



Parker McQuarrie thankful for the opportunity to quarterback JC Smith's Golden Bulls

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TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Johnson C. Smith University has secured \$1.031 million in federal funding for STEM education and career preparation as well as \$1 million from UNCF for its endowment to support long-term sustainability.

JCSU secures \$2M in grants for STEM and sustainability

Funding from US, James and Judith Dimon Foundation gift to UNCF initiative

By Herbert L. White
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The first week of Johnson C. Smith University's new academic year brought new investments.

The historically Black university received a \$1.031 million federal grant for STEM education, undergraduate research and career preparation as well as \$1 million from UNCF for its endowment. Community Project Funding for JCSU's Workforce Skills Enhancement through Equipment Initiative targets STEM education, undergraduate research and career preparation through acquisition and integration of equipment for student training and research in environmental chemistry, biology, agriculture and re-

lated fields.

The project includes laboratory instrumentation, microscopy and molecular analysis equipment, greenhouse enhancements, and drones equipped for geospatial LIDAR (light detecting and ranging) sensors, water quality and environmental research.

"Johnson C. Smith University has been educating generations of leaders and creating pathways to opportunity in Charlotte and beyond," said U.S. Rep. Adams, co-founder of the Congressional HBCU Caucus whose congressional district includes JCSU. "As a

longtime educator and champion for HBCUs, I know that our students excel when we invest in our institutions and give them the resources they need to compete. This federal investment will give JCSU students greater access to the technology, research opportunities and hands-on training that will prepare them for high-demand careers and help strengthen our workforce and economy."

JCSU President Valerie Kinloch added: "The \$1.03 million investment in our JCSU students and the residents of Char-



Adams



Kinloch



Earls



Stevens

NC Dems, GOP eye Supreme Court seat

Earls-Stevens race could shape bench's long term majority

By Sarah Michels

CAROLINA PUBLIC PRESS

North Carolina Democrats are dead set on winning one particular race this election cycle.

Party leaders say the result will likely determine the future of Congress and have poured over \$473,000 into the contest. Organizers, grassroots volunteers and other Democratic candidates are traveling across the state asking voters to pay attention to the matchup. It's as make or break as it gets.

But it's not the U.S. Senate race between former Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper and former Republican National Committee chairman Michael Whatley. Nor is it any of the handful of close U.S. House contests across the state.

Instead, it's a race further down the ballot, one that many voters may not have heard about at all: the state Supreme Court contest between current Democratic Justice Anita Earls and former State Rep. Sarah Stevens, R-Surry.

If Earls wins, it would be the second of a three-step plan for state Democrats to retake the majority-

Please see **STATE** | 2A

HUBs gather for strategy after state office's end

By Herbert L. White

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Owners of historically underutilized businesses will gather in Greensboro next month to talk about the future of access to state contracts.

The Sept. 10 forum at the International Civil Rights Center & Museum, titled "The HUB Office Is Gone. Now What?" focuses on the elimination of the state Office for Historically Underutilized Businesses. The state budget that became law on July 7 eliminated the office after 27 years as well as repealed statutes requiring participation goals and good faith efforts on public building projects as well as local reporting of participation data.

About 6,400 companies were certified as HUBs before the budget was signed into law.

Please see **HUBS** | 3A

Elections board agrees to drop Sunday early voting in 10 more counties

By Lynn Bonner

NC NEWSLINE

When members of county boards of election disagreed on whether to offer Sunday hours during early voting for this year's midterm elections, the North Carolina Board of Elections usually went along with plans to cut them.

Ten counties that had Sunday voting in the last midterm election won't have any this year as a result of state Board of Elections votes this week. The state board met Aug. 20 to consider early voting plans for 20 counties where local boards of election could not agree on locations, dates, or times.

The Republican majority on the State Board of Elections agreed with decisions of GOP majorities in Anson, Chatham, Columbus, Greene, Harnett, Nash, Pasquotank, Pitt, Union, and Wayne - counties that

Please see **ELECTIONS** | 3A

Environmental Justice Day includes West End cleanup and tree mapping

By Herbert L. White

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Beatties Ford Road neighbors are taking a grassroots approach to environmental justice.

SOL Nation, a Charlotte-based environmental advocacy nonprofit, is hosting EJ Day activities on Aug. 29 that include a community cleanup in Historic West End and mapping prospective sites for tree planting. Volunteers can register for the cleanup, which is from 10 a.m.-12 p.m., at bit.ly/ejdayccu.

The staging area is Allegra Westbrooks Regional Library, 2412 Beatties Ford Road.

Heat data maps of Charlotte neighborhoods show westside com-

munities tend to be hotter - caused in part by comparative lack of tree canopy - than higher-income areas. SOL Nation is collaborating with Trees Charlotte on the canopy project.

"Part of our initiative is what does it look to have clean and healthy neighborhoods ... but then also we're looking at tree canopy because we know that the westside of Charlotte tends to be a couple of degrees hotter than other sides of town, such as Myers Park or Dilworth," said Tiffany Fant, SOL Nation's executive director. "This EJ Day, we're really focusing on solutions, and one of our pillars is called sovereignty in prac-



Fant

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Please
Recycle





JP MORGAN CHASE

JP Morgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon and his wife Judy donated \$12 million to UNCF through the James and Judith K. Dimon Foundation for sustainability initiatives at 12 private historically Black colleges, including Johnson C. Smith University.

JCSU secures grants for STEM and sustainability

Continued from page 1A

lotte's Historic West End community will provide them with the necessary access to technology, workforce development skills and hands-on learning experiences that will ensure they are prepared for high-demand careers. JCSU remains committed to helping drive economic mobility in Charlotte and across the region, and this award further enables that commitment to be fully realized."

JCSU is also one of 12 UNCF campuses to earn \$1 million from the James and Judith K. Dimon Foundation for long-term sustainability initiatives through long-range planning, research and academic and infrastructure capital.

The fund, launched as the Dimon Fund to Advance Economic Opportunity within UNCF's \$1.5B capital campaign, provides endowment capital to the UNCF schools as part of their \$5 million institutional match within a pooled endowment fund. The campuses were picked for their track record of preparing educators, nurses, and other healthcare professionals. Several of the schools chosen have cross-institutional collaborations such as credit-transfer partnerships in health-related disciplines that speed the transition from academics to career.

"Our country's future and strength depend on our young people. Our system of HBCUs continue to serve as the springboard to success for thousands of students in pursuit of the American Dream," the Dimons said in a joint

statement. "As the children of first-generation high school and college graduates, we were imbued with a thirst for knowledge and a drive to succeed—principles that we have passed on to our own children and that we wish to share with all the students at the selected HBCUs."

Three other Carolinas schools earned endowment investments: Shaw University in Raleigh; Benedict College in Columbia, S.C., and Voorhees University in Denmark, S.C.

Jamie Dimon is chairman and CEO of JPMorgan Chase and a former UNCF director.

Judy Dimon, president of the Dimon Foundation, leads a strategic grant-making portfolio geared to improving career-connected learning for students in New York City's Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools, six-year public high school programs that combine career training and tuition-free community college.

"Their gift is both a vote of confidence and a catalyst," said Johnnetta Betsch Cole, UNCF president-in-residence and co-chair of UNCF's capital campaign.

