

THE CAROLINA JOURNAL

AN AWARD-WINNING JOURNAL OF NEWS, ANALYSIS, AND OPINION FROM THE JOHN LOCKE FOUNDATION

CAROLINAJOURNAL.COM

VOL. 35 • NO.1 • FEB/MAR 2026 • STATEWIDE EDITION



National Freedom Truck tour launches at NC charter school

BY BEN SELLERS

The Freedom 250 “Freedom Truck” made its first stop in North Carolina, kicking off a nationwide tour of what organizers call the largest traveling exhibit ever focused on America’s founding, inspired by the 1976 Freedom Train. The project is part of a broader slate of patriotic initiatives tied to President Donald Trump’s Executive Order 14189, marking the nation’s upcoming 250th anniversary.

US Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy led the recent Greensboro launch event.

“We have bumps in our road — maybe potholes, if you want to use a DOT analogy — in the history of America,” Duffy said in the speech at Revolution Academy, a charter school in Summerfield.

“We should acknowledge those potholes of history, and we should recognize that our country strove to get through those difficult times and make it better and brighter for everybody,” Duffy added. “But we have people who want to just focus on the negative. This is a time to focus on the true and accurate history of America.”

Duffy said one of the exhibit’s displays that caught his eye was

a “wall of heroes” that allowed visitors to discover biographical details about individuals whose contributions in various fields helped put America on the map.

“It’s a montage of just great Americans, and you look at what America and its innovators and its artists and its poets, its creators, what it’s offered to the world, it is like nothing else in the world,” Duffy said.

“And those Wall of Heroes exist because of the freedom that this country has,” he added. “It’s the free enterprise that this country offers its people that has created the most remarkable men and women that are in the Wall of Heroes in this museum.”

In addition to Duffy, a former congressman and Fox News host, the event included representatives from the White House and Labor Department. There were also several private organizations that had partnered with the America 250 initiative to create the six “Freedom Trucks,” soon to be touring communities across the United States.

“I really hope you remember this day for the rest of your life,” Deputy Labor Secretary Keith Sonderling told the audience. “It is very special because it represents a culmination of hard

work, organization, and imagination to make this truck a reality.”

Prager University and Hillsdale College, two groups that partnered with the Education Department to supply the content for the interactive exhibits, also had representatives on hand.

NASCAR magnate Richard Childress was there to help highlight the initiative’s local ties to North Carolina.

SPEVCO, a specialty vehicle company headquartered just west of Winston-Salem, was responsible for providing the vehicles themselves.

“They are double-wide 18-wheelers designed to bring the remarkable story of American independence to students, families, and citizens in every corner of our country,” said Brittany Baldwin, White House senior policy adviser for Freedom 250.

Baldwin and others noted that the idea of the “Freedom Trucks” was based in part on the “Freedom Train” featured during the 1976 bicentennial celebration.

“Each of us in our own communities — and our own circle of friends, family members, churchgoers, and fellow workers — can think about how we can rekindle the fire of liberty to spark a flame in the hearts

of students, like those beautiful students here today, to inspire them to think, 15 years from now, to look back at this anniversary and think, ‘That was the moment I was proud to be an American,’” Baldwin said.

Revolution Academy students and parents, along with SPEVCO employees and media outlets, constituted much of the audience at the late January event.

The school incentivized student participation by offering special passes to those who toured the exhibit that would allow them perks such as a day to dress out of uniform. Yet the visit also helped to reinforce material they had covered in class.

“We are taking civics right now, so we’ve been learning all about how America came to be and the Constitution and stuff like that,” Revolution student Olive Crandall said.

Shyam Patel, a freshman and student ambassador at the school, said the Freedom Truck’s launch “gave me a different thought on how I see America” and had inspired him to deepen his understanding of US history.

His mom, Swati, noted that while the school had taken a field trip to Washington, DC, last

year, the mobile museums would afford the same opportunity to students in communities farther afield, where access to cultural enrichment may be more difficult.

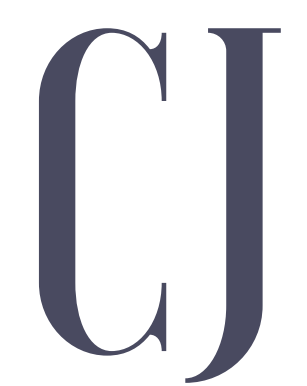
“We were really excited about it, that they brought this here, because not all the schools have a trip to DC, and they have incredible historical stuff there that everyone can see,” she said.

Dave Machado, executive director of the North Carolina Coalition for Charter Schools, said hosting Duffy, Childress, and other luminaries undoubtedly was the biggest event, to date, for Revolution Academy, which opened its doors in 2020 with around 300 students and has since expanded to more than 1,000.

“I’m sure a lot of our charter schools in the state are very jealous right now,” Machado said.

He added that America 250’s decision to launch the mobile museum initiative at a charter school seemed a logical fit.

“People that are part of the school choice movement tend to be very patriotic, tend to be very involved in their family’s education,” Machado said. “So, to me, this is great collaboration between the school and in this freedom truck.”



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ISSN 2578-8167 Carolina Journal is a
monthly journal of news, analysis, and
commentary on state and local govern-
ment and public policy issues in North
Carolina.

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Federal shift could give NC more control over K-12 education

DONNA KING
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



A major federal policy shift is underway, as the US Department of Education transfers administration of dozens of K-12 grant programs to the Department of Labor. According to a joint fact sheet from both agencies, the move is intended to “return authority over education to the States and local communities” while improving alignment between K-12 schools and the workforce pipeline.

For North Carolina, where lawmakers have steadily expanded parental choice over the last decade and more parents are taking advantage of educational innovation, the change presents an opportunity — if it is done with an eye toward reducing federal government strings and influence.

What the federal plan actually does

Under a new interagency agreement using the Economy Act (31 U.S.C. §1535), the Department of Labor will take over the administrative side of many grants previously managed by the Department of Education. These include Title I grants for disadvantaged students, migrant education funding, literacy support, teacher quality grants, after-school programs, rural and low-income schools funding, and some federal dollars that flow to North Carolina’s charter schools.

The Department of Education will still hold statutory authority, but Labor will run the competitions, handle paperwork, and coordinate funding streams.

Federal officials say the administrative shift will “empower parents and States, promote innovation, and deliver process improvements.” The opportunities here are clear: This could fund students, not sys-

tems, something that the John Locke Foundation has advocated for years.

Therein lies the problem, say critics, who are framing it as a restructuring that weakens the Education Department’s influence, a theme echoed in mainstream news.

To which supporters would say, “Yes, you’re welcome.”

Why it matters for North Carolina

This is language we understand here in North Carolina, where we already have education and workforce development programs that are more cohesively intertwined than most states. Our state’s community college system and College and Career Promise, CTE expansion, ApprenticeshipNC, and regional workforce boards are relatively tight with the K-12 system.

With DOL now administering federal grants, that coordination could strengthen our system further. Local administrators and families could gain the flexibility to craft innovative, customized solutions for students and communities.

If the Department of Labor streamlines compliance requirements or reduces duplicative federal reporting along the way, districts and state agencies could see faster grant processing and fewer bureaucratic hoops. That would free local educators to spend more time on teaching and school improvement rather than federal paperwork.

Most importantly, the shift could give North Carolina more room to tailor federal dollars to state-defined goals rather than chasing every federal culture “fad of the day.” Think of it: School districts could offer optional specialized programs in high school for coding and biotech in RTP, agriculture and energy in the east, tourism in the west, manufacturing labor

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One tax reform NC should finish in 2026

DONALD BRYSON
PUBLISHER



With 2026 in full swing, North Carolina stands in an enviable position. After more than a decade of disciplined tax reform, the Tar Heel State has emerged as one of America’s most economically competitive states. CNBC’s America’s Top States for Business rankings once again place North Carolina among the nation’s leaders, confirming what employers and investors already know: North Carolina is a premier place to invest, expand, and create jobs.

That reputation is reinforced by the Tax Foundation’s 2026 State Tax Competitiveness Index, which ranks North Carolina 13th overall — up from 44th as recently as 2013 — ahead of most states that levy all the major taxes and near the top nationally on corporate taxation. This strong showing is no accident. It reflects a flat 4.25% individual income tax, the lowest corporate income tax rate among states that still levy one, at 2.25%, and a sustained commitment to broad tax bases and low rates rather than politically favored credits.

Yet even the Tax Foundation is clear: North Carolina’s biggest remaining obstacle to greater competitiveness is its franchise tax.

What makes the franchise tax different — and harmful

Unlike income-based taxes, the franchise tax is levied on a business’s net worth — its accumulated capital — regardless of whether the business is profitable. Companies pay it year after year simply for owning assets, even in downturns or start-up phases. In effect, the tax penalizes investment itself, taxing firms not on what they earn but on what they have built.

The Tax Foundation’s North Carolina profile does not mince words. It calls the franchise tax “unusually aggressive,” noting that it taxes businesses “on their worth rather than their profits,” harming investment and violating basic principles of tax fairness and ability to pay. In a state otherwise defined by pro-growth tax policy, the franchise tax stands out as an anachronism.

Real costs for real businesses

This problem is not theoretical. A 2024 John Locke Foundation report shows that the franchise tax creates especially high compliance costs due to its complexity and traps small businesses and independent contractors in mandatory minimum payments. The burden falls especially hard on mom-and-pop businesses, such as a local plumbing company with fewer than 20 employees that owns a small fleet of work vans. Even in a slow year, that firm owes the franchise tax simply for having invested in the vehicles and equipment it needs to operate — penalizing small businesses not for profits, but for preparedness.

The same analysis shows that the tax exposes companies to punitive audits over technical errors rather than real tax avoidance, and that businesses can owe the tax even if they lose money — or even if they have no physical presence in North Carolina, so long as they sell goods here.

And for all that damage, the franchise tax contributes little to state finances. In recent years it has accounted for just over 2% of General Fund revenue, a share that is shrinking further due to recently enacted caps. That is a steep economic price to pay for such a modest and declining return.

That reality leads to the most common objection to repeal — and the least persuasive.

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NC school choice: Growth comes with challenges

Audit reveals thousands of vacant state jobs costing NC over \$1B

BY THERESA OPEKA
& KATHERINE ZEHNDER

North Carolina had almost 9,000 long-term job vacancies across 46 state agencies that totaled \$1.04 billion in lapsed salary, according to a 661-page performance audit released on Jan. 15 by State Auditor Dave Boliek's office.

As of Aug. 6, there were 8,846 long-term vacancies.

Lapsed salary is defined by the Office of State Budget and Management as the amount not expended for salary during the entire period in which the position was vacant. The long-term vacant positions are funded by state appropriations, specific agency-generated receipts, and federal funding and grants.

The UNC Health System is not included in the report; UNC System universities and NC community colleges also submitted information to the Office of the State Auditor, which will be included in a future report.

State agencies reported the information to the auditor's Division of Accountability, Value, and Efficiency (DAVE), which was created in August. The enabling legislation requires each state agency to report to the DAVE on how the agency spends taxpayer funds and instructs the auditor's office to put together a report by the end of the year on which state agencies and jobs can be cut.

Boliek previewed the report on Jan. 6 to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Justice and Public Safety, along with Jared Cronk, director of DAVE.

"I want to be clear about one thing," Boliek told legislators. "This is a snapshot; all these numbers tend to be somewhat fluid. This is a snapshot in time that will give us today the opportunity to take a look at exactly what the issues are."

He continued, "The state auditor is not in a position to cut positions or add positions. Our job is to take a data-driven approach, look, and get the actual facts. To be sure, not everybody's going to like the facts. But the facts are what they are."

The state agency with the highest number of long-term vacancies (six months or more) was the Department of Health and Human Services, with 3,074 vacancies, or \$375 million in lapsed salary.

The figure is down from \$386 million from a report Boliek released in November.

In that report, OSBM reported that NCDHHS discovered the \$386 million in lapsed salaries, with \$151 million coming from state appropriations and \$235 million from receipts and federal funding, which represented 30.6% of all lapsed salary funds in North Carolina for fiscal year 2024-25, and was the most of any state agency.

In an emailed statement to Carolina Journal, a spokesperson for NCDHHS hit back, saying the report contains "misleading associations and omissions of context."

Next on the list was the Department of Adult Corrections, with 2,817 vacancies generating \$228.6 million in lapsed salary; followed by the Department of Transportation, with 838 vacancies generating \$78.6 million in lapsed salary; and the Department of Commerce, with 684 vacancies generating \$226.1 million in lapsed salary.

Boliek said that explanations for vacancies from state agencies were most commonly attributed to low compensation or unqualified applicants, positions recently filled or about to be filled, no response or unsure, and administrative lag.

The report acknowledged that between the passage of the DAVE Act and the data collection deadline for state agencies, 13% of long-term vacancies had been filled. Additionally, 5% were reclassified, and 22% were never posted, while only 9% have been or are planned to be abolished.

Additionally, the report notes uncompetitive pay for correctional officers, nursing assistants, registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, and youth counselors. It was also found that the State Highway Patrol keeps positions vacant so they can make fuel purchases

and respond to other vehicle needs.

At the same time, he said long-term vacancies in those positions should be preserved.

Recommendations:

- State agency budgets should accurately reflect the actual expenditures necessary to deliver services and fulfill statutory responsibilities to North Carolina.
- Tracking and reporting lapsed salary usage should be improved.
- Any position that meets certain criteria should be eliminated.
- North Carolina salaries should be competitive with those offered to similar positions in surrounding states.
- Administrative delays in the hiring process can be reduced by increasing accountability and streamlining workflows.
- Many state agencies should improve their tracking of hiring and vacancies.

Boliek stated that several cost-saving measures can be taken, including eliminating positions vacant for five years or more that are not federally funded or unfunded placeholder positions. That would cut 140 job vacancies, and result in an estimated \$1.9 million in direct state appropriations savings and allow for the potential reallocation of \$4.5 million in receipts.

Additionally:

- Eliminating positions vacant for three or more years would reduce 1,159 job vacancies, yielding an estimated \$11.2

million in state appropriation savings.

- Eliminating positions vacant for one year or more would cut 4,514 job vacancies, create an estimated \$138 million in state appropriations savings, and allow for the potential reallocation of \$79 million in receipts.

The auditor also began publishing a dashboard on Dec. 31 that displays long-term state vacancies across different state agencies and the amount of funding generated from lapsed salaries.

Ardis Watkins, executive director of the State Employees Association of North Carolina, sent a letter to Democratic Gov. Josh Stein; House Speaker Destin Hall, R-Caldwell; and Senate Leader Phil Berger, R-Rockingham; about her concerns with Boliek's report. Watkins blamed the lack of a state budget as the main reason for the vacancies.

Watkins added that if these frozen positions were permanently cut, North Carolina would have more than 1,000 fewer state jobs than in 2009, despite adding 2 million residents since then.

"These are not unnecessary jobs," she said. "They are positions tied to real services. When agencies cannot hire, citizens wait longer, workloads grow, and outcomes suffer. Vacancy numbers will rise when hiring is prohibited, regardless of need."

NC delegation demands action on illegal truck driver's licenses

BY CJ STAFF

Alarmed that North Carolina appears to have repeatedly failed to follow federal law in issuing commercial driver's licenses to foreign nationals, all Republican members of the state's US House delegation are pressing Gov. Josh Stein to act immediately, warning that the state's negligence could cost nearly \$50 million in federal highway funds.

The members of Congress have signed onto a letter led by US Rep. Pat Harrigan that follows earlier reporting that the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration found widespread failures in North Carolina's issuance of nondomiciled CDLs. Federal auditors determined that approximately 54% of the licenses sampled in their audit were improperly issued, including licenses granted without proper verification of lawful presence or issued beyond the expiration of legal status. FMCSA warned that the deficiencies could jeopardize \$48.7 million in federal highway funds beginning in fiscal year 2027.

ning in fiscal year 2027.

"When over half of the licenses reviewed don't meet basic federal requirements, that's a clear breakdown in oversight," Harrigan said. "Commercial trucks are on our roads every day, alongside parents driving kids to school and people heading to work. North Carolinians should be able to trust that the system responsible for licensing those drivers is doing its job. Right now, that trust has been damaged, and state leadership needs to move quickly to restore it."

In the letter, Harrigan and his colleagues urged the governor to revoke improperly issued licenses, conduct a comprehensive audit of the CDL program, strengthen verification procedures, and return the state to full compliance with federal safety standards. The federal audit was part of a nationwide audit of states' processes for ensuring safe issuance of commercial truck driver licenses. The warning letter focused on North Carolina's handling of nondomiciled CDLs, which are issued to drivers

who are not US residents, but the law requires that they be authorized to work in the United States.

Truck drivers sounded the alarm

The findings echo concerns raised back in August by the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association, the nation's largest organization representing independent truck drivers. OOIDA previously called on governors to suspend issuance of nondomiciled CDLs. At the time, OOIDA sent a letter to Stein warning that lax enforcement posed public safety risks.

"OOIDA and truckers across America applaud Secretary [Sean] Duffy for responding to our concerns by taking substantial actions to crack down on the irresponsible issuance of nondomiciled CDLs in North Carolina," said OOIDA president Todd Spencer in a statement. "For too long, loopholes in this program have allowed unqualified drivers onto America's highways, creat-

ing unnecessary safety risks for professional drivers and the motoring public alike. These enforcement actions will also remove bad actors from the road and restore accountability to the system. The Department's action is an important step toward safer highways and a stronger, more professional trucking industry."

