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MATT LACZKO | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Quality Comprehensive Health Center CEO Dr. Ra'Shawn Flournoy sits in the PowerHouse 2.0 mobile unit at the center's headquarters in Historic West End. PowerHouse 2.0 will shutter next month after losing federal funding that will be reallocated to state and local health departments.

Federal funding shift forces HIV testing initiative to close

Charlotte's PowerHouse 2.0 loses CDC support to public health departments

By Cameron Williams
cameron.williams@thecharlottepost.com

An HIV testing center in Historic West End is closing after losing federal funding.

PowerHouse 2.0, a program of Quality Comprehensive Health Center since 2010, has been supported through grants from the Centers for Disease Control. In July the Trump administration ordered millions of dollars in HIV prevention funding redirected from community initiatives like PowerHouse 2.0 and moved to state and local health departments. As a result, the Charlotte ini-

tiative is losing its five-year, \$2.5 million grant and will close by month's end.

"What we were told is that the funding will shift to the health department with our state, and that hopefully the state would then be able to work with those that were impacted by the funding cut," QCHC CEO Dr. Ra'Shawn Flournoy said. "However, with the lack of communication from the state health department, we haven't heard anything. So, right now everyone is just kind of scrambling around trying to figure out what to do."

STD rates in Mecklenburg County are among the highest in North Carolina, ac-

cording to the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. In 2025, Mecklenburg had 249 newly-diagnosed HIV infections and 118 new AIDS cases, a decrease compared to 2024 when 273 and 149 respectively were recorded. Chlamydia was Mecklenburg's most prevalent sexually transmitted infection in 2025 with 7,308 infections compared to gonorrhea (3,096) and syphilis (698).

According to Invigor Medical, a Washington, D.C.-based medical clinic, the Charlotte region - which includes Con-

Please see **HIV** | 2A

A future without MWBE support

NC small business owners scramble after budget eliminates office, benchmarks

By Charles K. Harris
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

When North Carolina's 2026 Appropriations Act was signed in July, there was little media coverage.

Even those most affected were caught off guard.

"The elimination of the North Carolina Department of Administration's Office of Historically Underutilized Businesses certainly came as a surprise to me," said Nicole Outlaw, assistant director of Chapel Hill-based NCGrowth, founded in 2012 to created equitable economic opportunities for communities. Outlaw is also founder and president of the Bertie Business Network, an organization she launched in 2021 to help entrepreneurs access resources, network building and growth opportunities.

"There were many areas of concern regarding the negotiations at the General Assembly, especially budget discussions," Outlaw said, adding, "While I cannot speculate if it was a deliberate act to keep it



Outlaw

Please see **SMALL** | 2A

OK to exhale after court soot ruling

By Zamone Perez
NORTH CAROLINA NEWS SERVICE

North Carolina clean air organizations are cheering a series of court rulings forcing the Environmental Protection Agency to implement new regulations on soot levels.

Under President Joe Biden in 2024, the EPA strengthened National Ambient Air Quality Standards for fine particulate matter, commonly known as soot. Republican-led states and fossil fuel industry groups sued to prevent the decision from taking effect and the Trump administration joined the lawsuit. However, a D.C. Circuit Court invalidated the challenge in June.

Andrew Whelan, director of strategic communications for the advocacy group CleanAIRE NC, said one in five North Carolina children have asthma, and a reversal of stricter standards threatens their health.

"Asthma, of course, has been directly linked to particulate matter exposure," Whelan said. "If the EPA

Please see **OK** | 3A

Some NC voting rules may be delayed until after midterm elections

By Lynn Bonner
NC NEWSLINE

A state commission that OKs administrative rules unanimously approved changes for elections and voting, though at least some of those rules may not be ready in time for the midterm elections.

The Rules Review Commission is usually a final stop for administrative rules changes before they're activated. That's unless at least 10 people object to a rule. When 10 or more people write acceptable letters of objection, rules effective dates are delayed for legislative review in the General Assembly's next regular session. The legislature is on a break but is still in session. The next regular session won't start until next year.

As of Aug. 26, the proposed rules for photo ID and for voting site conduct received more than 10 objec-

Please see **SOME** | 2A

Hospitals embrace a new tool to reduce childbirth risks: Wristbands

By Andrew Jones
KFF HEALTH NEWS

Hospitals across the U.S. are trying to reduce maternal deaths and complications after pregnancies using one small tool: a silicone wristband stamped with the declaration "I Gave Birth."

