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— ALTERED STATE —

How five years of conservative rule have redefined North Carolina

December 2015

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The wrecking crew

Government shrinks, the safety net is shredded and benefits flow to the wealthy

By Chris Fitzsimon

Executive Director, N.C. Policy Watch

In October 2011, just a few months after the end of the first General Assembly session controlled by Republicans in more than a hundred years, House Speaker Thom Tillis told a small group of GOP faithful in Mars Hill that one of his goals was to “divide and conquer” people on public assistance.

Tillis, now a U.S. senator, explained that he wanted to get people with disabilities to “look down” at others on public assistance, low-income families whom he deemed unworthy of public support.

It was a revealing moment for the new Republican majority in Raleigh, laying bare one of their goals, to unravel the social safety net in pursuit of their aim to shrink the government they disdain and slash taxes on corporations and the wealthy.

It is part of an agenda they have pursued without pause in the last five years, and the damage to North Carolina has been remarkable and stunning to behold.

Republicans took over control of the General Assembly in the 2010 election in what amounted to a perfect political storm — the national backlash in the midterm election of the first term of the first African-American president, the concurrent and well-funded rise of the Tea Party, and the collapse of the North Carolina Democratic Party.

The investments of tens of millions of dollars in state-level propaganda outfits in the last 20 years by conservative financiers like Raleigh businessman Art Pope played a key role as well.

It was a moment they had been planning for, and it couldn't have come at a more opportune time — just before the General Assembly would redraw the lines for legislative and congressional districts that would define state elections for the next 10 years.

Once they took over the state House and Senate,

the new legislative leaders moved to consolidate and preserve their power, with gerrymandered electoral maps and new voting laws aimed at making it tougher for people who don't generally support Republicans to vote.

They took over state government completely in 2012 with the election of former Charlotte Mayor Pat McCrory as governor. McCrory had lost to Democrat Bev Perdue in 2008, but the stars were again aligned for Republicans four years later when Perdue announced shortly before the campaign started that she would not seek reelection. That left Democrats scrambling to find a candidate before settling on Lieutenant Governor Walter Dalton, whom McCrory handily defeated.

Republicans also understood that their gerrymandered districts and many of their most radical attempts to remake the state would face legal challenges. Gathering millions in donations from allied outside political groups, they maintained a majority on the N.C. Supreme Court, where many of the challenges to their agenda would land.

With all three branches of government securely under their control, the ideological shift left few areas of state policy untouched. People who were already struggling have been hurt the most — low-wage workers, single mothers, people of color and immigrants. Vital life supports, such as child care subsidies, pre-K programs, unemployment insurance and food stamps, have been slashed.

And there's been more than a loss of basic benefits. People living on the margins have been demonized in the last five years too, blamed for their struggles, penalized for their inability to find jobs that don't exist, and cruelly stereotyped for political gain. The folks now in charge of Raleigh haven't just made government smaller, they have also made it meaner.

Most of the money they saved from slashing safety net programs hasn't been reinvested in education or job training or infrastructure. Instead, even as tax revenue has risen as the state recovers from the Great Recession, the savings have been given to corporations and the wealthy in a series of massive tax breaks.

Thanks to the anemic budgets of the last five years, North Carolina now spends almost 6 percent less on state services than in 2008 in inflation-adjusted dollars.

Now the folks in charge are pushing to lock in the woeful recession-era level of public investment by adding arbitrary spending limits to the state constitution in the misnamed Taxpayer Bill of Rights. In Colorado, the only state that has adopted it, it has been a disaster.

Nowhere have the cuts hit harder than in public schools, where rankings in teacher pay and per pupil funding have spiraled toward the bottom of the 50 states.

Once recognized across the country for its commitment to public education, North Carolina now is making headlines for how much of it is being dismantled, with teachers fleeing to other states because of low salaries and the culture of animosity and disrespect from state leaders.

The meanness is evident here too. The nationally recognized Teaching Fellows program has been abolished, even as the state struggles to recruit bright students into the profession, merely because of its ties to prominent Democrats like former Gov. Jim Hunt.

Low-income kids and their families are the biggest losers in the attacks on public schools, but there are winners in the ideological assault: new for-profit companies that run charter schools, private and religious academies that now receive taxpayer funding and sketchy online institutions that are raking in state dollars.

The new ruling class in Raleigh, while professing a commitment to reduce the scope of government, increased its role in people's personal lives and health care decisions, interfered with local issues in communities across the state, and pushed to resume executions even as two men were freed from prison, one from death row, after serving for more than 30 years for a murder they did not commit.

They made it harder for some people to vote but easier

for many people to get a gun and take it into more places — bars, restaurants, parks and playgrounds. They have systematically rolled back important environmental protections, undeterred by the massive coal ash spill into the Dan River in 2014, the worst environmental disaster in the state's history.

The radical transformation of North Carolina has prompted a passionate response in protest, as thousands have marched in Raleigh and across the state in the NAACP-led Moral Monday movement.

Most of the state's papers have editorialized against virtually every piece of the right-wing agenda, and the national media have weighed in too, most famously *The New York Times* in a 2013 editorial "The Decline of North Carolina," that lamented the "grotesque damage that a new Republican majority has been doing to a tradition of caring for the least fortunate."

The protests and biting criticism have galvanized opponents of the new direction, but the ideological crusaders running things in Raleigh seem undaunted. In late October, Gov. McCrory signed bills that rolled back another group of important environmental protections, cut off food stamps for 100,000 families, and made life more difficult for immigrants in the state.

This report, "Altered State: How five years of conservative rule have redefined North Carolina," is a look at what has happened since political control changed in the 2010 election.

It is impossible to catalogue, much less describe in detail, all the changes; that would take hundreds of pages. Instead, this report is about themes and trends as well the consequences of those policy changes for families and for the vital institutions that for a generation made a North Carolina a relatively progressive Southern state, a leader in education, environmental protections and quality of life.

Five years after taking control of North Carolina's government, the regime in Raleigh is still dividing and conquering, leaving North Carolina an altered state indeed. ■

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Public investment falls, tax responsibility shifts

Low- and middle-income taxpayers bear more of the load

By Alexandra Forter Sirota
Director, N.C. Budget & Tax Center

Public investments are essential building blocks of long-term economic growth and shared prosperity. Decades ago, North Carolina diverged from its Southern neighbors by investing in good roads, quality public schools and universities and early childhood programs.

Since the official recovery began in 2009 — when rebuilding from the Great Recession would have been possible — state lawmakers have turned away from that tradition, choosing to sharply limit public spending in favor of tax cuts. Overall, state support for services in the 2016 fiscal year will be nearly a full percentage point below historic investment levels as a share of the economy.

In fact, state spending as a share of the economy — measured by state personal income — has fallen every year since 2009. The new budget continues this trend, and caps off the only period in more than four decades in which state spending declined as a part of the economy for more than five straight years.

The tax code has been radically transformed since 2010 in a way that makes adequate funding of core public services more difficult.

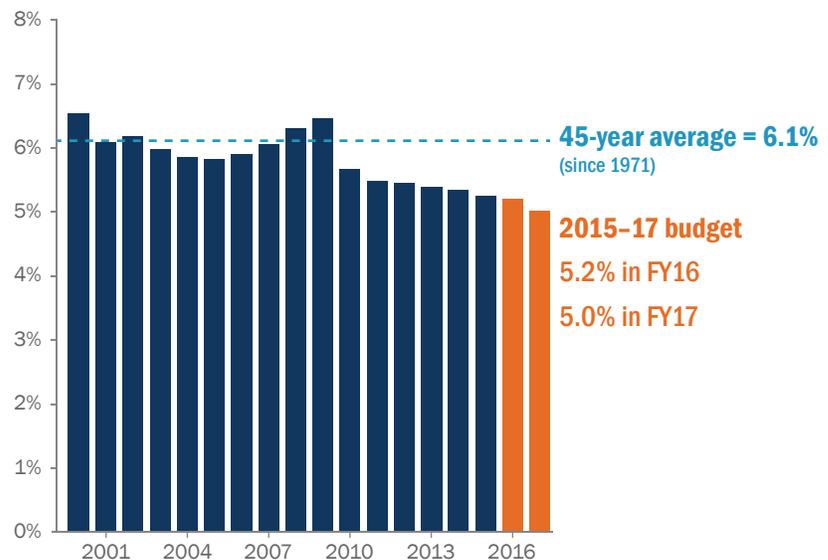
The most recent chapter in state fiscal history began in 2009 with the worst revenue shortfalls since the Great Depression. State policymakers responded with targeted spending cuts, deferred capital projects and measures to bolster state revenues. A temporary tax package passed in 2009 combined a sales tax increase with a surcharge on high-income taxpayers and profitable corporations to raise \$1.3 billion. It expired in 2011.

The official recovery began in

July 2009, but job losses in the state continued for 14 more months. Despite still-sluggish job creation and revenue projections, policymakers, having allowed the temporary tax package to expire, made \$1.7 billion in additional budget cuts in 2011. At the same time, the legislature passed a tax exemption for business “pass-through” income at a cost of more than \$300 million per year.

In 2012, the legislature increased taxes on many working families by reducing the value of the state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). At the same time, lawmakers constrained the ability of the Department

State spending as part of the economy continues to shrink, remains below 45-year average



▲ “State spending as part of the economy — measured by state personal income — has consistently fallen in the past few years.”

— “A Summary of the Fiscal Year 2015-2017 Budget,” *BTC Reports*, October 2014

Source: N.C. Budget & Tax Center

5.9

— percentage decline of investment in state services from 2008 to 2016 when adjusted for inflation

of Revenue to prevent multi-state corporations from shifting profits to other states to avoid paying taxes on profits earned in North Carolina.

In 2013, as the state’s economic recovery was finally taking hold, lawmakers enacted a major overhaul of the tax code that further reduced revenues. They scrapped North Carolina’s progressive income tax and replaced it with a flat rate, phased in tax cuts for profitable corporations, extended the sales tax to several services and eliminated many credits and deductions — including the state EITC — reducing available revenue by roughly \$1 billion per year. In a separate bill they also eliminated the estate tax that would have been levied on the value of estates worth more than \$5 million. The combined effect was to shift the tax load further onto working- and middle-class taxpayers while giving millionaires a significant tax cut. Reductions on the public investments side included: fewer slots in pre-K programs; elimination of funding for small business lending in underserved

communities; decreases in Medicaid provider rates; and reduced staffing for monitoring and testing the state’s environmental quality.

Policymakers made fewer changes to state-level taxes in the 2014 legislative session, but they enacted restrictions on the ability of local governments to compensate for the loss of state funding support caused by previous tax cuts. Most significant was a new law barring local governments from collecting privilege license taxes from businesses.

In 2015, policymakers once again cut taxes on profitable multistate corporations, reduced the personal income tax rate and expanded the sales tax to more services. On top of increasing the share of total state taxes paid by low- and middle-income families, this package of changes will reduce available revenue by more than \$1 billion annually within four years. ■

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Tax cut winners: the 1 percent

Average total tax change in North Carolina since 2013

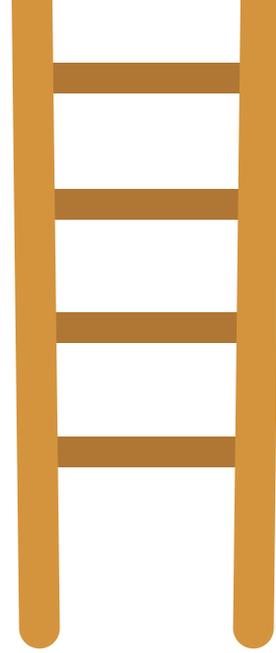


▲ **Changes in personal income and sales taxes since 2013** have reshaped the state’s tax code in a way that shifts the tax responsibility to low-income and middle-income taxpayers. Note: Chart illustrates the combined impact of 2013 and 2015 tax changes (personal income tax and sales tax changes, fully phased-in). Baseline for comparison is pre-2013 tax code with state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) in baseline.

Sources: Data request to Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy (ITEP), October 2015; N.C. Budget & Tax Center



— consecutive years in which state spending measured as a percentage of state personal income has fallen with the passage of the 2015–17 budget



Yanking away the ladder

Legislature blocks and cuts programs that help people climb out of poverty

By Sarah Ovaska-Few
Investigative Reporter

David Turner's spine and back issues cause him nearly constant pain and distress, keeping him inside his house most days and unable to meet with clients for his web design business or care for his two children.

A medical test would clear Turner for steroid shots to lessen the pain, but the \$5,000 price tag is too steep for the Gaston County family with an annual income of less than \$20,000 and no health insurance.

The Turners are stuck in what's known as the Medicaid expansion gap, a hole created when North Carolina's legislature rejected federal money that would have expanded the program to cover a half-million of the state's lowest-income adults.

The Turners essentially make too little to qualify for federal subsidies that would make health insurance on the open market affordable and aren't sick enough to get health care through the existing Medicaid program, which primarily serves low-income children, elderly and disabled persons. (Their children are enrolled in Medicaid.)

"We're hanging on by a thread," said Karen Turner, who has diabetes but delayed treatment so the family can afford her husband's pain medications.

If David Turner had access to medical care, there's a good likelihood that he would be able to work more, earn more, pay more taxes and better support his

family. North Carolina is one of 20 states that has not expanded its Medicaid program to cover poor adults, even though the federal government would cover most of the costs. North Carolina accounts for 10 percent of all the nation's adults that fall into the Medicaid gap, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

A central element in the five-year reign of conservatives has been a fundamental change in how state government views and treats its poorest and most vulnerable citizens. The 2013 decision to reject Medicaid expansion is part of a broad effort to cut, limit or eliminate programs that provide ladders to help poor families climb out of poverty and find better futures.

