sumner class of 1952; Ms. Nelgwin Redmond, Sumner class of 1956; Ms. B. Joanne Smith, Sumner class of 1959; Dr. Jesse Kirksey, Sumner class of 1962; Mr. Thomas Womack, Sumner class of 1965; Mr. James McConnell, Wyandotte class of 1966; and Dr. Mary McConnell, Wyandotte class of 1967—all shared stories of living in segregated Kansas City, Kansas. All attended segregated schools for either their entire public school experience or for the majority of it in KCKPS. Mr. Womack said that *Brown v. Board of Education* meant nothing to him, “It didn’t affect us. Our schools were segregated. There was nothing to look forward to.”³¹ Dr. Mary McConnell said, “We didn’t know. I was in a segregated school, and I didn’t know. I just thought that was the way it was.”³² Her husband, Mr. James McConnell, added, “We didn’t know about *Brown v. Board of Education* at that time.”³³ Dr. McConnell concluded, “All Black students, all Black teachers, everything Black. No buses, no school buses. Everybody walked to school.”³⁴

Ms. Smith stated about Schlagle, “Well, the only thing that I can say, Schlagle was a known racist, as far as I was concerned.”³⁵ She gave an example of not having enough supplies in her photography class while at Sumner, but students knew students who attended Wyandotte in the same class had the supplies they needed for the entire school year. She

³¹ Thomas Womack, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 14, 2021.

³² Dr. Mary McConnell, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 13, 2021.

³³ James McConnell, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 13, 2021.

³⁴ Dr. Mary McConnell, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 13, 2021.

³⁵ B. Joanne Smith, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.

went on to say it did not matter what they did not have, because the teachers at Sumner were some of the very best; teachers at Sumner were highly educated and supportive. Mrs. Moten added a story of her only encounter with Schlagle while he was superintendent.

During my senior year, looked like Scottie P. Davis [a teacher at Sumner] enjoyed using me as moderator and chairman of every program, And I think it was education week or something like that and Schlagle came to speak. And she told me to make sure that I congratulate Schlagle on his speech. I was to introduce him, and I did. And he got up and he spoke, and I never will forget the thing that came to my mind. So, when he said it, I don't know, just like something went off in my head. And he was saying how he appreciated the education system was teaching you people how to be good citizens. And that just ran on in my head. You people. You people. And I felt within myself...What are you talking about, you teaching me to be a good citizen? It really had made me mad. But of course, you couldn't...In those days you didn't express it and everything. And I thought to myself, I don't want to sit here and listen to this man. The only thing I can remember of him, that man, but I couldn't tell you what he looked like if you showed me a picture of him, I couldn't remember what Schlagle looked like now. But I remember him standing there, and I remember him saying about he's so glad that our education system was teaching you people how to be good citizens.³⁶



Figure 20. Scottie P. Davis, Sumner Teacher

³⁶ Barbara Moten, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.

She went on to say that Principal Solomon H. Thompson and the teachers congratulated Schlagle on his speech, calling it wonderful, and that she was so angry. She said she told her teacher she had to be excused and that got her out of congratulating the superintendent on his speech. After she had finished the story, she agreed with Ms. Smith that Sumner had the better teachers who cared about their students.



Figure 21. Barbara Moten, 1952 Sumner Yearbook

The 1950s brought with it unrest in the nation. As mentioned earlier, in 1954 the landmark case of *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* changed public education forever, by overturning *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which had legalized separate but equal concerning race. In the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision, the United States Supreme Court deemed segregated schools unconstitutional. Their opinion concluded as follows. “We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”³⁷ Although this was the new law of the land, documents and interviews give evidence that KCKPS did not address desegregation

³⁷ *Segregation in the Public Schools: Opinion of the Supreme Court of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1954).

immediately. In a document dated October 19, 1953, KCKPS answered the question about the district maintaining racial segregation at the elementary level in the affirmative (see Figure 21). The questionnaire includes a question as to whether the “Board of Education adopted any official policy with respect to abandonment of the practice of segregation,” to which KCKPS responded no.³⁸

QUESTIONNAIRE

Questions regarding racial segregation in the public schools in Kansas.

1. Does your school system maintain racial segregation in the elementary grades? yes
2. When was this system established? 1905
3. If segregation was formerly practiced and has been abandoned in your city, please indicate the period during which the policy was in effect? _____ to _____
4. What is the total enrollment in the elementary schools of your school system? 12,033 The negro enrollment? 4601

white	1102
negro	3777
Total	5194
5. How many elementary school units are maintained in your system? 37 How many units are maintained exclusively for negroes? 7

white	1
negro	6
6. What is the total number of teacher employees in your elementary schools? 222 How many negro teachers are employed? 123

white	110
negro	112
Total	222
7. Has your Board of Education adopted any official policy with respect to abandonment of the practice of segregation? no
If so, what generally does such policy provide? _____
8. Should it be determined in the Supreme Court of the United States that G. S. 1949, 72-1724, under which segregation is authorized in cities of the first class, is unconstitutional, how much time do you estimate it would require for your school system to make the adjustment to an integrated system? at least 2 years
9. Could such an adjustment be effected forthwith without serious difficulty? any major change in policy would encounter some difficulty
10. In such an event, would the construction of new buildings or the acquisition of new facilities be required? yes
11. Would it be necessary to redistrict your city geographically? city already divided into school districts
12. Would it be possible to assimilate all negro teachers presently employed into the integrated school system? within 1 year
13. What other special problems would be involved? _____

Figure 22. Questionnaire, October 19, 1953

³⁸ Questionnaire, October 19, 1953 [loose paper, KCKPS archives].

In another questionnaire found in the district archives regarding public school segregation a year later, October 18, 1954, there are questions about plans to integrate and how many schools are maintained solely for Black students (see Figure 22).

COPY

10-18-54

QUESTIONNAIRE RE PUBLIC SCHOOL SEGREGATION

City Winn-Dixie, Fla. St. Johns

1. Has your board of education adopted a resolution or announced a policy with respect to the termination of segregation in the public schools? yes
If so, will you attach a copy of such statement? yes
2. Has a detailed plan for the termination of segregation been prepared or approved by your school system? yes (enclosed copy of Board's report)
3. If so, does such plan provide for the gradual or immediate termination of segregation? gradual
4. If gradual termination is contemplated, when will the process be completed? completion of segregation
5. Has the process of integration of segregated schools actually been begun? yes Has it been completed? yes
6. How many negro students are now attending mixed elementary schools? 68 105 total = 173
7. How many are required to attend segregated schools? We have permitted only Kindergarten, Grades 1,6,7,10,11 & 12 to attend the school within their district. The students in grades not included would total approximately 1,000.
8. How many schools are now maintained exclusively for negroes? none (there are no white children enrolled)
9. How many of your elementary school units are now operated on an integrated basis? 37 (37)
10. Are any negro teachers employed to teach mixed or all white classes? no If so, how many and in what capacities?
11. Does it now appear that the negro teachers presently employed can be assimilated into the integrated school system? yes
12. Insofar as you have been able to observe, has there been much, little or no protest in your community against integration of the elementary schools? no protest
13. If there has been objection, has it been expressed by the white citizens of your community, the negroes, or both? _____
14. Comments: The announced program by the Board of Education was well received by whites and negroes alike and it is felt that integration in our schools is accepted and will be completed when classroom space permits. We are now engaged in the completion of a 6½ million dollar building program that includes the immediate problem before us. will

Figure 23. Questionnaire Regarding Public School Segregation, October 18, 1954

This survey is evidence there was pressure on the superintendent and the school board to make changes in the school district. The document asks how many “negro” students were attending “mixed” elementary schools. The response recorded is 68 in the high school and

135 in elementary, a total of 233 Black students in integrated schools.³⁹ However, during the 1954–1955 school year, there was a total elementary enrollment in the district of 15,414 students. Of those elementary students, 4,139 were Black, recorded as Negro on the document.⁴⁰ The plans put into place to address the public school integration mandate from *Brown v. Board* were not aggressive. In 1954, KCKPS gave Black families the choice to attend their neighborhood schools, because the requirement to attend Black schools had been lifted.⁴¹ There were a few, as mentioned in the survey, who took advantage of this option. “If few colored were in the elementary school district, these pupils were given the option of attending a colored school or formerly white school.”⁴² Families with high school students also had the same option, so Sumner students had the choice to attend their attendance area school or continue their education at Sumner.⁴³

In her interview, Ms. Smith spoke of a few of her Black schoolmates at Sumner who chose to attend their neighborhood schools. She said one friend attended Rosedale High School, and she was told by teachers not to try out for anything. “So instead of busing in, they were staying in their district.”⁴⁴ These small changes in the district caused white families to move further west in the district away from the areas that had the possibility of integration due to residence. For example, after the 1954 decision, there were a small number of white students at Dunbar Elementary until their families moved out of the area.⁴⁵ Mrs. Redmond spoke of two white students attending Sumner who were bused in. She also

³⁹ Questionnaire Regarding Public School Segregation, October 1954 [loose paper, KCKPS archives].

⁴⁰ “Membership by Schools by Number and Percent of Ethnic Groups Old Kansas City, Kansas District,” Kansas Collection, Kansas City Kansas Public Library.

⁴¹ McGuinn and Adams, “African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859–1961), Part 7 of 7,” 174.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ B. Joanne Smith, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.

⁴⁵ Boone, *A History of Black Education in Kansas City, Kansas*.

mentioned that there were three or four Black students at Kansas City Kansas Community College when she attended.⁴⁶

Membership by Schools by Number and Percent of Ethnic Groups Old Kansas City, Kansas District											
Elementary Schools											
<u>School Year</u>	<u>Total Enrollment</u>	<u># White</u>	<u>% White</u>	<u># Negro</u>	<u>% Negro</u>	<u># Indian</u>	<u>% Indian</u>	<u># Oriental</u>	<u>% Oriental</u>	<u># Spanish</u>	<u>% Spanish</u>
1954-55	15414	11275	73.2	4139	26.8						
1955-56	15147	10829	71.5	4318	28.5						
1956-57	15002	10550	70.3	4452	29.7						
1957-58	15239	10594	69.5	4645	30.5						
1958-59	15312	10503	68.6	4809	31.4						
1959-60	15082	10261	68.0	4821	32.0						
1960-61	14650	9834	67.1	4616	32.9						
1961-62	14474	9522	65.8	4952	34.2						

Figure 24. Kansas City, Kansas District Demographics, 1954–1962

Although the city and the schools were segregated, the interviewees felt segregation protected them from the storms of desegregation, integration, and the overall climate of the city, state, and nation during the 1950s. Ms. Smith described it as a safe haven for all who lived in the area.

Okay. We were in a pod. We were in a pod. We went from 13th Street to Third Street. This is the majority from Minnesota Avenue to Quindaro. There were those that lived outside, but the majority of us lived in this area. This was a true community. It's like we were family to a degree only because if you didn't know someone, somebody in your family knew them because they went to school together. Everybody almost knew everybody. We may not have known the individual, but we knew the family.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Nelgwin Redmond, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.

⁴⁷ B. Joanne Smith, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021. According to Ms. Smith, the boundaries of the “pod” were Thirteenth Street to Third Street, which ran west to east, and Minnesota Avenue to Quindaro, which ran south to north.



Figure 25. B. Joanne Smith, 1959 Summer Yearbook

She described the Black community in Kansas City, Kansas. Blacks frequented and owned their own shops and stores. Professional Blacks lived in the same “pod” with everyone else. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, and other professionals all lived in the “pod” because of segregation. Ms. Moten added no one was considered poor. No one was poor.⁴⁸ The community shared with each other. They shared their memories and spoke fondly of segregation. Mrs. Redmond explained that she moved from Texas to Kansas City, Kansas her senior year, and she lived in the “pod” and was accepted by the community. She said it was her first experience with a segregated neighborhood. She said in Texas she went to segregated schools, but her neighborhood had both Blacks and whites.⁴⁹ Dr. Mary McConnell and Dr. Jessie Kirksey described the community with words such as “wonderful experience” and a “village.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid.; Barbara Moten. interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.

⁴⁹ Nelgwin Redmond, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.

⁵⁰ Dr. Mary McConnell, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 13, 2021; James McConnell, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 13, 2021; Dr. Jessie Kirksey, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 22, 2021.

When I grew up, I grew up on Fifth and Oakland. We lived there all the way until the end of my sixth grade year. It was wonderful, wonderful, wonderful experience because it was community and everybody knew everybody. Back then, you didn't have to lock your door. All the families on the street, everybody had children, a lot of children. Everybody just kind of looked out for and after each other. We had a mix of different types of people that lived on our street. About two or three doors up, we had a business owner that owned the business on Fifth street. Then across the street from him up a little bit further, the lawyer, Cordell Meeks. They lived there. So, we had just a wealth of different types of people that lived in our neighborhood. All around that area, there were businesses, and they were Black-owned businesses.⁵¹



Figure 26. Nelgwin Redmond, 1956 Sumner Yearbook

Dr. Kirksey described the protection in the community as preparation. She said the teachers prepared students to succeed to “rub shoulders with the big boys.”⁵² She described the 1950s when parents were meeting in churches discussing desegregation and integration. She found out only later what the meetings were about. She and her friends just enjoyed being together at the church to socialize while the adults discussed adult matters. She said,

We didn't know that our parents were talking about this thing called integration and things like that. But you know what? It happened in 1954, like I said, and we still remained here in Kansas City, we didn't have a desire to go other places. Or we

⁵¹ Dr. Mary McConnell, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 13, 2021.

⁵² Dr. Jessie Kirksey, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 22, 2021.

didn't know that we could. We just felt that the education that we were getting at a segregated school was the best education that we were going to get.⁵³

Although they were in the protection of the community, there were issues concerning school integration. In a September 11, 1955 Western Union Telegram to Schlagle, James P. Davis, Attorney for the NAACP, wrote:

This is to inform you that the legal redress committee of the Kansas City, Kansas Branch of the NAACP is advising all Negro parents whose children were refused admittance to respective schools to accompany their children back to these schools on Monday morning. Refusal of admittance will necessitate legal action. Kansas City, Kansas Branch of NAACP ATTY James P. Davis Chairman Rev I.H. Henderson President⁵⁴

In the October 18, 1954 questionnaire, there is a question asking about protests from Blacks or white; the written response is "no protest."⁵⁵ There may not have been protests during the time of the questionnaire, but the telegram is evidence some in the Black community were not satisfied with the actions of the district. This dissatisfaction was recorded in an article by Mr. James P. Davis titled, "Lawmaker's View of K.C.K. Schools." In the article he states,

It was predicted by authorities that following this decision the courts would be entertained with various schemes and plans to avoid compliance with this historic decision. In other words, there would be approximately 100 years of litigation.⁵⁶

Mr. Davis goes on to compare the movement of Kansas City Missouri School District (KCMSD) in Kansas City, Missouri with the moves and plans of KCKPS. He says, "In Kansas City, Missouri, the public schools are integrated and the faculty of many of its

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ NAACP Western Union Telegram to Schlagle, September 11, 1955.

⁵⁵ Questionnaire, October 18, 1954.

⁵⁶ James P. Davis, "Lawmaker's View of K.C.K. Schools" [loose item in unnumbered box, KCKPS archives], n.d.

elementary, junior high and senior high schools are integrated.”⁵⁷ Although he mentions KCMSD in favorable terms, that district also faced challenges in implementing their integration plans. An October 25, 1955 letter from James A. Hazlett, Superintendent of Kansas City, Missouri School District, asked local superintendents about their experience with integration (see Figure 24). Schlagle responded to Hazlett’s letter on October 28 (see Figure 25).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

October 24, 1955

To Superintendents of Schools
In Cities Having Population of Above 100,000:

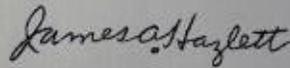
Dear Colleagues:

The Kansas City, Missouri, Public Schools are serving students this year on a completely desegregated basis for the first time in history.

So far this change has been orderly, without incident and completely up to expectations; however, as you would expect we are experiencing some problems related to the change. And as usual we are turning to our colleagues for assistance.

The data requested on the next page is needed in the approach to one such problem. We will greatly appreciate your arranging for us to have the information from your Schools by November 4.

Cordially yours,



James A. Hazlett
Superintendent of Schools

Figure 27. James A. Hazlett Letter, October 24, 1955⁵⁸

⁵⁸ James A. Hazlett, Letter to KCKPS Superintendent, "To Superintendents of Schools in Cities Having Population of Above 100,000," October 24, 1955.

Mr. James A. Hazlett
 Superintendent of Schools
 Public Library Building
 9th and Locust Street
 Kansas City, Missouri

F. L. Schlagle
 (Name of Person Replying)

~~Superintendent of Schools~~
 (Title)

1. Are your schools integrated? Yes No

2. Estimated per cent of Negro pupils
 to total enrollment 24% %

3. Estimated per cent of Negro profes-
 sional workers (teachers, principals,
 supervisors, etc.) to total profes-
 sional staff 23% %

4. Estimated per cent of building
 faculties having both Negro and
 white teachers none %

October 28, 1955

Figure 28. F. L. Schlagle's Response to Letter from James A. Hazlett, October 28, 1955

There is no indication as to when Mr. Davis' article was written, with the exception that it mentions the 1960-1961 school year. Regardless, Schlagle's responses corroborate Davis' words and the interviews mentioned previously.

A March 28, 1956 document about segregation in KCKPS shows the number of students segregated due to their residence. There were 6,676 Black students enrolled in KCKPS at the time, and 75% of them were segregated because of their residence.⁵⁹ This means that although families could send their students to their neighborhood schools, many of the Black students lived in all-Black communities, thereby making their neighborhood or resident area schools segregated. Because of these numbers, the district was out of compliance with the May 17, 1954, desegregation order by the Supreme Court. To address the lack of racial balance in enrollments, district families were given notices mandating where their students would or would not attend schools. An example of such a notice is one to families of students attending Northeast Junior High School, the Black junior high school dated April 13, 1956 (see Figure 26).⁶⁰

⁵⁹ “Survey of Children Segregated because of Residence—Negro,” March 28, 1956 [loose document in KCKPS archive box].

⁶⁰ Joseph H. Collins, Letter to Parents re: Northeast Junior High School, April 13, 1956.

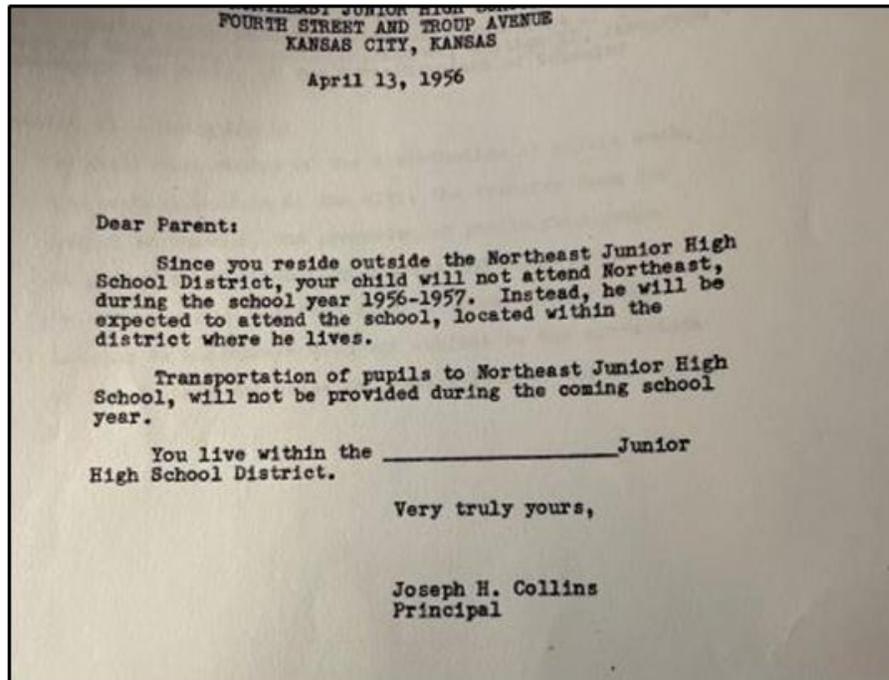


Figure 29. Notice to Parents of Students Attending Northeast Junior High School, 1956

At this time, students were expected to attend their attendance area schools, thereby redirecting Black students away from Northeast Junior High School. Mr. and Mrs. McConnell discussed this change and how they felt about the district mandate of attending their attendance area school. I asked them both about attending Northwest Junior High School as Black students in KCKPS. Dr. McConnell stated, “I went to Northwest because we moved, but it was devastating. That was trauma back then...because I wanted to go to Northeast.”⁶¹ Mr. McConnell stated that everybody—all of their friends—went to Northeast. Dr. McConnell added, “That’s where they were going, to Northeast and then on to Sumner. I mean, that was just something that we looked forward to.”⁶² Mr. McConnell said,

Those were some tough times back then, right during that period. You asked earlier what year it was. It was the early ‘60s when that happened. During that time, they changed the boundaries is what happened, and a lot of kids that were living in a certain location at one point in time would have been a part of Northeast, but when

⁶¹ Dr. Mary McConnell, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 13, 2021.

⁶² Ibid.

we moved there, they changed the boundary and then it became Northwest. Oh my God, why'd they do this?⁶³

Although the McConnell's were speaking about the early 1960s, their stories corroborated archival documents from the 1950s.

This April 18, 1956, board policy gave the superintendent the authority to reassign students in the district from school to school (see Figure 27). This policy aligns with what the McConnell's shared and with the letters that were sent to families of Northeast students. Some students were also moved from Northwest Junior High School to West Junior High School to lessen some of the crowding at Northwest.⁶⁴

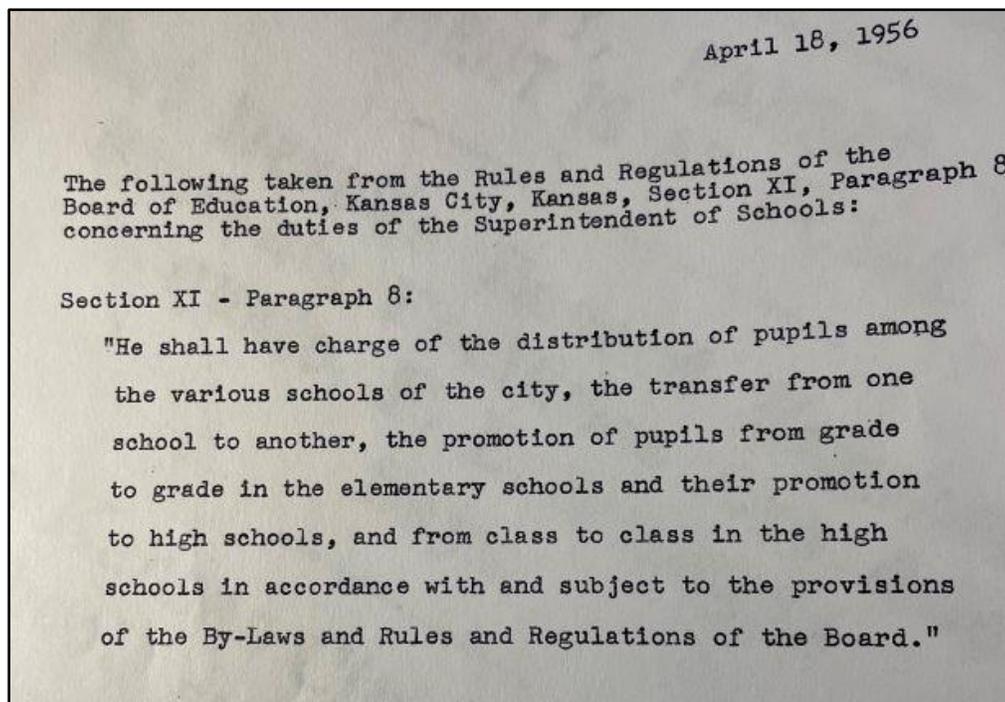


Figure 30. Board Policy, KCKPS, April 18, 1956

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ "Peak Load at Schools: Kansas City, Kansas, Enrollment Is at 24,144," *Kansas City Times*, September 18, 1956, p. 33.

The district was also challenged with enrollment capacity. The September 18, 1956, issue of the *Kansas City Times* carried a story entitled “Peak Load at Schools; Kansas City, Kansas, Enrollment is at 24,144.”⁶⁵ The article notes 475 more students than the year before in the district. Schlagle said that “the enrollment was about what had been predicted for this year, and...there are adequate facilities and teacher to take care of all students.”⁶⁶ The article also notes how integration impacted school enrollment.

Every school showed an increase over the first week’s figures and only a few elementary schools show declines from last year. Schlagle said these decreases are the result of the reorganizing of the school districts and because of integration.⁶⁷

The last sentence in the article gives insight into the pace at which the district was moving to integrate schools. “Grant, a Negro school, has 569 students and Frances Willard has 298.”⁶⁸ In 1956, Grant Elementary moved into a new building, and the director of colored elementary schools was the speaker at the opening of the new facility.⁶⁹ The district was working to integrate schools but still had a director of colored elementary schools. Again, this shows the district was facing the challenge of integrating schools.

The discussion of integration in the district was not just about schools; it was also about integrating the school board. In 1957, board member Frank Rushton died and left an open position on the school board. The Black Ministers Union in Kansas City, Kansas went

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ McGuinn and Adams, “African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859–1961), Part 7 of 7.”

before the school board to urge them to select a Black person to fill the open position.⁷⁰ The subject of adding a Black person to the school board is discussed later in the study.

Boundaries, Protests, and Transition

In the 1960s, Schlagle and the school board were under pressure to address desegregating the district. In a letter to the Board of Education, Schlagle asked that the school board adjust boundaries to balance enrollment at Northeast and Northwest Junior High Schools (see Figure 28). In the letter he asked the board to amend the descriptions of attendance areas and schools. This action would require some Black residents to attend Northwest, when Northeast was the original Black junior high school during segregation. He also mentioned that he would be granting transfer permits “when requested, and when they can be accommodated in other school districts, to students resident of districts where the majority of the students are of a different race. These permits are granted without regard to the race of the applicant.”⁷¹

⁷⁰ “Want Negro on Board,” *Kansas City Times*, May 7, 1957.

⁷¹ F. L. Schlagle, Letter to Kansas City, Kansas School Board, August 22, 1960.

The removal of residents from the Gateway Renewal Project and the Juniper Gardens Project has resulted in a considerable decrease in the student population assigned to the Northeast Junior High School. In order to better distribute student load at the Northeast and Northwest Junior High Schools, I recommend that the attendance districts as adopted by the Board of Education on August 6, 1956, effective September 1, 1956, and amended August 5, 1957, and August 4, 1958, be now amended by deleting the descriptions of attendance districts for the Northeast Junior High School and the Northwest Junior High School, and substituting therefor the following:

Northeast Junior High School, 4th & Troop: Northeast Junior High School is composed of students in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades residing in the following elementary school districts: Douglass, Danbar, Grant, Hawthorne (east of Thirteenth Street), Stowe.