The wristbands are part of a growing initiative first launched by North Carolina-based ECU Health as Congress sought to address the nation's growing maternal mortality crisis during the covid pandemic. Since 2021, nearly 50 North Carolina hospitals and the state's health department have begun distributing the wristbands, to give mothers and care providers a visual reminder of the life-threatening health risks after

birth.

The Connecticut state health department; large health systems in Arkansas, Georgia, and Mississippi; and hospitals in at least 24 other states have also embraced the program. The wristbands are intended to make emergency workers aware of postpartum risks, ensure better treatment, and help lower maternal mortality rates in the U.S., where nearly 70% of pregnancy-related deaths happen after the day of delivery — and nearly 40% happen after the six-week mark.

This year, North Carolina plans to expand the initiative with part of the \$213 million it received through the Rural Health Transformation Pro-

Please see **HOSPITALS** | 2A

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HIV initiative shuttered after loss of US funding

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cord and Gastonia – was fifth in the U.S. last year with 1,338.9 STD cases per 100,000 people. Only Philadelphia, Atlanta, Bronx County, New York and New York County, N.Y., metro areas recorded higher infection rates.

Over the last 16 years, PowerHouse 2.0 has become more than an HIV testing site. Clients also come in for free STD testing as well as prevention education, referrals and connections to healthcare and support services.

“There’s always been a stigma when it comes to HIV testing,” Flournoy said. ... “Discretion has always been one of the things when it comes to getting testing, so to be able to pull up to a safe haven, get tested, be able to walk back out and kind of go back to their lives or whatever, that’s a huge plus. And I think that one of the things that makes it even more devastating is that when you’re looking at capacity, our local health department doesn’t have the capacity to even test as well, so they’re literally sending people down to our agency to get tested.”

PowerHouse 2.0 is located where access matters.

The center, located at 1401 Beatties Ford Road, is in an area where access to healthcare and supportive resources can and have been historically limited. Even if clients don’t have access to transportation, PowerHouse 2.0 has a mobile unit that reaches people where they are.

“It goes beyond just the brick-and-mortar location we have here,” said Dr. Jamie Troutman, QCHC’s chief of programs. “We have our mobile unit where our team can go out and provide testing in the community and reach individuals that otherwise wouldn’t be able to make it here and get tested. The reach has been wide and vast and that is going to be significant

ly impacted by this funding cut.”

Said Flournoy: “PowerHouse is rooted in Charlotte’s Historic West End, in a ZIP code where access to healthcare and other resources can be limited for some of the very people we serve. We believe people should not have to leave their community or navigate complicated systems just to receive basic prevention services.”

According to Jory Heckman with Government Executive, the changes in funding distribution will result in more upfront administrative costs and longer waits for federal funding to reach community-based groups — if at all — like in PowerHouse 2.0’s case.

“We’re looking at people’s lives,” Flournoy said, “and no matter what side that you sway to there’s people whose lives are truly impacted by these types of services that are being cut, so we need everyone to work together. And I think that as a community, in order to make an impact, we have to make that voice known.”

Although the outlook is closure for PowerHouse 2.0, Flournoy and his team are looking to a solution that replicates its impact in the community the last 16 years.

“As we work on transitions, we’re definitely working on building the strategic plan,” he said, “so we never have this issue happen again. We’re looking at how do we grow the organization, looking at community partnerships, looking at donations, also looking at expanding our reach with our 340B program, which allows us to be able to link folks to care through prep, and being able to so just looking at different ways to be able to be innovative in our reach into communities.

“Just kind of looking at a different approach for now and continuing our mission.”

Small business owners caught off guard by end of state goals

Continued from page 1A

under the radar, I believe those who were aware knew that the impact would raise significant concerns.”

Why the “significant concerns?” To answer that question, understanding the full scope of the 2026 state budget is critical.

The law eliminated the Office of Historically Underutilized Businesses effective immediately.

HUBs are identified as small businesses in which at least 51% ownership is held by a woman, minority or service-disabled veteran.

The HUBs office was part of the North Carolina Small Business Enterprise, which is under the Department of Administration, established in 1999 and signed into law by then-Gov. Jim Hunt. Executive Order 150, as it was known, included a statutory framework that mandated a percentage of all state agency procurements be obtained from certified HUBs. Qualifying businesses were granted certification after an application process.

“The (HUB) office aided in supporting businesses to prepare by providing access to resources and building capacity regarding the certification and the procurement process,” Outlaw said. “It afforded an opportunity to small businesses to provide goods and services to large anchor institutions.”