There's not a single program that can eradicate poverty, making it all the more important to maintain strong public education systems, adequate housing, access to child care and health care as well as strong safety nets to provide food and shelter in emergency situations, said Elizabeth Lower-Basch of the Center for Law and Social Policy, a national advocacy group for low-income people.

"There's not one magic bullet," Lower-Basch said. "It's everything working together."

In North Carolina, more than 17 percent of residents live in households with annual incomes below the federal poverty line, roughly \$24,000 for a family of four. Many of those at the bottom are children; census data released

17.2

— percentage of North Carolinians living in poverty

in October showed that nearly one in four North Carolina children live in impoverished households. Nearly 40 percent of black and Latino children live in households classified as impoverished.

In the Gaston County community of Bessemer City, the Turners are waiting for Karen's anticipated 2017 graduation with a community college degree in medical office administration. The hope is that she can find a job that provides insurance for the family.

Meanwhile, they've looked into temporarily moving to a state that has expanded Medicaid or traveling to Mexico to get spinal surgery for David, but they have concluded that neither option is feasible.

"We're stuck," David Turner said.

After a medical scare Karen Turner had this fall, the couple opted to divert their limited funds from paying for David's medicines and instead begin treating his wife's diabetes.

Advocates of limited government contend that the policy changes and spending cuts enacted by the legislature are long-overdue measures to reduce the size of state government, cut taxes to individuals and businesses and stimulate the economy.

"It puts us on a stage and lets them know that North Carolina has made more progress than any other state in the last three years on economic policy," former Republican N.C. House Speaker and current U.S. Senator Thom Tillis told *Governing* magazine in 2014. "I'm proud of that."

Others disagree. Critics say decisions like the refusal to expand Medicaid are cruel and

unnecessary, especially with the state's slow recovery from the national recession.

"What we've seen is a legislature that has ignored the moral and constitutional values that we do what is the best for the whole," said the Rev. William Barber II, the head of the state's NAACP branch. "They've only done what's best for the wealthy."

Barber, a pastor of a Goldsboro church who has led the civil rights organization for the last decade, is one of the most outspoken critics of decisions by the legislature. He is the leader of the Moral Monday protests that gained national attention in 2013 with weekly displays of civil disobedience.

When the Democrats were in power, they too did not do enough to help the poorest citizens, Barber said. And those in power now, he said, show little regard for the struggles that working and low-income people face.

Gene Nichol, a UNC law professor studying the effects of poverty, is blunter.

"Democrats for a long time in North Carolina have ignored poor people," Nichol said. "Now, in the last five years, we've learned that there's one thing worse than

ignoring poor people. That's waging war on poor people."

Painful Recession

North Carolina was once seen as a state that managed to dodge the worst of the South's widespread poverty, in large part because of a commitment from state leaders to building a strong public education and infrastructure system.

But the state was hit hard by the Great Recession. In 2008, more than 16 percent of the population lived in poverty in 47 of the state's 100 counties, according to U.S. Census figures. By 2013, that was the case in 79 counties.

The spending cuts – in public education, health and human services – are especially deep, because they come on top of reductions forced by the recession. The earlier cuts, enacted by Democrats then in control of the legislature and the governor's office, came in response to the plunge in tax revenue from business and income taxes caused by the economic collapse.

But the decisions made after the 2010 shift in power amplified and deepened many of those cuts. An accompanying overhaul of the tax structure broadened



► Constant distress

Karen Turner recounts medical and other expenses the couple incurs while her husband David shifts to find a comfortable position to sit.

Photo by Ricky Leung

the sales and other taxes that the N.C. Budget & Tax Center says are disproportionately paid by low- and middle-income residents and flattened an income tax structure largely to the benefit of businesses and wealthier residents.

The decisions range from those that affect many — such as the 500,000 residents not eligible for Medicaid — to smaller programs, like the elimination of dozens of state dental hygienists who visited schools to check on the teeth of children.

In 2006, the state Oral Health Department in the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services had 84 people on its staff. Less than a

decade later, that number is down to 36. Many of those let go were dental hygienists who provided examinations at elementary schools throughout the state and then helped coordinate care for children whose families couldn't afford regular dental care. The cuts leave 35 counties without the dental services.

"It just doesn't make any sense to me," said Mary Oates, who coordinates the school nurses in Lee County Schools, one of the areas cut off from the program. "We're not talking about a huge amount of money, but the benefits across the state were tremendous for our children."

Tom Vitaglione, a senior fellow with the child advocacy group N.C. Child, said the state had been making progress in reducing infant mortality, building up early education programs and increasing high school graduation rates.

"The problem right now is that we're regressing," said Vitaglione, who has been working on child poverty issues for more than 30 years. "All those advances are not being built upon and are eroding."

In fact, the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services announced in October that the infant mortality rate rose slightly to 7.1 deaths for every 1,000 births, well above the national rate of 6.0. For black children, the infant mortality rates are more than twice that of white babies.

Many other programs affecting the poor have been scaled back or eliminated over the last five years.

North Carolina was the only state in the nation to get rid of its Earned Income Tax Credit, affecting nearly one million poor, working households that used to receive an average \$119 tax refund.

The state's lauded pre-K program for low-income children will serve 6,476 fewer children in 2016 than it did in 2009.

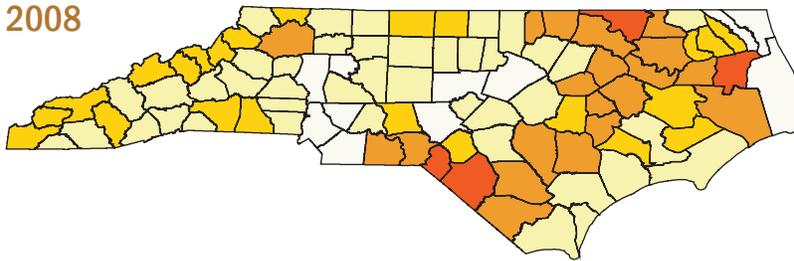
Advocates for the elderly say a failure to increase spending for nutrition and health care programs has left many of the state's senior residents in compromising and potentially dangerous situations.

"Statewide, we are seeing fewer resources than we were 10 years ago," said Dennis Streets, who heads Chatham County's Council on Aging and formerly served as the head of the state's aging and elderly services. "We are losing ground."

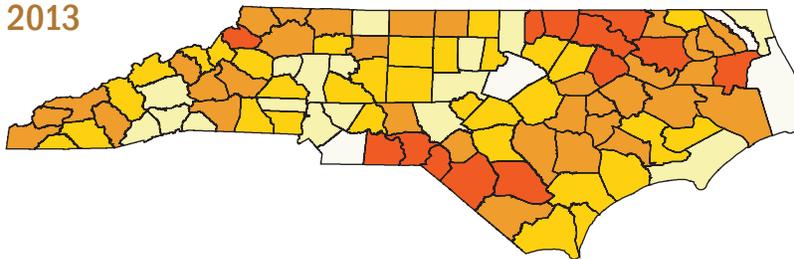
The programs that keep elderly people healthy and independent — allowing for visits from home aides, meal delivery or daily community meals at senior centers — can be the first to go when spending gets tight.

Percentage population in poverty by county

2008



2013



▲ **In 2008, 47 counties in North Carolina** had more than 16 percent of their population living under the poverty line. In 2013, that grew to 79 counties.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau's 2013 Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates; 2008 Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates

6,227

— number of children who lost access to child care subsidies as a result of new eligibility restrictions adopted by the General Assembly in 2014



▲ Working to get work

Having lost her job in March and sold her belongings to live in her parents' home with her two children, Ramona Aragon is now enrolled in a subsidized training program at Durham Technical Community College. Aragon spends her evenings reviewing her own school work while helping her children with their homework.

Photo by Ricky Leung

Some of the spending decisions were forced by the recession. As the economy has begun to recover and tax revenue has risen, however, legislative leaders have maintained a tight lid on spending.

A \$400 million surplus in the last budget year was not used to significantly shore up the public schools or restore cuts to many of the programs affecting the elderly, indigent and poor children around the state. Instead, some money was placed in a rainy day fund and another round of tax cuts was provided for businesses.

Unemployment benefits slashed

The unemployed have been subjected to especially severe treatment. North Carolina cut its benefits to the lowest levels in the nation, from a maximum of \$535 a week to \$350. The reduction rendered more than 170,000 long-term unemployed residents

ineligible for additional federal benefits in the second half of 2013. North Carolina was the only state to reject this federal money, even as its unemployment rate topped the national average.

The lowered benefits have pushed some people into a downward spiral difficult to shake off. Ramona Aragon of Durham lost her job as an administrative assistant in March. It was the first time she'd ever been laid off, and she immediately applied for unemployment benefits while she looked for new work.

But 15 weeks went by without her application being processed, and, with her savings depleted, she had to sell her belongings and move back into her parents' home with her two children, 13 and 7.

"I had to give away all my furniture, everything I owned, and move back in with my parents because I couldn't find work," Aragon said. "I'm 39, I never thought I'd be where I am now."

Even if the unemployment

benefits had come through when they were supposed to, Aragon said it's unlikely it would have saved her. She had been making \$600 a week, and the unemployment help was a fraction of that.

"I truly don't know anybody who could live off of \$240 a week," she said.

The father of her children is not in the picture and owes her more than \$35,000 in child support. For a while, she took a job as a waitress, but had to quit when she was unable to arrange child care. Unpaid bills have destroyed her credit record, and she now thinks her poor credit scores have kept her from getting jobs at several financial services firms.

Aragon, who had been working toward a nursing degree before she was laid off, is now enrolled in a training program at Durham Technical Community College to prepare her for work in the pharmaceutical industry. She hopes that once she finishes the program later this year, a job will materialize and she can earn enough to move her and her children out of her parents' house and start rebuilding their life.

"It's been hard on all of us," Aragon said.

30,000 fewer getting help through day care subsidies

Child care subsidies, designed to make it possible for low-income parents to go to work, have also come under the knife. The legislature narrowed the income eligibility for families that could get help, and about 6,000 children lost their places in day care as a result, said Michele Rivest, the executive director for North Carolina's Child Care Coalition.

The income-eligibility changes came in the midst of general drops in funding and changes in reimbursement rates that led the

state to provide child care help for 30,250 fewer children in 2014 than it did in 2010.

“I have no understanding of why that happened,” Rivest said, other than a “general thing about decreasing the size of government.” What happened to the affected families is unclear, she said, because no effort is made to track the results of the policy changes. Those working in the field say the usual alternatives are that parents have to quit their jobs, children are cared for by neighbors or family members, or the children are left to fend for themselves in empty homes after school.

Donna Pyles owns a Fayetteville area child care center where multiple families withdrew their children after income eligibility was increased. She too worries about what becomes of those families, many of them headed by single mothers, and whether their children are in safe settings or getting the developmental help they need.

“You’re actually hurting the whole community,” Pyles said about the child care subsidy changes. “This parent is not going to be able to work or continue to go to school.”

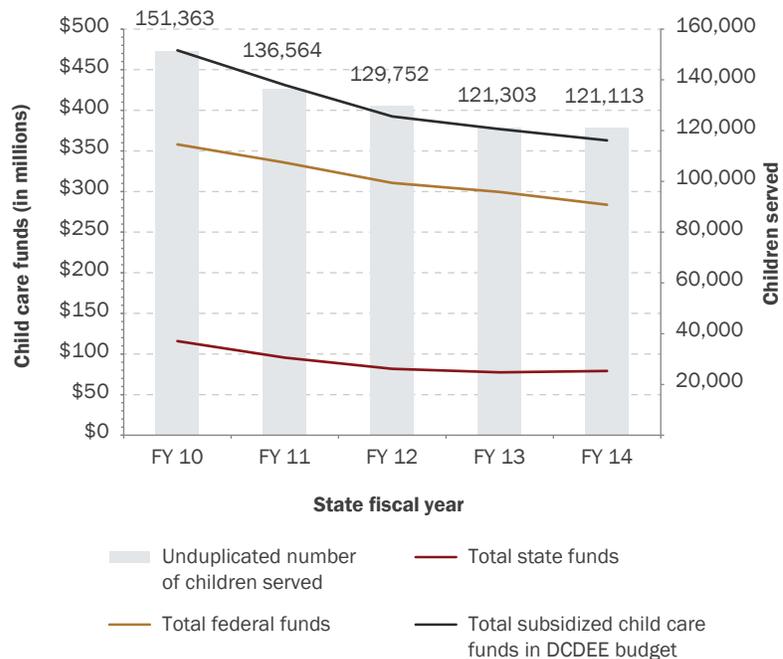
Changes to the child care subsidy program had an immediate and disastrous result for Calla Caristo, a single mother of three earning \$16.50 an hour as a receptionist at an Asheville real estate firm.

Late this summer, Caristo learned that her two elementary school-aged children would no longer qualify for after-school assistance, and the co-pay for her 3-year-old’s child care would go up by \$100 a month, enough to put it out of reach.

Caristo had to quit her job to care for her children. She had been living with her brother and his family, but tensions rose in the house as he faced foreclosure and financial issues of his own, and she moved out in September.

“My children and I are pretty

Subsidized child care expenditures for direct services by state fiscal year (inflation adjusted)



▲ **Amid declining expenditures** for child care subsidies over the past few years, changes in policies regarding eligibility have also caused many families to withdraw from day cares.

Sources: N.C. Division of Child Development and Early Education; N.C. Child Care Coalition

much living in my car,” Caristo said, “all because some politicians decided that my family didn’t count.”

She doesn’t know where she’ll end up and said she takes each day as it comes to find money for meals that often end up being peanut butter sandwiches. The family spends some nights at a friend’s house and many others parked at city parks. She tells her children they can see the stars through the car’s sunroof, something most kids don’t get to do.

