

► Recession Drags on for Some NC Communities

As the Triangle rebounds, other areas struggle to recover from years of job losses

By **Julia Hawes**, NC Justice Center Communications Specialist

IT WAS NEARLY 12 YEARS ago that Hurricane Floyd swept across North Carolina, leaving flooded towns, destroyed homes and crop damage in its wake. Rocky Mount, NC suffered some of the most severe devastation, with more than 20 percent of the city estimated to be under water by the time Floyd finished its watery tantrum.

It seemed like communities were just beginning to move on from the storm when a new type of devastation touched down in Edgecombe County. The Great Recession left thousands of individuals hunting for work so they could support their families and remain in the cities they called home.

Jerontric Green was one of them. An electrician by trade, Green was working for a private trucking company in early 2010 when the company tried to cut costs by laying off its newest employees, including Green.

"I can't make anybody hire me," Green, 33, said.

Green hasn't worked in a regular, steady job for nearly three years. He

found the occasional, short-term contract job with the help of Opportunity Industrialization Center, Inc. (OIC), a nonprofit in Rocky Mount, working in warehouses or driving transit buses. But even those jobs seem to have dried up.

Green, who's unmarried, has three sons, ages 3, 2 and 4 months, and has been staying with a relative in

Tarboro, about a 20-minute drive from Rocky Mount. As his children get older, the pressure will only increase to find work to support his family.

"I'm focused on finding work, period, no matter what it is," Green said. "I have three children. I'm not picky."

Green has lived in Edgecombe County for more than 10 years and doesn't plan to leave the area, but Rocky Mount's dearth of employment

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Photo by Julia Hawes

► How North Carolina Can Create Jobs

Expanding successful job-creation programs could put thousands back to work

By **Alexandra Forter Sirota**, Director of the NC Justice Center's Budget & Tax Center

NORTH CAROLINA'S ECONOMY is creating jobs at a sluggish pace, and that has implications for the well-being of working families and the long-term trajectory of the state.

The job numbers for January tell the tale. North Carolina gained just 4,500 jobs in that month—far short of the 14,000 needed each month to reach pre-recession employment levels by 2015. Without a considerable increase in job creation, the economic recovery will ring hollow for hundreds of thousands of working families in North Carolina for years to come.

Public investments can support and accelerate job creation. North Carolina's recent experience in the Great Recession with a wage subsidy program, funded with federal stimulus dollars, demonstrates public investments can create jobs, connect workers to employment opportunities, create wealth and spur business forward.

Job Creation Works

The federal government created the TANF Emergency Fund to support state job creation efforts. It provided North Carolina with critical funding for numerous supports for working families, such as child-care subsidies. It also enabled North Carolina policymakers to effectively implement a subsidized jobs program with \$11.4 million in

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► Child care is critical to economic growth

Subsidies for child care help parents keep jobs and drive economic growth

By **Louisa Warren**, NC Justice Center Policy Advocate

“I WORK FOR AN AIRLINE company and was doing well enough to buy my own home. However, due to cuts in the industry, I was forced to take a lower-paying job in order to maintain my employment. Because I had not been able to access child care subsidy in my county due to a waiting list, I recently lost my home, and my four-year-old and I have spent nights in my car. Now I stay with friends or family members for a few days at a time. I need help with child care so I can keep my job and not be homeless!”

That is the voice of a real North Carolinian who lives in Mecklenburg



County. Her story isn't an anomaly—finding affordable, quality child care is one of the biggest barriers to obtaining and holding on to a job.

The future of North Carolina depends on the state's ability to foster the healthy development of the next generation—our children. And the state's economic recovery is contingent on ensuring that North Carolina's workers hold on to the jobs they have and obtain the support they need to seize new employment opportunities.

Unfortunately, quality child care is the

single most expensive item in a family's budget, averaging between \$600 and \$1200 per month, per child. For a family of four with two minimum-wage earners, child care can easily eat up a third of their annual earnings. Many families are forced to choose either to work, to leave their children in inadequate and potentially unsafe care arrangements, or to pay for housing, food, and other basic living necessities.

Fortunately, North Carolina has an excellent, if under-funded, child-care subsidy program to help reduce this barrier to employment and economic hardship. The vast majority of child-care subsidy recipients are required to work (93 percent of current recipients are working), with a small portion receiving time-limited subsidies while they pursue

education and training or search for a new job. Nearly all working parents receiving child-care subsidies are required to contribute 8% to 10% of their incomes to child-care costs, with the subsidy making up the difference.

In 2010, more than 151,000 children across the state benefited from North Carolina's child-care subsidy program, and 85% of those children were enrolled in child-care programs that are high-quality (meaning they have earned at least three stars on the state's five-star rating system). Approximately 84% of

these children lived in households earning less than \$25,000 a year.

Regrettably, funding cuts and the Great Recession have taken their toll. The child-care-subsidy waiting list is now at an all-time high of 45,507 children who are eligible for – but not receiving – quality child-care subsidies.

As state policymakers consider further drastic budget cuts in health and human services funding, they should carefully consider the impact of such cuts on the education system, jobs and North Carolina's future economic prospects.

The child-care subsidy program is one critical part of the state's nationally recognized early childhood education system, which includes Smart Start and More at Four. (Learn more about these programs on page 6.) Children receiving child-care subsidy may receive “wrap-around” health services at a local Smart Start agency and then qualify as four-year olds for More at Four. Moreover, their funding is blended, with 30 percent of Smart Start funds required to go to child-care subsidies. A large cut to child-care subsidies will impact the integrity of Smart Start and More at Four, and vice versa.

Furthermore, investments like child-care subsidies and other early childhood programs are essential to the vitality of local economies across the state. The child-care industry as a whole employs almost 50,000 North Carolinians and allows 380,000 parents to work. In total, these families earn almost \$12.5 billion annually, which is spent locally and drives local economic growth.

But perhaps most importantly, investments in programs like child-care subsidies are an investment in North Carolina's future. High-quality early childhood education has been proven over and over again to be the most critical intervention a state can make to support high student achievement and the development of a productive workforce.

North Carolina's future business leaders, nurses, firefighters, and elected officials are being trained now. If the state invests in them and their families today, we will all reap the benefits – now and in the long run. ■



The North Carolina Justice Center is the state's leading

progressive research and advocacy organization. Our mission is to eliminate poverty in North Carolina by ensuring that every household in the state has access to the resources, services and fair treatment it needs in order to enjoy economic security.

