

Criticized Poet Is Named Laureate of Newark Schools

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By ANDREW JACOBS

NEWARK, Dec. 18 — In an act of defiance aimed at the state's political establishment, the school board here has anointed Amiri Baraka the district's poet laureate at a time the state is trying to take the same designation away from him.

The unanimous vote by the nine-member advisory board comes as Mr. Baraka, the poet laureate of New Jersey, is under fire for a poem he wrote last year suggesting that Israel had advance knowledge of the plot to attack the World Trade Center.

A longtime Newark resident who was pivotal in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960's, Mr. Baraka has ignored calls from Gov. James E. McGreevey and others that he resign the post, which pays a stipend of \$10,000. The governor does not have the power to remove the laureate mantle, but legislative leaders in Trenton said they had enough votes to dissolve the post entirely when they meet after the New Year. If that should fail, there are more than a half-dozen other bills meant to strip Mr. Baraka of the two-year position, which he has held since August.

The school board's decision, made during a sparsely attended meeting late last month and reported today by The Star-Ledger of Newark, quickly reignited passions that were only just beginning to subside.

"What Amiri Baraka has both written and said is clearly, patently inappropriate for children," said Shai Goldstein, New Jersey regional director of the Anti-Defamation League. "To make a decision to expose children to this kind of bigotry is a cause for great sadness." Kevin Davitt, a spokesman for the governor, agreed, saying the appointment "just boggles the mind."

But there were few voices of condemnation in Newark, where Mr. Baraka, 67, remains one of the city's best known and beloved citizens. Many elected officials, like Councilman Donald Bradley, praised the board's decision, saying it brought much-needed attention to Mr. Baraka's expansive body of work and his years of devotion to the city's beleaguered public schools through poetry workshops and readings.

"Even though he's written some controversial things, he has his First Amendment rights and he's done some wonderful things for Newark,"

Mr. Bradley said.

For members of the elected board, which plays an advisory role in a school system still run by the state, the resolution honoring Mr. Baraka, a graduate of Newark schools, was an act of solidarity. At the previous meeting, the board passed a resolution calling on the Legislature to read the poem from beginning to end.

"When someone is under attack unjustifiably, that's the time you have to speak out," said Richard Cammarieri, the board member who introduced both measures.

Mr. Cammarieri, a friend of Mr. Baraka, said he did not consider the poem, "Somebody Blew Up America," anti-Semitic, noting that it addresses the oppression of both blacks

A show of solidarity for a writer accused of anti-Semitism.

and Jews and poses a provocative a question that is directed at Israel, not Jews:

Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed

Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers

To stay home that day

Why did Sharon stay away?

Although that theory has been discredited, Mr. Baraka stands by the contention that Israelis were forewarned about the Sept. 11 attacks, saying there were only five Israelis among the nearly 3,000 victims.

"The idea might sound bizarre, but to say I'm an anti-Semite is not based on reality," Mr. Baraka said today. "If they want to find anti-Semites, read the poetry of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, poets that are loved and praised."

As in the past, he challenged his critics to a line-by-line examination of the poem, which provoked widespread ire after it was read at a poetry festival in September. Moved by the school board's proclamation but resigned to the fate that awaits him in Trenton, Mr. Baraka offered a wry assessment of his short, stormy tenure as New Jersey's poet laureate.

"At the very least," he said, "you can't say I'm not promoting poetry."