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ABSTRACT:

Many inner-city public high schools in 2016 face particular challenges with regard to funding, segregation and increasing competition for promising students from charter schools. These trends developed over decades, and can be seen especially in the case of John F. Kennedy High School in Richmond, California. Once one of the top public high schools in the state of California, Kennedy High has now for two decades been one of its worst. By examining the reasons for its initial success and its decline, this story hopes to draw lessons for the future.

SOURCES

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BOOKS

Busing and Backlash, Lillian Rubin

The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in WWII, Marilyn S. Johnson

Just Schools: The Idea of Racial Equality in American Education, David L. Kirp

Kennedy High School: Fall of an Educational Camelot

How a once-great urban high school fell into decline, and what it says about the future of public education.

By Knowles Adkisson

“The center was not holding. It was a country of bankruptcy notices and public-auction announcements and commonplace reports of casual killings and misplaced children and abandoned homes and vandals who misspelled even the four-letter words they scrawled. It was a country in which families routinely disappeared, trailing bad checks and repossession papers. Adolescents drifted from city to torn city, sloughing off both the past and the future as snakes shed their skins, children who were never taught and would never now learn the games that had held the society together. People were missing. Children were

missing. Parents were missing. Those left behind filed desultory missing-persons reports, then moved on themselves.”

In late September 1967, readers opened the *Saturday Evening Post* to writer Joan Didion’s alarming report from the heart of San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury district, where more than 100,000 young people had flocked during the summer in search of enlightenment.

Later it would be known as the Summer of Love, looked back on as a seminal moment in the hippie movement that challenged so many old conceptions of order. But in the ranks of San Francisco’s pilgrims Didion saw something far darker. It was there where the “social hemorrhaging” was the worst. She found teenage runaways, some as young as 14 and 15, living in abandoned parking garages and getting high. Some had given birth to children of their own, taking on the responsibilities of parenthood without any of the guides who might have taught them how to fulfill them.

Had she ventured across the San Francisco Bay, Didion would have found a different story. In Richmond, an industrial town north of Oakland, a rising generation of youth was also coming of high school age. They were the sons and daughters of African-American laborers who had ventured from the South during World War II to work in naval shipyards, feeding an explosion of population that saw the city quintuple in size from 20,000 in 1940 to nearly 100,000 just three years later.

Against the backdrop of race riots in Los Angeles and Detroit the year before that left more than a thousand wounded and entire neighborhoods in tatters, Richmond was experiencing its own challenges. A controversial school unification measure had thrown together heavily black Richmond with whiter, more conservative communities. A liberal school board had initiated desegregation of the city’s schools through busing, provoking a backlash among white, working-class conservatives.

But amid the turmoil of that fall of 1967, a unique experiment in secondary education flowered, almost as by accident. John F. Kennedy High School opened its doors to a student body and faculty inspired by the possibilities of a decade that began with so much promise.

The new institution was to be a model for California and the country. It would have comprehensive education, offering classes in aerospace, biotech and computers to college-bound students, as well as vocational programs such as auto body, food service and retail. A highly qualified faculty was assembled, comprised of energetic, young teachers educated at the local UC-Berkeley, veterans who attended college on the G.I. Bill, and women who in later years might have been lawyers or doctors instead.

Motivated African-American and Hispanic students from two-parent households came to school determined to go to college. They were joined by the children of doctors, lawyers and professors who lived in the surrounding hills and believed in the promise of integration.

Just as the slain president had urged Americans ask what they could do for their country, the students and teachers of John F. Kennedy High School would learn from one another. In doing so, they hoped to produce bold and innovative leaders for the future.

“Everyone wanted to judge people on merit rather than skin color,” former teacher Mike Peritz remembered. “[The president] said let’s go to the damn moon. Robert Kennedy, Sargent Shriver. JFK took off his hat in the rain at his inauguration, played touch football.

“So let’s just call it the Camelot effect, you know?”

For roughly two decades after it opened, former teachers and students say, the school served as a unique example of a successful public school in an urban environment. Dozens of students went on to educations at Ivy League universities, hundreds to local state colleges, and others went directly from high school into manufacturing and food service jobs with middle-class wages and benefits.

But as time went on, imperceptibly at first, things began to fall apart. Cutbacks in public education funding, waning enthusiasm for integration, and the hollowing out of the inner city through a waning economy and drug-fueled violence all ensnared the school. By the turn of the century, JFK High School would be one of the worst in the state of California, a position it has struggled to escape.

Today graduates struggle to explain what once made Kennedy special. Even more difficult to untangle is the thorny question of what went so wrong. The high-minded ideals of its founding days long ago crashed and shattered on the sobering rocks of reality. But in its rise and fall, perhaps John F. Kennedy High School still has something to teach the country about the way forward.

Mr. Mitchell goes to Washington

Richard Mitchell, 17, waited in the grand auditorium, relieved. He also felt confident, and stylish. Dressed in a green tweed suit, with the wide collars and flared pants, he had just delivered a speech before several hundred of the country’s finest high school debaters at the 1969 National Speech Tournament. Out of thousands of contestants across the country, Mitchell had made it to the final round in original oratory at the Lisner Auditorium on the campus of George Washington University.

