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Have a safe, happy 4th of July!

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Board denies teacher formal hearing

Board, Henion asked to resign

By SUSAN R. HARRIS
Editor

The board of education took the most heat Monday night after adjourning regular session for failing to grant Sharon M. "Sherry" Smith a formal hearing.

Before the two-hour session ended, the board and superintendent Randall L. Henion had been asked to resign by Tom Fleck. Fleck's suggestions were met with applause.

Fleck asked for resignations from all school board members and Henion "because I feel that this matter is not being handled properly."

Smith was suspended with pay on March 15 pending an investigation into misconduct charges. In April, she requested, through her attorney, Luke Larges of Charlotte, a hearing before the board. On May 17, the board voted not to renew Smith's contract. On May 19, Henion told Smith she could return to the classroom. She returned on May 24, 70 days into her 90-day suspension. She was granted the opportunity to speak before the board in executive session on June 21. During the closed meeting, Smith said she asked for her job back. After that session, which was attended by over 60 people, board chairman L. Wayne Howell said the board would study Smith's presentation and make a decision on June 28.

"What does the board have to lose by having a full hearing on this in executive session?" N.C.A.E. UniServe representative Lueta Sellers asked. "She has requested a hearing in private, a full-fledged hearing, and the board said no."

"Why was she denied the private hearing?" Brenda Bass asked.

Dail Harris asked if the board would consider a public hearing.

"If she would request a public hearing, the board would certainly consider it," board chairman L. Wayne Howell said.

Howell then said that a hearing was against North Carolina public school law.

Sellers told Howell it was not, and cited two general statutes dealing with the issue.

"If you have a good case, you have nothing to lose (by granting Smith a hearing)," Cathy Terranova, a former New Jersey teacher, said. "If nothing happens, you seven people (board members, Henion and assistant superintendent Jake Boyce) have a great deal to lose."

"We are not going to let this rest," Terranova continued. "It's not fair. You need to put this issue to bed and the only way to do it is to grant Mrs. Smith a hearing."

Marie Ayscue said the community should go over the board's head to resolve the issue.

"I'm fed up with it. I don't think this is the board to make the decision," Ayscue said.

Howell said he believes the board made a fair decision in the Smith case.

"Based on what we knew, we made our decision," Howell said.

Sellers said in an interview after the meeting that she, Smith's attorney Luke Larges and the Smiths are prepared to take the case into the legal system.

"I think at this point the board leaves us only one alternative and that is to go to court," Sellers said.

"I'm horrified that the board did not even grant my request for a hearing to allow me the opportunity to present witnesses who can shed light on my case," Smith said after the meeting.

"They (the board) had a chance to rectify their reputation and accountability in the community and they didn't," Smith said. "They blew it."



Sherry Smith (left) awaits the Perquimans County Board of Education decision on overturning her nonrenewal Monday night. With her is Lueta Sellers, N.C.A.E. UniServe representative. The board took no action on Smith's request to get her teaching job back, nor did they grant her a formal hearing. Sellers said Smith will take her case to court. (Photo by Susan Harris)

Byrum supports Smith

By SUSAN R. HARRIS
Editor

Perquimans High School principal William Byrum spoke publicly about the Sharon M. "Sherry" Smith case for the first time during a board of education meeting Monday night.

"I see her as a good teacher," Byrum said. "Others have different opinions."

Byrum spoke in response to questions regarding rumors that he had been harassed by schools superintendent Randall L. Henion, had been ordered by Henion to change or falsify a teacher's evaluations and had been threatened that his job was in jeopardy if he did not cooperate with Henion.

Byrum said Henion asked to see Byrum's evaluation of Smith's performance before going over the document with Smith. Henion questioned Smith's ratings when he reviewed the document, according to Byrum. The principal said he told Henion Smith's performance warranted the ratings and he felt he could not change them.

"Dr. Henion never directly said 'change' (her ratings), he asked me to think about it," Byrum said.

Later Byrum said that his job at the high school is not in jeopardy.

"I've been assured that I have a job," he said.

Byrum said his career status II designation is now probationary because Henion downgraded him for not properly evaluating teachers. If his evaluation rating does not rise by next year, Byrum said he will be put back to career status I and lose approximately \$400 per month in salary.

As people continued to ask what information, and from what sources, the board used to make its decision not to renew Smith's contract, Byrum again spoke.

"I know all the particulars against Mrs. Smith," Byrum said, adding that he would not divulge that information. "She is guilty of two minor things...if she gets fired, some of the rest of us ought to go too."

Several people spoke in support of Byrum.