Last year, Harrigan also pointed to federal enforcement gaps highlighted by the audit. He introduced the SAFE Drivers Act, legislation that would create a single, standardized English proficiency test during CDL issuance and re-

newal. Federal law has long required English proficiency for commercial drivers, but the bill aims to standardize enforcement across states.

State officials have not yet announced what steps will be taken to address the federal findings, but they have 30 days to respond to the letter from the DOT. FMCSA warned that failure to correct the deficiencies could lead to escalating enforcement actions, including the loss of federal transportation funds critical to North Carolina's highway system.



Report warns tariffs could cost NC farms \$700M, 8,000 jobs

BY KATHERINE ZEHNDER

A new report from the John Locke Foundation examines the potential economic effects of tariffs implemented during the Trump administration, estimating they could lead to nearly \$700 million in losses and approximately 8,000 jobs affected in North Carolina's agricultural sector, the state's largest industry, which contributes \$111.1 billion annually to the economy.

The report, "How Tariffs Threaten North Carolina Agriculture," found potential losses of up to \$695 million to the state's farming industry, representing approximately one-third of the average net farm income in the state. Economic losses in the state resulting from trade policy retaliation have the potential to exceed \$1.9 billion, or 2% of the state's GDP.

"When agriculture is targeted in international trade disputes, North Carolina is especially vulnerable," Donald Bryson, Locke president and CEO, said. "This report shows that the costs are not abstract — they mean lost farm income, lost jobs, and real

harm to rural communities."

The report analyzes North Carolina's major commodities and their likelihood of being exported. While the state's major commodities do not perfectly align with top US exports, a decline in major US exports will still impact the state's agricultural industry.

"[I]f exports were to fall, that would leave more supply in the American domestic market, which would mean lower prices for all producers of affected commodities, whether their commodities are exported or not," wrote Jeffrey Dorfman, report author and Hugh C. Kiger distinguished professor of agricultural and resource economics at North Carolina State University.

Additionally, the report analyzes major North Carolina commodities (soybeans, corn, and wheat) that would be at risk if retaliatory trade policies were implemented. In terms of annual production value, all are essential commodities to the states, with significant export values and major exports to countries that could retaliate against the United States

in response to recent changes in trade policy. They are also commodities for which a high dollar value of North Carolina production is exported. These are the commodities most at risk from the rapidly evolving and uncertain future world trade policies.

The report examines both historical examples and academic literature to predict the price sensitivities of specific commodities and assess the economic impact of retaliatory tariffs. The report references a 2018 trade dispute in which China boycotted US soybeans, which was re-run in 2025.

"It suggests that even though North Carolina farmers are partially shielded from damage due to their soybeans having a strong local market of demand from in-state livestock producers," wrote Dorfman, "with annual production in North Carolina of about

60 million bushels, such a decline would yield an estimate of \$90 million at risk."

NC'S biggest crops

Tobacco and sweet potatoes are two of the largest crops in North Carolina. Prices dropped 5-10 cents per pound for American tobacco when China stopped buying American tobacco between 2019 and 2020. This resulted in a loss of approximately \$30 million to NC tobacco growers, or a 5% reduction in normal gross sales.

The most recent upheaval for sweet potato farmers occurred in 2019, following a poor crop in 2018, which left few US sweet potatoes available for export.

"The European Union grabbed market share, leading to very depressed export sales in 2019," according to the report.

This resulted in a price drop of approximately 10%. With annual production exceeding \$300 million in an average year, North Carolina sweet potato farmers could easily lose upwards of \$30 million if export markets were lost.

For cotton growers, if China and Mexico retaliate and pur-

chase 10% less from the United States, prices are expected to drop by 60%, according to the report. As recently as 2009 and 2001, prices have dropped below 40 cents per pound.

Based on academic analyses, pork is one of North Carolina's largest commodities, resulting in a conservative estimate of \$430 million in losses for pork producers. Additionally, cotton growers could lose \$125 million, tobacco growers could lose \$90 million, and sweet potato growers could lose nearly \$50 million.

If export markets are closed to NC farmers, Dorfman found that production would be reduced to minimize losses, meaning fewer workers would be needed. In his estimation, losses assessed would amount to 3.5% of the state's farm output but would be concentrated in labor-intensive commodities, such as tobacco and sweet potatoes. This would account for approximately 8,000 jobs being lost: 3,000 in agricultural production and 5,000 in food processing, as well as cigarette, fiber, and forestry and wood product manufacturing.



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NC joins growing list of states limiting screen time in classrooms

BY DAVID BASS

North Carolina students returning for the spring semester are facing a disconnected classroom environment, following a Jan. 1 state deadline that required all public school boards to enact strict bans on the use of smartphones and laptops during instructional time.

The ban under House Bill 959, Protecting Students in a Digital Age, prohibits students from using, displaying, or having a wireless communication device turned on during instructional time, unless otherwise instructed by a teacher. The bill also requires districts to prohibit students' access to social media platforms in the classroom "except when expressly directed by a teacher solely for educational purposes."

Certain exceptions are included in the bill, including use of electronic devices for teacher-authorized educational ac-

tivities, in emergency situations, or for cases where students have Individualized Education Programs or health plans.

Additionally, the law extends beyond a ban and requires schools to teach students about social media addiction, misinformation, and sex trafficking.

The legislation provides school administrators with teeth to enforce the new rules, explicitly authorizing disciplinary measures that include the confiscation of devices found in use during instructional time. Accountability extends beyond the classroom as well — under the new statute, the NC Department of Public Instruction is required to report any noncompliant school districts to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee annually.



"We applaud state leaders for taking this important step to reduce classroom distractions and safeguard precious learning time," said Bryce Fiedler, director of the Carolinas Academic

Leadership Network. "A growing body of research points to the academic and social benefits of restricting phones in school. CALN supports continued efforts to strike a balanced approach to classroom technology — one that limits excessive screen time and encourages pen-and-paper instruction."

The new law puts North Carolina on a growing list of states that have banned or limited the use of internet-connected devices in classrooms. As of January, 26 states have enacted such prohibitions on classroom screen time. A total of 38 states either have an outright ban or have a statute in place that encourages school districts to adopt such policies, but stops short of an outright mandate.

Smartphones have gotten

most of the attention, but as Virginia Gentles, parents rights director at the Defense of Freedom Institute, told the Epoch Times, addressing smartphones is only the first step.

"We're not done. We're just beginning to acknowledge the commodification of kids' attention," she said.

Gentles noted that test scores have declined since the widespread digital adoption during at-home learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She argued that constant screen time has eroded basic skills like handwriting and reading comprehension.

Part of the problem arises because local governments and school districts entered into contracts with technology vendors for tablets and computers to help facilitate at-home learning. But as the time approaches for those contracts to expire, 2026 could be a pivotal year for softening or even reversing tech-related policies.

NC's March 3 primary sets the stage for a high-stakes 2026 midterm

Visit the John Locke Foundation Vote Tracker at carolinaelections.com for the most up-to-date results on the March 3 primary election.

BY DONNA KING

North Carolina voters will head to the polls March 3 for the state's 2026 primary election, choosing candidates for midterm contests that will shape congressional representation, control of the General Assembly, and the ideological balance of the state's appellate courts. With candidate filing

closed, the primary field is set, revealing crowded ballots, incumbent challenges, and strategic maneuvering by both major political parties.

The 2026 primary will be held on Super Tuesday, placing North Carolina among a group of states voting on the same day and increasing attention on turnout and organization. As of publication, 808 votes have already been cast in the March primary through mail-in early voting.

Many races are in districts where the primary effectively determines the eventual officeholder. While general elections often draw broader participation, midterm primaries tend to attract more motivated and ideologically engaged voters, making them especially consequential for party direction.

The Civitas Partisan Index indicates that out of 50 seats in the North Carolina Senate, 16 are safe Democratic seats, one likely Democratic seat, two lean Democratic seats, three toss-up seats, three lean Republican seats, nine likely Republican seats, and 16 safe Republican seats.

"For Democrats to gain a majority, they would need to sweep all the toss-up seats and lean Republican districts, plus win in one likely Republican district. Since 2026 is a midterm election with a Republican in the White House, that goal is unlikely, but not impossible," said Andy Jackson, director of the John Locke Foundation's Civitas Center for Public Integrity.

There are 120 seats in the North Carolina House. The CPI indicates that there are 37

safe Democratic seats, six likely Democratic seats, four lean Democratic seats, seven toss-up seats, 15 lean Republican seats, 10 likely Republican seats, and 41 safe Republican seats.

Incumbents face intraparty challenges

This year, for the first time since at least the Reconstruction era, Republicans surpassed Democrats as North Carolina's largest political party. Still, unaffiliated voters outnumber both Republicans and Democrats, pointing to the state's continuing competitiveness.

Eight sitting members of Congress and 38 state legislators will appear on primary ballots with at least one opponent. Such intraparty challenges reflect ongoing ideological tensions where

incumbents are sometimes targeted by candidates claiming the party has drifted from its core principles. In some cases, challengers argue that long-serving officeholders have become disconnected from grassroots voters.

However, primary challenges do not guarantee turnover, but they force incumbents to campaign aggressively and spend money. Senate Leader Phil Berger faces a GOP primary challenge from Rockingham County Sheriff Sam Page in Senate District 26. President Donald Trump has given Berger his "complete and total endorsement," suggesting Page consider working in the presidential administration instead of running. Page has declined, insisting he

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Are progressives strategically running in NC GOP primaries?

BY BEN SELLERS

A Durham-area Republican candidate for the state legislature has garnered national attention for her lengthy Democratic voting record and positions that some say do not align with GOP values.

But experts say there is little to be done about it, given the state's commitment to holding open primaries.

Lakeshia Alston, the sole Republican running for the state Senate's District 22, went viral in December after social-media posts highlighted what critics said were her dubious conservative credentials.

Alston, who has been registered in Durham since 2004, voted Democrat in three previous primary elections before switching to Republican to vote in Durham's municipal primary races last October.

According to Andy Jackson, director of the John Locke Foundation's Civitas Center for Public Integrity, it isn't uncommon to have candidates whose values misalign with those of the party during open primaries, and it is generally up to voters to sort out the wheat from the chaff.

"Having 'un-

welcome guests' as candidates is a natural consequence of having a primary system (as opposed to nominating conventions)," Jackson told Carolina Journal. "It is exacerbated by North Carolina's open primaries, which are now mandated by law."

Still, some say the opposition has grown increasingly brazen in its effort to meddle in the process itself rather than focus on robust debate over the issues.

"[W]e are very aware of the far left playing games during candidate filing," said Matt Mercer, director of communications for the North Carolina Republican Party.

In a Daily Caller interview, Alston doubled down on her party identification, insisting that Republicans best aligned with her own values.

"I know that I have been seeing a lot of people with hesitation about the party that I choose to represent just because, you know, growing up, you pretty much do what your family does, what their beliefs are as far as your party," she said. "But, like I said, I am matured in my own revelation of what the Republican Party represents, and it looks like me."

When pressed, Alston suggested that any incredulity might be racist.

"Are we going back to segregation time?" she said. "Because, I'm a Republican, and I don't really understand the aims and the values of what that party represents? So I'm just going to be taken back at what somebody looks like, because we're used to the Democrats pussy-footin' around."

Alston, who said her father was an Army veteran who fought in the Vietnam War, did elaborate on some of her stances in support of the Trump admin-

istration — including its tariff policies, which have bucked traditional Republican support for free trade.

Alston caused some controversy by wearing a full niqab face covering in her photo for the Durham County Board of Elections. She explained her Muslim-friendly attire as part of an effort to focus on substance over style.

"I didn't want it to go in for the looks," she told the DCFN. "I wanted it to be about who is the most qualified."

Durham Republicans remain skeptical. Alston reportedly failed to identify any planks of the GOP platform with which she was aligned during a November party meeting.

"We did our best to vet her as the candidate that came forward," Durham GOP chair Christina Crosby told Carolina Journal. "She was unable to articulate her positions as they relate to the Republican platform and didn't have much to say about anything that she believed in."

Crosby said Alston initially planned to challenge state Rep. Vernetta Alston, no relation, who is an incumbent Democrat, but instead she filed for the state Senate race.

Because the Dec. 19 filing deadline for the primary has lapsed, she will be the only GOP candidate on the ballot for the District 22 race.

However, Durham Republicans hoped to file a petition to field an alternative for the November election.

"[W]hat we plan to do is collect 250 signatures to request a write-in option on the November ballot and will find somebody to put down," Crosby said.

Regardless, it may be a moot point in deep-blue Durham,

where Democrats enjoy a significant electoral advantage.

"They will likely both lose to the Democrat challenger, which is whoever passes that primary on the Democrat side," Crosby said.

NC Educators on the Ballot

While Alston's run may prove to be little more than a political spectacle, several competitive races feature GOP candidates whose voting records may warrant extra scrutiny.

Mercer said the NCGOP was not at liberty to discuss specific candidates during the primaries but flagged concerns over NC Educators on the Ballot, a group "led by a registered Democrat."

The self-declared "grassroots campaign," founded by retired educator Patricia Saylor, is encouraging teachers to run as a way to force reforms to the state's education funding.

Its website lists six active candidates seeking House seats in the General Assembly. Alston is not one of them.

"Because for so many seats, the only path to Raleigh is through the Republican primaries, that's where we needed to go," Saylor said at a rally in September.

Jackson said other high-profile examples of alleged primary meddling included the "Fire Madison" campaign to oust former US Rep. Madison Cawthorn, a staunch ally of President Donald Trump, in 2022.

Repeated scandals and attacks on Cawthorn ultimately may have succeeded in weakening his appeal, although Republican voters broke for a more established Republican, current US Rep. Chuck Edwards,

over the progressive alternative, Wendy Nevarez.

According to Jackson, the solution is simple. "The Republican Party should do a better job of candidate recruitment," he said.

He conceded that the situation was different in deep-blue districts like Alston's, where election may be statistically improbable, if not impossible. Nonetheless, he said it was unlikely to help the GOP.

"I do not see much of an upside for Republicans, although a warm body is better than nothing," Jackson said.

Meanwhile, for opponents who use the primaries to push so-called fake Republicans in competitive races, the upside is clear.

"While they will not win, it could make those incumbents use resources that they would otherwise use to prepare for the general election," Jackson said.

While Jackson said this strategy is rarely successful, he did point to one example where it was used effectively, but only due a special circumstance where multiple candidates of the same party could run in the general election.

"Perhaps the most prominent and successful example of a 'fake Republican' candidate was Chris Anglin, who switched parties to run as a Republican for North Carolina Supreme Court in 2018," said Jackson. "His effort led to the defeat of incumbent Republican Justice Barbara Jackson. A quirk in the 2018 election allowed multiple candidates of the same party to run in judicial general election contests. Anglin took advantage of that loophole to split the Republican vote, allowing Democrat Anita Earls to win despite receiving less than half of the total vote."



Applications for Opportunity Scholarship open as enrollment surpasses 100K students

BY DAVID BASS

As the total number of students enrolled in the Opportunity Scholarship Program has risen to 104,599, applications are now open for families to apply for the 2026-27 school year.

The priority application period runs from Feb. 2 until March 2, according to the NC State Education Assistance Authority, the state agency responsible for overseeing the program.

Opportunity Scholarships, available to all K-12 students, are the state's voucher program designed to enable families to choose a private education for their children. The program is available to all families regardless of income, but lower-income households are prioritized.

The NCSEAA has announced updated income guidelines and scholarship award amounts as well. Each scholarship is now valued at between \$3,578 and \$7,942 each year, spread across four income tier levels rang-

Number in Household	Award Tier 1 Max. income to receive up to \$7,942	Award Tier 2 Max. income to receive up to \$7,148	Award Tier 3 Max. income to receive up to \$4,766	Award Tier 4 Income NR or above tier 3 max. to receive up to \$3,574
2	\$40,034	\$80,068	\$180,153	No income limit
3	\$50,542	\$101,084	\$227,439	
4	\$61,050	\$122,100	\$274,725	
5	\$71,558	\$143,116	\$322,011	
6	\$82,066	\$164,132	\$369,297	
7	\$92,574	\$185,148	\$416,583	
8	\$103,082	\$206,164	\$463,869	
9	\$113,590	\$227,180	\$511,155	
10	\$124,098	\$248,196	\$558,441	
11	\$134,606	\$269,212	\$605,727	
12	\$145,114	\$290,228	\$653,013	

ing from \$61,050 for a family of four in the first tier to \$274,725 a year in the fourth tier. Those figures are about a 2.6% increase from the prior year's numbers.

Income guidelines for 2026-“The new numbers for the Opportunity Scholarship suggest demand for the program

is as strong as ever,” said Robert Luebke, director of the Center for Effective Education at the John Locke Foundation. “Families want educational options. And North Carolinians should be thankful for the program and lawmakers who have supported it and helped it grow. Never take

a good thing for granted.”

The application period for the ESA+ program — designed for students with special needs — will also open during the same timeframe. Awards for ESA+ may be used at an eligible private school or for approved educational expenses, including

for families who home school.

North Carolina lawmakers have also been working to make a new federal tax-credit scholarship a reality. The tax-credit program is part of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act enacted by Congress in July. It would allow NC taxpayers to make deductible contributions to designated Scholarship Granting Organizations, which in turn would issue stipends to students for private school expenses, including tuition and other allowable costs. The measure was vetoed by Gov. Josh Stein and is pending an override vote in the state House.

A recent Carolina Journal Poll of likely voters put support for the Opportunity Scholarship Program at 64%, compared to 29% who are opposed.