Northwest Junior High School, 18th & Haskell: Northwest Junior High School is composed of students in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades residing in the following elementary school districts: Abbott, Bryant, Chelsea, Fairfax, Hawthorne (west of Thirteenth Street), Mark Twain, McKinley, Parker (east of Thirty-first Street), Quindaro.

Under the authority granted me by the board's adopted policies, I am granting permits to students from the Hawthorne district east of Thirteenth Street who attended Northwest Junior High School last year to continue at that school. I am also granting transfer permits, when requested, and when they can be accommodated in other school districts, to students resident of districts where the majority of the students are of a different race. These permits are granted without regard to the race of the applicant.

Respectfully submitted,
F. L. Schlagle
F. L. Schlagle

Figure 31. Letter from Schlagle to the Board of Education Regarding School Attendance Districts, August 22, 1960

This action caused disruption in “the pod.” Mr. McConnell spoke of these changes in his interview. Dr. McConnell described the change as devastating. “That was trauma back

then.”⁷² The McConnell’s said integration seemed to be moving one way. “The thing of it is that it was going in one direction. In other words, I went to Noble Prentis, but you weren’t seeing any whites going in the opposite direction. You weren’t seeing them going to Stowe or to Douglass or to Dunbar North or South.”⁷³ She added, “The teachers were still all Black,” referring to those in Black schools. “Now, when we went to Northwest, they were all white.”⁷⁴ The information that Mr. and Dr. McConnell shared corroborates the letter Schlagle wrote to the school board.

Boundary shifts during the 1960–1961 school year upset the community. The McConnell’s explained that some Black families homeschooled their students because of the changes. However, when they enrolled their students the next school year, KCKPS required them to repeat the grades that they were homeschooled.⁷⁵ At this point in KCKPS history, things became more unsettled. A letter written to Schlagle from Robert M. Farnsworth, who was chairman of Greater Kansas City Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), outlined that CORE “voted to support the picketing of the Northwest District Citizens Committee and protest to you against such discrimination” (see Figure 29).⁷⁶

⁷² Dr. Mary McConnell, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 13, 2021.

⁷³ James McConnell, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 13, 2021.

⁷⁴ Dr. Mary McConnell, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 13, 2021.

⁷⁵ Ibid.; James McConnell, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 13, 2021.

⁷⁶ Robert M. Farnsworth, Letter to F. L. Schlagle, Kansas City, Missouri, September 22, 1961.

5809 Woodland
Kansas City, Missouri
September 22, 1961

Mr. F. L. Schlagle
Superintendent of Schools
Kansas City, Kansas

Dear Mr. Schlagle:

A delegation from the Northwest District Citizens Committee has twice appeared at meetings of the Greater Kansas City chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality and presented evidence of racial discrimination in the districting of schools in Kansas City, Kansas. Our CORE chapter has voted to support the picketing of the Northwest District Citizens Committee and protest to you against such discrimination.

We are at present collecting as much information as possible concerning the allegations of the Citizens Committee and would welcome any statement or information from you explaining the district boundaries and the operation of the permit system, since these are the primary cause for complaint.

Sincerely,

Robert M. Farnsworth
Chairman, Greater Kansas
City CORE

Rec'd 3 pm Sept 22 1961
Post marked - 1 pm Sept 22 1961

Figure 32. Farnsworth Letter to Superintendent Schlagle, September 22, 1961

Another supporting document for the letter details the time and place for the protest. “Pickets will walk from 10:30 am to 4:30 pm tomorrow in front of the Board of Education offices in the 600 block on Minnesota” (see Figure 30).⁷⁷

⁷⁷CORE Picketing Plans, Kansas City, Missouri, September 22, 1961.

Kansas City, Missouri - September 22, 1961 - UPI

The Greater Kansas City Chapter of the Committee on Racial Equality will join picketing because of alleged discrimination by the Kansas City, Kansas School Board.

Dr. Robert Farnsworth, a professor at the Kansas City University, who heads the CORE unit here, sent a special delivery letter to Superintendent F. L. Schlagle of the Kansas City, Kansas Schools outlining the picketing plans.

Pickets will walk from 10:30 am to 4:30 pm tomorrow in front of the Board of Education offices in the 600 block on Minnesota.

Farnsworth said CORE has joined the protest move at the request of the Northwest District Citizens Committee, a group that charges the school board and superintendent for discrimination because of race in connection with enrollment at the Northwest Junior High School.

Figure 33. CORE Picketing Plans, September 22, 1961

The Northwest District Citizens Committee was protesting because of boundary changes that were impacting Northwest Junior High School, asserting that boundary changes allowed segregated schools to continue. Protests concerning this issue went through November. A local citizens organization picketed in front of the KCKPS Board of Education building to end segregated schools.⁷⁸ In a November 12, 1961 article in the *Kansas City Kansan*, Carl Randolph, the president of the Northwest District Citizens committee, was quoted as saying, “the object of the picketing was ‘the removal of’ Supt. Of Schools F. L. Schlagle and the school Board.”⁷⁹ In the same article, Schlagle is quoted about those picketing, “We don’t pay attention to them (the pickets). There is not a word of truth in what those signs say.”⁸⁰ He went on: “We’re sick and tired of the whole thing. Somebody has got to stand up to them.”⁸¹ These statements show that Schlagle viewed the idea of free speech—the voices of the community—as oppositional. The same November 12, 1961 article in the *Kansas City Kansan* states that suits were filed in the United States district court charging the Board of Education with maintaining segregated schools and they were waiting for the court’s decision. Indeed, just as mentioned earlier by those interviewed, there was no real change after the *Brown v. Board* decision.

In 1961 Schlagle had all of the responsibilities of running the district in addition to dealing with the changes that the civil rights movement was bringing to Kansas City, Kansas. In March of that year, he battled with the state about school funding for larger districts. He noticed the formula used by the state benefitted small districts and rural districts.⁸² Another

⁷⁸ “Pickets Resume Protest on School Issue,” *Kansas City Kansan*, November 12, 1961.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² “Schlagle Sees Bias,” *Kansas City Kansan*, March 10, 1961.

concern was families who had children in Douglass elementary, a Black school, were asking for a new facility.⁸³ The board responded by telling families that they would consider plans and places in 12 to 15 months because the board had abandoned their original idea of adding rooms to the school. The board had to address the budget for such a project and what they should do.⁸⁴ The following year, 1962, brought about more protests about school desegregation and boundary changes.

Schlagle's Last Months as Superintendent

In 1962 in the midst of official complaints about racial desegregation in schools and lawsuits, Schlagle announced his retirement after thirty years as superintendent. He made it known that he would retire at the end of the 1961–1962 school year.⁸⁵ He had reached the mandatory retirement age of 70.⁸⁶ At his announcement, the board started a regional search for a superintendent.⁸⁷ While the board was searching, Schlagle still had to address the allegations that were brought against him and the district concerning racial desegregation. According to a January 30, 1962 article in the *Kansas City Times*, Schlagle testified in court that boundaries were changed to balance school numbers.⁸⁸ The battle over redistricting the lines that determined whether students attended Northeast or Northwest Junior High Schools remained.

Responses from the “Pod”

⁸³ “New Douglass School Asked,” *Kansas City Kansan*, April 18, 1961.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ “F. L. Schlagle Will Step Out,” *Kansas City Kansan*, January 2, 1962.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ “School Head May Leave,” *Kansas City Star*, January 2, 1962.

⁸⁸ “Schlagle Defends School Area Lines,” *Kansas City Times*, January 30, 1962.

This is part of the story that is complex. In my interviews with former students of the district, they felt they received a wonderful education while in segregated schools. They felt the experience of growing up in a segregated society was to their benefit. However, they knew that segregation was wrong. Some of the arguments and complaints from the Black community reflect that paradox. They wanted their students to remain in Black schools so they could attend Northeast Junior High and Sumner. In a January 30, 1969 article in the *Kansas City Times*, parents complained that students were offered permits to attend schools outside of their attendance area, though the permits issued were, “for children living in one district to attend a school in another district if the school in the child’s own district is predominantly of another race or nationality.”⁸⁹ Schlagle continued, “this policy on permits extended to Negroes as well as to whites.”⁹⁰ This plan or policy would not integrate schools. It would do the opposite; it would maintain racially segregated schools. By this logic, Black students living in the Black community would not have permits approved because they looked like everyone else in their school, including their teachers. The boundary changes did little to expand integration, because the city was also segregated. In some instances, the boundary changes separated siblings. Black students who were already attending Northwest would be allowed to remain; however, in some families another sibling of junior high school age would be routed to Northeast, thereby having students in the same family in different schools.⁹¹ Parents filed suit and explained to the court that they tried to enroll their students in Northwest after their student completed sixth grade at Hawthorne Elementary, and they

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ “Parents End Testimony,” *Kansas City Times*, January 31, 1962.

were told the boundary had changed and their students would be required to attend Northeast.⁹²

There were white students who were in the same situation whose families were granted permits for them to attend Northwest.⁹³ These actions by Schlagle and the Board of Education appeared to keep the district segregated under the guise of balancing enrollment numbers. It was because of this that Black families filed had suit against the district.

The KCKPS school board gave the following statement before the court in 1962 when asked to explain the boundary changes.

The permit system allows a student, upon application, to transfer from a school in his own district not preponderantly of his own race or nationality to one in another district where his race or nationality predominates. It applies to both Negroes and Whites.⁹⁴

Members of the school board denied race had anything to do with the boundary changes, and they were not aware the line changes impacted racial balance of the schools.⁹⁵ The conflict concerning the boundaries of Northeast and Northwest was corroborated by Dr. McConnell during her interview. She explained that her father took off work to enroll her in Northwest. As she spoke, she now thinks that the conflict is the reason that he took her to enroll.

My dad, he worked for TWA for many, many years. He took off work and took me to Northwest to get me enrolled that day. I don't know if he did that because of security, now that you mention that, or he just wanted to make sure that nothing happened, and everything went okay. But I do remember that he took off work that day to take me to Northwest to enroll me after we moved out there.⁹⁶

⁹² "Parents Complete Case in Race Suit," *Kansas City Times*, January 31, 1962.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ "School Board Denies Charge," *Kansas City Star*, January 31, 1962.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Dr. Mary McConnell, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 13, 2021; James McConnell, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 13, 2021.

Schlagle is recorded as saying during questioning in the lawsuit about the district maintaining segregated schools:

the student's best interest are to be served first. Emotional stability, educational background and ability to "get along" with others are also factors considered in granting a permit between schools where one or the other race predominates⁹⁷



Figure 34. Mary McConnell, 1967 Wyandotte Yearbook

The dispute about the boundaries continued. There were Black real estate agents and bankers who were financing Black families and helping them find homes to "break blocks" in the Hawthorne district where the dispute started.⁹⁸ To break blocks meant Black families were moving into areas that were predominantly white. "[Mr.] Sewing said that prior to 1960, most of the Negroes in the Hawthorne district lived east of 13th. Now, he said from 50 to 55 Negro families live west of 13th."⁹⁹ This would mean that Black students west of 13th Street should and would be enrolled in Northwest. These families had to move outside of the new boundaries to integrate Northwest Junior High School. This is what Dr. McConnell

⁹⁷ "School Policy Cited," *Kansas City Kansan*, January 31, 1962.

⁹⁸ "Decision Must Wait," *Kansas City Kansan*, February 1, 1962.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

meant when she referenced that her family “moved out there.”¹⁰⁰ They were outside of the pod.

While lawsuits were before the courts, the school board was continuing the search for a superintendent. There were more than 100 applications for the position, and they narrowed the list to eight.¹⁰¹ It was imperative that they find a superintendent before August 31, 1962, when Schlagle’s retirement would become effective (see Figure 31).¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ “School Head May Leave,” *Kansas City Star*, January 2, 1962.

¹⁰² “Missourian to Be Superintendent,” *Kansas City Kansan*, March 8, 1962.



**Figure 35. F. L. Schlagle, Superintendent 1932–1962
1961–1962 Wyandotte High School Yearbook**

When Schlagle presented his formal letter of retirement at a board meeting in March of 1962, the board announced that as a result of their search, Dr. Orvin L. Plucker would succeed him as superintendent.¹⁰³ In April of the same year, Black students were denied

¹⁰³ Ibid.

enrollment at Northwest and Wyandotte high schools.¹⁰⁴ Parents of Black students were told enrollment would be in the afternoon after they arrived in the morning. Then they were told they did not live in the attendance area to enroll in the school. The parents were told their students needed to enroll in Northeast and Sumner because they lived within those boundaries.¹⁰⁵ The end of Schlagle's tenure brought about more protests and lawsuits.



Figure 36. 1961–1962 Sumner High School Yearbook

Schlagle left the school district on August 31, 1962; Plucker began his position after that school year had started. This overlap can be viewed as a transition period between their leadership. Plucker was forced to pick up where Schlagle left off, with discord in the district.

¹⁰⁴ "Negroes Again Try to Enroll," *Kansas City Kansan*, April 30, 1962.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 4

1962–1986: A COURT ORDER, CHANGES, AND INTEGRATION

Introduction and Overview

Oren L. Plucker was superintendent of KCKPS from 1962 to 1986, a total of 24 years. This chapter investigates Plucker’s leadership and his actions to address the lack of a viable desegregation plan. In Plucker’s “Four Decades of Segregation Desegregation Integration and Repopulation in Unified School District 500, Kansas City, Kansas: History and Personal Observations,” written in 1986, he outlined his thoughts and reflections on segregation. This primary source is Plucker’s personal account of his time in the district, in which he shared events about his life and his tenure as superintendent. He reflected on his upbringing in South Dakota and his first experience seeing a Black person. He shared that he was older than 12 when this occurred:



Figure 37. Oren L. Plucker, Superintendent 1962–1986

At the age of 86+, I look back on my heritage as a country boy from South Dakota. I never saw a Black person until after I was 12 years old and then only as a Negro church choir came to present a concert at our little country Baptist church. My next experience was as a freshman student at Sioux Falls College. In 1941, I was enrolled in a large English class where seating was in alphabetic order. By chance I was seated next to Hattie D. Phillips, a friendly, personable student and probably the only Black person enrolled in the school. She was also enrolled in the college choir of which I was a member.¹

During Plucker's tenure, the United States was in the midst of the Cold War, which included a near catastrophic incident with Russia during the Cuban missile crisis, as well as the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and Dr. King and the Watts riots, which were a cry and trumpet blast for change in the United States. Although none of these events occurred in Kansas City, Kansas, their impact was felt in the area. Black communities in Kansas City, Kansas experienced protests that highlighted inequality and racism in the city. *The Kansas City Star* and other periodicals added insight into the period and helped to paint a clear picture of the greater Kansas City area by giving local reports during this age of protests and demonstrations. A 1980 article in the *Star* began with the following sentence describing KCKPS.

A front-page article in *The Kansas City Star* in 1965 cataloged a dismal array of problems plaguing the Kansas City, Kansas, School District, not the least of which was "all the smugness of a small town."²

I was a student in the district from 1976 to 1989. I recall vestiges of Plucker's leadership. One memory that stands out deals with inclement weather. Plucker was known for not calling snow days. I would get up early as an elementary school, middle school, or high school student on mornings after a heavy snow and listen to the radio or turn on the

¹O. L. Plucker, "Four Decades of Segregation Desegregation Integration and Repopulation in Unified School District 500, Kansas City, Kansas: History and Personal Observations," 1-47.

² Joseph H. McCarty, Jr., "KCK Educator Sees Gains, Looks to '80s," *Kansas City Star*, January 14, 1980, p. 1.

television. I remember hearing and reading about school districts calling snow days. On one particular day, I heard the radio announcers chuckling about how KCKPS—and Plucker—never called a snow day. In his interview, my father, who was a high school student in the 1960s, also mentioned this character trait of Plucker’s, so Plucker was consistent in his decision making. He was known as an unyielding leader when it concerned seat time in the classroom. As a child I thought nothing much of this decision. However, as an adult, I wonder if he ever considered the well-being of students in the district.

Plucker and Integration

Plucker had the heavy task of creating and submitting a desegregation plan to the court to address the order mandating that the district integrate. Throughout his term, Plucker kept records and details outlining his plans. Using resources at the Main Library in Kansas City, Kansas, I gained access to four documents addressing the court order and the changes in the community and the district.³ Three of the four were written by Plucker himself. This chapter includes an examination of the impact of the desegregation plan on the district and the community.

Integrating KCKPS was not Plucker’s first experience with integrating a district. Before coming to KCKPS, he was superintendent of Independence School District in Missouri, appointed in May of 1954 just as the Supreme Court ruled segregated schools

³ “Comprehensive Plan to Remedy the Unconstitutional Student Segregation at Sumner, Northeast, Banneker, Douglass and Grant and to Alleviate Remaining Teaching Faculty Imbalance,” submitted by the Board of Education, Unified School District #500 Kansas City, Kansas, Pursuant to Orders of United States District Court for the District of Kansas in re: *United States of America v. Unified School District No. 500*, K.C.-3738, April 12, 1977; O. L. Plucker, Superintendent of Schools, Remarks to Board of Education, Unified School District #500, Kansas City, Kansas, re: Desegregation Plan, April 12, 1977; Plucker, “Schools in Kansas City, Kansas in Years of Change 1962–1986,” June 1987; Plucker, “Four Decades of Segregation Desegregation.”

unconstitutional. I examined the decisions made by Plucker related to this issue in the Independence School District to determine if there were any patterns or differences that emerged when he was faced with the same challenge of integrating KCKPS. I inferred from newspaper articles and documents written by Plucker that the KCKPS school board selected him because of his experiences with integrating schools. Schlagle was leaving the community, and the state was becoming impatient with the false starts and the smoke and mirrors around integration.⁴ The school board, no doubt, felt this pressure and had to respond.

Plucker wrote a reflection on his experience as superintendent in Independence Schools, the task of desegregating the district, and his early thoughts about coming the KCKPS.

At the very next meeting of the Board, I proposed that beginning in September, the transfer of Negro high school students to Kansas City should be discontinued, that they be totally integrated into the all-white William Chrisman High School and that plans should be made to integrate the students and teachers of the elementary school at the earliest feasible time.⁵

Resolving the problems of school desegregation in a district with a relatively small number of minority students and teachers, an unaroused population, the absence of outside influences and the determination to resolve the potential problems in a non-confrontational manner is a rather simple process when approached directly and concluded before old wounds are opened and allowed to fester. The simplicity of resolving small problems in desegregation of schools may be misleading when faced by the complex issues of urban core demographics.⁶

In 1962 an old friend, F.L. Schlagle, was retiring in Kansas City, Kansas after 30 years as its Superintendent of Schools and a total of 43 years in the system. His predecessor, Mr. M.E. Pearson, had served in the position from 1902-1932. A combined tenure in the superintendent's office of 60 years! The district had grown older quite gently but was just beginning to feel the pressures of changing urban demographics. However, its struggles with segregation issues were not entirely new.⁷

⁴ Plucker, "Schools in Kansas City, Kansas in Years of Change 1962-1986," June 1987.

⁵ Plucker, "Four Decades of Segregation Desegregation," 3.

⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁷ Ibid., 5.

In Plucker’s “Four Decades of Segregation,” his word choices concerning race were inconsistent. He used the terms Negro, Black, Polyglot, and Balkanization as he described the changes in the nation and within the district.⁸ When he used the word “diversity,” he placed quotation marks around it. He also used the term “urban” throughout his writing when there was a shift in demographics. An analysis of Plucker’s reflections is included later in this chapter. Figure 34 shows urban demographic trends as more Blacks enrolled in schools and white students left the district.

Table III*
Changes in Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Urban Core
Population of Kansas City, Kansas, 1970-1990

AREA	Census Year 1970				Census Year 1990			
	White	Black	Other	Total	White	Black	Other	Total
A #	4,257	23,899	107	28,253	910	13,212	191	14,313
%	15.06	84.55	.04	100.0	6.3	92.3	1.3	100.0
B #	26,600	5,802	92	32,494	12,808	13,894	647	27,470
%	81.86	17.85	0.28	100.0	46.62	50.58	2.35	100.0
C #	18,386	628	172	19,121	4,658	3,994	7,266	15,918
%	96.16	3.28	0.89	100.0	29.26	25.09	45.65	100.0
D #	19,761	421	90	20,272	18,776	2,138	418	21,332
%	97.47	2.02	.05	100.0	88.01	10.02	1.73	100.0
E #	25,428	2,112	312	27,852	14,448	3,628	2,963	21,039
%	91.2	7.60	.01	100.0	68.67	17.20	14.21	100.0
F #	26,895	1,178	290	28,935	19,400	3,012	4,091	26,503
%	92.95	6.14	1.00	100.0	73.20	11.36	15.44	100.0
G #	76,970	31,747	836	109,553	43,762	30,222	6,891	80,875
%	70.26	28.97	76	100.0	54.11	37.37	8.52	100.0

* Explanation: Combined, Areas A-B-C-D-E and F essentially include all of the area of USD 500. Census districts vary slightly from USD 500 boundary lines. Area G. contains only that part of USD 500 that lies east of Highway 635

Area A. Bounded by Washington Ave on the south, 18th St. on the west and the KS/MO State Line on the east. (Most of the old Northeast Jr. High and Sumner H.S. area)

Area B. Bounded by State Ave. on the south, I-365 on the west to Paralell, thence west on Paralell to 67th St., thence north to Cernich, thence east to 55th St., thence north to the KS/MO State line, thence east to I-365. (Primarily the West Jr.High, Bethel-Welborn, and Quindaro Bluffs areas)

Figure 38. Urban Core Statistics, 1970–1990

⁸ Ibid., 1–47.

In another of his writings, “Schools in Kansas City, Kansas in Years of Change 1962–1986,” published in 1987, Plucker outlined his reflections about the district during his tenure. He recounted his views about the culture and climate of the district just before he took leadership and as he took his position. In the Foreword he stated:

Schools in urban centers of America have been in deep trouble and turmoil during most of the past quarter century. The opportunity to serve twenty-four years (1962–1986) as Superintendent of Schools in Kansas City, Kansas, during years in which superintendents in most similar cities were changing at an average of about every three or four years has been unique and rewarding in many ways. These chapters, and others which I hope may follow, are an effort to describe some of the experiences of that period and to provide a record of the events which took place in an urban center which had the unique qualities of stability in the tenure of its board of education and executive leadership (p. ii).⁹

In this statement, he referred to the “unique qualities of stability” when describing the leadership of the district. He summarized the racial and civil unrest, contentious school board elections, desegregation issues with the state, arguments concerning school lunch programs, and bond issues, labeling these concerns “Welfare vs. Education” issues.¹⁰ In one example of a school board dispute, he wrote about the 1969 school board appointment of a Black man:

In the meantime, the Board offices received telegrams and letters signed by several hundred persons supporting its appointment of Pastor Wadlowe, as well as similar letters in opposition. Reacting to the tense situation, Mayor Joseph McDowell, on April 8, sent a message to the Board expressing fear that violence might erupt and requesting that they delay the installation of Wadlowe until a later time. When that suggestion was relayed to Wadlowe, his response was one of absolute rejection, indicating to the Board that unless they had the courage to support their own decisions, he would not accept the appointment.¹¹

What is interesting about this account is Reverend Wadlowe was not the first Black man to have been appointed to the school board. When a Black dentist who lived in the community

⁹ Plucker, “Schools in Kansas City, Kansas.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 11.

had been appointed under Plucker's tenure, the reaction to his appointment had been completely different. Perhaps this was because he was a professional on a list drawn up by Black community leaders, both ministers and other professionals.

When he was appointed superintendent, Plucker had more conflict to contend with than did his predecessors. Not that they did not, but laws had changed, and Plucker was bound to follow the law. *Brown v. Board of Education* was decided on May 17, 1954. When Plucker became superintendent in 1962, the district had made little to no progress concerning desegregation and integration in the district. Lawsuits had been filed against his predecessors claiming that they were maintaining segregated schools. There were also complaints about Schlagle changing boundary lines after he claimed he had desegregated the district.¹² The new boundaries in reality continued segregation in the northeast section of the city. Pearson's and Schlagle's decisions, although difficult, seemed not to have to deal with the pressures that came with Plucker's term. I believe that the new laws on the books concerning civil rights and the lawsuits he had to answer concerning desegregation shaped his time in the position.

¹² "School Board Denies Charge," *Kansas City Star*, January 31, 1962.



Figure 39. F. L. Schlagle and O. L. Plucker, 1962

Picking Up the Pieces: The 1960s

As Plucker started his tenure as superintendent in KCKPS, he was faced with fallout from the boundary changes made before he started in his position. His predecessor's tenure ended on August 31, 1962, which was the beginning of the 1962–1963 school year. Plucker began his job as superintendent on September 1, 1962. Although Schlagle was superintendent during the first month of the school year, the month of August of 1962 is added to Plucker's tenure in this study.

According to an October 14, 1962 article in the *Kansas City Kansan*, integration since the 1954 ruling had been orderly in Kansas City, Kansas. Perhaps it seemed orderly because not much integration had taken place and therefore no law enforcement was needed.¹³

¹³ Shirley Christian, "School Integration Is Orderly," *Kansas City Kansan*, October 14, 1962.

However, Kansas City, Kansas reflected other places in the United States concerning school integration. There were protests, lawsuits, and disagreements between the Black community and the school district (see Figure 36). In August of 1962, approximately fifty Black adults gathered on Minnesota Avenue protesting boundary changes that directly affected Black students who were to attend Northwest Junior, Hawthorne Elementary, Bryant Elementary, and Fairfax Elementary.¹⁴ In the August 29, 1962, issue of the *Kansas City Star*, Schlagle responded to those allegations.

F.L. Schlagle, superintendent of schools said no boundary changes had been made. Furthermore, Schlagle added, the board of education has no intention of changing any boundaries until the U.S. District court makes a decision on the question in the case now pending before it.¹⁵



Figure 40. Picketers in Front of School Board Office, November 12, 1961

¹⁴ "School Classes Under Way... With a Note of Protest," *Kansas City Star*, August 29, 1962.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Carl Randolph, the president of the Northwest District Citizens Committee, which was formed in response to the push to deny enrollment into traditionally white schools, said they were protesting boundaries that forced Black students into overcrowded schools. The group claimed that there were empty classrooms in white schools that were near the Black community.¹⁶ When Schlagle left his position, he denied that there were empty classrooms in other buildings. He made the point that Hawthorne Elementary School was getting an eight-room addition to be completed in November of that year.¹⁷ However, there were several overcrowded schools in the Black community, and that community expected Plucker to address this issue. Figure 37 outlines the racial enrollment trends in the district from 1954 to 1986, thus encompassing the years during Plucker’s tenure. What becomes evident is the clear shift in demographics, with whites leaving the district and Blacks enrolling.

