Let school board president take a pay cut

Tying salaries to graduation rate won’t fix problem, but it can set tone of leadership

A while back, Van Henri White proposed linking Rochester Board of Education members’ pay to the graduation rate.

You might be shocked to learn that the board did not adopt this suggestion. So no financial repercussions will result from the fact that Rochester’s graduation rate has fallen to 43 percent, making it the lowest in the state.

Under the formula in White’s first proposal, the financial penalty would have been about $100. Rochester’s board members, who are slated to earn more than $25,000 next school year, would have remained New York’s highest-paid by far. They take home more than three times the salary of Syracuse’s board members, who earn $7,500 a year, and five times Buffalo’s, who earn $5,000.

Over the years, Rochester’s board members have defended their salaries, which are linked to the salaries of the City Council. They say that other school boards are underpaid, given the complex and time-consuming work.

From time to time, board members in Buffalo and Syracuse have proposed pay increases for themselves. Not because they want more money, of course, but because higher salaries for school board members might mean better student results. Opponents of such raises just tell voters to look Rochester’s way.

The last time Buffalo’s president asked for a salary boost, one man suggested that board members should instead be eligible for bonuses if attendance and graduation rates passed 80 percent. A salary increase that was not tied to performance goals would make no sense whatsoever, he wrote on The Buffalo News website. He wrote: “Rochester by the way, which pays their board members $23,000, has a school system which performs worse than Buffalo.”

Our school board members’ salaries are higher now, and our graduation rate is lower. The Rochester board’s total budget next year will be $589,330, according to budget documents on the district’s website. Boards in Syracuse and Buffalo, which both saw increases in their graduation rates this year, are each slated to spend less than half that figure.

After White failed to get school board members to give up a tiny portion of their very large salaries, he came back with another proposal that would have affected only his pay as president. The president receives a few thousand extra dollars for extra responsibilities, and White proposed a policy requiring the president to give it back if the graduation rate fell. White said he believes that it is important to lead by example, especially at a time when the district is trying to hold teachers and other staff accountable for the results of their work.

Since the proposal affected only his pay, he was surprised to encounter resistance. Even talk of a sunset clause that would end the penalty at the end of White’s term as president wasn’t enough to get the proposal out of the board’s governance committee. A school board president giving back a few thousand dollars isn’t going to save the world. But the board’s rejection of this symbolic gesture adds to a long list of things that just don’t look good at 131 W. Broad St.

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Board of Education president Van White proposed pay for board members be tied to the city's graduation rate, but his proposal was denied.