

HOME

“The gangs all here let’s give a cheer, give a cheer for Sexton High, we will keep that name a symbol here.”

It’s a song of good times and innocence, the cheer of the west side Lansing high school built a few miles away from the one-room, wooden schoolhouse where classes were first held in 1847. But there’s a hushed controversy that kept the class of 2002 from hearing any valedictorian speeches at Saturday’s graduation ceremony at the Breslin Center, and that leaves graduating seniors feeling anything but innocent. High school is no shelter from the tooth-and-claw competition that awaits them in the “real world,” once the rites of passages of graduation were over. This year, there were no songs at commencement.

It all began in April 2001. Two top female students in their junior year had perfect grade point averages until they were told they’d receive B+ grades in their chemistry class. The girls had “worked their butts off since first grade,” one’s mother told City Pulse, and did not deserve to lose their valedictorian status because of a single B+. Both of the students were African-American. Could this be a situation of racism? After the intervention of their parents, who had good contacts with district officials, the girls were allowed to repeat the chemistry class as an independent study. That decision frustrated students, who felt the two students had been given a chance not available to everyone. Sexton High’s principal, Clyde Carnegie, worked to resolve things quietly. But the valedictorian controversy frustrated students, who wrote letters to City Pulse and other local media, asking them to report on the story.

“They tried hard to sweep things under the carpet,” remembers T.J. Adams, who graduated in 2001. But the students had important questions: Was it all about learning or making the grade? Were the best students the ones with the most active parents? Did the low

ratio of African-American valedictorians suggest reverse racism? This year the girls were the only black valedictorians in a predominantly African-American high school.

Clyde Carnegie

Then “all hell broke loose one day,” describes one student. The accused teacher signed a grievance process with the teacher’s union for grade changes that occurred without her approval. City Pulse learned of the district administration’s resulting 60-page document (whose existence school officials later refused to confirm). Students whispered and argued about the case. Some even openly booed the two students. “Many don’t even look at our daughters as true valedictorians. They simply think their grades were changed,” said Toni Armstrong, the mother of one of them.

It was in the middle of these arguments among peers that Armstrong’s daughter was asked to give a speech at a 3.5 GPA honor’s banquet in May. But, her parents said, the young woman became a target of criticism from her peers. “Finally my daughter refused to speak, because the emotional pressure was much too high,” remembers Armstrong. And sadly, because of this “she lost the \$500” speaker payment.

Valedictorians receive even more money: an equal share of scholarship funds from a pot totaling roughly \$10,000. Additionally, valedictorians receive a big leg up for college admission and scholarships. A 2001 Sexton valedictorian, Samara Webb was awarded a full scholarship to Hope College and \$200,000 for postgraduate work in medicine.

“In the spring I planned to write a letter to the district, because what happened just didn’t seem right to me,” remembers one of this year’s valedictorians. “The girls were purposely playing their minority card, although our chemistry teacher is far from being racist.” Nobody understood why they were allowed to take an independent study course, since this was usually allowed only when class hours conflicted with normal schedules. “After I read the school’s guidelines twice, I really felt I had to get this off my chest.” What kept him from writing the letter was that in April “the girls’ mothers came to our class. One girl pointed me out and called me ‘little Chinese boy.’” In front of the teacher and class she referred to another valedictorian student as “that white girl.” No disciplinary actions were taken. Rather than writing the letter, the student decided to just wait until this “ridiculous experience” was over and to move onto college in the fall.

Because of the ongoing controversy, no valedictorian was allowed to

address the graduating class last Saturday, in fear of angering more people. "I was kind of looking forward to giving a speech, as my aunt is coming from Texas and other relatives from California," said one. The whole story left a bitter taste in his mouth. "I don't think I want to return to Lansing very soon again."

The Scandal That Wasn't There

Although Sexton High School students criticized the district's policy of "sweeping things under the carpet," the grown-ups – concerned about the two students in question and about the bad press – pretended there was nothing to report. "There's no controversy," they told City Pulse. The principal, Clyde Carnegie, denied comment. One would probably "have to ask the Human Resources Department," he said. The school's head counselor, Aubrey Radcliffe, wouldn't talk either. And the school district's media spokesman, Mark Mayes, didn't even see "that there is a case, I wouldn't even call it an investigation." The accused chemistry teacher couldn't comment for fear of losing her job. It seems like we have a case of the scandal that wasn't there. "There was a disagreement over a grade – and students were allowed to take the class over again on an independent study basis," Mayes said.

Larry Mc Queen, the teacher advocate at the Michigan Education Association, is still waiting for the investigation report from the district, the report which officially doesn't exist. "What we believe has occurred is that the school district, contrary to the contract, has altered the mathematical impact of the teacher's assigned grades - and this has been taken to arbitration." The unionist also represents a Sexton math teacher whose grades would have also endangered the valedictorian status of one girl. The student was failing the second semester of Advanced Placement Calculus, a class designed to prepare students to take the AP test, to gain credit for lower level college math classes. Her status was changed to an audit, something unheard of. "It became clear that the instructor was not notified of this and was forced to go along for the ride," remembers another student in the class. This made another young woman who'd lost her perfect GPA in this class very upset. She requested to audit the calculus class but was not allowed, even though she had more credit hours of As than any other student. Does the reader, like the journalist, worry that the atmosphere of heated competition in Lansing's school system might not be healthy for its students?