To make opportunity and prosperity for all a reality, we fight for:

- **Public investments** in services and programs that expand and enhance opportunities for economic security
- **A fair and stable revenue system** that adequately funds those public investments while fairly distributing tax responsibility
- **Health care** that is accessible and affordable
- **Public education** that opens a world of opportunity to every child
- **Consumer protections** that shield hard-earned assets from abusive practices
- **Jobs** that are safe, pay a living wage and provide benefits
- **Housing** that is safe and affordable
- **Fair treatment for everyone** in North Carolina, regardless of race, ethnicity or country of origin

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options is problematic. Driving back and forth to a job, even one in Greenville, a city 45 minutes away, would eat away at his paycheck.

"I'm not the most strong-minded person," Green said, but if he were any less so, he believes he might have fallen into a deep, perhaps dangerous depression. Green tries to look to the future, like so many others in Tarboro who face the same struggle. There aren't a lot of jobs to apply for, Green said, and

January, Edgecombe currently rates sixth in unemployment. Graham County has the highest rate in the state with 19.4 percent unemployment – a dramatic and disconcerting jump from a rate of 15.8 in December 2010.

Reuben Blackwell, president of OIC, where Green found contract work, has seen a rapid increase in demand for employment and housing services in Rocky Mount, Edgecombe County's largest metropolitan area. With 13.1

Children (DEPC) in Rocky Mount, agreed. "Things may have gotten better in the Triangle but not in Edgecombe County."

DEPC, a nonprofit serving Nash and Edgecombe counties that focuses on prevention and intervention services for children under age 8, has already faced \$1.5 million in cuts internally and among its associated programs. The community could face an additional \$7 million cut when the new state budget is announced. Already, childcare workers are not making a living wage, Zalkind said.

"If those folks lose their jobs, it cuts off the bottom of the education system," Zalkind added.

Education and childcare cuts could create a huge ripple effect in communities already blighted by the recession. One signature from the governor could put thousands of people out of work – both childcare workers and the individuals who rely on their services.

"There are 6,000 parents who are able to work because their kids are in childcare,"

Zalkind said. "Those jobs are at risk if there's no available care for their kids."

Both Blackwell and Zalkind said that disasters like Hurricane Floyd and changes to local manufacturing laid the groundwork for a shaky economy long before the recession hit. Blackwell estimated that 10,000 jobs were lost in Rocky Mount due to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which opened borders and caused tobacco and local textile companies to relocate.

"Edgecombe died earliest," Zalkind said simply. She noted that many families had to leave Rocky Mount to follow good jobs, disrupting already marginalized communities.

Willy Mason, a case manager with

United Community Ministries in Rocky Mount, said he's seen a growing number of families that have been pushed out of jobs, and in some cases, their homes.

"It's been a struggle," he said. "Lots of homeless people, jobs way down... We just have to hold our heads up."

Mason said The Community Shelter, which is part of United Community Ministries, has turned people away due to limited space, and the center gets 15 to 20 calls per day from people looking for shelter.

UCM works with other local job-based programs and offers job readiness classes to help clients improve their resumes and interview skills. "I've noticed people [coming out of the shelter] who have become supervisors of plants, managers, line-leaders," Mason said. "They stepped up and made a change."

Although nonprofits and community services are aiming to keep hope alive in



Photo by Julia Howe

what is available is mostly in the fast-food industry. Even those jobs are highly competitive.

"You do what you gotta do," Green said. "You gotta work three fast-food jobs if that's the case."

Green's story isn't uncommon among the individuals looking for work in North Carolina. According to reports in January by the Employment Security Commission (ESC), unemployment dropped from 11.4 percent in January 2010 to 9.9 this past month.

But you wouldn't know it to look at some of North Carolina's most beleaguered communities, such as Tarboro, the county seat of Edgecombe County and the town where Green and his family live. In early 2009, Edgecombe County had the highest percentage of people looking for work in North Carolina, with a 13.3 percent unemployment rate.

Although that rate has only increased over the past two years, resting at 15.3 in

percent unemployment – up from 12.6 in December – Rocky Mount has the highest unemployment rate out of all North Carolina metropolitan statistical areas.

"The recession has been a depression for us," said Blackwell, who's also a member of the Rocky Mount City Council.

Blackwell said that OIC has seen a 100-percent increase in total numbers of individuals who come to the center looking for education opportunities and work training. "Without education, nothing is available to you," Blackwell said.

The city council is trying to coordinate with other nonprofits and government resources to help Rocky Mount families get out of the "black hole of economic struggle."

"We're just beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel," Blackwell said. "[But] really, we've been in an abyss."

Henrietta Zalkind, the executive director of the Down East Partnership for

"The recession has been a depression for us... We're just beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. [But] really, we've been in an abyss."

– Reuben Blackwell, Rocky Mt. City Council Member

Edgecombe County, some forces are out of their control. For now, jobs and companies seem to be in constant flux, with devastating lows as well as hopeful highs. This past January, Home Depot



Photo by Julia Howe

shuttered two stores in Rocky Mount and Greenville, putting nearly 100 people out of work in Rocky Mount alone. A month later, Gov. Bev Perdue announced that the home-shopping retailer QVC would

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How NC Can Create Jobs (continued from page 1)

stimulus funds that supported working families and provided job opportunities for low-income adults.

The subsidized jobs program allowed counties to develop their own programs to suit local labor market and economic development needs. Employers who used the program provided workers with training and supervision, and they received a 100% subsidy of the workers' gross wages, which ranged from \$8 to \$12 per hour. The programs provided the subsidy for three to seven months, after which the job could become permanent.

Workers served by the program were low-income adults earning less than 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Line. While the Department of Social Services does not yet know how many of these temporary jobs became permanent, it is certain that more than a thousand workers gained work experience, maintained or developed their skills, and established networks for future employment.

The wage subsidy works to change the economics of hiring by providing a cushion for employers as they build up demand for their goods and services. And because it creates jobs for low-income workers, who are most likely to spend their earnings quickly, the funds contribute to local demand for goods and services, which helps to keep workers that produce, ship and sell those goods and services employed.

North Carolina can do even more

Looking at wage subsidy programs in other states, North Carolina can find ways to expand on its recent successes and put thousands more people to work.

For example, a program implemented in Minnesota in the 1980s created more than 18,000 permanent jobs. Participating employers said the wage subsidy motivated them to expand their payroll and allowed them to grow their businesses.¹

Research shows that the most effective programs engage the private sector in identifying job opportunities and provide workers with case management that connects them to training and work supports.² Building off North Carolina's recent experience with subsidized employment and incorporating this longer-term systemic approach should be at the top on the state's job-creation agenda.

There is a lot of talk these days about policymakers' promises to create jobs and how best to accomplish that goal. The evidence points to the benefits of targeted public investments—not corporate tax cuts and

spending cuts that will move North Carolina to the back of the pack in the race to recover.

