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CITY & REGION

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THE BUFFALO NEWS

Wednesday, February 6, 2008

Board stands behind Williams — for now

*Recent controversy
adds to divisiveness*

BY PETER SIMON

NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Superintendent James A. Williams' support on the Buffalo Board of Education remains steady — but still tenuous — following weeks of public controversy surrounding the

suspension of a McKinley High School student.

Williams' supporters said he is driving long-needed improvement in the troubled school system and the McKinley situation has been overblown and should not be allowed to halt or slow down that progress.

Critics on the board called for an investigation of how the suspension was handled. They said it demonstrates the secretive nature of Williams' administration and his ten-



File photo

Superintendent James A. Williams has at least four reliable supporters on School Board.

dency to hurt himself by doing and saying "outrageous" things.

But Williams still has at least four reliable supporters on the nine-member board and has shown the ability to craft majorities on most key issues. And while his yearly evaluation is coming up, there is no clear indication that his job is in jeopardy.

Williams, under contract through July 2011, makes \$205,000 a year.

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Divisions preceded McKinley controversy

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"I think he's doing a great job," said Christopher Jacobs, an at-large board member. "It's a very difficult job. It's a huge organization, and things will happen."

West District board member Lou Petrucci said the suspension of Jayvonna Kincaannon demonstrates the uneven nature of Williams' work, and he is seeking a full investigation.

"[Williams] will go down a path where he does many good things," Petrucci said. "Then he does something so outrageous that we say: 'Where is this coming from?' He makes these gaffes that make your jaw drop. It undermines any good things he's done."

Jayvonna and her supporters said she was punished for attempting to protest the dismissal of an assistant basketball coach. School administrators said she violated several rules and was insubordinate.

Interviews Monday and Tuesday with eight of the nine board members also revealed sharp differences of opinion on the board's proper role in following up on the suspension.

Williams' supporters point out that the superintendent already has said that a planned seven-week suspension was too long, that it was shortened to five weeks and that Jayvonna is back in school.

They generally believe the board's follow-up should be limited to a review of the district's rules and regulations regarding student suspensions.

"Beyond that, I think we need to leave it alone and get on with the business of educating children," said Florence Johnson, an at-large board member. "I think it has been handled as best as it could be handled."

West District board member Ralph Hernandez disagreed, saying Jayvonna's suspension should be fully investigated by the board's Ethics Committee.

"I think it was handled poorly," he said. "I truly feel there was an attempt to cover it up. I think the board should take full control of the issue."

But Hernandez, who is often a key swing vote, said he is keeping an open mind. "Until all the facts are in, I wouldn't judge the man," he said.

The bulk of Williams' support has long come from Jacobs, Johnson, Vivian Evans and Catherine Collins, all of whom were on the board that brought him to Buffalo in 2005.

"I'm saying, unequivocally, that I have the utmost confidence in the superintendent's ability," Johnson said.

"I wouldn't use one incident to make a judgment on a superintendent's ability to do his job," said Evans, the East District representative. "As long as the superintendent is doing the job we hired him to do, which is improving student achievement, I don't see how this weighs in."

Board President Mary Ruth Kapsiak said the superintendent's support apparently was not diminished by the controversy. At the same time, Kapsiak said the details of the suspension remain unclear.

"I can't say what happened here because I don't have all the facts," she said.

Catherine Nugent Panepinto, the board's North District member, earlier this week called for an investigation by the Ethics Committee and said an independent investigator may be needed to lead the probe.

Underlying the disagreements over the board's role in the McKinley suspension are broader differences over the responsibilities of board members.

Evans and Johnson describe themselves as policy-makers who leave day-to-day operations to the superintendent and his staff.

"I'm not really clear on all the details," Evans said. "It's not my job to be clear on all the details."

"I hire a superintendent," Johnson said.

"I set policy. I make sure resources are in place for these things to be carried out."

Petrucci favors a more activist role.

"Oftentimes we, the board, are kept at arm's length and at a distance," he said. "That's a terrible way to run a district."

Hernandez said it is unclear how the board will proceed with the McKinley situation, or even when it will be fully discussed.

"Unfortunately, we're not communicating the way we should," he said. "We should be communicating more, especially on matters like this."

Board member Pamela Perry-Cahill said she has not been provided enough information to make a judgment on how the case was handled or what kind of follow-up there should be.

"I honestly do not have the answers yet," she said. "What I do have doesn't make sense."

Collins could not be reached to comment.

Deep divisions on the board preceded the McKinley controversy.

Mistrust developed a month before Perry-Cahill, Kapsiak, Petrucci and Nugent Panepinto took office last year, when the previous board gave Williams a two-year contract extension. The new board members — who had been elected but were not yet in office — said they were shut out of that process.

And at the new board's first meeting, the four new members formed a voting bloc with Hernandez and shut the returning members out of key leadership positions.

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