TABLE I
Racial Enrollment Trends in Kansas City, Kansas Schools
(1954-1986 Selected years)

Year	Total Enr.	White		Black		Am. Ind.		Asian		Hispanic.	
		#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
54-55	23,596	17,260	72.8	6,337	26.9						
59-60	23,702	16,473	69.5	7,229	30.5						
63-64*	24,515	16,214	66.1	8,301	33.9						
67-68**	35,340	25,220	71.5	10,070	28.5						
69-70	34,533	22,914	66.4	10,402	30.2	46	0.2	17	0.04	1,114	3.3
74-75	30,444	17,513	57.5	11,416	37.5	101	0.3	55	0.20	1,359	4.5
79-80	25,128	12,707	50.6	10,837	43.1	56	0.2	453	1.90	1,293	5.3
84-85	22,937	10,460	45.6	10,551	46.0	46	0.2	459	2.00	1,421	7.0
85-86	23,123	10,411	45.0	10,755	46.5	47	0.2	476	2.00	1,857	8.1
86-87	23,315	10,267	44.0	11,042	47.4	54	0.2	440	1.80	1,539	6.5

*Race related data for 1964-65, 1965-66 and 1966-67 were not gathered for the district.
 **Data for 1967-68 and all years following include all of the students of the Washington district that was attached in 1967.

Figure 41. Racial Enrollment Trends in Kansas City, Kansas Schools¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Plucker, “Four Decades of Segregation.”

Plucker mailed letters to parents suggesting voluntary transfers from Stowe Elementary so that their students could receive an education in a more comfortable learning environment. Students were transferred from the overcrowded Stowe Elementary to Grant and Dunbar elementary schools. This movement alleviated the enrollment pressures on Stowe.¹⁹ However, his decision did not improve the integration problem. Students would simply unenroll from one Black school and enroll in another Black school. Plucker himself externalized over-enrollment by blaming two housing projects that were new in the district: Juniper Gardens and Gateway housing projects, which were built in the portion of the city where Blacks resided.²⁰ Plucker recounted in his writing his thoughts on the building of the housing projects in the city.

The effect on school enrollments was immediate and powerful. The residents of the homes that were being purchased for the U.R. project suddenly had the money to buy a house better than the one they had sold. Block “Busting” thrived especially in the area mostly to the west and north of the Northeast Jr. High School area. Its accompanying phenomenon, “White Flight” was immediate and massive. Enrollments declined at Northeast and skyrocketed at Northwest. Enrollments in adjoining elementary schools were equally affected.²¹

The school district claimed to have integrated in September of 1954.²² However, a September 1962 article in the *Kansas City Kansan* refers to Northeast as the “Negro school” and Northwest as integrated.²³ The boundary that affected Northeast and Northwest junior high schools added to disputes about who should attend Wyandotte High School.

The families of seven Black students filed suits against the KCKPS school board because the families were told they could not enroll in Wyandotte because they lived in the

¹⁹ “Some Transfer of Pupils Suggested,” *Kansas City Kansan*, September 7, 1962.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Plucker, “Four Decades of Segregation.”

²² Christian, “School Integration Is Orderly.”

²³ Lucille Doores, “Enrollment Is Ordered,” *Kansas City Kansan*, September 9, 1962.

Sumner attendance area.²⁴ The battle concerning this boundary line would be fought for several years. Suits were brought against the district because Black students could not enroll at Northwest Junior High School or Wyandotte High School (see Figure 38).

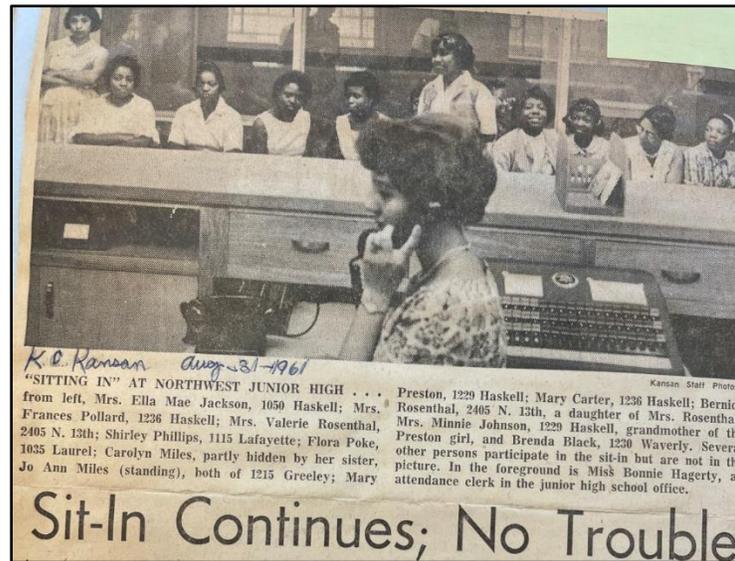


Figure 42. Sit-in at Northwest Junior High School, *Kansas City Kansan*, August 31, 1961

However, the McConnell's brought up another side concerning the same boundaries. When asked about protests in the city, they said they had heard a few things, but they were not really aware of what was happening because they were protected by their families and the community. In fact, Mr. McConnell stated that many Black families did not want to integrate. They were pleased with the education that Northeast Junior and Sumner High offered the community. When asked about these boundary protests, Mr. McConnell stated:

Because they were supposed to be going to Northwest whereas they wanted to remain at Northeast. That was during that time. I'm not sure it affected Wyandotte so much, but I think it was primarily a Northwest/Northeast type of thing. The parents, they were really adamant about it. They didn't want their kids to go to... They didn't want to integrate. They didn't want to be in an integration setting. They wanted them to remain at the segregated Northeast, but they lived in areas that the boundary changed.

²⁴ Ibid.

So, the expectation was that they'd go to the school where they're supposed to go to. But they boycotted that year.²⁵

The boycott Mr. McConnell referred to involved several Black families who decided to homeschool their students rather than send them to an integrated school. And as mentioned earlier in this study, those students had to repeat the previous year when they returned to district schools.

So, the battle was twofold. There were Black families fighting for integration and other Black families that were boycotting against integration. Plucker referred to the issues of litigation and the boundary lines in his personal observations. He wrote:

By September 1956, the Board of Education had completed the task of drafting new attendance zones for each school. Those zones were based on the capacity of each school. While there were some disagreements as to whether or not lines had been somewhat gerrymandered along racial lines, subsequent litigation in the case of Ernest L. Downs, et al v. Board of Education, it was determined that they were not egregiously so. The Downs case was the first desegregation case brought against the school district subsequent to the 1954 rulings in *Brown v. Topeka*.²⁶

This statement is interesting, because in an August 29, 1962 article in the *Kansas City Star*, Schlagle had said no boundary changes had been made. He added that the board of education had no intention of changing any boundaries until the U.S. District Court made a decision on the question in the case.²⁷ While that particular boundary line was in litigation, there were other boundaries that were impacting enrollment at Kealing Elementary, a Black school. Again parents were requesting transfers to Grant Elementary, another Black school, to lessen the enrollment pressure.²⁸ Black families wanted their students to attend school in learning

²⁵ James McConnell, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 13, 2021.

²⁶ Plucker, "Four Decades of Segregation," 11.

²⁷ "School Classes Under Way... With a Note of Protest," *Kansas City Star*, August 29, 1962, p. 7.

²⁸ "Many Request School Change," *Kansas City Kansan*, September 10, 1962.

environments that were not overcrowded, but they also wanted their children to remain in the Black community. The interviewees alluded to this.

Segregation Still in Kansas City, Kansas and KCKPS in the 1960s

The 1960s in KCKPS were about responding to court orders, complaints, and lawsuits. The district had to answer to the courts to fulfill the May 17, 1954, Supreme Court decision concerning school integration. Kansas City, Kansas was a segregated city during the 1960s like other cities across the United States, and to integrate fully there would need to be a major shift in school boundaries, because the Black community was concentrated in the northeast portion of the city. With the boundary lines as they were, Robert L. Carter, general counsel for the NAACP in New York, argued that the KCKPS school board was maintaining segregated schools.²⁹ James P. Davis, another attorney, argued, “boundaries still are on Negro residential patterns with Negro staff.”³⁰ These lawyers contended the board should break up the system that had 75% of all Black students in all-Black schools.³¹ They described the school zoning system at that time as “containment” of Blacks in Kansas City, Kansas.³² Those interviewed for this project did not consider it “containment”; in fact, they affectionately called it “the pod.” However, there appeared to be no choice or options for Black students to attend schools outside the northeast area. Those I interviewed believed they received the best education because they had the best Black teachers in the city. Dr. Jessie Kirksey described this area.

The district in Kansas City, Kansas, when I was a student was a strong district that really cared about the children. They really wanted you to excel. And I don't care

²⁹ Lucille Doores, “NAACP Attorney Would Revamp School System,” *Kansas City Kansan*, September 18, 1962, pp. 1–2.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.



Figure 43. Jessie Kirksey, 1962

from what background they taught us as if we were going to have the best ever. We had great teachers because they couldn't go anywhere but right there in Kansas City. At one time most of our Black professionals were either teachers or we had a few doctors and a few lawyers, but the majority of them were teachers. So, these teachers had their PhDs, they had their advanced degrees, and they became very good teachers because they were able to really learn how to teach and what to teach. And they had the expectations for the children. So, I would say teachers were together in a group, they would come together in a group. For instance, at Dunbar Elementary School, from the kindergarten teacher to the teachers on up, they would have students in the auditorium talking about being the best, doing well in school and things like that. So that went all the way to the sixth grade. So, it looked like the teachers had a community where they were feeding on each other.³³

She further said,

Even my teachers in Dunbar knew the teachers at Northeast. And what I'm trying to say is that the teachers took an interest in you and knew you and the system. Because we were segregated, we had strong educators like Thompson, the principal at Sumner, Boone and Collins, the principals at Northeast, and Miller, the principal at Dunbar. It seems like those people came together to talk about the education of the children and where we were at the time.³⁴



Figure 44. Thomas Womack, 1965

Another interviewee, Thomas Womack, said, "We stayed in our neighborhood; we were all right. If we ventured out of it, we could tell we weren't wanted."³⁵ He went on to say, "Our teachers were the best they could be. They had more contact with the students, and they wanted to make sure that the students were at least prepared to progress as far as going into the college framework."³⁶ Reading the transcripts of these two interviewees,

³³ Dr. Jessie Kirksey, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 22, 2021.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Thomas Womack, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 14, 2021.

³⁶ Ibid.

there is no tone of “containment” or “trapped,” The closest allusion to that sentiment is when Mr. Womack said when they traveled outside of the Black community, they knew they were not welcomed. In either case, these interviewees were in public schools in KCKPS after May 17, 1954, in a segregated system.

The NAACP lawyers of the plaintiffs argued “containment,” and district lawyers argued “overcrowded” schools.³⁷ The suit involved 15 children of Black families that believed KCKPS board was maintaining segregated schools.³⁸ The plaintiffs’ attorneys brought up the issue of permits, arguing the school board’s actions “perpetuates a segregated school system, a violation of the constitution.”³⁹ Not long afterwards, Plucker implemented a new racial transfer policy.

The “minority to majority” rule was reversed to “majority to minority” rule. Any student living in a school area where his/her race was in the majority could request and would be granted a transfer to a school where his/her race was in the minority. The purpose of the rule was to facilitate and increase the degree to which different schools would be more integrated.⁴⁰

Clearly, this policy would do little to move white students into Black schools, but Black families would move their students to white schools. This situation made me think of the McConnells’ statement that integration felt like it was one-sided. The new policy also ended the transfer of Blacks to Black schools.

A second effect was the result of discontinuing the requests for transfers of Black students from predominantly White schools to the predominantly Black schools. That change primarily resulted in increased enrollment of Black students in Wyandotte High School and at Rosedale and Argentine Jr./Sr. High Schools.⁴¹

³⁷ Lucille Doores, “School Suit Decision Is Awaited,” *Kansas City Kansan*, September 19, 1962.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Lucille Doores, “NAACP Attorney Would Revamp School System.”

⁴⁰ Plucker, “Four Decades of Segregation.”

⁴¹ Ibid.

By this time in the 1960s, all schools allowed Black students to enroll if they lived in the attendance area. However, due to residential patterns, there were still areas in the district that were one race, thereby making the schools in those areas one race.⁴² Because the northeast area of the city was predominantly Black, if not all Black, the eight district schools in the neighborhoods reflected the citizenry of the area. There were eight district schools that were predominantly Black. Those schools were Sumner High, Northeast Junior High, Douglass Elementary, Dunbar Elementary, Kealing Elementary, Stowe Elementary, Hawthorne Elementary, and Attucks Elementary.⁴³ Although policies had been changed and implemented, the problem of properly integrating schools in the Black community remained.

In addition to integrating students in schools, Plucker had to integrate faculties and address hiring and application practices in the district. Plucker wrote the following in his memoir.

In the same year, 1963, the first step was taken in the integration of school faculties. Black teachers were assigned to the all-White staff at Quindaro elementary school and at the Junior College. It was established that in future assignments, there would be an effort to develop a racially mixed staff in every school. In discussions with teachers, it was also agreed that no teacher would be involuntarily transferred from one school to another. It was agreed that a transfer under duress would not be in the best interest of either the students or the teacher.⁴⁴

In 1964 KCKPS was before the courts again about the integration of faculties in buildings. Seven elementary schools, Northeast Junior High, and Sumner High School had over 95% Black students, and only Black teachers and Black administrators worked in those schools.⁴⁵

⁴² Christian, "School Integration Is Orderly."

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Plucker, "Four Decades of Segregation."

⁴⁵ Shirley Christian, "Rights Witness Testimony Heard in Local School Case," *Kansas City Kansan*, September 2, 1964.

Because of this situation, there were questions about the hiring and application practices of the district.

A college placement director testified Tuesday he received on April 18, 1963, a letter from the Kansas City, Kansas school system listing separately its vacancies for white and Negro teachers.⁴⁶

Testimony from a member of the Kansas City, Kansas Human Relations Commission shared that in a meeting on December 11, 1963, she was told by the KCKPS school board vice president that their “primary interest was education and not integration.”⁴⁷ She described the meeting and what she heard. She remembered that she had said that she hoped her elementary student would have a “Negro” teacher. A board member responded that she “should move to a Negro residential area in that case.”⁴⁸ Although the district was arguing that they had integrated and they had fair hiring policies, the evidence that was being brought before the courts did not align with their claims.

KCKPS was under pressure to integrate fully staff and students. KCKPS sent a letter to teachers on June 29, 1964, asking them if they would consider transferring to other schools to balance races on the faculty.⁴⁹ A local pastor, Reverend Maurice Culver, said the letter was about racial balance but he felt the implications were that the schools were not encouraging the transfers.⁵⁰ In court, under examination by Park McGee, assistant attorney general, attorney and NAACP member Robert Waters stated that at the July 19, 1963 school board meeting he asked “if Negro teachers were considered for assignment to predominately Negro

⁴⁶ “School Jobs Listed by Race,” *Kansas City Kansan*, September 2, 1964.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

schools.” Plucker replied that was true.⁵¹ In January 15, 1964 testimony, Plucker said that Black teachers would be considered for employment at predominantly white schools.⁵² A September 2, 1964 article in the *Kansas City Kansan* stated, “Plucker told him Negro teachers are not limited to predominantly Negro schools and that they are considered for placement at predominantly white schools.”⁵³ However, in an affidavit referring to the July 19, 1963 meeting with the board and NAACP leaders, Plucker was recorded as saying, “Negro teachers would not be considered for employment at predominantly white schools.”⁵⁴ At the same time, there was concern that white teachers would not accept jobs at predominantly Black schools and if forced to transfer, they would leave the school system.⁵⁵ On the other hand, the district claimed to have asked nine Black teachers if they would transfer to a white school, specifically Hawthorne Elementary, and three Black teachers agreed to the transfer. And just as Plucker suspected that white teachers would leave the system, some Black teachers who were asked to transfer said they would quit if they were forced to do so.⁵⁶ In the same September 2 article, it was recorded that Carl W. Glatt, executive director of the Kansas Commission on Civil Rights, said, “as pupil racial patterns at schools changed the school board [would] integrate faculties.”⁵⁷ From this statement it is evident that the board’s plan concerning integration would be slow, as they were waiting for demographics to change across a city that was segregated.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Christian, “Rights Witness Testimony Heard.”

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

There were some minor moves by the district to integrate faculties. For instance, in 1966, three white teachers were added to the all-Black faculty at Dunbar Elementary.⁵⁸ Other faculty shifts in 1966 impacted three Black schools and one white school. Six Black male teachers who were in Black schools were shifted.⁵⁹ However, of the six, only one was transferred to a white school (see Figure 41). The others were transferred to new positions in Black schools. A story about teacher transfers in the February 4, 1966, edition of the *Kansas City Kansan* stated,

the Civil Rights commission recognizes that the school board has made substantial progress to integrate its faculty since 1963. The commission also recognizes that a fully integrated faculty may take some time to achieve...the board still maintains a partly segregated faculty. Out of a total of 850 teachers, only about 39 or 40 are in schools where the enrollment is predominantly of the other race.⁶⁰

Willard Phillips, KCKPS school board attorney, responded to the statement by saying there were 60 teachers in schools of another predominant race.⁶¹

Other evidence that showed the district's plan was to move slowly was the fact that the original application for employment in the district required a photograph and asked race as well as church preference. The application was eventually changed, removing those items from the application, but they were there in the early 1960s.⁶²

⁵⁸ *In Commemoration of Dunbar Elementary School: A Compilation of People and Events Surrounding the Children of the Northeast Area* (Kansas City, Kansas: Dunbar Elementary School, 1971).

⁵⁹ "Teacher Shifts Made," *Kansas City Kansan*, August 1, 1966, p. 6.

⁶⁰ "Teacher Transfers Rights Aim," *Kansas City Kansan*, February 4, 1966, p. 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Christian, "Rights Witness Testimony Heard."

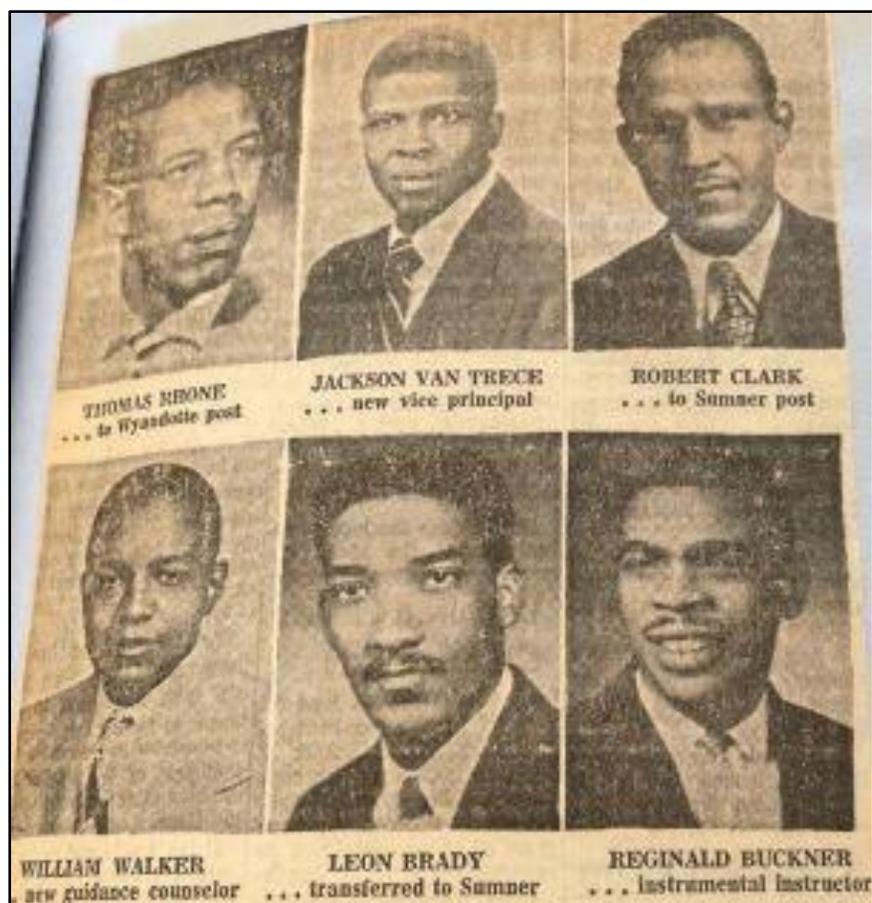


Figure 45. 1966 Teacher Transfers

Another question the district faced was the allegation from the NAACP that there were separate professional teacher organizations for Black teachers and white teachers.⁶³

The NAACP, in its charge has contended the school board gave official sanction to separate elementary teachers associations for white and Negro teachers. The Civil Rights commission investigator, however, said it found no probable cause for that charge.⁶⁴

Although the separate association did not exist at the time of the charge, the DuBois Grade Teachers Club had been formed in 1926 and disbanded sometime in the 1960s.⁶⁵

⁶³ "School Jobs Listed by Race."

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ *In Commemoration of Dunbar Elementary School.*

As time progressed, the extent of segregationist practices in the district became more evident. Black supervisors were still assigned to Black schools, and although the position was a district level position, they had segregated office space.⁶⁶

There were some gains in the 1960s, more specifically 1966, when a Black dentist was named to the KCKPS school board.⁶⁷ There had been no Black representation on the school board since the late 1800s. Earlier in this study, I mentioned that Corvine Patterson had been on the board in 1872 and there was mention of a Dr. Greenberry (George) Howard Browne, who was a member of the board from 1887 to 1888.⁶⁸ In 1966, prominent Blacks sent a list of five names to the school board in a telegram, and Dr. Fletcher was chosen at a 6:30 a.m. school board meeting.⁶⁹ With this decision, the Black community gained a voice on the school board.

The district did offer employment opportunities to Black teachers in the state of Kansas. About half of the Black teachers in the state of Kansas were employed in KCKPS.⁷⁰ And in 1963 the Kansas Commission on Civil Rights ruled against the KCKPS school board on four issues. They were as follows.

Refusal to hire or consider employment of Negro teachers in predominantly white schools, refusal of the board to permit the Negro supervisor to have authority over predominantly white schools, maintaining separate associations for white and Negro teachers (which never had existed), and refusal of the board to transfer teachers from one school to another over their objections.⁷¹

⁶⁶ "Teacher Transfers Rights Aim," *Kansas City Kansan*, February 4, 1966, p. 3.

⁶⁷ "Education Board Names Dentist To Fill Vacancy," *Kansas City Kansan*, September 15, 1966.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ "Racial Balance in Schools," *Kansas City Kansan*, July 10, 1967.

⁷¹ "Court Ruling on Teachers Gain for Rights—Plucker," *Kansas City Kansan*, July 7, 1967, p. 1.

1970s: More of the Same and then Some More

In “Schools in Kansas City, Kansas in Years of Change 1962–1986,” Plucker listed and reflected on the themes of his convocation speeches. In his reflections on the district in 1970 he did not mention the challenges of integration. He reflected on the youth movement as the focus of his convocation message, although the district was still in the midst of lawsuits.

The year 1970 found the schools concerned about the youth revolution but at the same time many of the more mature teachers failing to understand or care. The address was directed totally as a “revival” message and an attack on the national “me” psychology. It was an emotional polemic designed to produce in teachers a greater sense of responsibility for children and a deepened sense of caring for individuals as opposed to a broad concern for society as a whole. As such, it did not deal with the specific programs or projects of the district, but was a reaction to the broad social concerns of the times. Among its many themes were these:

- Is the world more humane for my having been in it? Is life more beautiful for others for what I have done?...
- The time is here when teachers need to become, in a sense, a new priesthood of spiritual reawakening;...the healers of men who are suffering from the accumulated ills of an affluent society that is losing its roots in the past and its guiding values of the future...
- The problems of America will not be solved by making men more prosperous or by making better readers of their children...The greatest challenge you and I face this year is helping young people learn to care—to grow up respecting themselves, their families, their jobs and, yes, the holy creation about them.
- Let this be the year when the youth of this city know that teachers really care!⁷²

In the 1970s the district was still in court defending and responding to suits that were filed in the 1960s. Evidence from school enrollments in five schools proved that the district was maintaining segregated schools. Data from the 1974–1975 school year show that Sumner

⁷² Plucker, “Schools in Kansas City, Kansas.”

High had 100% Black enrollment, Northeast Junior had 99.5% Black enrollment, Douglass Elementary was 98.9% Black, Grant Elementary was 99.6% Black, and Banneker Elementary was 99.9% Black.⁷³ Banneker is significant because it opened in 1972 and therefore was a fairly new school in 1975. The Justice Department was concerned that the school was nearly 100% Black. “Altho [sic] Banneker is a new school, opened in 1972, the Justice Dept. contends it was built to accommodate black students and teachers at three other schools operated prior to 1954.”⁷⁴ Because of the lack of integration in these five schools, the Justice Department filed “a preliminary injunction to force the district to integrate Sumner, Northeast, Banneker, Douglass and Grant schools by the first day of school Aug. 26.”⁷⁵ The district had challenges fully integrating. Plucker and the school had the task of creating and implementing viable plans to integrate the district, and in 1974 the Justice Department offered their assistance by suggesting a possible integration plan for the district.⁷⁶ Their plan would require the district to create more bus routes to transport students throughout the district. The plan moved Black students and white students to different schools to fully integrate.⁷⁷ Plucker responded to the lawsuit:

The board will fight the move with “every resource at its command.” The petition of the Justice Dept., he said, can be regarded as nothing more than “an effort to force a decision on this vital issue without even so much as a full hearing in the courts. It is the typical empire building effort of a small group of bureaucrats in Washington who have no real regard for the education of children or the wreckage of cities and school districts they leave in their wake.”⁷⁸

⁷³ Marilyn Petterson, “Swift Integration Move Sought Here,” *Kansas City Kansan*, July 15, 1975, p. 1.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Even with evidence the district had not integrated, Plucker responded by saying he and the board would fight the suit. The suit consisted of the following complaints the Justice Department cited as evidence.

In its suit, the Justice Dept. has cited as examples of evidence promoting segregation here: school construction and site selection, formulation and modification of school attendance boundaries, school feeder patterns, faculty assignments and reassignment of individual students and student transportation.⁷⁹

Integrating faculties was another challenge KCKPS had to resolve. In the early 1970s, schools located in the northeast end of the city had nearly all Black enrollments and nearly all Black teachers. However, there was some movement, although slow, in 1970 (see Figure 42).