Research shows that young, small firms—not the large corporations or multi-state businesses lured by economic development dollars—are the most likely to create jobs. These firms can be built in North Carolina from start-ups that are seeded with small capital injections and may well turn into the future behemoths of the business world. Right now, however, these small-business

- “My name is Celeste Smith, and I am an employee through the TANF program. This program has opened many doors for me. I am a mother of four and a student. This position has assisted me with getting off welfare. I have recently been able to open a bank account and move into my own place without public assistance. This program has given my family some independence and a huge amount of work experience. I am so thankful for this opportunity.”

- “Working as a Benefit Bank Counselor at Sacred Pathways in Pembroke [through the TANF wage-subsidy program] has helped me to see and help connect with the needs in our community. This job has given me an opportunity to help families become more stable. It is rewarding to know you are helping make a difference in the way someone lives.

This job has made a tremendous impact on my family. We've been able to meet our monthly obligations without the stress of how we're gonna make it. I am saddened to think this opportunity will end for me soon. I cannot stress to you the importance of me keeping my job.”

— Sandra S. Dial, Pembroke, NC

owners need support from Small Business Centers at community colleges, as well as access to capital from state and federal sources.

Creating a truly entrepreneurial environment in North Carolina will also require continued investment in a strong public education system, sound court system and good transportation networks and infrastructure to get goods and services to market.

No time to waste

North Carolina cannot turn away from the job creation challenges faced today. Confronting the demand for work and the need for good, quality jobs is the only way that North Carolina will move forward into a new and brighter economy. ■

1 Rode, Peter, March 1988. MEED means more business: Job Growth through Minnesota's Wage Subsidy Program. JOBS NOW Coalition: Minnesota.

2 Katz, Lawrence. Wage Subsidies for the Disadvantaged. National Bureau of Economic Research.

Speak NC

Real Stories from Real North Carolinians

Together NC—a coalition of 120 advocacy groups, service providers and professional associations—has launched a new website that looks at the people who provide and benefit from vital state services.

Speak NC (www.speaknc.org) is rolling out a video each week featuring North Carolinians who rely on speech therapy, nursing, or any of the hundreds of public services that touch thousands of people every year.

Watch the videos, learn more about the state budget debate, and get involved in the conversation about North Carolina's priorities and values at www.speaknc.org.



► NC Legislators Push Tax Increase of Working Families

Some state lawmakers want to cut the State Earned Income Tax Credit

By **Jeff Shaw**, NC Justice Center Communications Director

PATRICIA EVENS-CARPENTER'S FAMILY is like many others across North Carolina: working hard to make ends meet. She lives with her grandchildren and her daughter, who works as a hotel housekeeper, making about \$15,000 per year. That is the family's only income.

Because North Carolina's tax system is regressive, working families like hers pay a greater share of their income in taxes. To help offset this regressive system, North Carolina has an Earned Income Tax Credit – a credit that helps people who work hard but don't make high wages.

This common-sense policy helps families provide necessities and local economies grow. But today, the Earned Income Tax Credit is under attack in North Carolina. State House Bill 93 and Senate Bill 117 would eliminate key portions of the credit. Even if the bills don't pass, there is talk of lawmakers attacking the EITC during the state budget process.

Undermining North Carolina's Earned Income Tax Credit would have dire effects on the state's working families, as well as North Carolina's economy.

What would happen if this program were cut?

"Well, if such a thing was to happen," says Evens-Carpenter, "families that depend on a small amount of money like mine would never be able to get caught up on medical and food bills, housing expenses, and other necessities."

It's not just Evens-Carpenter's family, but hundreds of thousands like hers that benefit from the Earned Income Tax Credit. In 2008, the first year North Carolina's state EITC was in place, more than 800,000 North Carolinians claimed the credit. In that year, the state EITC put \$59 million into the pockets of low-income working families.

In addition to providing resources to help low-income working families meet their basic needs, the state EITC stimulates local economies because these families are likely to spend those dollars quickly and close to home.

Last year, Evens-Carpenter's family used about \$250 from NC's EITC to help pay for a car so her daughter could get to work.

Stories like this are repeated throughout the state. Families use the tax credit on vital needs like transportation. The fact that those funds are spent locally helps the economy grow.

The Earned Income Tax Credit has long been a bipartisan policy. On a federal level, the EITC was proposed by Richard Nixon, signed by Gerald Ford, and expanded by Ronald Reagan. Reagan was a staunch advocate of the Earned Income Tax Credit, calling it "the

best anti-poverty, the best pro-family, the best job creation measure to come out of Congress."

With more Tar Heels living in poverty than at any time in decades, cutting a program that helps many of the poorest members of the labor force seems to ask for considerable sacrifice from those least able to afford it.

Rep. Jennifer Weiss has called it "appalling" that some lawmakers want to effectively raise taxes on those

families. To Evens-Carpenter, this is asking for blood from a stone. "I don't think it's fair for those who don't have anything," she said. "How can you share what you don't have?"

Maintaining the EITC, however, would bolster the state's middle class and protect thousands of families from hurtful cuts in a time of great economic uncertainty, said Alexandra Forter Sirota, director of the NC Budget & Tax Center.

"The Earned Income Tax Credit helps working families build a path to the middle class," said Sirota. "Undermining this credit would raise taxes on these families, prevent them from making ends meet, and harm local economies across North Carolina."

The Earned Income Tax Credit helps struggling families build a better life. Really, is there any better investment? ■



The EITC is vital to families for purchasing food and other necessities.

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add 200 jobs in Rocky Mount and invest \$71 million over the next five years.

Public and private agencies are also brainstorming ways to create jobs in the area. The Twin County Business Growth Initiative, a project developed by University of North Carolina's Kenan Institute and Carolinas Gateway Partnership, is attempting to identify companies in Edgecombe and Nash counties that have potential for expanding and adding jobs. It's not enough to simply hope that new companies are going to open shop in Rocky Mount or Tarboro. Instead, the idea is to focus on existing local industry and mobilize community resources in order to provide financial and technical services for these businesses to grow and expand their workforce.

Ultimately, education could be the defining tool in helping Rocky Mount residents fight unemployment, Blackwell said, and might help recruit industries



Photo by Julia Howe

and small businesses to the area.

"You have an entire region with a strong work ethic," Blackwell said. "But there aren't skill sets to match the new environment... We have to retrain our workforce to compete in high-tech

industries."

Crystal Crocker is a testament to that philosophy. Crocker, 37, worked as a phlebotomist for the Red Cross until 2009, when she fell ill and missed 90 days of work, forcing the Red Cross to terminate her position.