"By accelerating endowment growth, this commitment from the Dimon Foundation will strengthen the financial position of these vital institutions and expand their capacity to make long-term decisions benefitting students, faculty, and the broader communities they serve as they prepare the teachers who awaken young minds today and the healers who will mend our communities tomorrow."



Cole



KEYONA SMITH

Charlotte's Environmental Justice Day, launched in 2021 with a proclamation by then-Mayor Vi Lyles, combines activism with community activities and community awareness initiatives. SOL Nation, a Charlotte nonprofit, is organizing a community cleanup and tree canopy mapping in Historic West End for EJ Day on Aug. 29.

Environmental justice advocates gather for neighborhood cleanup

Continued from page 1A

tice, which means that we are really putting solutions into place – giving the community the opportunity to not just observe but participate in what it means to create the communities that we live in."

In Charlotte, where development and environmental racism have sped removal of tree canopy in lower-investment neighborhoods, recent initiatives have been leveraged to improve the physical and economic health of historically underserved communities. In 2023, the city of Charlotte received a \$1.1 million federal grant from the U.S. Forest Service to protect and preserve trees in its six Corridors of Opportunity.

The grant was part of a \$1 billion national investment in urban and community forestry.

The face of climate advocacy and environmental justice is evolving as more people of color take on local leadership roles. SOL Nation, which is led by Black women, launches community initiatives to raise awareness and participation.

"What we call like the big greens – the big organizations that do conservation and things of that nature – were leading the work, but it has always impacted Black and brown communities disproportionately," said Fant, who lives in Historic West End. "Black and brown communities have always been working, trying to ad-

vocate, but they didn't have necessarily the resources of the power, so I think what's happening now is people are realizing that they're seeing ... how they're being directly impacted, and a lot of that looks like my energy bill is going up, the cost of food is going up, and so people's ears are more tuned because it's hitting the pocketbooks.

"Also, I think they're seeing the direct correlation of what's happening of how this air quality is impacting my personal life, and so what we do, we try to be culturally confident."

EJ Day isn't all work, however. Music and food are part of the program, which Fant said is part of celebrating community and commitment to environmental sustainability. The goal is to engage neighbors as advocates through awareness and relationships.

"I always joke and say it's not the sexiest topic," she said. "This isn't a topic that necessarily catches people's attention, so when we do things, it typically involves music, food, and then add some type of like fun aspect to it, or some type of relief that people may need, whether that's groceries or they need gas cards.

"We try to engage people in a way that is more than just a meeting. What is it that we as Black folks like to do? This work doesn't have to be all gloom and doom. We can have joy in it as we look for these solutions."

State Supreme Court seat

Continued from page 1A

Republican court before the next round of redistricting. The first was Democratic Justice Allison Riggs' narrow reelection victory in 2024, and the third would be flipping at least two of three Republican justices' seats in 2028.

On the other hand, if Stevens wins, it would expand the court's conservative majority to 6-1. Democrats would then have to flip all three Republican seats in 2028 to regain the majority they lost in 2023.

At stake are the state's electoral maps, and consequently, North Carolinians' representation on the state and federal level. Every decade, lawmakers redraw state legislative and U.S. House district maps to account for population changes identified by the U.S. Census. In North Carolina, the resulting maps inevitably end up as subjects of court challenges — often more than once a decade. As the state's highest court, the North Carolina Supreme Court is the final arbiter of how districts are drawn.

While the state Supreme Court tackles a variety of other issues, including voting rights, criminal law, utility rates and education, the redistricting implications are front and center this election cycle.

Meet the candidates

Before Earls became a judge, she had a long career as a civil rights attorney. Upon graduation from Yale Law School, she joined the first integrated law firm in North Carolina, founded by Charlotte civil rights lawyer Julius Chambers. Earls, who is Black, was attracted by the opportunity to work on civil rights cases.

Earls later spent five years in Washington, D.C., as deputy assistant attorney general for the US Department of Justice's civil rights division under President Bill Clinton's administration. In 2000, she argued on behalf of Florida voters who were disenfranchised in the presidential election, she said. But she missed her North Carolina work and wanted to be closer to the communities she was serving, she told Carolina Public Press.

In 2007, she founded the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, a nonprofit organization that advocates for legal justice for Black, brown and low-income people in the South.

Earls was one of several SCSJ attorneys — including fellow Democratic Justice Allison Riggs — who represented voters in a 2015 racial gerrymandering case that made it to the US Supreme Court. In the case, North Carolina v. Covington, they argued that 28 state legislative districts in 2011 redistricted maps were unconstitutionally drawn based on race. They won in federal district court, and the Supreme Court upheld a requirement for lawmakers to redraw the maps.

Chris Ketchie, SCSJ research director, met Earls in early 2011 while doing some part-time redistricting consulting. He said she valued good ideas over status, which made him feel like an equal in any room. "She's the kind of person that you follow into battle at the drop of the hat, no questions asked," Ketchie said.

As Earls gained experience, she realized that the state courts were important tools to protecting North Carolinians' rights.

"At the time that I ran, there was no one on the court with civil rights experience or background, and yet it was a court that was deciding these issues," she said. "So it seemed important to me to have someone on the court with that kind of experience and background."

In late 2017, she stopped practicing law so she could spend a year campaigning for the 2018 election. While she would eventually hear many court cases covering topics she's previously litigated on, Earls said that year gave her space to become independent.

"A lot of the cases that we've heard on the court all involve things that happened years after I had stopped practicing law, which is why I didn't need to recuse myself," she said.

Earls cruised to victory in 2018 in a three-way race, 15 percentage points ahead of the second-place finisher.

If North Carolina's electoral history is any indication, her reelection bid will be much closer.

The last time a state Supreme Court race was on the ballot was 2024, when Riggs won by 734 votes against Republican Jefferson Griffin, after half a year of post-election litigation. Four years prior, Republican Chief Justice Paul Newby defeated Democratic challenger Cheri Beasley by 401 votes. Other recent state Supreme Court race results have been separated by a percentage point or two.

This time around, Earls faces Sarah Stevens, a family law lawyer who served 17 and a half years in the state House before resigning to campaign in June. During her time in the General Assembly, Stevens became a leader on criminal law and election policy.

She sponsored some of the most high-profile legislation of the past few sessions, including Iryna's Law and House Bill 958, this session's wide-ranging elections bill.

Iryna's Law followed the fatal stabbing of Ukrainian refugee Iryna Zarutskya on Charlotte's transit system by DeCarlos Brown Jr., who had a documented criminal history and mental health issues.

The law tightens pre-trial bail requirements, makes changes to involuntary commitment laws and calls for studies into mental health in the judicial system and alternative methods of execution beyond current law, in an attempt to resurrect the death penalty.

Stevens also pushed House Bill 805, which requires online operators to conduct age verification and get written con-

sent of people pictured in pornographic images before posting them online. The bill also states that North Carolina only recognizes two biological sexes, bans state funds from paying for gender affirming care for people in prisons and requires local education boards to allow parents to remove their students from classroom discussions they believe impose a burden on their religious beliefs.

Continuing her trend of leading crime bills, Stevens sponsored Jaleeyah's Law this year, which cracks down on criminal gang activity.

On the elections side, Stevens was one of many Republican sponsors of the voter ID constitutional amendment in 2018, and reviewed and drew several maps during her time in the legislature, she said.

Stevens said her redistricting experience taught her which questions to ask when maps come to the state Supreme Court. She also would bring a wealth of family law experience others on the court lack, she said. And if there was a question of legislative intent, she certainly would know where to find answers.

