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Angry groundswell rips MPS board: 'Stop making excuses,' 'We want an audit'

By Beth Hawkins | 10/15/14



Nekima Levy-Pounds, left, was last on the speaking roster. Kermit the Frog's only statement was on his sign. MinnPost photo by Beth Hawkins

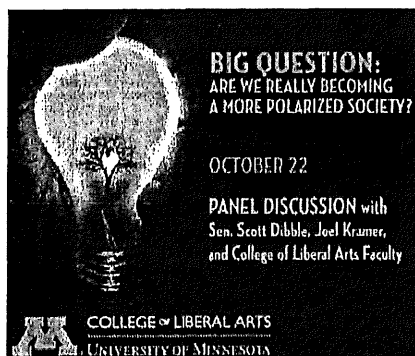
When Nekima Levy-Pounds rose Tuesday night to address the Minneapolis School Board there was a brief and pregnant pause. The University of St. Thomas law professor was part of a group that the night before had aimed a barrage of sharp tweets using the hashtag #jimcrowjr at Superintendent Bernadeia Johnson and other district leaders.

Now members of a new group she helped found, the Black Education Advocates, were at the meeting to demand answers about a \$375,000 no-bid contract being referred to in the community as "hush money."

Levy-Pounds was last on the roster. In the hour before her turn came, a long line of community members stepped to the podium to air a diverse and mind-boggling set of complaints.

There were the North High School football players who showed up to ask for sports facilities equity. Or at a minimum indoor restrooms with running water.

There was the woman who called out the district for letting employees into sporting events for free while charging even the poorest students.



There was the 20-plus-year early childhood education aide who broke down describing the bureaucratic snafu that cost her and a number of her colleagues their jobs last spring, and the bureaucracy's disinterest in hearing them out.

And then there was Kermit the Frog, who showed up in a purple stocking cap and an orange jumpsuit emblazoned with the words "State Penitentiary," a symbol of the school-to-prison pipeline.

The frog, who was about the size of a human teen, did not speak but carried a hand-lettered sign: "Minneapolis Public Schools awarded a \$375,000 contract to an organization with no website, no phone number, #butthat'snoneofmybusiness."

When Levy-Pounds finally spoke, her words summarized the evening's angry groundswell. "You all constantly claim you want community engagement," she said. "But when we step up

our voices are silenced."

'Stop making excuses'

There was applause as she continued: "We are sick and tired of being sick and tired. Stop making excuses, hold yourself accountable and educate our babies."

While she spoke, Black Education Advocates co-founder Chris Stewart, a former MPS board member, created a devastating Storify, "Jim Crow Jr., Minneapolis Style," featuring the tweets coming out of district headquarters as well as memes starring Kermit sipping a cup of tea under provocative questions about the CSI contract.

Last week, the Black Education Advocates sent an open letter to district leaders calling for an outside investigation into a controversial contract that had been tucked into the board's May consent agenda, the list of routine business requiring board approval but not meriting discussion.

The contract in question awarded \$375,000 to the Community Standard Initiative (CSI), a group that had no legal structure and could not articulate a plan beyond a desire to work in schools and neighborhoods to promote positive behavior. District leaders had recommended against inking the deal, especially after a \$30,000 investment in trying to help CSI develop programming yielded little.

CSI did, however, have some powerful promoters. Minneapolis DFL Sens. Jeff Hayden and Bobby Joe Champion either urged the district to enter into the agreement or threatened to turn off a crucial funding stream, depending on which version of the story is being told.

A longtime district critic

CSI's creator, Al Flowers, is a longtime district critic. He also has a long history of showing up in controversial headlines — most recently after an encounter with police that is still under investigation. Champion is his attorney.

CSI was paid \$47,000 before news stories in this publication and others drew attention to the no-bid contract. The organization's fiscal agent, Clarence Hightower, recently said it lacked the capacity to deliver the contracted services.

Minneapolis Public Schools leaders, meanwhile, were mum on how the item made its way onto the consent agenda and which version of the story about lawmakers' intercession was true.

Board member Rebecca Gagnon last year testified in favor of the funding at the Capitol and her colleague Kim Ellison once worked for Hightower. District insiders have said at least four board members were in favor of the contract. Gagnon told the Star Tribune she is disappointed CSI could not deliver.

A week ago, the Black Education Advocates — other members include leaders of Students for Education Reform — sent an open letter to district leaders calling for an outside investigation. A MinnPost request for comment on the letter went unfulfilled, although an article a day later in the Star Tribune elaborated on the district's decision to end the arrangement.

Board chair replies to letter

On Monday, board Chair Richard Mammen replied to the letter [.png], saying that placing the contract on the consent agenda was legal and that he was confident all board members were aware of it. "The board will participate fully in any investigation ordered by an appropriate authority pertaining to this contract or any other matter concerning alleged 'breaches of leadership,'" he wrote.

Over the weekend, supporters of the lawmakers and CSI called out the Black Education Advocates in radio broadcasts, calling Levy-Pounds a bourgeoisie black elite. (It's unclear whether either senator knew of or had a hand in the broadcasts.)

Separately, members of another new group, Not on Our Watch, staged protests on the city's north side. At Tuesday night's board meeting, Natonia Johnson identified herself as a member of the second new group.

