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District flunked test on evaluating school principals - petrilli trial revealed weakness

Lexington Herald-Leader (KY) - Monday, August 17, 2009

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At issue

Herald-Leader editorial, July 31: "The rest of the story; Petrilli case leaves troubling questions."

A surprising revelation from Peggy Petrilli's unsuccessful racial discrimination suit against Fayette County Superintendent Stu Silberman was that principals rarely - if ever - get marked down on their evaluations.

A Herald-Leader editorial was correct to say, "the district must do a better job of evaluating employees. ... employees who aren't accurately graded can't really be expected to improve."

Given his considerable talents, it must have been difficult for the editorial board to pen comments critical of Silberman, although they softened it as much as they could. Their assessment that problems existed with "the district" deflected responsibility. And writing that "employees" weren't being marked down takes the focus off principals, the real issue.

Silberman testified that he was aware of numerous problems at Booker T. Washington Academy, but incredibly, the Herald-Leader claims he "had no inkling of the irregularities that would later be discovered."

Silberman told the jury that the district immediately reported allegations that Petrilli was cheating on state tests to the Kentucky Department of Education. In fact, before her resignation, the board attorney advised Silberman to suspend Petrilli, but he refused.

No inkling? C'mon.

Silberman testified, "It was an ongoing litany of problems and we supported Peggy in every single one of them... please understand there was a problem every other day."

The jury heard that she demoted fourth graders on the first day of testing, monkeyed with test booklets, muffed hiring practices, created tremendous staff turnover, went back on agreements, ignored students' individual education plans, jeopardized Reading First funding for 11 schools and made unilateral program changes that damaged relationships.

The district showed, to great effect, that parents had reason to complain on grounds that had nothing to do with race, thus crippling Petrilli's claim of a discriminatory conspiracy.

But you wouldn't know any of it from looking at Petrilli's stellar evaluations.

Silberman says they "supported Peggy." But what the district really did was enable Petrilli by not using the evaluation system as it was intended: to motivate her to improve in areas where she

was weak.

In a May 2008 editorial the Herald-Leader regretted its prior belief in "miracle-working" principals and noted "how eager everyone was to be gulled, to believe that all it takes is the right principal for kids who have almost no advantages to suddenly knock the lid off standardized tests."

Has the paper really sworn off the idea of a savior, or just switched to superintendents? Having helped build the pedestal from which Petrilli fell, would they erect a new one for Silberman?

We should support our leaders when they are right and depart from them when they are wrong. But if leadership is not challenged through the evaluation system or in the public forum, the motivation to do better disappears.

State regulations already outline an evaluation system that will work, but only if the district uses it as designed.

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