It took four months of convincing before Stevens agreed to run, though. Some of her friends, including current Supreme Court justices, told her she was "needed," she said.

Carolina Public Press reached out to several of Stevens' legislative colleagues and the North Carolina Republican Party for comment, but all did not respond or declined to comment.

In a June press release, however, the North Carolina Republican Party said Stevens will defend parental rights.

"Sarah Stevens has built a career as a common sense conservative who will uphold the constitutional rights of North Carolinians while radical liberal activist Anita Earls is in the pocket of rich out-of-state donors," an unnamed spokesperson said.

Redo. Redo. Redo.

On Earls' first day on the court, she joined a Democratic majority. Between 2019 and 2022, they made several key rulings that wouldn't last.

One was Harper v. Hall, a case challenging partisan gerrymandering. The 2022 court ruled that drawing maps to give one party an advantage was unconstitutional and ordered the legislature to redraw maps based on new guidelines. The result was a U.S. House map intended to elect seven Democrats and seven Republicans.

However, after Republicans won a 5-2 majority on the state's high court in the 2022 election, they decided to take another look. The conservative bloc reversed the previous year's decision, ruling that the legislature was in charge of drawing maps, and the court couldn't decide partisan gerrymandering claims because it required them to put their thumb on the political scale.

Earls dissented, decrying the break from precedent.

"Unchecked partisan gerrymandering allows the controlling party of the General Assembly to draw legislative redistricting plans in a way that dilutes the voting power of voters in the disfavored party," she wrote. "In so doing, those who hold political power can guarantee that they remain in office for decades, making them impervious to the popular will."

The resulting 2023 map elected 11 Republicans and three Democrats to Congress.

The second reversed case was Holmes v. Moore. The Democratic-majority court originally ruled that a voter ID law was unconstitutional because it was enacted with the intent to racially discriminate, but the newly configured Republican-majority court decided instead that the courts should assume legislative good faith unless both discriminatory intent and impact could be proven. The voter ID law didn't meet that standard, they ruled.

The final reversal related to a decades-long educational case, Hoke County Board of Education v. State of North Carolina, often referred to as the Leandro case. In 2022, the state Supreme Court ruled that the Constitution requires state lawmakers to provide every child with the opportunity to receive a sound, basic education, and that the court could order \$1.75 billion in state funds to be appropriated for that purpose if the executive and legislative branch repeatedly failed to correct issues.

Earlier this year, the Republican majority reversed that ruling on technical grounds, and said courts could not decide how the state spends money.

Earls again dissented, arguing that the legislature decides education policy, but the court can enforce a constitutional, educational right.

While courts can overturn precedent, she said, doing so in the same case is confusing and improper.

"A litigant shouldn't be told at one point in their case the law is X, and the same litigant in the same case later be told no, the law is Y," she said.

Stevens has a different take. She sees Earls as an "activist judge" who rules based not on what the law says, but what she wishes it said. The reversed redistricting and voter ID cases are two examples of Earls acting as an activist, and the conservative court righting the ship, Stevens said.

"I've seen other opinions from conservative courts going, we don't like this law, but it's not up to us to change it," Stevens said. "They'll basically send a message over to the legislature. She just simply cuts that out and says this is what it should be and what it will be."

If elected, Stevens said she would be a true conservative who follows the law as written, not as she wants it to be.



CLAYTON HENKEL | NC NEWSLINE

Krista Savage-White traveled to the North Carolina State Board of Elections meeting Aug. 20, 2026, from rural Gates County. Savage-White was concerned about a proposal to cut Sunday early voting in Pasquotank County and move the county's early voting site away from the K.E. White Graduate Center on the Elizabeth City State University campus.

Elections board agrees to drop Sunday early voting

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opened polls on Sundays for voting four years ago - to drop those hours this year.

Those decisions continued the contraction of Sunday voting since Republicans took majorities on the state Board of Elections and county boards last year.

Election boards in about a dozen counties that had Sunday hours in 2022 had already agreed in their unanimous plans to drop them for this fall's general election, NC Newline reported.

In addition to those 10 counties, Lenoir dropped Sunday voting this year. Lenoir elections board members could not agree on an early voting plan, but neither of the options they asked state board members to consider included Sunday hours.

The partisan disagreement over Sunday voting goes back for years. Democrats have largely supported them, while Republicans are generally opposed. That pattern continued this week in 3-2, party-line votes with Republicans on the state board approving early voting plans that didn't include Sundays.

Sunday voting supporters knew those hours were in serious danger of getting chopped.

A former staffer in state Auditor Dave Boliek's office, Dallas Woodhouse, encouraged county board chairs to drop Sunday hours. Woodhouse is a political operative and former state Republican Party executive director whom Boliek hired to work with county boards.

At an Aug. 20 rally, the Rev. Dr. Floyd Wicker of the Lillington First Missionary Baptist Church in Harnett County spoke against cutting Sunday hours, which are important to Black and brown voters.

"It appears that some people on our state Board of Elections are trying to make it more difficult for people in my community to vote," he said.

Republicans argued that Sundays should be reserved for church and family, that opening polls on Sunday isn't worth the cost, and that Sundays are burdensome and boring for poll workers.

Democrats argued that Sunday voting hours are important for people who work long or irregular hours, people with long commutes, and people with care-giving responsibilities. Older people who don't drive may only be able to vote in person on

Sundays, when family members are available to provide transportation, supporters said.

In an attempt to refute claims that Sundays are not cost effective, some county board members said Sunday hours cost less per vote. Sunday hours only appear to be under-used, they said, because polls are open only a few hours on Sundays.

Betsy McCormick, a Democrat on the Harnett board, told state board members that in 2024, the county's early voting sites served 31 voters per hour on weekdays and 32.5 voters per hour on Sunday.

Eight percent of early voters cast ballots on Sunday that year, she said, while Sunday hours were only 5% of the total early voting hours available.

"Sunday voting hours are a cost-effective way to provide a wider range of voters the opportunity to cast their vote," McCormick said.

Danny Moody, chair of the Harnett County Board of Elections, told the state board that Sunday voting traffic is light, and he heard no complaints about a lack of Sunday hours for this year's primaries.

"I do not believe that Sunday is needed, or perhaps wanted, in Harnett County," Moody said. At one of the county's sites, only four people voted on a Sunday in 2020, he said.

The voting rights group Democracy North Carolina denounced the cuts.

"The cuts to Sunday voting in many counties will have a chilling effect on voters, full stop," Brian Kennedy, policy director for Democracy NC, said in a statement. "Cutting Sunday hours and sites not only has a huge impact on working families; it also creates confusion in communities who have grown accustomed to certain hours and locations being available to them during elections."

Though he is no longer a Boliek employee, Woodhouse has been active in promoting early voting plans. Democrats' objects are rooted in partisan anger over not controlling elections, Woodhouse wrote on X.

"It's a proud day for North Carolina voters and for me personally, as the GOP-majority State Board gave final approval to a comprehensive 2026 early-voting plan that offers unprecedented voter access for any North Carolina midterm election in history, as measured by total voting sites, total voting hours and even weekend hours," he wrote.



ADOBE STOCK

Owners of historically underutilized business will gather in Greensboro on Sept. 4 to discuss the closing of North Carolina's HUB office and advocate for access to state contracts.