Caristo wishes someone had stopped and thought about families like hers before putting the changes in place.

“There are these people that are

falling and why? For what? Can we get to the very bottom?” Caristo said. “The person that makes that final decision needed to go and see what is going to happen.” ■

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Paradise for polluters

Pro-business agenda trumps environmental concerns

By Sharon McCloskey
Courts, Law & Democracy Reporter

Conservatives rolled out the welcome mat for business when they took control of state government, making clear that unleashing companies from regulatory burdens ranked at the top of their agenda.

“The reason I’m running for governor is to represent business,” then Charlotte mayor and longtime Duke Energy employee Pat McCrory told a group from the Council of Independent Business Owners during a 2012 campaign stop in downtown Asheville. “I’ve been a business leader for 30 years.”

Nowhere has that pro-business strategy played out more visibly over the past five years than in the energy and environment sector, as lawmakers eager to boost the economy pursued rushed and risky opportunities at the expense of the state’s natural resources.

In addition to rolling back regulations, they cut funding and stripped staff at the Department of Environment and Natural Resources and passed the word on to those who remained at the agency that, in the name of customer service, enforcement should take a back seat to the exploration and expansion of energy alternatives.

Then 39,000 tons of coal ash spilled into the Dan River in early February 2014, and the finger pointing started.

▲ Murky waters

Coal ash pollutes the Dan River near Danville, Va., about 20 miles downstream from a spill that occurred at a closed North Carolina coal-fired power plant owned by Duke Energy near Eden, N.C., in 2014.

Courtesy of Appalachian Voices; photo by Eric Chance

600,000

— amount in dollars the state environmental agency returned to the U.S. EPA that would have been used for water testing in areas potentially affected by fracking

The spill, the third largest on record in the U.S., came as little surprise to environmental advocates, who had been pushing the state for years to penalize Duke Energy for groundwater contamination stemming from leaky coal ash pits and order the utility to move the ash to lined pits away from water. Instead, as most state residents learned after the spill, DENR and Duke Energy had

been negotiating a deal to settle violations at Duke's Asheville and Riverbend plants for less than \$100,000.

The coal ash spill could have been a wake-up call, a cautionary tale of deregulation run amok.

In the aftermath, lawmakers did step up funding for DENR — now known as the Department of Environmental Quality. But the push for deregulation and

rush toward speculative energy alternatives continues at the General Assembly. And business favoritism persists, evidenced most recently by the state's agreement to settle what was once a \$25 million fine on Duke Energy for coal ash violations at two plants, now reduced to \$7 million for violations at all 14 of its plants here — and requiring ash removal at only a few of those plants.

An agency dismantled

When John Skvarla took the reins at DENR in January 2013, he brought with him years of experience in helping companies mitigate environmental hazards and avoid regulatory interference.

He also brought with him an environmental protection view that frightened many in the conservation sector. In a memo released soon after his appointment, Skvarla professed some doubt about the science underlying claims of global warming and other concerns and announced an agency mission statement along the same lines. "Environmental science is quite complex, comprised of many components, and most importantly, contains diversity of opinion," the statement read.

It was a page straight out of the conservative playbook, promoted

◀ TOP — Out, damned spot

Amy Adams, N.C. Campaign Coordinator for Appalachian Voices, shows some of the fine coal ash deposited on a piece of driftwood just upstream of the drinking water intake in Danville, Va.

*Courtesy of Appalachian Voices
Photo by Eric Chance*

BOTTOM — All fed up

A demonstrator protests the ties between Duke Energy and state leaders in downtown Raleigh in February 2015.

Photo by Ricky Leung



aggressively by the fossil fuel industry: Dismiss the scientific evidence — no matter how overwhelming — as opinion and contend that there's a controversy.

Skvarla also made clear that, consistent with the McCrory administration's attention to "customer service," companies he viewed as overburdened by government regulation would find a sympathetic ear at his newly reconstituted agency.

Everything DENR would do would involve some consideration of economics, Skvarla said in a talk given at the conservative John Locke Foundation in Raleigh.

Skvarla pushed out veteran environmental regulators and announced a reorganization of DENR, which had already had its budget slashed by the conservative majority in 2011 and 2012, with state funding cut nearly in half from what it was before the recession.

Staffing cuts continued into 2013 — including at critical regional offices — and with fewer regulators came less enforcement.

"There's a direct link between the number of environmental cops on the beat and the amount of enforcement that happens," Molly Diggins, North Carolina director of the Sierra Club, told WRAL a few months after the spill.

In the meantime, others at DENR jumped ship, including Susan Wilson, a 24-year employee who quit her job in September by way of an email to Skvarla, with a video of the song "Take This Job and Shove It" attached.

In that email, Wilson explained why she was quitting:

"Between your inappropriate mission statement, the dismantling of the Division of Water Quality, and HB74 (along with a few other gems from this session's NCGA), I see no reason to continue here — because my own mission — to assist all citizens and protect those

"Between your inappropriate mission statement, the dismantling of the Division of Water Quality, and HB74 [...], I see no reason to continue here — because my own mission — to assist all citizens and protect those that don't have a voice, would be compromised."

— Former DENR employee Susan Wilson
in an email to John Skvarla, former secretary of DENR

that don't have a voice, would be compromised."

Skvarla moved on in late 2014, taking the reins at the Department of Commerce. In his place, the governor appointed Donald van der Vaart, who previously worked in the agency's air quality division for years and was serving as McCrory's "energy policy adviser" — a new position focused on "increasing domestic energy exploration, development and production in North Carolina as well as promoting related economic growth and job creation."

That's a focus van der Vaart has apparently carried over into his role as head of the state's newly-branded agency.

Just before his appointment, critics called him out for authoring a letter defending a closed meeting on offshore drilling between state and federal officials that also included representatives from the oil industry, even though van der Vaart said that neither industry officials nor environmental advocates were attending.

And in September 2015, van der Vaart also appeared as the guest speaker at an event hosted by the John Locke Foundation, discussing the state's opposition to the Obama

administration's Clean Power Plan.

Rejecting science

The elevation of business interests over the protection of the state's environment, combined with an abundant dose of climate change denial, has posed a clear threat to the state's natural resources.

"Initially, there was a lot of pent-up demand, a lot of anger from legislators coming in, a belief that government doesn't work very well and that we need to get rid of regulations, but not a lot of discrimination about which regulations we were getting rid of," said Grady McCallie of the North Carolina Conservation Network.

For the environment, that meant the rollback of clean water and air regulations, often with little debate or consideration of underlying science.

Carefully constructed reform measures, such as the rules to clean up Jordan Lake — negotiated over a decade by interested parties ranging from affected communities to environmental managers and set to take effect in 2013 — were scuttled by the conservative majority.

Instead, lawmakers poured more than two million dollars into "solar

bees,” water mixers that when placed in the lake would supposedly reduce algae. Test results thus far are not promising.

Dismissing the climate change research, lawmakers also rejected measures to establish a state standard for sea level rise, allowing developers to continue to build on land that might just be underwater by the end of the century.

Energy alternatives like fracking and offshore drilling also got fast-tracked in the name of job creation — with fracking now a done deal, despite uncertainty over its long-term safety and without much discussion about its worth, given the small amount of natural gas projected to be in North Carolina.

Industry won big with that deal, as the law criminalizes the disclosure of chemical fracking fluids and reduces the radius of contamination liability. Local communities, on the other hand, are now prohibited from issuing their own fracking bans and cannot tax drilling activities.

The conservative majority allowed renewable tax credits to expire and persisted in their efforts

to repeal the state’s Renewable Energy Portfolio Standard, which calls for 12.5 percent of the state’s energy to come from renewable sources by 2021, according to Dan Crawford of the N.C. League of Conservation Voters.

“That standard made North Carolina a hotbed of solar energy,” he said. “Some places rank us third or fourth, and during the Great Recession, that industry was one of the only growth sectors here. There’s been close to two billion dollars in investment in that here in the state.”

A coal ash cleanup bill passed, but it didn’t require much of a cleanup — allowing Duke Energy to leave ash in unlined pits at 10 of its 14 plants across the state. The governor took a pass on this one, letting it become law without his signature.

The conservative majority also gave the green light to provisions slipped into a rules reform bill — provisions dubbed the “Polluter Protection Act” by critics — that would give companies who self-report pollution incidents a pass on enforcement and penalties.

Whistleblowers, on the other hand, who learn of workplace pollution incidents they’d like to report, didn’t fare as well.

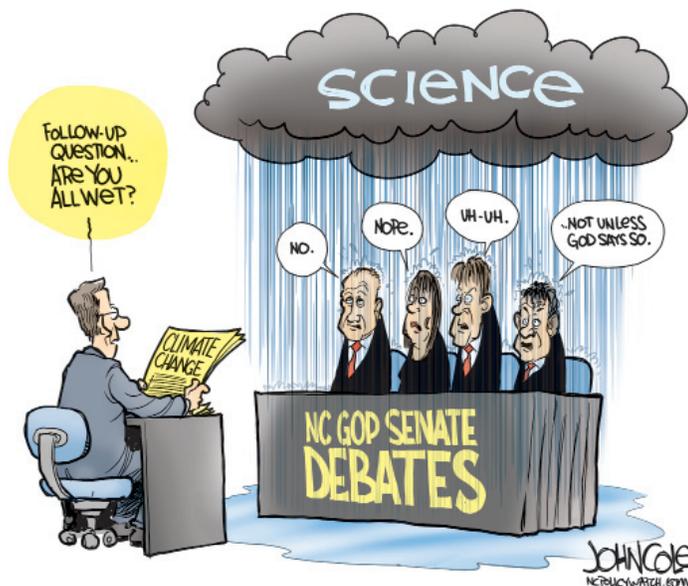
The majority passed into law, over the governor’s veto, the so-called ag-gag bill, which allows companies to sue anyone — employees included — who gains access to a company’s non-public area to obtain workplace secrets or take pictures of workplace violations.

What remains, then, after five years of business first, environment later governing in North Carolina?

“Lawmakers used to use science-based evidence; that gave us the Clean Water Management program and the Clean Smokestacks Act,” Crawford said.

“We were heading in the right direction, doing the right things to protect our air, water, wildlife, so that we could pass our state on in a better condition to future generations. Now that’s stopped. It’s the difference between night and day.” ■

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◀ Read and worn

Textbooks at Bunn Middle School in Franklin County. Budget cuts have made new book purchases impossible for the past several years.

Photo by Ricky Leung

Starving the schools

Teacher assistants, textbooks, services slashed as per-pupil spending plummets

By Lindsay Wagner
Education Reporter

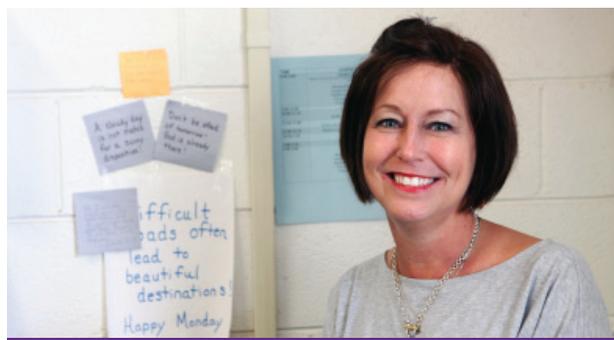
Barbara Dell Carter is not a social worker. Nor is she a nurse, psychotherapist, nutritionist or a special needs educator.

Carter is a second grade teacher. But in today's classrooms in North Carolina, she's expected to take on much more than planning lessons and teaching her students.

"And the needs of our students are just getting greater and greater," said Carter, who teaches at Beaufort County's John Cotten Tayloe Elementary School in Eastern North Carolina.

Carter says she and her colleagues must routinely assist students who have profound needs – emotional, academic and medical – even though they generally lack the training or resources to adequately address them.

As for the training they have received on addressing medical emergencies, Carter said, "We've watched some videos."



▲ More than a teacher

Second grade teacher Barbara Dell Carter and her colleagues must rely on fewer resources than ever to respond to all of the emotional, medical and academic needs of their students.

Photo by Ricky Leung

Teachers must be able to react quickly to students experiencing complications associated with diabetes and asthma because the school shares one nurse with the two other elementary schools in the district. The nurse is at Tayloe just two days a week.

When Carter began her teaching career nearly 20 years ago, there were more programs available to identify students who needed focused interventions and to give them the one-on-one instruction they needed.

“Those programs have gone away,” said Carter, who says she sees bigger academic gaps than ever before — especially in terms of students’ abilities to read proficiently.

“At this point, my greatest concern for the future is that with the diversity of kids we’re dealing with, how will we ever meet their needs with limited resources — and all by ourselves in the classroom?” said Carter.

For the fifth year in a row, Carter is flying solo in a classroom of 20-plus students, save for a handful of hours a week. That’s because lawmakers in Raleigh have been cutting funds for early-grade teacher assistants for more than five years, along with many other line items in the public schools budget. Today there are 7,000 fewer teacher assistants employed by the state than there were in 2008.

Funding for education absorbed a sharp cut when North Carolina and other states scrambled to balance budgets in response to the 2008 recession. Between 2008 and 2010, the economic collapse resulted in a drop of \$1.2 billion in state tax revenue, forcing the then-Democratic leadership to cut nearly every line item of the state budget.

