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South Plainfield High School teachers will not participate in graduation ceremonies

By Laura Craven
June 22, 2009, 7:54PM

Nearly all of South Plainfield High School's teachers will not participate in tomorrow's graduation, a week after the district's board of education reversed a decision by school administrators to ban from the ceremony a group of students who came drunk to the prom.

A spokeswoman for the state teachers association stopped short of calling the move a boycott, but noted that as many as 75 teachers -- or three-quarters

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of the staff -- would normally volunteer at graduation ceremonies in South Plainfield each year. South Plainfield Police Chief John Ferraro said his department will send "a few extra officers" to the ceremony at the request of district officials, but declined to elaborate.

School and district officials were unusually tight-lipped today about the situation. Superintendent Jose Negrón refused to comment, as did more than a half-dozen teachers approached outside the school or contacted at home.

"This is a school issue," said principal Kenneth May. "I really can't comment."

Kathryn Coulibaly, the spokeswoman for the New Jersey Education Association, said local union leaders told her that 103 teachers planned to skip the graduation.

Coulibaly said the situation stemmed in part from an incident that occurred at the school's prom. Students had signed a pledge to arrive at their prom alcohol-free but at least some came "visibly inebriated," Coulibaly said, repeating information she said she received from the South Plainfield Education Association.

Instead of getting the police involved and making the students take a Breathalyzer test, Coulibaly said, the principal banned the students from graduation ceremonies because they "broke the promise."

Coulibaly said the NJEA did not endorse or promote the teachers' decision to skip the ceremony.

The students' parents protested to the Board of Education last Wednesday, threatening to take the issue to Lucille Davy, the state commissioner of education. The board then reversed the decision.

Board president Jim Giannakis confirmed yesterday that the board dropped the punishment against the students.

"It's a difficult decision to make," Giannakis said. "Unfortunately, there are extenuating circumstances we really can't speak about. Everything we've done, we've done on the advice of counsel."

The board's lawyer did not return a call seeking comment.

"It's over and done with, and now we move forward," Giannakis said.

Brent Johnson and Aliyah Shahid are reporters for the New Jersey Local News Service. Brent may be reached at (908) 243-6232 or bjohnson@njlins.com. Aliyah may be reached at (908) 243-6233 or ashahid@njlins.com.

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Posted by **spfan09**
June 22, 2009, 8:28PM

i hope all the teachers who are boycotting that went drunk to their proms feel an insane amount of guilt thinking, "damn, thank god we didnt get caught."

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Posted by **ravenmane**
June 22, 2009, 8:59PM

L. O. L.

That pretty much sums up my thoughts on this article. Granted, it does make one wonder how the graduation ceremony will run without, and I quote, three-quarters of the staff helping out.

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Posted by **ravenmane**
June 22, 2009, 9:00PM

L. O. L.

Yeah, that pretty much sums up my thoughts on this article. Granted, it does make one wonder what the ceremony will be like without "three-quarters of the staff" assisting.

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Posted by **sparkse1951**
June 22, 2009, 10:05PM

It never fails.....whenever a school system has an incident that makes the papers the "TOP DOG" always claims "there are circumstances that cannot be commented on." The taxpayer (whose dollars pay the salaries) is always kept in the dark.

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Posted by **taxd2death**
June 22, 2009, 10:09PM

So parents are OK w/ their kids underage drinking. Brilliant.

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Posted by **ravenmane**
June 22, 2009, 10:16PM

Exactly. And if it was another person's kids, they would be singing an entirely different tune, so to speak.

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Posted by **njtime46**
June 22, 2009, 10:27PM

Why is this a volunteer event for the teachers? Isn't graduation part of going to school?

They should be told its mandatory and if they choose not go then fire them.

What about the children who didn't drink and wanted the teachers to participate in the graduation.

What if someone gets hurt or something else happens because the 'volunteers' aren't there.

Another 'It's all about us the teachers and the hell with the rest of you' provided by the members of the NJEA.

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Posted by **slice**
June 22, 2009, 10:45PM

Let me get this straight-1.The school makes the kids sign a pledge not to drink & then go to the prom 2.Some kids go to prom tipsy or drunk and break the pledge. 3.School bans them from graduation. 4.Kids dont follow rules and drink underage and parents complain and threaten the school. 5.School then caves in & lets kids graduate. 6.Some teachers boycott graduation and they are the bad guys/gals? Good for the teachers. south plainfield kids & parents are punks & school is chicken.