Racial makeup of schools here

Following are racial composition figures for staff of Kansas City, Kan., district schools as of Tuesday.
As part of a court-ordered desegregation plan the KCK school board pledged to work toward a goal of within about 10 per cent of the district average of 23.6 per cent black staff at each elementary school and 29.8 per cent at each secondary school. All but the Area Vocational Technical School are within those goals and many already reflect a goal of within 5 per cent pledged for the 1978-79 school year.
The black/white staff figures, with percentages in parenthesis are:

SECONDARY			
School	White	Black	Total
Schlagle	32(78.9)	14(21.2)	66
Harmon	49(79.0)	11(18.3)	62
Sumner	30(65.2)	16(34.7)	46
Washington	72(81.8)	16(18.2)	72
Wyandotte	69(79.3)	16(18.4)	87
AVTS	51(87.9)	6(10.3)	58
Arrowhead	31(77.5)	9(22.5)	40
Central	35(71.4)	12(24.4)	49
Coronado	25(73.3)	9(25.5)	34
Eisenhower	36(75.0)	11(22.9)	48
Northwest	34(69.4)	15(30.6)	49
West	29(82.9)	6(17.1)	35
Argentine	31(73.8)	9(19.0)	42
Rosedale	30.5(69.3)	11(25.0)	44

ELEMENTARY			
School	White	Black	Total
Banneker	16(62.7)	9.5(37.3)	25.5
Bethel	7.5(45.2)	4(34.8)	11.5
Bryant	14(63.6)	8(36.3)	22
Central	6.5(68.4)	3(31.6)	9.5
C. Huyck	10(71.4)	4(28.6)	14
Douglass	11.5(82.1)	6(32.4)	18.5
Emerson	10(71.4)	4(28.6)	14
E. Ware	7(63.6)	4(36.4)	11
Fairfax	12(70.6)	5(29.4)	17
F. Willard	9(75.0)	3(25.0)	12
F. Rushton	13(72.2)	5(27.8)	18
Grant	11(68.7)	5(31.2)	16
Hawthorne	13(63.4)	7.5(36.6)	20.5
H. Grove	16(68.1)	7.5(11.9)	23.5
Kennedy	12(66.7)	6(33.3)	18
J. Fiske	9(69.2)	4(30.8)	13
Lindbergh	9(60.0)	6(40.0)	15
Pearson	22(82.9)	12(34.3)	35
M. Hudson	5.5(64.7)	3(35.3)	8.5
M. Twain	7(66.7)	3.5(33.3)	10.5
McKinley	4(61.5)	2.5(38.5)	6.5
Morse	5.5(64.7)	3(35.3)	8.5
N. Fremis	9(69.2)	4(30.8)	13
Parker	12(66.7)	6(33.3)	18
Quindaro	14.5(56.9)	11(43.1)	25.5
Roosevelt	8(64.0)	4.5(36.0)	12.5
Silver City	5.5(73.3)	2(26.7)	7.5
Stanley	12(75.0)	4(25.0)	16

Figure 46. Racial Makeup of Schools, September 8, 1977

⁷⁹ Ibid.

I interviewed a former district employee who worked 35 years in KCKPS. As a Black male, Mr. James White shared how he was recruited to work in the district.

Someone from the district office would come to Tyler, Texas, to this Black college every year and interview prospective teachers. And the main reason they came was because they were looking for Black teachers to teach here in Kansas City, Kansas. Now, Texas College was a teacher's college that was all Black. We might have had one or two Asian students, maybe one or two. It was all Black. So, it was just a gold mine. I mean, if you're looking for Black teachers, that's where you go. And so, I was interviewed as a junior, they came back, I was interviewed as a senior, but my senior year I was working for a company called General Electric, which is now Carrier. It's a big company there in Tyler. And so, when I graduated, I just continued working there, because I was probably making more money than the staff at the college. And General Electric went on a strike in the spring of 1970. Dave Crockett, district HR, calls me from Kansas City, Kansas, and says, he was going to be on campus in Tyler, at Texas College on May 15th. I kind of remember this. He said he'd like to interview me about coming to Kansas City, Kansas to work, to teach school. Well, we were on strike so I said why not. So, I went out and met him. He asked me to sign a contract and I signed right there in Tyler. I had never even been to Kansas City, Kansas. I never saw the school. And he told me that I would be at White Church and that I would be teaching sixth grade."⁸⁰



Figure 47. James White
White Church Elementary School, 1970–1971

Mr. White's statement is significant because he was told he would be teaching at White Church Elementary School, a school that had been a part of the Washington School District,

⁸⁰ James White, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 12, 2021.

which had been annexed by KCKPS in 1967.⁸¹ The schools that were brought in with the annexation were considered far west, located in areas that had little to no diversity. That Mr. White was being offered a position at White Church shows the district was addressing integration of faculties by hiring new Black teachers to fill positions in predominantly white schools. Mr. White continued:

So, I went to White Church. I came to Kansas City, Kansas, drove all the way from Tyler, I had everything I owned in my little car. And on the 15th of August, I was to report to White Church. When I got there, the principal tells me that I would not be teaching sixth grade and that she was going to have me teach fifth grade. I told her HR said that I would be teaching sixth grade. She said no and that I would be teaching fifth grade. Well, so I thought, what is the difference? I later figured out why. The kids were leaving elementary school, and they left after the sixth-grade year. The principal felt if I didn't do a good job, or if I didn't move my kids along as a fifth-grade teacher, then the sixth-grade teacher would have a chance to bring them up to par. That's the reason she moved me to fifth grade.⁸²

Mr. White stated that in 1970 White Church was 95% white, and each year he was there, more Black students were enrolling.

This is 1970. And I still remember this one Black student's name. And then the next year I had maybe two Black kids. I never had more than two. And right on up through my fourth year there I had one or two Black students and I had 33 to 35 students in my class. Well by my second or third year, the kids, for some reason, just loved me. Even the students who weren't in my class got to know me during recess duty. And so, kids would walk up to me and say, Mr. White, I want to be in your class next year. These were fourth graders, and I would say, "Yeah."⁸³

The students who wanted to be in Mr. White's class were white students. He became so popular with the students that parents went to central office requesting their students be enrolled in Mr. White's class. This, of course, brought attention to Mr. White's classroom and instruction, because he was the only Black teacher on the faculty at the time.

⁸¹ Patricia Adams, "Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools Timeline Part 1 Introduction and Schools Organized/Built/Opened 1844-1871." *The Historical Journal of Wyandotte County* 1, no. 12 (2004): 517-32.

⁸² James White, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 12, 2021.

⁸³ Ibid.

Because there was a demand by Black and white students to be in Mr. White's class central office personnel came to visit his classroom to observe. Mr. White shared with me when they came into his room with the principal, he did not change anything he was doing. Whatever lesson he was teaching or learning activity the students were working on he continued the lesson as he planned it. During this visit he believes that he was teaching a reading lesson to his fifth grade class. He said the visitors walked around the room and watched what the students were doing and how he conducted his classroom.

I asked Mr. White if he knew about the lawsuits the district was involved in during the 1960s and 1970s. He said,

Yeah. The federal government had filed a lawsuit against KCK school district, and the district was to integrate. They did what they called the bus transfer. They transferred some of the Black kids from in town out here. Now they were supposed to transfer some of the white kids in town to Black schools. But no white kids would go, okay, so for years, a number of years, they were using racial balance transfers. When I went to central office in 1995 as an assistant superintendent, one of my duties was racial balance transfers.⁸⁴

Mr. White's anecdotes provide insight into the 1970s and the journey of the district to integrate.

During these plans to integrate and teachers being required to teach in integrated settings, support was offered to faculties. Kansas State University's (K-State) Urban Institute on Human and Ethnic Understanding offered such support to help with the district's integration process.⁸⁵ In 1974, 150 certified KCKPS personnel participated in this institute.⁸⁶

The institute's goals were:

To give the educator a feeling of additional ease in working with students and parents across racial and ethnic lines. To reexamine existing school policies, practices and

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ "Social Acceptance Sought," *Kansas City Kansan*, August 11, 1974, p. 12B.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

instructional content to see how they mitigate against children today. To help educators with self-analysis to become aware of their feelings with working with children who are different than they.⁸⁷

Again, the district showed that they were making moves, but they were moving slowly. The Supreme Court of the United States deemed segregated schools unconstitutional or illegal in May of 1954. This was the early 1970s, and the district was still trying to comply with integration laws. The Urban Institute maintained that student bodies were changing, but curriculums were not. Curriculums still emphasized European origins and included no information about non-European groups.⁸⁸

K-State's Urban Institute also addressed teachers' need to understand human differences such as race, socioeconomic factors, and changing gender roles in society.⁸⁹ Everything seemed to be changing for the district, and it seemed to be a challenge for them to accept the changes. Even the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) wanted the district to conduct surveys concerning the demographics of the district.⁹⁰ However, Plucker would not conduct such a survey. His reasons were that it would be too expensive, it asked for information that he considered too personal such as family backgrounds, beliefs, and income, and he believed that it would hinder the integration efforts.⁹¹ He believed a survey that requested such information could be used against the district.⁹²

I interviewed Pastor C. L. Bachus of the Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Kansas City, Kansas, who had moved his family from the south to Kansas City, Kansas in 1970. He also

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Marilyn Petterson, "Survey Would Be Expensive, 'Absurd,'" *Kansas City Kansan*, December 26, 1974, p. 10A.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

ran for the school board in 1973 and 1975. When I asked him about the district and Plucker, he said,

Well, I think the district in 1971 maybe 1972, had a reputation. When I left Helena, Arkansas, one of the principals of one of our schools was very high on the fact that we were coming to a state that had very good school systems. And I think Mr. Plucker was superintendent at the time. And everybody was talking about him one way or the other. One thing he did not do well, you almost had to have ten feet of snow before he would cancel school, for one thing. And he just wasn't going to cancel school easy.⁹³

Pastor Bachus had five young children, and when he and his wife moved to Kansas City, Kansas, three of those children were school aged. He said that his children attended Northwest Junior High School, which was originally the white junior high school. But where they went to school after Northwest was most interesting. He and his family lived in the northeast portion of the city, which was mostly Black. His three oldest children should have gone to Sumner High or Wyandotte High School, but he said they all went to Schlagle. When I asked about that, he said,

It [Schlagle] was supposed to be a great school in Kansas City, Kansas. My kids went there. They should have gone to Wyandotte, and I assigned them, after they left Northwest, to go to Schlagle because I felt like it was the best school. It seemed to be a little bit more regulated. Looked like the academic and social environment out there was a little bit better than some of the other schools were. And I might have just been deceived. I just didn't know all that much about it, but anyway, my kids did go to Schlagle. All of them finished high school at Schlagle other than Selwyn and Sonja, who went to Sumner Academy.⁹⁴

⁹³ Rev. C. L. Bachus, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, December 4, 2021.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

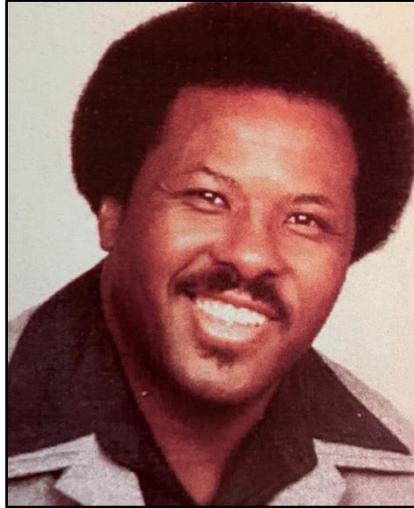


Figure 48. Pastor C.L. Bachus, circa 1971
Mount Zion Baptist Church has been in the community in the same location for more than 100 years.

I asked Pastor Bachus if he had a choice in assigning his children to Schlagle High School. He said that he had a choice as to what high school his children would attend. I asked whether having choice was a part of the desegregation order or part of the district integration plan. His response was:

I am not exactly sure what it was, but I know we were able to get it done because Verneda, Reggie, and Jerome finished high school at Schlagle. And by the time they got out of high school, they had created Sumner Academy.⁹⁵

Even with the progress mentioned by Mr. White and Pastor Bachus, there were still concerns in court about integration. An article in the November 6, 1975 issue of the *Kansas City Kansan* reported on Mrs. Kelley, the eighth witness to be called by the government,

Mrs. Kelley said about Black students being allowed to enroll in Quindaro Elementary, “we told them our school was overcrowded. The parents told me they took them (children) to Quindaro but they wouldn’t accept them. They were refused attendance at Quindaro,” she testified.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Gloria Vobejda, “Blacks Rejected,” *Kansas City Kansan*, November 6, 1975, p. 1.

While this was occurring, white students did not have to attend the school in their attendance area that happened to be a Black school: “the Vernon school...was always black and...white students in the district did not have to attend the school.”⁹⁷ These testimonies from the lawsuits put more pressure on the district to devise more aggressive integration plans.

There were also those in Plucker’s cabinet who testified before the courts. In the case of the U.S. Department of Justice against the Kansas City, Kansas Board of Education, Dr. Bertram Caruthers, Sr., the assistant [to the] superintendent spoke before the court. In the December 10, 1975, edition of the *Kansas City Times*, it states, “The assistant to the Kansas City Kansas, superintendent of schools said yesterday he did not believe there is a relationship between the racial makeup of a school and the quality of education.”⁹⁸ This statement is significant because Dr. Caruthers was a high ranking Black member of what would be considered the superintendent’s cabinet,

Dr. Caruthers went on to explain in his testimony that he was against any desegregation plans that would change Sumner High School. As a 1929 graduate of Sumner High and because of his position in the district office, he was able to have his voice heard as the district struggled with the challenges of mandates from the government requiring the district to desegregate and integrate. In the *Times* article, Beal notes what Dr. Caruthers said about Sumner: “the school has a heritage which should be preserved. He said he believed the consensus of the black community in Kansas City, Kansas, was to oppose such desegregation

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Dr. Bertram Caruthers is referred to as the Assistant *to the* Superintendent in the *Kansas City Times*; he is referred to as the Assistant Superintendent in the *Kansas City Star*. It is clear he had a significant leadership role in the district and was instrumental in sharing the views of the Black community concerning proposed integration plans involving Sumner High School. Today, there is a school named for him.

plans.”⁹⁹ This difference in opinion on the superintendent’s team did not make much difference in the decisions that Dr. Plucker would execute to address court mandates.

A Real Integration Plan

The district went through some major changes during the mid- to late 1970s. The tension of the time is recorded in Plucker’s memoirs. Oddly writing in the third person, he stated,

The 1977 convocation address began with an effort to build in teachers an understanding of the unique heritage of the city and its people. In colorful language, the Superintendent described first, the economic, social, ethnic and cultural diversity of the teaching staff. Among the major historic movements which shaped the city and its schools, the Superintendent noted Kansas City, Kansas, as the first important free city west of the slave territory of Missouri; the infusion of Mexican immigrants with the extension of railroads and development of the silver smelter in the late 1800’s the migration of Croations, Yugoslavians, Serbians, Polish and others from depressed and troubled southeast Europe in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s; and the strong effects of diverse religious groups; the growth of the area into a collection of competing villages which did not begin to unite until the early 1920’s.¹⁰⁰

I believe Plucker’s words were an attempt to provide a salve on the open wound that desegregation and integration had caused. During this time the district was answering court orders and lawsuits that had upset the status quo. The litigation disrupted KCKPS so much so that the 1977–1978 school year would see major integration changes across the district.

Before the 1977–1978 school year, Plucker met with community members and parents to hear and discuss proposals to address the court order requiring KCKPS to eliminate segregation in five schools (Sumner High School, Northeast Junior High School, and Banneker, Douglass, and Grant Elementary Schools).¹⁰¹ One proposal was based on the magnet school concept that would have special programs in one school (Sumner), and

⁹⁹ John W. Beal, “Education Not Related to Racial Balance,” *Kansas City Times*, December 10, 1975, p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ Plucker, “Schools in Kansas City, Kansas.”

¹⁰¹ Marilyn Petterson, “New Plan Sent to School Board,” *Kansas City Kansan*, March 7, 1977, p. 1.

students would be moved from all over the district.¹⁰² However, it was argued that in that proposal, the burden of integration fell mainly on the Black community. In response to a proposed desegregation plan that would close or reassign schools in the northeast area of the city, Gerald Hall, the only Black school board member, said, “I believe in integration,...but I believe it should be a 2-way affair.”¹⁰³ Plucker said in a report to the board dated April 12, 1977:

With respect to secondary schools, at one extreme consideration was given to the possibility of simply closing both Sumner and Northeast Junior High Schools and transporting their students to other secondary schools. Such a proposal would have the advantage of providing for complete integration and would be the least expensive alternative since two large schools would be closed and the only increase in cost would be for transportation. At the same time, such an answer would have the distinct disadvantage of removing all secondary students from the Northeast area and would leave no secondary educational program in operation in that part of the city. In addition, it would result in an extremely distasteful process of one-way bussing.¹⁰⁴

Schools that were established and had once educated the Black citizens would no longer be in operation. Plucker mentioned the same movement in his convocation speech; however, his remarks were directed toward the courts and outside legal counsel in court proceedings.

In rather bitter tones he said, “Unbelievable as it may be, the cities are still the victims of some of the visionary but mindless social reconstructionists of America....They continue the crusade to resolve the complex urban dilemma by the harassment and relocation of children in schools without recognizing that such an approach once more fuels the moving vans for a few more loads to the suburbs.”¹⁰⁵

Plucker made his views clear. He had a problem with courts making decisions for the district. By referring to them as “mindless social reconstructionists of America,” he implied that they truly did not understand the makeup of cities and the problems that outside views and

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Marilyn Petterson, “School Changes Aired in Desegregation Plan,” *Kansas City Kansan*, April 12, 1977.

¹⁰⁴ Plucker, “Desegregation Plan.”

¹⁰⁵ Plucker, “Schools in Kansas City, Kansas.”

decisions created for the district and the community. When asked about the desegregation plan and Plucker, Pastor Bachus responded,

Well, I think that Mr. Plucker was a very wise, and a very, very, very, smart fellow on the social and political side of the school district and tried to manage it in a way that would keep down a lot of hoopla. And he did a pretty god job of it. He was pretty smart in doing that if I remember things correctly.¹⁰⁶

The plan would reassign students who would have attended Northeast Junior to one of four junior high schools: Rosedale, Central, Arrowhead, or Eisenhower.¹⁰⁷ The plan also included shifts for students who would have attended Sumner High to Washington, Schlagle, or Harmon high schools.¹⁰⁸ The plan had similar moves for students at the elementary level. According to an April 12, 1977 article in the *Kansas City Kansan*, “Redistribution of Northeast and Sumner students is planned so that no receiving school would have more than 40 per cent black or 50 per cent minority enrollment.”¹⁰⁹ This part of the plan was what upset the citizens in the northeast portion of the city. Up to this time, parents and their students had looked forward to attending Northeast and Sumner. Earlier interviews with community members evidenced the pride and importance placed on the district schools for Black students. Pastor Bachus remembered comments he heard about Sumner High as he was moving from Arkansas.

Now you know everybody who had graduated from Sumner High was upset. Everybody in Kansas City, particularly Black people. They were upset because they thought that the Lord would be unkind if the sun came up and went down without shining on Sumner High School. I think they were afraid of losing the enthusiasm and commitment and love that they had generated for Sumner and its reputation. It had a reputation. Because one of the educators in Arkansas was mentioning Sumner high school when we were getting ready to come here. Of course at that time none of my kids were ready for high school, so it didn't make much difference to us. But I'd

¹⁰⁶ Rev. C. L. Bachus, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, December 4, 2021.

¹⁰⁷ Petterson, “School Changes Aired in Desegregation Plan.”

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

heard so much about it. It was a whole lot of buzzing going on about the integration and them turning that into an academy.¹¹⁰

Pastor Bachus' comments is evidence that Sumner had a positive reputation that went outside of the community. He mentioned an educator in Arkansas telling him about Sumner High School in Kansas City, Kansas. With the integration plan, Sumner High would be changed to Sumner Academy of Arts and Science in the fall of 1978. The April 12, 1977 issue of the *Kansas City Kansan* said,

Sumner High School would become a district-wide “academic center” and Northeast Junior High school a “human resource” community center under a desegregation plan proposed...by the Kansas City, Kan., school board.¹¹¹

Sumner Academy would be a school for only a select few: “for gifted and highly motivated students...from throughout the district.”¹¹² This decision caused a rift in the community because Sumner was already known as an academically strong institution. According to what I overheard from adults in the community when I was a child and even now according to my father, Blacks considered this an insult, because Sumner was already a premiere high school. The fact that the school would not be open to all created even more tension. To be eligible to attend, ninth grade students at Sumner Academy would need to rank in the upper 40% of their class or test in the 75th percentile for their age group. Tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders would need to rank at least in the upper 50% of their class or meet similar testing requirements.¹¹³ The dismantling of Sumner High School is still an area of contention in the Black community today.

¹¹⁰ Rev. C. L. Bachus, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, December 4, 2021.

¹¹¹ Petterson, “School Changes Aired in Desegregation Plan.”

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

Plucker stated his feelings regarding these changes. He said as he reflected upon his convocation speech,

Much of the address was devoted to an explanation of the implementation of the district court's order and an effort to allay any strong negative public or staff reaction. At that point, only voluntary racial balance transfers were required at the elementary school level. Northeast Junior High was to be closed and its students and teachers reassigned to other schools. Sumner was to be converted to an academic magnet school in 1978.¹¹⁴

Up to this point every principal of Sumner had been Black, but as it changed to an Academy, a white man was hired for the position. Mr. James White said the following about the desegregation plan and the selection of the principal for Sumner Academy: "Plucker knew if he placed [Hobert] Neil at Sumner Academy, then the white people from out west would accept the idea of the academy concept. Now they didn't have very many go that first year, but later on the numbers for white students exploded."¹¹⁵ White added that the assistant principal selected for the academy was a Black man.¹¹⁶ While the court order did not require that racial balance of the faculty be achieved, it did state that there be continued progress toward this end.¹¹⁷

The desegregation plan was the answer to a three-and-a-half-year lawsuit against the district claiming the district was maintaining segregated schools.¹¹⁸ The judge ordered the district to implement the plan at the beginning of the 1978–1979 school year.¹¹⁹ Black

¹¹⁴ Plucker, "Schools in Kansas City, Kansas."

¹¹⁵ James White, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 12, 2021.

¹¹⁶ Megan Floyd, "Black Schools Must Desegregate," *Kansas City Kansan*, February 14, 1977.

¹¹⁷ Plucker, "Remarks to Board of Education, Unified School District #500."

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

residents felt the plan was one-sided.¹²⁰ They believed the burden of integration was placed solely on the Black community.¹²¹

The desegregation plan created turmoil in the community among the residents. Discussions about the changes were held by both Black and white community members. At Claude Huyck Elementary School, located in the western part of the district, a group of more than 200 parents, predominantly white, met to show their support of the desegregation plan. The president of the school's Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) let it be known that white parents were opposed to busing and they should support the plan because it had the least amount of busing.¹²²

A group of Black citizens met who planned to fight the desegregation plan because it moved children from the northeast portion of the city, away from schools in their neighborhoods, to schools in the western part of the city.¹²³ It also closed Northeast and ended Sumner High School. This group of more than 300 Black residents were fighting to preserve their schools in the Northeast community.¹²⁴

The 1980s: More Issues than Opportunities

Plucker's reflections on the beginning of the 1980–1981 school year gave insight into the climate of the district at the beginning of the new decade.

The opening of the 1980 school year was somewhat less than ideal with respect to working relations between the Board and Superintendent and the leaders of the KCK-NEA. Negotiations had broken down in the early summer. After going through the required legal steps, the Board of Education had adopted salary schedules and other terms and conditions of employment for the 1980-81 school year on a unilateral basis. Although the convocation had been scheduled, it was not held. The weather was

¹²⁰ Marilyn Petterson, "Group Set to Fight Desegregation Plan," *Kansas City Kansan*, April 28, 1977, p. 5.

¹²¹ Marilyn Petterson, "Blacks Suggest School Remedy," *Kansas City Kansan*, May 6, 1977, p. 4B.

¹²² Petterson, "Group Set to Fight."

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

unusually hot and the Wyandotte High School auditorium in which it was usually held was not air conditioned. Those conditions were used as a reason for the cancellation. It was generally recognized, however, that the “climate” was not right in more ways than just the thermometer.¹²⁵

The words from Plucker’s memoirs are corroborated by newspaper headlines that speak of union issues, busing, education reform, desegregation, and integration. The 1980s were challenging for Plucker and the district. His comments regarding the lack of a convocation for the 1980–1981 school year reflect the discord in the district between stakeholders. A July 27, 1980 article in the *Kansas City Star* mentioned a high teacher turnover in the district. The National Education Association (NEA) asked for a 13.5% raise in pay across the pay schedule to lessen the chances of employees leaving the district. The board offered 12.75%, even though it was found that the board could afford to pay employees higher salaries.¹²⁶ Although Plucker believed district employees should be paid more, he also believed pay increases should be comparable to those of other public employees, and fire fighters and police officers had received 10% raises.¹²⁷ Plucker also had concerns about the quality of applicants that were applying for employment. Negotiations between district leadership and the union were attended by a fact-finder from the University of Kansas School of Business, who was there to give guidance, advice, and suggestions.¹²⁸ However, the board did not have to follow the recommendations, even after the NEA presented evidence that KCKPS salaries were lower than the Kansas average. In addition to his disagreement regarding the amount of the raise, Plucker wanted to reform the evaluation process. He believed education needed to

¹²⁵ Plucker, “Schools in Kansas City, Kansas.”