Public education, a sector that accounts for about half of the state’s spending plan (higher education included) was not spared. Between fiscal 2008, the peak year of spending for K–12 education, and

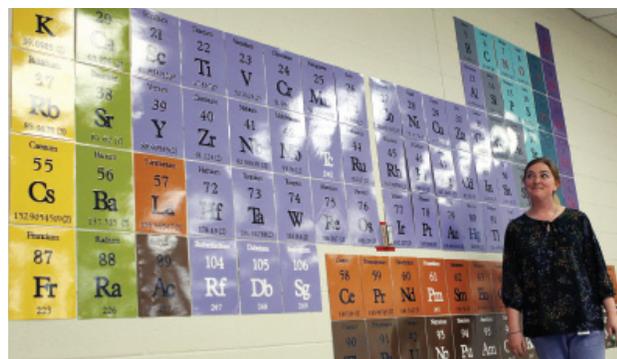
fiscal 2011, total state funding for public schools was cut by about \$1.04 billion when adjusted for inflation, according to the N.C. Budget & Tax Center.

Since then, the economy has recovered significantly, but state spending on education has not. And that is reflected in the disappearance of teacher assistants and in schools left scrambling for supplies, textbooks and professional development for their educators.

Overall spending on public education is rising modestly year to year, but not in a way that keeps pace with growing enrollment. For the 2015–16 school year, nearly 76,000 more students are attending public schools than in 2008.

Philip Price, chief financial officer for the state’s public schools, broke it down this way in late 2014:

“If you back out the funding added for benefit-cost increases and salary adjustments, the funding available for classroom activities (textbooks, transportation, teacher



▲ **Make-your-own classroom**

Many teachers like Patty Korman dig into their own pockets to create resources for their classrooms. Korman made a periodic table with her own money for her chemistry class at Bunn Middle School.

◀ **Uncertain future**

Second graders Taylor Eatman (right) and Karyme Mendoza read together during a “buddy reading” time. Budget cuts have left teachers like Carter worried about how they will meet their students’ needs with limited resources.

Photos by Ricky Leung

14.5

— percentage reduction in per-pupil spending in North Carolina from 2007–08 to 2014–15 when adjusted for inflation

assistants, teachers, etc.) has been reduced by over \$1 billion,” since 2008–09.

In the 2013–15 biennial budget, the legislature’s allocation for public schools was more than \$100 million below what the state budget office recommended as necessary to maintain the status quo and more than \$500 million less (adjusted for inflation) than what was spent on public education in 2008.

And the new budget for 2015–17 continues that trend with investments that remain well below

2008 pre-recession levels, spending roughly \$500 less per student. In 2014, North Carolina ranked 47th in the nation in per-student spending.

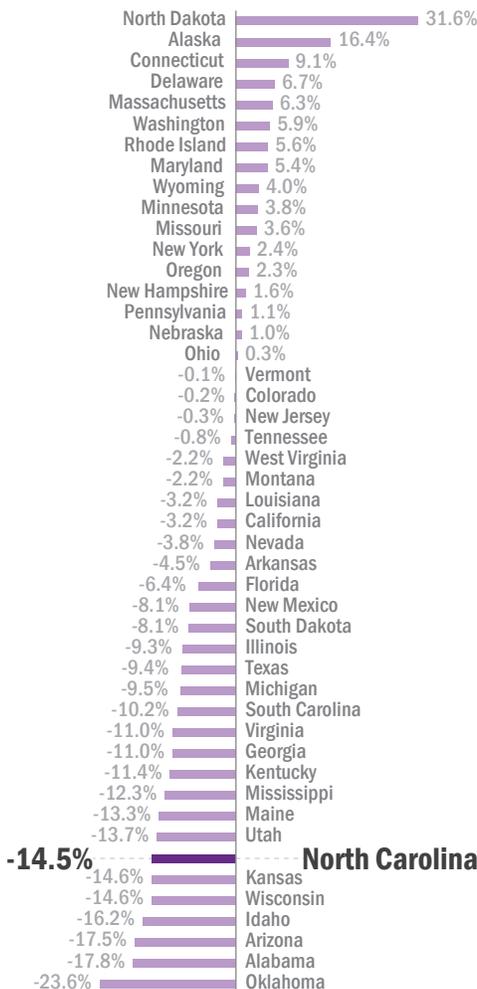
Big employers looking to establish themselves in North Carolina never used to question the state’s commitment to investing in public schools – but now they are, said Keith Poston, the N.C. Public School Forum’s executive director.

Poston said people from out of state are now asking him more frequently, “What’s going on with your education system? It seems like you’re taking a step back.”

Classroom resources dwindle

J.C. Tayloe Elementary lost most of its teacher assistants as a result of the 2011 budget decisions. An instructional support first envisioned by former Gov. Jim Hunt, teacher assistants (often known as TAs) give students individual help in reading or math, make sure students with special needs receive focused instruction and keep the classroom free from disruptions. And they are especially important now that classroom size

Percent change in spending per student, FY08 to FY15 (inflation adjusted)



North Carolina state funding per pupil for public education (inflation adjusted)



▲ **ABOVE – \$1.04 billion cut** in total state funding for public schools between fiscal 2008, the peak year of spending for K–12 education, and fiscal 2011, when adjusted for inflation. For fiscal years 2015 through 2017, budget figures exclude pay increases to follow prior practice so that accurate comparisons can be made over time.

LEFT – In 2014, North Carolina ranked 47th in the nation in per-student spending. The state is among 14 others continuing to spend at least 10 percent less on a per-pupil basis than they did in 2008. (Note: Hawaii, Indiana and Iowa are excluded because data for valid comparison are not available.)

Sources: N.C. Budget & Tax Center; N.C. Department of Public Instruction; Center on Budget and Policy Priorities; National Center for Education Statistics



– rank of North Carolina among 50 states in largest percentage of reduction in per-pupil spending from 2007–08 to 2014–15

limits have been eliminated by state lawmakers.

Tayloe's principal, Bubs Carson, now must spread six TAs out around his building, each covering four or five classrooms in a day. They now spend maybe an hour in each room, giving teachers short bathroom breaks, quickly working with students who need one-on-one help the most, then moving on to the next room.

"Students just no longer receive the one-on-one assistance they used to get in years past," Carson said.

Staffing isn't the only dwindling resource in the classroom — so are classroom supplies. Carter and other teachers dip into their own pockets to buy supplies and to meet emergency student needs. Carter said she typically spends \$500 to \$600 a year. Compared with 2008, the state has reduced the public schools' classroom supplies budget by 52 percent.

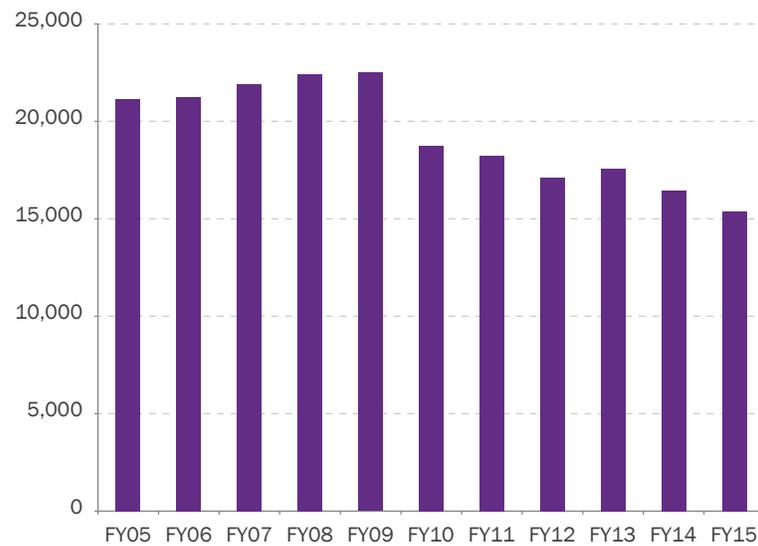
Beaufort County is mostly rural with a large number of poor residents. At Tayloe, 77 percent of the students qualify for subsidized lunches.

"Often when children come to my classroom, they are hungry," Carter said. "They need to be fed before they can think about reading comprehension. And I don't know how many children come to school who are sleeping three or four to a bed. And maybe one sibling wets the bed. So they come to school hungry, tired and wearing yesterday's clothes, sometimes soaked with urine."

"Let me be clear," added Carson, the school's principal. "Our teachers have been back and forth to that Wal-Mart across the street purchasing their own supplies for their classrooms."

Every teacher at her school, Carter speculates, has bought clothing for students at one time or another or taken a child to get cleaned up and fed so they can

Number of state-funded teacher assistants in N.C. public schools



▲ **Today 7,000 fewer teacher assistants** are employed by the state than in 2008. Lawmakers have steadily cut funds for early-grade teacher assistants over the last five years, along with many other items in the public schools budget.

Sources: N.C. Budget & Tax Center; N.C. Department of Public Instruction

learn. It's a combination of teachers' own money, whatever support the PTA can lend and church donations that foots the bill.

Perhaps recognizing that their budget cuts have made it impossible to have the necessary resources on hand, in 2011 lawmakers enacted a tax credit for teachers who purchased classroom supplies out of their own pockets. They eliminated that credit in 2013, only to reinstate it this year.

Goodbye textbooks and electives

The effects of North Carolina's shift from being a state known for its investments in public education to one that ranks behind states such as Mississippi and South Carolina in per-student spending are painfully clear to Roosevelt Alston, who retired this year from his job as principal of Bunn Middle School

in Franklin County.

The days of taking home a textbook to study, for example, are long gone. "We try to keep classroom sets [of textbooks] on hand," said Alston, whose school is in rural Franklin County, "but there is no money for new textbook adoption."

In 2010, the recession forced the legislature, then still led by Democrats, to nearly zero out spending on new textbooks; the allocation dropped to less than \$3 million from the previous year's \$121 million. It was intended to be a temporary measure.

But since then, the legislature has largely left that large hole in place. There were some modest year-to-year increases to the textbook budget, and lawmakers have budgeted a significant increase for the next two years. But the total is still less than half of what it was in 2010, which leaves some classrooms

with outdated textbooks or none at all. Many teachers rely on handouts — and often have to pay the copying costs themselves.

Myra Bridgers, an eighth grade language arts teacher who has been teaching for more than 20 years in Franklin County schools, said the past few years have been the worst she's seen in terms of budget cuts.

One casualty of lawmakers' decision to disinvest in public education, Bridgers said, is too few classes for students to take. "Sometimes students take PE [physical education] or computer classes twice or even three times in one day. We just can't afford more teachers to teach the extra classes we need."

At Bunn, no one is available to teach any foreign languages; the only option is to take the classes online through the state's virtual public schools.

"Parents always ask, is this all you got to offer?" Alston said.

Remediation falls by the wayside

Alston came to Bunn Middle School in 2008, intent on transforming it from a low-performing school to a place where students excelled. He implemented a strong remediation program for struggling students. Children with learning difficulties were identified early in the school year, and then Alston hired teachers to stay after school to work with them. He even hired drivers to get the children home on activity buses after they got extra help. Bunn also had a full-time summer school remediation program, complete with breakfast, lunch and buses.

In just five years, Bunn's performance composite, which is based on end-of-grade test scores, increased from the low 60th percentile up to the 81st percentile.

But the school's remediation

program was slowly whittled down by budget cuts, then eliminated altogether. Students who need extra help now must rely on the good will of teachers who are not compensated for any extra time they can devote to students.

There's no turnaround in sight. For fiscal 2015, state lawmakers cut funding for at-risk student services programs by more than \$9 million.

It's a perplexing scenario given that Senate leader Phil Berger recently pushed reforms aimed at improving the achievement of underperforming students. Policies contained in Berger's Excellent Public Schools Act of 2013 require schools to do better at remediating students who don't read proficiently. The law also sanctioned an A-F school grading scheme that punishes schools whose students don't perform well on standardized tests.

Without the funds and resources necessary to accomplish these end goals, the desired results appear to be very difficult to achieve.

Falling back on the community

The resources keep dwindling as the needs grow ever greater, but Barbara Carter remains an exuberant and upbeat presence in her second-grade classroom at J.C. Tayloe. She's an experienced professional who cares about her work and about the children.

Still, she said, it's harder to give the children the attention they need without more help from a teacher assistant. "I'm just left to believe that the current leadership just doesn't support public education," she said.

Principal Carson said that the school will continue to rely on the goodwill of the community to try to fill in the gaps left by state lawmakers.

"First United Methodist Church

has adopted this school through the 'Hand in Hand' program for more than 10 years," said Carson. "Through their generosity, that church gives us money so that if a child has a hole in his shoe or needs decent clothes, we can go out and get what the child needs."

The local church also provides hungry children with food on the weekends as well as books, classroom supplies and other necessities Carson identifies. Yet while the community support is welcome and deeply appreciated, it remains hard to replace what's perhaps most desperately needed — more staff, more instructional assistance and more academic interventions.

Carter wants the state's leaders to better understand how costly it is to disinvest in public education.

"I offer my classroom," she said, "to any lawmaker willing to spend some real time here to see the gaps for him or herself." ■

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▲ Done with the grind

Roosevelt Alston, who retired this year from his job as principal of Bunn Middle School, saw firsthand the effects of budget cuts to public education.

Photo by Ricky Leung

Losing its luster

Low pay, lack of respect prompt teachers to rethink their chosen profession

By Lindsay Wagner
Education Reporter

By any measure, Asheville Middle School's Chris Gable was a teaching star. Gable outperformed all of his colleagues as measured by his students' test scores, and he had a gift for engaging his students. He coached young writers and was always finding innovative ways to make language arts interesting.

But a salary low enough to qualify him and his family for Medicaid and food assistance, combined with a lack of other professional support, forced him to leave his beloved town and state in search of a living wage.



► **Hanging by a thread**

Teachers and their allies, at a 2014 rally in downtown Raleigh, call for more support from the legislature.

Photo by Ricky Leung

“I feel guilty,” said Gable, who left two years ago for a teaching position in Columbus, Ohio. There, Gable said, he would earn nearly \$30,000 a year more than the \$38,000 he was making in North Carolina with 10 years’ experience and a master’s degree.