In 2024, insufficient funds in the program led to 55,000 students being placed on a waitlist. In September of that year, both the Republican-led House and Senate, who at the time had veto-proof supermajorities, passed legislation to clear the waitlist.

SOURCE: NCSEAA.

State officials detail shortfalls, delays in Helene recovery

BY ANNIE DANCE

State officials overseeing western North Carolina's disaster recovery efforts acknowledged ongoing funding gaps, federal reimbursement delays, and housing challenges during Jan. 9 and Feb. 9 meetings of the Governor's Recovery Office for Western North Carolina (GROW NC).

Each month, the advisory committee meets at a different community college or virtually. The January meeting was at Isothermal Community College in Spindale, and the February meeting was virtual. The Jan. 9 meeting offered a detailed status update on recovery from Hurricane Helene, more than 15 months after the storm, and highlighted persistent issues for local governments and residents.

“This is a multi-year effort,” Gov. Josh Stein said.

Officials reported that roughly 15.5 million cubic yards of storm debris have been removed across affected counties, describing cleanup as one of the “most advanced components” of recovery.

“We’re getting close to finishing the debris mission, though final numbers are still being updated,” said Matt Calabria, director of GROW NC.

Damage to private roads and bridges remains one of the most significant challenges. The General Assembly appropriated \$25 million for a reimbursement program that allows property owners to recover up to 50% of repair costs for eligible sites. Applications are open for six months and must be submitted

by the end of February.

The state has received nearly 7,000 applications. “If we were to fund all eligible claims, the total would far exceed the available appropriations,” Calabria said. Projects serving multiple households or providing emergency access are prioritized under state law; not all applicants will receive assistance.

Several speakers highlighted persistent delays in FEMA reimbursements as a major source of financial strain for counties and municipalities. To address cash-flow issues, the state created a loan program allowing local governments to borrow against anticipated FEMA payments. Officials confirmed that all \$150 million allocated for the program has already been awarded.

The governor compared North Carolina's federal disaster recovery funding with past large-scale storms. States affected by Hurricanes Katrina, Sandy, and Maria typically received 40% to 50% of total federal disaster funding within the first year. “In contrast, North Carolina has received less than 12% of expected federal recovery funds about 16 months after Hurricane Helene,” Stein said.

Officials said they are actively advocating for additional federal appropriations and described congressional action as essential to the state's long-term recovery.

FEMA temporary housing assistance is limited to 18 months after a disaster. As of Jan. 9, less than 60 households were participating in FEMA's Direct Housing Program, while slightly more than 100 house-

holds received rental assistance. State leaders acknowledged a shortage of transitional housing for residents whose homes are undergoing repairs.

Officials also updated the committee on Renew NC, a housing repair and reconstruction program funded with federal disaster recovery dollars. The application deadline was extended through January following door-to-door outreach, resulting in 7,373 completed applications. The program follows the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development guidelines.

Heavy rainfall from Helene caused more landslides in western North Carolina than in the previous two decades combined. David Korte, manager of the state's landslide hazard mapping program, said that the storm had also changed the program's approach.

“We moved from hard landslide science to a focus on resiliency,” Korte said. “Hard landslide is what we used to do — physics, material properties, engineering. Now we’re trying to help communities and emergency managers be more resilient.”

Helene triggered over 2,000 mapped landslides, compared with 358 across the state from 1990 through 2023. Landslides killed 31 people out of the 108 who died due to the storm, according to available state data. About 75% of the slides affected a road, structure, or river. Most occurred in areas with at least 10 inches of rainfall; none were found where precipitation remained below five inches, Korte told the committee.

Scientists currently can use



PUBLIC DOMAIN BY KATE ALLSTADT FOR USGS.

Multiple landslides and mudflows in Bat Cave, NC.

rainfall and soil moisture data to predict potential landslides within 24 hours, but precise, short-term forecasting remains limited. “We’re not talking half an hour ahead of time. These are fast-moving, unpredictable slides,” Korte said.

Current landslide maps highlight broad areas of potential risk, useful for long-term planning but less practical for emergency management. Korte said new maps will flag areas expected to receive at least five inches of rain over 24 hours. “We’ll identify ‘areas of concern’ using Weather Prediction Center forecasts and share that information with state and local emergency management,” he said.

The program also plans a network of monitoring stations to track precipitation and soil moisture. “Places with higher soil moisture are more likely to experience slides during heavy rain,” Korte said.

Budget writers cut funds for

landslide mapping in 2011, with partial restoration in 2017. Last year, the General Assembly allocated \$3 million for Helene-affected areas. The recovery committee recommended \$6.1 million to expand mapping to 15 counties and update nine existing county maps, plus \$600,000 for an early warning system.

The landslide hazard program currently has three staff members. Korte hopes to double the team to install and maintain monitoring stations and improve map accuracy. “Maintenance has been neglected because we’ve focused on mapping,” he said. “We don’t have enough people to do both well.”

Officials stressed the need for additional federal funding, continued housing support, and improved landslide hazard mapping to protect residents and critical infrastructure.

“GROW NC is always trying to be entrepreneurial, figuring out where they can fill gaps,” Stein said.

NCDPI celebrates National School Choice Week with focus on public schools

BY DAVID BASS

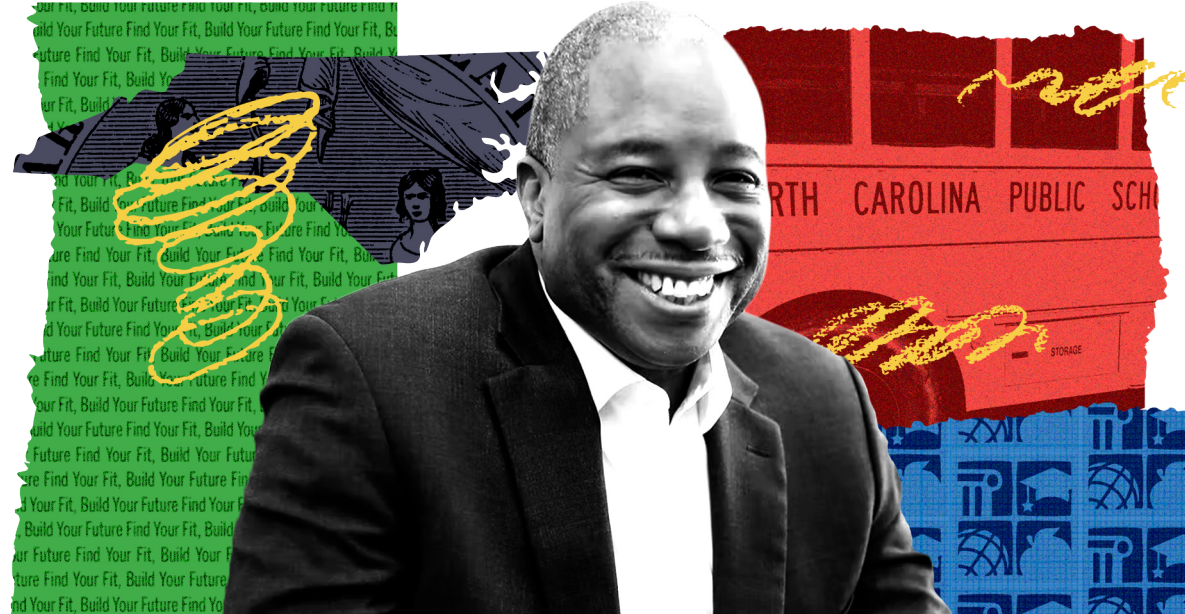
The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction chose to celebrate National School Choice Week by focusing on traditional public and charter schools during a press event Jan. 28.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Maurice “Mo” Green used the event to announce the launch of “Find Your Fit, Build Your Future,” a six-week initiative built around sharing information on the “remarkable range of choices available to families within North Carolina’s public school system.”

That focus comes during a time when enrollment in traditional public schools has been on the decline since the COVID-19 pandemic, as more families choose alternatives. Public school enrollment has dropped to around 80%, while enrollment in public charters, in the private-school Opportunity Scholarship Program, and in homeschools has surged.

National School Choice Week ran Jan. 25-31. It was designed to highlight the variety of educational options available to parents.

“I do want to spend just a moment to be sure that we thank the vast majority of families who are already choosing our pub-



lic schools and our educators who are making our schools such enriching experiences for all of our students,” said Green, who pointed to public school options, like the state’s 229 magnet schools, 138 early college high schools, career and technical education pathways, gifted programs, and virtual learning opportunities.

“When some families think about school choice, they often don’t realize just how good our schools are and how many choices are available that already exist in our public education system,”

he added.

Green said that he expected the decline in traditional public school enrollment to ease in the future, and he pointed to funding as the key catalyst.

“It’s certainly a critical part of being sure that we have wonderful opportunities to offer to families, and certainty a recognition that the General Assembly has a critical part to play in that,” he said.

Asked about open enrollment policies — which allow students to change public schools within the same district if the new

school is a better fit — as one option to expand choice in public schools, Green urged a cautious approach and said that the existing structure of district schools offer ample opportunities.

Ashley Logue, executive director of the Office of Charter Schools, also spoke during the press conference.

“Not every child thrives in the same exact environment, and charter schools give families the ability to find the right match for their student, whether that’s a different teaching approach, a focus on their passion,

or a program that prepares them for their specific future goals,” Logue said.

More than 150,000 students are enrolled in public charter schools, with a waitlist of nearly 75,000 students.

The event additionally focused on classroom-to-career pathways in state high schools and community colleges. Sneha Shah-Coltrane, senior director of advanced learning and gifted education at NCDPI, pointed to the state’s early college high schools as an example — which allow students to earn a high-school diploma and two-year associate degree at an accelerated pace.

“These schools offer an opportunity for students to be fully immersed in the college experience, whether they be at a community college or at one of our four-year universities and colleges across our state,” Shah-Coltrane said.

And Trey Michael, senior director of career and technical education at NCDPI, highlighted career and technical education programs.

“I like to think of CTE as the best place to apply academics,” he said. “We focus on engaging and motivating students through active participation in their own learning and skill development.”

Bipartisan state, federal pressure on grid operators to lower costs

BY NICK CRAIG

The Trump administration and a bipartisan group of governors, including North Carolina Gov. Josh Stein, are pressuring the nation’s largest regional electric grid operator to rein in rising electricity costs. The coalition is urging PJM Interconnection, which serves states such as Virginia, Tennessee, Ohio, and northeastern North Carolina, to lower prices as demand surges, particularly from AI data centers.

“I am committed to keeping electricity cost as low as possible for families,” said Stein in a press release. “That means making sure data centers pay their fair share for the electricity they require to be generated. I applaud the US Department of Energy for this initiative and remain committed to making life as affordable as possible for North Carolinians.”

“Data centers and their power needs are a real problem for electricity grids and electricity consumers in the short term,” said Jon Sanders, director of the Center for Food, Power, and Life at the John Locke Foundation. “While the centers will pay for

electricity commensurate with the amounts they consume, their very presence necessitates building more power plants, whose expenses get apportioned out to the other consumers’ bills as well, and that is the problem the governors and the Trump administration are trying to address with PJM.”

At the 2026 World Economic Forum in Davos, President Trump outlined plans to cut red tape and let data center companies build their own capacity.

“And we’re leading the world in AI by a lot. We’re leading China by a lot. I think President Xi [Jinping] respects what we’ve done, in part because I’ve allowed these big companies, building these massive buildings, to build their own electric capacity,” Trump said. “They’re building their own power plants, which, when added up, is more than any country.”

Sanders echoed the statements from the president, highlighting the importance of reducing regulation.

“If the facilities are able to build their own power generators, that would be the best solution for other consumers,” Sanders told Carolina Journal. “Un-

fortunately, permitting delays make it difficult to get power plants built quickly and add to their expense, plus natural gas supplies that could help the data centers power themselves have been constrained in the mid-Atlantic owing to pipeline permitting delays and denials, lawsuits, and other political obstructions.”

Last June, Amazon announced it planned to invest \$10 billion to launch a new high-tech cloud computing and AI innovation campus in Richmond County.

Recent analysis from Bloomberg shows wholesale electricity prices in many parts of the United States have surged dramatically since 2020, with some areas near large AI data-center hubs seeing costs rise as much as 267% compared with five years ago.

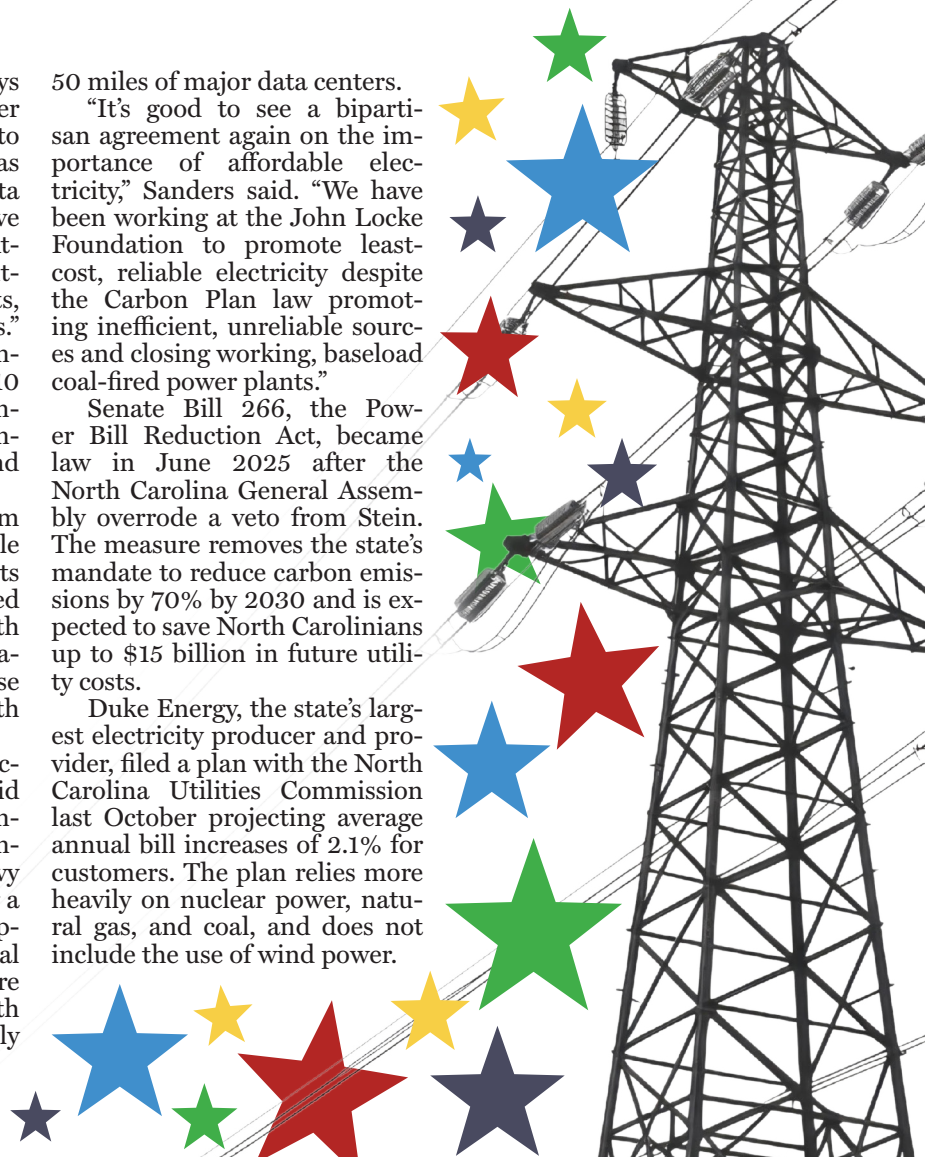
The report tracked electricity prices at thousands of grid “nodes” and found that price increases are much more concentrated near regions with heavy data-center activity, suggesting a strong connection between rapid data-center growth and local electricity cost pressures. More than 70% of the locations with rising prices are within roughly

50 miles of major data centers.

“It’s good to see a bipartisan agreement again on the importance of affordable electricity,” Sanders said. “We have been working at the John Locke Foundation to promote least-cost, reliable electricity despite the Carbon Plan law promoting inefficient, unreliable sources and closing working, baseload coal-fired power plants.”

Senate Bill 266, the Power Bill Reduction Act, became law in June 2025 after the North Carolina General Assembly overrode a veto from Stein. The measure removes the state’s mandate to reduce carbon emissions by 70% by 2030 and is expected to save North Carolinians up to \$15 billion in future utility costs.

Duke Energy, the state’s largest electricity producer and provider, filed a plan with the North Carolina Utilities Commission last October projecting average annual bill increases of 2.1% for customers. The plan relies more heavily on nuclear power, natural gas, and coal, and does not include the use of wind power.



