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Local News: Thursday, July 06, 2000

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Published Correction Date: 7/11/2000 - The Seattle School District's 2000-01 budget increases spending on professional development for education reform by \$400,000. The amount was misstated in this article.

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Crowd protests school racism

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PROTESTERS SAY SEATTLE SCHOOLS continue to shortchange minority students in several areas, including discipline and education, during a **School** Board meeting. Officials say they need concrete suggestions for improvement.

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Race took center stage at a Seattle **School** Board meeting last night as dozens of people complained that minority students are being shortchanged by the **school** district.

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Organized by the Coalition to Undo Racism Everywhere, the sometimes-raucous protesters blasted the **school** district for failing to end racial disparities in academic achievement, special education and student discipline.

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At one point the crowd chanted, "No justice, no peace!"

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"This racism has to stop," said one woman who claimed her grandson had been suspended by **school** officials rather than deal with his behavior resulting from attention-deficit disorder.

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The Rev. Jimmie James of New Hope Baptist Church asked the **school** district to turn to mentoring programs and faith-based organizations to help students of color.

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"We will not give up, we will not shut up, we will not let up" until improvements are made, James said.

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Don Alexander of the Seattle Human Rights Commission urged parents of color to keep their children out of public schools in the fall if the district does not respond to their concerns.

"Walk out of the schools and stop the money," Alexander said.

School Board members did not comment during the meeting. But during a break, public-schools spokesman Bill Southern said the district has been aware of racial disparities and is committed to reducing them. But, Southern said, the protesters failed to offer concrete suggestions for improving the situation.

The academic achievement gap between African-American and Hispanic children and white students has been a focus of the district and of the minority community for years.

Superintendent Joseph Olchefske met with about 60 black community leaders and parents in December to discuss the continuing problem. Last night's display of political force suggests that some minority-group members are losing patience.

Earlier in the meeting, the **school**-district administration said the former **Colman school**, where activists have sought to locate an African-American heritage **museum**, is about to be put up for sale.

Because of repeated delays in closing a deal on the building, administrators last night told the **School** Board it will solicit proposals for purchase of the property.

A **museum** proponent delivered a sharply-worded warning.

"I dare you to make that decision because you have an obligation to all those black children that you have miseducated, that you have not given the ability to think," said Omari Tahir, drawing applause from many in the audience.

Museum promoters have worked for 15 years to realize their dream, including an eight-year period in which Tahir and others occupied the 90-year-old building.

Dan Graczyk, the district's logistics director, said a proposal to sell the property will be taken to the **School** Board in February, allowing time to reappraise the property and for potential buyers to study the property.

In other business, the **School** Board adopted a \$406 million general fund budget that increases funding for implementation of new academic standards and for improved maintenance of buildings and grounds.

In order to help students achieve higher reading standards, \$1 million was earmarked to continue the K-12 Literacy Initiative launched last spring, and \$400 million was budgeted for **school** reform.

The budget will receive a boost from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which is contributing \$4.9 million for technology and comprehensive **school** reform.

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Overall, the budget is up by 7.4 percent, primarily due to increased state support.

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