“I wanted to continue to serve this community, but the state legislature has made it impossible,” he said.

Gable is one of many. According to surveys conducted by the N.C. Department of Public Instruction, teacher turnover rates have risen significantly over the past five years.

What’s up for debate is why teachers are leaving. Some say the figure does not represent a mass exodus because teachers are fed up, but rather that teachers are simply retiring early or moving to other school districts within the state.

But what is clear is that the teaching profession in North Carolina has taken a lot of hits over the past several years and that many teachers are exhausted, frustrated and ready to get out.

Teacher pay hits bottom

In the 1990s, then-Gov. Jim Hunt persuaded legislators to lift teacher pay to the national average to make North Carolina an attractive destination for highly qualified teachers. But the commitment didn’t last. Between 2008 and 2014, teachers saw their salaries frozen, save for a small increase offset by a rise in health insurance premiums. By 2014, the state had fallen in national rankings on teacher pay to 47th.

National Superintendent of the Year and former State Board of Education adviser Mark Edwards has a daughter who recently completed a teaching degree. She didn’t even try to teach here, Edwards told the State Board, instead taking a teaching job in Tennessee, where she will make about \$11,000 a year more than a

starting teacher in North Carolina.

In 2013, the starting salary for beginning teachers was just \$30,800. Lawmakers have worked since then to bring the starting pay back up to \$35,000 (where it was in 2008, adjusted for inflation). But compare that with Texas’ average starting salary of \$47,000.

“On starting teacher pay and average teacher salaries, we are below Virginia, we’re below Tennessee, we’re below Kentucky, we’re below South Carolina, we’re below Georgia,” said Keith Poston, executive director of the Public School Forum of North Carolina. “How can we expect to get the kinds of high quality teachers that we need when we can’t even keep our own teachers in North Carolina?”

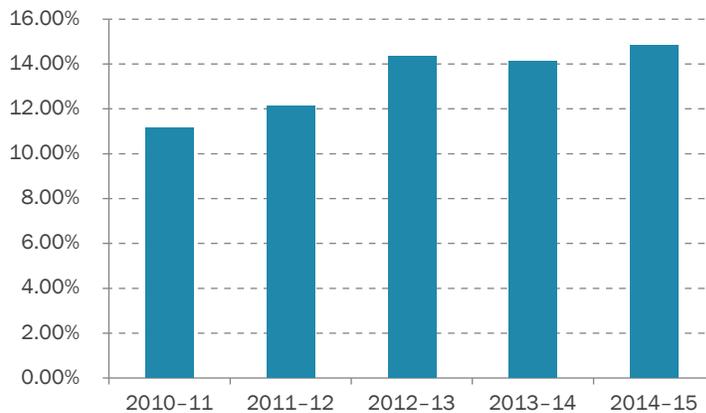
While lawmakers raised beginning teachers’ salaries in 2014 and 2015, veteran teachers were for the most

part left behind, with minuscule pay bumps over the past several years, base salaries capped at \$50,000 and salary supplements eliminated for teachers who earn master’s degrees.

“Of all industries, education should reward lifelong learning,” said June Atkinson, the state’s top school official. “And there is plenty of evidence to show that a master’s degree in a teacher’s area of study really makes a difference in student achievement.”

CJ Flay, a teacher at North Iredell Middle School in Olin, expressed his disappointment in a letter to N.C. Policy Watch about the ending of salary supplement for advanced degree holders. “I would never have gone on to pursue my degree if that decision had been made prior to August 2006,” said Flay in his letter. He said his wife, also a teacher, decided not to pursue a master’s

Teacher turnover rates, 2010–15



▲ Exodus of teachers?

Teacher turnover rates have risen significantly. While some debate whether teachers are simply retiring early, moving to other school districts within the state or leaving the state or profession altogether, many teachers say they are exhausted, frustrated and ready to get out.

Source: N.C. Department of Public Instruction

degree because she could not expect a raise that would help her repay the cost of obtaining that degree.

Lawmakers do away with Teaching Fellows

As teachers expressed frustrations with the changes inflicted on their profession by the legislature — not just low pay, but also cuts to classroom supplies and teacher assistants and the loss of tenure — the UNC system has experienced a 27 percent decline in undergraduate and graduate teaching programs from 2010 to 2014.

One incentive was eliminated in 2011 when state lawmakers began phasing out the North Carolina Teaching Fellows program, which awards scholarships to North Carolina high school students to pursue teaching degrees in the state. Graduates of the highly selective program were then required to teach for four years in North Carolina. More than 75 percent of Teaching Fellows stay in the state beyond five years.

The legislators took money earmarked for the program and put it toward expanding the presence of Teach for America (TFA), a national program designed to provide college graduates without degrees in education minimal training and place them in jobs in low-performing schools.

Teach for America's retention rates are poor, however. On a national level, only 28 percent of TFA teachers remain in public schools beyond five years, compared with 50 percent of non-TFA teachers.

While the Teaching Fellows program was relatively small, doing away with it was a symbolic gesture, according to one of the program's last graduates, Tacey Miller.

"Teaching Fellows was created in North Carolina and used as a

national model for other programs looking to do something similar," said Miller, who questioned why there is a will to eliminate a program that has worked so well to prepare future teachers and lure those thinking about teaching into the profession.

Due process rights eliminated

Another serious blow to the profession is the elimination of

tenure, formally known as "career status."

Tenure isn't a guarantee of a job, but rather an assurance of due process before a teacher can be fired or demoted. It was an important benefit for teachers who often found themselves at the mercy of politicized school boards if they spoke out against harmful policies.

Legislation passed in 2013 would have eliminated tenure for all teachers by 2018, but the courts rolled back part of that law

Falling behind: N.C. average teacher pay vs. national average



▲ Sinking toward the cellar

Between 2008 and 2014, teacher salaries were frozen, except for a small increase to offset a rise in health insurance premiums. By 2014, the state fell in national rankings of teacher pay to 47th.

Source: NEA Rankings of the States 2014 and Estimates of School Statistics 2015; N.C. Department of Public Instruction

last year, saying it violated the state constitution. The courts also rejected lawmakers’ proposal to offer some tenured teachers fatter pay raises and four-year contracts in exchange for giving up their tenure before 2018.

The result is that currently tenured teachers retain that benefit for the remainder of their careers, but teachers hired since August 1, 2013, can no longer rely on any kind of due process if they are fired or demoted. Instead, they get

temporary year-to-year contracts — unless pending litigation overturns the law.

The list of hits to the teaching profession is taking its toll.

Melissa Noel, an AP English teacher in Johnston County with 19 years in the classroom, came to North Carolina five years ago to support her aging in-laws.

“It feels like we’re being encouraged to leave the profession,” said Noel. “Sending money to private schools in the form of school

vouchers, reducing public school budgets, telling us our advanced degrees are not appreciated, and now our governor says experience is not appreciated? I know a lot of my colleagues will leave.” ■

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▲ **Death of a profession**

Public school teachers protest the proposed end of tenure outside the N.C. General Assembly in 2013.

Photo by Clayton Henkel

▶ **Overworked and underpaid**

Chris Gable, formerly a teacher at Asheville Middle School, is one of many experienced teachers who left the state to work elsewhere.

Courtesy of Chris Gable



14.84

— percent rate of North Carolina teacher turnover, 2014–15

Paving the way toward privatization

Legislators embrace vouchers, charter school expansion, disregard calls for accountability

By Lindsay Wagner
Education Reporter



Since taking charge in Raleigh, conservative lawmakers have been steering public dollars into a range of alternatives to traditional public schools that march under the banner of “school choice.”

Beginning as a trickle, but with the potential to become a flood, spending is growing for vouchers to pay tuition at private and religious schools; an expanded roster of charter schools run by for-profit companies; and two virtual charter schools operated by a scandal-plagued company.

Meanwhile, those same legislators are squeezing conventional K-12 schools with budgets that place North Carolina near the bottom of national rankings for teacher pay and per-pupil spending. A central rationale for providing these alternatives is that traditional schools fall short in educating children from low-income households and communities, children of color and children with special needs.

But even as they cite end-of-grade test results and other data to demonstrate the shortcomings of conventional schools, the legislators are requiring no such accountability from voucher programs and charters. So far, there is no evidence that at-risk children fare better on average in the alternative settings and an abundance of anecdotal examples in which they are clearly worse off.



▲ “Vouchers = theft”

Teachers gather on the mall outside the N.C. General Assembly in 2013 to speak out against state lawmakers’ cuts to public education.

Photo by Clayton Henkel

4,200

— amount in dollars of vouchers provided to low-income students to use at private or religious schools

Vouchers for unaccountable private schools

In 2013, legislators opened the door for sending taxpayer funds to private schools, 70 percent of which are religious in orientation and sponsorship. And some are home schools pretending to be something more.

School vouchers of \$4,200 a year, formally known as “Opportunity Scholarships,” are touted as a way to help low-income and minority children who are falling behind in their local public schools by providing access to better options in private ones. The program is strongly embraced by conservatives, but there is concern about accountability in their own ranks.

Near the end of the 2015 legislative session, a group of Republicans in the House banded together to block a proposal by school voucher champion state Rep. Paul “Skip” Stam (R-Wake) that would have put the voucher program on track for a major expansion. Among them was state Rep. Leo Daughtry (R-Johnston), who described one school in his district benefiting from the vouchers.

“I went to visit this school,” Daughtry said. “It’s in the back of a church, and it has like 10 or 12 students – and one teacher, or one-and-a-half teachers. I think you need to go slow with Opportunity Scholarships. From what I saw, [it] didn’t seem to be a school that we would want to send taxpayer dollars to.”

Before the voucher program began, there was little concern about the low level of state oversight of private schools because they received no public money. The voucher money is flowing now – \$11 million this year, with \$24 million budgeted for 2016 – but private schools are subject to minimal requirements for student assessment and none at all for

“I went to visit this school. It’s in the back of a church, and it has like 10 or 12 students – and one teacher, or one-and-a-half teachers. I think you need to go slow with Opportunity Scholarships. From what I saw, [it] didn’t seem to be a school that we would want to send taxpayer dollars to.”

– State Rep. Leo Daughtry (R-Johnston)

in response to a legislative proposal to expand school vouchers



▲ Back of the church

Star Christian Academy, which Daughtry raised concerns about, is housed in the back of New Generation Christian Church in Smithfield. The private school has received more than \$12,000 in school voucher funding for 2015–16.

Photo by Ricky Leung

curricula, instructional staff or financial viability. The schools can choose the pupils they want to admit and are free to provide religious instruction.

Only low-income families are now eligible for vouchers, but it is expected that those requirements will ease in the future.

Public school advocates and other stakeholders mounted a legal challenge to the program soon after its inception. They won the first round when Franklin County Superior Court Judge Robert H. Hobgood ruled that the program violated the state constitution.

“The General Assembly fails the children of North Carolina when they are sent with public taxpayer money to private schools that have no legal obligation to teach them anything,” he wrote.

Early this year, the state Supreme Court overturned Hobgood’s order, allowing the voucher program to continue without requiring any additional accountability.

Charter schools expand their market share

In 2011, North Carolina lifted the cap on the number of charter schools that can operate in the state. When first established in the 1990s, the schools were billed as laboratories of innovation, where best practices could be developed and shared with local public school systems. With the expansion, legislators diverted more funds from traditional schools and increasingly into the hands of for-profit operators.

Some charters provide students with an exceptional education. Typically those high performers are well-resourced, with strong community support and often with additional funding from philanthropic interests.

Charter schools that don’t attract extra funding and community support are at risk of poor academic and

financial performance. The schools receive per-pupil funding that matches traditional public schools, but they’re not subject to the same oversight and accountability standards. State oversight has become even spottier in recent years because staffing has not grown to keep up with the increased number of schools.

Problems have ensued. A 2015 state auditor’s report found that a Kinston charter school’s CEO mismanaged hundreds of thousands of dollars over several years. The school shut down just a few days into the 2013-14 school year, leaving its students academically homeless.

Three Charlotte-area schools also abruptly closed in the last year because of financial woes and poor governance. In all instances, reviewers of these schools’

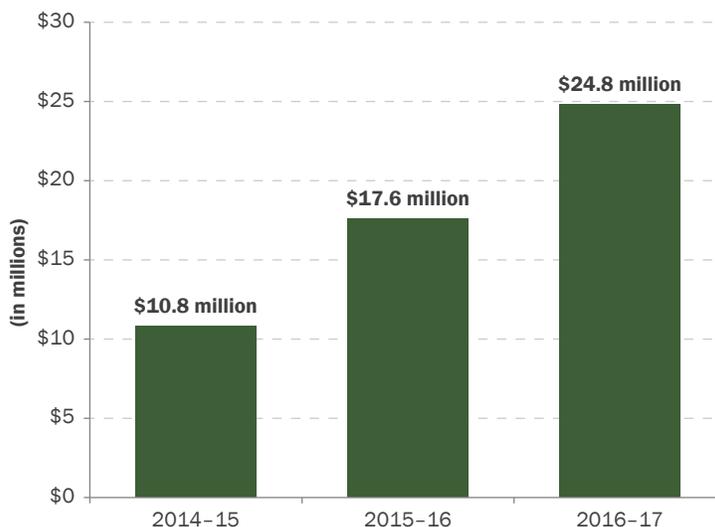
applications for charters expressed reservations about the schools’ ability to survive and succeed.

And questions continue to dog Eastern North Carolina charter operator Baker Mitchell, Jr., who runs four charter schools and has received millions in taxpayer money through his for-profit companies, which lease the land to the schools and run their operations. His notoriety spurred a critical investigative report by the national media outlet ProPublica last year.

Virtual charters lobby their way into N.C.