The speech had gone well—most thought his chances of being named the top orator in the country were excellent. Titled, “Why Did They Kill Dr. King?,” the speech was a

passionate argument in favor of non-violent, direct action to effect changes in civil rights. The assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy little more than a year before seemed to create an urge among Americans to find meaning in their deaths. Mitchell had seen it first-hand. His speech received standing ovations wherever he went, first in debate competitions for John F. Kennedy High School in the San Francisco Bay area, before civic and business groups, and now at the national finals for speech and debate.

Now, the final verdict on his speech was in the hands of three judges. Mitchell was standing with his classmates when his coach, passionate young Brooklyn native named David Dansky, wandered up muttering furiously. It was about one of the judges, a woman from Mississippi.

“As soon as I heard where she was from, I knew first place was in jeopardy,” Mitchell said.

After the final speeches, Dansky had wandered into the judges’ room. As he passed by a group of people including the judge, she casually remarked, “No nigger is gonna win the national title if I’m the judge.”

All they could do was wait, now. As the final results were announced, it appeared Dansky’s fears were justified. Mitchell had come in first one two judges’ ballots; third on another. Through a tiebreaker, he received second place.

While Dansky never forgot about the slights suffered by his student on the trip, Mitchell seemed to give little thought to the snub. To him, old ways of thinking did little to dampen the incredible experience of traveling to D.C. The trip had been funded through hundreds of donations that rolled in after a clip of his speech was played back home on the local news. It was evidence, to Mitchell, that his words had made a difference.

A manager at Macy’s in San Francisco had provided him with a complimentary wardrobe for the trip.

“When I came back I took the trophy over to Macy’s, to the general manager, and said, ‘Well, here’s what I brought back,’” Mitchell recalled. “That was really an amazing experience for a 17-year-old.”

In truth, it was not only the trip that was a culmination of events that lined up just right for the Harvard-bound youth. Starting from his birth in post-war Richmond, through his education in integrated primary schools and finally his experience at Kennedy, Mitchell always seemed to be in the right place in the right time.

His parents grew up on farms in east Texas, during the Depression. His mother was orphaned at 12. His father’s mother also died when he was 12, leaving six children behind. He worked dozens of jobs to help his father support the family, driving a

logging truck in rural Texas, then as a short order cook and chauffeur in Houston. In 1942 they lit out for California, joining the long caravan of Arkies, Okies and Texans who traveled by car and horse and wagon seeking work. They ended up in Richmond, just north of Oakland and across the bay from San Francisco, where the industrialist Henry Kaiser had recently secured a government contract to build battle ships. A crushing demand for labor had transformed what had been a sleepy port city of 23,600 in 1940 to a throbbing madhouse of more than 93,700 by 1942. The influx of people overwhelmed the city's housing stock. The Navy built temporary war housing to house workers, while others slept in movie theaters during their time off.

Pre-War Richmond and post-war Richmond would be two completely different cities. Unlike oil boomtowns, the wartime prospectors stayed.

Most of the workers were unskilled black and white laborers from the Midwest and the South, who brought the difficult racial history of their region with them. In addition to men, thousands of women worked in the shipyards, known as "Rosie the Riveters." Mitchell's mother was one of them. Both of Mitchell's parents found work as welders in the shipyards. When the war ended, nearly every one of those workers was laid off overnight. Over the next decade, city leaders attempted to get them to go back home by demolishing the temporary wartime housing stock. The newcomers were referred to derisively as "Okies, Arkies and darkies," Mitchell's mother told him.

But a combination of factors led them to stay.

The rural whites from Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma, and elsewhere took advantage of federal subsidies to buy homes in single-family tract housing, modeled after Levittown, New York, that was springing up in new outlying communities that were going up north of Richmond with names like Pinole, Hercules and El Sobrante. The cheap housing also enabled them to move away from the African-American workers, self-segregating in the ways they had grown up knowing in the south.

Black workers had their own reasons. California was far from utopia. Redlining and blockbusting determined where they could live, and the unions for longshoremen and construction in the East Bay effectively banned them from joining even though they had picked up trades while working in the shipyards during wartime. But in comparison with the Jim Crow South, social mobility was far greater.

Things might still have been untenable for African-Americans in Richmond, but for two developments. First, it took the city about ten years to tear down the housing where they had lived during the war, and during that period, flight of whites to the new suburban communities left housing available in the city. And while tens of thousands of workers faced immediate unemployment when the shipyards closed, the growing aggression of the Soviet Union in the late 1940s prompted a major investment in federal spending at local military bases. African-American tradesmen

who were shut out of the local unions went to work by the thousands in the East Bay for the federal government, supporting a black middle class through the prime of their careers.

“Had it not been for the federal government, you know, these guys would not have been able to use the trades they developed during the war,” Mitchell said. “So I can never get too angry at the Russians. They began to misbehave and started the Cold War, and then the Cold War’s what kept the shipyards open. And African-Americans were able to have stability.”

In 1951 Mitchell was born, the second of five children his parents would have over the next ten years. A few years later, his father left his job as a short-order cook on the railroad to work at the Mare Island Naval Base. The family moved in 1954 from wartime housing to South 37th street in Richmond, in a majority white neighborhood. In October of 1957 the Soviets did Mitchell and his siblings another favor, launching Sputnik into orbit in October of 1957. When panic set in that America was falling behind the USSR in education, more than a billion dollars flooded into American schools through the National Defense Education Act. A student loan structure was created that would allow millions of Baby Boomers to attend college in record numbers.