"I would blame the entire situation on the principal, Dr. Carnegie," says another graduating senior. "He's allowing these two girls to maintain a 4.0, which helps the image of our school, a minority school." Fifty-five percent of Sexton High School's students are

African American. Rates at Eastern (25 percent) and Everett (38 percent) high schools are lower. None of the students City Pulse spoke with, half a dozen of whom were African-American, considered the teacher to be racist.

“I had no idea that the valedictorian thing would create so much tension,” says Toni Armstrong, the mother. “Is it a racial issue or is it not? Would all of this controversy have been raised if they weren’t black? It makes me wonder.” She explains how the parents tried to resolve the problem without making a big scene. That’s why instead of formally appealing the grade (which would take the two girls out of valedictorian status) they chose to deal with the principal, to “leave the teacher alone, and try to fix the problem without ruining her reputation.” Armstrong concedes if she could have foreseen the tension “maybe we should have just asked for a hearing.”

The second student’s mother confirms that she also wanted to resolve the case with the principal together with the district’s superintendent, E. Sharon Banks. She criticized the chemistry teacher’s indifference toward two high-achieving African-American students. “She knew that they were on a valedictorian track, she knew that they’d received nothing but As and this was the first B they’ve ever received.” The mother also blamed the chemistry teacher for changing her grading system to a bell curve method - which is supposed to help weaker students pass by raising the bar. However, within this grading system the girl’s extra-credit points were now worth less. “She can’t just institute a new form of grading halfway into the year. I know that. I’m a teacher.”

Another graduating senior adds that until the valedictorian controversy, he’d never seen district officials at the high school. Now, with the investigation, they were everywhere. He’d also seen one of the two girl’s grandmothers step in. The grandmother, Jacqueline Warr, was the secretary of the school district’s Board of Education. Warr declined comment. And Armstrong believes “there should be more parents involved in their children’s education.”

Making the Grade

A recent study of the National Center for Education Statistics shows that parents have a strong influence on their kid’s high school performance as well as their later academic careers. “Therefore, examining parents’ education in relation to students’ behaviors and academic experiences as they plan and prepare for college during high school may produce insights into how the influence of parents’ education might be reduced,” concludes the report, “Students Whose Parents Did Not Go to College.” The author, Susan Choy, suggests rethinking the entire financial aid policies, to focus more on

parent's educational backgrounds, instead of simply offering some scholarship monies to minority and low-income groups. As parents' education increases, so does students' likelihood of enrolling in post-secondary education. Of 1,992 high school graduates whose parents did not go to college, 59 percent enrolled in some form of post-secondary education in 1994. The enrollment rate increased to 75 percent among those whose parents had some college experience, and to 93 percent among those whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree.

"It's the educational backgrounds, it's not the money," confirms Aubrey Radcliffe, head counselor at Sexton High School. Concerned parents are seen quite frequently in the limestone building at 102 McPherson. Many of them work for the state government, explains Radcliffe. "We have a strong middle class background here." According to 2001 data, Sexton ranks first in terms of academic excellence. One in 18 students exceeded Michigan standards in math, reading, science or writing, while at Everett it's one in 26, and at Eastern one in 25.

Sexton High School seniors wait in line to receive their diplomas at the Breslin Center. The first seven on the right were this year's valedictorians.

As a consequence it seems unsurprising that the state Department of Education's accountability plan for a more competitive public school system – "Education YES! A Yardstick for Excellent Schools" – was unveiled at Sexton in December 2001. The proposal aimed at improving schools and closing achievement gaps, was a direct response to complaints from parents and the business community for greater school accountability. Starting in 2003, principals will have three years to adjust to the new accreditation standards before the first official grades are handed out in 2006, and annually thereafter. Three-quarters of the school accountability grade will be based on the scores of students taking the Michigan Education Assessment Program Test. The rest will be based on factors such as parental involvement, professional development, school attendance and drop out rates. Such a program may do little to dispel growing tensions among students trying to make the grade, made visible during this year's grade change controversy at Sexton.

A stricter evaluation of school achievement may rather reinforce the unhealthy struggle for better grades, as grants take mainly GPA figures into account. The Michigan Merit Award Program provides merit scholarships to high school graduates with a high qualifying score on the MEAP test. Last year, 87 Eastern, 85 Everett and 68 Sexton high school graduates received the prestigious award, a success rate that is about the same in relation to the three

school's enrollment figures. In addition, there is also the National Merit Scholarship Program. This year's three Lansing high school students are in the final running for 8,000 Merit Scholarships, worth more than \$32 million. Three other Lansing students are finalists in the National Achievement Scholarship Program, an academic competition for black high school students. They are in the final group applying for 700 Achievement Scholarships worth a total of \$2.5 million.