8 STATE POLICY

Lawmakers examine intersection of mental health, justice system

BY THERESA OPEKA

Lawmakers in Raleigh are in discussions on how to improve the mental health system in North Carolina when it comes to outpatient versus inpatient commitment, both involuntary and voluntary, and what can be done to improve outcomes. The topic is being closely examined by the House Select Committee on Involuntary Commitment and Public Safety, which scheduled meetings on Jan. 14 and Feb. 11. The increased scrutiny comes after the recent murders of Iryna Zarutska of Charlotte and Zoe Welsh of Raleigh. Welsh allegedly died at the hands of Ryan Camacho, who has a lengthy rap sheet and a history of mental illness. It has been reported that Camacho became delusional in 2016, had schizophrenia, and that his mother had him involuntarily committed. She would also try to get him declared incompetent several times over the years and was reportedly granted guardianship over him multiple times. A Wake County assistant district attorney tried to have Camacho involuntarily committed for an August crime, but Wake County District Court Judge Louis Meyer III denied

the request, and the charges and case were dismissed, leaving Camacho to walk free. Zarutska, a 23-year-old Ukrainian refugee, was stabbed in the neck on Aug. 22 on Charlotte's Lynx Blue Line on her way home from work. Decarlos Brown Jr. was arrested and charged with first-degree murder. Brown, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia, had been previously arrested 14 times, including for felonies. The consensus at the Jan. 14 meeting was that continuing care is needed for those who have mental health issues. Dr. Marvin Swartz, a professor at Duke University School of Medicine's Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences and the lead of the Behavioral Research Team at the Wilson Center for Science and Justice at Duke Law, said North Carolina was a role model at one time for other states, like New York, for assisted outpatient treatment. Swartz said that all changed with mental health reform in 2001, when the shift away from area programs made the responsibility and accountability for outpatient commitment by Local Management Entities/Managed Care Organizations (LME/MCOs) ambiguous and fell into disuse, adding that monitoring by these has been severely lack-

ing. Many of the patients who are treated are also in the Medicaid system. Swartz said that long-term outpatient commitment, usually six months or more, can reduce hospital readmissions, shorten hospital stays, and lower rates of minor violence, and is safer for the patient than being committed because they would be less likely to be victimized or assaulted by someone else. While she thanked Swartz for his presentation, Rep. Donna McDowell White, R-Johnston, said not everyone with a severe mental illness can live outside of an institution. She noted that a psychiatric patient was placed on the cardiac floor of her local hospital for over six months because there weren't any beds at any psychiatric hospitals. "It is not the responsibility of our law enforcement, our hospitals, our acute care hospitals," White stated. "It is the responsibility of our long-term operating psychiatric hospitals. ... We need to have qualified people in those hospitals that were designed to keep people in a safe environment where they are much happier, and they're not out there wreaking havoc among the general population." Carrie Brown, chief psychiatrist for the North Carolina Department of Health and Hu-

man Services said some individuals with serious mental illness are caught in a pattern of cycling through hospitals, jails, and emergency departments due to their noncompliance. With limited resources to encourage them back into treatment, they deteriorate and only re-enter the system when they're in the midst of a crisis. She did stress that outpatient commitment is not appropriate for the vast majority of individuals with mental illness. They also discussed mobile crisis services — which deliver an immediate response directly to the person, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, by licensed mental health professionals, thereby easing the burden on the system. Stephen Eide, senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, urged lawmakers to increase psychiatric bed capacity, increase the length of stay, focus any community-based investment on serious mental illness, and use assisted outpatient treatment to make community mental health systems more accountable. He told lawmakers that a provision in Medicaid, known as the IMD Exclusion, which prevents Medicaid from being used for standalone psychiatric hospital care, such as in-state hospitals for adults between the ages of 18 and 64, has been in Med-

icaid since the 1960s. The provision restricts states from receiving reimbursement for that type of care. He said ultimately Congress will need to address it to help states with funding. Committee Co-Chair Rep. Hugh Blackwell, R-Burke, stated that the state has 300 hospital beds in mental psychiatric hospitals that are closed because there aren't enough staff. "I think one of the questions is: Are there enough nurses that are out there just waiting for us to pay enough and then they'll come to work, or do the numbers we need not exist?" Blackwell asked. "So, the question for me is what do we do while we're waiting on Washington, while we're waiting on the pipeline, to try to get into beds people who need it and treat them as best we can." Others are also questioning how the criminal justice system handles such cases and what can be done to improve it. Democratic Gov. Josh Stein said at January's Council of State meeting that the system isn't doing a good enough job in treating those with mental health issues who have such violent behaviors and suggested behavioral health urgent care centers, or BHUCs, would be more appropriate than an emergency room

SOURCE: NCLEG LIVESTREAM

continued PAGE 12

Incentives for training in trades, as labor-intensive careers lag

BY KATHERINE ZEHNDER

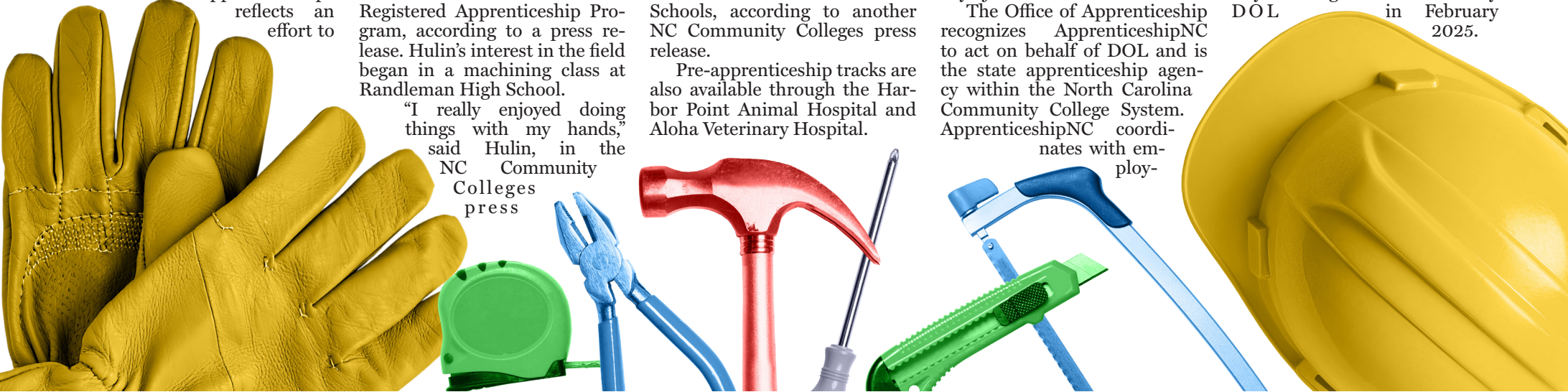
In the last year, there has been a push in North Carolina, on par with a national trend, to increase education related to trades-focused careers, with national funding allocated to trade programs. In June, North Carolina received a \$1.2 million federal grant, as part of \$84 million in grants announced by the US Department of Labor across all 50 states. The grants are allocated to increase the capacity of Registered Apprenticeship Programs to meet the Trump administration's goal of expanding the program to 1 million apprenticeships. "This federal push toward apprenticeships reflects an effort to

revive the skilled trades after years of cultural pressure that steered young people toward four-year degrees," Joseph Harris, fiscal policy analyst for the John Locke Foundation, told the Carolina Journal. "However, as tuition costs continue to rise, trade careers are regaining attention. The open question is whether channeling federal grants through institutions can meaningfully influence those individual career decisions, or whether real change depends more on wages, employer demand, and market signals." Tyler Hulin of Randleman is one of many success stories coming out of ApprenticeshipNC. Hulin is a graduate of United Brass Works Inc.'s Machinists Registered Apprenticeship Program, according to a press release. Hulin's interest in the field began in a machining class at Randleman High School. "I really enjoyed doing things with my hands," said Hulin, in the NC Community Colleges press

release. "I found a niche for that." Hulin's father encouraged him to explore machining as a long-term career option. He learned about registered apprenticeship opportunities through his career development counselor. Hulin connected with United Brass Works Inc., a member of Apprenticeship Randolph and a local manufacturer. "Working at United Brass Works Inc. has been great! There are always opportunities to learn," continued Hulin. Another example is the Animal Hospital of Statesville, a RAP partner that also offers a pre-apprenticeship track for veterinary technicians. These programs are open to students 16 and older in Iredell-Statesville Schools, according to another NC Community Colleges press release. Pre-apprenticeship tracks are also available through the Harbor Point Animal Hospital and Aloha Veterinary Hospital.

"It gives the students an opportunity to explore the career path," Todd Williams, executive director of industry, trade, and business development for Iredell-Statesville Schools, said in the release. "It also shows them the options available to them to continue their educations." As of August 2025, according to the US Chamber of Commerce, North Carolina's labor shortage is extreme, with only 76 available workers for every 100 open jobs. There are 257,000 open positions and a labor force participation rate of 59.2%. And the numbers for blue-collar jobs, such as construction and agriculture, are often even worse, as they aren't the first choice for those entering today's job market. The Office of Apprenticeship recognizes ApprenticeshipNC to act on behalf of DOL and is the state apprenticeship agency within the North Carolina Community College System. ApprenticeshipNC coordinates with employ-

ers, community partners, and educational institutions to cultivate and develop RAP and pre-apprenticeship programs across the state. Wake Technical Community College is one of many community colleges that offer apprenticeship programs through RAP and is registered with ApprenticeshipNC. The North Carolina Rural Water Association also offers RAP apprenticeships registered through ApprenticeshipNC. In addition to \$1.2 million for the apprenticeship program, North Carolina also received a \$4 million grant from DOL for workforce re-entry training for incarcerated individuals — the \$4 million falls under the Pathway Home grant announced by DOL in February 2025.



New UNC policy requiring syllabi be posted online takes effect

BY DAVID BASS

University of North Carolina System President Peter Hans is implementing a new policy that requires instructors to post course descriptions and syllabi to an online searchable database. The move is designed to increase public transparency, with recent polling showing growing skepticism toward institutions of higher education.

Under the directive from Hans, which took effect Jan. 15, all syllabi must include the course name, prefix, and description; goals, objectives, and student learning outcomes; an explanation of assessment, grading scale, assignment breakdown, and the impact of attendance/participation; and a list of all required course materials.

Additionally, each syllabus must contain a statement affirming that the course engages diverse scholarly perspectives for critical thinking and that the inclusion of readings does not

imply endorsement.

The directive also mandates that syllabi be posted to an online searchable database “no later than one week prior to the first day of classes for the applicable semester or session.” If the materials are not available due to operational limitations, they must be posted by the first day of classes.

“We are living through an age of dangerously low trust in some of society’s most important institutions,” Hans wrote in an op-ed for the Raleigh News and Observer in December. “While support for North Carolina’s public universities remains strong and bipartisan, confidence in higher education generally has dropped in recent years, driven by concerns about value and a perception that some colleges and universities have drifted from their core mission.”

“There is no question that making course syllabi publicly available will mean hearing feedback and criticism from people who may disagree with

what’s being taught or how it’s being presented,” Hans added. “That’s a normal fact of life at a public institution, and we should expect a vibrant and open society to have debates that extend beyond the walls of campus.”

The move has garnered opposition from the NC American Association of University Professors.

“This policy will stifle academic freedom, chill free inquiry, and expose educators and students to politically motivated attacks and targeted harassment. At its core, this new directive is an effort to intimidate instructors whose research and teaching delves into subject matter that some politicians don’t want to see explored,” said AAUP President Todd Wolfson in a statement.

“Dark money-funded right-wing activists and their allies in the UNC System’s leadership are attempting to strangle critical thought and the free exchange of academ-

ic thought by harassing faculty, disrupting student learning, and threatening the pursuit of truth,” Wolfson added. “Ultimately, Peter Hans’ regulation amounts to a doxxing database that will further empower those attempting to censor teaching and learning in the UNC System.”

Jenna Robinson, president of the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, wrote a letter praising the decision by Hans but cautioned that more needs to be done.

“The UNC System’s decision to make syllabi public is a significant step towards greater transparency,” Robinson said. “It’s disappointing that not all reading materials will be listed in syllabi. I hope this can be addressed in a subsequent policy revision.”

A Pew Research Center poll from October found that seven in 10 Americans now say higher education is generally headed in the wrong direction. That’s an increase from 56% who said the same in 2020.

UNC-Chapel Hill announces expansions of campus footprint, civic curriculum

BY DAVID BASS

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill announced two significant initiatives in January designed to expand the school’s capacity and influence.

To accommodate the state’s rapid growth, the university will break ground on its largest physical expansion in two centuries — a new mixed-use campus focused on applied sciences and medicine. Meanwhile, the university’s School of Civic Life and Leadership (SCiLL) announced a \$10 million grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to bolster civic education, scholarship, and leadership development.

“We have a fundamental obligation to the people of this state,” said Chancellor Lee Roberts in a statement regarding the physical expansions. “As North Carolina continues to be one of the fastest-growing states in America, the demand from qualified North Carolina students is only going to increase. If we do not create the physical capacity to serve more of them at the same level of excellence, we will either have to turn away thousands of our own citizens or diminish the quality of the education we provide. Neither is acceptable for the state’s flagship university.”

The physical centerpiece of the growth strategy is a new campus extension in Carolina North, located on and around the former site of the Horace Williams Airport in Chapel Hill. Groundbreaking is expected to begin in early 2027 on a

230-acre plot. University officials envision the site not merely as an academic annex, but as a multifaceted development with mixed-use housing for students and local families integrated with retail, dining, entertainment, and cultural spaces.

The new campus will focus on applied sciences, biomedical engineering, and artificial intelligence. University officials stated that the site will function in tandem with UNC Health to foster rapid advancements in medical technology and patient care. Development will rely partly on a public-private partnership model, and planning will include an advisory group of students, faculty, and community members.

The project has to go through a number of layers of approval before completion. The total price tag is undetermined, but officials say they will rely on a mix of state support, university trust funds, debt, private philanthropy, and third-party investment. The university anticipates beginning to issue requests for qualifications for master planning and development partners in spring 2026, targeting initial site preparation and infrastructure work to begin ahead of the groundbreaking in 2027.

“This campus extension is an unparalleled opportunity for our students and North Carolina’s future and a powerful catalyst for long-term growth,” said Malcolm Turner, chair of the UNC Board of Trustees, in a statement. “By creating a place where education, research, and industry intersect, the Univer-

sity is strengthening its role as a driver of innovation, entrepreneurship, and investment across the state. This kind of forward-looking development benefits our students, fuels job creation, attracts new partners, and reinforces Carolina’s competitiveness for decades to come.”

While the new campus focuses on technical innovation, the university is also expanding its intellectual footprint in the civics education space with the \$10 million matching grant for SCiLL.

The investment will support the creation of eight endowed professorships in areas such as American political thought, constitutionalism, classical civic education, great books, and leadership. The ultimate goal is to establish SCiLL as a world-class civics school, addressing national concerns about declining civic knowledge, historical literacy, and civil discourse, supporters say.

“We’re educating citizen leaders for constitutional self-government through free inquiry and civil discourse, and this grant allows us to do that at a higher level, so we can recruit top scholars of the text ideas and traditions that shaped American democracy,” said Jed Atkins, dean and director of the School of Civic Life and Leadership, in an interview with Carolina Journal. “Their teaching will give students the knowledge, judgment, and habits they need to lead wisely and talk across real differences.”

“With NEH’s support, [the School of Civic Life and Lead-

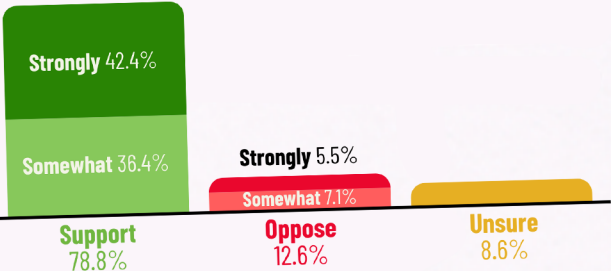
ership] can become a national hub for viewpoint-diverse civics-related scholarship,” added Dan DiSalvo, professor and associate dean of faculty development and curriculum at the school, in a statement. “This investment allows us to recruit distinguished faculty who will prepare the next generation of scholars committed to civic education as well as leaders who will contribute to communities across the nation.”

Following initial approval from UNC-Chapel Hill trustees in early 2023, SCiLL officially launched in fall 2024. The school operates on \$4 million in nonrecurring funding from the NC General Assembly as start-up funds. In October 2025, the US Department of Education also awarded the school \$979,000 for a summer civics institute.

SCiLL currently offers a minor that focuses on connecting philosophy, history, politics, and economics to help students explore foundational American texts and civic traditions. The ultimate goal is to prepare students to engage in public discourse in a pluralistic democracy. For the future, Atkins said the school plans to create a doctorate-level program focused on American thought and constitutionalism, plus a masters-level program in military leadership.

“There’s a growing hunger in this country for serious civic education, but not enough scholars trying to teach it well,” said Atkins. “We’re looking forward to doing that at an even higher level.”

Do you support or oppose intra-district open enrollment in public schools?



Poll: NC voter su
choice rem

Nearly two-thirds of North Carolina voters support taxpayer-funded school choice scholarships through the Opportunity Scholarship Program, according to a poll of likely voters released Jan. 29.

Dropping during National School Choice Week, the new Carolina Journal Poll found broad support for other key planks of the school-choice movement. That includes 57% support for public charter schools and 79% support for policies that allow students to change public schools within the same district if the new school is a better fit — known as open enrollment.

“Voters continue to strongly support school choice in North Carolina,” said Carolina Journal publisher and John Locke Foundation CEO Donald Bryson. “While charter support has leveled off from recent highs, backing for private school options is growing again, showing parents remain committed to choice and focused on what works best for their children.”

“North Carolina ranks dead last on open enrollment laws, even as voter support continues to rise. That gap between what North Carolinians want and our state’s education policy should be a wake-up call for lawmakers,” Bryson added.

A plurality of voters, at 41%, oppose Gov. Josh Stein’s veto of a bill that would opt North Carolina into a federal tax credit scholarship program. The program would allow individuals to get a federal tax credit of \$1,700 for donating to approved Scholarship Granting Organizations, which in turn issue stipends to students for private school expenses, including tuition and other allowable costs. A veto override vote is still pending even as numerous other states are opting into the program.