"I've been looking for a job ever since," Crocker said. "I kept applying for jobs – I applied for a lot."

After months of silence and occasional rejection, Crocker decided to go back to school, hopeful that furthering her education might get her one step ahead.

Crocker, who lives with her boyfriend and 16-year-old daughter, began studying

to get her Certified Nursing Assistants (CNA) certification at Edgecombe Community College. With several phlebotomy and pharmacy technology college courses already under her belt, Crocker hit the books and received financial aid and resumé guidance from OIC as she completed her certification.

Crocker was finally granted a reprieve in February, when she was offered a job at an eye care center in Tarboro, just a few minutes away from her home in Pinetops. She started in mid-March and soon she'll take the CNA certification board exam.

After a year without a job, Crocker is more grateful than ever to be working full-time when so many others are waiting – and hoping – to do the same. Unemployment can feel relentless, but the hope of that first day at a new job is a sustaining force.

"It's going well so far," Crocker reported after her first week on the job. "I feel a lot of relief." ■



► Protecting North Carolina's Best Educational Investment

Pre-kindergarten programs, which improve education and and save money, are targeted for severe cuts

By **Matthew Ellinwood**, Policy Analyst,
NC Education & Law Project

NORTH CAROLINA HAS TWO nationally renowned, award-winning pre-kindergarten programs—Smart Start and More at Four. Both programs prepare young children for school, and numerous studies show that these students do better throughout their academic careers.

But this year, the NC General Assembly is considering proposals to consolidate the two programs, reduce funding, or even eliminate one or both of them.

Tens of thousands of parents who can't afford quality child care rely on these programs, and the cuts under consideration would put these families and local economies in jeopardy. Also,

Preparing Children to be Great Students

More at Four (MAF) is a high-quality pre-kindergarten program targeting low-income four-year olds at risk of later academic failure. It is proven to have net economic benefits—a dollar spent today can save many more dollars later in welfare, education, health and justice-related expenditures, and it can generate revenue through the improved career trajectories of all children.

The independent researchers at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at UNC Chapel Hill have closely scrutinized MAF since its inception in 2001. These evaluations have consistently shown that quality in MAF classrooms is high and that MAF students at the greatest risk of academic failure exhibit the highest rates of learning growth. In addition, MAF students are better prepared for

Start has a distinct but connected mission. It is a public/private partnership, administered with the NC Division of Child Development, that was created under Governor Hunt to serve all children in North Carolina under age 6 regardless of income. The primary goals of Smart Start are to help families pay for child care and to ensure children are healthy and prepared for school.

Independent evaluations by Duke University's Center for Child and Family Policy show that MAF and Smart Start provide substantial educational benefits to all students in areas where programming is offered—even

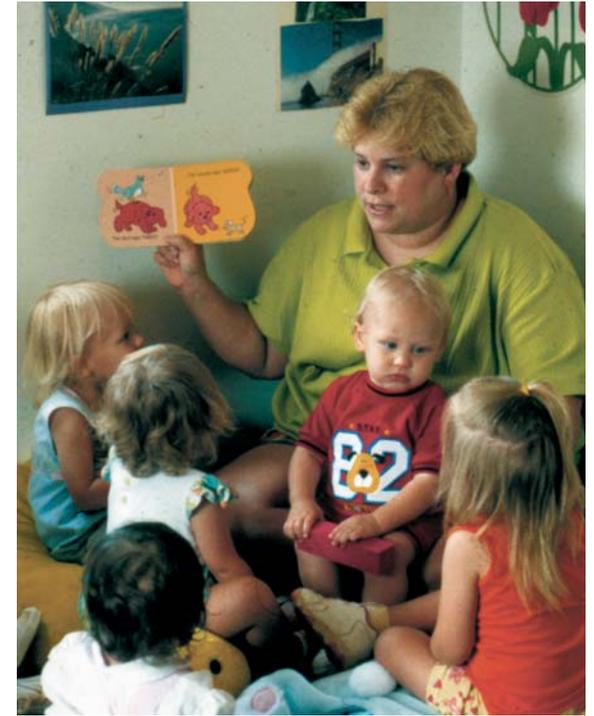


Photo courtesy of NC Partnership for Children



Photo courtesy of NC Partnership for Children

targeting More at Four and Smart Start makes no sense fiscally. These programs have been thoroughly evaluated over many years, and the research shows they provide substantial and measurable educational benefits not only to students who participate but to all students who live in areas where they are offered.

kindergarten and do significantly better on end-of-grade reading and math tests than similarly situated children who did not participate in the program. Thus, the benefits of MAF continue to accumulate for years after students age out of the program.

While MAF is strictly an academic program targeting at-risk children, Smart

to those who did not participate in either program. The center's most recent findings show that North Carolina third-graders have significantly higher standardized reading and math scores (equivalent to several months of extra schooling for all children) and lower special-education placement rates in areas where families have access to these programs.

Early Childhood Investments Boost the State's Economy

Children aren't the only ones who benefit from programs like More at Four and Smart Start. Everyone in the state benefits.

Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman from the University of Chicago put together a consortium of economists, psychologists, statisticians, and neurologists to look at the impact of early childhood development programs. They

found that such programs provide a 7% to 10% return on investment per year. The long-run estimated return on investment is an astonishing \$7 for every \$1 invested, according to Dr. Heckman's research along with the National Institute for Early Childhood Education.

Some of the economic returns are immediate, as parents who could not otherwise afford child care are able to go to work. And the returns continue through the children's school years with reduced remedial-education, special-education and health-care costs. Finally, the economic benefits of these programs can be seen in the children's adult lives, with increased school and career achievement and earnings and reduced criminal justice expenditures. Investment in early childhood education has been shown to increase graduation rates, which can produce huge savings in incarceration costs and crime-related expenditures associated with higher drop-out rates.

Budget cuts to early childhood programming would directly harm every child and taxpayer in the state. With the controversial educational reforms and budget reduction options that are currently being considered, let's hope that the General Assembly leaves proven successes like these alone. ■

► Charter School Battle Rages in Rutherford County

Discrimination charges and mocking emails from legislators add fuel to fight over resources

By **Sarah Ovaska**, Investigative Reporter, NC Policy Watch

A GROUP OF Rutherford County schoolchildren found themselves recent fodder for legislators' jokes about the state's public school system.

The jesting began after a number of students from the western North Carolina county emailed lawmakers about Senate Bill 8, which would dramatically increase the funds that school districts must give to charter schools, even if the charters serve no additional children. Some of the emails arrived with grammatical and spelling errors, and that became an opening for some legislators to start joking about the failings of the state's public school system.

