

FORUM

Enough is enough at the N.C. General Assembly



Chris Fitzsimon
Guest Columnist

Sen. Tom Apodaca was partially right Wednesday afternoon when he lamented the inability of legislative leaders to reach

a final agreement on a state budget six weeks after it was due and just days before schools start across North Carolina with funding for teachers and teacher assistants still up in the air.

"Enough is enough," Apodaca belted on the Senate floor.

But then he urged his colleagues to vote against a resolution to keep government operating for another two weeks while negotiators try to come up with a final version of a spending plan for the next two years.

Apodaca apparently was ready to shut down state government out of frustration with House leaders, but that's no solution and only a handful of his fellow Senators agreed with him. The continuing budget resolution passed and lawmakers have two more weeks to pass a budget.

It wasn't supposed to be this way of course. Republicans promised a more transparent and efficient government when they took over and they have been running the General Assembly for five years and have been working with a Republican governor for the last three.

Efficiency and transparency have hardly been hallmarks of their reign. Supporters of the Republican majority have been scrambling to circulate a chart showing that past legislatures have often missed the June 30th budget deadline, and that's true.

But the chart also shows that this is already the latest budget in 13 years and with one exception, the latest two-year budget since at least 1961.

And's it not just a show of ineptness and inefficiency. The delay has real conse-

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quences as school officials are getting ready for students to return next week with no idea how many teachers or teacher assistants they can afford to pay.

The Senate budget slashes 8,500 TAs while providing more funding for teachers to reduce class size in early grades while the House budget leaves TAs in the classroom and provides an across the board salary increase.

TAs are also bus drivers at many schools, causing many principals to wonder how they will get students to campus if the Senate budget prevails and teacher assistants are laid off.

And Apodaca's thinks he's frustrated. The budget impasse and two-week extension of the continuing resolution also come after lawmakers took an unprece-

dentive week of vacation in early July after missing the budget deadline and after leg-

islative leaders attended conferences in San Diego and Boston while the budget was overdue.

And to make matters worse, Apodaca and his fellow Senators unveiled a series of unwise and controversial constitutional amendments last week and rushed them through committee without a public hearing or even testimony about what the amendments would mean for the state.

The most controversial one, the so-called Taxpayer Bill of Rights, would place artificial spending limits on future legislatures and would threaten funding for education, teacher pay, early childhood programs and other vital state services.

The full Senate passed the regressive amendments on to the House and they are

now part of the swirl of activity that dominates a General Assembly as it careens towards an eventual budget agreement and adjournment.

No one saw the constitutional amendment package coming. No one had a chance to prepare for the committee discussion of proposals that could dramatically change North Carolina for the next generation.

Senate leaders simply decided to rush it through while budget negotiations were proceeding, forcing House leaders to respond and even hold a Republican Caucus meeting to discuss the amendments.

And the Senate's not the only playing dangerous and nontransparent games.

Rep. Rob Bryan is working behind the scenes on legislation pushed by national right-wing forces that could turn over struggling public schools to for-profit charter school operators who would have the freedom to fire all the teachers.

That proposal has yet to be unveiled publicly and could appear at any moment, with no time for thorough debate or public input.

It's time to stop all the secret scurrying around and slamming never before seen legislation through committees and floor votes.

It's time to pass a budget that keeps TAs in the classroom and gives teachers a meaningful raise and adequately funds state services. And it's time for lawmakers to go home.

Enough is enough indeed.

Chris Fitzsimon, founder and executive director of NC Policy Watch, writes the daily Fitzsimon File, delivers a radio commentary broadcast on WRAL-FM and hosts "News and Views," a weekly radio news magazine that airs on multiple stations across North Carolina. Contact him at chris@ncpolicywatch.com.

Lawmakers should consider the impact of no teacher assistants and the effect of vouchers



Ronda J. Gordon
Guest Columnist

As a school social worker, my goal is to make sure that each child I come in contact with has an opportunity to graduate and is ready for

college or a career. Each day that I walk into schools, my focus is on everything and everyone who impacts a child's opportunity for success.

Education serves as the great equalizer and the foundation on which success is built. Unfortunately, in North Carolina, that foundation is crumbling and the future of our students is in jeopardy. It is the right of every child in this state to have a sound, basic education, but without adequate funding and resources, they are being set up for failure.

Our lawmakers, as they work to finalize a budget, need to strongly consider the impact of two very important components - how schools will function without teacher assistants and the effect opportuni-

ty scholarships will have on the educational system as a whole.

Contrary to what some may think, our teacher assistants are a vital part of the school community. They not only provide one-on-one instructional time for students who need it, but they perform various screenings and assessments with students, which assist teachers with classroom instruction. These highly qualified professionals, many of whom live in the communities in which they work, are part of a school's educational team and are committed to inspiring students' natural curiosity, imagination, and desire to learn. Many of them not only serve in the classroom, also on the school buses and are responsible for safely transporting our children to and from school!

Now for a discussion on opportunity scholarships. The N.C. Supreme Court has

"Contrary to what some may think, our teacher assistants are a vital part of the school community."

ruled that public money can be used for private schools, despite what the N.C. Constitution states. To add injury to

insult, those on Jones Street are proposing additional funding to ramp up this process. As a public school employee, I witness firsthand the great things that are happening in the schools in my district and that students - regardless of their ZIP code, economic status or educational level - are thriving. Public schools, unlike private institutions, open their doors to ALL students. Public schools are held to rigorous standards. Educators must be certified, and assessments have been put in place to ensure students are on grade level. These state-mandated requirements and accountability measures unfortunately do not apply to private schools.