¹²⁶ Yumi Kamada, “Money Issues Aired in KCK Teacher Talks,” *Kansas City Star*, July 27, 1980, p. 42.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

have strong supervision and evaluative processes for classroom instruction.¹²⁹ He thought the accountability measures based on college hours and longevity were no longer effective.¹³⁰ He also believed education to be “undersupervised and as totally lacking in quality control.”¹³¹ Plucker was critical of all levels of education from kindergarten to college; he believed unless supervision was improved, academic growth would suffer.¹³²

The 1980s also saw the continuation of desegregation and integration plans from a suit that was originally filed by the Justice Department in 1973 against the district. The desegregation plan KCKPS submitted to the courts had limited busing that included Black and white children.¹³³ The board and superintendent were revising the plan to fulfill the court order, but their plans fell short of the court’s expectation. The complaint was there were still elementary schools that were majority Black enrollment: Grant, Douglass, and Banneker.¹³⁴ Again, the focus was on the northeast portion of the city, where there was a large concentration of Blacks living in homes and housing projects. There was no mention from the courts of the schools in the western portion of the city that were majority white; all of the emphasis was on Black schools. Plucker said the following about the order to integrate: “There’s no way you can integrate three schools of a mono-racial character without affecting other schools.”¹³⁵ To achieve full integration, more schools would need to be a part of the plan, and they would not consider adding schools that were majority white. According to a May 6, 1980 article in the *Kansas City Star*:

¹²⁹ “Dr. Plucker Urges Education Reforms,” *Kansas City Star*, January 24, 1980, p. 41.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Joseph H. McCarty, Jr., “KCK Receives Busing Plan for Schools,” *Kansas City Star*, April 2, 1980, p. 1.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

For seven years the Kansas City Kansas, School District has been losing its desegregation tug-of-war with the federal government in a series of yanks and jerks. But the district has managed to lose it as slowly as possible—and that, school district official say, is precisely what they have intended to do.¹³⁶

The district viewed the desegregation order “forced [the district] to become agents for social change.”¹³⁷ The district had planned to move slowly regarding desegregation to cushion the impact on the community.¹³⁸ By this time they had closed Northeast Junior, changed Sumner High to Sumner Academy, and shifted Black students across the district. These moves disrupted and upset the Black community, but district leadership was more concerned about the white community being upset. “The thing we want to avoid is community destabilization,” he [Plucker] said. “Community destabilization is a euphemism for white flight—I don’t like to say it, but that’s what we’re talking about here.”¹³⁹ The district was worried that whites would leave the district and/or leave the city if KCKPS moved too quickly with integration plans.¹⁴⁰ Glen DeWerff, a district spokesman, stated, “Desegregation sometimes just encourages white flight in the long run. What we’re trying to do is implement this as quietly and with as little community dislocation as possible.”¹⁴¹ The district and the Justice Department could not reach an agreement.¹⁴² The Justice Department believed one community or race should not bear the burden of the desegregation plan. Plucker interpreted their suggestions as more busing.¹⁴³ “Since 1973 Justice Department lawyers have wanted the district to desegregate swiftly, and in a way in which white students

¹³⁶ Roy Wenzl, “KCK Desegregation: New Round in Long Fight,” *Kansas City Star*, May 6, 1980, p. 1.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Roy Wenzl, “Desegregation Plan in KCK Challenged,” *Kansas City Star*, May 2, 1980, p. 3.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

would share the busing burden equally with the blacks.”¹⁴⁴ “We don’t want to destroy our community any faster than the law requires,” was Plucker’s response to the Justice Department.¹⁴⁵ The “Justice Department lawyers strenuously objected to a new desegregation plan the district filed Friday” and it was rejected in May 1980.¹⁴⁶

While the district was in court, schools continued to move forward. The 1980–1981 school year was the beginning of integration in the district. During open houses, parents and students visited their new schools that were outside of their neighborhoods.¹⁴⁷ The August 22, 1980 issue of the *Kansas City Star* reported the open houses were well attended and positive.¹⁴⁸ The open houses eased the anxiety of the parents and the students who were part of the changes. The shifts in school enrollments precipitated declining population in some elementary schools. Because of this, it was not financially feasible to keep them open. Therefore, the board considered closing two elementary schools—Bryant and T. A. Edison—at the end of the 1982–1983 school year.¹⁴⁹ The closing of Bryant would have “a neutral effect,” according to Plucker.¹⁵⁰ Students enrolled in that school and the schools to which they were being dispersed each had at least a 98% Black student body.¹⁵¹ However, the concern was with the other elementary school recommended to be closed, T. A. Edison Elementary, which was 90% white. “Closing Edison, Mr. Plucker said, would be integrative, eliminating what is essentially a mono-racial school.”¹⁵² This comment shows the district

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Roy Wenzl, “KCK Desegregation: New Round.”

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Scott Farina, “KCK Eases into New School Era,” *Kansas City Star*, August 22, 1980.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Scott Farina, “Board Considers Closing Two KCK Elementary Schools,” *Kansas City Star*, November 10, 1982, p. 67.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

was more concerned about what white citizenry would say and do about changes in the district. However, the protests and complaints from the Black community after their schools were closed and their students bused out of their neighborhoods fell on deaf ears. A board member said, concerning the closing of Edison Elementary, “We’re dealing with a volatile issue here,”¹⁵³

In 1982, as the desegregation and integration argument continued in the courts and the community, Gerald Hall was indicted by a federal grand jury “on 12 counts of making false statement on applications for federally insured housing loans.”¹⁵⁴ As a result, Mr. Hall resigned as school board president.¹⁵⁵ His resignation impacted his position as the board president, but he remained on the school board as a member.¹⁵⁶ Another cloud that shadowed the district was an investigation by the Kansas attorney general looking into discrepancies in attendance reports in the district.¹⁵⁷ The attorney general said, “if the investigation reveals that school administrators deliberately overstated enrollment figures to obtain state aid, criminal charges could be filed.”¹⁵⁸ Plucker denied the inaccurate recorded data was done deliberately. He responded yes to a question from the post-audit committee asking if the district received monies they were not entitled to, the district would return it.¹⁵⁹ This was yet another battle Plucker had to fight while he was superintendent.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ian S. Simpson, “Hall Quits Board Post in KCK,” *Kansas City Star*, October 18, 1983, p. 4.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Barbara Cornell and Jim Sullinger, “School Records Stir Kansas Probe,” *Kansas City Star*, February 23, 1984, p. 3.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

Analysis of Plucker's Ideology

Plucker's ideas and philosophies were noticeable during the 1980s in his comments and his decisions regarding public schools. He believed a competitive salary schedule would attract highly qualified candidates. Although he referred to this concept, there was no indication about his criteria for qualified candidates. In a January 14, 1980 article in the *Kansas City Star*, Plucker spoke of salary increases:

This is very important, as we move into this area where we have this tremendous drain of qualified individuals going to business and industry. There are more and more women doing this, and also minorities.¹⁶⁰

The quote from the article gives the impression that Plucker did not consider women and minorities as quality candidates for employment in the district. In the same article, Plucker spoke about families being disoriented, which caused children to have problems.

“Society in general has undergone tremendous changes in the last few years,” he said. “Family disorientation has produced severe problems in children. It's beginning to look like many of these children have very shallow roots.”¹⁶¹

Analysis of Plucker's words shows that he was struggling with the changes in society. He believed education had shifted from improving society to benefiting individuals in their goals.¹⁶²

As the years progressed, Plucker continued to make his views known. His reflection on his 1981 convocation gives a clear view of his beliefs and philosophies concerning education and American society.

The schools can, must and will continue to teach children the fundamental skills of reading, writing and arithmetic...but there is much more to education. Your job and mine is not that simple.

¹⁶⁰ McCarty, “KCK Educator Sees Gains,” p. 1.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

During the past two decades, he said, we have built larger and more elaborate houses and apartments but our homes have fallen apart. “in this group today, it is safe to say that at least one out of every three persons present is involved in serious family problems making home life a source of stress, tension, unhappiness and instability.

“...this year at least one out of every four children will be experiencing home conditions which are destructive, disruptive and reduce the child’s ability to function effectively.

“This is a day to look at priorities for the ‘80’s and the ‘90’s. Building a future for the home and family is high on that list.... There must be a renewed commitment to families, a deeper sense of responsibility, a willingness to share, an ability to manage and budget and an understanding of the responsibilities, skills and joys of parenthood.”¹⁶³

Plucker essentially asserted that the job of the teacher had become more difficult with the changing times. He implied that people’s focus was not on what was important, in his opinion. He considered the family important, and he used insulting words, suggesting that many of the employees were experiencing what he would consider familial problems. As he spoke to teachers about their lives, he used deficit language to describe the changes in the family unit. He referred to non-traditional families as homes that have fallen apart. He carried the same thinking when describing students who attend the schools. He used words like destructive and disruptive to explain students’ home lives. He showed no consideration for the teachers who worked in the district or the students who were in the classrooms. He spoke about them with disdain, as if he were a father figure. He made it clear at the end of this section that people should focus on family. His reflections show acutely white middle class values.

¹⁶³ Plucker, “Schools in Kansas City, Kansas in Years of Change.”

He went further by criticizing the citizens in the community and their thoughts and opinions about local government. Again, his assumptions were derogatory as he continued to use deficit language.

A second major area of concern discussed was that of civic responsibility and, "...the cynical withdrawal of large numbers of people from that arena. In our own community, there is a tacit assumption that elections are controlled.

"...We have been most negligent in building a citizenship that looks for the common good."¹⁶⁴

Plucker attacked educators by suggesting they had not done their jobs completely when it concerned teaching citizenship to students. Once more, he insulted employees by speaking negatively about how students were being prepared for their civic duties in adulthood. As he continued, his reflections became more personal, as if he were speaking to individuals and not the entire KCKPS workforce.

Next, the superintendent moved to the need for health education. "I am convinced that we are doing a better job of teaching basic skills than we are doing in teaching young people to care for their own bodies....The use and abuse of alcohol and drugs by students and adults is growing at an alarming rate and so far, we haven't devised an approach that seems to make a difference. Teenage pregnancy...grows at an alarming rate...

"The first step in health education is the development of a respect for our own mind and body and that requires our own example and second, a conviction of every teacher that a healthy mind deserves to be served by a body as healthy as we can make it."

He began to explain what I would consider moral and personal choice arguments. The words he used along with the tone of his writing made it clear that he did not approve of decisions that adults and children made. He was so adamant in his views that the words read as though he did not care for the community in which he worked and lived. He further said:

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

The need to rebuild the American work ethic and the productivity of the work force also came in for its share of attention. “Our population has become increasingly anti-work oriented,” he said. “There is a willingness to exploit every avenue of public welfare and every potential for unemployment insurance in preference to doing anything that might be described as hard work....Neither we nor students, he continued, can achieve much if we only work to make a living....It’s up to us to develop in youth the understanding that work is life. By being productive and in work well done, one gains dignity and self-respect.”

The extracurricular program of the schools also came in for its share of support. “There is a vital need for the development of aesthetic tastes...it is in the crucible of what we loosely call extracurricular activities that skills, attitudes and ideals are merged into qualities of leadership and standards of performance so badly needed outside of the school environment.”

The final plea for the preparation of young people for life in the 21st century was for the development of values and character.

Recognizing the importance of home, church and other institutions, the Superintendent said, “but we can’t be satisfied to teach by accident and chance. Building the character and values vital to a humane, decent, and democratic future rests squarely on us.”¹⁶⁵

It is apparent Plucker struggled with how the world was changing. His views were extremely conservative, and he saw the world as disintegrating. It is evident he was looking at society through a white male middle class lens, and he saw the changes in society as a detriment to culture. He was so stuck in his own views that he saw anything different as a problem to be addressed. Although he was in his position for five more years, his reflections gave insight to what he thought about the district and the community he served.

The End of a 24-Year Tenure

Plucker gave his last convocation speech in 1985, and it was significant not because it was his last, but because it marked the 99th year of KCKPS. Following are some of the documented speech notes.

¹⁶⁵ Plucker, “Schools in Kansas City, Kansas.”

The Superintendent reviewed briefly the prior 98-year history of change from a collection of warring villages, the establishment of segregated schools and subsequent desegregation, and the evolution of a modern urban school system during the past traumatic twenty-five years.¹⁶⁶

Plucker dealt with the issues of desegregation and integration every one of the 24 years he was superintendent. He addressed them by placing all of the burden on the Black community by closing their schools and recreating their jewel, Sumner High School, as a magnet school that neighborhood children would not be able to attend unless they qualified academically. He was attentive to those who lived in the western portion of the district—citizens who were majority white—and made a conscious effort to not disrupt their schools. Figure 45 outlines the desegregation chronology for the district. Figures 47 and 48 outline the shifts in demographics from 1955 to 2007.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

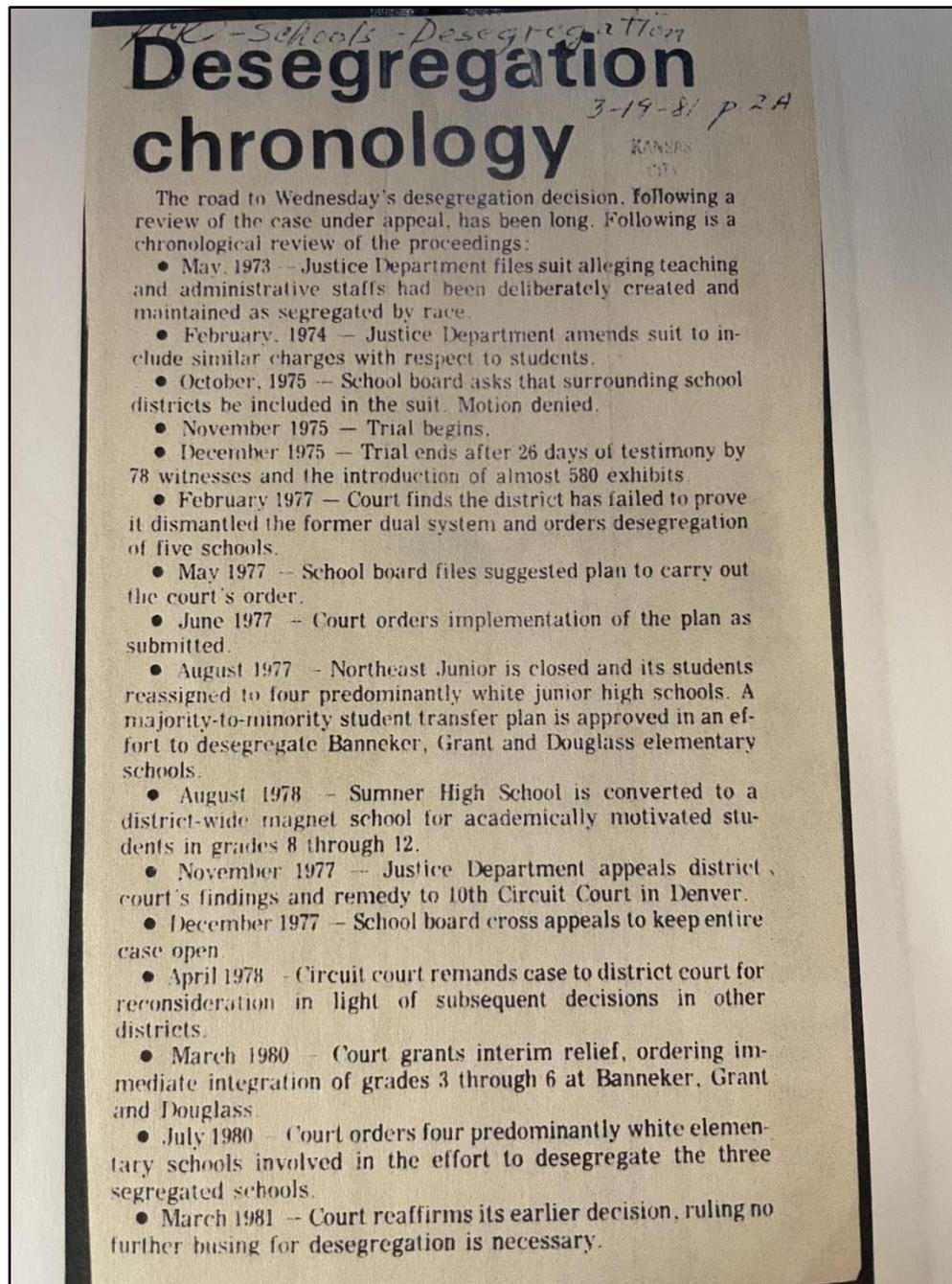


Figure 49. Desegregation Chronology, *Kansas City, Kansan*, March 19, 1981

Rosedale and Argentine Middle Schools, created from the Argentine and Rosedale secondary schools in are an illustration of the demographic trends in the southeast part of USD 500. In 1970, the combined enrollments of the two schools was about 10% Hispanic, 80% White and 10% Black. By 1980, enrollment of the combined schools was 15.95 Hispanic, 51.1% White and 28.9% Black. The increase in Black enrollment was largely the result of construction of large public housing projects in both the Rosedale and Argentine areas. Also of some importance was the transfer of a major part of the Northeast Junior high students to Rosedale as a part of the desegregation plan.

Table IV
Racial and Ethnic Changes in Enrollments in
High Schools, Middle Schools and other secondary schools
1955-2007

School & Year	Enrollment	White	% White	Black	% Black	Hispanic	% Hispanic	Asian	%Asian	Other	% Other
Schlagle											
1955	NA	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1970	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
1980	1105	501	45.3	599	54.2	2	.2	2	.1	1	.1
1990	1016	458	28.6	698	68.7	262	23.7	8	.8	0	.0
2000	1097	178	16.2	842	76.8	27	2.5	47	4.3	3	.3
2008	892	97	10.9	641	71.6	102	11.4	4.6	5.2	.6	.6
Harmon											
1955	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
1970	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
1980	1079	551	51.1	312	28.9	172	15.9	2	.2	2	.2
1990	1107	458	41.4	344	31.1	262	23.7	39	3.5	4	.3
2000	1086	316	29.1	313	28.8	404	37.2	50	4.6	5	.6
2008	1155	224	19.6	251	21.7	636	58.1	41	3.6	3	.3
Sumer HS											
1955	1050	0	0	1050	100.0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1970	815	0	0	815	100.0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sumner Academy (I)											
1980	765	482	63.0	248	32.4	27	3.5	8	1.1	2	.2
1990	935	596	63.8	279	29.8	33	3.5	23	2.5	4	.4
2008	919	207	22.5	426	45.7	232	25.2	57	6.2	3	.3
Washington											
1955	1081	1020	94.4	61	5.6	X	X	X	X	X	X
1970	3491	3265	93.5	169	4.8	44	1.3	1	.1	12	.3
1980	1538	902	58.6	612	39.8	18	1.2	6	.4	X	X
1990	1254	645	49.5	611	46.9	38	2.9	7	.5	2	.2
2000	1134	382	33.7	687	60.6	45	4.0	17	1.5	3	.3
2008	987	213	21.6	660	66.9	86	8.7	25	2.36	3	.3
Wyandotte											
1955	2145	2134	99.5	11	.1	X	X	X	X	X	X
1970	2406	1507	62.	832	34.6	62	2.6	X	X	5	.2
1980	1446	516	35.7	845	58.4	60	4.1	20	1.4	5	.4
1990	1254	354	28.2	753	60.1	100	8.0	44	3.5	3	.2
2000	1196	111	9.3	799	66.8	228	19.1	55	4.6	3	.3
2008	1176	87	7.4	553	44.2	499	42.4	32	2.7	5	.1
Argentine Jr. Sr. (I)											
1955	1081	1020	94.4	61	5.6	X	X	X	X	X	X
1970	1264	1019	80.6	103	8.1	140	11.1	2	.2	1	.1
Argentine Middle School (I)											
1980	704	354	50.3	171	24.3	149	21.2	25	3.5	2	.3
1990	533	206	38.7	209	39.2	111	20.8	6	1.1	1	.2
2000	641	182	28.4	170	26.5	260	40.6	25	3.9	4	.6
2008	525	99	18.8	85	16.1	332	62.9	8	1.5	4	.6
Rosedale Jr. Sr. (I)											
1955	873	826	97.5	21	2.5	X	X	X	X	X	X
1970	1100	861	78.3	132	12.0	106	9.6	0	.0	1	.1

Figure 50. Racial Changes in Secondary School Enrollments 1955–2007

Table IV Continued

School & Year	Enrollment	White	% White	Black	% Black	Hispanic	% Hisp.	Asian	% Asian	Other	% Other
Rosedale Middle School (1)											
1980	743	414	55.7	197	26.5	83	11.2	47	.6	2	.3
1990	502	209	41.6	193	38.5	86	17.1	12	.2	2	.4
2000	492	141	28.7	156	31.7	165	33.5	29	.6	1	.2
2008	532	77	14.4	121	22.7	315	59.2	12	.2	0	0
Arrowhead (1)											
1954	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
1970	899	862	95.9	23	2.6	14	1.5	0	.0	0	.0
1980	754	415	55.1	328	43.5	9	1.2	1	.1	1	.1
1990	604	277	45.9	301	49.8	25	4.1	1	.2	0	.0
2000	462	190	49.1	227	49.1	37	8.0	4	.9	4	.08
2008	501	142	28.3	267	53.3	80	16.0	8	1.6	4	.07
Central (1)											
1955	850	802	94.3	48	5.7	X	X	X	X	X	X
1970	1234	1014	82.4	101	8.2	108	8.8	4	.3	3	.03
1980	942	468	49.7	337	35.8	82	8.7	50	5.3	5	.05
1990	797	331	41.5	317	39.8	116	14.6	31	3.9	2	.02
2000	742	117	15.8	255	34.4	324	43.7	42	5.7	2	.03
2008	586	64	11.4	73	12.5	419	71.5	25	4.3	2	.03
Coronado (1)											
1955	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
1970	836	748	89.5	78	9.3	8	1.0	1	.1	1	.1
1980	548	272	49.6	270	49.3	6	1.1	X	X	X	X
1990	539	192	35.6	330	61.2	13	2.4	4	.8	X	X
2000	453	88	19.4	326	72.0	21	4.6	18	4.0	X	X
2008	436	57	13.1	258	59.2	97	22.3	22	3.2	X	X
Northeast											
1955	1038	X	X	1038	100.0	X	X	X	X	X	X
1970	1022	X	X	1022	100.0	Northeast closed in 1977					(See pg. 32)
Northwest											
1955	1242	1230	99.0	12	1.0	X	X	X	X	X	X
1970	1285	213	16.6	1067	83.0	5	.4	X	X	X	X
1980	641	16	2.5	621	96.9	X	X	4	.6	X	X
1990	469	8	1.7	459	97.9	1	.2	1	.2	X	X
2000	538	32	6.0	472	87.7	28	5.2	3	.6	3	.6
2008	296	12	1.8	191	70.2	77	26.0	7	.2	X	X
Eisenhower (New School. Opened 1973)											
1980	853	504	59.2	328	38.5	16	1.9	2	.2	2	.2
1990	749	350	51.8	388	51.8	10	1.4	1	.1	X	X
2000	687	176	25.6	480	69.9	15	2.2	13	1.9	2	.3
2008	615	91	14.8	439	71.4	69	11.2	9	1.5	7	1.1
West (1) (Opened in 1960)											
1970	737	646	87.6	84	11.4	5	.7	X	X	2	.3
1980	453	201	44.4	245	54.1	5	1.1	2	.4	X	X
1990	500	138	27.6	351	70.2	10	2.0	1	.2	X	X
2000	449	81	18.0	320	71.3	16	3.6	30	.6	2	.3
2008	548	78	14.2	378	68.9	76	13.8	12	.2	5	.1

(1) Sumner High School was closed before 1980 and Sumner Academy of Arts and Science became a district wide "magnet" school serving academically talented students in grades 8 through 12. Northeast Junior High School was closed and its students redistributed to Central, Arrowhead and Rosedale Middle Schools. All Jr. high schools previously serving children in grades 7-9 in 1970 were changed to middle schools serving grades 6-8 before 1980. J. C Harmon and F. L. Schlagle were two new senior high schools opened in

Figure 51. Continuation of Figure 46: Racial Changes in Secondary School Enrollments 1955–2007

Plucker referred to his longevity as superintendent as “consistent.”¹⁶⁷ I believe his consistency continued more of the same for the school district. The adage, “the more things change the more they stay the same” sums up Plucker’s tenure. As he left the superintendency, he was the last KCKPS leader to stay in the position for more than 20 years. His retirement marked the end of an era in KCKPS.

¹⁶⁷ Matthew Schofield, “Plucker Fits KCK Tradition of Longevity,” *Kansas City Star*, August 15, 1984, p. 84.

CHAPTER 5

THE TRAJECTORY OF 84 YEARS OF STABILITY:

CONCLUSION AND ANALYSIS

Three superintendents in 84 years is a phenomenon. This so-called stability in leadership in KCKPS molded a community as well as the district. This study investigated the leadership of Pearson, Schlagle, and Plucker from 1902 to 1986 and examined their actions through the lens of Black community members. This chapter closes this research study by reviewing themes that developed and examining current demographics of the community and the district. Several themes were revealed in this investigation: *institutional caring*, *community caring*, *loss of community*, and *leadership*.

Institutional caring entails how the needs of students were met through the actions of the schools. This section shows how forced segregation developed strong schools and community that left a legacy as it added to the history of the city. *Community caring* evolved from the need to protect young people and children from the challenges of living in a segregated city. The unfortunate circumstances of a racially divided city created the ideal situation for Black people in Black neighborhoods to create Black enterprise. Segregation fostered the development of a support system that birthed excellence. The section on *loss of community* recapitulates desegregation and integration plans and how they dismantled community and unraveled institutional caring by closing Black schools, busing Black children out of the community, and enticing Black community members out of “the Pod.” The last theme, *leadership*, is the actions of the district leaders and how their leadership decisions directly and indirectly created circumstances for institutional and community caring, producing strong Black school leaders and outstanding Black teachers. The final

piece of this chapter examines the current status of KCKPS and the Kansas City, Kansas community: demographics, challenges, triumphs, and equity and inclusion.

Institutional Caring

Education has always been important to the Black community. Throughout history, Black people risked their lives in the pursuit of education because they saw the value in knowledge acquisition. This tradition of attaining knowledge as a means for upward mobility was certainly the case in Kansas City, Kansas. Black students had to travel to get to schools that they could attend. “In order to obtain an education, children as young as six were often required to travel long distances over unpaved roads to sit in classrooms that were uncomfortably crowded.”¹ Not only were they overcrowded, but the facilities were also not at the same standard as the schools white students attended.² An example is Lincoln Elementary School. Before consolidation, this was the only school that Black students could attend; it was built in 1867 and it had nine rooms. In 1894, 588 students were enrolled in a building with a capacity of 450.³ No matter the condition of the school, the community supported it. The northeast area in Kansas City, Kansas was majority Black, and the schools the students attended were all Black. “The majority of schools where Black students attended were located North of Central Avenue.”⁴

The schools for Black students that were founded both before and after consolidation with the district were places of pride for the Black community. When I interviewed people

¹ Susan D. Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas: A History* (Kansas City, Kansas: The City, 1982).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ W. W. Boone, *A History of Black Education in Kansas City, Kansas: Readin', 'Riting, 'Rithmetic* (Kansas City, Kansas: Kansas City Kansas Community College, 1986).

who grew up in the community, they were proud to tell me each school they attended. “I attended Douglass Elementary, Northeast Junior High, and Sumner High,” exclaimed Mrs. Moten.⁵ Ms. Smith attended the same schools and was proud to say so. My father, Thomas Womack, said, “I attended Grant Elementary, Northeast Junior High, and Sumner High School.”⁶ Dr. Mary McConnell stated the following about Grant Elementary School.

At Grant we had some wonderful, wonderful teachers. They were all Black teachers. Many of them went to HBCUs. They made sure that you learned. They just instilled high expectation and achievement within you. I think that’s something that’s missing a lot today, especially with our young people. So, I’m just glad and thankful that I had the experience of being in an all-Black school and experiencing those teachers.⁷

These once segregated schools were sources of pride for the community.