Meanwhile, voters expressed concern with the direction of public education in the state. Fifty-three percent of likely voters are dissatisfied with the quality of education in public schools across the state, compared to 29% who are satisfied. There was also an intensity gap on the question — 21% were “completely dissatisfied” while only 6% were “completely satisfied.”

Asked where they would send their child if money was no object, 46% chose a private school, 30% a traditional public school, 11% a homeschool, 8% a public charter school, and less than 1% a virtual school. For those who would choose a nonpublic school option for their child, the

Support for school remains strong

most popular reasons why were academic quality, curriculum or education values, and school safety or bullying.

Just one in five likely voters could name the correct dollar range for the average per pupil spending on K-12 public schools, which is now over \$13,000, according to NC Department of Public Instruction data for 2024-25. But when given the correct amount, 43% said the figure was “too little” spent on public education, compared to 16% who said it was “too much” and 15% who said it was “the appropriate amount.”

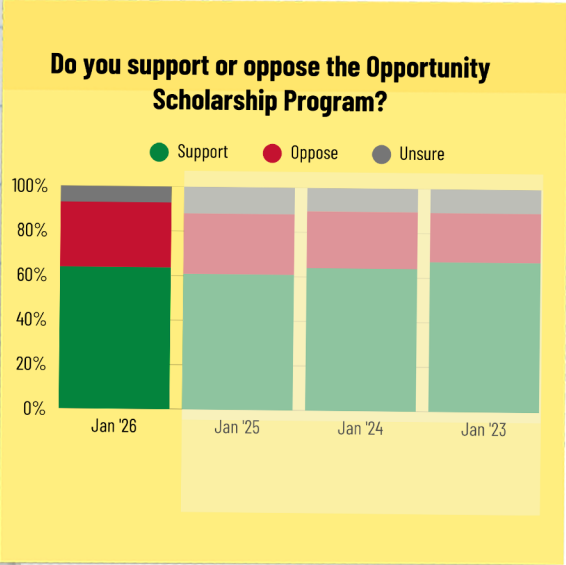
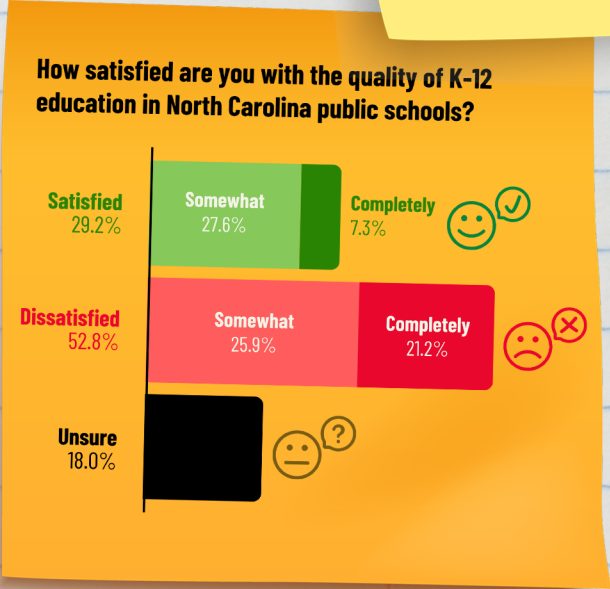
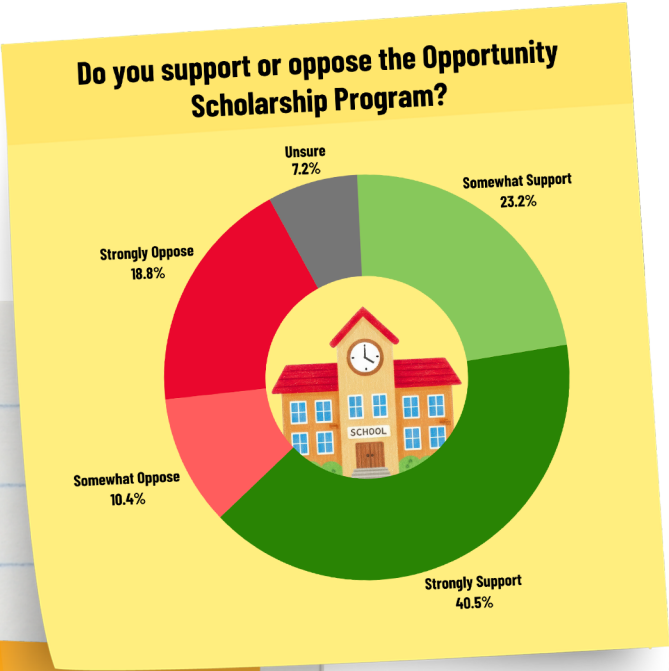
Likely voters were evenly divided on the question of whether the state should allocate facilities funding for public charter schools.

Asked to name the most pressing issues facing public education today, 20% said a “shortage of high-quality teaches,” 15% pointed to “adequate finances,” and 14% said “academic standards.” Lower down on the priority list were “preparing students for the workforce” at 12%, “curriculum concerns” at 10%, and “lack of parental involvement” at 10%. Half of voters, at 51%, believe that higher teacher pay is essential regardless of measured student outcomes.

An overwhelming 83% of likely voters say that COVID-19 pandemic school closures from 2020 and 2021 continue to negatively impact student achievement, with just 5% saying the impacts were minimal or that there was no impact and 2% saying the impact was positive for some students. Respondents also took a dim view on how school districts spent pandemic recovery funding for public schools — 45% said those funds were spent poorly and 20% said they were spent well.

Asked to rank the performance of their local school board with a letter grade, the most popular choice was a C at 32%, followed by a B at 17%, a D also at 17%, and an F at 11%. Less than 4% gave their local board an A.

The CJ poll surveyed 700 likely voters and was conducted Jan. 22-25 by Harper Polling.



12 CONTINUED

Federal shift

continued from PAGE 2

pipelines in the Triad, all without the cumbersome requirements coming from Washington. The change could decentralize educational edicts, returning authority to states and local communities. This would serve as an accelerator for North Carolina's efforts over the last decade toward parental empowerment, state-level innovation, and more efficient use of taxpayer dollars. This could create meaning-

ful flexibility in designing literacy programs, expanding school choice, or building stronger career pathways right out of high school; innovation designed for our students in our communities.

Watch for the red flags

North Carolina should lean in to this direction but do so with a careful eye toward how the Department of Labor implements the new structure. Statutory requirements remain intact under the move, and federal grant conditions could simply migrate from one agency to another if

not carefully monitored. DOL's workforce metrics must not overshadow our own academic priorities or push states toward implementing a federal one-size-fits-all training mandate. It could also bring with it strings that push DOL's focus on workforce development metrics in the grant competitions, rather than some of the educational priorities that states prioritize like civics, arts, literature, and other academic foundations for a liberal arts education. The change could bring new federal bureaucrats on the scene who create overly prescrip-

tive policy, which would dampen state-level flexibility and innovation. The ramp-up could be messy. Statutory authority and oversight still lie with the Department of Education, while the administration is with DOL. Those first few grant cycles will likely be confusing with frustrating threads of communication. In the interest of efficiency, the feds could be tempted to take more control than necessary promising to ease the reins later, and then never do so. Most of all, watch for the messaging red flags. States will get the same level of grant mon-

ey that they do today; it will just come from DOL. Critics could frame this as a "cut" in Title I money or reducing federal standards from the Department of Education. This federal shift is not the end goal, but it is a step in the direction of moving educational authority to states. We must guard against potential federal overreach, but North Carolina could seize the moment to build a more locally driven, parent-centered, efficient, and results-oriented education system designed for today and the workforce to come.

Tax reform

continued from PAGE 2

The revenue objection — and why it falls short

Critics will argue that repeal is impractical because the franchise tax still generates revenue. But that objection misunderstands both scale and trade-offs. The amount involved is small enough to absorb through normal economic growth, ongo-

ing budget surpluses, or modest base broadening elsewhere. More importantly, repealing the franchise tax would remove a direct penalty on capital investment, encouraging business expansion that broadens the income and sales tax bases over time. In other words, repeal is not a gamble on growth — it is an exchange of a narrow, distortionary tax for a broader, more sustainable revenue stream. Other states have recognized this reality. Oklahoma repealed its capital stock tax. Mississip-

pi is phasing its out. Connecticut is completing its repeal. Louisiana has already enacted repeal as part of a broader competitiveness package — and the Tax Foundation expects that move alone to produce meaningful improvements in Louisiana's rankings and investment climate. Meanwhile, North Carolina risks being left behind, clinging to a tax most states have already abandoned. What makes this moment especially important is that North Carolina has already done the

hard work. The state has resisted the temptation to rely on narrow tax credits and instead built a system based on low rates and neutrality. That approach is precisely why North Carolina ranks so highly among states that levy all major taxes. Eliminating the franchise tax would not be a radical departure — it would be the logical completion of a long-running reform agenda.

A clear next step for 2026

If lawmakers want a single, concrete goal for strengthening North Carolina's economy in 2026, this is it. Repeal the franchise tax. Remove the last major tax penalty on capital formation. Signal to entrepreneurs, manufacturers, and employers that North Carolina will not tax them for growing, investing, or weathering hard times. North Carolina has become a national model by refusing to settle for "good enough." Ending the franchise tax would ensure it remains one.

March primary

continued from PAGE 5

will continue his campaign. Political analysts say that Berger's two decades in Senate leadership and pivotal role in shoring up North Carolina's economy will be difficult to beat, not to mention his notable campaign war chest. Page accuses Berger of failing on key conservative issues. The sheriff emphasizes his law-enforcement experience. Campaigns were required to file year-end fundraising totals by Dec. 31. As of the mid-year report filed in July, Berger had raised more than \$1.8 million for his re-election campaign. Page reported roughly \$45,500 in contributions, highlighting the wide fundraising gap heading into the primary.

US Senate and House contests

Capitol Hill is a major focal point of the primary. The marquee contest in March is the Republican and Democratic nominating contest for North Carolina's open US Senate seat, a race with national implications for the balance of power in Washington. Longtime incumbent Sen. Thom Tillis announced he would not seek re-election, opening the seat to fresh contenders. On the Republican side, several candidates will be on the ballot, including former Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Whatley, who has drawn backing from Trump. Other Republicans running are Don Brown, Richard Dansie, Thomas "T.J." Johnson, Michele

Morrow, and Elizabeth Temple. Margot Dupre has also filed for the Republican primary but faces a residency challenge at the NC State Board of Elections. On the Democratic side, former two-term Gov. Roy Cooper is on the ballot, leveraging his widespread name recognition after 40 years in statewide elected office. According to the November Carolina Journal poll, Cooper leads Whatley by 8.7 points. Early in the election cycle, former US Rep. Wiley Nickel also launched a campaign before suspending it to endorse Cooper. Five other Democrats appear on the primary ballot: Robert Colon, Justin Dues, Daryl Farrow, Orrick Quick, and Marcus Williams. Third-party candidates, such as Green contender Brian McGinnis and Libertarian Shannon Bray, round out the field. With Republicans holding a narrow majority in the US House and controlling most of North Carolina's congressional delegation, national Democrats say they see opportunities to compete in districts long considered GOP strongholds. Republicans currently hold 10 of the state's 14 House seats, but Democrats argue that shifting voter behavior and midterm dynamics could put some of those districts in play. One target is North Carolina's far-western 11th Congressional District, represented by Republican Chuck Edwards, a Hendersonville businessman and former state senator first elected to Congress in 2022. While the district has traditionally leaned Republican, Democrats contend that pockets of growth and changing turnout patterns, particularly around Buncombe County and

the progressive city of Asheville, could make the seat more competitive in 2026. Judicial elections quietly carry big consequences

While congressional and legislative races draw most of the attention, the 2026 primary also includes critical judicial contests. A state Supreme Court contest between Justice Anita Earls, a Democrat, and challenger Sarah Stevens, a Republican state representative, will appear on the November ballot. Meanwhile, three seats up for election this year on the North Carolina Court of Appeals feature two primary contests. Incumbent Democrat Judge John Arrowood will face either Republican Matt Smith or Republican Michael Byrne in November for Seat 1. Incumbent Judge Toby Hampson, a Democrat, faces Republican George Cooper Bell for Seat 2. Democrats James Whalen and Christine Walczyk are competing for their party's Seat 3 nomination, with Republican Craig Collins unopposed on his side. Judicial primaries often fly under the radar compared with legislative or congressional battles, but the outcomes can have lasting effects on state law. North Carolina's appellate courts routinely hear cases involving election law, regulatory disputes, and constitutional questions, making these races especially significant.

Election rules and administrative debates

Several policy debates could

also influence voter participation in the March 3 primary. One involves early voting locations, particularly on college campuses. State law does not require campus early voting sites for primaries, leaving decisions to local election boards. Supporters argue that flexibility allows counties to allocate resources efficiently, while critics contend that the absence of campus sites could reduce access for student voters. The issue has resurfaced as turnout strategies take center stage ahead of March. "The total number of college and university voting sites is an increase of one," explained Chris Cooper, director of the Haire Institute for Public Policy at Western Carolina University. "There's been a lot of attention in two places: one I know well, which is the Western Carolina University site that actually has been a college and university voting site since 2016, and that includes midterm primaries. But in Guilford County, there's also been a lot of attention about [NC] A&T and UNCG, and it turns out they actually didn't have early voting sites in the primary in 2022. Some of this media attention says it's been a decrease. That's just not quite true, at least comparing apples to apples." Another area of scrutiny is how party affiliation changes are processed through the Division of Motor Vehicles. Lawmakers are considering whether to rethink the DMV's role after concerns about lag times and discrepancies between when voters update affiliations and when those changes are reflected in official election records. Because North Carolina has a partially open primary system, party affiliation can determine

which ballot a voter receives. Delays or confusion in updating records could affect voter or candidate eligibility in closely contested races. "We're required under federal law to register voters through DMV, but we're not required for them to do affiliation changes," said Rep. Bill Ward, R-Pasquotank. "It's really my opinion that they shouldn't be doing changing affiliations through DMV because of the lag time and then the questions that rise out of that." "I mean, you don't go to the Board of Elections to get your driver's license, so why are you changing affiliation through DMV? I think it's something we at the General Assembly will have to look at, and we'll probably look at it when we go back into short session," Ward added.

What to watch on primary night

As results come in March 3, political observers will watch whether incumbent lawmakers fend off challengers and whether targeted congressional districts show signs of shifting political momentum. Turnout levels will also provide insight into voter engagement ahead of the November general election. In the 2022 midterm primary, North Carolina saw a nearly 20% voter turnout statewide, one of the highest for a midterm primary in recent decades. Still, it reflects the broader trend that primaries draw far fewer voters than general elections. Strong participation in contested primaries could signal enthusiasm, or frustration, within party bases.

Mental health

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or prison. State Rep. Marcia Morey, D-Durham, who served as a District Court judge for 18 years, and as chief District Court judge for five years, before being appointed to the General Assembly in 2017, told Carolina Jour-

nal that an examination of local bond policies and ensuring all judges and magistrates are properly trained and have access to prior criminal histories are actions that could be taken. "The criminal justice system is a lot more complex than people realize," state Rep. Mike Schietzelt, R-Wake, an attorney and Marine Corps veteran, told Carolina Journal during a recent interview.

"There's a long backlog of petitions for involuntary commitment," he told CJ. "There's the legal standard problem about this gap between competence to stand trial and an imminent threat to yourself or others. And if somebody falls into that gap like Camacho apparently did in this one judge's estimation, then they are going to be released. That's one problem."

Schietzelt points to the availability of resources, like beds and the workforce available to handle people that he says need to be in custody. He added that examining how to make things run more efficiently is crucial right now because the federal justice system and court system, including prosecutors, criminal defense attorneys, and public defenders,

are so overwhelmed. Schietzelt hopes that the committee can come up with some solutions and that something can be done when the short legislative session starts in April. If not, he said he will not rest until something is done. "Hopefully, we can get some significant solutions in the coming months, but this is going to take a while," he said.

OPINION

NC school choice: Growth comes with challenges

BOB LUEBKE
LOCKE CENTER FOR
EFFECTIVE EDUCATION



BACK IN 2011, the first year that North Carolina celebrated National School Choice Week, approximately 87% of all students attended traditional public schools, over 41,000 students were enrolled in 99 charter schools, less than 100,000 students attended private schools. And there were no public programs to encourage private school choice.

A decade-and-a-half later, the steady growth of alternative educational options makes North Carolina look like a different state. Now about 75% of all students attend traditional public schools, while 25% attend either charter, private, or home schools. Over 156,000 students are enrolled in over 200 charter schools. The state also has one of the largest home school populations at over 165,200 students. The Opportunity Scholarship Program provides scholarships of up to \$7,700 for over 100,000 students to attend a private school of their choice.

These numbers rightly suggest school choice is alive and growing in North Carolina, an ostensibly purple state. There is much to celebrate, and reflection is good. Continued growth, how-

ever, is not guaranteed. Tests lie ahead. To ensure school choice continues to flourish, focus and effort are required to meet numerous challenges looming over the movement.

These include:

Can the Opportunity Scholarship Program change with the times?

OSP vouchers have helped students secure education in a private school. New education models, however, don't necessarily fit the traditional definition of a private school. Other alternative educational models, such as hybrid schools and microschools, have much different characteristics and operating environments. The definition of a private school may need to be revisited. In addition, greater flexibility in how vouchers are used may also help encourage the growth of alternative education models.

Can the Federal Tax Credit Scholarship Program be successfully implemented?