The 2014 state budget contained a provision calling for two online charter school companies to establish a four-year pilot

Funds for voucher program



▲ The rise of public spending on unaccountable private schools

Lawmakers voted to more than double the school voucher program over a two-year period, despite a lack of data on the program’s effectiveness.

Source: North Carolina General Assembly budget documents



— number of credentials, licenses or levels of educational attainment required of teachers at schools eligible to receive taxpayer-funded vouchers

program in the state. Supporters of these virtual charter schools say they're a necessary option for children who don't do well in traditional schools because they need remedial help or advanced learning; have health issues; full extracurricular or athletic schedules; or are dealing with bullying.

Data from several studies of cyber schools suggests that they do a poor job educating students. The author of one scathing recent report said the schools' gains in math were so small that it was "literally as though the student did not go to school for the entire year."

The report, issued in October by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University, concluded, in part: "The majority of online charter students had far weaker academic growth in both math and reading compared to

their traditional public school peers. To conceptualize this shortfall, it would equate to a student losing 72 days of learning in reading and 180 days of learning in math, based on a 180-day school year."

One of the companies enlisted to open a virtual charter in North Carolina is K12, Inc., which had lobbied for years for the program. A publicly traded company whose CEO earned \$4 million in total compensation for 2014, K12, Inc., backs virtual charter schools across the country, including California-based CAVA (California Virtual Academy).

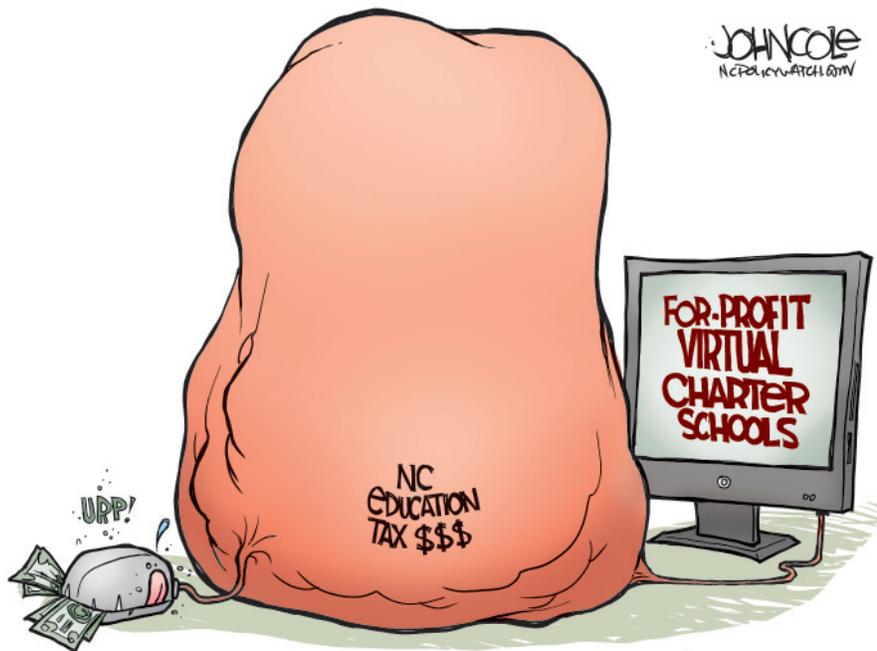
Jan Cox Golovich quit her job as an online high school teacher at CAVA two years ago, having concluded that her students were being cheated out of an education. "CAVA lets students fail," she said in an interview with N.C. Policy Watch. "They let the kids go a whole

year performing poorly in school and then fail. But CAVA has made their money."

CAVA was also the subject of a critical report by In the Public Interest, a Washington-based think tank. The report found poor oversight when it came to ensuring accurate student attendance, dramatically lower test scores than their traditional public school counterparts and difficulty accessing technology.

Combined, the two virtual schools in North Carolina could receive up to \$66 million a year in taxpayer funds by 2017 if enrollment reaches a combined 6,000 students by then, according to the Associated Press. ■

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— number of schools eligible to receive taxpayer-funded vouchers that will be evaluated as part of the state's A-F grading system designed to give more information to parents

UNC system at risk

Budget cuts take a toll, and wariness grows of political interference

By Sarah Ovaska-Few
Investigative Reporter

The tumultuous political changes that have swept over North Carolina this decade have not spared the state's public universities.

The 17-campus UNC system stands out nationally, especially in the South, for its quality, affordability and independence. It boasts the nation's first public university; the prestigious N.C. School of Science and Mathematics for the state's brightest high school students; more public historically black colleges than any other state; and campuses that routinely produce groundbreaking research.

In a 1994 book, historian John Egerton described the flagship university in Chapel Hill as "the single most glowing exception to broad-based mediocrity in the Southern academic world" for much of the 20th century.

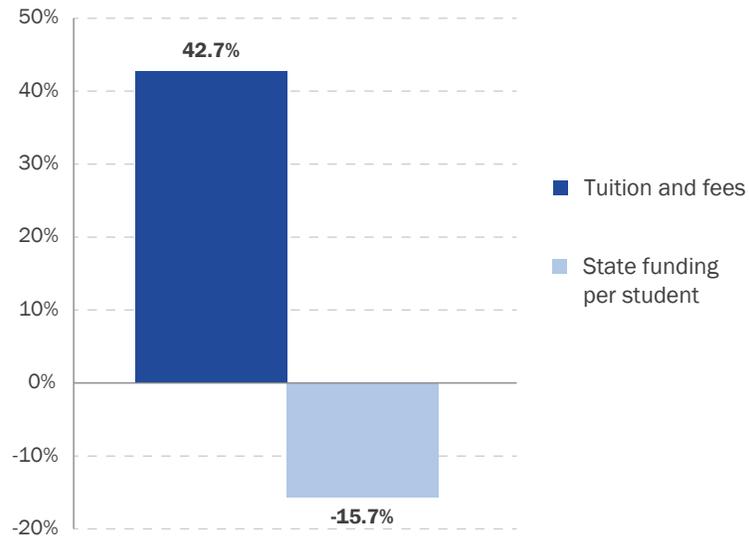
Concern is growing in many quarters of the state, however, that years of budget cuts and a growing threat of political interference are placing the UNC system, in many ways the bedrock of the state economy, at risk.

"Where do you go from here?" asked Paul Fulton, a prominent Winston-Salem businessman and former dean of UNC-Chapel Hill's business school. "We keep nibbling at this support, and you don't see strategic investment anymore."

A tradition of broad support

The University of North Carolina's long list of offerings took decades to build, with steady financial

Tuition jumps, state support drops since 2008



▲ Percentage change in tuition/fees and state funding per student for UNC system since 2008

Tuition and fees at UNC system schools, adjusted for inflation, have risen more than 40% since 2008 to an average of \$6,449 a year per student. Meanwhile, state funding per student dropped by 16 percent.

Sources: UNC data; N.C. General Assembly's Fiscal Research Division; N.C. Budget & Tax Center

support from taxpayers. The UNC system maintains that position even today. In 2015, only five other states dedicated more funding to public universities as a proportion of state personal income, according to the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.

In a 1961 visit to the Chapel Hill campus, President John F. Kennedy remarked on that commitment, a sign of North Carolina's larger goal of instilling a sense of public responsibility in its graduates.

"This is a great institution with a great tradition and with devoted

alumni, and with the support of the people of this State," Kennedy said. "Its establishment and continued functioning, like that of all great universities, has required great sacrifice by the people of North Carolina. I cannot believe that all of this is undertaken merely to give this school's graduates an economic advantage in the life-struggle."

That support has paid off in the more than 50 years since Kennedy's speech. Research Triangle Park, for example, which is home today to 200 companies and more than 50,000 employees, would never have

42.7

— percentage increase in tuition and fees at UNC system schools since 2008

succeeded were it not for the UNC system. And UNC's campuses are continuously recognized for offering some of the most valuable educations in the nation.

But there have been significant and measurable changes for the 17-campus university system and its 220,000 students, driven by substantial budget cuts of more than \$500 million since the start of the recession. State funding per student, when adjusted for inflation, has dropped steadily since the start of the recession from \$15,635 per student in 2007–08 to \$13,187 for the current school year. The recession forced the first rounds of cuts, and conservatives who have ruled the legislature since 2011 have enacted larger cuts since then.

Tuition costs up sharply

Much of the cost of education has been shifted to students and their families. In-state tuition and fees have risen by more than 40 percent since 2008 to an average of \$6,449 a year, and the state's share of per-student funding has dropped by 16 percent, according to a budget analysis taking inflation into account. In 2014, the UNC Board of Governors voted also to cap need-based financial aid.

"We're gradually off-loading the cost to the individual and families," said Fulton, the Winston-Salem businessman who is also co-chair of Higher Education Works, a nonprofit group pushing for reinvestment in North Carolina's public university system. "It's really crushing not only the low-income families but the middle-income families."

Many faculty and staff are also concerned about affordability, especially on campuses without a deep alumni base or other resources to fill in funding gaps, said Steve Leonard, a UNC-Chapel Hill political science professor

and current chair of the university system's Faculty Assembly.

"You add all those things together and it's a recipe for difficulty if not disaster for some of the institutions that serve populations of students from less privileged backgrounds," Leonard said.

Some conservatives agree that rising tuition costs are a problem but say the remedy is that the universities should reduce administrative and management costs and become more efficient.

"The cuts from the General Assembly should have been a signal to the university system to make internal cuts rather than pushing it to students in tuition increases," said Jenna Robinson, the director of the conservative John W. Pope Center for Higher Education. "There are a lot of places within the administration where cuts can be made."

Independence in question

Of equal concern to many is what they perceive as a threat to the university's academic freedom. As veteran political writer Rob Christensen noted in a September 29 column in *The News & Observer*, for much of the past century "[p]olitical interference in public Southern universities was a way of life," even as UNC usually managed to stand apart as an example to the contrary.

The 32 members of the current Board of Governors owe their appointments to a very conservative state legislature. UNC President Tom Ross is now on the way out, and members of the board have struggled to counter the widespread perception that he was forced out simply because he was appointed by a previous board dominated by Democrats.

Earlier this year, the board also ordered the closing of Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity at



▲ Change in leadership

The UNC Board of Governors selected former U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings (left) as the new UNC system president in October 2015.

Photo by Ricky Leung

UNC-CH, headed by law professor Gene Nichol, an outspoken critic of the Republicans now running the state.

The process of choosing a new leader, former U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, was chaotic and contentious, with the legislature squabbling with the Board of Governors as lawmakers took a late stab at inserting themselves in the selection process. Spellings, who starts in March 2016, has spent much of her career working for former President George W. Bush. She will need to contend with legislative leaders who have made clear they want a more streamlined system focused on building up the state's economy. ■

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Win the courts, win the war

How the state Supreme Court advanced the conservative agenda

By Sharon McCloskey
Courts, Law & Democracy Reporter

Conservative justices hold a 4-3 majority on the ostensibly nonpartisan state Supreme Court and, as party operatives understand well, maintaining that edge has been critical to ensuring Republican control elsewhere throughout the state.

“Lose the courts, lose the war.” Political consultant John Davis labeled this “Rule Number Five” in his 2013 report, “How the North Carolina Republican Party Can Maintain Political Power for 114 Years.”

“The Republican majority has a right to initiate radical reform,” Davis wrote. “Everyone else has a right to sue them. That’s why [the 2014] Supreme Court

votes are critical for long-term Republican dominance.”

Bolstered by the legislative majority’s repeal of the state judicial public financing program in 2013 and by millions in donations from outside political groups as a result of the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* decision, conservative justices have held on to that control in subsequent elections.

Party lawmakers did their part to protect that control, enacting a law in the waning days of the 2013 session that gave the justices the sole authority to discipline judges — including themselves — and allowed them to decide if, when and whom to discipline in secret.

Both Justice Sarah Parker, then serving as chief justice, and Judge John Martin, head of the Judicial Standards Commission, had objected to such a drastic change in the handling of judicial ethics complaints. But during debate on the bill, lawmakers said that Justices Paul Newby and Mark Martin had been pushing for the law, leading to speculation that some justices may have wanted to silence such complaints ahead of the upcoming election.

During the 2015 legislative session, the conservative majority passed yet another law that all but ensures



▲ **Justices of the Supreme Court of North Carolina** (left to right) — Justices Cheri Beasley, Robin E. Hudson, Robert H. Edmunds, Jr., Chief Justice Mark Martin, Justices Paul M. Newby, Barbara Jackson and Sam Ervin, IV.

51

— percent of North Carolina voters who cast a ballot for a Democratic U.S. House candidate in 2012

“The Republican majority has a right to initiate radical reform. Everyone else has a right to sue them. That’s why [the 2014] Supreme Court races are critical for long-term Republican dominance.”

— **John Davis, N.C. political consultant,**

in a 2013 report, “How the North Carolina Republican Party Can Maintain Political Power for 114 Years”

continuing control on the court through the use of retention elections. State Supreme Court justices running for reelection now no longer have to face a challenger; instead, their reelection will be determined by voters giving them an up-or-down vote.

Should the voters not approve the justice, the governor will choose an interim justice who will sit for two years and then run for election. The law is effective immediately and will benefit conservative Justice Robert Edmunds, whose term is up in 2016.

The justices like to say that party labels don’t matter when they are deciding cases, and in many instances that’s true. Most opinions handed down by the court are unanimous. But in matters steeped in partisan or philosophical ideology, they align with their like-minded colleagues and opinions issued in recent years reflect that divide.

In decisions that split along party lines, the justices have upheld conservative redistricting maps, turned North Carolina’s consumer protection law on its head, weakened Fourth Amendment search and seizure protections and sustained the private school voucher program.