Northeast Junior High School

Northeast Junior High School was the only junior high for Black students in KCKPS; it opened in 1923 and was closed in 1977.⁸ Black students rode buses and streetcars to get to school.⁹ Black students who lived in surrounding districts that did not have Black junior high schools had to attend Northeast. The board gave a contract to a Black business owner, W.R. McCallop, to transport children by bus to Northeast.¹⁰ Mr. McCallop lived in the Shawnee Mission school district, and he picked up students from Shawnee Mission, Edwardsville, and White Church in Kansas and from the east bottoms in Missouri.¹¹ Mr. Thomas Womack spoke fondly of Northeast Junior High School. “A lot of times the teachers would almost get involved parenting students. My father was abusive, and so my mother raised me and my

⁵ Barbara Moten, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.

⁶ Thomas Womack, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 14, 2021.

⁷ Dr. Mary McConnell, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 13, 2021.

⁸ Boone, *A History of Black Education in Kansas City, Kansas*.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

siblings. I had a science teacher at Northeast that became a sort of father figure to me. He kept me moving forward. His name was Mr. Lee Roy Pitts.”¹² This was an example of institutional caring. A component of institutional caring is teachers being “strong advocates for their students.”¹³



**Figure 52. Lee Roy Pitts, Sr., Ph.D.
1960 Northeast Junior High School Yearbook**

Dr. Jesse Kirksey stated, “I went to Dunbar North, Dunbar South, Northeast Junior High School, and Sumner High School.”¹⁴ She went on to say:

As I got older, probably at Northeast, I could really see what Ms. Miller meant when she said, “I want you boys and girls to be able to rub shoulders with the big boys.” And we didn’t quite understand, but I’ll tell you by the time we got to seventh grade, we knew exactly what they meant about rubbing shoulders with the big boys. So, the teachers helped us to be able to live in this world and compete, and really keep up. In other words, have a desire to go further, but also be content until we could move further.”¹⁵

¹² Thomas Womack, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 14, 2021.

¹³ Rafael Heller, “Telling the Untold Stories of School Integration: An Interview with Vanessa Siddle Walker,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 100, no. 5 (2019): 43–49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721719827546>.

¹⁴ Dr. Jessie Kirksey, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 22, 2021.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Attending Northeast was a rite of passage that Black students, living in a segregated city, looked forward to. Mr. McConnell said, “I was really upset that we had to move because I was really looking forward to going to school at Northeast Junior High School.”¹⁶ His wife, Dr. Mary McConnell, said it was devastating that she was not able to attend Northeast Junior High with her friends.¹⁷

Northeast had a good reputation in the community. “Northeast Junior was the only junior high school in Kansas City, Kansas which had a membership charter for the National Junior Honor Society.”¹⁸ It was also the first junior high school to have a chapter of Future Teachers of America.¹⁹ The community supported the school and expected excellence from the school as well. The citizens in the northeast part of the community purchased an organ for \$2,000.00 that was placed in the auditorium in 1938.²⁰ The PTA in 1962 raised \$16,000.00 “to purchase instruments for the music department.” In the 1960s, 40% of the Northeast faculty held a master’s degree.²¹ The teachers held the students to high standards. Every Black student who attended Northeast was prepared and looked forward to attending the beacon in the community, Sumner High School.

Sumner High School

According to the Adams article in *The Historical Journal of Wyandotte County*,

After a member of a prominent family was killed by a colored boy, not a student at the school, agitation began for separate schools. In response to rising hostilities, community leaders of both races convened at the Carnegie Library. Although they ultimately agreed that permanent separation of the city’s high school students was the only way to forestall violence against black students, they also adopted a resolution

¹⁶ James McConnell, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 13, 2021.

¹⁷ Dr. Mary McConnell, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 13, 2021.

¹⁸ Boone, *A History of Black Education in Kansas City, Kansas*.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

condemning the school ban as unconstitutional. They demanded black students be restored their rights or the school be closed to both races until the Kansas Legislature changed the law. The black students were reinstated until the next meetings of the Legislature, in January 1905, during which the 1884 law was repealed and House Bill No. 890 was adopted, providing for student segregation in KCK only.²²

This synopsis explains the reason behind the founding of Sumner High School. The school was created as a response to tragedy. Reading the history, those that were truly agitated were the white students and their families. They called for separate schools, which they claimed was the only way they could keep Black students safe. Black students wanted to return to school,²³ and when they returned, they were separated by race in separate school sessions.²⁴ Black students attended school between 1:15 p.m. and 5:00 p.m., while white students attended classes between 8:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.²⁵ There were no more incidents, but the call for segregated high schools became clarion.

The session that Black students attended was officially called Manual Training High School, even though it was located in Kansas City, Kansas High School, the same building where they had always attended school. This foreshadowed the school board's plans. The session separation and referring to it as the Manual Training High School caused Black families to take their concerns to court. It also led to some Black students violating the new session arrangement²⁶ by trying to enroll in the morning session with white students. They were denied.²⁷ As mentioned earlier in this study, Black student Mamie Richardson filed a

²² Nellie McGuinn and Patricia Adams, "African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859–1961), Part 5 of 7," *The Historical Journal of Wyandotte County* 3, no. 3 (2010): 87.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ David J. Peavler, "Drawing the Color Line in Kansas City," accessed April 17, 2021, https://www.kshs.org/publicat/history/2005autumn_peavler.pdf, 188.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

lawsuit that made it all the way to the Kansas Supreme Court regarding the separation (see Figure 49).²⁸ In the meantime, construction of Sumner High School began in June of 1905.²⁹

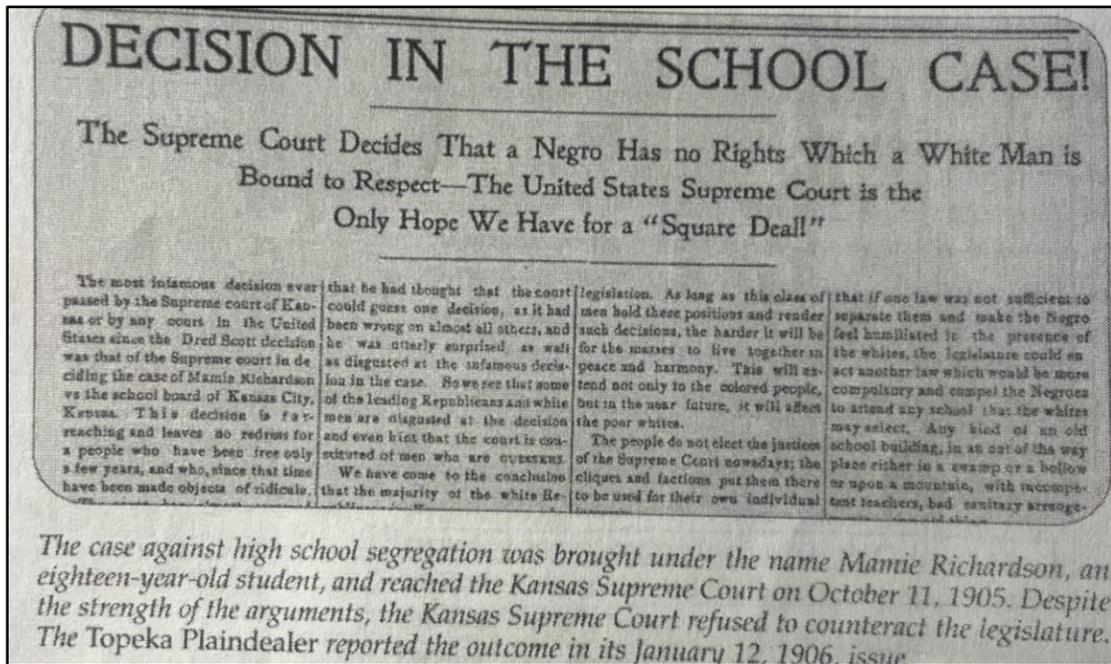


Figure 53. Headline included in the Peavler Study³⁰

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Wilma F. Bonner, *The Sumner Story: Capturing Our History, Preserving Our Legacy* (New York, New York: Morgan James Publishing, 2011).

³⁰ Peavler, “Drawing the Color Line in Kansas City.”

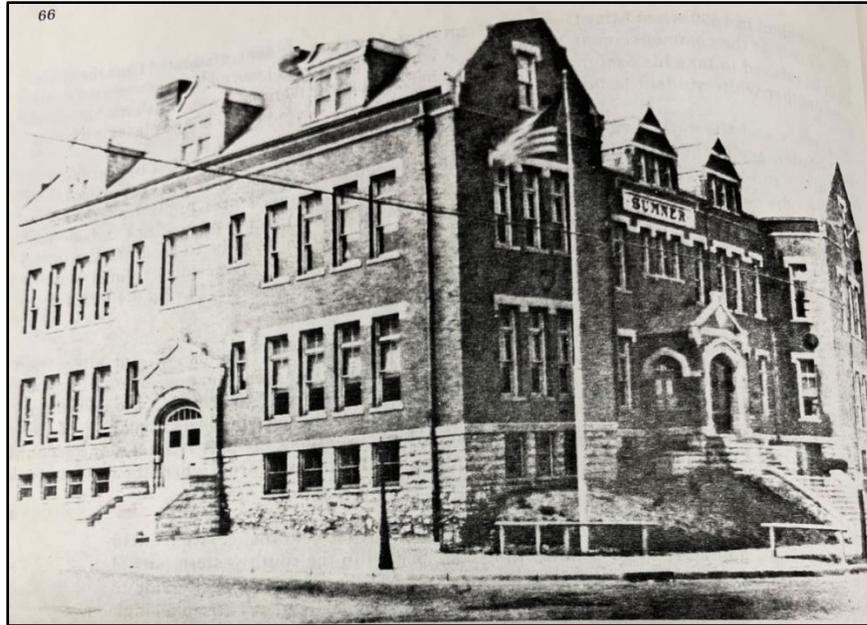


Figure 54. Sumner High School, 1906, at Original Location at Ninth and Washington Blvd.

The school board wanted to name the new school Manual Training High School, but the Black faculty and the Black community insisted on a name of which the community would be proud, and Sumner, after abolitionist Senator Charles Sumner, was chosen.

It was the vision and hope of the new Sumner High School faculty that every boy and girl who passed through the halls of the new school would learn to emulate the courage, broadmindedness, virtues, and character of the man whose name the school bore. They believed this name gave black citizens a greater sense of pride and optimism for the future than the name Manual Training High School could have ever evoked.³¹

The leadership and faculty of Sumner worked to create a college preparatory curriculum even though the school board wanted the school to focus on vocational training.³² The first two Sumner principals, J. E. Patterson and John Miller Marquess, pressed the path of excellence for Sumner students. They developed a school with a strong college preparatory curriculum

³¹ Bonner, *The Sumner Story*, 39.

³² *Ibid.*

and hired teachers who were willing to be involved with the community.³³ This was a criterion for employment at Sumner High School.



**Figure 55. J. M. Marquess, Principal
1911 Sumner Yearbook**

Ms. Smith reflected the sense of community she felt in the pod. “Dr. Love, Dr. Alexander, all the teachers, we all lived together. It was no separation in terms of what your profession was. There was no place other than this Kansas City, Kansas community that everybody lived in.”³⁴ Mrs. Moten expressed her feelings regarding segregation. “We didn’t feel segregated, we were all together. We felt quite comfortable in everything.”³⁵

The leadership also worked to improve the school for the community. They created night classes and supported Western University, the only HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) in the area, through their leadership. Garfield A. Curry, a Sumner teacher during the 1920s, said, “Night School stood for the abolishment of illiteracy among Negroes.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ B. Joanne Smith, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.

³⁵ Barbara Moten, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.

Remember this, and also bear in mind that without education and culture, no race of people has risen to supremacy.”³⁶ This statement is evidence of institutional caring that developed with the creation of not only Sumner but all the Black schools in KCKPS. John A. Hodge, the third principal of Sumner, is described as playing “a major role in the lives of students as well as the Kansas City, Kansas community.”³⁷

He believed in the capability of all black youth. He did not want them to think of themselves as inadequate, and he did everything in his power to see to it that his students were successful. He was regarded as one of the most brilliant educators of his time.³⁸

This statement is corroborated by my interviews with the women whom I affectionately refer to as the church ladies—Mrs. Moten, Ms. Smith, and Mrs. Redmond.

Mrs. Moten: “Well our principal was Hodge. We didn’t have too much acquaintance with Schlagle. He was kind of in a distance thing. We just knew about Hodge, and Hodge was such a powerful man in a way that he had everybody’s respect.”³⁹

Ms. Smith: “My mother talked about Mr. Hodge. And how he was the one. They loved him.”⁴⁰

³⁶ Bonner, *The Sumner Story*, 40.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Barbara Moten, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.

⁴⁰ B. Joanne Smith, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.



**Figure 56. John A. Hodge, Principal
1952 Sumner Yearbook**

Ms. Smith offered her reflections of Sumner High School: “We had some topnotch educators at Sumner. English was Ms. Bloodworth, and I never will forget Ms. Bloodworth, she made me start appreciating the classics. We did a lot of Shakespeare.”⁴¹

Mrs. Moten shared her memories about Ms. Bloodworth:

I remember Ms. Penman...No, Ms. Bloodworth. That was Ms. Bloodworth. I was sitting in her class and the bell rang and we got up to leave and she says, “Oh, sit down, sit down, sit down. We cannot leave Silas like this.” We were reading Silas Marner. “We cannot leave Silas like this, continue.”⁴²

Mrs. Moten also spoke fondly of Ms. Penman:

Ms. Penman was another one. Our teachers were, I think more highly educated than any place else and everything. Because at that time, the Black teachers were getting more pay here in Kansas City than they were in many places. So a lot of teachers came here to teach, and we had some fantastic teachers and they demanded discipline.⁴³

The ladies and others I interviewed who were educated in segregated schools have memories of caring, love, support, and discipline. The segregated schools gave students all

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Barbara Moten, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.

⁴³ Ibid.

they needed to prepare for the world outside the pod they would soon encounter. This is in line with the research of Vanessa Siddle Walker (2001), who wrote of segregated Black schools that focus on negatives and deficits of Black schools. However, she realized during her interviews of those who were directly impacted by the segregated schools that they had a different view of the situation.

In these more intimate portrayals of the school, the African American teacher is a critical figure in a web of caring adults who placed the needs of African American children at the center of the school's mission. Teachers are consistently remembered for their mother-like or father-like behaviors, for having high expectations, for motivating students to excel, and for providing resources to address perceived needs. They were, as Jones (1981) recounts, educators who "were open to students, ... understanding of their problems, and...[who] encouraged students to work to their fullest." In accounts where teachers—rather than the school—are the focus of the research, African American teachers are also lauded for their caring attributes.⁴⁴

These Black schools were strong educational centers because of the pride and support of the Black community. They were also the only places where educated Black professionals could find employment. As a result, some of the most educated teachers with advanced degrees worked in these schools. Sumner's faculty members were evidence of this fact. Black teachers had to be better than good (see Figure 53). It was truly a life-or-death situation concerning educating Black students, because they had so much to prove to the majority race.

The teachers displayed characteristics of institutional caring. According to Caruthers and Poos (2015), "These characteristics included exemplary teachers and principals who were well-trained and created a culture of teaching that demonstrated high expectations and a demanding teaching style."⁴⁵ Black teachers in segregated systems wanted to make sure their

⁴⁴ Vanessa Siddle Walker, "African American Teaching in the South: 1940–1960," *American Educational Research Journal* 38, no. 4 (2001): 752, <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312038004751>.

⁴⁵ Loyce Caruthers and Bradley Poos, "Narratives of Lincoln High School: African American Graduates in Kansas City, Missouri," *Journal of Black Studies* 46, no. 6 (2015): 626–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934715592841>.

students were prepared to be and do anything they aspired to do. Dr. Kirksey said of being educated in a segregated school system:

Well, when I was growing up Kansas City, Kansas was a segregated school system, but surprisingly when I tell people this, they look at me very funny. We never realized segregation, I mean, we didn't know that much about it. We just felt that we had great teachers and a great community. And during the time that I grew up, it was like education is the key, education is the key. And so, school was very important to us. And so going to all segregated schools, you were just taught that you had to do well, you had to work hard. You couldn't be as good as, you had to be better was something that was just throughout the community. And everyone in the community seemed to be really in favor of education for children.⁴⁶

1927 and ...
they were earned.

4.2 Faculty Roster 1926 - 1927 (41 percent held a master's degree in 1927)

Andrews, Grace M. (English/Journalism)	A.B. University of Denver
Buster, G. B. (Constitution, American History)	B.S. Kansas University, Wilberforce University
Branch, Mary E. (English, Psychology)	A.B. and A. M. University of Chicago
Curry, G. A. (Latin)	A.B., M.A. University of Chicago
Davis, Scottie P. (English)	A.B. University of Minnesota
Hodge, John A. (Psychology)	A.B., A.M. University of Indiana
Jackson, Vera (French, Mathematics)	A.B. University of Kansas
Lewis, J.J. (Mathematics, Discipline Hall)	A. B. New Orleans University
McNorton, Florence (Domestic Science)	B.S. Howard University
Mowbray, G. H. (Manual Arts)	A.B. Howard University
Murry, F. Luther (English, constitution)	A.B. Lincoln University; A.M. Columbia
Pendleton, Emma A. (Commercial Branches)	Drake Business College, New York
Penman, Beatrice E. (Physical Training, English)	B.S. Ohio State University
Reynolds, T. H. (Music)	A.B. Indiana University; Oberlin Conservatory of Music
Smith, Ruth B. (French, English)	A.B. Wittenberg College
Taylor, E.A. (Biology, Botany)	B.A. Wilberforce; A.M. Columbia
Williams, H. S. (Physics, Chemistry)	A.B. Oberlin College; A.M. University of Chicago
Wright, Edwina (Domestic Art)	A.B. University of Pennsylvania; A.M. Columbia University

Figure 57. 1927 Summer Faculty and their Degrees

This stellar education was on display during the annual science fairs. This was a point of pride for the alumni, even if they did not participate. Mrs. Moten said, “My last year, my senior year was the first year of the science fair...the science fair was something that Sumner High School got topnotch over all the schools in the area. Wyandotte, Argentine, all of them

⁴⁶ Dr. Jessie Kirksey, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 22, 2021.

came in second to Sumner.”⁴⁷ Ms. Smith followed with, “Lincoln [high school in Missouri] wasn’t bad either, but we won more than Lincoln. But once the downtown people saw that we were winning the science fairs, they took our science instructor out of there” (see Figure 54).⁴⁸

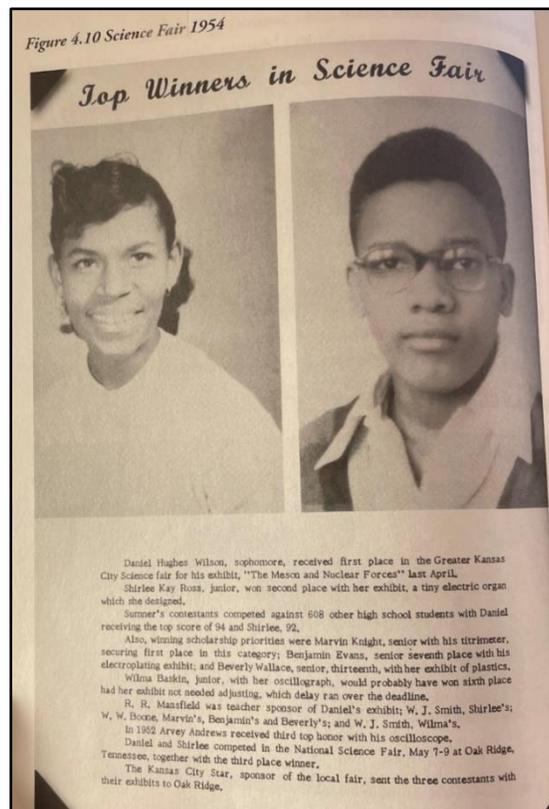


Figure 58. 1954 Science Fair Winners from Sumner

Sumner High was a strong institution that graduated outstanding people who went on to be professionals. “We had a gold mine and didn’t realize it until it was taken away from us,” according to Beverly J. Caruthers Thompson, Sumner class of 1954, recorded in *The*

⁴⁷ Barbara Moten, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.

⁴⁸ B. Joanne Smith, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.

Sumner Story.⁴⁹ Sumner High School was officially closed in May of 1978. The beacon in the community was no more.

I deduced from the interviews that even though the idea of a segregated school was not what Black parents wanted for their children, it was the best thing that could have happened to the students and the community. The principals and faculty made it a high academic center that believed in its students' abilities and capabilities. Although I did not attend Sumner High School, I was taught the same values with high academic expectations by my parents, who were both educated in segregated schools. The legacy of Sumner High continues through me and others.

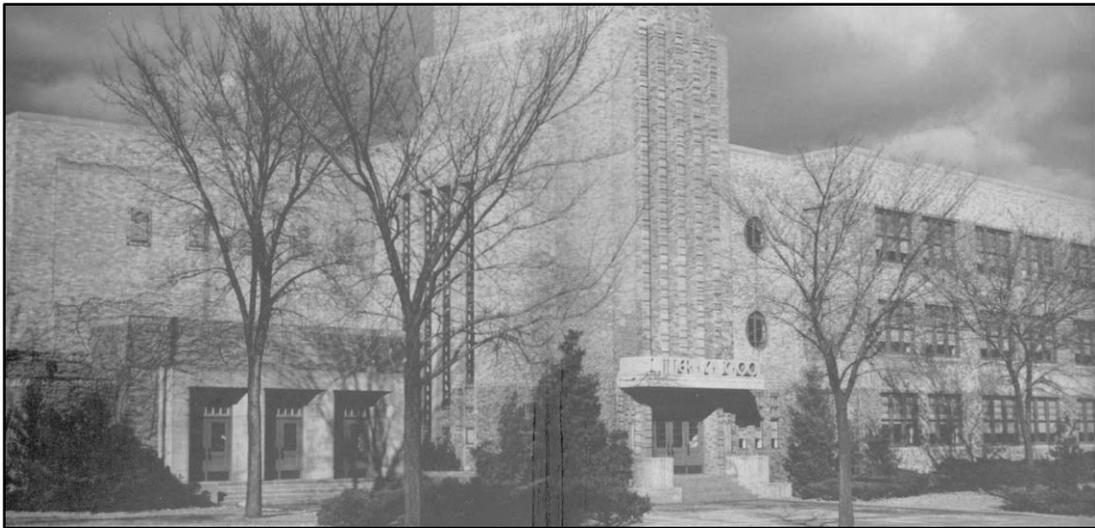


Figure 59. Sumner High School, 1953 Yearbook

⁴⁹ Bonner, *The Sumner Story*, 1.

The Sumner Song.

Words by CARRYE WHITTENHILL Music by T. H. REYNOLDS

Con spirito

1. In the Northwest part of old Wyandotte, Stands a building that's tall and
 2. Now the school's nam'd for this grand good man, Can't be oth-er than good and

wide. It re - ceived its name from the fam - ous man, This
 great. And we're sure 'twill be just as fine as he, The

build-ing is Sum-ner High. Sum-ner was a man de -
 i - dol of this whole state. Now the mem'-ry of this

spised in the land, For his kind-ness to-wards the blacks, And for
 school shall be, Up - per-most in our minds and hearts, When we

this same cause without fear or laws, He while unarmed was at-tacked.
 leave her walls, ans'ring du-ty's call, We'll be trained to do our part.

Over

Figure 60. The Sumner Song

Community Caring: The Pod

In chapter three, Ms. Smith referred to the northeast area of Kansas City, Kansas as “the pod.” She described it as a place where everyone knew everyone. And if you did not know someone, you knew their family.⁵⁰ Mrs. Moten and Mrs. Redmond described the pod

⁵⁰ B. Joanne Smith, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.

having Black-owned businesses such as grocery stores, drug stores, movie theaters, and a bowling alley. They also stated that Black professionals lived in the same community with everyone else, so they saw doctors, lawyers, and teachers in “the pod.”⁵¹ Dr. Mary McConnell described the area in her interview as well.

We had grocery stores. We had a drug store. We had Dr. Alexander. He had his office there. It seems as though, as I’m reflecting back, we had everything. Everything that we needed was in that area. My grandmother had a first cousin that owned a store, a produce store down there on Fifth and Oakland.⁵²

⁵¹ Barbara Moten, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021; B. Joanne Smith, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021; Nelgwin Redmond, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.

⁵² Dr. Mary McConnell, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 13, 2021.

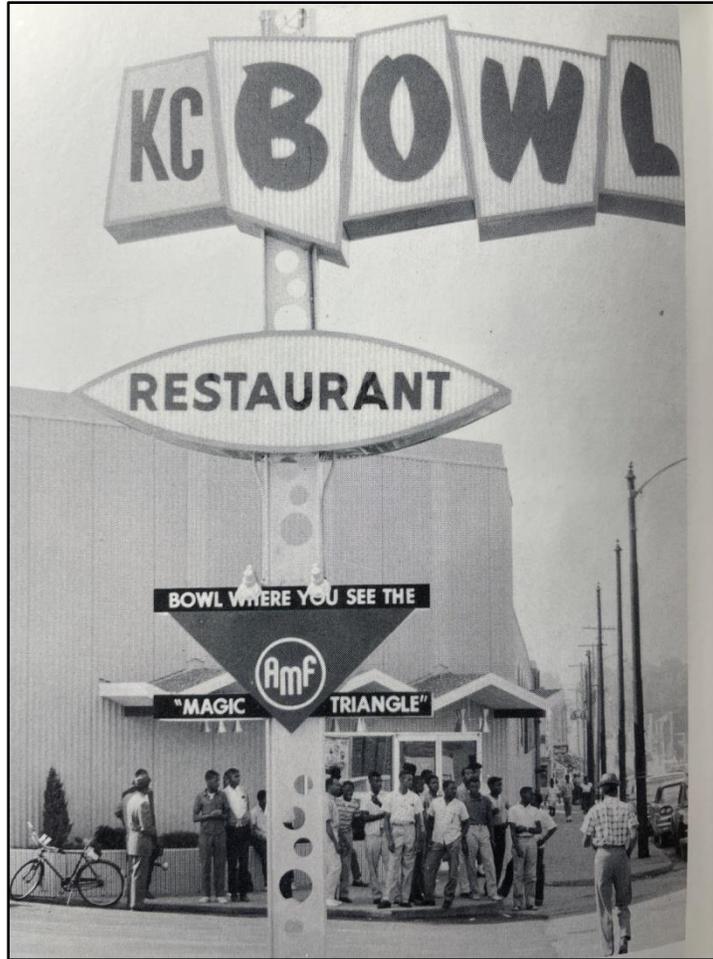


Figure 61. Bowling Alley in the Pod, which Opened in 1955 and Closed in the Late 1960s

The community and the school were connected to one another. Black businesses supported the school through ads in the yearbooks. Figures 58 and 59 show several ads from an early, 1911 Summer yearbook, demonstrating the community's connection to the school that continued for decades. Each of the businesses was located within the pod, which, according to Ms. Smith, extended from Thirteenth Street to Third Street, west to east; and Minnesota Avenue to Quindaro, from south to north.⁵³ This portion of the community was

⁵³ B. Joanne Smith, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.

and still is referred to as “the north end” or “northeast Kansas City, Kansas,” and what the interviewees coined the “pod” was the Black community in segregated Kansas City, Kansas.