It was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the progressive French 18th century educational philosopher, who sent each of his kids to an orphanage, because he couldn't pay for their schooling. Rousseau's educational theories had a large influence on predecessors, who would demand that the state should provide free education for every citizen. It's questionable whether Rousseau would have had more choices for his children were he living in the United States today and trying to send them to college. It's a huge investment today to produce a successful child. Annual tuition at Lansing Community College is \$1,576. With the recent tuition hike, an in-state college freshman can expect to pay \$5,666 to attend Michigan State University. Harvard carries the hefty bill of \$24,630. And we haven't even mentioned room and board or expenses for travel and books. Student's educations are like everything else in a competitive market (i.e. automobiles, restaurants, clothing): Price dictates quality.

The Broader Picture

Most of the students City Pulse spoke with were fed up with the "shameful fact that the incident happened in front of hundreds of other students, faculty and administrators and yet nothing was said or done," as one young man put it. The fight over grades, and the competitive culture at a school, with high failure rates for freshman created unnecessary pressures and frustrations, another source told. The principal's effort to avoid any public debate about the scandal at Sexton thus led many students to experience a "totally screwed up graduation." Even the fact that no student speakers were allowed during commencement turned into a small scandal, because students said the principal misinformed student representatives that none of the other district schools had student speakers either. Both Everett and Eastern high schools didn't see any reason to interrupt the tradition of letting their valedictorians speak to the audience at Breslin Center. As soon as his senior year ended in 2001, T.J. Adams left Lansing "because of hypocrisies such as this." Frustrated about the superficiality of the grade scandal that spring, he went to Brazil for a Summer Missionary Apprenticeship. He decided not to attend his own graduation – "so much of a farce it had become."

“There shall be no dissent in Middletown and our town, our industries and public utilities, and our ways of doing things shall be accepted uncritically as right. If conditions of national and local strain continue even moderately sharp, Middletown’s forward-looking teachers will either ‘tone down’ their teaching or conceivably be quietly removed.” Your City Pulse reporter takes this quote from Robert and Helen Lynd’s sociological study of a close-knit, midwestern industry town published back in 1937. Teachers anxiously seek the backing of their union representatives; the economy and society is changing, and principals no longer seem fully responsible or able to control what happens inside their schools, though they try to keep a firm grip. Perhaps in this respect not much has changed. Today however, the pressures of small town and big city (BIG WORLD) are merging. When small town folks want to keep a secret, they refer you to their press speaker.

Across America today, some school districts have gotten rid of the old-fashioned valedictorian tradition. Since 1999 many top high school students in the Washington, D.C., area are no longer recognized with this title for their hard work and diligence. Area schools simply abolished the tradition of naming valedictorians and salutatorians. Two reasons are feelings of inadequacy among lower-performing students and an unhealthy competitiveness between students. In 1993, the Montgomery County Board of Education passed a resolution saying that high schools no longer had to report student grade rankings to colleges. As a result, many county high school administrators interpreted the policy to mean they should not honor valedictorians. Therefore, they’ve dropped their honors program. Most of the county’s high schools do not honor individual valedictorians, believing colleges care more about which classes students take and less about their “weighted” grade point averages. In Fairfax County, Va., Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology (one of the country’s top schools) has also dropped its valedictorian tradition. “To sort out people at the top, we would have to deal with hundredths of decimal points, and that seems not productive to us,” explained Shirley Bloomquist, the school’s guidance director.

“I guess the whole valedictorian tradition needs to be changed,” comments Toni Armstrong thoughtfully. Although she’d successfully fought for her own daughter to remain on the list, she now feels sad about the fact that there weren’t any student speeches at graduation. “Why can’t salutatorians speak? It could be anybody, a wonderful story of child’s challenges in his or her life at high school!”

It was a lackluster graduation ceremony on Saturday, June 15. The principal listlessly read out each student’s name. Graduates seemed

only welcome to fetch their diplomas and quickly leave the show. No students gave speeches. The grown-ups exchanged a few wise phrases, like Malcolm X's famous quote, "Education is your passport to the future." But these were read bookishly, in weighted air. Nobody mentioned what had caused the 14-month turmoil at the public school, although attentive listeners sought clues of it as the Sexton Area Director Diana Rouse spoke. "I've gotten to know many of you in the last year. We've grown to love and respect each other." It was only when Mrs. Rouse announced her regards "to your retiring principal," that the student body applauded enthusiastically. Dr. Clyde Carnegie had been the Principal at Sexton for 22 years. Too bad he had to end his career as the man who kept things under control. Too bad about the scandal that wasn't there, the important questions swept under the rug. In his speech, Carnegie praised those "who had demonstrated leadership," unaware that his muzzle had weakened that spirit of leadership and purpose, in this silent crowd of graduating seniors — the exhausted class of 2002.