FTCSP will allow a dollar-for-dollar credit of up to \$1,700 to those who donate to approved scholarship granting

organizations, which will distribute funds to eligible children. FTCSP can supercharge existing choice programs or jump-start programs in blue states that do not have state-funded school choice programs. While the program won't begin until 2027, the stakes are still high.

Final regulations from the IRS won't be available until later this year. However, people are waiting to see if the regulations will be flexible and respect the autonomy and discretion of the states or if the federal regulations will be overly proscriptive and homogenize programs formerly left to states and the private sector.

States are required to opt in to make taxpayers eligible for the deduction. North Carolina passed legislation (House Bill 87) to opt in last August, but Gov. Josh Stein vetoed the legislation. In his veto statement, Stein said he feared the legislation would hurt public schools. Still Stein did give a glimmer of hope.

He said, he "could see opportunities for the program to benefit public schools." If the final regulations allow that, Stein said he would opt in. Democratic governors, like Stein, will be under intense pressure to sign opt-in legislation or face losing the scholarship money that has been donated in North Carolina to

other states. To date, Jared Polis of Colorado is the only Democratic governor who has signed opt-in legislation for his state. Could Stein be the next?

Will North Carolina Democrats continue to oppose school choice?

Polling now suggests the public trusts Republicans more than Democrats to address education issues, an advantage long held by Democrats. That advantage switched during COVID and was propelled largely by Republicans backing parents in opposition to school shutdowns and favoring more parental choice.

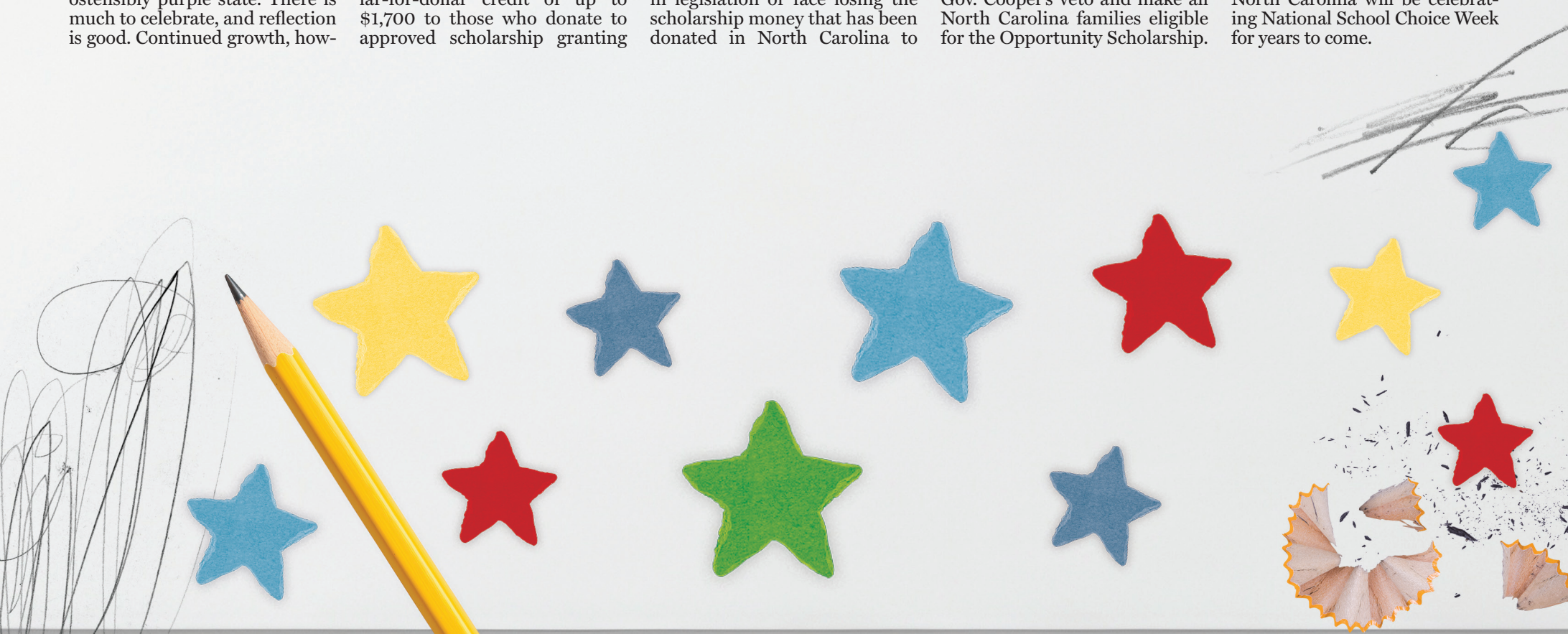
North Carolina's political landscape mirrors the national. The state's Democratic Party has long sided with teacher unions and, with the exception of charter schools, has opposed school choice. Over time North Carolina Republicans and a handful of school choice Democrats — who have now largely vanished — have been able to work together and pass school choice legislation.

In 2023, state Rep. Tricia Cotham famously switched parties to become a Republican and became the crucial final vote to allow Republicans to override Gov. Cooper's veto and make all North Carolina families eligible for the Opportunity Scholarship.

The point: Republicans have needed Democrats to move forward with much school choice legislation. Now even the majority of registered Democrats say parents are best suited to choose where a child goes to school. Other Democrats are saying the battle for school choice is over and openly lobbying their party to support school choice, albeit a more Democratic and progressive version, one with their preferred provisions regarding testing and transparency and guardrails around civil rights.

Will Democrats like Josh Stein choose to embrace such a vision, or will they limit choice to public schools? The crack in the door that Josh Stein left in his veto message mirrors the internal changes roiling the Democratic Party. Can Republicans and Democrats in North Carolina come to the table and work together on school choice? The answer will dictate what school choice looks like in the years ahead.

The last 15 years have brought significant growth and expansion to the school choice movement in the Tar Heel state. The wins come with new problems and opportunities to innovate and work together for the good of all families. Only by surmounting these challenges can we ensure that North Carolina will be celebrating National School Choice Week for years to come.



NC's 'Great Refusal' to ratify US Constitution led to Bill of Rights



DAVID LARSON
MANAGING EDITOR

YOU MAY HAVE noticed that the Carolina Journal recently took the bold (or maybe odd) decision to begin publishing all 85 essays from the Federalist Papers, which, at a rate of one per

Thursday, will take us about 85 weeks, if my math is correct. In the context of this project and the 250th anniversary of our nation, it is important to also remember North Carolina's response to this push to ratify the US Constitution in 1788.

Even if we revere the Constitution now and recognize its genius, not everyone was immediately convinced. Article VII said that if at least nine of the 13 states ratified the document, it would become effective in those states. And exactly nine states did so over a six-month period. But four states (New York, Virginia, Rhode Island, and North Carolina) dragged their feet. This is what motivated Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay to write the Federalist Papers. They were specifically written to convince New Yorkers, but the arguments were also used to pressure those in the other three states.

While many other states were dominated by Federalists, who favored a stronger union than the Articles of Confederation had provided, the Anti-Federalists had a major foothold in the Tar Heel State. Federalists had major Founding Fathers (like those that wrote the Federal-

ist Papers), but Anti-Federalists had their own prominent voices, like Patrick Henry and George Mason. And the Anti-Federalists in North Carolina, remembering the strong arm of British rule, were wary of individuals and the state losing any power to a far-away central government.

These North Carolina voices, led by Willie Jones, insisted that the US Constitution have a "declaration of rights." And in the 1788 Hillsborough Convention, Anti-Federalist arguments won the day, successfully moving the state to vote against ratifying the US Constitution. For his efforts, Jones, sometimes called "the Jefferson of North Carolina," is honored in downtown Raleigh, as the General Assembly resides on a street named for him.

The proposed amendments to the US Constitution that North Carolina sent along with their conditional refusal to ratify mirror many of the rights we enjoy in the eventual Bill of Rights. The proposals were clearly influenced by Anti-Federalist leader George Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights. But the right to life, liberty, property, happiness, and safety (a mix of John Locke and Thomas Jefferson's formulations) is notably first on

the list. Then there were amendments for the right to bear arms, the right to freedom of speech, the right to freedom of religion, and rights dealing with legal procedures, all of which would be included in the official Bill of Rights as well.

This bold move in Hillsborough, often called "the Great Refusal," pressured the First US Congress to promise a Bill of Rights. After that promise was secured, North Carolina responded with another convention, in 1789, this time in Fayetteville, where it agreed to ratify the US Constitution and join the union.

The headline image for this article has a picture of the historical marker in downtown Hillsborough, noting this major event. I snapped it on the way to work after writing this article, but I walk or drive past it multiple times a week. When I do, I often think of just how important that meeting in my small town was, not just to individual rights in our nation, but to the world.

Would we have "First Amendment rights" to religion, speech, the press, or assembly without North Carolina's Great Refusal? Likely, in some form,

but they may have been harder to defend. The same can be said for the Second Amendment right to bear arms, or the Fourth Amendment freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures.

When people around the world think of basic individual rights, they often think of the American Constitution, using terms like "freedom of speech" or "freedom of religion," which, at least in part, were influenced by the American Bill of Rights.

It should be a point of pride that North Carolina, in little Hillsborough, refused to join the union without a guarantee of these individual rights. Many nations have given broad powers to a central government, with verbal assurances to treat the people and local governments fairly. Getting it in writing, and insisting over the last two and half centuries that these rights be upheld, has been key to maintaining a government of, for, and by the people. Like the nobles who forced the English king to make written guarantees in the Magna Carta, the delegates at the Hillsborough Convention made what appeared like a small step for their own liberty that ended up being a giant step for mankind.



Transparency will help, not harm, campuses



JOHN HOOD
LOCKE BOARD MEMBER

I ADMIT THAT I am not a career academic. But I have taught at the university level for many years, and leadership classes for decades. I can't imagine any scenario in which sharing my course outlines or syllabi with the general public would impair my freedom, effectiveness, or reputation.

I also admit that many professors see the matter very differently. When Georgia recently required professors at public universities to post their syllabi for public consumption, the president of the state's labor union for professors said he was "all for transparency" but only "to parties that have a stake in the classroom - which are, you know, students, and if you want to include parents in that."

Here in our state, where University of North Carolina President Peter Hans has just issued an order requiring the posting of syllabi across all campuses in the system, the union president at UNC-Chapel Hill agreed that "transparency, accountability, accessibility" were "important aspects of a public universi-

ty system," but insisted that the new policy was really about "capitulating to pressure at the state level and at the federal level to scrutinize faculty and intimidate faculty who are teaching unpopular subjects right now." An online petition opposing Hans' decision drew thousands of signatures.

I don't think state or federal lawmakers should attempt to micromanage how professors teach or classes are structured. Having been involved in numerous campus activities as a founder or organizer, I am also a dogged proponent of academic freedom - which, in my experience, is most frequently violated by left-wing students shouting down speakers and left-wing faculty impeding a colleague from freely operating programs they dislike.

As an advocate of syllabus transparency for decades, however, I find the arguments against it wholly unpersuasive.

For starters, a syllabus doesn't at all resemble research files, a book manuscript, or other work product a professor ought to be able to keep confidential. It is handed out, posted, or emailed to current or prospective students - who are, in turn, hardly sworn to secrecy. Post-

ing syllabi on a publicly accessible website will certainly make it easier for people other than students to read them, but it doesn't traverse some bright red line.

Second, for public universities, the universe of those with a legitimate interest in what is being taught extends far beyond students and parents. The University of North Carolina is a state agency placed explicitly by the state constitution under the supervision of the General Assembly. And it remains one of the most heavily subsidized university systems in the United States. Taxpayers, voters, and the legislators who represent them have every right to review course summaries and reading assignments - which are, once again, neither properly private work documents nor potentially dangerous state secrets.

As Peter Hans pointed out, confidence in higher education has been declining in part because the public perceives professors and administrators as placing personal interests or ideological causes above the institution's proper priorities of preparing students to shoulder their professional, familial, and civic responsibilities. Transparency will help restore that public confidence.



UNC System President Peter Hans addresses the university's Board of Governors.

"There is no question that making course syllabi publicly available will mean hearing feedback and criticism from people who may disagree with what's being taught or how it's being presented," Hans wrote in the News and Observer. "That's a normal fact of life at a public institution, and we should expect a vibrant and open society to have debates that extend beyond the walls of campus."

Samuel Abrams, a professor of politics and social science at Sarah Lawrence College, observed that academic freedom

"exists to protect intellectual inquiry from coercion, not to shield publicly funded instruction from public view."

"Transparency about course structure and readings is not ideological surveillance," Abrams wrote in an American Enterprise Institute piece defending the new UNC policy. "It is basic accountability. Syllabi are not private correspondence. They are formal documents outlining expectations for students who pay tuition and, in public institutions, rely on taxpayer support."

Precisely correct.

PUBLIC DOMAIN FROM BOG LIVE STREAM.

Continued growth of charters shows school choice success

DAVE MACHADO

EXEC. DIR. OF NC COALITION
FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS



AFTER THIS YEAR'S National School Choice Week, it's clear that the movement toward options for families has become deeply entrenched in the policy and political landscape. Its roots can no longer be easily ripped out. What a wonderful thing that is for the millions of parents who now have a choice in their children's schooling.

Still, misconceptions about school choice and its impact on traditional public schools remain, even as inspiring stories of collaboration and innovation continue to emerge.

School choice opponents often suggest, for instance, that offering options to parents is somehow an attack on traditional public schools. I know from personal experience how untrue this is.

I formerly led the Department of Public Instruction's charter school division, and I now lead the North Carolina Coalition for Charter Schools. I can tell you that we in the public charter school field don't see

competition. We see opportunity — to learn from one another, to get better, and most importantly, to offer children an array of learning environments that might best suit their unique, God-given gifts.

Take Paul R. Brown Leadership Academy as an example. A small, public charter school in rural Bladen County, it has become an exemplar of innovation, excellence, and collaboration.

The vast majority of the student body — 86% — is non-white, and 81% are economically disadvantaged. It's also a military charter school, one of only a handful in the country. Parents often enroll their children in the school because they struggle elsewhere.

Not long ago, this school was on the verge of closure because of chronic underperformance. In fact, I would've been one of the people at the Department of Public Instruction to help shut it down.

But something changed. The school brought in a new leader, Dr. Jason Wray, as its superintendent. He oversaw a school-wide culture change, from the leadership to the students to the janitorial staff. "One thing I tell

the teachers and the staff: 'Don't mistake behavior for ability,'" Dr. Wray said recently.

He should know. Wray grew up in the housing projects of Portsmouth, Virginia, one of seven kids raised by a single mother. Though he was the second-youngest of the group, he was the first to graduate high school.

He developed uncanny leadership skills during his 22 years in the military, and he applied them relentlessly when he took over Paul R. Brown Leadership Academy.

In 2022, when he joined, the school ranked almost last in Bladen County for both student achievement and student growth. Just three years later, the school outscored every other public school in Bladen County for student growth, and ranked second in student achievement.

I share all this background to set up what happened next. The Wake County School System is the biggest in the state. Its superintendent, Dr. Robert Taylor, saw Wray's success and invited him to share leadership lessons with Wake County principals.

"A small charter leader coming to the largest school district



Durham Charter School orchestra performs at the CLC 24 school choice luncheon.

in the state. ... I was really in awe of it," Wray said. (Taylor previously led Bladen County's school system and hired Wray to lead one of his schools several years ago.)

That is what I mean when I say I don't see competition between district schools and charter schools — I see opportunity.

Innovation and excellence can come from anywhere — from small, rural schools and from big, urban schools, and everywhere in between. What's important is having the vision and

humility to recognize excellence and learn from it, no matter its origin.

National School Choice Week is a time to highlight stories like this one and to reaffirm our collective commitment to quality education for all students, whether they attend district schools, public charter schools, private schools, or other learning environments.

The growing demand for charter schools in North Carolina reflects families' desire for options that suit their children's

Teacher callouts are illegal work stoppages, not protests

JEANETTE DORAN

LOCKE SENIOR COUNSEL



IN JANUARY, NEWS reports highlighted calls from teachers and education advocates for coordinated absences, also known as "callouts," in response to teachers' funding complaints and the lack of a state budget. Protest organizers plan to have a callout once a month through April.

Some commentators in the press and on social media characterize such callouts as expressions of protest or free speech. That framing obscures a key legal distinction. Coordinated refusals to perform assigned public duties should not be seen as merely expressive conduct, but rather as unlawful work stoppages.

North Carolina General Statutes § 95-98.1 expressly provides that strikes by public employees are "illegal and against the public policy of this State." The law is clear: "No person holding a position either full-or part-time by appointment or employment with the State of North Carolina or in any county, city, town, or other political subdivision of the State of North Carolina, or in any of them, shall willfully participate in a strike by public employees."

Some have suggested that the strike prohibition does not apply because the demands associated with these callouts are directed at the General Assembly rather than local school boards. That reading is inconsistent with both the text and purpose of the statute. North Carolina law defines a strike as a coordinated cessation of work used "as a means of enforcing compliance with a demand upon the employer," and the focus of that definition is on the use of a work stoppage as leverage, not on the formal identity of the policymaker being pressured.

Local boards of education remain teachers' employers, even though the General Assembly controls much of the funding that determines compensation. A coordinated callout intended to influence legislative budget decisions necessarily pressures the employer by disrupting its operations and student services. Interpreting the statute to allow work stoppages whenever demands are framed as legislative rather than managerial would create a loophole that swallows the rule.