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Posted by **oopsnj**
June 22, 2009, 10:45PM

what i don't understand is that the principal didn't call the cops "Instead of getting the police involved and making the students take a Breathalyzer test,

Coulibaly said, the principal banned the students from graduation ceremonies because they "broke the promise." the principal should have charges placed on him

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Posted by **slice**
June 22, 2009, 10:47PM

Who is lucille davy??? She sounds like a noname wannabe.

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Posted by **slice**
June 22, 2009, 10:50PM

Hey oopsnj, why should the principal have charges placed on him?
Did your dad give you that name the night you were conceived?

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Posted by **corazinesux**
June 22, 2009, 10:52PM

This reminds me of Beverly Hills 90210....Donna Martin graduates!!!!

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Posted by **delpaso**
June 22, 2009, 11:01PM

for the very first time, i support and applaud the decision made by the teachers union.

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Posted by **david07003**
June 22, 2009, 11:12PM

The punishment didnt fit the crime. The kids spent 4 years going to school. If they had a few too many or even acted bad at the prom, you do not stop them from graduating or going to the graduation just for that one instance. Look at the teachers union rules, if a teacher does something bad, they go before and arbitrator who then looks at their whole teaching career, and then usually sides with the teacher, because that one event is not representative to all of the years that they taught. Good call board of ed.

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Posted by **rixmix**
June 22, 2009, 11:23PM

You might figure the teachers would care more about all the other graduating students they taught & knew. I'd at least show up "unofficially" to wish them well.

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Posted by **njnypact**
June 22, 2009, 11:25PM

So much for rules, promises and consequences. This is total BS.

Mistake #1: The cops should have been called immediately. It is common for school boards to "police" their own problems, the moment you call the cops there is public disclosure and it is out of the school board's control...and they like control. Cops know this and are frustrated by this. Here is a perfect example.

Mistake #2: Students should not be permitted to attend graduation. Somebody has to have the guts to stand by the decision. Some parent threatened a lawsuit and the school board backed down rather than risk the bad press.

Mistake #3: Graduation should not be optional for teachers. It is a school function that should be celebrated by all and the expectation that all teachers attend. What we have here is simply teachers staging a protest, a boycott, but they will not be terminated nor reprimanded.

The lesson learned by the students: In the end, what did the adult leaders in this situation (the principal, entire school board, parents of students caught violating the rules who still allow their child to attend graduation, the protesting teachers) teach the students who did not drink? How NOT to be a true leader.

I'd love to hear that at least one parent had the guts to tell their child that the original punishment stands and that they will not be allowed to attend their own graduation! That would be leadership!

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Posted by **reelfangz**
June 22, 2009, 11:41PM

Mmmm....gotta love any story that talks about proms, drinking booze & "tight lips."

Bow-Chicka-Wow-Wow....

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Posted by **ralph331**
June 22, 2009, 11:45PM

The only extenuating circumstances I can think of is that someone spiked the punch without the knowledge of the students. If this is true, that person committed a crime for serving minors or even tampering with food and/or beverage. What if one of the students was on a perscription medication which should not be taken with alcohol.

If this is the extenuating circumstances, that person should be charged.

I see no reason why the BOE could not disclose that the students were deemed not responsible due to the action of an outside party. This would defuse the situation. Without such disclosure, the BOE leaves itself under suspect of playing favorites. I do not blame the teachers for their action under the circumstances.

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Posted by **ravenmane**
June 22, 2009, 11:48PM

@ David07003: First, the punishment wouldn't fit the crime if the 18-year-old student(s) who had broken the rules hadn't signed a binding contract telling them exactly what they are not permitted to do. They signed the contract, they understood the contract, and they chanced it anyway.

Second, the only thing the student(s) would be excluded from is walking in a graduation ceremony. They would still graduate, but would not participate in the "for-the-parents" ceremony.

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Posted by **hawk9**
June 22, 2009, 11:54PM

The kids today live in a strict almost a NAZI like state.

Everyone's trying to push their power on these kids to walk the strait line...

Hey, NJEA what are you trying to prove?

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