"We want an independent audit of how the \$47,000 given to CSI was spent," she told the board. "We will get it. That's not a threat, that's a promise. You have not seen the last of my face."

After Levy-Pounds spoke, most of the angry community members filed out into the foyer, where the din threatened to drown out Johnson as she made her first public remarks [PDF] on the controversy.

'Had many reservations'

"In considering the contract with CSI, my staff and I had many reservations about moving forward with it," Johnson said. "I was cautious because it was apparent that they would need significant support and assistance from the district to fulfill the contract. MPS did more than our due diligence to help CSI succeed, even linking them up with our research and evaluation team, to develop a specific timeline for implementation and execution, as well as metrics to determine how the program was progressing. But I was also optimistic about the potential for students to benefit from the services that CSI said they could provide."

Johnson addressed the question of outside pressure only obliquely: "Several board members, elected officials and community members expressed support of this contract, which further influenced moving forward with the contract."

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School board's approval of \$375,000 contract for Al Flowers-related group drawing questions

BY BETH HAWKINS | 07/30/14

The founder of the Community Standards Initiative is community activist Al Flowers, an MPS critic whose name is in the headlines this week.

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Beth Hawkins writes Learning Curve, a blog about education, for MinnPost and also covers a variety of other public policy topics.

COMMENTS (11)

"bourgeoisie black elite"

SUBMITTED BY THOMAS SWIFT ON OCTOBER 15, 2014 - 10:31AM

"bourgeoisie black elite" Wow.

Does "Uncle Tom" by another name smell as racist?

There's cash in them thar schools, and plenty of it. It's clear the status quo won't go down without a fight, and Flowers et. al. have a long, successful history of comebacks by such black "leaders" as Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson and Marion Barry to boost their morale.

Personally, I'm popping popcorn.

Far more cash in the

SUBMITTED BY LOGAN FOREMAN ON OCTOBER 15, 2014 - 4:44PM

For profit colleges that Kline milks. Personally don't care that you are popping popcorn.

Are those for-profit colleges

SUBMITTED BY THOMAS SWIFT ON OCTOBER 16, 2014 - 7:50AM

Are those for-profit colleges sending thousands of minority kids out to the streets each year functionally illiterate? I'd be interested to know more about that.

While your party carves

SUBMITTED BY ROBERT GAUTHIER ON OCTOBER 15, 2014 - 8:23PM

Up the schools for more vouchers? The whole education "reform" movement is just an excuse for the private sector to harvest tax dollars for profit. And take out the teachers union to silence opposition.

Nothing in the world wrong

SUBMITTED BY THOMAS SWIFT ON OCTOBER 16, 2014 - 7:54AM

Nothing in the world wrong with profit, as long as the customer is getting good value for his dollar. That is clearly not the case with Metro area

government schools. Personally, I think it's long past time the teachers unions are silenced, and the number of people that agree with me grows every day; but you may feel differently.

running water

SUBMITTED BY ROBERT OWEN ON OCTOBER 15, 2014 - 11:51AM

"Or at a minimum indoor restrooms with running water."

They really don't have indoor plumbing at North High School?

That odor

SUBMITTED BY RAY SCHOCH ON OCTOBER 15, 2014 - 1:09PM

...wafting from the MSP board's meeting room is beginning to take on the characteristics of a genuine stench. Saying you "will participate fully in any investigation ordered by an appropriate authority pertaining to this contract..." is not an explanation, it's part excuse, part delaying tactic.

As for "...bourgeoisie black elite," you know *something* has hit the fan when your own people are calling you names that are less-than-complimentary.

I expect there will be further developments in this story...

However

SUBMITTED BY BILL KAHN ON OCTOBER 15, 2014 - 1:29PM

However this situation surrounding the CSI contract turns out, community and family engagement in MPS efforts contracted for remain unmet.

Seems as though many Neighborhood Revitalization Program projects fell flat, perhaps for the same sorts of reasons, leaving objectives to reach the broader goals in NRP plans left unmet. Maybe this was because they were not thought out well enough, but in most cases ongoing approvals and auditing got the truth out without all this kerfuffle over CSI.

NRP was a haphazard way of approaching problems, but it engaged and educated folks to act in their own interests in ways that improved life even beyond neighborhood and city borders.

Why Minneapolis dropped NRP in favor of a pale shadow that excludes most of the folks probably had much to do with the same motivations of those screaming for heads to roll over this CSI mess.

Minneapolis Public Schools can learn a great deal from the CSI experience and recall the past successes of the NRP with which MPS participated and take up where the City of Minneapolis dropped the ball. Until they do something more effective than contract for services with those unlikely to deliver, they are going to be sitting ducks for talented organizers like Levy-Pounds and Stewart who, in turn, seem to be sweating the small s#*t.

bourgeoisie black elite?

SUBMITTED BY NEAL GENDLER ON OCTOBER 15, 2014 - 2:13PM

Does that mean some people think it wrong for an African-American woman to become a successful professional?

Hope not

SUBMITTED BY BILL KAHN ON OCTOBER 15, 2014 - 7:21PM

Hope not, because there are many out there although I think some might think Supt. Johnson is not one of them.

I cannot wait ...

SUBMITTED BY JOE MUSICH ON OCTOBER 15, 2014 - 11:12PM

for this education discussion to hit bottom and enter a 12 step program. There seems to be no good guys except the classroom teachers.