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School board needs to focus on students

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Once again, the Durham Public Schools Board of Education is split along racial lines, demonstrating its inability to come to a consensus on critical school issues, including the possible removal of a board member.

Durham School Board Member Jackie Wagstaff was convicted last November of two counts of misdemeanor larceny for falsifying two city check requests in July. She used the check requests to convince a bus company that the city would pay \$1,452 for two amusement park trips that her nonprofit organization, Northeast Central Durham Reinvestment Inc., had arranged for inner-city children.

Durham District Attorney Jim Hardin initially charged the school board member with two felonies, but reduced those charges in exchange for Wagstaff's guilty plea.

Since the media ink began to spill on yet another controversial issue that has the school board torn along racial lines, many have expressed their opinion on the actions, if any, that should be taken against Wagstaff.

State law allows a local school board to investigate and eventually unseat a member for "immoral or disreputable conduct" if the state Board of Education thinks there is sufficient evidence. The state board voted 6-4 a few months ago that there was enough evidence to warrant an investigation by the Durham school board.

Durham schools hired an outside counsel in early February, at \$185 an hour, to investigate Wagstaff. The State Bureau of Investigation already presented the counsel with a copy of a report on her actions, yet a temporary injunction against the school system by Superior Court Judge Orlando Hudson has stalled this process. School board attorneys and Wagstaff's lawyer are scheduled to appear before Hudson today in a hearing on whether the injunction should be extended.

The issue should have never gotten this far, many people think.

Breaking the law does not set a good example for students, but neither does the constant racial division on the school board or the erroneous decision to waste needed dollars on overthrowing democracy.

The right for citizens to elect individuals to represent them in public office is a freedom not enjoyed throughout the world. Rather than creating tension through its racial division, the school board should have supported the

Rev. Michael Page's substitute motion to lobby legislators for a local bill allowing the recall of school board members. Although Chairwoman Kathryn Meyers and others stated their support, the motion failed when the Rev. Page insisted his motion replace the original to contact the state board a second time.

County Manager Mike Ruffin recently proposed a \$118 million bond referendum for next year including \$101 million for Durham Public Schools.

When the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People first announced its opposition to the 2001 bond referendum that included money for the schools, it seemed appalling that anyone would oppose money that would benefit Durham's students.

Yet, when the school board votes 4-3, along racial lines, to hire an outside counsel to investigate one of its own, it is evident that the board did not vote and act impartially for the good of the school system. The money used for the investigation will not benefit the students of Durham Public Schools as it should be.

During Gov. Mike Easley's State of the State Address, he urged "fiscal restraint" among state lawmakers. As local, state and national deficits continue to rise, all elected officials should be conscious of fiscal needs and held responsible for taxpayer's money.

Before writing this column, many students suggested the topic of how the school board spends money, as well questioning why the board is willing to spend money on the removal of Wagstaff. They said there are more vital concerns within the schools - overcrowding, under-achievement, under-enrollment in some schools and structural disintegration.

Instead, the board continues to show students that it would rather waste money than focus monetary resources to the schools that need more textbooks, repairs, upgrades, paint jobs, resources and other needed material so that all students have an opportunity at a fair and full education in an encouraging environment.

The school board cannot continue to do business as usual. This nation, as well as other cities in the South, has dealt with racial division for far too long, and Durham does not need a body of elected officials that is unwilling to work together to better the educational experience.

The school board should let District 1 decide the fate of its elected representative and focus on the more pressing issues in the school system.

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