"Are English and writing still 'apart' of our core curriculum in North Carolina?" wrote Rep. John Blust, a Greensboro Republican, in response to an email from student that said he was "apart of RS Central," a high school in Rutherford County.

"From the emails we are receiving I would say no," quipped Rep. George Cleveland, a Jacksonville Republican, in response.



A classroom at Forrest W. Hunt Elementary School in Forest City, NC, a traditional public school.

Blust and Cleveland sent their March 9 remarks to an email chain that included bipartisan House Education Committee members. That committee held a hearing last month on Senate Bill 8, a GOP-backed bill that could lift the 100-school cap on charter schools, allow charters more access to public funding streams, and take oversight of charters schools away from the State Board of

Education and give it to a new commission.

NC Policy Watch obtained copies of the some of the legislators' emails through a public records request to the Rutherford County Public School System. Names of the children were redacted, and copies of the emails can be seen at www.ncpolicywatch.com.

The email exchanges highlight a growing rift between supporters of charter schools and traditional public schools as the legislature debates Senate Bill 8, which appears to be on its way to Governor Perdue's desk.

Public charter schools, funded with public dollars and tuition-free, are offshoots of traditional public school systems and have been glorified recently in critically acclaimed documentaries like "The Lottery" and "Waiting for Superman," which portray the schools as last hopes for parents raising children in urban areas with sub-standard schools.

But charter schools and the "parental choice" that goes along with them have also become rallying cries for conservative groups and the Tea Party movement, which praise the business-like approach to education. Critics on the left fear the push from conservative quarters to expand charters is a dangerous first step toward privatization of the public education system.

In North Carolina, the push for charters is coming as the state grapples separately with a \$2.4 billion budget shortfall that will likely result in drastic cuts to the state's public schools, with proposals like eliminating

teacher-assistant positions in classrooms or cutting early education programs already on the table.

Tensions rise in Rutherford

The debate over the role of charters schools appears to be most heated in Rutherford County, a rural manufacturing community in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Here, manufacturing

plants have steadily pink-slipped thousands of workers, and the unemployment rate was 15.5 percent in January.

The Rutherford County School system was sued in January 2009 by its local public charter school, the Thomas

Jefferson Classical Academy. The lawsuit could do to district's budget drew 500 parents. The Facebook page "Stop NC Senate Bill 8" attracted more than 1,000 followers in less than a month and keeps concerned parents and teachers abreast of the debates going on 200 miles away in Raleigh. Local newspapers carry stories



Thomas Jefferson Classical Academy in Mooresboro, NC. The charter school sued the Rutherford County School District for \$900,000.

Jefferson Classical Academy. The lawsuit opened up a divide in the community.

Thomas Jefferson is a top-ranked charter school that puts students on track for college, but critics say it is an exclusive haven for children of area's well-to-do professional class. Teachers and Rutherford County administrators have seen some low-performing children sent away from Thomas Jefferson and back to traditional school just before end-of-grade tests, an important measure of how schools stack up against each other, said Dr. John Mark Bennett, the chair of the county school board and a local family physician.

In the lawsuit, Thomas Jefferson sought \$900,000 in funds it contends the school system should have shared. The charter school got a favorable ruling from a lower court, and both sides are now awaiting a decision from the N.C. Court of Appeals.

It's in that atmosphere of growing tension in Rutherford County that Senate Bill 8 has attracted so much attention and inflamed emotions, Bennett said. A lifelong resident of the area and 11-year member of the school board, Bennett thinks that Senate Bill 8 has split the population more than any other issue he's ever seen his county face.

An informational meeting held by the school district about the bill and what it

and editorials about the bill, while parents, teachers and schoolchildren on both sides of the debate have contacted legislators with their views.

Blust, the legislator that emailed a joke about a student's misuse of the word "apart," said he thought the students were emailing as part of an orchestrated effort and expected better grammar and spelling if they hoped to influence lawmakers.

"You'd think that if someone were pushing school children, they'd be very careful they (letters) were well written," Blust said. "I don't think someone, a schoolchild, sitting in Rutherford County would do that on their own."

But that's exactly what's happening, Bennett said, who thought legislators were inappropriate and mocking in their jokes. Instead of making fun of the children, the legislators should have commended them for taking an interest in a problem facing state government and for getting involved, he said.

"The sad part is this is an adult issue with administrators and boards and the legislature making decisions," Bennett said. "But there's a lot of bitterness with the children, saying 'Your board is trying to steal our money' and things like that. They see it and they feel threatened about it." ■

Death by Buckshot

The legislative assault on North Carolina's public schools

By **Chris Hill**, Director,
NC Education & Law Project

PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN NORTH CAROLINA are looking down the barrel of a shotgun this year. Buckshot of budget cuts and so-called reform measures threaten to rip apart the state's public education system.

Our schools educate the future workforce and open a world of opportunity to our children. Yes, North Carolina's schools face many challenges—which is why state leaders must support them in ways that ensure the success of all students. Doing so is essential for the state's economy and is the responsibility of a civilized society. It is also a fundamental obligation of state leaders and lawmakers—North Carolina's constitution mandates that the state provide a sound, basic education for every student.

The General Assembly is considering severe budget cuts that will eliminate teaching positions and decimate the ranks of teacher assistants, resulting in larger class sizes with fewer people to serve the educational needs of students or provide the support they need to thrive.

In addition, the legislature is considering a bill that would eliminate the cap on the number of charter schools in North Carolina. It would also give charter schools money taken from traditional public schools without the same oversight. It is important to know how this proposal threatens traditional public schools in North Carolina.

The original intent of charter schools was to provide places where teachers could try innovative techniques, and successful ones would be integrated into traditional public schools. But today, rather than talking about the free exchange of ideas, proponents

of charter schools tout them as an alternative to traditional schools, as free market choices for parents. While parental choice should be honored, schools are not businesses and children are not widgets.

The proposed changes to the state's charter schools law would place traditional public schools at a disadvantage because school districts would be forced to give money to the charter schools for services they don't even provide. The charter schools would receive transportation and child-nutrition money with the mere promise that they will make plans to provide these services. At a time when traditional public schools are told that they will receive major cuts, which will mean real job losses to real people affecting real students, charter schools would receive already limited money for unproven promises and yet-unrealized innovation.

And this isn't the only proposal to strip traditional schools of funding. Another one would provide vouchers to parents who send their children to private schools or homeschool them. The idea is a transparent way to encourage the use of private schools with taxpayer dollars.