Public employees in this state do not possess a legal right to strike, regardless of the policy issue at stake. A state committed to educating its children cannot

normalize illegal work stoppages by those entrusted with teaching them the meaning of civic responsibility.

Teachers, like all citizens, have full First Amendment rights to petition the government and express dissent. They can organize marches, lobby lawmakers, and speak out about public policy. What they cannot do under state law is orchestrate a collective withdrawal of labor.

This issue isn't just about the law itself. Public schools are charged not only with delivering academic instruction but also with modeling lawful civic conduct and engagement. When educators knowingly disregard the law, particularly in a highly visible and well-publicized manner, the message conveyed to students is obvious: Compliance with the law is optional. If we teach students that laws may be ignored whenever they become inconvenient, we should not be surprised when respect for those laws erodes beyond the classroom. After all, if people can violate inconvenient laws, why not break any inconvenient rule?

The North Carolina Constitution protects the rights of free speech and assembly (NC Const. art. I, §§ 12, 14). Still, those protections do

not create a constitutional entitlement for public employees to abandon their duties in violation of duly enacted statutes. The Constitution also guarantees students' right to the opportunity to an education. The Constitution declares that "the people have a right to the privilege of education" and requires the State to maintain a system of public schools (NC Const. art. I, § 15; art. IX, § 2). Coordinated callouts that disrupt instruction interfere with the state's constitutional obligation and with students' constitutional right to uninterrupted access to education.

Nothing in this legal framework silences teachers or diminishes their ability to advocate for policy change. Educators retain their full constitutional rights to speak or protest, outside the performance of their public duties. What the law does not permit is

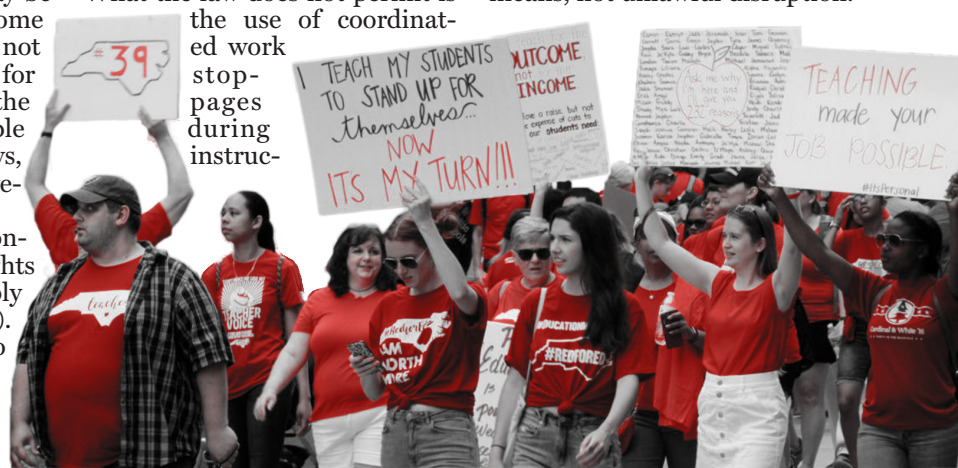
the use of coordinated work stoppages during instruction.

tional time as a means of political leverage against the public employer.

Encouraging or normalizing conduct that violates existing law is neither principled advocacy nor sound public policy. It undermines legal order and places students in the middle of disputes that should be resolved through lawful channels.

Students deserve continuity, stability, and adherence to the constitutional framework that governs public education. Upholding both requires a clear distinction between protected speech and unlawful conduct — and a firm commitment to resolving disputes within the rule of law.

North Carolina's students deserve an education grounded not only in academics, but in the example that change in a free society is pursued through lawful means, not unlawful disruption.



Open enrollment: a win for parents and public schools

BYRCE FIEDLER
DIRECTOR OF CALN



NORTH CAROLINA'S PUBLIC education system is at an inflection point. Enrollment continues to fall in most of the state's traditional public school districts, and further declines are projected. More than half of voters are dissatisfied with their quality of education. And a recent public showdown between legislators and district officials over alleged noncompliance with a parental rights law highlights growing impatience in the General Assembly with school accountability.

But what if there were a policy choice that not only benefited parents and students, but also the durability of the school system itself? There is, and that policy is open enrollment.

In short, open enrollment lets families choose among traditional public schools, so long as space is available. That choice gives students opportunities beyond their ZIP code or assigned school, while generally remaining within their local district. And unlike most other forms of school choice, it is an option districts may pursue independently.

Consider this example: You're a parent with a child in your neighborhood public school. That school, for academic or other reasons, is not meeting your expectations or your child's needs. Local charter schools are full, and you don't have the means to send your child to private school — even with North Carolina's generous Opportunity Scholarship Program. For you, open enrollment might be the ideal solution.

Despite the issues we see today, there is reason to believe that many parents want to remain in public schools. Nearly 30% of North Carolina voters said they would choose a traditional public school for their child over other options, even if money were not a factor, according to a new Carolina Journal Poll. Moreover, 79% said they support the idea of

open enrollment, up roughly seven points from last year.

Imagine how many more families would stay in the public school system if meaningful choice existed within it?

I stress this point to demonstrate that district school choice is a win-win for all parties: students, families, and districts themselves. Rodney Trice, superintendent of Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, recently told a panel of legislators, "Our biggest challenge I think we face now is certainly issues tied to declining student enrollment." For many families, greater choice could be what keeps them in the public system.

Yet today, only a handful of districts in North Carolina offer open enrollment. Fam-

ilies in Union County can apply to any district school operating below 85% capacity, for example, while those in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools may select from a limited group of schools within their attendance zone. A few other districts provide similar — but often constrained — options.

The good news is that our school boards can change this. They have full authority to adopt policies, including open enrollment, that afford families greater educational freedom. While a statewide mandate would be optimal — similar to those recently passed in Nevada, Arkansas, and New Hampshire, which require every district to allow within-district transfers — there is no reason for local officials not to take the initiative now.

More choice means more innovation and healthy competition and healthy com-

petition — two things our public schools need a healthy dose of. When families can choose among district schools, those schools have an incentive to respond by improving instructional quality, student achievement, and their reputations in order to attract students. The more choice parents have, the stronger those incentives become.

Local leaders must embrace this competition mindset. The fact is that North Carolina is already a front-runner in school choice, with parents having greater access to private, home-school, and charter options than ever before. Enrollment growth across all three sectors proves it. Open enrollment is one of many ways district schools can become more competitive and stand out in the busy marketplace of K-12 options.

Of course, we cannot expect choice to be the ultimate cure for every issue afflicting public education. Curricula must improve, teacher training programs need to be overhauled, and achievement must be prioritized over politics and social agendas in the classroom. What it does represent, however, is a catalyst for serious reform. That alone should make parental freedom through open enrollment a priority for North Carolina.



School choice helps deliver America's promise of freedom

HEIDY GOMEZ
PARENTS FOR EDUCATIONAL FREEDOM IN NC



I STILL REMEMBER the moment I knew we had to leave Venezuela.

There had been a quiet but growing realization that hope was shrinking, as the system was stacking against us. I had an education, ambition, and dreams, but opportunity was systematically being rationed. Coming to the United States wasn't about chasing luxury or even an easy life. It was about living with the promise of freedom. Like so many immigrant families like mine, we believe in the American promise: Work hard, play by the rules, and your children's dreams can come true. A better future is waiting.

For me, that promise became real through my children's education, through school choice.

In Venezuela, education was assigned and controlled. Parents' voices were small and powerless. In North Carolina, I discovered how different things

could be. Parents matter! Every mother wants their children to learn in a school where they are safe, supported, and challenged. Here, I was encouraged to play an active role in their education.

Through programs like the Opportunity Scholarship Program and ESA+, I was given financial support to choose private schools that were aligned with what each of my children needed. Not only did it change the trajectory of their lives — it changed mine too. While my children were thriving at school, I put



deep roots here through work, building a business, and contributing to my community.

Today, I help other Hispanic and Latino families do the same by helping them find the schools where their children can thrive too.

Many of the parents I help are just like I was — they love their children, they are hardworking and hopeful, but they are overwhelmed with an educational system they don't fully under-

stand. Some are new to the United States, and others were born here but don't know they have options. North Carolina is far more than a place where educational freedom is a talking point or a far-fetched dream. It's a reality, and thousands upon thousands of families have had doors swung wide open to them through the Opportunity Scholarship and ESA+.

Scholarship applications for the 2026-27 school year opened Feb. 2. For families who are navigating the process for the first time, particularly if English is a second language, it can help to have someone walk beside them as they take the first step. That is why I spend my time helping parents understand their options and take their first step with information and confidence.

The American dream is alive, and educational freedom is real. As North Carolina families prepare for the upcoming application season, my hope is simple: that more parents realize they have a choice and that their choice can change everything. It did for my children and for me.

How accountable are NC's public schools, really?

BOB LUEBKE
LOCKE CENTER FOR
EFFECTIVE EDUCATION



IT'S OFTEN CLAIMED by lawmakers, teachers, administrators, and education activists that public schools are accountable. But are they? What does it mean to be accountable?

Advocates point to all the structures in government providing oversight and support for public education. The State

Board of Education, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, various state boards, and state laws and regulations represent the apparatus of accountability. There is even a North Carolina School Accountability Model that awards letter grades to schools based on a model combining scores on tests (end-of-grade and end-of-course), academic growth, and graduation rates.

But does operating with the language of accountability and

repeatedly calling yourself accountable actually make you accountable?

Polls of North Carolinians find that they are increasingly dissatisfied with the state of public education in North Carolina. In our latest January 2026 CJ education poll, the numbers remained fairly consistent with the year before — with fewer satisfied (29% rather than 33%) but also fewer dissatisfied (53% rather than 55%).

In his paper “The Accountability Myth,” Michael McShane, director of national research at EdChoice, offers a helpful, three-pronged framework for determining whether public schools are accountable:

- **Financial accountability:** Do schools spend money responsibly and effectively?
- **Democratic accountability:** In how they are organized and in their spending choices, do

schools uphold the values and preferences of the larger community supporting them?

- **Educational accountability:** Do schools produce graduates prepared for careers or college and able to contribute to society?

Applying McShane's framework to North Carolina public schools shows them lacking much of the accountability that advocates assert they have.

Are North Carolina schools financially accountable to the state's taxpayers?

In 2024–25, North Carolina spent \$11.1 billion on K–12 education. Including state, federal and local funding, that number increases to \$17.8 billion.

The State Board of Education and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction have the job of developing education policy and ensuring the money is spent wisely.

NC DPI is charged with implementing education policy in North Carolina, including the policies of the SBE. NC DPI distributes a considerable amount of data available at the state, federal, and local level to assess revenue and spending devoted to public education. Education revenue and expenditures are frequently listed in annual publications like the North Carolina Public Schools Statistical Profile, Highlights of the North Carolina Public School Budget, and accounting systems such as the Educational Directory and Demographical Information Exchange.

Each year the North Carolina Public Schools Statistical Profile web site posts financial, personnel, student, and other information for Local Education Agencies (LEAs, or school

districts) and charter schools. The Statistical Profile gathers and publishes data from the local, state, and federal levels about how LEAs spend money to educate children.

Merely having information available does not make North Carolina schools financially accountable. North Carolina provides many examples of school spending. Most spending is categorized as current expenses, which are the costs of operating a school. But this category excludes costs that many would think should be included in the costs of educating students. For example, capital costs (the costs of building and maintaining buildings) are not included in the final per-pupil expenditure calculation for North Carolina public schoolchildren.

NC DPI does provide an estimate for capital costs. Nevertheless, if the capital costs mentioned in Table 28 were included in the calculation of per-pupil spending, it would be approximately \$1,435 higher. Thus, the final per-pupil expenditures for 2024–25 would be \$14,503, not \$13,068, an additional 11% more.

Because capital costs add

significantly to the costs of operating schools, they should be included in any assessment of the costs of education. To exclude them is to offer an incomplete and inaccurate assessment of the costs of public education.

A second way that current practices obscure financial accountability is the emphasis placed on per-pupil spending. While it provides an average spending level per student, its use has significant limitations.

First, merely looking at per-pupil spending ignores the very large differences in spending caused by geographic differences, different district sizes, and the varying needs of the different types of students served. It also ignores complicated factors that significantly impact education, such as teacher salaries, class size, and the complexity of how education is funded. Equally important, per-pupil spending also fails to account for the needs of students based on their socioeconomic status or academic proficiency.

Finally, the focus on per-pupil spending places heavy weight on inputs — dollars spent — and treats them as an

indicator of financial accountability. A serious look at financial accountability, however, would be more balanced and also include a look at educational outcomes.

Even though provisions in the Every Student Succeeds Act require recipients of federal aid to report data at the school level, not all schools do, and ES-SA lacks substantive enforcement measures to compel them. School-level data are important to help accurately assess how much schools are spending, what schools are spending on teacher salaries or health benefits, and why. Lacking such data, it's difficult to determine which schools are spending money wisely and which are not, much less answer larger questions of financial accountability.

Also harming financial accountability for North Carolina public schools is that very few people understand how education is funded and how dollars are actually distributed to schools and students in North Carolina. The fact that only a few local school board members and state legislators fully understand how schools are funded does not lead to stron-

ger accountability.

At last count there were 50 different allotments for public schools, each with a different formula to determine how much money schools would receive. Over the years various government and private reports have criticized how North Carolina funds public schools. A 2024 report by the John Locke Foundation's Center for Effective Education, “Funding Our Future,” concluded that the current system of financing public schools in North Carolina is overly complex, inequitable, lacking in transparency, and unable to track to see if the money is having the desired impact.

Sadly, this is not a new problem. A 2016 state report found that the system is so complex that most school districts reported that it takes school business officers two or more years to understand it fully.

In sum, the mere availability of data does not accountability make. A lack of understanding about the true costs of education and a reliance on incomplete data are some reasons why North Carolina public schools lack true financial accountability.

What keeps public schools from being democratically accountable

McShane, whose book was referenced earlier, explains that accountability in schools includes being democratically accountable to their communities. Schools and school boards must reflect local values and be responsive to local concerns.

Unfortunately, this standard is hard to achieve when so many school boards in North Carolina are selected in off-year elections, which are notorious for low voter turnout. These elections maximize the influ-

ence of teacher unions or professional associations because such groups are successful in turning out their members. Such elections have helped groups like the North Carolina Association of Educators and the North Carolina School Boards Association wield much greater influence over what is school board policy, who is appointed superintendent, and who makes decisions regarding teacher salaries and compensation. In so doing, they dimin-

ish local parents and taxpayers, who better reflect the values and preferences of local communities.

Off-year elections aren't the only thing that jeopardizes democratic accountability in public schools. In a sample of 16 states, including North Carolina, researchers Vladimir Kogan, Stéphane Lavertu, and Zachary Peskowitz found that half of school board races go uncontested and that incumbents are re-elected 80% of the time.

In recent years, the North Carolina General Assembly has sought to remedy some of these problems (see House Bill 832, House Bill 959, and also Senate Bill 227, which was vetoed by Gov. Stein, but an override vote passed in the Senate and is pending in the House). Unfortunately these laws also limit the discretion and the authority of the local school — and hence work to limit local accountability.

Finally, even though North Carolina school boards are

democratically elected, it doesn't necessarily mean they are democratically governed. About two-thirds of the money local districts receive is from the state. That money always comes with strings attached, causing the boards to focus more on the interests and concerns of state lawmakers and less on those of parents and local leaders. It doesn't mean local control doesn't exist, but it certainly limits local accountability.

What keeps public schools from being educationally accountable

Public schools must also be educationally accountable. That means students are learning what they should and are able to progress to the next level academically. Advocates would point to the state accountability model that provides report cards to all schools with letter grades based on their students' test scores (80%) and ac-

ademic growth (20%). Graduation rates and measures of college readiness are other means to measure students' academic performance and inform parents about school quality.

But do academic models really ensure educational accountability?

Every state had to develop an accountability system for its

K–12 schools as a condition for receiving federal funds. North Carolina's state plan is over 200 pages filled with complicated rubrics and calculations. The variety of metrics and alternative options make it very easy for schools to find what they need to stay out of trouble.

The very tests designed to show academic progress and

learning comprehension have been criticized for placing too great an emphasis on proficiency rather than taking a broader view of student achievement. Other ways to measure student achievement — including work portfolios, formative assessments, and the development of real-world skills — offer a different and more holistic view

of the learning process, but the current accountability system ignores them.

The larger problem is that North Carolina's tests and evaluation systems are developed by the same state agency responsible for educating students. It is a major conflict of

Bell-to-bell phone restriction or bust

KARL JOHNSON
GILLINGS SCHOOL OF PUBLIC
HEALTH, UNC-CHAPEL HILL



AS OF JAN. 1, all North Carolina public schools must have a policy in place that “at minimum ... prohibits students from using wireless communication devices during instructional time,” according to the NC General Assembly’s House Bill 959. To date, the vast majority of North Carolina’s school districts have adopted this bare-minimum policy, which allows free access to wireless devices between every class and lunch. The group Smart-Phone Free Childhood USA and others have given a “C” rating for its ability to protect our children. Only a handful of the state’s districts have opted for the “best practice” policy that the NC Governor’s Council for Student Safety and Well-being recommended to protect students’ mental health: cell phones off and away, from the first bell to the last bell of the day. North Carolina is now completely surrounded by states with bell-to-bell policies. A total of 17 US states, plus DC, have these best-practice policies, and another five states are in the process of passing bell-to-bell bills.

