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Participant Observation of a Binghamton School Board Meeting

It is 7 pm on a Tuesday night. A rainstorm spills a miserable mess of wet and wind upon the city. An October chill rocks the air and seeps into the bones of the few soaked and bedraggled souls that hurry down the streets. Any warmth that Binghamton usually holds has been stolen by the grim weather; any evidence of the city's pulse has been drowned out by the torrent of rain. It is, without a doubt, a terrible night for business. Unfortunately, it's this day—October 22nd, 2019—that the Binghamton City School Board is holding its monthly meeting. The Columbus School lies in the heart of Binghamton, NY and deep in the heart of the storm. When someone approaches such a place, soaked and cold, they should ask themselves: why would anyone want to be here?

The Columbus School is unremarkable: thick, limestone bricks make up the building—blocky and imposing against the night sky. It has a security guard at the front entrance, a main stairwell, and an elevator that inches its way as slowly as it can between floors. It is, for lack of a better term, a school. The meeting is held in a relatively impressive room, a spacious performance hall, probably intended for the school's various bands and musical groups. There are three tables set into a “U” shape that have a placard and a place for each member of the school board. A few rows of chairs sit in front of the tables, despite the raised auditorium seats that line the left wall. Attendance is sparse; about nineteen people are in the room, half of them children. A few, muted conversations between onlookers can be heard before the meeting starts. Two women discuss the previous meetings—it is obvious that they have been here more than a couple of times. A man leans over to the two young boys who sit next to him and asks them how they are feeling. An excited buzz comes from three boys who each hold a different type of saxophone. Scattered reassurances litter the air and it is plain that the trepidation that fills the room is for something other than the upcoming bureaucracy.

Ten nametags populate on the board's table: Christina Choi, David Thon, Tonia Thompson (Superintendent), Joseph Gasior (President), Brian Whalen (Vice President), Penelope Harper, Korin Kirk, Liz Rosenberg, Steve Seepersaud, and one student body representative. At 7:06 pm the student body representative is the only one seated—and the only one in the room. He has been left alone, and it raises the question: how indicative is this of greater proceedings? How much is the student body considered? How loud is the student voice? The rest of the members arrive all at the same time, through the same door, about five minutes after the student. It is clear that they have come from some sort of preliminary meeting—conversations continue, jokes shared, as everyone carries in the same brand of plastic water bottle. There is an apparent distinction, when they first enter the room, between the student body representative and the adult

representatives. Everyone takes their seat and President Gasior opens the meeting.

They start with the Pledge of Allegiance, led by two young boys, probably each around eight years old—a decision that is beyond confounding. The Pledge, by itself, is a questionable and outdated form of blind nationalism, but to have it delivered by the youngest, least autonomous people in the room only compounds these issues. Everyone stands, everyone places their hand over their heart—except for one teenage girl—and everyone recites the long-ago memorized words. No one seems to take issue with the Pledge of Allegiance's presence or its antiquated and obsolete message.

The two boys who led the Pledge, Dennis and Joshua, are from the Horace Mann School, an elementary school on the West side of the city that serves approximately 300 students each year. They are there to see a presentation from one of their teachers, who organized a school-wide field trip to Camp Sertoma. He details how, in an effort to expose their children to outdoor activities, Horace Mann brought every one of their students on a day trip to Camp Sertoma to fish, hike, roast marshmallows, and explore the wilderness. Despite the dense forestry of Binghamton's surrounding area, many of Horace Mann's students had never been outside of the city to participate in a camping experience. It was an interesting approach to learning: teach a new experience, not new information. The presentation goes well and seems to garner positive reactions from every member of the school board. Liz Rosenberg makes particular note of the “real world experiences” and will continue to bring up the Horace Mann trip throughout the night.

