

C O M M E N T A R Y

# It's Never Too Late for Compassion

When the going gets rough in school politics, there are very few of us who'd like to be sitting on the board of education.

After all, it's not a no-pay job that very often seems to have very little to do with the actual education of kids. There are multi-million dollar budgets to deal with, tax hikes to approve and ... every so often, the thorniest of personnel issues seem to come up.

Members of the Liberty Board of Education now find themselves between a rock and a hard place as they move forward with a plan to remove a Middle School librarian from her job. A hearing to conduct what is known as a 3020-a proceeding against librarian Angela Page is set to begin March 26. If the school district wins, it would mean the termination of Page's job at the school. She has worked there for 23 years.

In point of fact, Ms. Page has not been at her post in the Middle School library for the past three years. She has instead been sick and suffering with multiple chemical sensitivities. It's a malady that is growing more and more common across the nation as an increasing level of contaminants enter the atmosphere. The illness suffered by Ms. Page is thought to be the result of extraordinary amounts of mold in the school and especially in the library where she spent most of her working hours since 1991. It is well-known that the leaking school provided an ample growing ground for mold and their destructive spores. The school board and administration have taken steps to correct the problem, though problems persist.

At any rate, Ms. Page has not been able to return to school and does not want to retire. She is only 50 and not of retirement age.

The circumstances surrounding negotiations between Ms. Page and the school are not public. It is clear that some give-and-take was attempted, but to no success.

Ms. Page, it has been stated, prefers to continue working. As her life partner, John Webber, told the school board Monday night, teaching is what she loves and it is "what

makes her a person." In an era when too many would take early retirement or disability payments and not look back, it is hard to find fault with someone who wants to keep working in some way simply because she loves it and happens to be good at it.

Colleagues and supporters of Page testified as to her dedication and caring attitude. The senior class valedictorian, Amarynth Sichel, told a personal story of how action taken by Ms. Page five years ago allowed her to get into the school honors program, a program from which the girl had been closed out.

Ms. Page has made it clear that she wants the school to accommodate her request to have a job. It has been suggested that she could conduct work over the Internet, create a virtual library, work as a grants writer from home or in an environment that is safe for her condition.

Many an outside observer would agree that it is a tough thing to watch a child stand before the school board to ask them not to fire her mother. But Miranda Hardy did an admirable job of it Monday night. She spoke of her mom's skill as a librarian and an educator and talked a bit about the difficulties that her mom's disability has meant for her family (prior to the mold-induced sickness, Ms. Page had been a healthy and vibrant member of the staff and mother to her kids). This slight girl of 17 then went on to tell it like it is: "Why would you put your money into lawyers and court cases when accommodation is both the easy thing and the cheap thing?"

That's teenaged wisdom cutting to the chase. It also makes a good deal of sense for a school board to listen to its staff, especially when 130 out of 160 union members signed a petition asking the school board to reconsider (some did not sign as they were untenured).

In a remarkable and sometimes moving show of solidarity, the Liberty teaching staff stood tall and united Monday night in the face of what would appear to be a wrongful action against one of its colleagues. Remember, the teachers

really have nothing to gain in all of this. They will not get raises or increase their benefits. They are only asking that the right thing be done. And in this case, going forward with the firing of Angela Page can and will only be seen as the wrong thing.

While there may be many reasons for removing Ms. Page from her job, there is none that makes sense from the standpoint of human compassion.

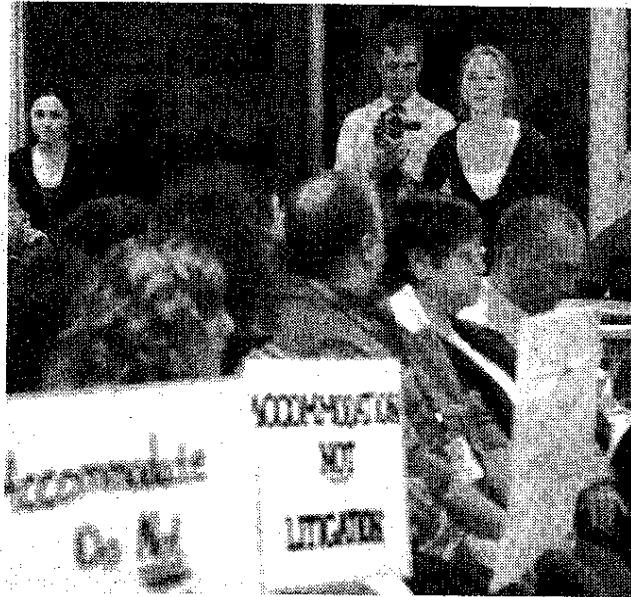
Former longtime school board member Charlie Barbuti was able to speak with considerable credibility Monday night from his seat in the audience. Everyone there knew that Mr. Barbuti has seen his share of contentious issues. But this time, he had to confess, he was "at a loss ... to figure out what possessed the board to come to this decision."

He is right; it has come as a shock to many. Indeed, the

EDITORIAL

# The Towne Crier

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**SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD** Miranda Hardy on Monday night asked the Liberty School board to refrain from firing her mother.

general public is at a loss to see how and why it could possibly be fair to fire an employee who has put more than 20 years into a school district job only to fall sick due to conditions in the school itself. The general public also fears that this is a dismal and dangerous message to give to students. Complexities aside, the pending action carries a message that says it is OK to fire a person just for being sick – we all know that in a conscientious society we do not condone that kind of thinking or that kind of action. We hope to teach our children that this kind of action is wrong.

There is no real way to see the coming 3020-a hearing as something other than negative, destructive and unfeeling. Even the idea that the school board might be trying to save taxpayer money does not wash as we all know that the 3020-a disciplinary proceeding is among the costliest personnel actions on record. Even in the case of a so-called victory for the school board, the legalities and the costs will drag on and the focus, at least for some in this district, will be on all of the wrong things and not on delivering a thorough and excellent education to the children of Liberty.

To reverse a decision once it has been made – such as this decision to take the Angela Page case through the 3020-a process – is not easy and it is rare. But as speech teacher Bill Fleck pointed out Monday night, it's not impossible.

It takes courage – an uncommon trait – but one that, from time to time, is found on even the most beleaguered of school boards.