From 1954, when the Mitchells moved in to the house on South 37th Street, to 1966, when he started high school, Richard Mitchell attended integrated schools with whites, blacks and Asians. This was by chance rather than any high-minded social decree.

“The reason we didn’t experience segregation because we were in what I would refer to as a block-busted community,” Mitchell said. “What happened was, the real estate industry was getting rich on fear.

Along Mitchell’s street and elsewhere in Richmond, realtors made big profits by scaring white homeowners with whispers that the arrival of blacks would devalue their homes. Then they turned around and sold those homes to black buyers at inflated rates. By the time he got to high school, the scare tactics had seen his neighborhood change from 90 percent white to 90 percent black. In the interim, though, Mitchell grew up in an integrated neighborhood and integrated schools.

And those schools had funding. Although it would never recover its reputation after a crime outbreak during World War II as a gritty, low-income city, there were many manufacturing jobs in Richmond. The Standard Oil refinery, later Chevron, employed more than five thousand workers. Under California law at the time, schools were funded by property taxes, and the industrial activity filled Richmond’s coffers with property tax revenue.

The boom in population of Richmond, and the industrial local tax base, led to a 1964 bond measure that renovated several local high schools and built other new ones,

including a place that would outperform all expectations: John F. Kennedy High School.

Golden Years at Kennedy

When Mitchell joined the inaugural class of Kennedy High School as a sophomore in 1967, he stepped into a world more integrated, both racially and economically, than perhaps any public high school in the U.S. at the time. The sons and daughters of skilled African-American tradesmen walked the halls with students whose parents worked for Bank of America in San Francisco, and oversaw academic departments at the University of California, Berkeley.

But how did this come to be? It helps to understand where people in the area lived, and why. Beginning south of Oakland, a range of hills extends north, through Berkeley to unincorporated Richmond. Historically, the wealthy (and, usually, the white) live at the top of the hills, with home prices declining and the skin tone of the inhabitants growing darker the closer one gets to the water, in the “flatlands.” This racial and economic dichotomy turns in a flash when the hills bottom out at San Pablo Boulevard, a north-south road that separates El Cerrito, Kensington and the rest of the hills from most of the low-lying City of Richmond.

In 1967, Kensington and El Cerrito boasted some of the wealthiest and well-educated citizens in the Bay Area. Cosmopolitan liberals from these hills were elected to the district school board in 1958. With integration the issue of the day, they put their ideals into action by pushing a consolidation plan in 1964 of Richmond with the more conservative, working-class bedroom of communities to the north of El Sobrante, Pinole and Hercules.

Though the stated reason for consolidation was to save administrative costs by combining multiple districts, the ability to integrate Richmond’s black population through a larger number of predominantly white schools was not far from the board’s mind. As one board member later said, “It’s one thing to integrate schools with a 25 percent black population, another when the blacks are 40 percent and rising.”

The conservatives to the north revolted in 1968 at the suggestion of two-way busing and voted the liberal board out. But a voluntary busing plan survived, and at Kennedy it brought two busloads of students every day down from the hills.

“You had some of the poorest kids going to school with some of the richest kids,” said Mike Peritz, who taught at the school when it opened until his retirement in TK. “You had kids from the hills, you had kids from the flatlands.”

That mixture of the student body was crucial. The high-achieving kids from the hills, who were mostly Jewish with some Asians, joined with some of the better students from the flatlands to create a strong top of the school and a small but relevant

middle ground, balancing out the large group of students who struggled due to their low-income backgrounds.

They were attracted not only by their parents' sense of duty, but a cornucopia of educational offerings at Kennedy. The school was like a small college. Some courses were team-taught by teachers. Students operated on block scheduling, with students taking eight or nine classes that met twice a week, leaving large blocks of time open during the day to study, talk or work on extracurricular projects. There was a 24-seat restaurant built inside the school, as part of a catering program taught by Peritz called FEAST. Educators traveled from other states and countries to observe the new food service model.

Students received training at events outside of school. At one point, local caterers complained to the superintendent that the program was hurting their businesses.

"We were doing bar mitzvahs in Oakland and weddings at Lake Tahoe," Peritz said. "You know, just throw the kids in the van and move the food. A lot of church dinners at the elementary school. Spaghetti dinners. Retirements."

Clubs flourished. A glance at the 1969 yearbook reveals clubs for science, journalism, Kiwanis, photography, business, a capella and pep band. There were African-American, Asian-American and Mexican-American youth organizations, Spanish Club and German Club. One of Richard Mitchell's teachers started a class in Mandarin.

The proliferation of clubs fed into efforts by the students and the faculty to work through the heightened racial and political tensions then roiling the country. There was a Kennedy interracial conference, where students from other schools were invited to take part in discussions. In drama class the students put on impromptu plays, assuming opposite racial identities during role-playing.

"We really did have a lot of student energy going into trying to understand people across racial lines," Mitchell said. "The students wanted to do it. So the teachers that we had, those young energetic teachers, many of them coming out of UC-Berkeley, they were up to the task."