In 2012, for example, in a 4-3 decision written by Justice Paul Newby, the conservative justices ruled in *Heien v. State* that so long

as a police officer’s mistaken view of the law is reasonable, a traffic stop based upon that view is justified under the Fourth Amendment. The U.S. Supreme Court later upheld that decision, giving rise to what Justice Robin Hudson predicted in her dissenting opinion and what N.C. Policy Watch has called “the *Heien* effect” — courts excusing mistakes by police when making traffic stops based on a misunderstanding of what the law is — with violations ranging from brake lights to trailer hitches to air fresheners.

In 2013, in a 5-2 decision also written by Justice Newby, the conservative justices (joined this time by then-Chief Justice Sarah Parker, who frequently sided with the majority) ruled in *Bumpers v. Community Bank of Northern Virginia* that consumers suing banks for deceptive practices had to prove that they relied on those practices in order to recover under consumer protection laws. Consumer advocates uniformly agreed that the court’s decision struck a blow to consumer rights, making it much harder to make a case for deceptive practices.

“It’s a terrible decision for consumers,” Margot Saunders of the National Consumer Law Center said at the time.

In the 2014 decision *Dickson v.*

Rucho, written by Justice Edmunds, the conservative justices by a 4-2 vote (then interim justice Robert Hunter abstained) upheld the 2011 redistricting maps adopted by Republicans in the General Assembly, finding that lawmakers were justified in drawing districts based upon a mechanical formula (50 percent plus one of black voting age population) in order to avoid liability under the Voting Rights Act. That logic has since been called into question by the U.S. Supreme Court in an Alabama redistricting case decided last year.

And in 2015, in the 4-3 *Hart v. State* decision written by Chief Justice Mark Martin, the majority upheld a school voucher program that allows taxpayer dollars to fund tuition for private schools that have virtually no legal obligation to provide students with even a basic education. ■

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Open season on individual rights

Conservatives seek voting restrictions, keep fighting on old social issues

By Sharon McCloskey
Courts, Law & Democracy Reporter



▲ **“What democracy looks like”**
Demonstrators gather in Raleigh, N.C., during the 2014 “Historic Thousands on Jones Street” rally.

Photo by Ricky Leung

The party of less government rolled into Raleigh after the 2010 elections champing at the bit, eager to fulfill an agenda long delayed.

“Regulations kill jobs” became the rallying cry, but as it turned out, that cry only went so far. When it came to voting booths, bedrooms, doctor’s offices and execution chambers, the self-styled opponents of intrusive government injected themselves in ways not seen before in state government.

Voting rights landed first in their crosshairs.

“We’ve lost every gain we’d made,” Bob Phillips of Common Cause North Carolina said. “We’ve lost just about all the pro-voting, pro-democracy laws that we had pushed.”

But voters weren’t alone. Women, gay North Carolinians, death row inmates — all were fair game as conservative lawmakers pursued their causes with a vengeance.

“There’s a real harsh, mean spirit inside the Legislative Building, more so than I’ve ever seen,” Phillips added.

Moving the lines, changing the rules

The attack on voting rights in North Carolina began even before the new conservative majority took charge in the General Assembly in January 2011.

Just after the 2010 election, legislative leaders hired high-profile mapmakers working for the Washington-based Republican State Leadership Committee to assess the 2010 census and redraw voting lines in a way that would ensure party control for years to come.

Taking cover under the Voting Rights Act, the majority adopted a redistricting map for the state legislature and congressional seats that split precincts, combined counties and extended claws into outlying areas in unprecedented fashion — reaching pockets of African-American voters and packing them into districts where they’d already been electing their candidates of choice, often for years and by wide margins.

The result: whiter and more conservative districts everywhere else.

The lawsuit that followed, pending now for four years after

a full run through the state courts and up to the U.S. Supreme Court, is now back in state Supreme Court, with a final resolution potentially years away.

In the meantime, voters went to the polls in the 2012 statewide elections, and the results were telling. As mathematicians at Duke University confirmed in a study, district voting lines skewed the outcome of North Carolina’s congressional elections that year.

Although more votes were cast for Democrats than Republicans in those races, Republicans won nine of the state’s 13 seats.

“Through this gerrymandering process, politicians are choosing who is going to win the next election,” said Democratic state Sen. Jeff Jackson of Mecklenburg County.

“We all deserve to have a competitive election, because voters deserve to choose who their representatives are,” he said. “Of the 13 congressional districts we have, zero are competitive. It doesn’t matter if they’re outright corrupt, or incompetent, [incumbents] cannot lose a general election.

That’s terrible.”

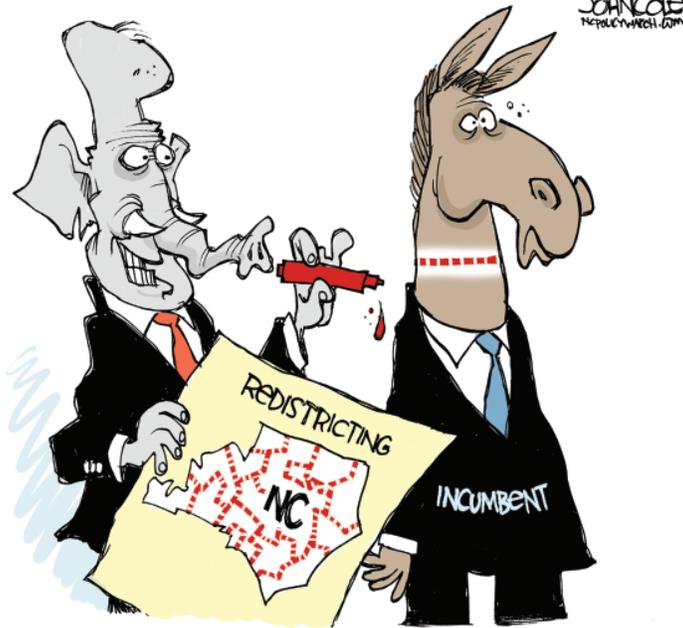
According to Justin Levitt, a redistricting expert and professor at Loyola Law School in Los Angeles, the increase in citizen protests and voter discontent is a result of the distorted voting maps.

“It’s a direct line,” he said. “Some of the protests have to do with the substance of legislators’ actions — that people don’t like what they’re doing — but just as much of it has to do with the fact that they feel like this legislature doesn’t fairly represent them.”

Redistricting wasn’t the only tack the conservatives took in an effort to control the vote. After years of growth in voter turnout brought about by early voting, same-day registration and other curative measures, the legislative majority set out to change the rules of the game.

Early efforts at passage of a voter ID bill were stymied by Democratic Gov. Bev Perdue’s veto in 2011 but renewed a session later.

Then came the U.S. Supreme Court’s June 2013 decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*, gutting the requirement that states with a



history of discrimination like North Carolina get voting changes precleared by the Justice Department. That freed state lawmakers to pursue broader and more restrictive measures.

“Now we can go with the full bill,” state Sen. Tom Apodaca (R-Henderson) said, and go they did, pushing House Bill 589 through both chambers and on to Gov. Pat McCrory’s desk for signature in just weeks.

According to election law experts, the “Monster Voting Law” created one of the most restrictive voting environments in the country. Among its sweeping changes, it requires a photo ID for in-person voting, prohibits the counting of out-of-precinct ballots, shortens the early voting period and eliminates same-day registration.

Which if any of these changes will be in effect for the 2016 elections — starting with the March primaries — depends upon state and federal court rulings expected in the coming months, and a final resolution by the U.S. Supreme Court is not out of the question.

Blocking marriages

North Carolina doubled down on its same-

sex marriage ban in 2012 when voters approved a General Assembly-initiated constitutional amendment recognizing marriage as between a man and a woman only, adding to a state law that already prohibited same-sex marriage.

It was an aggressive move by conservative lawmakers hoping to seal the fate of marriage equality challenges here.

But courts elsewhere had already begun overturning such bans, and in June 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court weighed in on the subject, ruling in *U.S. v. Windsor* that provisions of the federal Defense of Marriage Act defining marriage as only between a man and a woman were unconstitutional.

After *Windsor*, state barriers to marriage equality fell with remarkable speed, either by court or legislative action, and public approval of same-sex marriages grew just as fast.

In North Carolina, a gay couple had already filed suit in federal court challenging the state’s ban on second parent adoptions and then added a challenge to the marriage amendment, as did parties in three additional federal lawsuits filed here in 2014.

Those lawsuits were pending when the federal appeals

“Of the 13 congressional districts we have, zero are competitive. It doesn’t matter if they’re outright corrupt, or incompetent, [incumbents] cannot lose a general election. That’s terrible.”

— State Sen. Jeff Jackson (D-Mecklenburg)

on the effects of gerrymandering



▲ **For love and family**

Shawn Long (right) and his husband Craig Johnson (left) were among the first in North Carolina to file a lawsuit for same-sex marriage so they could be a legal family with their son, Isaiah.

Courtesy of Shawn Long, Director of Operations at Equality NC

Photo by Ricky Leung for the American Sexual Health Association

court in Richmond struck down a similar Virginia ban. That prompted N.C. Attorney General Roy Cooper to declare that his office could no longer defend North Carolina's ban, and it gave judges in each of the lawsuits cause to overturn the ban here.

Persisting in their efforts to save the state ban, conservative lawmakers appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court for relief. The high court considered the Virginia ban

instead and put the entire issue to rest this past June, ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that states could not deny same-sex couples the right to marry.

Having lost the war, North Carolina conservatives nonetheless continued to press for laws obstructing marriage rights. One of the first bills filed this past session in the Senate, enacted over a veto by the governor, allows magistrates throughout the state to opt out of performing marriages if

they have a "sincerely held religious objection" to same-sex marriage.

More than 30 magistrates statewide — including all four in McDowell County — have recused themselves from performing marriages since that law's passage, burdening those who continue to perform their jobs.

"The intent of Senate Bill 2 has always been clear — to allow for legal discrimination to occur under North Carolina law," said Chris

Sgro, executive director of Equality NC. “The fact that we are having to ship magistrates from county to county to comply with this bill is simply unacceptable. This is only costing taxpayers more money and placing additional burdens on magistrates’ offices.”

Abortion battles continue

With little notice to their colleagues and on the eve of the July 4 holiday in 2013, conservative lawmakers brought to the floor what had once been a motorcycle safety bill but had been gutted and replaced with provisions aimed at

forcing the closure of many abortion clinics in North Carolina.

It was a move that spoke both to the tactics resorted to by some state lawmakers these past five years and to the majority’s continued insistence on injecting themselves into women’s health care decisions.

Labeled the “motorcycle vagina” bill by opponents, the law, as ultimately signed by Gov. Pat McCrory (despite campaign promises to the contrary), called for regulations holding abortion clinics to the same standards as ambulatory surgical centers — standards that could force the shutdown of many if not most clinics in the state, according to pro-

choice groups.

It wasn’t the majority’s first foray into anti-abortion legislation.

Over a veto by then-Gov. Perdue, state lawmakers enacted the Woman’s Right to Know Act in July 2011, which required that a doctor perform an ultrasound on a patient — regardless of consent — at least four hours before an abortion, showing her the images and describing what is seen.

U.S. District Judge Catherine Eagles overturned the law in January 2014, ruling that the legislature could not compel doctors “to speak the ideological message of the state.” The Fourth Circuit agreed with Eagles, and the U.S. Supreme Court later refused to hear the case, leaving the lower court rulings in place.

Legislative intrusions into women’s health care decisions continued this year as lawmakers pushed through a 72-hour waiting period for abortions, saying that such a change was necessary to protect women from the consequences of what the conservative majority deemed to be an otherwise hasty decision.

Opponents derided that purpose as patronizing and insulting to women.

“This is not about respecting or supporting women,” state Rep. Tricia Cotham (D-Mecklenburg) said, noting that other life-changing procedures did not require a waiting period. “It’s about creating barriers that unfairly harm especially women of very limited financial means.”

“Abortion is a deeply personal decision,” Cotham added. “My womb and my uterus are not up for your political grab.”

The bill passed nonetheless, and for a second time, McCrory broke his campaign promise of no more abortion restrictions by signing the bill into law in June. North Carolina is now one of just four states requiring such a delay.



▲ The motorcycle monologues

Pro-choice supporters protest what they call the “Motorcycle Vagina” bill in 2013 at the N.C. General Assembly. Changes to the original motorcycle safety legislation meant the closure of many clinics across the state that provide access to safe abortion procedures.

Photo by Ricky Leung

72

— number of hours to which House Bill 465 that passed in 2015 raised the mandatory waiting period for a woman seeking an abortion

“There’s always a chance we might execute an innocent person.”

— **Former N.C. Supreme Court Chief Justice I. Beverly Lake, Jr.**

Jump-starting executions

It didn’t take long for McCrory to put pen to paper and sign off on the repeal of the state’s landmark Racial Justice Act in 2013, making good on his campaign promise to rid North Carolina of legislation he once called a joke.

Enacted in 2009, the law allowed death row inmates to seek a conversion of their sentence to life in prison without parole upon a showing — through statistical evidence and otherwise — that race was a significant factor in the imposition of their sentences.

Death penalty opponents hailed its passage as a necessary safeguard to continued racial bias in the judicial system. From Day One, though, prosecutors and other proponents set out to overturn it.

By the time of the repeal, most of the state’s 152 death row inmates had filed motions seeking to have their sentences commuted. All but a handful of those motions have gone nowhere, but four inmates were able to win reductions in their sentences based upon a showing of racial bias. Their cases are now pending in state Supreme Court.

In the meantime, the state witnessed the release of several wrongly convicted death row inmates — most recently Joseph Sledge, Henry McCollum and Leon



▲ Free to live

Leon Brown spent decades in prison on death row awaiting execution for a crime he did not commit. Brown was finally exonerated on Sept. 2, 2014.