HUBs gather for strategy after state office's demise

Continued from page 1A

Registration is required through Eventbrite at GoneNowWhat.Eventbrite.com by Sept. 4. Seating is limited to 200.

"Thousands of North Carolina firms lost the one office, in existence for 27 years, that was established to assist them with state government and public sector contracting opportunities," Gerry McCants, president of the Greensboro Business League said in a statement.

"Most of these businesses found out about the HUB Office's elimination after the fact. No one is talking about the devastating impact this is having on our HUB and small businesses. This town hall on Sept. 10 is not a meeting about what happened, but more so about what we do next to rebuild the infrastructure, create new pathways, and ensure our HUB and small businesses are positioned to compete for public-sector opportunities."

Small businesses account for 99.6% of North Carolina businesses and produced 89.9% of the state's net new jobs in the most recent year measured, according to the U.S. Small Business Administration. In construction, the sector governed by the repealed statutes, small firms make up 99.3% of employers.

The forum will open with a briefing on business owner questions, such as whether HUB certification remains valid and what happens to contracts in progress. Moderated panels will follow in addition to a work session to set priorities.

Attendees will be asked to contact the governor's office and their state legislators in support of a drafted executive order that would move a newly created Small Business Enterprise office from the Department of Administration to the Department of Commerce, set a 25% small business participation goal and define good faith efforts with enforceable standards.

Organizers also seek restoration of 12 staff positions that the budget eliminated from the HUB Office.

"This is a statewide issue, and it requires a statewide response," said C.J. Broderick, president and CEO of the Greater Durham Black Chamber of Commerce and a member of the N.C. Coalition of Black Chambers. "Firms in Durham, Greensboro, Charlotte, Raleigh, Winston-Salem, and our rural counties are all asking the same questions, and no single chamber or county can answer them alone."

The Charlotte Post

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As back-to-school prices rise, donations fill gap for families

By Clayton Henkel

NC NEWSLINE

There is perhaps no clearer sign that summer is drawing to a close than the arrival of school supplies in big box stores and school supply drives in most counties.

Last week, Gov. Josh Stein delivered school supplies collected over the summer to W.M. Irvin Elementary School in Concord. It's the eighth year the governor's office has partnered with the State Employees' Credit Union, the North Carolina PTA, the Boys & Girls Clubs of North Carolina, and Communities in Schools of North Carolina to distribute supplies to students in need.

"This year's state budget had a lot of good news for education, but to truly support our public schools and our students' futures, we need to better support teachers who pay for school supplies out of their own pockets," Stein said in a statement.

The state budget Stein signed in July provides the largest average teacher pay raise in 20 years, the governor said. It also provided a 3% raise and a bonus of at least \$1,000 for all other school staff and non-certified employees.

But that modest boost in pay diminishes quickly when teachers dip into their

own pocket to pay for school supplies. A 2025 study by CouponBirds revealed teachers in the Tar Heel state shell out more than \$1,600 annually to outfit their classrooms, the second highest average in the country. Only Pennsylvania teachers spent more out of pocket than North Carolina teachers.

In the state's largest public school district, Wake County schools are invited to fulfill their back-to-school wish list at the Tools4Schools store near downtown Raleigh.

The idea of a free supply store just for public school teachers was created four years ago by the nonprofit WakeEd Partnership. Since then, about 6,000 of the county's 10,000 public school teachers have taken advantage of the assistance.

WakeEd CEO Keith Poston said the goal is to remove some of the financial pressure that educators feel at one of the most important times of the school year.

"Regardless of political perspective, folks understand intuitively that a teacher trying to teach children should not also have to worry about bringing in classroom supplies. We're talking about the things they need to do their job," said Poston in an interview with NC Newline.

Poston said the "good-heartedness" of Please see **DONATIONS** | 4A

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What a vacuum teaches about use of power

By Preston Blakely

STATELINE

When people see me serving as mayor — leading council meetings, hosting community events, or delivering speeches — I am usually in a suit.

But before I was ever elected, I started cleaning buildings at night when the world slept in far different clothes.

My family owns a janitorial business. It is the work I spent countless nights doing with my parents growing up. It is the work I continue to do, and it is the work that has shaped my leadership.

Politics teaches you how to talk. Janitorial work taught me how to listen.

Throughout America, millions of janitors serve our schools, hospitals, offices, and town halls. They stay after hours and make sure facilities are safe and clean for the next day.

But janitors are often overlooked and underpaid, despite their necessity. The median wage is around \$17 an hour. This reflects the lack of dignity our country provides janitors, especially if you are trying to support your family.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics asserts there are more than 300,000 janitorial openings each year. Not because this is an expanding industry, but because turnover is incredibly high. It is a job that will burn you out.

This is more than a statistic for me. It is my family's and my life. My parents founded Quality Janitorial Group, and we have been at it for 35 years. We've made a living for ourselves and other community members. Growing up, my evenings and weekends looked different than my peers. I recall being frustrated as a child because I hauled trash and vacuumed carpets while my friends went home.

As an adult, I carry so much pride and ownership as I do this work with my family. We care for clients. We want the floors spotless. Every detail reflects my parents' reputation and sacrifice.

When you clean after business hours, it is quiet. You notice so much that most people miss. The paperclips that were dropped under the desks. A continuous stream of coffee on the walls next to the trash cans. The evidence that people worked hard throughout their day.

Our work goes unnoticed, especially when tasks are completed correctly. Invisibility teaches you many lessons that politicians need, like humility, consistency, listening, and work ethic. You are not honored for vacuuming a large room. You must find the pride and value in the work for its own sake, not for attention. If you cut corners, eventually the mess shows. When you're in a still, empty building, you see the details. And when it is your family's business, you cannot just call out. The work is there daily; the floors get dirty daily. Just as in public service, the problems continue, and so must you.

In America, being blue-collar comes with pride and struggle. Rarely do politicians create policy that returns dignity to blue-collar workers. And when you clean buildings at night, you realize that perhaps the working class does not have the dignity they deserve. Janitors work multiple jobs, stretch paychecks, or work nights while still getting up for their kids in the morning.

That is why Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign existed. The Memphis Sanitation Strike draws comparisons for working-class people today. The workers proved how much their labor should have been valued and respected.

American politics often forget that fact. However, it has taught me more than any committee meeting ever has.

I am 31 years old. I am Black. I am the mayor of Fletcher, N.C. Additionally, I have cleaned bathrooms for my family business. I want to lean into it, not gloss it over.

Most people in America relate more to cleaning bathrooms than cutting ribbons. We deserve a society where more leaders can come from jobs like these. Our politics would look vastly different. Janitors, bus drivers, warehouse workers, and many other blue-collar workers make everything possible. Without them, the world does not go 'round as well. Just as those sanitation workers in Memphis proved.

I still work with my family business at Quality Janitorial Services, but I also carry the responsibility of serving as mayor. Both roles are service-oriented and require you to show up with humility, patience, and a willingness to deal with recurring problems, even if you are tired.

I am so proud to bring lessons from janitorial work into the mayor's office. Whether I am cleaning a bathroom or leading a Council meeting, the goals remain constant: create a safe space where people have dignity and are cared for.

So, each morning when you walk into a clean building, take a moment to take it all in. There was someone there working when nobody was watching. Perhaps that is the purest form of leadership there is.

Preston Blakely is mayor of Fletcher, North Carolina.

NC's investment in home care will make a real difference for families

Every day, across Cleveland, Gaston, Lincoln, and Rutherford counties, our team sees what home care makes possible.