Perhaps the most prominent program at the school was Dansky's program for speech and debate, also known as forensics. Only 29 years old when the school opened, Dansky energetically recruited for the team. He searched incoming students transcripts "for any sign beyond scores that they would like oral communication." He chased students down in the hallway, collaring Mitchell the first time he heard him speaking as a junior.

"We would get 20, 30, 40 teams [of two students each], fill up a bus and go, because I really believed that speech and debate was the best activity a student could possibly do in high school, in terms of learning to organize and analyze," Dansky said.

In 1972, three years after Richard Mitchell finished second in the country in oratory, Kennedy High won its first state championship in speech and debate under Dansky. From then until 1988, when Dansky retired, the team would never finish lower than third in the state. The extracurricular program became a draw for the school.

“Here we are in a lower economic school district, and Dansky had us trained at such a high level,” said Joni Hiramoto, who graduated in 1979. “He said if we work really hard, we can be up there with the best of them. We respected [opponents], but he gave us the confidence that we could be as good as any of the schools that we ran into. Back in the day, Kennedy was really feared.”

Hiramoto, Mitchell and others such as Richard Gonzales, who would go on to work for National Public Radio, were part of a pipeline of Kennedy students who attended Harvard. The speech and debate program sparked the attention of the Ivy League schools.

“Nobody had gotten into Harvard from Kennedy, and then in one year four got in,” Hiramoto said. “So Harvard started sitting up and taking notice. The recruiters started coming around and asking Mr. Dansky, ‘Who’s a good candidate this year to go to Harvard?’ Every year somebody would get in, usually from the debate team.”

Integration helped the students from the flatlands, according to Gonzales.

“[We were] in the same classes with kids from [the hills], and we’re competing with them,” he said. “And they’re learning about us and we’re learning about them. Great preparation for college. I hate to use the word, because it sounds pretty corny, but in many respects it was pretty groovy. We were helping to invent diversity. And a lot of us knew it.”

Not all students went on to Ivy League educations, of course. But a strong manufacturing sector in Richmond enabled many students to gain jobs right out of high school.

Warehousing, chemical and research companies had sprouted up in the shorefront areas vacated by the military after the war. Safeway and United Grocers together employed several thousand workers at large distribution complexes that shipped goods to grocery stores throughout Northern California. U.S. Peroxygen, herbicide manufacturer Stauffer Chemical and Airco Industrial Gases were local chemical companies. Rheem Industries produced water heaters and boilers, Georgia Pacific did paper products, and Sealy Mattress had a facility.

Many of the jobs were unionized. Ron Teninty started working at the Safeway distribution plant in 1967, two years after graduating from Richmond High School. In 1969, he became a steward at the Teamsters Local 316, a particularly “militant” chapter of the national union that represented roughly 5,000 workers in the area. Its

aggressive bargaining resulted in contracts that often set standards for other chapters around the country, he said.

“These were what you’d call middle class jobs,” Teninty said. “They paid middle class wages, they had health and insurance plans, they had paid leave. You got a job at Airco, [or] one of these larger facilities, it was a good job. Plus you worked a certain amount of overtime, you could make some decent money.”

Most of the workers lived in Richmond or surrounding communities, Teninty said, and “the vast majority” owned their own homes.

“You have this whole concept where money gets re-filtered and re-filtered through the local economy when you have benefits like these,” Teninty said. “Regular dental, orthodontic care. We had people going to restaurants, bars, movie theaters. There was a lot of money going through the economy, and being recycled. Not to mention the grocery stores themselves.”

The companies provided a base of local middle-class employment, a key necessity for social cohesion and two-family households. They also offered a direct pipeline to a middle-class job to local teenagers right out of high school. And while residential property values in Richmond were never very high, the property taxes from local industry were sizeable, and, since schools were majority locally funding during that time, local schools such as Kennedy reaped the benefits.

Turbulent 1970s, and Proposition 13

The advantageous tax situation in Richmond was first thrown into doubt in 1971, when education activists, upset about inequities between districts with low and high property tax revenues, took the matter to court. At the time, the state offered a basic amount of funding and each district set property taxes to meet their needs. But districts with poor tax bases had to raise their property taxes much higher to provide adequate schools; and in many cases the inequities were still startling. In *Serrano v. Priest*, the California Supreme Court found the funding structure unconstitutional under the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. A follow-up decision in 1976 required the state to close the gap between districts within six years.

This the state did by establishing revenue limits for each school district based on historical property tax revenue, and then contributing larger cost of living increases to low-wealth districts than high-wealth districts. The decision effectively severed the connection between a community’s property tax dollars and its local schools, instead routing them to the state. In a tragic irony, according to a 1997 Little Hoover Commission report, these effects landed heavily on poor and minority students in urban areas with high tax assessments – just the students the Serrano decision was supposed to help.

Before school districts had much time to adjust to the new reality, a second drastic change shook California public policy. A surge in home prices in the late 1970s began to hit California homeowners heavily in the pocketbook, when property tax bills grew higher every year due to the higher housing assessments (based on market value), even as homeowners' income did not keep pace. A petition drive led by anti-tax activists Howard Jarvis and Paul Gann resulted in Proposition 13, which limited property tax assessments from rising more than two percent per year, except when a property changed ownership.

