

Republican Perspective
2 December 2015
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A Teachable Moment

Josef Stalin is reputed to have said “It doesn’t matter who gets the most votes. It only matters who counts the votes.” A Soviet version of democracy.

“When we reviewed the results of our Associated Student Body election...we saw that it was not fully representative of our school population. I made the decision to pause on sharing the results with the students in order to capitalize on a teachable moment.” So wrote Principal Lena Van Haren, trying to explain to dismayed parents and students why she had put the election results on hold.

Now before going further, let me say that Van Haren is not the issue here. The issue is that there are likely other like-minded administrators out there. Van Haren is just the immediate symbol of that mindset. Please read on.

According to the principal, the student body of Everett Middle School in San Francisco is 80% students of color (predominantly Hispanic) and 20% white. But the student council election results did not mirror that mix. The winners were white and Asian. Van Haren thought this situation needed some remedy, so she notified the parents by e-mail that she was delaying the results while she pondered what to do.

Van Haren said she wanted “to make sure all voices are heard from all backgrounds.” Weren’t all voices heard when they voted in the election? Well of course they were, but sabotaging the results has the opposite effect---making sure their voices are *not* heard.

Van Haren may have come up with a solution. She said the school might add several appointive positions to the student council---thus achieving the racial representation she favors without actually ousting those who won the election. Of course this solution makes a mockery of the election, disenfranchises the students, and undermines the democratic process by diluting the election results.

The parents and students see what is happening and they’re not happy. One student summed it up this way: “The whole school voted for those people, so it’s not like people rigged the game, but in a way, now it’s kinda being rigged.”

So the principal seems to see two competing concepts here. On the one hand, she believes that students can only be represented properly by those of their same race. She said “It’s not ok for a school that is really, really diverse to have the student representatives majority white.” On the other hand, there is the

democratic process---by which the student body (including those “of color”) chose their representatives.

Her initial reaction to put the election results on hold was not a good omen for democracy at Everett Middle School. The public outcry has caused her to say “We’re not nullifying the election...we’re not saying this didn’t count.” It is scary that an educator sees the two competing concepts of democracy and racial parity as equally deserving of consideration. Worse yet, that she could think the desirability of any particular outcome might outweigh the value of the democratic process.

It is unclear what lesson Principal Van Haren hoped to deliver from this “teachable moment.” Clearly it was she, not the students, who had something to learn. And apparently she did learn something, because she said: “In retrospect I understand how this decision...created concerns. Today I visited classrooms to announce the winners.”

It would have been much better if she had actually learned that the sanctity of the democratic system is infinitely more valuable than achieving the desired outcome. Better still if she had known this from the get-go, and had never even considered tampering with the election.