

This year, it happened in South Plainfield. A handful of kids showed up at their prom with alcohol on their breath, or alcohol in their possession. All had signed an agreement: drink at the prom, and you lose your right to march in graduation. Pretty simple.



Joe Epstein/For The Star-

LedgerMembers of the Class of 2009 at South Plainfield High School proceed onto the football field as the start of graduation ceremonies. There was some controversy over whether students kicked out of prom for drinking alcohol should be allowed to attend graduation ceremonies.

But when the school tried to enforce the punishment, parents complained and the school board caved.

So the kids marched in their caps and gowns last night, making the pledge they signed worth less than the paper it was printed on. The teachers were angry: The school board decision made a joke of their authority. Undermined. Disrespected. Those kinds of words all apply.

Some teachers said they would [boycott graduation](#), and a controversy, which slightly stained a proud moment for the town, was born.

South Plainfield is a solid middle-class, all-American town of mixed ethnicities, races and cultures. The kind of place that fights our wars and pays our taxes, as principal Kenneth May said during the ceremony.

The high school holds its hopes for all its children, white, black, Hispanic, Asian, Middle or Far Eastern. The school maintains a 97 percent attendance rate, the schoolwide GPA hovers around 3.0 Every senior fills out a college application, whether they plan to go to college or not. The idea is that those with no plans for college will change their minds once accepted.

The student council president, Nathaniel Eliassen, is headed to West Point. The salutatorian, Victoria Tran, is off to Stevens. The valedictorian, Audrey Cupo, had a weighted GPA of 5-and-change (out of 4). Of the 279 kids graduating, 99 made at least one national academic honor society, wearing a variety of colored sashes over their emerald green or white gowns. But none of that was news.

The possible teacher boycott was news.

TV cameras and newspaper reporters showed up at graduation.

But so did many of the teachers.

After all, they're teachers. And graduation night is a celebration of their work, too.



Joe Epstein/The Star-Ledger
Class President Michael James Boyle to do the roll call of the graduates during the graduation ceremony for the class of 2009 at South Plainfield High School. There was some controversy after students who were kicked out of the senior prom for drinking, were allowed to attend graduation ceremonies.

And so when each of the class leaders spoke, they thanked their teachers and principals. The names kept coming. Dr. May. Ms. Flannery, Dr. Panek, Mr. Green, Mr. Size, Mr. Crosby, and many more. Teachers.

Not babysitters.

Not cops.

And, mostly, not parents.

This is lost on parents who defend their kids by using this rationale: They're just kids (even though some are 18 and legal adults). Everybody makes mistakes. The punishment doesn't fit the crime. The school shouldn't act like police.

They're absolutely right about the last.

A school shouldn't have to police their kids. That is the job of parents, and when that fails, it's the job of real police.