The policy dramatically reduced the property tax revenues collected by the state, and in time, schools suffered budget cuts. Together with *Serrano*, which in effect prevented districts from spending local property taxes on local schools, districts such as Kennedy's found their destinies out of their control.

Kennedy felt the effects of the law overnight. The district immediately cut 11 percent of its budget and laid off 400 teachers. Included in the cuts was \$500,000 for the voluntary busing that had carried, among others, the two school busloads of students from the hills to Kennedy for roughly ten years. Despite a protest of roughly 75 parents outside the district headquarters, the enthusiasm for voluntary busing had waned to the point the conservative school board did not feel pressured to backtrack on the decision.

"Busing doesn't work," Board president Virgil Gay said. "It doesn't help anyone achieve better, it is wasting money which could be better used elsewhere, and it does not bring about the social utopia which liberals envisioned."

The Decline of Kennedy

The initial cuts from Prop. 13 marked the first cracks in the template that had worked so well for Kennedy to that point. The school continued to send kids to good colleges. But the squeeze was on. From 1970 to 1980, the Kennedy faculty had shrunk from 74 teachers to 65. Gym classes became a problem when the lack of a site supervisor to monitor the boys' locker room led to fights and disruptions. A dispiriting note from the math department enclosed in a three-year progress report in 1980 captures the mood of the time.

"We have involved students in the cleaning of the student desks but are presently unable to do anything about sweeping due to unavailability of brooms," the math faculty wrote.

The initial cuts were just the start of a structural deficit, and slowing population growth led to declining enrollment district-wide. By June 1982, the district faced a \$5.4 million shortfall, and laid off 57 high school teachers. Among them were six Kennedy teachers, four in the English department alone. By then, the Kennedy faculty were resigned to the deteriorating conditions.

“It is just a financial matter and things are probably going to get worse,” drama and English instructor Diana McClelland told the school’s student newspaper.

“Whatever happens, just happens,” German teacher Ruth Reible said. “I do not concern myself with the tiring bureaucracy.”

Truancy rates crept up at Kennedy, and test scores declined. An uptick in violence in the area prompted concerns about security on the campus, which was partially but not entirely fenced. Parents from the hills in El Cerrito and Kensington, especially those with children had attended integrated middle schools and were slated to attend Kennedy, began to want out.

It was around this time that a new K-8 system of private schools opened in the hills, attracting young students from families determined to opt out of the district entirely. One of the first cracks in the public school system in the hills, it marked the beginning of a trend in which the district would be increasingly forced to compete for the district’s best students. Other parents petitioned for transfers within the public school system, citing difficulty for their children with “psychological adjustment” should they attend Kennedy.

To David Dansky, the drive smacked of irrational fears stoked in part by racism.

“The same student that did just fine with other black and Asian students in middle school, couldn’t possibly go to high school with them,” Dansky said.

Searching for a way to halt the steady decline from budget cuts and the flight of the middle- and upper-class white students, Dansky and a cadre of parents submitted a proposal to the school board: turn Kennedy into a magnet school.

It would be the district’s only magnet school, a place for the “academically interested.” Modeled after a high school in Sacramento, students who wished to attend Kennedy under the plan would be required to maintain a C average or above to remain at the school. Parents would be required to sign written agreements stating that they would take part actively in the school and attend one-on-one teacher conferences if their children flagged on their homework. Students who fell below the minimum grade requirement would be transferred. The school would have a closed campus; students could not leave during the school day.

But the plan ran into opposition from parents in other parts of the district, who worried that the new setup would disperse problem students into their schools and recruit their best students out. It eventually failed.

Ironically, as the school’s academic decline began, its athletic programs were hitting their apex. In 1984 the Kennedy Eagles beat archrival El Cerrito High for a North Coast Section championship in a hotly contested game at the Oakland Coliseum remembered forever in local lore as the “Soul Bowl.” The team featured two players,

Terry Obee and Rod Moore, who would later play in the NFL, and a total of five who received Division One college football scholarships. For the rest of the decade and through at least 1992, Kennedy would send at least one player every year to a Division One college football program on scholarship.

Former players from that era remember their time in high school fondly. Football games were an event in the community, broadcast on local television and radio, and as many as four and five thousand fans attended big matchups such as Homecoming. The spirit of the school, which had always had a robust student life with clubs and activities, also remained intact.

“It was a lot of things socially, and positive that you could get involved with when I went to school here,” said Rae Jackson, a former Kennedy player who attended from 1984 to 1987 and now teaches at the school.

Students started their own fraternities, Jackson said, and there was break-dancing in the hallways, lunchtime dances and step shows on the open-air Kennedy mall. Athletes felt no stigma taking part in academic clubs.

“You had the debate team, you had the chess club, you had the computer club, I mean the list goes on and on and on of activities that you could find your niche and fit in,” he said. “I used to mess around with the guys in the Chess club.”

But even while a diminished staff kept the original spirit of the school intact, gathering storm clouds began to hover more ominously over the school. In addition to the school district’s funding problems, the city of Richmond began to face unwelcome economic changes. Manufacturing losses, a nationwide trend, began to hit Richmond. A roof manufacturing plant that employed 130 workers shut down in July 1984, followed the next month by the Sealy mattress plant where 87 employees were let go.