*Courtesy of the N.C. Coalition for Alternatives to the Death Penalty
Photo by Jenny Warburg*

Brown — men who spent most of their lives behind bars, awaiting execution for crimes they did not commit. Their exonerations exposed a flawed justice system, plagued by bias and corrupt evidence and haunted by prosecutors who elevated their own success over the truth.

They also deepened a growing rift in conservative thinking, with more public officials on the Right joining the conversation about putting an end to the death penalty.

Former N.C. Chief Justice I. Beverly Lake, Jr., for example, has made it his mission since leaving the bench to help free death row inmates who may have

been wrongfully convicted, and he recently stated that he now opposes capital punishment.

“There’s always a chance we might execute an innocent person,” he said in a recent interview.

That conversation aside, and in the face of botched executions elsewhere across the country, conservative lawmakers have persisted in seeking to jump-start the death penalty here.

During the 2015 session, the legislators enacted a death penalty secrecy law that cuts off public debate by exempting the N.C. Department of Public Safety from rule-making requirements when executions are involved, eases restrictions on the type of drugs used for lethal injections and allows medical professionals other than doctors to monitor the process.

It also gags opposition by protecting the manufacturers of the drugs, whose identities will now be confidential.

“It’s important that the manufacturers be allowed by contract to stay confidential so that they aren’t litigated to death in order to prevent them from selling these drugs to the state,” state Sen. Buck Newton (R-Wilson) said during floor debate. ■

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Amid the gloom, rays of hope

The Right remains firmly in control, but important cracks are emerging

By Rob Schofield

Research Director, N.C. Policy Watch



► **Forward together**

Thousands gather in front of the N.C. legislature during a Moral Monday protest in 2013.

Photo by Ricky Leung

At the conclusion of the whirlwind 2011 session of the North Carolina General Assembly — a session in which new conservative majorities pushed through a raft of dramatic policy changes — many progressive North Carolinians surveyed the aftermath and found themselves actually breathing a sigh of relief. There was a widespread feeling that the fury of the storm had passed, that the Right had vented its collective spleen and that, having pushed through so much of its long-stymied policy agenda, conservative leaders would settle down to focus on governing the state.

Today, of course, this all seems remarkably naïve. As the preceding pages have made clear, 2011 wasn't the climax; it was just the first chapter in a long-term

effort to radically remake North Carolina and rewrite the state's social contract. Where once the state was widely regarded and frequently celebrated as a Southern outlier and an outpost of forward-thinking attitudes and policies, strict conformance with modern conservative ideology is now the order of the day.

Nowhere is this dramatic shift better symbolized than in the way state leaders think and talk about government itself. For the better part of the 20th century and into the first decade of the 21st, government was widely seen and spoken of as a force for good — a powerful engine that, alongside a healthy home-grown business community, helped drive progress and promote widely-shared prosperity.

Today, things are very different. According to North

Carolina's most powerful politicians and their most important supporters, government is at best a necessary evil and at worst the enemy of freedom.

The results of this dramatic shift are readily evident in the increasingly underfunded and fragile public structures that once undergirded the middle class. Even as conservatives describe every new job as part of a miraculous "Carolina Comeback" and blame every plant closing or shuttered hospital on the Obama administration, the plain fact is that North Carolina is a darker, drabber, more divided and less hopeful place than it ought to be several years into an economic recovery.

Consider the following:

- Median incomes are down.
- Most counties have fewer jobs than they did prior to the Great Recession.
- State expenditures, as a percentage of total state personal income, are at a 40-year low and the responsibility for funding government has been shifted away from the wealthy and profitable corporations and onto the poor and middle class.
- The state's once middle-of-the-pack social safety net stands torn and threadbare.
- Thousands of North Carolinians die prematurely each year for want of access to affordable health care.
- Schoolteachers, university professors and other public employees are a dispirited, underpaid and increasingly overwhelmed group.
- Compliance with environmental protection laws has been made voluntary for polluters.
- The state's once-burgeoning voter participation rates have been depressed by new and restrictive laws.
- Narrow sectarian religious views have been elevated over the fundamental rights of women and LGBTQ citizens.
- Laws to abet the spread of guns and, indeed, to treat them as near-sacred icons stand triumphant.

The Right is far from finished

And lest anyone conclude, à la 2011, that any kind of letup is on tap in the conservative push, they would do well to think again.

One of the most important and dangerous examples of this sobering situation is "TABOR" — the egregiously misnamed "Taxpayer Bill of Rights." Also sometimes referred to as the "Taxpayer Protection Act," TABOR has been a favored scheme of many conservative

and libertarian think tanks for decades. Its simple and superficially appealing objective: to amend state constitutions so as to arbitrarily limit year-to-year growth in spending to a rate that reflects a combination of inflation plus population growth.

In 1994, conservative activists succeeded in getting Colorado voters to enact a TABOR amendment, and the results were disastrous. Funding for education and other core state services plummeted. At one point the federal government was forced to take over the state's bankrupt child immunization program.

Since that time, the Colorado experience has helped block its adoption in any other state. In many instances, business leaders have spearheaded the opposition. Unfortunately, hard-right think tanks and activists remain undeterred.

In 2015, the TABOR bug infected North Carolina as the state Senate unveiled and speedily pushed through a late-session proposal to place a TABOR constitutional amendment on the ballot in the fall of 2016. And while the House has thus far chosen not to follow suit, it's easy to envision such action next spring — something that would force voters to render judgment on a complex and misleading constitutional amendment in the midst of a lengthy presidential election ballot.

If that happens and voters were to approve it, TABOR would have the effect of locking in permanent budget cuts that would be even more severe than those of



▲ More than a moment's movement

The Rev. William J. Barber II, president of the N.C. NAACP and leader of the Moral Monday movement, urges North Carolinians to speak out against regressive policies being adopted by the legislature.

Photo by Clayton Henkel

recent years. That, in turn, would assure, for instance, that no general, across-the-board raise could ever — literally, ever — again be provided to teachers and state employees unless it was paired with massive spending cuts elsewhere in the budget.

And while TABOR would institutionalize the overarching war on government and modernity, conservatives remain determined to push ahead on several other fronts as well, including:

- **Education**, where the drives to privatize K-12 schools with vouchers and for-profit charters and dramatically reduce the state’s commitment to public higher education remain in the full-speed-ahead mode.

- **The social safety net**, where conservative leaders talk openly of working to do away with unemployment insurance, Medicaid and other “welfare” programs and of repealing the Affordable Care Act.

- **Environmental protection**, where the push continues to transform the once-proud Department of Environment and Natural Resources (now the Department of Environmental Quality) into a backwater bureaucracy that exists primarily to serve as adjunct staff to local polluters looking to evade federal rules.

- **Civil rights**, where conservatives proclaim regularly and loudly that, in effect, a color-blind society has been achieved and that no further state action is necessary to address the effects of centuries of racial segregation and discrimination.

- **Social issues**, where the religious right remains undaunted in its crusades to end all abortion, greatly limit the use of birth control and to force LGBTQ North

▼ **Packing the statehouse**

People from all over the state flocked to Raleigh, packing the statehouse on multiple occasions for Moral Monday demonstrations in 2013.

Photo by Ricky Leung



Carolinians back into the closet.

Even on the huge challenge of **climate change** — a matter on which North Carolina stands especially vulnerable to threats of drought, increasingly intense storms and rising sea levels — a majority of conservative leaders remain obstinately opposed to even acknowledging the problem, much less following the lead of other states by taking strong action.

In short, things seem as likely as not to get worse before they get better. Five years of conservative rule has produced dramatic changes, but its authors are hardly sated or ready to declare “mission accomplished.” The Right — especially the hard, Tea Party Right — sees itself no less aggrieved by the state of the nation and the planet in 2015 than it was in 2010.

The path forward: Grounds for hope?

And still, for all of this sobering news and analysis, there are excellent reasons for caring and thinking people to take heart and even to feel a sense of optimism as they contemplate the future of North Carolina. Here are five that stand out:

#1 – North Carolina hasn’t become Alabama or Mississippi overnight — North Carolina government may be in the midst of a policy upheaval, but it would be a huge mistake to see it as permanent or reflective of some parallel shift in popular values. The 2010 election gave conservatives a commanding legislative majority, and they used the census-year redistricting process to lock in that majority for the decade. But that doesn’t alter North Carolina’s status as a moderate, evenly divided “purple” state that supported President Barack Obama in 2008 and nearly did so in 2012.

#2 – The conservative upheaval finds little support in public opinion — Public opinion remains generally in favor of more investment in public education, a higher minimum wage, stronger gun laws, reproductive freedom, a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, tougher environmental protection laws and opposed to school vouchers, tax cuts for millionaires and weaker consumer protection laws. Even on marriage equality — an issue that found minuscule popular support a decade ago — polls now find North Carolinians evenly divided and trending progressive. In part because of these trends, support for the General Assembly is nearly as low as it is for Congress. Meanwhile, Governor McCrory continues to draw higher unfavorable ratings than President Obama.

#3 – Conservative leaders face significant challenges from within their movement — As with a lot of “revolutions,” the first few years of conservative rule in North Carolina have put in power a lot of true believers — committed ideologues more interested

in policy outcomes than the processes and niceties of governance. This, in turn, led to the use of lots of ends-justify-the-means tactics to get laws passed as quickly as possible — bent legislative rules, late-night sessions, limited debate, the secretive burying of new law changes in “technical corrections” bills that were never discussed in public and so on. Over time, this has provoked a growing chorus of opposition from within conservative circles — something that seems certain to grow stronger over time. Indeed, during the seemingly endless 2015 session, one saw real divides emerging among Republicans in the General Assembly — many of whom wondered openly whether the process and even some of the substance had been pushed too far.

#4 – The demographic trends favor progressive change — Through all of the upheaval, North Carolina remains a large and fast-growing state. What’s more, essentially all of this growth is taking place in larger, urban counties whose citizens tend to think, view the world and vote through a more progressive lens. Add to this the rapid growth in the population of racial and ethnic minorities (the state will become majority-minority within a few decades) and, once again, the current conservative push looks less and less sustainable.

#5 – The emergence of an increasingly potent progressive grassroots movement — But perhaps the best and most important grounds for optimism at the close of 2015 are rooted in the emergence of new and increasingly formidable political forces committed to returning the state to a progressive path. The Moral Mondays/Forward Together “fusion” movement led by the dynamic Rev. William Barber II of the North Carolina NAACP is the most visible and celebrated symbol of this resurgence, but many other important actors and forces stand out. There’s the insurgent activism of grassroots groups like the “Fight for 15” living wage movement, the revival of progressive activism on college campuses, the steady growth of the state’s Latino and Asian-American advocacy communities, the emergence of a new breed of progressive, high-tech corporate leaders and, of course, a growing population of transplants from around the U.S. and the rest of the world. Together with the surviving elements of the state’s once dominant progressive business establishment, these forces stand poised to push the pendulum back toward the center.

And so...

By 2030, a point at which it is projected to be the nation’s seventh most populous state, North Carolina figures to have at least as much in common with the progressive and diverse states of the West Coast and Northeast as it does with the Old South, or even fellow



▲ A renewed progressivism

TOP - Black Lives Matter supporters join the Forward Together movement, presenting a visible presence in 2015 during an annual march at the state’s capital.

BOTTOM - Shifting demographic trends point to a growing population of minority communities, who often view issues in a progressive light, particularly in relation to racial equity. Asian-Americans, for example, are the fastest growing minority group in North Carolina and are becoming a visibly important part of the electorate.

Photos by Ricky Leung

Sunbelt states like Florida and Texas.

If that's the case however, what should we ultimately make of the current conservative surge? Have the past five years been a mere interlude — the last loud gasp of an ideology about to meet its demise in a tidal wave of demographic and economic change? As we've seen, there's good reason for hope.

But progressives would also do well to recall that much of the Right's undeniable success in working its will on state policy is the residue of design. For decades now, conservative funders, politicians, think tanks, religious activists and corporate lobby groups have worked diligently and spent mountains of cash in a coordinated fashion to roll back the clock and to resist the social and economic changes that progressives champion and conservatives fear. They will not go quietly or painlessly back into the minority. It will

take the sustained commitment of tens of thousands of activists, organizers, lobbyists, litigators, writers, bloggers, researchers, thinkers, business people, funders, politicians and voters to turn things around.

Fifty-plus years ago, the forebears of modern North Carolina progressives faced down and overcame the obstructionism of a cast of conservative characters far more hateful and shameless than the wrecking crew running the show today. Through determined advocacy and sacrifice they helped turn the tide and usher in a new era of relative social progress and widely shared prosperity.

Now is the time to do so once again. ■

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▼ Looking to the future

Thousands show up in downtown Raleigh in 2014 to express their frustrations with how things are going in the state.

Photo by Ricky Leung



62.6

— percentage of North Carolina registered voters who do not think businesses should have the right to refuse services to people who are gay or lesbian because of the business owner's religious beliefs



▲ **Not one step back**

Demonstrators gather in the streets of the state capital in 2014 to call attention to issues that disproportionately affect people of lower income.

Photo by Ricky Leung

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

N.C. Policy Watch would like to thank Rob Waters for his tireless contributions toward the editing of this report; Cedric Johnson, Tazra Mitchell and Alexandra Forter Sirota of the N.C. Budget & Tax Center for help in providing data analysis; Phyllis Nunn of the N.C. Justice Center for assistance in layout and production design; administrative staff of the N.C. Justice Center for assistance in promotion and general support; John Cole for his editorial cartoons; Appalachian Voices, the American Sexual Health Association and the N.C. Coalition for Alternatives to the Death Penalty for allowing us to use their images; and all the individuals who agreed to speak with our reporters.

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