Immediately following the Camp Sertoma presentation is a musical performance from members of the Columbus School stage band. Three boys, each with a different denomination of saxophone (alto, tenor, and baritone), played a number for those present. It seems unnecessary, perhaps, to comment on the band, or the boys, but it does seem necessary to question their purpose at this meeting. Why did three, handpicked, saxophone players need to perform in front of the school board? Were they there to show progress? Promise? Before the performance it was mentioned that the music department employs 25% of their student base, but picking the three best players out of that base seems a very disingenuous way to represent progress or promise. Are they there purely for posturing? Was it merely to show *something* good to the board or its onlookers? There was no discernable purpose for the stage band's performance other than to sound nice. Which, in and of itself, is fine but is fairly problematic given the setting. If there is no argument coming from those instruments, if there is no case being made, if there is nothing new being said, then all the three boys act as propaganda. Their performance betrays the role of the Binghamton City School District Board and anticipates the meeting that follows: the board is meant to better and maintain Binghamton's schools, it is meant to constantly critique and improve its decisions. It is not meant to promote inactivity; it is not meant to pat itself on the back.

After the music ends, it is obvious that the main draw of the meeting is the Camp

Sertoma presentation, albeit obligatory. There are nine people left in the room when the board begins to discuss their agenda. There is one main topic of debate: filling a vacancy on the board. There are only six members on the actual school board—the other four names at the table are part of the superintendent's office—and someone has received enough support to be considered for the open seat. This person or persons are never named, but they have the vote of the public for a spot on the Binghamton City School Board. Unfortunately, for whoever this person is, not only is the public's vote required for a seat on the school board, but so is the vote of four current school board members. The debate over this vacancy has been ongoing. According to Gasior, it had been the hot topic for the past three meetings and if not resolved in October, projects to be a problem for many more. The board is split into two camps on the issue: on one side Korin Kirk, Liz Rosenberg, and Penelope Harper support filling the seat; on the other Brian Whalen, Steve Seepersaud, and Joseph Gasior oppose filling the seat. Whalen and Rosenberg act as the spearheads for their respective sides, their arguments vehemently inflexible. Whalen argues that the board's job is to conduct business, and adding another member would slow down that business for a couple of months. He says that, with only four people technically required to have the board function, there is no obligation to add a seventh member. Rosenberg's counter is fairly simple, as government officials they have a responsibility to uphold the decisions of the voters. She says that more members create a more functional democracy, regardless of obligation. It is obvious from the beginning, however, that Rosenberg's side is fighting a losing battle, especially with Korin Kirk absent from October's meeting. Gasior motions for a vote on filling the seat.

It fails: 3-2.

The arguments made by Brian Whalen's team during this debate are concerning. Referring to the board's purpose as "conducting business" is not necessarily wrong, but it's grossly oversimplified. The school board is an agent of the community's parents and kids. It is designed to conduct business, yes, but it is designed to conduct business for a very specific reason: to shape educational policy based on the interests of the community it represents. If that district's community members have decided to elect a new official to the school board, then the school board's business becomes getting this new person on board. Whalen's language indicates that he has a very different understanding of what his job means—and, debatably, indicates that his understanding is dangerously wrong.

Rosenberg's argument is more reassuring, although her word choice is a bit troubling. Where Whalen repeats the phrase "conducting business," Rosenberg repeatedly uses the word "stakeholder" to refer to her supporters. It does not automatically imply that Rosenberg is some sort of corrupt shill—a political stakeholder is merely a citizen, or someone who has a stake in political impact—but it does raise uncertainty about Rosenberg's stake in the election. Rosenberg supports filling the seat because she had a responsibility to her "stakeholders" to do so. A question remains, however: is that responsibility there because she respects the public's decision

or because her stakeholders are the same as the newly elected board member? Is Rosenberg fighting for democracy, or fighting for her *side*?

The inner workings of the school board were interesting to see. The different alliances, oppositions, and bureaucratic proceedings were plain from the moment the members began to speak to each other. The politics of it, even at such a low level, were gripping. I think the most interesting way to approach the meeting, however, is to look at the public engagement it garnered. How was such little excitement generated from something so important? Where were all the supporters who voted this new person into office? There were nine people in the audience who came to watch their school board meet, nine people who were silent throughout the entire debate. The Binghamton City School District told its citizens that their vote didn't matter, and nine people came to sit and watch them do it. The meeting left me bewildered, angry: How could there be so few parents in the Binghamton school system who cared enough to come to this meeting? How could there be voters passionate and organized enough to elect a seventh member but not passionate and organized enough to make time to have themselves heard? Why didn't more community members feel responsible enough for Binghamton's future that they would ask themselves: how could I not be there?