BABY
Sweet Toothsome



BEEF
J. H. CLAYBORNE
High Class
Groceries,
Fruits, Vegetables,
Country Produce.
Oysters in Season.

10th St. and Washington Blvd.
Bell Phone W. 2682.

Wall Paper, Paints, Oils, Glass,
Trunks and Traveling Bags.

Maunder & Dougherty

Books and Stationery.

Phone West 161.
632-634 Minnesota Avenue,
Kansas City, Kans.

Forty-nine

Figure 62. Ad in the 1911 Sumner Yearbook

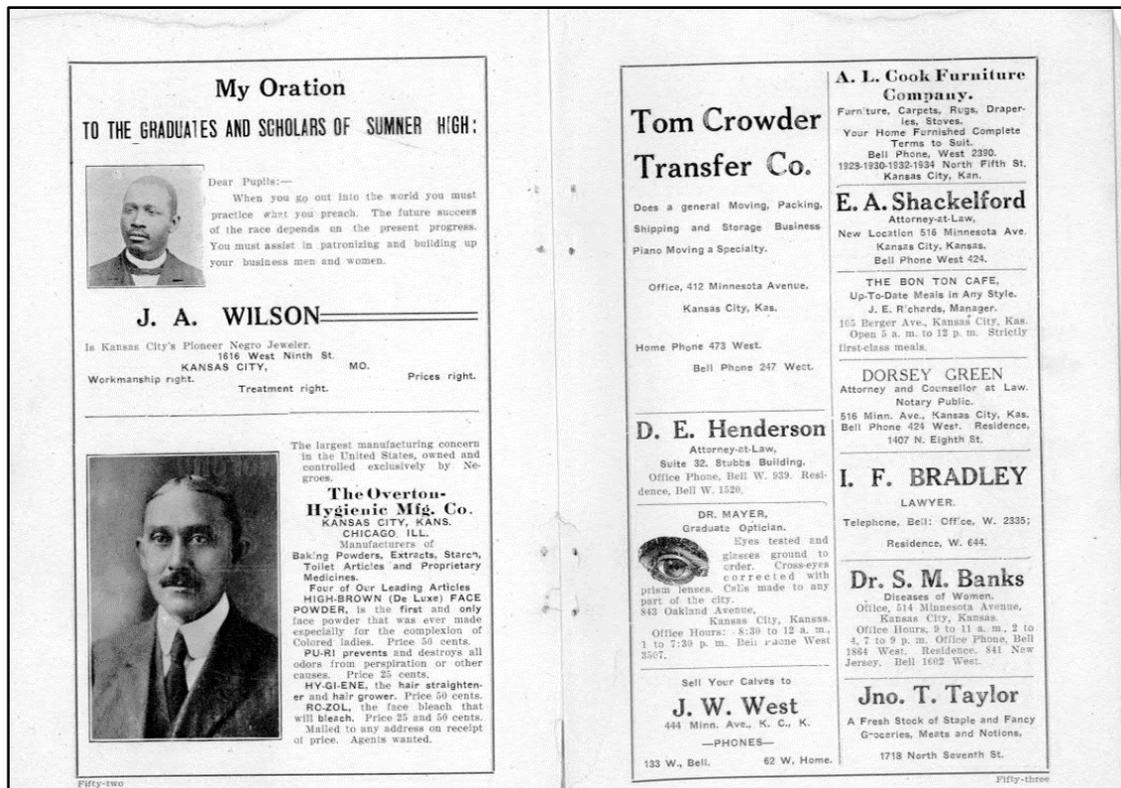


Figure 63. Ads in the 1911 Sumner Yearbook

Ms. Smith shared her memories of living within the pod.

So you get the bus or the streetcar and go over town to shop. Like I said, we were like family to a degree because everybody basically knew everybody in the community. The thing that made us close was that the attorneys, the doctors, everybody, we all lived together. There was no Overland Park. They didn't move outside into a big house. You might live next door to the doctor. Dr. Davis was right there on the corner of Washington and Ninth street."⁵⁴

The community was tight-knit, as they supported themselves, the schools, and the students.

Dr. Kirksey reminisced about her upbringing in the pod:

In other words, you talk about the village. I lived on Fifth Street in Kansas City, Kansas, and so we walked to school. And my mother was a beautician, and my dad worked for the railroad, but he also had a tavern, and that was like a bar these days, but it was a tavern. And everyone knew everyone. They knew all the children. I had Antioch Church on one end and I had what we used to call the "holy ghost church" on the other end. And so we walked in the community together, and I can remember

⁵⁴ Ibid.

school started at nine o'clock. So I would take my time walking from Fifth Street to Sixth Street. And along the way, there were people in the yards and they called me Baby Sister. And they would say, Baby Sister, you better hurry up, that bell's going to ring. I would say okay thank you, Mr. Pearl. Okay, and then I'd run a little bit, then I'd stop and walk a little bit. And then here comes Mr. Howard. Baby Sister, you better get up the street that bell is going to ring and I'm going to tell Percy if you don't get there on time. I would respond yes, Mr. Howard. I'm on my way. And so then I run a little bit and I tell you, finally, I got to school. But I knew by the time I got home that my mom would have heard from three people how slow I walked. And so that was really an indication of how the village was really concerned about the children and the education that the children were receiving.⁵⁵

The pod was concerned about the well-being of the children academically, behaviorally, and physically. My daddy, Thomas Womack, grew up in the pod at Fourth and Walker.

Well, in a lot of our neighborhoods, the parents were in contact with each other, and they watched over each other's children. I got more beatings from my neighbors and then they told my mother what I actually did."⁵⁶

Ms. Smith and Mrs. Moten shared stories about the truck farmers that would come through the community. Ms. Smith began the story. "My daddy used to buy, what we call them? The husker man. The people who used to come down and sell the bushels of apples and the bushels of peaches and the bushels of..."⁵⁷

Mrs. Moten interjected, "They were truck farmers. Yeah. They would come into the neighborhood."⁵⁸

Ms. Smith picked up the narrative again. "Yeah. So when my daddy bought a bushel of apples, I thought all the other kids were hungry. So I'd sneak apples out of the house to kids playing. My mother used to can fruits and so all the stuff they canned and put up. That's what we did."⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Dr. Jessie Kirksey, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 22, 2021.

⁵⁶ Thomas Womack, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 14, 2021.

⁵⁷ B. Joanne Smith, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.

⁵⁸ Barbara Moten, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.

⁵⁹ B. Joanne Smith, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 6, 2021.

The stories I heard were about sharing and caring for one another. They spoke of the community caring for its own and each other. They also reminded me there was no way to speak of the community history without mentioning the local churches in the community. Although it was not a significant part of this study, I would be remiss not to mention the Black church and its roots in the pod. At the time of the interview with the church ladies, their church and mine, Mt. Zion Baptist Church, was celebrating 132 years in the community, still in the original location at 417 Richmond Avenue, located in the pod. According to McGuinn's *Wyandotte County Historical Journal* article, in 1932, weekday church schools expanded under the leadership of Ethel Higby. Mrs. Higby was praised "for the success of the Negro church schools."⁶⁰ This shows a connection of the church and the schools in the Black community, working together to support and raise the children.

In 1859 Black families came together to form a church at Fifth and State Avenue.⁶¹ There were two ministers, one Methodist and the other Baptist, but they shared space and alternated their services. These two congregations worshipped together until they grew, and the Wyandots offered them a facility in which to worship.⁶² In her book, Susan Greenbaum mentions the new facility was the Wyandot Council House located at Fourth and State Avenue, known as the "Flagpole church." The Black congregations met there until shortly after the Civil War in 1865.⁶³ In 1863 a third church was formed when a large influx of escaped slaves crossed the Kansas river from Missouri.⁶⁴ In 1869 an African Methodist

⁶⁰ Nellie McGuinn, and Patricia Adams, "African-American Education in Kansas City, Kansas (1859–1961), Part 7 of 7," *The Historical Journal of Wyandotte County* 3, no. 5 (2011): 173–4.

⁶¹ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

⁶² Loren L. Taylor, *The Historic Communities of Wyandotte County, Kansas City, Kan.*: A joint project of Wyandotte County Historical Society and Museum, Historical Journal of Wyandotte County, Historian's Roundtable of Wyandotte County, 2005.

⁶³ Greenbaum, *The Afro-American Community in Kansas City, Kansas*.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Episcopal church was started in Quindaro on the property of Abelard Guthrie, one of the early founders of the Quindaro settlement.⁶⁵ The Black church helped to build support in the community. Although Blacks earned low wages from the industries in the area, they still had tremendous “giving” power due to the size of their population.⁶⁶ They financially supported their churches, lodge buildings, group insurance benefits, self-improvement programs, and cultural programs.⁶⁷ In the segregated city, Blacks looked to the church for support and to worship and participate in social activities.

Other social opportunities were connected with the people in the community. In a late-night text I received from Ms. Smith, she remembered other organizations in the community that helped to teach social etiquette to girls.

Something else I thought about was in high school we had two girls’ social clubs that were like sororities. The Les Jeunes Filles and the Gay Mademoiselles. BJ [Mrs. Moten] was in the first club, and I was in the second one. We met at each other’s homes for our meetings and each girl was expected to have a sit-down dinner. Parents prepared the meals. Now that I think back, I can’t remember our purpose.⁶⁸

This tidbit of information, in my opinion, gives insight into how much Black families wanted their young girls to be prepared for society. These stories and facts show the extent of the support members of the community gave each other.

As a child growing up in the 1970s, I would visit my grandmother, whose beauty shop was in the pod at Fourth and Walker, or my great-grandmother, who lived in the pod on Eighth Street just north of Sumner. In either case, there would be times when I experienced the pod. I remember walking down the street with my great-grandmother to get crabapples

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ B. Joanne Smith, text message to Yolanda Thompson, March 12, 2022.

from a neighbor's tree. The neighbor was kind and allowed Great Gran to have all of the crabapples that she wanted. She would then make jellies for them and other neighbors. Or she would send me two doors north of her house to the neighborhood store to get some items that were needed for a meal. The pod was not as connected as it was when my father was growing up, but I experienced enough of it to know that it was special, and the people made me feel special as Great Gran told them how well I was doing in school. I was proud that I made her proud, and some of her neighbors supported me as I went off to college in 1989. The pod was there for me.

Loss of Community

The United States District Court for the District of Kansas has ordered that the Board of Education of Unified School District #500 shall develop “a plan devised to remedy the unconstitutional segregation at Sumner, Northeast, Banneker, Douglass and Grant and to alleviate remaining teaching faculty imbalance throughout the district.” The Court further required that the “desegregation plan should begin no later than the opening of the 1977–78 academic year.”⁶⁹

This is the court order that forced KCKPS to abide by the May 17, 1954 U.S. ruling making segregated schools illegal in the United States. This court order not only forced school integration; it also ended an era, a school, and a community. The plans that were developed to achieve integration involved moving Black students out of the northeast area to schools in the western portion of the district. In my interview with Mr. James McConnell, he stated integration plans were going in one direction.

See, the thing of it is that it was going in one direction. In other words, I went to Noble Prentis, but you weren't seeing any whites going in the opposite direction. You weren't seeing them going to Stowe or to Douglass or to Dunbar North or South.

⁶⁹ “Comprehensive Plan to Remedy the Unconstitutional Student Segregation at Sumner, Northeast, Banneker, Douglass and Grant and to Alleviate Remaining Teaching Faculty Imbalance,” submitted by the Board of Education, Unified School District #500 Kansas City, Kansas, Pursuant to Orders of United States District Court for the District of Kansas in re: *United States of America v. Unified School District No. 500*, K.C.-3738, April 12, 1977, 1.

When I went to Noble Prentis, all the teachers were white, and there was just a small sprinkling of Black students.⁷⁰



Figure 64. James McConnell, 1966 Wyandotte Yearbook

Mr. McConnell spoke fondly of one of his teachers and how the teacher made connections with him and other students. He shared that he remained in contact with Mr. Porshay until he died because of the relationship that was built in the classroom.

Mr. Porshay, he would call me Mr. McConnell, not just me but all the boys in the classroom. He would give us a sense of respect and dignity. He referred to me as Mr. McConnell. As I interact with young men today, that is what I try to do is call them by their last name and put a mister in front of it. I would just hope that it means something to them.⁷¹

He continued speaking of his memories of Mr. Porshay.

Mr. Porshay passed away, and I didn't know, I didn't realize that he had passed away until right after his service. And I broke down and cried. I penned a letter to his wife. I let her know in that letter how much he meant to me and what he had instilled in me as a man. I was a grown man when this happened. She responded to me. She really, really appreciated that letter.⁷²

⁷⁰ James McConnell, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 13, 2021.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

Mr. McConnell's memories of his teacher are evidence of the bonds developed in the classroom. The lessons that he learned about respect from the respect that Mr. Porshay demonstrated to him and other students crafted how he interacts with young men to this day. Mr. Porshay is an example of how what happened in the classroom went far beyond the dictated curriculum.

The integration process in KCKPS was a challenge for district leadership. There were a few plans proposed that involved secondary schools in the northeast area of the city. Those schools were Northeast Junior and Sumner High. Plucker stated that the plans developed were "to provide the maximum opportunity for a productive and stable educational experience for all children."⁷³ In another statement in the same document, he wrote,

In a preliminary way, may I point out that the material which I plan to cover with you has been prepared with specific reference to the various orders mentioned and is an effort to comply to the greatest extent possible, while at the same time, seeking to develop and preserve the integrity, stability, continuity and quality of the public schools of Kansas City, Kansas, and the stability and integrity of the entire community.⁷⁴

As I analyze these two statements by Plucker, he gave the impression that the plans considered would be equitable. For example, in the first statement, he used the phrase "all children" and in the latter statement he used the phrase "entire community." "All" implies everyone and every child, no matter race, creed or color, and "entire community" implies everyone in the community, also meaning no matter race, creed, or color. However, in each of the plans that was considered, there is evidence of his failure to abide by his own words.

In the first plan, Plucker considered only closing Northeast Junior and Sumner High. "With respect to secondary schools, at one extreme consideration was given to the possibility

⁷³ Plucker, "Desegregation Plan."

⁷⁴ Ibid., 1

of simply closing both Sumner and Northeast Junior High Schools and transporting their students to other secondary schools.”⁷⁵ He went further to state about this plan, “it would result in an extremely distasteful process of one-way bussing.”⁷⁶ To even think of this as a viable plan went against his statements that claimed to consider all students and the entire community. There would have been no secondary school in the northeast area if they were closed. The second plan involved moving some Black students out of the northeast area schools and moving students into schools that were traditionally Black schools. He wrote,

At the same, it requires removal from the area of more than half of the resident students and thereby ends any possibility of retaining a community identity for the schools. It would also require forced or involuntary transfers of a majority of the students both into and out of these schools. It would be by far the most objectionable alternative from the point of view of the general public. It has an extremely high potential for disruptive action and the acceleration of the decline in white and black middle-class population in the school district.”⁷⁷

He continued his comments about this plan:

It is perhaps the alternative which would have the most serious economically, socially and politically disruptive impact on the community and would rapidly accelerate the out-migration of the portions of the population having the economic resources to leave.⁷⁸

My observations of Plucker’s thoughts about this plan are that they were one-sided. He was concerned about the white community and those with middle class status. Again, it was not about all or the entire community. It was about keeping one group satisfied.

The final plan was to create a magnet school at the Sumner High site.

The third group of considerations moving toward a middle ground, exploration was given to the establishment of a magnet school in the Northeast area to serve qualified students from all parts of the district on a fully integrated basis, together with the transporting of all students who live in the area who do not choose to attend the

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

magnet school to other schools throughout the district on a fully integrated basis. Such an approach has the advantage of providing for an integrated secondary school operation in the Northeast area while at the same time leaving a portion of the residents in the area.⁷⁹

He described this plan as “more conducive to improved community relations.”⁸⁰ Of which community was he speaking? It is clear that he is speaking of the community outside of the northeast end of the city—the community that was majority white. Plucker also shared the negatives of this plan, even though he considered it more conducive to positive community relations.

...disadvantages in that it will be extremely difficult to create a school whose program would be so attractive that it would draw significant numbers of white students from other secondary schools into the Sumner-Northeast area. The magnet school approach would also involve the cost of reorganizing the school with special programs so as to be sufficiently attractive to make it succeed.⁸¹

Once more, Plucker’s thoughts are about the white community and their concerns about sending their students to a school in the northeast area of the city. Thus, the planning of Sumner Academy of Arts and Science began, with the end of Sumner High School and the decimation of “the pod.”

The third phase, at the senior high school level, would convert Sumner High School to a school which would serve grades 9 through 12 for students with very special needs and abilities and would enroll students from all parts of the district so as to be fully integrated.⁸²

Sumner Academy of Arts and Science

The closing of Sumner High School was a blow to the northeast end of the city and the Black community. The last graduating class of Sumner High School graduated in May of

⁷⁹ Ibid., 4-5.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

1978. This was a bitter moment for the Black community, because Sumner High was known for excellence. In an article in the May 29, 1978 issue of the *Kansas City Times*, Rosalind Truitt wrote, “Sumner High School, touted in the 1940s as ‘Kansas’ finest contribution to the education of Negro youth’...”⁸³ The once acclaimed school was closing its doors forever due to a desegregation order. Mrs. Redmond’s eldest daughter was part of the last graduating class of Sumner High School. She said, “I was not happy about the closing of Sumner High School. Sumner High School was the only high school in the north end of Wyandotte County for minority students.”⁸⁴ Ms. Smith responded about the closing of Sumner High School as well:

The closing was a blow, a punch to the gut, as well as sadness. No matter how the community protested, the courts had their mind made up to take our school from us. The history of brilliant teachers, accomplished students who could compete with any school in the city was discounted or in the near future forgotten about. Sumner High School’s history may be written down, but in this day and age if Sumner is mentioned, automatically the assumption is you are talking about Sumner Academy. If you bring up Sumner on social media, it only brings up Sumner Academy. As time goes on, no one will remember Sumner High School. That makes me sad.⁸⁵

Sumner Academy of Arts and Science (the Academy) opened in the fall of the 1978–1979 school year by court order. When it was created, it seemed no expense was spared. Renovations, a consulting firm, new curriculums, transportation costs, staffing, and anything else needed was procured because it was imperative that the school be a success. In an article in the May 29, 1978 *Kansas City Times*, interviewee Dr. W. L. Davies, assistant superintendent for instruction, said the cost was “conservatively estimated...at more than half a million dollars.”⁸⁶ These monies were spent to attract white students into the northeast area,

⁸³ Rosalind C. Truitt, “New Sumner Has Hard Act to Follow,” *Kansas City Times*, May 29, 1978.

⁸⁴ “Two More Questions,” email to Yolanda Thompson, Nelgwin Redmond, March 10, 2022.

⁸⁵ B. Joanne Smith, text message to Yolanda Thompson, March 12, 2022.

⁸⁶ Greg Edwards, “Sumner Success Beats School Board’s Hopes,” *Kansas City Times*, May 29, 1978.

the part of the city that was Black. According to the writer, “Critics had predicted white parents would be unwilling to bus their children from suburbia to a black inner-city neighborhood, no matter how attractive the educational offerings were.”⁸⁷ The critics were wrong. The magnet school attracted white students; of the 660 students enrolled, 58% of them were white.⁸⁸ Sumner Academy was created as a magnet school with a specialized curriculum tailored to attract all races of students. However, the biggest concern was getting whites to come into the area. To accomplish that, the district had to make some major changes to Sumner.

The district destroyed a school to build faith in the community that it was no longer a “Black” school, that it was no longer the school that it had been for over 70 years. As a child, I remember hearing adults talk about the changes. And as an adult, I remember hearing people talk about the changes and what had to be done to coax white families to send their children to Sumner Academy. Sumner High’s colors were orange and black and the mascot was the Spartan. When it was changed to Sumner Academy, the colors were changed to royal blue and silver and the mascot became a Sabre. These were the aesthetic changes. More significant changes were made to ensure enrollment needs were met.

The academy, an attempt to desegregate a traditionally all-black high school, has established—at least on paper—a standard by which other magnet schools and college preparatory programs in metropolitan Kansas City may someday be judged.⁸⁹

The leadership at Sumner Academy’s inception worked hard to recreate a stellar school that did not resemble Sumner High School. Those who were on the planning committee also made sure the curriculum was different. In Plucker’s remarks to the school board he said,

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Greg Edwards, “Sumner Success Beats School Board’s Hopes.”

It is proposed that the program of studies in the Sumner High School building be so modified as to provide for the establishment of a magnet school which would serve academically talented students, highly motivated students, or gifted students.⁹⁰

He went on to say,

It would not be contemplated that the school would serve remedial needs or those of a strictly vocational nature. Neither would it seek to serve the general educational needs of the average and below average students.⁹¹

Sumner Academy would have more rigorous academic requirements than the other high schools in the district. All eighth graders were required to take Latin their first year at the academy. The school was designed for the student who planned to have a “professional career requiring rigorous preparation in the academic disciplines.”⁹²

I remember hearing the concern in the community about the other high schools, if so much care and concern was being placed on the Academy. My own parents were uneasy with the fact that if my sisters and I did not qualify for the Academy, we would receive less preparation for college.

Staffing changes were made as well. Sumner High was known for its caring, all-Black staff; the court order mentioned that progress should be made toward making the staff more balanced, but it did not mandate it. Teachers who taught at the academy were expected to have a master’s degree and at least two years of teaching experience in a racially integrated school, “or an equivalent experience in an integrated setting.”⁹³ This new requirement that Sumner Academy teachers have experience in an integrated setting meant some highly qualified teachers would lose their positions. Earlier in this study I shared that teachers at Sumner High had more advanced degrees because they had to be better than good

⁹⁰ Plucker, “Desegregation Plan.”

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

in a segregated society. In Rosalind Truitt's 1978 article, "New Sumner Has a Hard Act to Follow," Robert Clark, a former teacher and counselor, stated:

We got the best because on the high school level, Negro teachers didn't have that many opportunities at that time. These were people who went out and worked hard. And they knew that they had to be better than just good because if it came down to a choice between a mediocre white and a well-qualified Negro, the white would probably get the job. That's why we encouraged our students to be the absolute best they possibly could.⁹⁴

Academy teachers were told that they would have to work longer and harder.⁹⁵ Again, different standards, but this time for staff. The standards that the district established for the academy had already been in place at Sumner High School. S. H. Thompson, former principal of Sumner High for twenty-one years until his retirement in 1972, said about the academy: "They're calling it a magnet school but the concept is the same one under which we operated over the years."⁹⁶ The same article says, "...acquiring the very best teachers, administrators, equipment and faculties for the academy—is only a continuation of a Sumner tradition that has been responsible for turning numbers of young people into doctors, lawyers, musicians and scientists."⁹⁷ The more the district changed the school, the more it stayed the same, with the exception of enrollment demographics. It went from a majority Black school as Sumner High to a majority white school as Sumner Academy.

⁹⁴ Truitt, "New Sumner Has Hard Act to Follow."

⁹⁵ Edwards, "Sumner Success Beats School Board's Hopes."

⁹⁶ Truitt, "New Sumner Has Hard Act to Follow."

⁹⁷ Ibid.



**Figure 65. S. H. Thompson
Sumner High School Principal, 1951–1972**

As a 1989 Sumner Academy graduate, I remember the anxiety of wanting and waiting for an invitation during my seventh-grade year and the excitement I felt when I opened the letter. My parents were pleased that I got the letter saying I qualified for the academy. I also remember my father saying that he went to the real Sumner and that I was going to Sumner Academy. As a Black student at the academy, I knew that white students were the majority race in the school. But I was in the minority in every school I attended as a student in KCKPS. After reading remarks by Plucker, I believe it was by design. In his writing about desegregation in the district after the court order was addressed, he stated that the following numbers were anticipated:

- F. L. Schlagle High School would be 55.56% white
- Washington High School would be 59.56% white
- J. C. Harmon High School would be 59.73% white
- Sumner Academy would be 65% white⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Plucker, “Desegregation Plan.”

The court order was addressed by making white students the majority at four of the five KCKPS high schools. Wyandotte was not mentioned because it was not directly impacted by the shifts that addressed the court order. When I returned to the district as a teacher at Sumner Academy during the 1999–2000 school year, the increased diverse enrollment in the Academy reflected the changed demographics in the city. I remember before I got the call for the position, one of my friends who was also an academy graduate asked me to come visit her on the job. When I walked into the building and she met me at the entrance, I was surprised to see so many Black students in the school. It was a huge change from the way it had been when I was a student. Even with the change, there was still a rift in the community.



Figure 66. Yolanda (Womack) Thompson, Sumner Academy, 1989



Figure 67. Yolanda Thompson, 1999-2000 Sumner Academy Yearbook

The Chasm in the Community

The closing of Sumner High School and the creation of Sumner Academy created a split in the community. With the loss of Sumner, the Black community felt they had lost their

educational history. My father still has feelings of loss about his educational history in KCKPS, and he is not alone. When all of the changes were made, the school colors and the Spartan were removed from the building. The history was destroyed and buried, and the Black community felt they had been grossly disrespected and not valued as a part of the Kansas City, Kansas community. When asked about the extent of the loss to the Black community when Sumner High was closed, Ms. Smith said:

Education, pride in knowing the recognition of an outstanding school with outstanding Black teachers and students that came out of an all-Black community. During the times the community felt the loss of a bright light in our community. The light was out, as well, in American history. The name of Sumner was synonymous with competitive spirit in academia, Black excellence in education. We were a family and the family consisted of parents, teachers, students, alumni, Black-owned businesses, the whole community.⁹⁹

When asked about the closing of Sumner High, Dr. Eva Tucker Nevels, a 1972 Sumner High School graduate, said:

When Sumner High School was federally mandated to close for racial integration of schools, it felt like an “erasing” of history. I remembered being told that “I”—“we” should be proud that Sumner was chosen to become a magnet school. It would be “good” for the community. During that time, many questions circled around in my head—if it was going to be good for the community, why change the school’s colors, mascot, name, teaching staff, students and many other improvements that should have been done before the mandated plan? It was years later when I watched the movie that Arnold Schwarzenegger and Vanessa Williams co-starred in, “Eraser,” that really captured my thinking, “You’ve just been erased.” No longer would Sumner High School house the dynamic pillars of a proud community of intelligent, gifted, caring, strong, talented, unrelenting teachers and administrators who provided the shoulders for the “mighty Spartans” students to stand on. The consistent and countless recognitions of achievement down through the years—whether academics, the arts, or sports—Sumner High School exemplified academic excellence before it became an “academy.” The faculty earned the reputation of providing high school and college preparatory classes while inspiring students every day, and if I might add, communicating with your family either at the grocery store, church, and/or neighborhood.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ B. Joanne Smith, text message to Yolanda Thompson, March 12, 2022.