There is the argument that the vouchers, worth

\$2,500, would cost the state less than educating those children in public school. That argument is specious—if a child was going to private school anyway, there cannot be a savings. Plus, \$2,500 isn't enough money to convince parents to send their students to private school. The money would only offset the costs for those who can already afford it.

“ But today, rather than talking about the free exchange of ideas, proponents of charter schools tout them as an alternative to traditional schools, as free market choices for parents. While parental choice should be honored, schools are not businesses and children are not widgets.”

Students from low-wealth families—those most in need of greater investments in their education—would not be able to use these funds. Therefore, the voucher would not be a saving of government money; it would be the irresponsible spending of money that is needed for public schools.

Any one of these proposals would be a major threat to traditional public schools in North Carolina. If all of these measures are

successful, the state will be in danger of violating its constitutional mandate, and worse, it will endanger the future of our children. To underfund public schools programs is to tell the world North Carolina does not want to compete. ■

► Speaking the Language

Plain Talk about English Language Learner Education in NC

By **Tyler Whittenberg**, Fellow,
NC Education & Law Project

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS—students with limited English proficiency—are a rapidly growing portion of North Carolina's school-age population. The total number of ELL students in North Carolina has almost doubled in the past eight years, from 59,849 in 2002 to 113,823 in 2009. These students will one day make up a

considerable share of the state's workforce.

But they are struggling in North Carolina's schools. Overall, ELL students perform lower academically than their black, Hispanic and white peers. Only 36% of 4th grade ELL students tested in 2007 scored at or above basic reading levels, compared to 66% of non-ELL students.

The academic progress of ELL students in North Carolina is far from adequate, even by state-established standards. North Carolina failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for 3rd through 8th grade

ELL students in all but two years from 2002 to 2009, and the state has never meet AYP for 10th grade ELL students. Moreover, North Carolina's Hispanic students—many of whom are classified as ELL—had the lowest four-year graduation rate of all racial subgroups in 2010.

The North Carolina Constitution establishes that all school-age children in the state have the right to a “sound basic education,” but the challenge of educating ELL students transcends constitutionality. Demographic and academic trends suggest

that increasing numbers of ELL students will enter the worst job market in recent history without a high school diploma or the tools needed to support themselves financially. Educating them is a necessity if these students are to achieve their potential and contribute to North Carolina's economy—and if North Carolina is to avoid a workforce crisis in the coming decade.

The good news is that North Carolina can drastically improve ELL instruction while staying within the confines of a shrinking

► The Bill that Just Won't Die

Legislative leaders use shady tactics to revive bill challenging federal health reform

By **Adam Linker**, Policy Analyst, NC Health Access Coalition

LEGISLATION ATTEMPTING to exempt North Carolina from federal health reform has followed a strange path this session of the General Assembly.

Many conservative politicians campaigned in the last election on promises of creating jobs. Based on those pledges, Republicans gained full control of the state legislature for the first time since Reconstruction.

However, once installed in office, legislative leaders abandoned the focus on jobs. Instead, as their first act, Republicans filed a bill renouncing the Affordable Care Act.

The first bill introduced each session carries great import, as it advertises the priorities of the legislature. The last long session of the General Assembly opened with a ban on smoking in bars and restaurants. So it was a curious move for Republican leaders to push a bill regarding national health reform as their curtain raiser.

The bill, misleadingly named the Protect Health Care Freedom Act, was not a homegrown product. It used language imported from Washington, DC, via an organization called the American Legislative Exchange Council, or ALEC. ALEC gets paid to push conservative cookie-cutter laws out to the states for enactment. In North Carolina, leaders in the General Assembly grabbed the ALEC bill on health reform and rammed it through the legislature without delay and without public comment.

The intent of the Protect Health Care Freedom Act as explained by its sponsors was to compel North Carolina to join other states in a legal challenge to the individual mandate. The individual mandate refers to the requirement that everyone who can afford insurance purchase a policy. This requirement does not take effect until 2014.

Lawsuits probing the constitutionality of the mandate are underway already, and the U.S. Supreme Court will

likely take up the challenge. Adding North Carolina's name to the legal challenge would not change anything.

But the bill crafted in Washington by ALEC would do much more than force North Carolina to join a lawsuit. Other little-noticed provisions said North Carolinians could not be compelled to purchase insurance or undergo a medical procedure. It also allowed anyone who felt aggrieved by national health reform to bring a lawsuit and directed the state's attorney general to represent the chagrined citizen in court.

Fiscal researchers at the General Assembly were unable to judge the cost of the legislation because no one knows how many people would sue and require representation by the overburdened office of the attorney general. Moreover, many lawyers quickly recognized all of the flaws in trying to fit a half-baked Washington bill into a North Carolina pan. In many custody disputes, for example, a judge will order one parent to purchase health insurance for the child in the case. Would that violate the ban on requiring someone to buy insurance? In the case of a pandemic disease outbreak in North Carolina, could the state force citizens to undergo testing and treatment? The amendments kept piling up.

Instead of slowing down the legislation, the collective weight of these amendments seemed to give the bill added momentum as it slid through the General Assembly on party-line votes. The bill was filed in the House on January 26, passed out of that chamber on February 2, and was approved by the Senate on February 16. For the General Assembly this is screaming fast.

As they hustled this bill through various committees, no legislative leaders bothered to ask Attorney General Roy Cooper what he thought about the Protect Health Care Freedom Act. After the legislation moved to her desk for final approval, Gov. Bev Perdue requested an analysis

from the state's top attorney. It turned out that Cooper was not impressed with the bill.

In the opinion he submitted to the governor, Cooper noted that the bill would not change federal health reform; it could, however, have unintended consequences on state law. It could even threaten some of North Carolina's Medicaid funding, a distasteful risk in a year of drastic cuts to state schools and services. With that, Gov. Perdue vetoed the bill.

Republicans only need a few defecting Democrats in the House to override a veto, so they took a second charge at passing the legislation. The vote count fell short of the required two-thirds, and it was assumed this tortured bill was buried. But desperate opponents of health reform had other plans.

On a Thursday afternoon Minority Leader Joe Hackney asked Republican leaders if any more substantive items were on the legislative agenda. Several Democrats needed to leave town, including Rep. Pricey Harrison, who was making funeral arrangements for her sister. Republican leaders assured Hackney that he could release his members. Once enough Democrats left Raleigh, Republicans changed course and declared that they now had enough votes to override Gov. Perdue's veto. Hackney protested, and Republicans revived the legislation without voting on it.