We care for about 120 medically vulnerable North Carolinians each month, including seniors, adults



TAYLOR EDWARDS

with disabilities, and individuals who need hands-on support to remain safely in their homes. Our home health aides help with bathing, dressing, eating, moving safely around the home, and maintaining routines that allow people to live with dignity and independence.

For the people and families we serve, these services are not optional. They are essential.

That is why I am grateful that North Carolina lawmakers included funding increases for Medicaid personal care services, direct care workers, and direct support professionals in the state budget this year. This investment sends a powerful message: home and community-based services matter, and the people who provide this care deserve to be valued.

For years, providers have faced a difficult reality. Families may be approved

for services, but approval does not always mean a caregiver is available. Missed shifts happen because providers have struggled to recruit and retain workers in an increasingly competitive job market.

In our Shelby-area office, we employ roughly 100 to 120 home health aides. Some have been with us for 20 years; not because of the \$14 to \$15 per hour wage, but because they love the work and the people they care for.

But no one should have to sacrifice their own financial stability to stay in this field. In-home caregivers deserve fair pay for work that is compassionate, physically demanding, emotionally grueling, and essential to keeping vulnerable North Carolinians safe at home. Too many leave because they can earn upwards of \$5 more per hour in fast food, at Amazon, or driving for Uber and Lyft. They tell us they love the families they serve but feel they have no choice but to take jobs elsewhere.

This is why these funding increases matter. For providers, stronger investments make it possible to offer more competitive wages, improve recruitment, reduce turnover, and keep experienced caregivers in the

field. For caregivers, it means their service is being recognized. For families, it means a better chance that when care is authorized, someone will be there to provide it.

When a caregiver is not available, the impact is immediate. A senior may go without help getting out of bed, bathing, or eating. A person with a disability may lose the support they need to participate in daily life. A family caregiver may have to miss work, go without sleep, or burn out from carrying those responsibilities alone.

But when home care works, the impact is just as powerful.

A person can wake up in their own bed. A family can go to work knowing their loved one is cared for. A caregiver can build a lasting relationship with someone who trusts and depends on them. A loved one can remain at home instead of facing unnecessary institutional care.

That is what so many families want: care in the place their loved one knows best, with the people they love nearby.

North Carolina lawmakers deserve credit for recognizing that in this budget. By prioritizing personal care services, direct care workers, and direct support professionals, they are investing in

people, families, and communities. They are strengthening a workforce stretched thin for too long while supporting a model of care that is compassionate and more cost-effective than institutional care.

This budget investment will not erase every challenge overnight. Providers must still recruit, train, and retain workers. Families still need consistent access to care. Demand for home-based services will only grow as North Carolina's population ages and more people choose to remain at home.

But this is a significant step forward.

On behalf of the home care recipients, families, and caregivers we serve, thank you to North Carolina lawmakers for prioritizing home care in this budget. Thank you for understanding that home care is not simply a service: it is a lifeline.

As this investment moves forward, I hope we continue building on this progress so every North Carolinian who needs care at home can access it, and every caregiver doing this essential work feels valued enough to stay.

Families across North Carolina are counting on it.

Taylor Edwards is director of Bayada Home Health Care's assistive care state programs office in Shelby.

Turn wall on its side and it becomes a table

A friend said something to me once that I have never forgotten.

His name is Alec Baldwin. He told me, "I'm an old



BEN JEALOUS

school American. That means I believe you're an American the day you decide to come here and join us."

I love that line. It is simple. It is generous. It is true.

That is the country I was raised to believe in. A country with room. A country that makes space at the table. We seem to have forgotten that lately. We talk about walls. We talk about who to keep out. We talk about whole groups of people as if they were a problem to be solved.

But fear is a poor teacher. It tells us to lock the door. It tells us the stranger wants what is ours. It tells us there is not enough to go around. Fear is almost always wrong.

A great American answered that same fear long ago. His name was Frederick Douglass. He was born

into slavery. He freed himself. And in 1869, he stood up in Boston to speak for people who looked nothing like him.

The target back then was Chinese immigrants. Many Americans wanted them shut out. Douglass said no. He called for a "composite nation" — one people, made from many.

The immigrants would keep coming, he said, the way waves keep coming to the shore. And we would be stronger if we met them as friends. Stronger. Not weaker. That was his word.

Douglass was right. He is still right. Now think about our most famous symbol of welcome. The Statue of Liberty. She stands in New York Harbor with her torch held high.

Most of us were never taught where she came from: the end of slavery. The men who dreamed her up had fought to end it. In an early design, she held broken chains in her hand. Look closely today, and you will still find a broken chain and shackle at her feet. Most visitors never see them.

She is, at her heart, a statue about people set

free. And a statue about welcome. The two ideas were always one.

Which brings me to a film I cannot stop thinking about. It is called "The Welcome Table." The filmmaker Josh Fox made it, and it premiered June 23 on HBO. For years he followed families driven from their homes by floods and fires and drought. People the world keeps trying to wall out.

Fox had one simple idea. "A wall, on its side, can be a table," he says. The thing we build to keep people out can become the thing that invites them in. Same wood. Same length. We only have to lay it flat. So, he built one. A table 1,000 feet long. He gathered families from around the world to sit at it together on a levee in New Orleans. They ate. They sang. They told their stories. They began to heal.

Fox reminds us we have done this before. New Yorkers once feared Italian immigrants. Newspapers drew them as criminals. Today you cannot imagine New York without pizza. Every wave we feared, we later thanked.

Now Fox is taking the

table on the road. He is building a movement of house parties across the country. Neighbors gather in living rooms, watch the film, and talk — about who their own families once were, and who they might welcome next.

"Welcomeing is a virtue," Fox says. We have let it slip. He wants us to pick it back up.

That is the choice in front of us. We can keep building walls. Or we can lay them down and set the table.

I know which America I want to live in.

I want the America Alec Baldwin described. The one you join the day you decide to come.

I want the America Frederick Douglass fought for. The composite nation, stronger for its mix.

I want the America the Statue of Liberty was built to be. A free people, making room for the next.

An old saying goes when you have more than you need, build a longer table, not a higher wall. So, let's build the longer table.

Ben Jealous is a professor of practice at the University of Pennsylvania and former president and CEO of the NAACP.

Continued from page 3A

teachers prompts them to use their own money to make sure all the children in their classroom start the year on a level playing field.

A survey by the nonprofit found in 2025, Wake County teachers were spending on average \$1,200 on back-to-school supplies. With inflation, many teachers are able to afford less than they did just a year ago.

"We're gonna try to take that burden off as much as we can. It's not a substitute for adequate funding, but I like to think we've made a difference," said Poston.

Last week, the storefront, designed to look like a small Staples, opened its doors to Wake County teachers, who scanned the well-stocked shelves for items their students might need.

Highlighters, pencils, glue sticks, backpacks, and hand sanitizer are among the most sought-after items. Laptops and Chromebooks are provided by the school district, but Poston says teachers need a lot of basic supplies for their students



CLAYTON HENKEL | NC NEWSLINE

In the state's largest public school district, Wake County teachers are invited to fulfill their back-to-school wishlist for free at the Tools4Schools store near downtown Raleigh.

to start out the school year.

"I remind folks, this is a classroom supply store for teachers, but these are going to students," said Poston. "Something that we are keenly aware of here is that not every family can afford to go out and make sure that their child has a new backpack full of all the things they are supposed to have or need to have when they walk in the door."