¹⁰⁰ “Questions for Research” email to Yolanda Thompson, Dr. Eva Tucker Nevels, March 13, 2022.



Figure 68. Eva Tucker Nevels, 1972 Sumner Yearbook

Dr. Brenda Harris said this about the closing of Sumner High School:

Under the guise of desegregation, once again the Black community was bamboozled into believing that closing Sumner High School was best for Black students. When in actuality it was always to provide more options and opportunities for White students.¹⁰¹



Figure 69. Brenda Harris, 1976 Schlagle Yearbook

¹⁰¹ Dr. Brenda Harris, email to Yolanda Thompson, March 17, 2022.

Dr. Tucker Nevels shared that her educational history in KCKPS is no longer existent. She attended Kealing and Stowe Elementary schools, Northeast Junior High School, and Sumner High School. Unfortunately, she is not the only one who lives with this experience. Her thoughts about erasure were similar to statements I received from Mrs.

Moten:

Back in 1978, my question was WHY? All the high schools were integrated without changing THEIR names. WHY? Then I realized that all the accomplishments and successes of Sumner were to be buried in some undisclosed place—never to rise again! History was repeating itself. Our forefathers were stripped of their names, culture, and traditions. Even forbidden to orally relay them to their children. In 1978, a more dignified method was attempted—Sumner Academy was established. The Spartan emblem was removed and the black and orange were no longer the Sumner colors.”¹⁰²

Mr. James McConnell said this about the closing of Sumner High School:

The decision that a judge made in 1978 for the Kansas City, Kansas School District to close Sumner High School was devastating to the Black community of Kansas City, Kansas. The decision to desegregate the schools in Kansas City, Kansas affected Sumner High School more than any other Kansas City, Kansas high school, since it was the only 100% African American student-attended school in the city. Sumner High School was a well-known and well-respected school. The closing caused discontentment, confusion, and a loss of security. Throughout the years, there has always been a very high degree of camaraderie amongst Sumner High School students. Sumner was well connected with local African American churches, businesses, and public organizations.¹⁰³

The community disappointment and pain is evident in earlier comments. Dr. Kirksey added to the pattern of disappointment that developed in this study:

I, along with many Sumnerites and community activists, was very unhappy with the closing of Sumner High School in 1978. Sumner served as a source of pride and accomplishment for the students, parents, and community. It also served as a tribute to the master teachers that we were privileged to have. These educators provided an education of the finest quality for all the Scholars who entered its doors. Sumner’s culture was one of high expectations, with a “You Can and You Will” attitude. Our instructors truly believed that no one rises to low expectations. Sumner, being an all-

¹⁰² Barbara Moten, “Response to Email,” n.d.

¹⁰³ James McConnell, One More Question, email to Yolanda Thompson, March 13, 2022.

Black school, was very proud of the excellent educational opportunities that all scholars received. Many became doctors, lawyers, college professors, presidents of corporations, engineers, and above all, outstanding human beings who believed in giving back to their community. Sumner served as the hallmark of excellence in the community. Losing Sumner High School devastated us all. The closing was like a death sentence for the community. Our hearts were shattered.¹⁰⁴

Dr. Mary McConnell's thoughts reiterated the feelings of loss in the community:

Sumner High School was a strong cultural force and generational legacy for African Americans living in Kansas City, Kansas. In addition, it was the community school for most African Americans living in Wyandotte County. There was so much pride and talent embodied in those who attended that is still alive today. It was so connected and embedded within the Black community. It was more than a building. Everyone, even today, is proud to be a Sumner High School graduate—A Spartan. Although I did not attend Sumner High School, I was devastated when it closed. I felt connected in so many ways. I would describe the closing of Sumner High School as a strong pillar being removed and torn down that was so vital to the life of the Black community. It was a tremendous loss.¹⁰⁵

Dr. Brenda Harris had similar comments:

I believe the closing of Sumner High School in 1978 was an enormous loss for the community. For many years, Sumner had been the only high school Blacks could attend. My mother attended Sumner, and the education she received was rich because the Black educators worked hard to give the students a world class education. I also had two brothers who graduated from Sumner. Even today they speak about the teachers who taught them academics as well as life skills. We lost a big piece of our rich culture and traditions. Sumner was a core monument in the community.¹⁰⁶

The loss of Sumner High School is indisputable as reflected in these statements. All of the interviewees commented about the excellence and family atmosphere that was embodied by Sumner. When asked how the loss of Sumner impacted the community, the responses displayed the fractured community. Mrs. Moten said:

It was a stunning blow to the Black community also. All Black students from Argentine, Rosedale, and Edwardsville had been bused to Sumner for years, so their parents and relatives had also attended Sumner. Suddenly, all that changed. Many parents had been active participants in the PTA and basketball and football games.

¹⁰⁴ Dr. Jessie Kirksey, Two More Questions, email to Yolanda Thompson, March 13, 2022.

¹⁰⁵ Dr. Mary McConnell, One More Question, email to Yolanda Thompson, March 14, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ Dr. Brenda Harris, email to Yolanda Thompson, March 19, 2022.

Now, they were no longer to be fellow school rooters but opponents. Also, school and church had been the two activities that held us together. Teachers were members of local churches. School activities were aligned with local churches. They did not compete. In 1978, all that changed.¹⁰⁷

Dr. Tucker Nevels expressed the same feelings:

The extent to which I believe that Sumner High School has been erased, has impacted the Black community in ways that are lingering today. Even though I celebrate the many outstanding accomplishments of Sumner Academy, the school community is not the local neighborhood, but the pooling of identified talented students across Wyandotte County. Along with the many thousands of students who walked the halls of Sumner High, at the end of the school day, our homes were in the community, we worked and shopped in the local family businesses/stores and were raised with the support of neighbors—called “the village.” Once Sumner High closed, slowly the “soul” and “spirit” of a community began to fade and wash away. The federally mandated plan of actions echoed through the community—you are being erased—removed the “orange and black,” the “Spartans,” the school’s name, memories, and bus the families out. Build new, improved, and different. Tell the community this is better. Through reflective conversations, a quote was shared—“The past cannot be changed, forgotten, edited, or erased. It can only be accepted.” Was this acceptance to erase this school community and its people’s knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture? A quote by Marcus Garvey suggests that a people without the knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots. A tree without roots will not survive. So, was the intended outcome of the closing of Sumner High to remove the roots of a community so that it would not survive? Hmm...Erased or Accepted?¹⁰⁸

The legacy of Sumner High School lives in the hearts and memories of Black citizens in Kansas City, Kansas. The idea that their school and community were taken from them is still a tender wound; so much so, that my father did not care to enter the doors of the academy even after my sisters and I were accepted. Of course, he did, but he always had something to say or a memory to share.

Years later, when I became an assistant principal of Sumner Academy, the principal, working with Sumner alumni, had the Spartan seal placed at the entrance and returned to the

¹⁰⁷ Barbara Moten, email to Yolanda Thompson, March 13, 2022.

¹⁰⁸ Dr. Eva Tucker Nevels, Questions for Research, email to Yolanda Thompson, March 13, 2022.

gymnasium. I remember calling my dad to let him know, and he drove to the school, stepped into the building wearing an orange shirt, and just stared at the seal. He did not say much, but his smile said more than any words could express. He had the look of someone returning home after a long absence.

Sumner Academy has a long list of accomplishments and awards, just like Sumner High School did. The legacy of excellence started by Sumner High at 1610 North Eighth Street continues within the hallowed halls under a new name and a new identity.

District and School Leadership: An Analysis

The tenures of Pearson, Schlagle, and Plucker total 84 years. By some it is considered a period of stability because district leadership did not change often. The “stability” allowed the leadership to address social issues that impacted the operation of KCKPS. In 84 years the district contended with integration, segregation, two world wars, the Korean War, advancements in education, the Civil Rights movement, lawsuits, and court orders. Earlier in this study, many of these topics were addressed under the leadership that had to plan through and around them. This section includes a brief synopsis of the tenures of each superintendent and analyzes their contributions to the district and the impacts. This section also includes the leadership of Sumner High School and their contributions to the stability of their students and the Black community.

M. E. Pearson

While M. E. Pearson was superintendent, he had the challenge of organizing a young school system that was unifying with other smaller systems. However, in 1905 he made the decision, along with the school board, to segregate the district. Under his leadership, Sumner High School was founded, as well as educational facilities for Mexican students. Pearson

established a tri-racial system in the district after white citizens in Kansas City, Kansas protested the killing of a white student by a Black man.¹⁰⁹ The separation of Black students at the high school level indirectly created a center for educational excellence that was Sumner High School. Pearson was also responsible for adding the kindergarten concept, the junior high concept, and the junior college concept to the district and the city. As the city grew, the school district expanded under his leadership. The words he used in his report annual report covering July 1, 1911 to June 30, 1920 spoke of growth and the district's needs:

The period of growth and progress of the schools from 1911 to the present time has been a remarkable one. The city has grown in population from 82,000 to 101,000. This period includes the great World War, and has witnessed a community, civic, and commercial awakening. The war activities united all the people and carried them to a higher plane of service and human interest. Our reorganized Chamber of Commerce has been the leader in this civic spirit. The schools have been a part, and have taken a part in all these eventful movements. The aim of the schools has been re-defined. Their shortcomings have been pointed out and the future needs emphasized and brought to the consciousness of all the people. Community and civic life is not the same as it was ten years ago. The schools have a broader outlook.¹¹⁰

In the same report, he continued:

Twenty years has seen a complete change in the American Public school. Twenty years ago pupils were trained in the minimum essentials. Now they are prepared for the maximum service in life. "The old order changeth," and our schools have changed.¹¹¹

He acknowledged the changes the district had to make because of the changes in the world that had changed the city. His vision to establish kindergarten opened the district to younger students to give them foundational learning. His idea, then progressive, has developed even more into early childcare education. KCKPS is currently an early childcare to twelfth grade

¹⁰⁹ Rubén Donato and Jarrod Hanson, "In These Towns, Mexicans Are Classified as Negroes," *American Educational Research Journal* 54, Supplement 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831216669781>.

¹¹⁰ M. E. Pearson, "The Thirty-Fifth Annual Report of the Board of Education of the City of Kansas City, Kansas for the Years July 1, 1911 to June 30, 1920" (Kansas City, Kansas: Board of Education, n.d.), 17.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

(EC–12) district. His views on adding junior high separated the ages for the different stages of learning. His idea for junior college gave those who graduated high school and who wanted and had the means to move forward in their education the opportunity to do so in the city. People no longer had to travel outside of the district or city to get more education or training.

The district still has a partnership with the local community college that was started under Pearson. Kansas City, Kansas Community College (KCKCC) offers KCKPS students scholarships to their institution. KCKCC is in the high schools so that students can earn dual credits and attain an associate’s degree along with their high school diploma. Students even have opportunities for vocational certifications in KCKCC TEC (Technical Education Center). The vision Pearson had for making junior college more accessible has developed into a concept that has opened educational doors for many students and citizens of every race in KCKPS.

Establishing junior high schools in the district offered learning at different levels for adolescents. However, during Pearson’s tenure, separate junior high schools had to be built to accommodate different races. Again, with the need to segregate the races, Northeast opened in 1923 and inadvertently became a strong institution of learning in KCKPS for Black students. But it was intentionally made strong academically by the Black community. Students who attended Northeast were prepared for the education they received at Sumner High School. And like Sumner, Northeast was closed as part of the desegregation order. As time progressed, the concept of junior high school was changed to middle school to serve grades six through eight. Presently the district has seven middle schools that serve all races

represented in KCKPS. Like the junior high schools before them, they prepare students for high school level academic learning.

Pearson's contributions to stability were his vision of what public education should be and how KCKPS should progress. His ideas, however, were meant for the white citizens and their students. The educational strength and growth experienced by the Black community was a byproduct—a side effect—of segregation in KCKPS. Schlagle and Plucker spent their tenures dealing with the results of a segregated district.

F. L. Schlagle

“But if I had to list the changes of lasting impact, the desegregation of the district's schools in 1951 would be at the head,” was the statement made by Schlagle when asked what he was most proud of when he was superintendent.¹¹² This statement by Schlagle is baffling, because in 1951 the schools were still segregated. Further, even after the 1954 Supreme Court decision, the schools were still segregated. As mentioned earlier in this study, the school board said it would not make any changes until the decision had been interpreted by attorneys. However, using the writing of Plucker:

to desegregate...becomes the removal of any rules, laws or requirements that segregate. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1961) defines it as, “to free (itself) from any law, provision or practice requiring isolation of the members of a particular units, esp. in military service or in education.”¹¹³

Using these definitions, Schlagle may have desegregated the district by words, but certainly not by action.

¹¹² Gary K. Murrell, “Bell of Success Still Rings for Retired Schoolmaster,” *The Kansas City Star*, September 6, 1973, p. 4W.

¹¹³ O. L. Plucker, “Four Decades of Segregation—Desegregation Integration and Repopulation in Unified School District 500, Kansas City, Kansas: History and Personal Observations,” n.d., 10.

Despite the accolades that Schlagle received regarding his leadership of the NEA and being asked to participate in UNESCO, much of his tenure was involved with issues about segregation in the district. He had to respond to complaints from Black citizens who claimed that he and the board were maintaining segregated schools with their policies. These complaints led to protests, lawsuits, and NAACP involvement. The race issues consumed his tenure as he responded to these allegations. Ms. Smith, one of the interviewees, called him a “racist” because of the differences in how schools were supplied with the things they needed. The Black schools learned to do more with less. The Black community was so tight-knit that those I interviewed who were students during Schlagle’s tenure were not aware of the turmoil going on in the city not far from their homes. Dr. Kirksey mentioned her parents attended meetings about segregation in the local schools, but she remembers getting together with friends while her parents attended the meetings. The Black community buffered their young people while at the same time they prepared them to interact and work outside of the pod. Dr. Kirksey said her teacher told the students that she was preparing them to keep up with the “big boys,” and the teachers in the community did just that, despite the segregation in the district.

Black teachers were expected to work in Black schools only. This limited their job options but offered the very best teachers for students in the community. The northeast portion of the city was strong and resilient. However, when Blacks moved outside of the pod, Schlagle changed the boundary lines to extend the pod and keep schools segregated. And again, the Black community remained strong and continued their legacy of excellence. A quote from a student in *The Sumner Story* gives insight into this segregation:

The segregated public school systems of Kansas City, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri, seemed to offer a quality education, but they were a far cry from being “equal” to the schools white students attended. Consider, for example, that Wyandotte High School in Kansas City, Kansas, that whites attended offered courses in German, Italian, Russian, Spanish, French, Latin, and Chinese, whereas Sumner High School that blacks attended only offered Spanish, French, and Latin. Wyandotte also offered swimming, golf, tennis, archery, softball, baseball, football, and basketball and fielded teams in those sports. Sumner, on the other hand, only offered swimming, football, and basketball. Wyandotte had two gymnasiums and two swimming pools; Sumner had one gym and one swimming pool. The comparison clearly reveals that the course offerings and the facilities were separate but not equal. Notwithstanding these inequities, the segregated schools were an important part of our community. Elmer Jackson III, Class of 1958.¹¹⁴

Under Schlagle’s leadership, enrollment continued to grow, which caused the district to expand. As superintendent, he had to maintain the facilities in the district while updating them to be more modern, safe learning environments. Under Schlagle’s leadership, the district remained segregated as viable plans for integration were left to his successor.

O. L. Plucker

O. L. Plucker had to deal with more of the same lawsuits regarding segregated schools and racial issues in the district. He had to answer to the courts and abide by court orders regarding segregated schools. He responded by closing the two secondary schools in the Black community and busing the students out of the pod. Plucker was faced with the need to get white families to send their students to schools in the urban core, the northeast part of the city. He chose to create a magnet school in place of Sumner High School. Sumner Academy was created with a new mascot, new colors, new teachers, and new curriculums. Students who met the entrance criteria received invitations to enroll. The courts approved the plan, and the district was integrated. Plucker described the changes:

As a part of the closing of the conversion of the Sumner High School Building to the new Academy, redrawn attendance zones were drafted for all of the senior high

¹¹⁴ Bonner, *The Sumner Story*, 61.

schools, Wyandotte, Washington, the new J.C. Harmon and the new F.L. Schlagle, to absorb the Sumner students effective in 1978. The Northeast Junior high school was closed in 1977 and its attendance zone was divided into three parts attached to Rosedale, Argentine, and Arrowhead Junior high schools. Bus transportation was provided for all students living more than one mile from the school. Substantially all of the former Sumner and Northeast students and all the new Sumner Academy students were transported by bus.¹¹⁵

The integration plan created inequity in the district. Plucker developed an academic program that was more rigorous than those in the other high schools. Sumner Academy enrollment was now determined by set criteria, invitation, or testing; all students did not have the same educational opportunities, although they were in the same district. Sumner Academy became an award-winning high school like its predecessor, but as Rev. Bachus mentioned in his interview, he believed that all the high schools should have had the same type of academic rigor. The closing of Sumner High School and the creation of Sumner Academy ruptured the community, and the trauma is still apparent in the Black residents of the city.

Sumner High School Leadership

During the majority of the 84-year period with three superintendents, there were four principals at Sumner High School who offered stability throughout this same timeframe. Indeed, their presence created stability at a time when there was great racial turmoil in the district. The principals, J. E. Patterson, J. M. Marquess, John A. Hodge, and S. H. Thompson, provided leadership to Black students in a segregated system.

Each of these Black men were highly educated for the time period. Mr. Patterson, who was the principal from 1905 to 1908, had the challenge of getting the school started with

¹¹⁵ Plucker, "Four Decades of Segregation," 33.

a small faculty of three teachers and 80 students.¹¹⁶ He implemented a college preparatory program to equal that being offered at the white high school. Under his leadership, he and the teachers became a part of the community. They joined the pod, as Ms. Smith called it. Everyone lived in the same community and supported one another. In 1908 John Miller Marquess became principal. He expanded programs and oversaw the expansion of the building to accommodate the growth.¹¹⁷ Evening programs were added to offer more educational opportunities to the Black community. Mr. Marquess left in 1916 to lead at the college level. *The Sumner Story* records that he resigned to accept the presidency of Langston University in Oklahoma.¹¹⁸ Under the leadership of John A. Hodge from 1916 until 1951, the school continued to grow, and its good reputation spread. *The Sumner Story* stated:

Principal J. A. Hodge was greatly surprised to find so many enrolling for the Freshman Class....It was his opinion that Kansas City, Kansas had ceased to receive people from other states lying immediately to the south but this is not true. People are still flocking northward, as shown by the information cards pupils are required to fill out. Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas are states sending the largest numbers.¹¹⁹

Mr. Hodge adopted a college curriculum for the school. He added more training programs and a junior college within the high school for graduates who were interested.¹²⁰ Mr. Solomon H. Thompson served as principal from 1951 to 1972. He built upon the high academic standards and was known for his strong discipline policies.¹²¹

Each of these men had the same goal: to make sure the students were well educated so they could be successful in their community. During all of the turmoil of the 84 years,

¹¹⁶ Bonner, *The Sumner Story*.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 41.

¹²⁰ Bonner, *The Sumner Story*.

¹²¹ Ibid.

these men, along with their staffs, offered students at Sumner High School steady leadership. The school staff and the parents of the Black students created a strong foundation for the young people that helped them maintain high academic standards through all of the changes that were occurring in KCKPS.

The Absence of Care among District Leadership

The voices and the research give evidence of the absence of caring from district leadership during the tenures of M.E. Pearson, F.L. Schlagle, and O.L. Plucker. Each of these leaders made decisions that were meant primarily to satisfy the white community. Indeed, they considered the comforts of only one side and made decisions to create what they hoped would be “stability” for white families. As mentioned in the study by Mr. McConnell, desegregation and integration moved in only one direction, with Black students and families losing their sense of stability as they were bused outside of their own neighborhoods. This disruption of the stability within the Black community continues to exist today. The Black community that once was in Kansas City, Kansas during the time of this study no longer exists. So, a caring leadership that took into account *all* of the students in the district, was severely lacking during the 84 years of this study.

An Abundance of Care by Black School Leaders

The lack of care exemplified by the district leadership is magnified when juxtaposed with the leadership that took place at the building level in the segregated schools during the time of this study. Leadership by the principals and teachers in the Black schools exemplified institutional caring; they built relationships with their students both as teachers and as members of their community. Thus, Black school leadership in the segregated city demonstrated community of caring because they were a part of the caring community that

nourished and supported the Black students in the community and the district. It is important to note that the district had two very distinct examples of leadership: One that was focused on continuing a legacy of white supremacy and segregation through practice and policy, and another that took into account all of the needs of the students and their families.

Current Status of Kansas City, Kansas and KCKPS

KCKPS has continued to evolve since 1986. The integration plans Plucker put into place laid the groundwork for integration in the district. According to interviewee Mr. James White, desegregation and integration in the district was not complete “until after 2000.”¹²² The real cause of district integration was the changing demographics that came with time. Over time, the demographics of the city changed, which changed the enrollment in the district. Laws and policies also changed, which opened the school district to all races and cultures.

Kansas City, Kansas in Wyandotte County currently has a population of 152,945.¹²³ The city is 56.9% white, 23.26% Black, 9.65% Other Race, 4.92% Asian, Two or more races 4.55%, Native American .48%, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander .23%.¹²⁴ The city elected its first Black mayor in its history in 2021.¹²⁵ The average household income in Kansas City is \$57,202, with a poverty rate of 19.78%.¹²⁶

KCKPS is the largest school district in the city and the fifth largest in the state of Kansas.¹²⁷ The district’s enrollment is 22,245 students in 10 preschool sites, 28 elementary

¹²² James White, interviewed by Yolanda Thompson, November 12, 2021.

¹²³ “2022 World Population by Country,” accessed March 14, 2022, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/>.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ “Tyrone Garner,” Unified Government of Wyandotte County and Kansas City, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://www.wycokck.org/Government/Elected-officials/mayor-Biography>.

¹²⁶ “2022 World Population by Country.”

¹²⁷ “KCKPS at-a-Glance,” Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools, October 13, 2021, <https://www.kckps.org/kckps-at-a-glance>.

schools, 7 middle schools, 5 high schools, and 4 alternative schools.¹²⁸ These students represent many cultures and nationalities: 55% of the students are Hispanic, 24% are Black, 9% are white, 6% Asian, and 6% Pacific Islander, American Indian, and Native Alaskan.¹²⁹ Its diversity is one of the strengths of the district. The district is so diverse that all schools are integrated and share the richness of the different cultures in the city. The district has had three superintendents of color in the last four years. The current superintendent is the first Black female to hold the position. The school board is made up of five Black women, one white woman, and one Hispanic man.

School leadership has also changed over the years. All of the preschool principals are white; there are 11 elementary school principals of color, nine of whom are Black and two Hispanic. At the middle school level, five of the six principals are Black. Two principals at the high school level are Black women. Considering the history of the district, this is a major change, because there were no principals of diversity at any schools but those that were labeled Black schools. The district has implemented a diversity equity and inclusion department to offer training and assistance for all district employees as demographics continue to change and become even more diverse.

Academic programming has also evolved to offer more college and career opportunities to all students in the district. The goal of the district is, “Each students exits high school prepared for college and careers in a global society; at every level, performance is on track and on time for success.”¹³⁰ The district, although it started segregated, has worked to level options for all students. Currently it has implemented academic

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

programming to address the so-called “student achievement gap” for all students. Because of segregated schools and other unfair conditions that are a part of American history Gloria

Ladson-Billings calls the achievement gap an education debt.¹³¹ She wrote:

Our focus on the achievement gap is akin to a focus on the budget deficit, but what is actually happening to African American and Latina/o students is really more like the national debt. We do not have an achievement gap; we have an education debt.”¹³²

When we begin looking at the construction and compilation of what I have termed the education debt, we can better understand why an achievement gap is a logical outcome. I am arguing that the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society have created an education debt.¹³³

Scholars in the history of education, . . . have documented the legacy of educational inequities in the United States. Those inequities initially were formed around race, class, and gender. Gradually, some of the inequities began to recede, but clearly they persist in the realm of race.¹³⁴

I use Ladson-Billings’ words as a foundation to describe the solution KCKPS developed to address the education debt at the high school level. Every high school has advanced programming to give students opportunities. Every high school student has the opportunity to earn college credit and/or technical certificates before graduating high school. These programs help to get students who were historically behind a chance to attain credentials needed to create a successful post-high school life for themselves and their families. And because Kansas City, Kansas has a poverty rate of 19.78% that includes students and their families, the district pays for all the tuition and books for any college and vocational courses that high school students enroll in, thereby taking the concern and weight of tuition off of families.

¹³¹ Gloria Ladson-Billings, “From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools,” *Educational Researcher* 35, no. 7 (2006): 3–12, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x035007003>.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 5.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this study, I referred to Leiker's (2002) statement calling the state of Kansas racist. The history of KCKPS has paralleled the decisions of the state and the nation that were racially motivated and not in favor of non-white cultures. Through all of the changes throughout history that slowed the educational progress of the Black community in Kansas City, Kansas, the "pod" was the stability in the city. When the decisions of Pearson, Schlagle, and Plucker disrupted the district, the "pod" protected Black students and continued to provide them with an outstanding education.

However, when the federal courts stepped in and declared that KCKPS was still maintaining segregated schools and mandated that immediate desegregation and integration plans be implemented, the "pod" was destroyed. Although it is no longer as it once was, the spirit and support of those who grew up in that era still have the "pod" mentality of supporting, encouraging, and telling their story. Through this study I hope that I have made them proud by telling another piece of their story so that the history of the schools and the community in northeast Kansas City, Kansas in Wyandotte County lives on.

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VITA

Yolanda Kaye Thompson was born in Kansas City, Kansas. After completing her formative education in KCKPS, she started her undergraduate degree at Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas. She later transferred to the University of Kansas and earned her B.S. in Education in 1994 with emphasis in comprehensive social studies. She later returned the University of Kansas, earning her M.S. in Education in 1999. Continuing her education, she went on to earn a M.A. in Education Administration in 2005 from the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

While completing her education, Mrs. Thompson has spent over 20 years in the field of education as a teacher and in administration in Turner USD 202, Notre Dame de Sion High School, and Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools.

Mrs. Thompson enrolled in graduate school once again in UMKC's Interdisciplinary Ph.D. program with a desire to improve in her professional craft as an education administrator and instructional leader. Learning research-based educational practices is a passion for Mrs. Thompson so she can help students achieve academic success. Upon completion of the Doctor of Philosophy degree, Mrs. Thompson plans to continue working in the field of education.