Now the specter of the Protect Health Care Freedom Act haunts the General Assembly. Legislative leaders can reconsider the bill any time enough supporters of health reform leave the House chamber. And the way this bill was originally passed – no public comment, the rush through committees, the legislative trickery – has come to characterize this session. Unfortunately, partisan gamesmanship does not protect the interests of North Carolinians, and it does nothing to create jobs. ■



budget. Low-cost policy changes and trainings can make a tremendous difference.

First, the state should implement a policy requiring schools to develop Personal Education Plans for every ELL student. These plans, available to any student at risk of academic failure, allow students, families and teachers to work together to figure out what interventions will increase the likelihood of success.

Second, the state can increase the

frequency and improve the quality of professional development regarding ELL instruction. North Carolina needs more teachers who are well-trained in techniques that make grade-level content more accessible and promote English acquisition.

Third, schools should do what they can to overcome the language barrier that prevents the parents of ELL students from being involved in their children's education. At a minimum, school districts should hire bilingual teachers and staff

whenever possible and translate all crucial school forms into the native languages of the parents of ELL students.

As North Carolina's population of English Language Learners grows, so too will the need to better educate these students—for the sake of our economy and for the promise of these children's futures. By enhancing three initiatives already in place, North Carolina can improve the quality of ELL instruction in a manner that is both fiscally and administratively feasible. ■



► Afghan woman finds asylum in North Carolina

The story of one person helped by the Justice Center's Immigrants Legal Assistance Project

By **Julia Hawes**, NC Justice Center Communications Specialist

MUSADDIQAH (not her real name)* did not come to the United States to flee her homeland or with the intention of seeking asylum. In Afghanistan, she had been an outspoken member of her community—an unusual and potentially dangerous position in a country where, as she described it, women are regarded as “less than animals.”

Unlike other women in her family, who married young and stopped school at an early age, Musaddiqah completed her education and began working full-time, refusing to be limited by Afghan laws and restrictions placed on women. In her words, “I want to work and study, have my own freedoms and rights to dress the way I like and do whatever I wish as a woman who is entitled to fundamental human rights.” She often faced persecution and attacks by members of her community for not adhering to the social norm of marrying and tending to her family.

Yet it wasn't until after she came to the United States that Musaddiqah's entire family began to suffer as a consequence of her being an unmarried woman living abroad. Her family received phone calls from individuals accusing Musaddiqah of living an immoral lifestyle in the United States and threatening to kill her upon her return to Afghanistan to restore honor to the community.

That's when she turned to the NC Justice Center's Immigrants Legal Assistance Project (ILAP) for help. ILAP provides direct legal assistance to low-income individuals dealing with certain

immigration law issues. That includes asylum, a complex process riddled with legal red tape and countless documents, witnesses and expert accounts.

In May 2010, ILAP attorney Winstona Cole took Musaddiqah's case. “She could not go back to the place she once called home,” Cole explained. “That was the turning point in her decision to apply for asylum.”

In order to qualify for a s y l u m , Musaddiqah had to prove that she had suffered past persecution and/or has a well-founded fear of future persecution in Afghanistan on account of one of the five protected grounds: race, nationality, religion, political opinion or belonging to a particular social group. She worked with Cole and former ILAP Director Attracta Kelly to produce a clear, compelling case to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and satisfy the legal requirements for asylum.

Last summer, Cole and Musaddiqah traveled to Virginia for an in-person interview with USCIS. Although a decision is usually made within three weeks, Musaddiqah waited month after month without any word, during which time she was unable to work and lived with constant worry that her case would be referred to court or, worse yet, never be approved.

Thankfully, the ILAP attorneys' hard work finally paid off. Musaddiqah received approval for asylum in January.

“I can't express in words the joy when she came in to say thank you for what we had done for her,” Cole said. “To live free in a country where she won't be persecuted, living as a woman... that's human rights, to be able to do those things.” ■

**The asylum client's name was changed to protect her safety.*



Opinion from NC POLICY WATCH

The unexamined \$5 billion program

By **Chris Fitzsimon**, Executive Director, NC Policy Watch

As state lawmakers try to decide what to cut to address the state's massive budget shortfall, you would think that a program that costs \$5.85 billion a year would be worth some attention, especially if its cost rose roughly 40 percent from 2005 to 2009.

But while budget subcommittees are considering firing teachers and abolishing programs for at-risk kids, no panel is spending any time looking at the \$5.85 billion worth of tax expenditures the state makes every year.

It won't require a lot of research. There's a list readily available to lawmakers, compiled every two years by the Department of Revenue. The 2005 report found that the expenditures cost the state \$3.57 billion. The 2009 report came up with the \$5.85 billion figure. That's a \$1.38 billion increase. Surely that's worth a subcommittee meeting or two.

The Department of Revenue report defines a tax expenditure as “an exemption, exclusion, deduction, allowance, credit, refund, preferential tax rate or other device that reduces the amount of tax revenue which otherwise would be collected.”

There are literally hundreds of them, including sales tax exemptions for a farmer's seeds and a corporation's electricity. Individuals pay taxes on their utility charges. Many businesses don't.

One tax expenditure that is beginning to get a little public attention is the break that tobacco distributors get if they file their reports and cigarette tax collections on time. Alcohol distributors also get a break for timely collections and reporting. There's no break for citizens who file their taxes before the deadline, of course.

Rep. Johnathan Rhyne has filed a bill to set up another tax

modernization commission that will report back to next year's legislative session. That's a fine idea. The tax code certainly needs to be modernized, as several commissions have recommended in recent years.

But the lawmakers are trying to balance the budget this year. Shouldn't they spend as much time looking at why multistate corporations get a huge tax break as they do going line by line over the expenses at the western office of the governor?

These multistate companies are allowed to shift the profits they make in North Carolina to other states to avoid paying the state taxes they owe, robbing the state treasury of revenue and punishing North Carolina-based companies who compete with the multi-state corporations but have no place to hide their profits.

There are 49 exemptions to the state corporate income tax alone that cost the state \$300 million a year, and that does not include the loophole for multistate companies. Insurance companies receive almost \$200 million in tax breaks. Maybe there is a good reason for some of them. But there's a good reason to have teachers in the classroom and mental health services available to families too.

Most budget subcommittees now meeting have before them options for cuts of 5, 10 and 15 percent. There is talk of even larger cuts to the university system.

Somebody needs to make a list of possible cuts to tax expenditures at the same levels. A 5 percent cut would raise almost \$300 million, a 10 percent cut almost \$600 million.

Legislative leaders have said many times this session that everything is on the table as they decide how to balance the budget. That won't be true until they get a subcommittee busy reviewing the Department of Revenue report. ■

Hypocrisy of “local control”

By **Rob Schofield**, Director of Research and Policy Development, NC Policy Watch

“Local control!” For years, those two words have been a rallying cry for ideological conservatives in North Carolina as they railed against proposals to regulate this or mandate that.

