

Newark students seize Cami Anderson's office

February 19, 2015

A small group of Newark high school students Tuesday night seized the office of state-appointed superintendent Cami Anderson in a protest timed to coincide with her imminent re-appointment to another year, her fifth, as head of the state's largest school district. The action, which is continuing through the night, stands in stark contrast to the failure of Anderson's older-and, theoretically, more powerful-critics to do anything to dislodge her from her post.



Charlotte Hitchcock, NPS counsel, tried to shoo students from Anderson's office. The students set up their broadcast center.

The operation was executed with an efficiency that has eluded Anderson's control of the district. The dozen students and a few adult advisers pulled off the occupation of the suite of offices on the eighth floor while a public school board meeting droned on two floors above on the tenth floor. The students had attended the meeting and some spoke, hinting broadly they were about to do something, and then left in a group-but they weren't going home to do their homework.



Newark students sprint down long eighth-floor hallway to get to Anderson's offices ahead of security officers.

The dozen or so students crammed into an elevator and pushed the 8th floor button, then sprinted to Anderson's office, expecting all the while to be met with resistance from security officers. Instead, the office site was wide open and empty except for a puzzled janitor who, while mopping the floors, cautioned the students not to slip on the wet tiles. "Be careful," he said, not quite sure of the intent of the visitors.

The students—many of them from the city's vaunted Science Park High School—set to work establishing what amounted to a communications center where they broadcast their demands that Anderson resign immediately—for, among other reasons, her failure for a year to attend board meetings, including the one the students had just left.

Within a few hours, the students were live-streaming appeals for support like a band of revolutionaries whose first target was a government-controlled television station.

At first, top administrators of the Newark schools were not amused—although it did take at least a half-hour before they realized their offices were under the control of their critics. Charlotte Hitchcock, Anderson's chief attorney, stormed into the occupied office followed by her security director, Eric Ingold, and demanded the students leave. They were "trespassing" on "private

property,” she told the public school students in the leadership suite of New Jersey’s largest public school system.

Hitchcock testily tried to prevent a photographer from taking her picture at that moment—resulting in a photo that shows the hubris of the Anderson administration with the added benefit of depicting students setting up their live-streaming apparatus and ignoring her and her pomposity.

“Thank you,” a student said to her after she delivered her warning.

The angry nature of the initial reaction did cause some concerns among the students, some of whom openly spoke about what might happen if the Newark police tried to arrest them. At the same time, Hitchcock and her security crew refused demands from Newark school board members to go to the site and meet with the students.

Something obviously clicked in the minds of Cami’s assistants because, in about 45 minutes, the same Hitchcock reappeared at the offices and sweetly assured the students they would be provided access to bathrooms and food would be delivered.

(Pizzas later arrived, delivered by none other than assistant superintendent Roger Leon, often thought to be the next superintendent if Anderson can ever be pried loose from her hold on the \$300,000 job. They were, however, purchased by school board member Marques-Aquil Lewis. Sounds like something Leon would do.)



A mellower Hitchcock promises food and access to bathrooms.

“Our main concern is the safety of the students,” Hitchcock told the students, just an hour after she warned the students her main concern was their audacity in trespassing on the inner sanctum of the Newark public school administration.

Soon, the students were welcoming school board members and others, including Middy Baraka, the chief of staff and brother to Mayor Ras Baraka, who posed for a picture with the occupying students. Thai Cooper, the mayor’s chief policy adviser, called the students and her remarks about “standing in solidarity” with their cause were loud-speakered across the room.



Board members were finally allowed in to meet the students after 10:30 pm

Board members who arrived expressing their support included Antoinette Baskerville-Richardson, Marques-Aquil Lewis, and Donald Jackson. The board members gave live-streamed interviews endorsing the students' demand that Anderson be fired.

"Can you imagine that we were not even allowed to enter the school administration's offices?" said Baskerville-Richardson, whose husband, Essex County Freeholder Wayne Richardson, also came to show support for the students. "This is what it means not to have local control."

This was the second sit-in staged by roughly the same group of students in less than a year. Last May, they took over a school board meeting and sat in. On that occasion, then mayor-elect Baraka came personally to support them. As of midnight Wednesday morning, the mayor had not contacted the students directly.

The student occupation of Anderson's office was more than just a bold act by some of the city's most talented students—it also was a reminder that the adults who are supposed to be leaders have been helpless in preventing Anderson from being re-appointed to another year as superintendent.

The mayor has demanded her resignation and so have a legion of other elected officials. She has been denounced by virtually every member of the Essex County legislative delegation and a slew of union leaders. But Anderson survives—because only one man decides whether she will stay.

And that is Chris Christie.

Bob Braun wrote for The Star-Ledger in Newark, NJ, for nearly 50 years. He served as its education editor for almost 30 years and then became its senior news columnist. He now writes the "Bob Braun's Ledger" blog, where this article first appeared.