"I don't know of a finer - morally - man in Perquimans County than William Byrum," said Danny Gregory. "If William Byrum received a sub-par rating, then the board's and the superintendent's evaluation should be zero."

Overflow crowd awaited Smith decision

By SUSAN R. HARRIS
Editor

Over 110 people crammed into the school board conference room and spilled over into the halls Monday night to hear the board of education's response to Sharon M. "Sherry" Smith's request to have her nonrenewal overturned.

When the board came out of executive session, chairman L. Wayne Howell announced that the board would take no action on the Smith case.

"The only comment that I will make is that the board will stand on its previous decision," Howell said.

Howell adjourned the meeting immediately after announcing the decision, bringing an outcry from the audience.

"You should have the common courtesy to ask these people if they have anything to say," Brenda Bass said.

Several people spoke at once, asking why the board took no further action.

Linda Overton, a teacher at Perquimans Middle School and the parent of one of Smith's students, asked why Smith was denied a formal hearing. She also charged that the board allowed its attorney, Ken Soo, to question Smith's students without permission from the parents, a move Overton said is illegal.

"I don't think you're being fair to them (the students) or to Mrs. Smith," Overton said.

"A good special education teacher is a gift from God," Overton continued. "Sherry is one of the finest, probably one of the best, that my daughter has ever had. She's a very rare person. She's very special. It is criminal what you are doing. There are children that would never stay in school if it were not for Sherry."

Weldon Byrum told the board he felt it would be beneficial to address the allegations concerning Smith's case and put them to rest.

"I guess it would be fair to say that we are looking into everything," Howell commented.

Weldon Byrum pushed forward, questioning specific allegations concerning Perquimans High School principal William Byrum's harassment by schools superintendent Randall L. Henion and Byrum's rumored refusal to change a teacher evaluation at Henion's request. "Is that true?" Byrum asked.

"I would say that personnel issues are very, very difficult," Henion said. He added that the

Underwood asks for accountability, leadership from school board ranks

By SUSAN R. HARRIS
Editor

Former Perquimans County teacher Gil Underwood, a retired principal from Chowan County, told the board of education Monday night that there is a need for accountability and leadership among its ranks.

Underwood said he understands how difficult personnel matters are from his background in education, but that the board has obligations to the children, the taxpayers and the public to put the bad publicity surrounding personnel issues in the school system to rest.

"This whole situation needs to be buried in the best manner for everyone concerned," Underwood said.

Underwood said the present public and employee unrest will have a negative effect on the students in the county because quality personnel will not want to come to Perquimans County under the present circumstances.

Underwood said if he was "top-notch" principal or teacher looking for a job and a position

was open in Perquimans County, "I would not touch it with a 10-foot pole."

Underwood added that it is the board's responsibility to get to the bottom of the personnel matters presently before them and try to quell concerns of the public and employees.

"The buck stops here," he said. "This has gone on long enough and to the detriment of the educational system and to all these kids."

Underwood asked the board to "sit and take a good, hard look at what is happening."

Helen Hunter said she has spoken to many teachers about allegations of harassment and threats from administrators and has asked the teachers to come forward with their claims. But Hunter said they are afraid of losing their jobs if they speak out. Hunter said the teachers are afraid of some principals and of Dr. Henion.

"I hate for these teachers to feel that way," Hunter said. "I have talked to teachers and it is the truth - they are scared."

Henion: Retribution rumors are false

Schools superintendent Randall L. Henion denied allegations that Sherry Smith's problems began two years ago when she stood up for principal William Byrum in an open school board meeting.

"It was a rumor then and it is a rumor now," Henion said. "There's no connection."

Henion also stated that he had discussed that rumor with Byrum.

Henion's statement came

after Louise Ayscue said that she attended the board meeting because she had heard a lot of rumors concerning the school system. She said people came to the board meeting because they wanted to know the truth.

Ayscue said the rumor that disturbed people most was that Smith's job was on the line because she stood up for Byrum when people began saying that Byrum would be removed from his position at the high school.

Ayscue said she understood Henion made the statement that he would "get her back."

Henion immediately shook his head at Ayscue's assertion and denied the charge.

Henion also stated that Byrum will be employed by the school system next year.

William Byrum moved to the front and said, "I've been assured that I have a job."

decision was based on that information anyway.

The board failed to respond and after more questions from the audience, Sellers again asked the board if Smith's nonrenewal decision was based on information from Soo during the investigation, and asked if Soo and/or Henion turned the information over to them.

"There's a day coming when you all will be sorry for what you have done," said Alton Stallings.

