

# PHILADELPHIA DAILY NEWS

THE PEOPLE PAPER

## Dr. Clayton gets mixed review

**W**hen Dr. Constance Clayton announced her retirement, she left many of us in the wider educational community with mixed emotions about the impact of her 11-year tenure as superintendent of Philadelphia public schools.

At the time she came to the job, Clayton



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was handed an impossible agenda: to challenge high achieving students and rescue those who would otherwise drop out; to reduce the inequities in schooling and at the same time to maintain a standard that would allow the system to be competitive with other, better funded schools across the nation; and to reduce the massive deficits, political patronage and bureaucratic infighting that plagued the nation's fifth largest school district.

To her credit, Clayton re-established central control over the curriculum as well as the decision-making process. She formed partnerships with businesses and challenged teachers to make more of a commitment in the classroom than on the picket line. In short, Clayton made education — not politics — the priority.

Ironically, where she was less successful was in the application of her own educational philosophy, namely that education is a process of empowerment, not an act of appropriation. Her initial policy of merit promotion or encouraging students to rise to meet the challenge of more rigorous standards did not result in widespread empowerment among students, it only served to hold many of them back a grade or worse, to drop out.

More recently, Clayton did an about face and adopted the new rhetoric of school-based management with its experimental, nongraded "cluster" system. The plan proposes to remove the stigma of failure by allowing elementary school students to move through the system at their own pace. Students can be flunked only once and those who do not meet the promotion standards a second time will simply be "assigned" to the next level with remedial assistance.

Considering the increasing numbers of students who desperately need remedial work and the recent cutbacks in support staff, it is clear that students in this system will be no better off than those who simply "get by" under the merit promotion policy.

Ultimately, Clayton could do little to improve the overall academic achievement of students in our city's schools not for lack of effort, but simply because *no one* can begin to address the ills of poverty and social equity that inevitably impede a student's ability to learn. Through it all, Constance Clayton put the children of the city first. For that reason alone perhaps, she deserves to be admired. ■

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## Opinion

### Guest Opinions

THURSDAY, JULY 29, 1993