Local control is also supposed to be consistent with a belief in “limited government.” Here, the premises are that government is better when it’s smaller and that smaller local governments are “closer to the people.”

This year, with conservatives fully in control of the General Assembly, one would expect that local governments would be reveling in all sorts of newly

won or revived “local control.”

But, alas, as it has turned out, such an expectation would be 100% wrong.

When it comes to actual legislative action in the 2011 session, conservatives have rapidly and decisively abandoned all pretense of increasing local control. On the contrary, their policy has been to seize and centralize power and cement change as fast as possible.

Here are just a few examples:

Local taxing authority – One of the first actions of the General Assembly this session was to pass a bill that revokes the authority of counties to hold public referenda on a local land transfer tax. No longer may local governments or voters in individual counties have their say on this question.

Local annexation policy – Rather than simply reforming state annexation law – something that people across the spectrum agree could be useful – conservatives have been passing bill after bill to affirmatively revoke annexations that local governments have already duly and lawfully passed.

Local broadband – Another bill that flies in the face of “local control” is a proposal advanced by cable monopolies to ban the development of local, community-supported broadband networks. Though promoted as being about “leveling the playing field” with private providers, the bill is clearly about two things: appeasing to the demands of a large and powerful corporate lobby and preventing local governments from responding to the needs and demands of their constituents.

Gun control – The list of bills introduced by conservatives this session to make the possession of firearms easier than ever and restrict local gun regulations is a long one. Most recently, the state House of Representatives passed a maddening proposal that would prevent local governments from banning concealed weapons in restaurants and parks.

Billboards – Senate Majority Leader Harry Brown is sponsoring an industry “wish-list” bill that would encourage tree cutting, reduce local control and expand the use of electronic

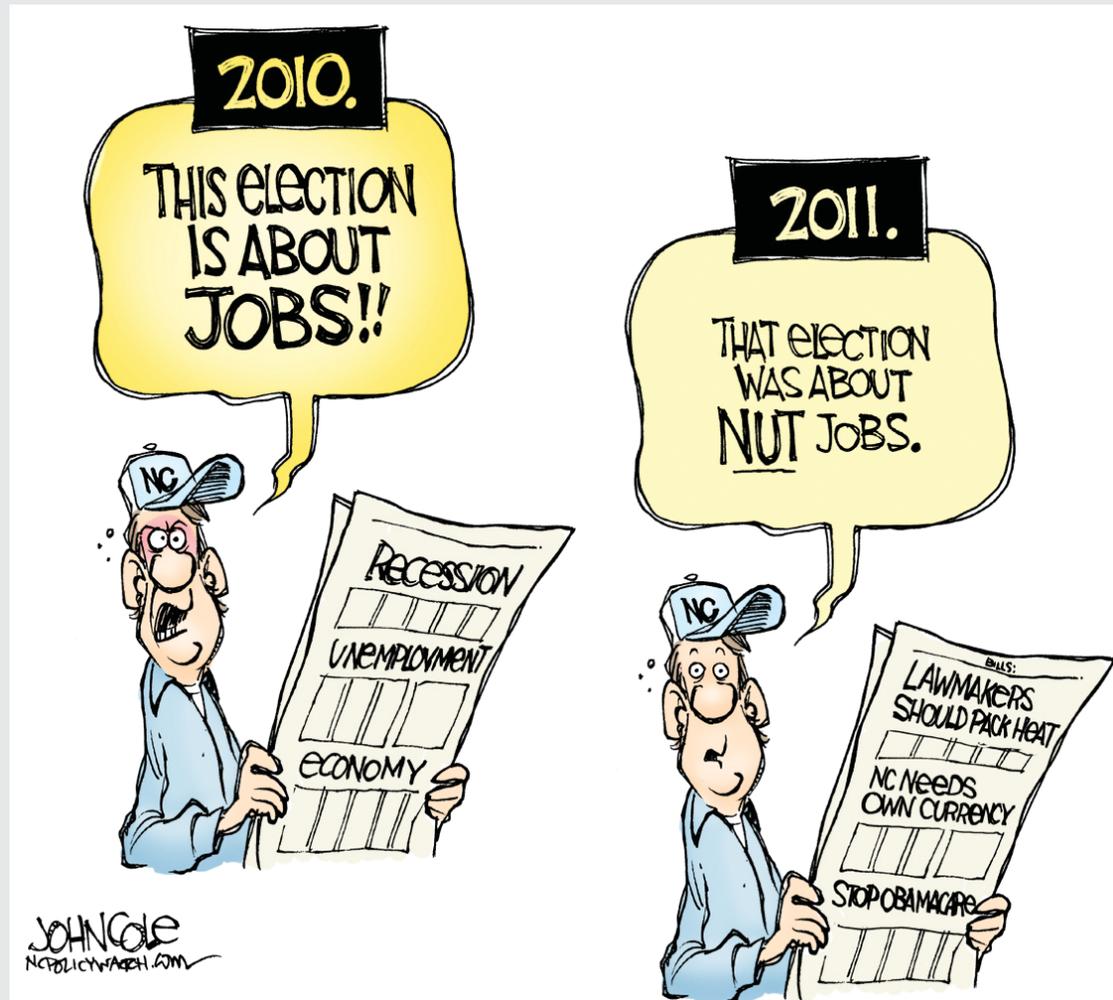
“digital” billboards. It remains to be seen whether opponents will be able to derail the proposal.

Immigrant identification – Recently, members of the House gave final approval to a bill that revokes the authority of cities that have seen fit to rely upon photo IDs issued by foreign embassies. This would apply even where city governments and law enforcement officials have made a determination that, for the purposes of public safety in their communities, such documents are an extremely useful way to secure immigrant community participation in aiding public safety.

These are just some of the areas in which conservative actions this session are at odds with traditional conservative rhetoric about local control. There are others, including:

- Early childhood education, where conservatives seem determined to do great damage to the statewide network of Smart Start programs that are the epitome of a locally controlled service delivery system
- High school accreditation, where conservatives propose replacing the current system in which schools work with private, regional organizations with a new, centralized bureaucracy in Raleigh
- Interscholastic athletics, where a conservative bill would force local school districts to allow homeschooled children to participate on public school athletic teams

Of course, there’s nothing inherently wrong with elected officials using the levers of power to advance their political agenda. They ought not to be allowed, however, to pretend that their agenda is something other than what it really is. In the days ahead, let’s hope more and more North Carolinians wake up and stand up to this hypocrisy. ■





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