At the same time, Richmond was facing problems with a new drug, crack cocaine. Inexpensive and highly addictive, crack was tearing through poor urban communities across the country. A dilapidated apartment complex called Kennedy Manor directly across the street from the school’s football field became a hotspot for the new drug activity, as well as a nearby park. Because the drug was largely sold outdoors, on street corners, gun violence associated with drug deals began to break out in public, near the school. It was not uncommon to hear gunshots in the area.

A student-operated donut stand outside Dansky’s classroom that helped fund his debate team was robbed three times in the mid-80s by teenagers who had wandered in off the street. Following the third incident, after he had chased down and confronted the thief, Dansky received a warning from a local police officer.

“[He] said, ‘Mr. Dansky, you stop fighting with these kids,’” Dansky recalls. “He said, ‘They’re high on crack cocaine, and they’d kill you and not even know about it, not

even care about it. I'm sure the school district would put a nice brass plaque on the wall that says, 'David Dansky died here defending his forensics donut stand.' And he said two nights later somebody would climb over the fence and steal the sign, sell it for five bucks."

At school district headquarters, officials took action. Unhappy with the declining performance overall of the district, the school board fired the superintendent in 1986. His replacement would change things forever.

The Infamous Walter Marks

In an effort to shake things up, the board hired an outsider with a reputation for innovative magnet school programs, a new theory that sought to attract talented students to urban schools by giving each one a specialty. Dr. Walter Marks was a charismatic administrator who had gained recognition for his "System of Choice" in previous stops in school districts in Ohio and Texas. As in his previous jobs, Marks championed an increase of spending on new programs in Richmond in an effort to make each school in the racially and economically diverse district attractive and to boost enrollment. In their eagerness to boost the district's flagging public schools, the school board overlooked that Marks had left each of his previous jobs under clouds of financial mismanagement.

As Marks took over, in summer of 1987, each school in the district was given a specialty – for Kennedy it was math and computers – and a host of new courses were approved. Crucially, Marks also adopted an open enrollment policy, allowing students to attend any school in the district as long as it had a course not offered in the school they were assigned to. While designed to increase diversity, open enrollment actually had the opposite effect; defections from Kennedy to other schools only accelerated. Parents in 1987 complained that 30 high-achieving incoming freshmen had used the policy to attend neighboring El Cerrito High School.

"I fully maintain that if there were a class at El Cerrito in window washing, you would have a generation of window washers," parent Sue Wittenberg told a local newspaper. "It's a joke what's going on, it's ridiculous."

Many of the core faculty and parents felt that the negative reputation of Kennedy did not match up with the reality. McCormack's Guide to Contra Costa County, a real estate handbook for prospective homeowners, in 1987 wrote of Kennedy, "pay attention to scores but not to the exclusion of everything else." The scores are "middling," McCormack's acknowledged, noting that the school drew from both low- and high-scoring elementary schools.

"But the school has excellent forensics and computer departments, and is a favorite shopping ground for the Ivy League colleges," the guide said. "It also has a highly rated food service program."

That year, the school sent five students to Stanford, three to Harvard, three to MIT, and others to Cal, Princeton, Cornell, Yale and UCLA. But the defections continued, prompting a series of desperate letters from Dansky to Marks, begging for a one-year moratorium on transfers to “give [Kennedy] a base to build upon.”

“I am crossing the Rubicon on this issue,” he wrote the superintendent in May of 1988, “if these transfers are not rescinded, we have no chance to succeed so anything I do will have to be seen in the context of having been betrayed.”

Despite Dansky’s pleas, transfers under the open enrollment plan proceeded. He retired that summer.

In December 1989, a dirge for the district appeared in the U.S. News & World Report by staff writer Miriam Horn, who grew up in El Cerrito and graduated from Kennedy. Comparing her hometown to nearby Berkeley, Horn wrote that, “Both cities have been operating on almost no money since Proposition 13 wiped out property taxes. Both cities are now agonizingly polarized between rich and poor, black and white.” El Cerrito, however, had responded differently to problems like homelessness, “play[ing] ostrich, hoping that if it just looks the other way the problem will disappear.”

“Integration programs begun in the late '60s have been jettisoned in favor of what the district calls ‘A System for Choice,’ which has resulted, if unintentionally, in almost complete segregation,” she wrote. “Our years experimenting with busing were rough, admittedly, especially when Martin Luther King was assassinated and our white teachers locked us into classrooms as rocks and chairs and knives sailed through the halls. But it seems too great a defeat to have closed my public elementary school and leased it to a largely white, private school that charges more than \$ 4,000 a year.”

A final letter from Dansky to Marks reflected his resignation to defeat.

“Glad so many private school kids have returned to RUSD (Richmond Unified School District),” he wrote in a letter to Marks. “Since they were allowed to go where they wanted, NONE came to JFK – surprise, many at ECHS (El Cerrito High School).”

At the bottom of the letter he drew a headstone, engraved with these words: “RIP JFKHS (John F. Kennedy High School) 1967-”

“We fought one hell of a fight, but the facts speak for themselves! Review my letters and you’ll see I was on target.

“Regards and with respect, David Dansky.”