A recent analysis from the Groundwork Collaborative and The Century Foundation, two progressive think tanks, finds a typical basket of school supplies will cost families 7.7% more this year, outpacing inflation.

According to new data released by Intuit Credit Karma, more than half of parents with kids under 18 are entering back-to-school shopping season with credit card debt. Nearly two-thirds of those parents (63%) expect that they will add to their existing bal-

ance to cover this year's school purchases.

Corporate sponsors and community groups can help make sure students have what they need to start the school year, but individuals can also play a role. Poston said an Amazon wishlist makes it easy to see which items are the highest priority, and people can then donate at any level that fits their budget.



TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Johnson C. Smith quarterback Parker McQuarrie is determined to reward the Golden Bulls – and himself – for taking a chance on his potential to lead the offense.

‘Definitely prepared’ for opportunity

QB Parker McQuarrie’s football journey to JC Smith fueled by shared belief in untapped potential

By Herbert L. White
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Parker McQuarrie was looking for an opportunity to prove himself.

Maurice Flowers was looking for a quarterback.

Email brought them together.

McQuarrie, a four-star recruit at St. Paul’s (New Hampshire) High in 2019, was out of football for a year when he reached out to Flowers for a chance at Johnson C. Smith, which was coming off a school-best 10-2 season, CIAA title and Division II playoff berth. The message languished in Flowers’ inbox until necessity stepped in.

Two quarterbacks transferred after spring practice, leaving Josh Jackson, a transfer from Central Connecticut State as the presumptive starter. The answer was sitting in Flowers’ email.

“Parker really recruited us,” he said. “I remember looking in my inbox one time. I’m like, ‘OK, Parker McQuarrie,’ and I looked, and I saw it was a quarterback and we’re going to be in the market for a quarterback. I think it was January or February when he first reached out. He had just been



McQuarrie

sitting in my inbox. We didn’t make contact ‘til like May or June when I really started looking for a quarterback.”

McQuarrie had his opportunity. After two years at UCLA, a season at Independence (Kansas) Community College and backup duty at New Haven (Conn.), the Golden Bulls represented a chance to make good. It’s been a winding road, but McQuarrie’s bringing valuable football and life lessons to JCSU.

“I’d say it’s definitely taught me that

no matter where you go, people are always people,” he said. “Obviously, the names are different. The names of the places you go are different. Obviously, the cultures of places are different, but at the end of the day, it’s just people trying to play. We’re trying to be the best football team that we can be.”

Flowers, who has built a reputation for developing quarterbacks of varying skill sets into standouts, believes McQuarrie, who has two years of eligibility remaining, has the temperament, experience and assets to succeed.

“As I look at him, what I see is he’s Please see **MCQUARRIE** | 6A

Hough defense flexes dominant capabilities



CHARLOTTE ATHLETICS

Ethan Royal, who quarterbacked Hough High to the North Carolina 8A title in 2025, tossed a pair of touchdowns in the Huskies’ 15-10 win against Rock Hill Northwestern Aug. 22, 2026 in Rock Hill, S.C.

By Cameron Williams
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ROCK HILL – The best defense helps a good offense.

The Hough Huskies No. 1 in The Post’s Magnificent Seven rankings, certainly played to it in their season-opening 15-10 win against Rock Hill Northwestern. After the Trojans struck first midway through the first quarter on a long touchdown run by quarterback Xavier Means, the Huskies didn’t allow another. Hough’s defense compiled 12 sacks to put everyone on notice about just how good the Huskies defense could be.

“We came into this game knowing [Northwestern’s] quarterback was a bad man,” Hough linebacker Ryan Peterson said. “He had a couple good run plays but at the end of the day that is football. But I love my teammates and I know they love me, so it doesn’t matter if the offense is struggling or if the defense is struggling, we are going to play for each other and play through adversity.”

Northwestern averaged more than 40 points per game in 2025 and for Hough to Please see **HOUGH** | 6A

NCCU, Shaw aim to earn pair of titles

Mississippi Valley State and Gardner-Webb have joined the MEAC as associate members in women’s flag football.

MVSU and GWU will compete alongside full-time members Delaware State, Maryland Eastern Shore, Norfolk State and North Carolina Central.

“Their addition strengthens our position in this emerging sport and reflects our continued commitment to expanding its championship opportunities for women,” MEAC Commissioner Sonja Stills said.

UMES hired Duane Tolson to lead its flag football program. North Carolina Central named assistant football coach Jennifer King women’s flag football coach.

N.C. Central (8-4)

Eight wins in a season would give many coaches a raise and/or a contract extension, but the bar is set high in Eagleland. And no one knows that more than head coach and alumnus Trei Oliver.

“Awful,” Oliver responded when asked about the 8-4 record on boxtorow.com. “For us it’s about winning championships. Second place is really the first loser.”

NCCU wasn’t even that last season after Delaware State finished second under first-year coach DeSean Jackson. The Eagles were third.

This season will not only see a new face under center but several newbies prowling NCCU’s sideline.

As of Aug. 19, Oliver had not named a starting quarterback among three viable candidates: redshirt sophomore Joshua Jones, Citadel transfer Cobey



BONITTA BEST

Magnificent Seven’s top three unchanged; Butler moves in

By Herbert L. White
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A week into the 2026 high school football season, and most of Magnificent Seven registered wins.

The preseason top three – Hough, Mallard Creek and Chambers – won, although the No. 1 Huskies were pressed by Rock Hill Northwestern. There was one exit with No. 7 Independence losing to Byrnes (S.C.) in a low-scoring affair that opened the door for Butler to slide into the rankings.

This week’s rankings:

1. Hough (1-0). The Huskies’ 15-10 win against Rock Hill Northwestern proved Hough’s defense has the potential to be North Carolina’s best. Up next is another good test in Cardinal Gibbons for the home opener.

2. Mallard Creek (1-0). The Mavericks opened with an impressive 45-25 win against Rolesville. Next is a road trip to Maury (Va.) for a non-conference clash.

3. Chambers (1-0). A 50-21 romp against Gray Collegiate

Academy was quite the debut for Cougars quarterback Jamouri Nichols. Next up is a trip to Hopewell.

4. Palisades (1-0). The Pumas lost head coach Jonathan Simmons for undisclosed reasons, but powered to a 42-28 win against Gastonia Ashbrook with assistant Darrel Wilson at the helm. Next up is neighborhood rival Olympic.

5. Charlotte Catholic (1-0). Teams and seasons change, but the Cougars’ mastery of South

Mecklenburg is a familiar constant. If you need proof, last week’s 24-0 thrashing offers plenty.

6. West Charlotte (0-1). New coach D.J. McFadden took a rough debut in a 24-0 loss to Greensboro Grimsley. Will the Lions shake it off with Monroe rolling into Historic West End?

7. Butler (1-0). Speaking of new coaches, Donald Littlejohn took the Bulldogs to a 27-14 win at Olympic in his debut. Another road trip – this week at Statesville – awaits.

Panthers’ special teams ace wants larger role

By Jeff Hawkins
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Lining up wide, Carolina Panthers linebacker Thomas Incoom pursued an open rush lane.

Except Jacksonville Jaguars quarterback Nick Mullens side-stepped him and gained a first down at EverBank Stadium in Friday’s preseason game. A special teams ace, Incoom’s presence on

the Panthers opening day roster is virtually assured. But the former Division II national champion wants more, intending to develop into a more complete player.