As a North Carolina resident, public health professional, and a new father concerned about my daughter’s future educational environment, I strongly urge members of the NCGA to amend the current bill in the 2026 short session. To protect all the state’s children in every publicly funded school from the harms associated with access to wireless devices throughout the school day, to allow students a distraction-free environment, and to allow teachers to focus on teaching, I urge our lawmakers to pass a statewide bell-to-bell policy and include no use of social media to communicate with students. Everyone wins from a bell-to-bell policy, as the outcomes are quickly becoming clear. In my evaluation work with Granville County Schools, we have found significant, positive correlations since the bell-to-bell policy began: increases in academic performance in math, science, and English language arts; a major reduction in disciplinary referrals and long-term suspensions; and improved teacher satisfaction. Positive correlations of bell-to-bell outcomes from other schools in the United States and abroad are similar, and also include: improved teacher-student relationships, reduced social isolation, reduced demand for mental health counseling, and reduced incidences of school violence and cyberbullying. The re-

sults of a national survey of more than 20,000 teachers confirm these benefits. “There’s a gradient,” concludes Dr. Angela Duckworth, the study lead. “The farther the phone, the more restrictive the policy, the better the outcome.” Beyond Granville County, a handful of other districts in the state have committed to bell-to-bell policies for similar benefits, including at least Brunswick, Chatham, and Randolph counties. The primary pushback from parents on bell-to-bell policies seems to be the desire to communicate with students in the event of a school shooter. Fortunately, school safety experts, including the National Association of School Resource Officers, have found that students are safest when they do not have their phones and are instead focused on the adults in front of them providing instructions, with their location not revealed by a phone’s lights and binging, and clear access to the school for faster response time by first responders. School resource officers found that students are also safer on ordinary school days, due to fewer in-school fights (largely coordinated through social media). For instance, Boston’s largest high school had very serious issues with violence that were largely resolved with their bell-to-bell policy.

Former English teacher Emily Cherkin has made the clear distinction between what is “scary” versus what is “dangerous.” It may be scary for parents not to be able to contact their children in case of an emergency. Yet giving a child a smartphone is dangerous, due to social media’s addictive design that lures children into many risks: reduced self-esteem, child predators, promotion of suicidal behavior, untraceable drug deals, and increased rates of psychiatric and medical conditions related to excessive screen time — all well documented by psychiatrist Victoria Dunckley, Jonathan Haidt, and others. Because of these dangers, at least 42 US attorneys general filed suit against social media giant Meta, plus a total of 200 US public school districts, including 12 in North Carolina. House Bill 959 calls on boards of education to “prohibit and prevent students from accessing social media platforms” and provide instruction on social media and its effects on health, once in elementary and middle school, and twice in high school. Yet the current NCGA bill allows children to access social media platforms every day between every classes. Local control for bell-to-bell policies can be maintained with decisions about implementation: consequences for students who violate the policy, education

to the school community, and storage solutions. Storage can be accomplished in numerous ways, such as phone lockers, Yondr pouches, or very-inexpensive padded envelopes kept in plastic crates and collected each morning. As a public health professional, I am an ardent defender of grass-roots, bottom up, and localized solutions to public health challenges. And yet, I acknowledge that there are certain public health crises which warrant a centralized response. Our epidemic of youth mental illness, one that is largely a product of excessive screen time and social media use, is that crisis. Over the last decade, the proportion of high school students reporting persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness increased by 40%, the share seriously considering attempting suicide increased by 36%, and the share creating a suicide plan increased by 44%. These numbers should shock us. Unless something powerful is done, these numbers could get worse. Anything less than a statewide bell-to-bell policy will not address the depth of this crisis. I urge parents, local school boards, and the NC General Assembly to commit to creating phone-free schools in 2026.

What SCOTUS decision on girls’ sports might mean for NC

JEANETTE DORAN
LOCKE SENIOR COUNSEL



THE US SUPREME Court appears poised to uphold state laws that bar transgender women and girls from competing on female school sports teams. The Court heard oral arguments on Jan. 13 in Little v. Hecox and West Virginia v. B.P.J. The cases come from Idaho and West Virginia, both of which enacted laws defining eligibility for girls’ and women’s sports based on biological sex rather than gender identity. During more than three hours of oral argument, a majority of the justices seemed skeptical of the challenges to these laws and more receptive to the states’ position. While the court has not yet issued a decision and is unlikely to do so for several months, the questioning suggested that most justices believe states have the authority to draw sex-based lines in athletics to protect fairness and safety in competition. At the same time, some justices appeared cautious about issuing an overly broad ruling that would impose a nationwide standard, hinting instead at a narrower decision that leaves room for state discretion. The two cases reached the

Supreme Court after lower federal courts blocked enforcement of the state laws. In the Idaho case, a federal appeals court ruled that the ban likely violated the Constitution’s Equal Protection Clause. In the West Virginia case, another appeals court held that the law conflicted with Title IX, the federal statute that prohibits sex discrimination in education. Both states asked the Supreme Court to reverse those rulings, arguing that neither the Constitution nor federal law requires schools to allow transgender athletes to compete on teams designated for the opposite biological sex. Several justices pressed lawyers challenging the bans to explain how existing federal law compels states to treat gender identity the same as biological sex in sports. There was notable skepticism toward the argument that Title IX, a decades-old law designed to expand athletic opportunities for women, was meant to eliminate sex-based distinctions in competitive athletics. Some justices also questioned whether courts, rather than state legislatures, should be making policy judgments in an area involving complex questions of biology, fairness, and youth sports. If the Supreme Court ultimately upholds the Idaho and

West Virginia laws, the decision would have direct relevance for North Carolina, which has already taken steps to define eligibility for school sports based on biological sex. In 2023, North Carolina enacted the Fairness in Women’s Sports Act, over then-Gov. Roy Cooper’s veto, requiring that participation on middle school, high school, and collegiate athletic teams be determined by sex at birth, with separate teams designated for males and females. A ruling favoring the states would signal that state legislatures, not federal agencies or courts, have the authority to set rules for school athletics, even when those rules draw distinctions based on biological sex. That matters because most of the legal criticism of such law rests on the same arguments raised in the Idaho and West Virginia cases: that sex-based sports categories violate either the Equal Protection Clause or Title IX. If the Supreme Court rejects those arguments, challenges to laws like those at issue in these cases would become much harder to sustain. Such a decision could also limit the power of federal regulators to impose new interpretations of Title IX on states. In recent years, federal agencies and progressive activists have

argued that Title IX requires schools to treat gender identity the same as sex in athletics. The Supreme Court’s skepticism toward that view suggests it is unlikely to allow administrative agencies to rewrite the meaning of a statute passed decades ago without clear direction from Congress. That would mean fewer mandates coming from Washington and more room for state-level decision-making. Rather than navigating shifting federal guidance and fear of litigation, North Carolina would be able to rely on state law when organizing teams and competitions. That kind of predictability is especially important in youth sports, where rules need to be clear, consistent, and enforceable. Even if the Court issues a narrow ruling, the overall message is likely to favor state autonomy. North Carolina would remain free to maintain its current law, amend it through the legislative process, or revisit it based on the preferences of voters and lawmakers — not under pressure from sweeping judicial mandates. In that sense, the case is not just about sports policy, but about who gets to decide difficult social questions in a federal system.

A final ruling is expected later this term, likely in early summer. Whatever the precise scope of the decision, the arguments strongly suggest that the Supreme Court is unlikely to strike down these laws wholesale and that states will retain broad authority to regulate school sports based on biological sex.



Revisiting the NC Education Lottery's promise

DONALD BRYSON
PUBLISHER



NORTH CAROLINA'S EDUCATION
Lottery was never a consensus idea.

The Senate vote deadlocked at 24–24, requiring then–Lt. Gov. Beverly Perdue to cast the tie-breaking vote. Lawmakers were divided not just over the expansion of state-sanctioned gambling, but over whether a lottery would actually deliver on its central promise: more money for education without raising taxes. Many supporters voted yes only after assurances that lottery revenue would supplement, not replace, existing education funding. That promise held together a fragile majority.

Nearly two decades later, that skepticism looks well-founded.

Supporters of the lottery are quick to point out that education funding from lottery proceeds remains historically high — and in raw dollar terms, that is true. The lottery now transfers more than \$1 billion a year to public education. But that fact does not answer the question posed in 2005: whether the lottery delivers a transparent, reliable source of new funding that grows in proportion to sales and strengthens classrooms. On that measure, the lottery has fallen short.

Lottery sales are now at record levels, exceeding \$6.5 billion annually. Yet education is receiving a shrinking share of each lottery dollar, even as sales soar. A growing portion of lottery revenue is absorbed by prize payouts, marketing, and administrative costs, leaving education

to take what remains. Sending a large check to Raleigh is not the same thing as strengthening public education. What matters is not the size of the transfer alone, but whether lottery revenue expands classroom resources rather than simply reshuffling state dollars.

Concerns that critics raised for years were formally confirmed in the state auditor's most recent audit, released in late December. As the report explains, "as lottery sales increase, the amount paid to the State's Education Lottery Fund also increases." Still, those gains are matched by rising "prize expense, retailer commission expense, and gaming system vendor charges." Even in years of booming sales, education funding can stagnate or decline in relative terms — not because of any single year's outcome, but because maximizing ticket sales becomes the system's primary objective.

This outcome reflects a structural flaw critics warned about from the start.

State lotteries are designed to drive participation, not educational outcomes. Higher payouts and aggressive marketing fuel sales growth, but they also reduce the net proceeds available for public purposes. As digital games expand and prize structures grow more generous, education funding becomes a residual beneficiary rather than the central goal.

Compounding the problem is how lottery revenue is treated in the state budget. Instead of serving as true new money for schools, lottery funds have often been used to supplant traditional appropriations. When lottery

dollars are counted toward education spending targets, lawmakers can redirect general revenues elsewhere while claiming schools are being helped. The result is less transparency and less accountability for how education is funded.

To be clear, this is not an argument that the lottery sends no money to education. It is an argument that the structure of the lottery makes it a poor tool for delivering honest, accountable education funding, regardless of how impressive the headline numbers appear.

There is also an uncomfortable truth about who pays for this system. Lottery participation is disproportionately concentrated among lower-income and economically distressed communities. In effect, North Carolina relies on gambling losses from its most vulnerable residents to fund public services, while education receives a declining share of the proceeds. That raises serious ethical questions about whether this is a fair or responsible way to fund schools.

Public education is a core responsibility of government. It

should be funded openly, debated honestly, and prioritized transparently — not propped up by a gambling enterprise whose success depends on encouraging people to lose money.

The strongest and most honest solution is to end the state lottery and return to direct appropriations for education, just as we do for public safety, transportation, and health care. Doing so would restore clarity to the budget process and ensure education funding decisions are made in full view of the public.

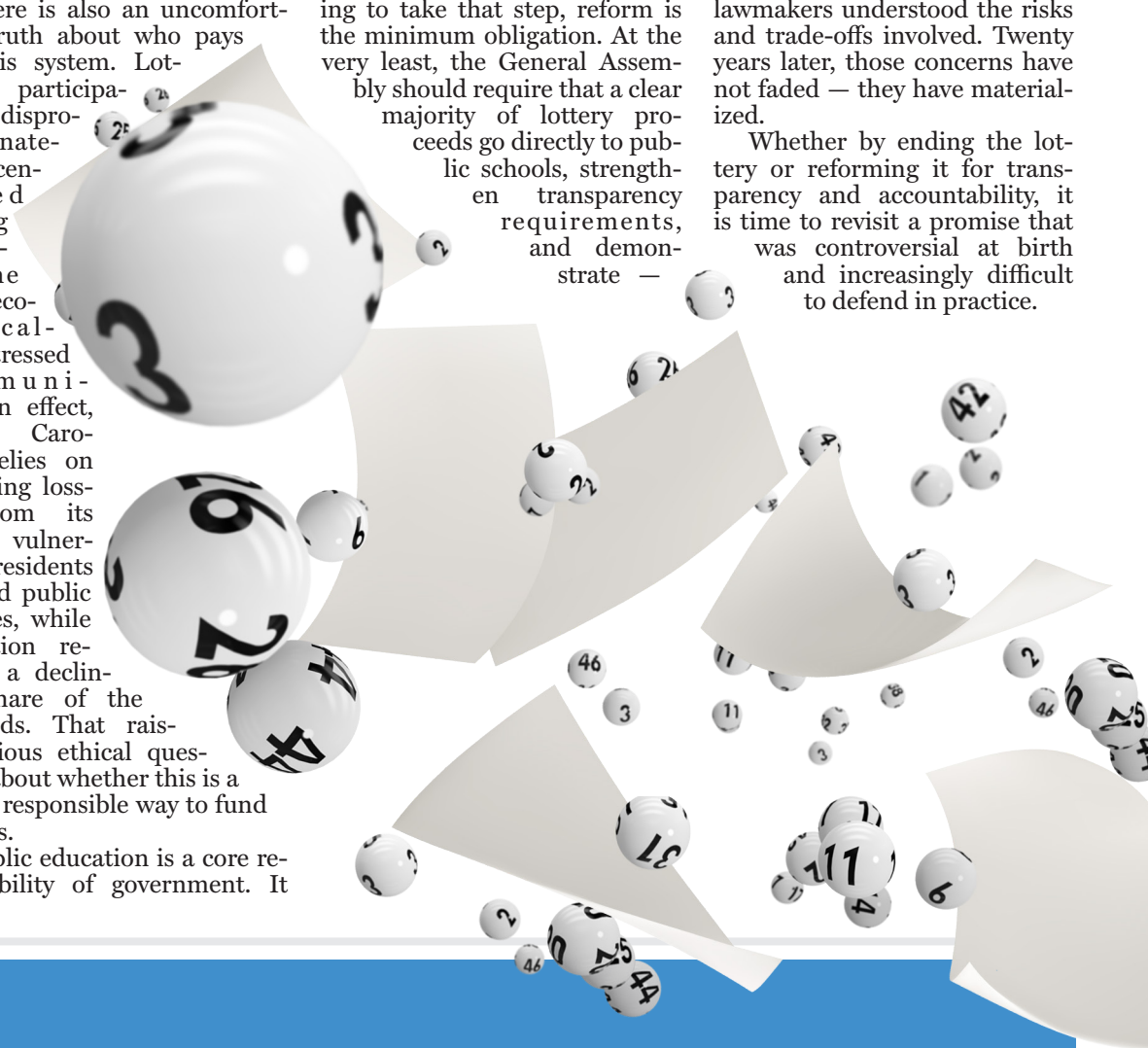
If lawmakers are unwilling to take that step, reform is the minimum obligation. At the very least, the General Assembly should require that a clear majority of lottery proceeds go directly to public schools, strengthen transparency requirements, and demonstrate —

plainly and publicly — that lottery dollars are truly adding to education funding rather than replacing it.

If the lottery is truly an education success story, its defenders should be able to show — clearly and consistently — that rising sales lead to rising classroom investment, not just rising prize payouts and marketing budgets. Until they can, North Carolinians are right to question whether this system serves students or merely sustains itself.

The Education Lottery passed by a single vote because lawmakers understood the risks and trade-offs involved. Twenty years later, those concerns have not faded — they have materialized.

Whether by ending the lottery or reforming it for transparency and accountability, it is time to revisit a promise that was controversial at birth and increasingly difficult to defend in practice.



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interest compromising the integrity of the system. Having an independent evaluator develop a testing system and academic model would do much to restore public confidence and accountability.

Furthermore, annual test scores do not reflect well on our schools or our ability to hold them accountable. For example, in 2024–25, only 54% of eighth-graders achieved grade-level proficiency in reading, and only 48.5% did so in math. According to NC DPI, out of North Carolina's 2,598 public schools, 7.6% received A's; 20.7%, B's; 40.2%, C's; 26.4%,

D's; and 5.1%, F's.

Clearly, some schools have been failing for some time at educating students. So what happens when schools fail?

When districts meet academic goals, superintendents and principals can receive extra financial bonuses. When those goals aren't met, however, there are no serious consequences. The accountability model is toothless. Funds continue to flow into failing schools even if parents remove their children and send them to better schools.

A "low-performing" school is any school receiving a D or F on school growth and either a designation of "Met Expected Growth" or "Not Met Expected Growth." A low-performing school must develop school improvement plans and potential-

ly apply for reform models. Parents will also be notified about the school's status, and the district will also face stricter oversight. The district is also likely to get additional funds to help improve the school's status. Failing schools often receive additional resources and services to help them remediate the problems, though there is no guarantee that solutions will be found.

In contrast, a charter school that fails to meet the goals outlined in its charter document gets shut down.

Public school failures are frequently blamed on a lack of resources, but more money isn't always the solution. From 2020 to 2025, North Carolina public schools received \$6.2 billion in additional federal funding to

help address the impact of the pandemic. Schools in low-income districts received more funding than the rest. About 52% of those funds went toward salaries and employee benefits, while only about 2% were used on proven methods of helping students, such as tutoring. So academic performance initially declined before showing only modest improvement.

Conclusion

If North Carolina public schools were a business, their bottom lines would be red and the state or local school board would be calling for new leadership. That North Carolina continues to tolerate the same disappointing results points to a very large problem.

Our schools are failing because our schools lack true accountability. Our schools lack financial accountability because the system lacks financial transparency and obscures the true costs of education. Our schools lack democratic accountability because off-year elections maximize the influence and power of teachers unions and educational special-interest groups. And finally, our schools lack accountability because the educational accountability model is flawed and has failed to deliver results.

It's a system that double-talks parents and taxpayers, challenges teachers and staff, and shortchanges students. It's time to bring true accountability to North Carolina public schools.



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