Darkest Hour

The storm of dark events that enshrouded the city of Richmond and its unified school district from 1988 to 1993 is almost unbelievable, in retrospect. Economic and social epidemics struck locally, just as the school district was about to undergo its greatest crisis since the city quintupled in population during World War II. Any many ways, Richmond was emblematic of trends occurring in urban communities across the country, as the manufacturing sector collapsed and crack cocaine worked insidiously through the inner cities. The result would be a Kennedy High School that was unrecognizable to previous graduates and teachers.

In July 1988, a fire broke out in the Safeway distribution center, destroying the plant. One day later, the company laid off 650 workers, half of whom were black or Hispanic. Rather than rebuild in Richmond, where there was a robust union presence, the company moved its operations an hour away to the rural Central Valley. Safeway's loss set off a domino effect through the local economy.

Businesses that supplied the Safeway distributor left. Doctors, dentists, grocery stores, bars, restaurants, and movie theaters that relied on workers closed down. Rising crime and vandalism prompted the move of other businesses.

“What you saw was this whole economic deterioration of the community, higher pockets of unemployment, social problems grew,” former Teamsters representative Ron Teninty said. “Desire by more businesses to leave, and other businesses decided not to locate there.”

The city's struggling economy and the influence of crack cocaine led to a spike in deadly crime. Homicides increased to 32 in 1988, followed by 40 in 1989 and a record-high 62 in 1990. With a population of 98,000, Richmond was the murder capital of the U.S., bearing a homicide rate seven times the national average.

Outwardly, things seemed to be going well for the school district. In November 1989, Lauro Cavazos, Secretary of Education in the Bush Administration, spoke in Richmond, praising Marks's school choice program. But deeply troubling signs had already begun to surface that something was amiss.

Even before Marks took office in summer of 1987, the district faced a \$1.1 million deficit, receiving a warning from the state auditor that its administration was bloated and pay raises could not be afforded. But the board of education charged ahead, approving increases in staffing, equipment and course offerings for the 1987-88 school year. By March of 1988, a county superintendent warned the district could face insolvency. By November, the level of deficit spending by the district was “alarming,” warned the county office of education.

Incredibly, the district projected a surplus in its initial budget for the following school year. Spending continued apace with a nearly \$10 million deal to buy computers from IBM. In the fall, the district approved a 16 percent raise for employees. Months later, just as Cavazos arrived to praise the district as a national

model for school reform, the county office of education rejected the school district's \$129 million budget, asking how it could afford to give raises to teachers. The decision triggered a state review.

By February of 1990, Marks was suggesting the district sell property to ease its deficit woes. A second proposal to cover operating expenses by issuing a bond failed that May. The state grudgingly approved a \$9.5 million loan for the 1989-90 school year, and appointed a state trustee to oversee the district. Marks's contract was bought out that December. Unbelievably, he left to take another superintendent job in the Kansas City school district for \$140,000 a year.

The true ramifications of Marks's spending spree did not become apparent until after his departure. In March 1991, the board laid off 860 employees, approving a plan to cut \$26 million for the 1991-92 school year. It then became the first California school district to declare bankruptcy.

Because there are several layers of oversight, bankruptcies among school districts are rare. There was little precedent for how to handle it. Unimpressed by the fiscal mismanagement, California Gov. Pete Wilson rejected a requested \$25 million bailout from the school district, seeking to make an example of the district as a deterrent for aberrant behavior elsewhere in the state. A ruling from a state court judge forced the state to give the district a \$19 million loan, allowing schools to stay open the last six weeks of the school year. In return, the state took over the district, and sued it for \$28.5 million in debt on behalf of taxpayers and students. IBM refused to take back the computers from its \$10 million order, and that debt continued. The expected date of repayment for all the loans was 2024.

"We bleed," district psychologist JoAnn Thomas told the school board four years later, ahead of a teachers' strike. "Most of us have been bleeding since 1991... our wounds cannot heal because the district keeps opening them."

Race to the Bottom

If Kennedy was in decline before the bankruptcy, it collapsed in the aftermath. By 1994, its enrollment had declined by roughly 500 over a decade to 821. It became a solid minority urban school, with a student body that was 70 percent African-American, 18 percent Latino, 8 percent Asian and just 4 percent white. Families continued to transfer, programs such as food service were cut, and the school became known as a dropout factory, as some joked that JFK stood for "Jail For Kids."

Richard Mitchell, the star orator who had graduated from Kennedy into Harvard and then a career in corporate America, was astounded when he returned to campus to 1998 to teach for one year.

He found students sitting on the curb in front of the school in the morning, waiting to get in after being kicked out of homeless shelters. The school was more Hispanic

than when he left, and was now taking in recent immigrants from Southeast Asia, the Middle East and South America with no English skills and no money for translators.

“You average their performance in and all the sudden the school’s performance numbers crash. And people say, ‘It’s a *terrible* school,’” Mitchell said. “But it’s doing the job nobody else is doing.”

By the early 2000s, Kennedy routinely ranked among the five worst high schools in the state of California.

Its long-term future did not look promising. With the district continuing to face deficits from its debts in the early 1990s, and a continued drop in enrollment, there was pressure to close several schools in order to apply the district’s staff as efficiently as possible. In 2009, Kennedy almost closed, but an agreement by the city of Richmond to pay the district a portion of its operating expenses for two years granted it a reprieve.