He’s willing to prove it. Incoom seeks expanded NFL role

The Panthers’ coaching staff, eager to solve the franchise’s long-suffering pass rush, is providing an opportunity. With high-priced free agent Jaelan Phillips, Princely Umanmielen and Pat Jones II headlining the edge unit, depth roles need to be filled.

Incoom, Cam Gill, Trevis Gipson and Bam Martin-Scott continue dueling for additional reps. Throughout training camp, defensive coordinator Ejiro Evero

experiments by alternating first-unit snaps.

“(The starters) play at a high clip, really great effort,” coach Dave Canales said earlier this month. “And so, with our days we kind of just say, ‘OK, what was his load the day before?’ How can we manage that on the following day, which gives us a

Please see **SPECIAL** | 6A

Please see **NC CENTRAL’S** | 6A

McQuarrie ‘definitely prepared’ for leadership

Continued from page 5A
chasing an opportunity to show everybody – most important himself – that I am that four-star to five-star guy that everybody saw out of high school,” Flowers said. “Everything that I have seen from him is a guy that is hungry. That’s the best word I could say for him – he’s a guy that was chasing an opportunity, and he’s really hungry to be the starter and show what type of daggone quarterback he can be, and then the quarterback that he is.”

McQuarrie understands what this chance represents. Although he’s never been a collegiate starter, McQuarrie will lead the Golden Bulls into their Aug. 29 season opener at Benedict. He’s ready for the moment.

“I’m definitely prepared,” McQuarrie said. “I’m confident in my preparation. I’ve done what I’ve had to do to know what my job is. Obviously, going out there actually executing it is a different story in terms of knowing you’re prepared versus actually doing it, and I believe I’m ready to go do it. I’m going to put my best foot forward. I know I’m ready for the opportunity, and that’s really what it is. It’s an opportunity, and I’m just happy to get one.”

McQuarrie is taking a more mature approach to football and learning. At 23, he’s gone from following and playing behind older players to mentoring as an elder.

“You can feel the transition,” he said. “Obviously, when you’re younger, you’re kind of just soaking up everything and you’re seeing how college football flows, how it goes, how the older guys handle themselves. You kind of have to learn how the system runs, how it works, how players mesh with other players, how coaches mesh with other players, and what’s expected of you, especially in a winning program like coach Flowers’.”

Part of McQuarrie’s growth includes learning the nuances of college offenses. As a high school standout, he could dominate on physical tools alone. That doesn’t apply on the collegiate level where scheme also plays a role.

“I had to learn how to play football going into college,” he said. “Coming out of high school, being from New Hampshire, football is not how it is down here. [There] you really kind of get the ball and drop back and hope somebody gets open. We weren’t really thinking about coverages or studying tendencies of defenses.

“All I knew when I got to college was get the ball and just find an open receiver, so I had to learn how to play the

game of football. ... There’s coverages, and you’ve got to look at this guy and it took a little bit, obviously, because you’ve got to learn it. You’ve got to understand the rhythm of how it’s played, and then you’re like, ‘Oh, I can do this.’ You’ve just got to put a lot of work in and repetition.”

Said Flowers, who is also JCSU’s offensive coordinator: “We have an advantage at our place that a lot of places don’t have. The first advantage is Parker’s quarterback coach [Tyrell Jackson] played in this offense and knows every expectation there is, and then his offensive coordinator is a guy that invented the offense. Those are positives, but the next one is he goes against a defense that is one of the top defenses in D2 every single day. To me as a coach, I don’t worry that he hasn’t had a lot of game experience because he’s getting those reps in practice.”

McQuarrie also benefits from an offense that returns nine starters from a unit that averaged 33.5 points per game in 2025. Three linemen are pre-season All-CIAA picks and Bobby Smith (running back) and Brian Lane (receiver) are in the fold after all-conference campaigns. The skill positions are stacked with experienced playmakers. No one has to shoulder the production alone.

“We have great running backs, great receivers, and a great line,” McQuarrie said. “We’re just going to do whatever we have to do to win – whether we’ve got to run the ball, and in certain situations, we’ve got to pass the ball. We just we have to use what we have, and we have a lot of good pieces.”

Said Flowers: “When he got here and you just go through the process of winning the job, he could see that his two new best friends were a good running game and a really good defense, so what that really equates to is he doesn’t have to be a hero.”

McQuarrie is ready to do his share, especially with an ascendant program. JCSU opens the season ranked No. 23 in the Division II national coaches’ poll and No. 1 among D2 HBCUs. There’ll be scrutiny, but that’s incentive to exceed last year’s lofty heights. After all, it’s an opportunity.

“There’s always going to be expectation, especially if you had a good previous year or a couple previous years,” he said. “You’re going to be expected to do well, but it’s not something that you don’t want because obviously if you want to play on a good team, there’s things that are going to be expected of you, and I don’t think those are things to shy away from.”

NC Central’s Oliver weighing the Eagles’ quarterback options

Continued from page 5A
Thompkins and North Carolina A&T transfer Nelson Layne. Only Jones is a returnee, appearing in nine games on a limited basis.

Whoever is selected will have major cleats to fill with the departure of record-setter and MEAC Offensive Player of the Year Walker Harris.

The transfer portal also affected Oliver’s staff. Chris Barnette takes over as offensive coordinator; Tommy Thigpen is defensive coordinator and safeties coach; Grayson Reed is offensive line coach, Elijah Coleman is cornerbacks coach and recruiting coordinator. Omar Beasley is director of speed development and Thomas Stallworth II is heading up strength & conditioning program.

Defense was NCCU’s biggest Achilles’ heel last season. Breakdowns cost the team in home losses against DSU and eventual MEAC champion South Carolina State. Two “big dogs” that are back to lead the pack are defensive linemen M.J. Campbell and Zaron Walters, Oliver said.

NCCU has opted into the NCAA NIL slush fund. For Oliver, however, players should earn their rewards.

“We are paying some guys, but it’s more about retention that recruiting,” he said. “Whoever has been at NCCU and performed at a high level gets paid first.”

NCCU opens the season Aug. 29 at Texas Southern. The game will be streamed on HBCU GO, which is now on YouTube TV.

Shaw (2-8)

The Bears had one, if not the, youngest squads in the CIAA last season.

By midseason Shaw had 13 true freshmen on the field. It was a learning curve that second-year coach Lamar Manigo expects to pay dividends.

“I told them to take their lumps now and be ready for this upcoming season,”

Manigo said at CIAA Media Day. “During the offseason, they came together as a team.”

One true freshman thrown into the fire earlier than most was quarterback Alexander Marsh who replaced the injured Justin Wheeler in the second game of the season.

Marsh started the next game against Lincoln (Pa.) and led the Bears to a 36-21 win, completing 13 of 22 passes for 165 yards, two touchdowns and one interception. He also rushed for a score. The hype was on.

Marsh ended the season with 101 completions for 1,117 yards, eight touchdowns and six interceptions. He earned a spot on the CIAA All-Rookie Team.

“We got experience in our quarterback position now,” Manigo said. “He took over last year, and he improved every single week.”

Marsh says his goal is to keep improving and having confidence in his teammates.

“Staying consistent with my fundamentals and being an overall leader for the team,” he said. “As a freshman, I had to step up real early. Now, I got guys I can depend on, coaches I can depend on.