Executive Order 150 also provided training and consultation to HUBs across the state. Along with the immediate closure of the HUB office, the new budget crafted by Republican lawmakers and signed into law by Gov. Josh Stein simultaneously repealed HUB-connected statutes, including mandatory good-faith effort requirements, and reporting certifications. In short, state agencies no longer must abide by statutes that guaranteed participation goals for women, minority or disabled small businesses.

Current data shows that 99.6% of the state’s businesses are small businesses and make up about 45% of the private sector workforce. Of those, nearly half are owned by women. Just under 16% are owned by Black people. As of July, almost 6,500 small businesses held state HUB certification.

“The business owners affected by the closing of this office represent a great number of new and existing businesses who were working to position themselves to obtain government contracts through HUB certification,” Outlaw said.

The NC DOA announced NCSBE is moving to the Division of Purchase and Contract but offered little else. NC DOA’s website only says, “more details coming soon.”

The NCSBE is described by the NC DOA as a “race- and gender-neutral program” that works to provide contracting oppor-

tunities to small businesses. That definition can have a misleading ring of equity and inclusion. Without consideration to race and gender, contracts will be awarded based on qualifiers such as business location, income and size, giving no consideration to the legacy of discrimination.

This is just one of the changes included in the state’s \$34 billion package aimed at dismantling any provisions for diversity, equity and inclusion, a reflection of the larger national efforts to eliminate DEI, which proponents call unfair, illegal and unconstitutional.

Earlier this summer, state House Speaker Destin Hall declared, “Taxpayer funded DEI is done in North Carolina.” Close inspection of the 634-page budget plan supports Hall’s proclamation. In addition to dissolving the HUB office and repealing its statutes, the budget also eliminated the Office of Health Equity within the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, which worked for three decades to improve healthcare access for minorities and close disparities in healthcare services.

The budget quashed a minority male mentoring program in the NC Community College Systems office. And while the budget allocates billions to the state prison system, including expansion efforts due to overcrowding, it nixed all state financial support to the Second Chance Initiative at Campbell University, a program that provides inmates with college education and career skills that can secure employment following release.

For minority small business owners though, all hope is not lost. While Outlaw encourages HUBs affected by the change to contact NCDORA directly for information about next steps. She also listed several other agencies that can offer ongoing guidance and support.

The Small Business Technical Development Center, with locations across the state, offers workshops and free counseling for small business owners. Other options include the North Carolina Community College Small Business Center Network, and the nationally active Service Corps of Retired Executives. NCGrowth provides no-cost technical assistance to small businesses in rural and economically distressed communities.

Outlaw emphasizes that the community at large can also make a difference.

“[Everyone] can support historically underutilized businesses by intentionally patronizing them,” she said. “Shop small. Support local.” Outlaw also says that spending power can go far when legislators fall short. “Our communities have the consumer power to overcome adversity when we use the challenges we face as fuel to start a movement.”

Some voting rules may be delayed until after midterm

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tion letters, as did one section of a proposed rule on recounts. The deadline for objection letters was Aug. 27, so it’s possible more rules will be delayed.

Brian LiVecchi, state Board of Elections chief of staff, said the board would consider issuing the rules as “numbered memos,” instructions to county elections boards that are less formal than rules.

“We probably will discuss that if anything is deemed critical,” he said.

Members of Democracy Out Loud – a group that says it wants a “fair and inclusive democracy” – spoke against the rules, saying they were not clear or that the board went beyond its legal authority to make the changes. Jim Womack, president of the conservative North Carolina Election Integrity Team, objected to a rule on buffers around voting sites.

Gov. Josh Stein sent the commission a letter asking it to delay one of the rules for absentee ballots and the rules for throwing out ballots when members of local boards believe that voters are lying about why they don’t have photo ID.

After the Aug. 27 hearing, Stein criticized “partisan actors” in Washington and Raleigh for moving to change election rules just days before North Carolina mails absentee ballots.

“The harmful and unnecessary changes proposed by Auditor Boliek’s State Board of Elections risk creating confusion for voters, chaos for election officials, and unnecessary barriers to the ballot box,” said Stein. “I urge all North Carolinians to

call on their elected officials and the State Board of Elections to stop undermining our democracy.”

As it stands now, a county board of elections must vote unanimously to discard the ballots of people who members think lied about the reasons they didn’t present an ID. The proposed rule would allow a simple majority to make that decision, meaning Republican majorities on boards could vote to toss ballots.

The rule on absentee ballots makes it hard to vote by mail, Stein wrote, and “increases the likelihood that more voters casting absentee ballots will see their votes thrown out. Many North Carolinians, including people who are elderly, disabled, or ill, choose to vote absentee by mail, and there is no evidence that the additional proposed requirements for these votes to be counted are necessary.”

