

Saying farewell to West Tech

By Pete Jedick

Forget the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. Forget the Indians winning the World Series or the Browns capturing their first Super Bowl title.

Years from now historians will argue that the most significant local event of 1995 occurred on Aug. 30 when West Technical High School's doors failed to open for the first time in 84 years.

It sounded the death knell for the Cleveland public school system.

I believe this not just because I'm a West Tech graduate. I believe this because I'm also a Cleveland historian.

Only a generation ago West Tech was the crown jewel in one of the most respected and innovative urban school systems in the country.

Historians will point out that after World War II representatives from war-torn Germany and Japan visited West Tech to learn how best to reconstruct their ravaged educational systems.

They learned West Tech's lessons well. Germany and Japan's economies flourished. Meanwhile our federal government dismantled West Tech while plunging our country into a trillion-dollar debt.

Today American educators are traveling to Germany and Japan to copy their systems. The federal government should have left West Tech alone in the first place.

West Tech was a magnet school before anyone ever heard of a magnet school. Any high school student on Cleveland's West Side could attend West Tech instead of their neighborhood school. (East Tech provided a similar opportunity to East Side students.)

Its draw was a unique curriculum that included courses like welding, machine shop, aircraft repair and carpentry. There was also a college-prep major that emphasized science and math.

You want to talk busing? I took two buses for four years for the privilege of attending West Tech. And the government didn't pay a penny of it. My parents had to squeeze the expense from their very tight budget.

West Tech was successful because its administration had the power to ship a troublemaker back to his or her neighborhood school. Thus, it could compete with non-public schools like St. Ignatius or St. Ed's. Either go along with the program or take a hike.

— Yet we weren't a bunch of goody-goodies. Far from it. West Tech was a tough inner-city school. We had gangs and we had fights.

But step through the doors of the huge four-story structure and it was a different story. It wasn't easy keeping discipline in the largest school in Ohio.

First, West Tech's principals had a tradition of hiring large male teachers, phys-ed types. Second, the teachers were allowed to run their classrooms with complete authority. They each had a wooden paddle hanging from their desks and they weren't afraid to use it. They'd show their technique the first couple days of school and the class would be peaceful the rest of the year.

It always amazes my classmates to recall that our toughest security guard was a middle-aged, 90-pound lady who sat at a desk in the first-floor hallway. No armed guards. No metal detectors. Her word was law because if she fingered you, the administration backed her to the limit.

The hallways were as quiet as the classrooms.

It wasn't a prison. We had a great time. There were enough extracurricular activities, clubs, sports and parties to make the day enjoyable.

Most pre-busing graduates will tell you that they loved West Tech.

What it had, and what is missing in Cleveland public schools today, was a safe, secure atmosphere that fostered education. Employers loved West Tech graduates. They stood in line to hire them before the ink was dry on their diplomas.

What happened? Very simply, federal judges who know nothing about education took over the school system and systematically destroyed it.

I visited West Tech the day its last class was due to graduate. About 100 of them. That's out of around 1,000 who had started there a few years earlier.

Daily attendance ran about 50 percent and even those figures were inflated. (Compared with more than 90 percent in my era.)

The building was in disrepair. Except for some new boilers, it looked as if there hadn't been a penny spent on maintenance over the last 20 years.

I don't blame the state for closing Tech. Most of us alumni see it as pulling the plug on a grand old lady suffering from an incurable disease. After all, our West Tech ceased to exist about two decades ago.

But what happened to West Tech borders on criminal neglect. If it was someone's child, the state would take custody. And that's just what it did.

It is probably too late to save Tech. At least as long as it is part of the Cleveland school system.

But I did have one idea. Take West Tech, remodel it and turn it into a super school. Its basic structure is sound. It only needs new plumbing, electrical, windows, etc.

Return its power to throw students out, maybe to a dump-off school for losers, and it might flourish again.

Make it difficult to attend. Make the standards high. Instill pride. Watch it grow.

The system could probably close three or four other high schools and save tons of money.

A nice dream. But the Cleveland school system could never pull it off, even if it did save a fortune. Not while the federal courts control it. Not while all the lawyers and carpetbaggers have their fingers in the till.

You can elect all the L-teams or X-teams you want, but the school board has no real authority anymore. And the superintendent, whether appointed by the school board or the state, cannot make the necessary changes with a federal judge handcuffing him.

The only real solution to the Cleveland schools dilemma is to put the system out of business. Break it up.

The city of Cleveland has six police districts and six fire battalions. It needs six school districts. Each operating independently.

This would get the federal courts off our backs. Each would be the size of large suburb like Parma. The schools could once again be manageable and responsive to the community.

Impossible, you say? I don't care what it takes. If necessary, sell the administration building to pay for the reorganization. Break the city of Cleveland itself into six suburbs if you have to.

Just do it.

Every year, thousands of Cleveland public school students are being deprived of learning the basic skills needed for a free economy and a democratic country.

How long can we keep up this charade? If we don't do something soon, we'll all pay later.

Do it for West Tech.

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