“He’s my safety blanket right there.”

The “blanket” Marsh referred to was senior tight end Keyshaun Powell sitting beside him. Powell, who looks more like a linebacker, caught 11 receptions for 113 yards and two TDs last season. But he’s more than willing to protect his quarterback from a rushing defensive line.

“I love blocking. I want to be reliable for the quarterback,” he said. “I can do it all: running back, quarterback, you name it, I can do it.”

Shaw opens the season Aug. 29 at Fayetteville State.

Bonitta Best is sports editor at The Triangle Tribune in Durham.



TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Thomas Incoom (48) is a mainstay on special teams with the Carolina Panthers, but he’s pushing for more playing time at outside linebacker as well.

Special teamer Incoom wants larger role at OLB

Continued from page 5A
great opportunity to look at how the other guys look with the rush groups and how they play on first and second down with the first group.

“So, great opportunities all across the board.”

The Panthers’ leader with 16 special-teams tackles, while helping Carolina win its first NFC South title since 2015, Incoom, viewed as a foundational piece, wasted little time in the offseason to re-sign, agreeing to terms on a one-year, \$2 million deal in March.

Details of his contact calls for Incoom to create more chances. According to Sportrac.com, he earns a \$250,000 bonus for participating in 20% of defensive snaps. He could also pocket another \$250,000 for compiling four sacks and \$500,000 for six.

With a new-look outside linebackers corps and a key contributor, Nic Scourton (knee), out for the season, the 27-year-old Incoom is focused on seizing more than a professional opportunity.

“Not just becoming an all-around player, just to improve myself as a regular person, too,” Incoom said. “Just come in and work for special teams ... for defense ... whatever place my number is called. I’m just trying to give the best I can be out there.”

That may mean not often getting drawn too far inside on run plays, as he did on a first-and-18. With Incoom occupied at the line of scrimmage, nickel cornerback Chau Wade-Smith faced a one-on-one situation with former Panthers running back Ameer Abdullah, who created a whiffed tackle attempt en route to a 23-yard gain.

‘A lot of guys competing’

A Stone Mountain, Georgia, native who started his college career as a tight end at Valdosta State and won a Division II na-

tional title in 2018 before transferring to Central Michigan, Incoom played behind the starting edge trio during Friday’s 34-17 win against the Jaguars. Incoom was credited with one tackle.

In the Hall of Fame Game win on Aug. 6, Incoom showed he’d recovered from June shoulder surgery by participating in 42 snaps, including 36 on defense.

“My training camp experience has been pretty good,” he said. “A lot of guys are competing.”

In 2025, they compiled just 30 sacks, tied with the Baltimore Ravens for the third fewest in the NFL. In ’24, they ranked No. 29 with 34 sacks. In ’23, the first under Evero, they were No. 32 with 27.

Rebounding from losing contain on Abdullah’s first-down run, Incoom pressured third-string quarterback Carter Bradley, but missed an ankle sack attempt to force an incomplete pass on third down.

On the punt return team, Incoom was flagged for holding, erasing Jimmy Horn Jr.’s 19-yard return.

Incoom said his drive for more opportunities has been aided by his “tight” peers.

“It’s a great room, man,” he said. “A room full of great guys and everybody’s competing, helping each other get better day in and day out.

“We help each other on the sidelines, too. Whatever we see, we’re just trying to coach each other so we can get better on the next rep. This is the tightest we have ever been in the room.”

Despite temperatures reaching nearly 100 degrees, Incoom remained on the practice fields behind Bank of America Stadium for an extra half-hour, working on fundamentals.

He wants more and wants to prove it.

Hough defense flexes early

Continued from page 5A

hold them to 10 speaks to how elite this defense can become.

“This defense can be amazing,” Peterson said. “This defense is amazing. We have great potential. Our front four are crazy good and then you have me and [Charles] Puckett back there at linebacker. Then all of our [defensive backs] as well; Josh [Dobson] a five-star, Jonah Holloway, Sincere Day, everybody. We can be really special.”

Dobson — who transferred to Hough from Catawba Ridge — has familiarity with Northwestern. “I have played against [Northwestern] for three years now, so I am kind of used to [Page Wofford’s] offense. He has kept the same offense for a lot of years, and it has worked. They usually score more than 40

points a game, but we have a crazy defense. I think we have the best defense in the country. Nothing is going to take that away from us. Being able to hold them to 10 points and knowing what they do to other teams; they are probably not going to be held to 10 points the rest of the season.”

Hough coach DeShawn Baker credited the coaching staff and preparation for the defense’s effort.

“I think what you saw is just a testament to how we practice,” he said. “Shout out to all of our coaches, coach Chachi [Sullivan] coach [Jamel] Byrd and our whole defensive staff for putting together a good game plan. They played lights out.”

The offense did just enough to get the win and Huskies quarterback Ethan

Royal, who tossed two touchdown passes, including the go-ahead score with 15 seconds left in the third quarter, credited the defense for stepping up.

“We feed off the defense’s energy,” he said. “Anytime they make a big play we are ready to come back out and make another big play on offense, so it feels really good to know we have a backbone to lean on whenever we are struggling.”

Royal tossed two touchdown passes, including the go-ahead score with 15 seconds left in the third quarter.

When asked if Hough has the potential to be one of the best teams in state history, Royal didn’t mince words.

“No doubt about it,” he said. “We will be really good once we put everything together.”

Littlejohn’s a winner in Butler debut

By Herbert L. White

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Donald Littlejohn’s Butler High debut wasn’t perfect.

The Bulldogs’ coach lamented a slow start in their 27-14 win against Olympic last week in the season opener, but the objective was met. They started slowly but finished with a flourish despite early miscues.

“I expect us to win,” he said. “Honestly, I thought it’d be a little bit sharper than what we [did], so I want to make sure that as we prepare this week that we know it just stays more to the game plan and execute a little better with what we do.”

Butler (1-0), which bumped its way into The Post’s Magnificent Seven rankings at No. 7, trailed Olympic 14-13 on Michael Mull’s 11-yard pass to David McAdams with 3:26 in the second quarter, but rallied quickly to flip the initiative. Nico Henderson’s 11-yard strike to Demetrius Starling on the final play before halftime pushed the Bulldogs ahead 20-14. They added another score in the third and dominated on defense to put the game away.



Littlejohn

“It’s all about the guys,” Littlejohn said. “If these guys are happy, and you know, I’m gonna keep them happy. But like I said, my biggest thing is, you know, we need to execute a little bit better early.

“It’s all about the guys,” Littlejohn said. “If these guys are happy, I’m going to keep them happy. My biggest thing is we need to execute a little bit better early, put the game [away] earlier. We kept a little bit too close, in my opinion.”

Littlejohn, an assistant coach at West Charlotte before taking Butler’s top job – his first – in the offseason, is no stranger to expectations. He’s coached state championship teams and no stranger to high-stakes contests. Butler, which won three North Carolina 4A titles between 2009-12, hasn’t been on that stage for more than a decade, but Littlejohn is determined to write a new narrative.

“It might have been my first game as a head coach, but it wasn’t my first game with extreme pressure,” he said. “My first game as [offensive coordinator] at [Rock Hill] South Point was versus Northwestern in the big stadium down there. I didn’t want too much to be about me, but more about them and it’s my seniors’ last first game. I think that’s what it’s really about.”

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