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School Board lacks guts to do right thing

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Of all the reforms possible in the wake of the McKinley High School fiasco, the most obvious has yet to be mentioned: Students need a union.

And lobbyists.

And bigger allowances, so they can make campaign contributions to buy off legislators who write the laws that **Buffalo** school officials are hiding behind to avoid holding anyone accountable.

In a sorry end to a shameful saga, the board this week lacked the **guts** to even consider whether Principal Crystal Barton or anyone else at McKinley should pay for what its own investigator called the "excessive" suspension of senior Jayvonna Kincannon, who has since graduated.

The ostensible reason for the board's cowardice?

"I can't vote for a resolution I haven't read," said President Mary Ruth Kapsiak, referring to the one-page bid to have experts advise the board whether disciplinary action is warranted.

If students came to class with that feeble an excuse, they'd get a seven-week suspension. Sponsor Catherine Nugent Panepinto has been pushing the measure for weeks, and her fellow board members knew exactly what was coming, whether they can read on the spot or not.

No, the real reason for the duck-and-cover is that the board **lacks** courage. In the lead-up to Tuesday's decisive inaction, officials cited everything from the cost to the time involved in using education law to hold McKinley officials accountable.

You can thank the unions and their grip on Albany's legislative machine, as well as their intimidating ability to affect a **School Board** candidacy in elections with minuscule turnouts.

Educators have some of the most potent unions around, and Barton isn't just a member; she's president of the principals union and has had support from the president of the teachers union. It's no wonder she could tell the board to take a hike, refusing to speak to its investigator.

Students can only wish that they had an organization with such muscle.

Ideally, that would be the board -- but not this board, which turned its back on what amounts to bureaucratic child abuse. Instead, it sent the message that might -- in the form of a strong union -- makes right.

"There will be accountability," Kapsiak insisted with a straight face after the vote.

If there is, it will have to come from the state.

A disappointed Panepinto said schools teach kids that actions have consequences, but the board's inaction "makes it hard to have credibility."

That's putting it mildly. Her proposal fell one vote short, as a majority of members either abstained, "sustained," opposed the motion or showed up late.

And some of this stuff is shown on TV. I shudder to think how bad they'd be if nobody were watching. This board is the best argument yet for moving school elections from May to November so somebody other than school employees might care enough to vote.

In a fitting tribute to mediocrity and mendacity, the board then held its organizational meeting and re-elected Kapsiak president while tapping Chris Jacobs as a vice president. Jacobs, to his credit, did vote for Panepinto's motion.

But they are the same two who held a news conference with Superintendent James Williams to say the board never discussed a key part of the McKinley mess in executive session when the investigator later concluded that they had.

They are now two of the board's three "leaders."

That takes the cake -- including the one the board served to reward itself for doing such a stellar job.

They should consider themselves lucky the kids can't organize.

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