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It's risky to expose students to the County Board

Evidently the community is serious about improving discipline in high schools. Somebody came up with the worst punishment yet - attending County Board meeting.



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Tuesday night the Kenosha County Board approved a Youth in Government program that will assign high school students to sit on board committees and to offer advisory votes.

Presumably students sent to the County Board meetings will be the ones school officials have failed to reach through traditional disciplinary measures. It's definitely an extreme step.

Of course it's billed as a leadership opportunity for the students, but it won't take long before the students realize they are being punished. It's going to be sad to see idealistic young people have their dreams tarnished like this. Sixteen years old is a little bit young to find out how tedious some of the high-profile roles in the community can be.

Tuesday's Kenosha County Board meeting, for example, was two hours long. Plop typical high school students into that room, and in 10 minutes they'd be playing electronic games on their cell phones. Maybe the polite ones would keep one eye on the proceedings and try to keep the phone out of sight. Students accustomed to doing homework while watching TV or listening to music and instant-messaging their friends at the same time would find the atmosphere of most government meetings, well, let's just say *unstimulating*. Almost anybody would. Most government meetings are, to use a word that would come quickly to the mind of a teenager, boring - excruciatingly boring.

OK, I'm being flip. But I know what I'm talking about. As a reporter, in Kenosha and other places, I covered county board, city council and school board meetings. When I was a city editor, I supervised reporters who covered government meetings. I never kept track of their first comments upon returning from a meeting, but "Oh my God" would have to be high on the list.

Sometimes I would have to scramble to find a part-time reporter to cover a meeting. It wasn't easy; I got turned down a lot. There are some things people would rather not do, even for money.

Not that the reporters didn't like the meetings when there was a good controversy, but that's not the way things go all the time. Most of the work of government is important but not glamorous or particularly exciting.

So exposing high school students to the harsh reality of county board committee meet-

ings isn't without risk. Some students who have great political potential may learn too much and get discouraged.

Here's what could happen. First the students will see the huge packet of reports that county supervisors are given as background reading for the meetings. Then they'll sit through an hour of "debate" on a topic about which there is no disagreement but every member of the committee still feels compelled to address. Then the students will start thinking about finding another activity that will look good on a college application but doesn't involve quite so much time spent listening to old people.

(The average age of the Kenosha County Board - after a youth movement in last year's election - is 56.)

There is always the possibility that the students will be a better influence on the County Board than the other way around. Board members could probably benefit by hearing what's on the students' minds.

The committee that developed the proposal for the county's Youth in Government program wisely decided to assign a mentor to each student. The mentors will have a difficult job.

It's not that the students will have a hard time understanding what board members do or how, but they might have a hard time understanding why someone would want to do it year after year.

If the students emerge from this program still enthusiastic about government, those mentors will have done a great job.

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