

**ANALOGIES OF AUTHORITY: Public Comment Before the Montgomery County
Board of Education**

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I am a professional educator of adults, usually young physicians or biomedical researchers. Like most educators I expect to learn from my students as well as to help them learn. They understand my authority, but have the right to challenge my decisions. This often happens, for example after a test is given and one or more students argues the validity of a question (or the designated "correct" answer). In most cases I am able to explain why a challenge to my "ruling" is not valid. In some cases I accept that the challenge IS valid and correct the test score accordingly. There is of course the rare case where I am convinced that I am right, but the student insists that my response to the challenge is inadequate. Usually I state that, in essence, while I understand why the student feels aggrieved, I must maintain that "my" answer is the best one. But sometimes I accept the challenge (even though I am convinced it is invalid), because I recognize that the student has argued cogently and will lose faith in my fairness if I insist on denying the challenge. I then give credit for the "incorrect" answer. In most such cases the score is of only modest consequence and it is more important to me to maintain the cooperative relationship that MUST exist between teacher and student if education is to work. And because we are ALL capable of being in error, EVEN when we are certain we are not.

When you come, later today, to item 9 on your agenda, and offer your "final decision" on the SLES issue, I hope you will consider what I have just said, as well as the following (abbreviated) paraphrase of the words of an obscure philosopher and poet (*Kram Namleda*):

'Leaders have the responsibility to exercise their authority. But authority MUST be exercised with wisdom. Of course, in attempting to decide what is the wisest decision with respect to any specific issue, one must keep in mind the BIG PICTURE; namely, how the specific decision will impact the overall goal. The unfolding events related to this controversy have drained the reserve of public trust in our leaders. Trust is the coin of the realm when it comes to moral authority and even as one weighs the importance of legal authority (and responsibility), one must also keep in mind the importance of moral authority. The REAL cost of all of this will not be known for a very long time, but it may prove to be EXCEEDINGLY high.'

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