

# OPINION: Climate of Fear is Real, Not Drama

Why is it that whenever New Bedford Educators Association (NBEA) President, Lou St. John, refers to a “climate of fear” that pervades the culture of the district, so few people understand the concept?

The Standard-Times, in a recent editorial called it “drama,” the Superintendent of Schools, Pia Durkin, dismissed the idea altogether, saying, it was simply that, “peoples comfort zones have been disturbed.”

By illustration, St John refers to the **deplorable chair-throwing debacle** at New Bedford High School, involving veteran business teacher, Joanne Maura. His theory is that because raw footage was captured via camera phone of this violent incident, thereby demonstrating the appropriate, measured response of the teacher under physical duress- the district had no choice but to **exonerate her for any trumped up accusations** of “failure to report the incident in a timely fashion.”

New Bed City Councilor, Brian K. Gomes, who immediately issued a strong statement in support of Maura, spearheaded a motion, passed by the City Council- prior to her disciplinary hearing – indicating that disciplinary actions against her would not be tolerated by members of this governing body.

Was it significant that a city councilor, not a school district official- all privy to the same incident- sought to protect the teacher from further repercussions? The answer is yes to the above interrogative, but no support from school committee or administration gives credence to St. John’s “climate of fear” assertion.

Under the Fear Doctrine, the onus is never on the school

committee or the superintendent for failure to establish a culture of cooperation; the onus is never on school administrators for failure to create a collegial, supportive environment in their individual buildings; the onus is never on the misbehaving, inappropriate student to taking responsibility to his or her conduct.

Under the Fear Doctrine, the onus always falls squarely on the shoulders of teachers-low test scores, high suspensions, disruptive behaviors, drop-out rates- each one the fault of bad teachers.

The case of Joanne Maura in real time and in vivid, live footage, finally, underscored the tunnel vision of the Pia Durkin regime. No school official came to the defense of an assaulted teacher , no position statement was issued in the media in a timely fashion-like Councilor Gomes'- decrying this specific violent act. The action promoted, instead, was a well-heeled approach- let the teacher dangle in the wind, make her feel the heat of possible dismissal, require her to face a panel who will question an alleged failure to report the incident. But what short circuited the fishing expedition- and the done deal districts are used to- was the existence of live footage showing Joanne Maura's steady, appropriate attempt to set a limit for her students, relative to cell phones and the level of violence she endured.

The S-T, in its recent editorial, stated that the NBEA is "myopically focused on organizational survival," that "the union has been unquestioned too long as it has spun a yarn about a "climate of fear" in the schools..., but that narrative unravels once we see behind the public relations facade."

Superintendent Durkin, for her part, continues to spin numbers- relating to the 60% graduate rate at NBHS and its Level 4 status, the Level 5 Takeover of Parker School- and maintains that district staff" will not remain in positions where they have not been successful,"

But the S-T, Durkin, the School Committee, and others speaking out against the **NBEA vote of "no confidence" in her leadership** are entirely missing the point.

What exists and what is ongoing in the New Bedford Public Schools is a "climate of fear." The vote of "no confidence" in Supt. Pia Durkin is merely a viewpoint by a majority of New Bedford educators that based on her work so far, she does not possess the right stuff to change it. Her mishandling of the NBHS chair-throwing fiasco is the clearest indication that the membership got it right.

Sincerely yours:

Bruce C. Ditata