

Language Log

« [Virginia, who said they would come](#) | [Main](#) | [The Problem With Today's Youth](#) »

April 26, 2007

THE N-WORD IN OMAHA

[Benson High School](#), a public high school founded in 1904, was recently designated by the Omaha [Nebraska] Public Schools as "a [Magnet Center](#) for Academic Research and Innovation". However, its first appearance in the national news didn't work out in a way that pleased OPS officials. The trigger was the [March 2007 issue](#) of the school newspaper, the Benson Gazette, which included a four-page section on [The N-Word](#).

The issue was distributed on April 10, and higher-level school bureaucrats quickly intervened to denounce the newspaper, to withdraw it from distribution, and to put the school's principal on administrative leave (Lynn Safranek, "[Students' frankness sets of OPS uproar](#)", Omaha World-Herald, Saturday 4/14/2007):

The Omaha Public Schools on Friday condemned a four-page section in the Benson Gazette, distributed Tuesday, that tackled students' use of the word "nigger." The section presented the viewpoints of black and white students and staff, including the school's dean of students and athletic director.

The school's principal, Lisa Dale, was put on administrative leave Friday. OPS officials declined to say why.

Calls came into OPS offices this week expressing concerns about the content of the section, said Luanne Nelson, an OPS spokeswoman. Some staff members from throughout the district, plus some Benson community members and students, were offended, she said.

On Friday, the newspaper was removed from Benson High's Web site as OPS announced an investigation into the matter. The district will take "appropriate action" when the investigation is completed, according to a statement.

"The Omaha Public Schools has never condoned and cannot support the actions which recently resulted in the inappropriate articles published in the Benson High Gazette," the statement read. "Unacceptable decision-making by staff has violated the standards set forth by the Omaha Public Schools to appropriately guide and educate our students."

Nelson said Dale's status is pending the results of an investigation by OPS's human resources department. Dale could not be reached for comment.

Benson students and parents reacted with shock and disappointment to the news that Dale had been placed on leave and that OPS disapproved of the articles.

I haven't seen the "standards set forth by the Omaha Public Schools to appropriately guide and educate our students", so it may well be true that permitting this newspaper to be published was a straightforward violation

of those standards. If so, it seems to me that the standards ought to be modified, because the section strikes me as a responsible attempt to explore a difficult subject, one that clearly comes up many times every day at a school like Benson.

And I can't easily come up with a better short document to recommend for outsiders to read, to help them understand this curious aspect of the linguistic anthropology of contemporary America. Reading about the OPS reaction helps to understand other dimensions of the situation, which is why I've decided to post about it.

The World-Herald article continues:

The four-page section included news stories and a transcript of a round-table classroom discussion. An editorial and two editorial cartoons produced by the newspaper staff poked fun at the dual meanings of the word and criticized the ability of one race, but not others, to use the word without repercussion.

Nelson, the OPS spokeswoman, said, "There is no question that the students had a valid, spirited discussion regarding this topic." She said, however, that a high school newspaper may not be an appropriate forum, "because, as a printed piece, it can be misinterpreted."

Benson senior Sarah Swift, the paper's editor in chief, disagreed.

"I think a newspaper is the perfect forum," said Swift, who is white. "Why would we have newspapers at all? It may make people uncomfortable, but you can't talk about things that people are always OK with. We can't just ignore the bad things and hope they go away."

Perhaps because of the national attention ("[Student paper's use of epithet sets off uproar](#)", AP, reprinted in JournalStar of Lincoln, Nebraska), or perhaps because there wasn't really any violation of policies, it didn't take long for the school authorities to back off, at least with respect to the principal's job status (Susan Szalewski, "[Principal reinstated at Benson after flap](#)", Omaha World-Herald, Monday 4/16/2007):

Lisa Dale, the principal of Benson High School who was placed on administrative leave after the school's student newspaper published a racially charged special report, has been reinstated.

Dale will return to work today.

Reached at her home Sunday, Dale said Omaha Public Schools officials determined that she could better serve the school and community by returning to her post. She did not elaborate.

Whatever may have happened since, it's been going on below the journalistic radar. In possibly-related news, however, the Omaha Reader recently [announced](#) that

Declaring they're fed up with concealed weapons laws and early bar closing times, Benson business owners have declared Benson its own nation-state with plans to secede from the larger Omaha metropolitan area. The group, armed with toy rifles, funny hats, musical instruments and loads of spirit have even set a date.

"We declare April 1 as Benson Independence Day," said J. Asintheletter, whose family has been in Benson since before it was cool. "We want everyone to know that they can be themselves here."

I infer that the rebels are against both concealed weapons and early bar closings -- the concealed-carry business apparently refers to passage of a new state law and repeal of a city ordinance, (Nancy Hicks, "[Concealed weapons will be legal in Omaha](#)", JournalStar, 7/18/2006); Nebraska's [legal bar hours](#) are 6:00 a.m. to 1:00 a.m., though perhaps Omaha has some local regulations as well.

There's nothing about alcohol in the [March issue of the Benson Gazette](#), but an editorial on p. 8 discusses the fact that 52% of students don't feel safe in school, although the concealed-carry law doesn't apply there:

After being released from first block on the morning of Monday, March 5, students trudged on to their second class of the day - not quite ready to be back at school after a four day weekend. It was at approximately 9:27 a.m that a large gang related fight erupted in the east wing of Benson, stirring the curiosity of onlookers and preventing others from getting to class on time.

As if this was not enough ammunition for "water cooler" talk between students (and even staff), a student was suspended for bringing a gun to school. News stations covered the story, there was a brief moment of shock and awe which passed as fast as it came, but life went on as usual the next day.

The truth is, the student who brought the gun was not the first, nor was he the last person to enter Benson with a firearm. The only difference in this instance is that he was caught.

In general, both the school newspaper and the school's web site leave me very favorably impressed with the school and its students -- the OPS central office should be proud.

[Update -- Here is a report of a school board meeting about the issue: "[School Board Meeting Packed With Opinions: 'N' Word At Center of Controversy](#)", KETV-7, Wednesday 4/18/2007. And an earlier article ("[Benson Principal Returns To Work](#)", KETV-7, 4/16/2007) that]

that indicates considerable support for Lisa Dale:

Students crowded around Dale at lunch on Monday. Student Nick George and fellow classmates said they were prepared to protest if Dale was fired. "It says, 'Support Ms. Dale. Free Press,'" said George, showing off a T-shirt that was made. "The back says, 'Ms D and newspaper are No. 1.'"

[KETV.com's online discussion](#) of the newspaper saw overwhelming support for the principal and the students, too.

In fact, as far as I can see, all of the 60 or so comments seem to support the students and the principal. The 4/16/2007 article quotes the principle as accepting responsibility"

Dale said on Monday it was a tumultuous few days for her.

"Not be here in the place that I love -- that, for me, is my heart and soul. The thought of that has been very difficult," Dale said. "The big question was: Did I see the articles before they went into print? And I did and so I take full responsibility."

but also as offering an interesting olive branch (fig leaf?) to the school board:

Dale said some good did come of the newspaper.

"It created conversations that allowed us to say, 'You know, even when it's casual, even when it's friendly, it's not appropriate,'" the principal said.

Dale said she learned a lesson.

"I probably wouldn't, however, looking back -- we'd use the asterick," Dale said of the paper's decision to spell out the N-word.

(I'm guessing that the non-standard spelling of *asterisk* was contributed by the reporter.)]

Posted by Mark Liberman at April 26, 2007 11:48 AM