In addition to private schools, which had been competing increasingly with the district since the 1980s, Kennedy in the 2000s began to face competition in a new form: charter schools. By the 2003-04 school year, five charter schools were operating in the county. The district’s top-ranked middle school was Manzanita Charter School in Richmond. Popular among many parents for giving students a chance to escape poorly performing public schools, the charters nonetheless faced criticism from Kennedy faculty and other public school advocates, who argued that the charters were undermining the public schools by taking the very best-performing urban minority students out of the public school system.

By the end of the decade, Kennedy had struggled for nearly 20 years in a post-bankruptcy fugue of fiscal austerity that left it with fewer resources than ever to serve a more disadvantaged population of students. They were almost uniformly poor, two-thirds from immigrant families, with more than half requiring English language assistance. Many were wracked by the traumas of homelessness, hunger, and exposure to violence and drug use. Students hung out in the hallways during class, talking on their cellphones. Some invited outsiders to campus, which sometimes led to conflicts and potential gang-related standoffs.

In 2012, a new principal was hired with a mandate to change the school’s culture. Philip Johnson, an ex-police officer who had served as an assistant principal at a nearby high school, preached a mantra that school safety came first. He introduced a set of strict policies banning hats, gang-affiliated dress, use of cellphones during the day, and loitering in hallways. Students who did not comply were suspended or expelled.

Under Johnson order has returned to the school. Test scores have marginally improved. Enrollment has stabilized above 900 students for the first time in years.

Outside his efforts, some Kennedy students have benefited from a program called the Ivy League Connection that puts promising students in contact with admissions directors at Ivy League schools. The privately funded program pays to send students to Ivy League campuses in the summers before they graduate, then receive academic counseling with a goal of gaining admittance by their senior years.

In 2015, a \$1 million grant from nearby corporate giant Chevron enabled Kennedy to become the first public school on the West Coast to receive a fabrication lab. Equipped with computer-controlled tools such as 3-D printers, the lab in theory allows students to make anything – from solar-powered turbines to wireless data networks. Another program, information technology, teaches students graphic design principles.

In many ways, though, the school still struggles with the basics. Of all the impediments to Kennedy becoming a stronger school, Johnson and others cite teacher turnover as the largest problem. Out of 42 teachers on site, the school loses ten to 15 per year, Johnson said. Aside from the general challenge of teaching in a poor, urban district, local Bay Area housing prices are expensive, and salaries for beginning teachers were \$5,000 lower than the state average for districts in the same category, according to state records. Mid-range teacher salaries pay a full \$10,000 per year lower than the state average, as do Kennedy's highest-paid teachers.

And while incidents inside the school's walls have relatively slowed down, the world outside remains a minefield. Two Kennedy students died during the 2015-16 school year in separate incidents of gun violence elsewhere in Richmond. The entire city was rocked when a man who operated a foster home and sometimes volunteered at Kennedy was arrested and charged with molestation.

"The issue is not here," Johnson said. "It's what happens when they leave here that they see the violence, they have the poverty, and the things that will affect them when they come back here. But we do the best that we can when they come back here."

For Rae Jackson, whose son Kyree attends Kennedy now as he did in the 80s, time has not dampened his enthusiasm for his alma mater. But he worries that his son has not experienced the stimulating high school environment that was so formative to his own life. The strict policies on dress and class attendance may be necessary for safety, but an element of freedom and exploration is lost in return.

"We have to discipline and instruct, and discipline some more," Jackson said. "And then we punish. So [the students are] kind of like, 'OK well school's boring, they just want us to do this, do that, do this, do this, so we ain't going to try to venture off and do anything else.'"

Looking Ahead

In the last two years, the issue of charter schools has grown more and more in importance in the school district. Eleven charter schools now operate in the West Contra Costa Unified School district alongside 48 public schools. Several that started out as elementary and middle schools are now seeking spaces for high schools. In 2014, two candidates backed by hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations from charter school proponents won seats on the five-member Board of Education. Should the trend continue down the same path, observers are pessimistic whether the public school district will survive.

Richard Mitchell, now the planning director for the City of Richmond, confesses to worrying as more charter schools apply to the city for permits at alternative sites around Richmond. Tax-payers are paying off enormous bonds that have rebuilt most of the public schools in the district, but without further investment in their success, he worries that increased competition will erase any chance of a comeback.

“Eventually they’ll kick enough legs out from underneath the public school system that it collapses and people will be left with nothing but charters,” he said.

His former teacher, Mike Peritz, is more direct.

“In 25 years there won’t be a unified district,” Peritz said.

It’s all very different from the community where Mitchell grew up, when the local economy supported a middle class and the schools set up him for success. Automation and the collapse of the local manufacturing industry have severed the old pipeline between local high schools and blue-collar, middle-class factory jobs. In their place, the students of Richmond see all around them on social media aspirational figures such as entertainers, athletes and Silicon Valley billionaires. But with few links to their local community, the prospects of success seem dim.

“Kids see all this material wealth around them [on social media], they feel like they’re entitled to it somehow, nobody tells them that you don’t just grow up one day and they give you a house,” he said. “So there’s a lot of despair and disruption and dislocation, and kids often look for a way to feel better, so you’ve got drugs... Nobody’s having an honest conversation about the U.S. and what it takes to compete in an international environment that we helped create.”

He sighs.

“Stable institutions are being replaced by unstable ones, and people are making money out of it.”