As I continue to ponder all of this, I

often question ...Who will be the gatekeeper for private schools? Who will be committed to the success of students? Who will ensure they receive support services like health, nutrition and transportation? Who will ensure that teachers have professional development opportunities and the resources they need? Who is going to hold private schools accountable? Like me, I'm sure many educators find themselves in the same situation I am; without answers.

From my experiences as an educator over the past 15 years, I know that our students deserve a better hand than they are being dealt. North Carolina was once a public education beacon and the light that once shone brightly is fading. It's time that we all face the music and commit to righting the ship before it sinks, or our children will be the ones who drown without ever having a chance to reach for a life jacket. Saving them is going to have to begin with an education system that is fully funded and provides the proper resources, and recruits and retains education professionals who are adequately trained and compensated.

Time is of the essence and we have no more of it to waste!

Julian Bond, an iconic jewel, will be sorely missed



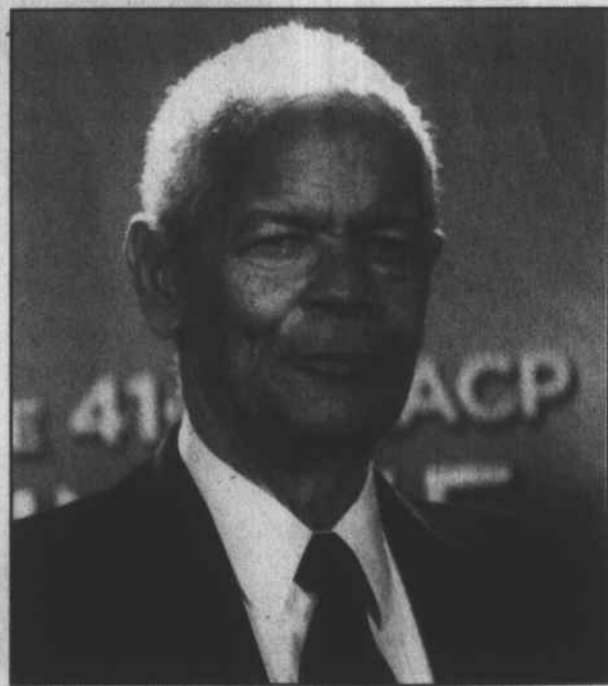
Jennifer Farmer
Guest Columnist

State Senate and the Georgia House of Representatives, to his decade-long tenure at the helm of the NAACP, Mr. Bond was an impactful leader, educator and civil rights activist. While many were never his formal students at the many colleges and universities where he taught and lectured - Harvard, American University, Drexel, The University of Pennsylvania - we are all beneficiaries of his enduring lessons on organizing against injustice and structural racism."

The Southern Poverty Law Center today [Sunday, Aug. 16] announced that Mr. Horace Julian Bond succumbed to a brief illness on Saturday, August 15. The national racial justice organization, Advancement Project, released the following statement regarding the passing of the long-time civil rights leader:

*Advancement Project Co-Director Judith Browne Dianis said: "A man of wisdom, courage and strong conviction, Mr. Bond was an iconic jewel who will be sorely missed. From co-founding the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Poverty Law Center, to serving as a state legislator in the Georgia

*Advancement Project Co-Director Penda D. Hair said: "As veteran civil rights attorneys committed to ensuring a more just democracy for all, we stood and stand in awe of Mr. Bond. In reflecting on the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act, I am reminded of Mr. Bond's unyielding work to make American democracy live up to its promise. He was one of only a few voices in America who never wavered from that mission.



Former NAACP chairman Julian Bond poses backstage at the 41st NAACP Image Awards on Friday, Feb. 26, 2010, in Los Angeles. (AP Photo/Matt Sayles)

Notably, his commitment to racial justice was not confined to the United States. Julian Bond championed the cause of oppressed people everywhere, including in South Africa, where he vocally

inherited and our shared responsibility."

*Advancement Project Managing Director and General Counsel Edward A. Hailes said: "In all respects, Julian Bond was legendary. In 1968, he was the youngest person, and the first African-American, to have his name placed into nomination for Vice President. He withdrew because he didn't meet the constitutional requirement of being at least 35 years old. Regardless of the formal title he held, Julian Bond continued fighting for marginalized communities. It is on his shoulders that young leaders, who have ushered in unprecedented focus and attention on police interactions with communities of color, stand."

*Advancement Project Managing Director for Communications Jennifer R. Farmer said: "Many people recognize Mr. Bond as a civil rights activist, but to me, he is revered as a strategic communicator,

having served as communications director for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and host of America's Black Forum, one of the longest running syndicated television shows in history. To great effect, he used communications as an organizing and public education tool to highlight injustices, shift public opinion and secure important policy wins for communities of color. I've always believed communications professionals can deliver the impossible. Mr. Bond is case in point."

Advancement Project is a multi-racial civil rights organization. Founded by a team of veteran civil rights lawyers in 1999, Advancement Project was created to develop and inspire community-based solutions based on the same high quality legal analysis and public education campaigns that produced the landmark civil rights victories of earlier eras. This commentary comes out of Washington, D.C.