Stein also objected to the rule making it easier for local boards to toss ballots if members decide a voter lied about photo ID.

“Making the rejection of voters’ ballots a partisan decision will undermine voters’ trust that their ballots will be counted,” Stein wrote.

The photo ID rule drew vigorous public objection when it went before the Board of Elections earlier this year. The board received 161 pages of emailed comments about the rule, and 1,506 comments through an online portal. Most were opposed to dropping the need for unanimous votes to toss ballots.



UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS FOR MEDICAL SCIENCES

Postpartum “I Gave Birth” wristbands gained traction across the country through health awareness campaigns fueled by social media posts and evening news segments.

Hospitals use new tool to reduce childbirth risks: Wristbands

Continued from page 1A

gram, a provision of President Donald Trump’s signature One Big Beautiful Bill Act, also known as HR 1.

Tamika Auguste, a physician and the board chair at the American College of Obstetricians & Gynecologists Foundation, praised the wristbands as a useful tool “to increase awareness and education around postpartum health.” But she and others who focus on maternal health said efforts like the wristband campaigns are only part of what’s needed to combat the broader maternal mortality crisis in the U.S.

And they noted the wristbands’ popularity is emerging as Trump’s 2025 law is expected to reduce Medicaid spending by more than \$900 billion over 10 years, according to a Congressional Budget Office analysis. Medicaid, the federal-state program that covers healthcare for low-income families, pays for at least 40% of births nationwide.

Elisabeth Wright Burak, a policy researcher at Georgetown University’s Center for Children and Families, said Trump’s tax-and-spending law is stifling the momentum states had been gaining with maternal care since 2022. That’s when Congress allowed states to extend postpartum Medicaid coverage from 60 days to a year, which nearly every state did.

Now, those extensions could end up on the chopping block, Burak said, as states seek ways to manage Medicaid losses.

“There is no question that HR 1 risks setting the clock back for maternal health,” Burak said.

A report she co-authored in July warned that postpartum patients have more to worry about with the new law than simply cuts to Medicaid. States are also setting up systems that may not adequately track pregnant and postpartum enrollees who should be exempt from the law’s new work requirements, erroneously dropping them from coverage, Burak’s report said.

Maternal mortality

U.S. maternal mortality rates have risen and fallen over the past seven years, with 649 maternal deaths in 2024, according to the most recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data.

Tennessee had the worst maternal mortality rate in the nation from 2020 to 2024, around 42 deaths per 100,000 births, according an analysis of CDC data by the Congressional Research Service. North Carolina’s rate was about 29 in 100,000, with a national average of 23.

In its Rural Health Transformation Program application, North Carolina said the initiative creating the “I Gave Birth” wristbands reduced postpartum readmissions by nearly a third at ECU Health Medical Center in Greenville, without elaborating.

In online promotions, some hospitals have claimed the wristband campaigns can save lives, though many have recently launched and their impact has yet to be studied.

“Additional research is needed to conclusively confirm the outcomes of such initiatives,” said Hannah Jones, a spokesperson for the North Carolina health department.

Hospitals provide a wristband to patients who have given birth and instruct them to wear it for weeks or months, hoping they’ll be reminded to check in with a physician if they feel chest pain, have headaches, or start bleeding. The accessory resembles the yellow Livestrong wristband, part of a cancer awareness campaign launched by cyclist Lance Armstrong’s foundation.

A nurse also talks through postpartum risks with the patients, and they’re sent home with pamphlets and guidebooks on how to care for their new child and themselves.

“The bracelet itself is simply a reminder of, ‘Hey, I got education,’” said Jessica Noble, a nurse with East Carolina University-connected ECU Health who pioneered the initiative.

It’s also intended to alert first responders and other healthcare providers that a woman has recently given birth and to check for postpartum complications, such as low blood pressure, bleeding, or infections. Emergency department staff and EMS workers sometimes don’t have adequate training to recognize postpartum complications, research shows, which can be dangerous when those patients end up in an emergency room.

Postpartum wristbands gained traction across the country through health awareness campaigns fueled by social media posts and evening news segments. New mothers appeared in promotional photos and videos wearing the wristband and raving about the accessory, saying it celebrated childbirth.

Some postpartum patients who faced traumatic births or mental health struggles saw it differently.

‘So many risks’

Alexandra Mellon gave birth last year. Her daughter was stillborn. Devastated, she sought out a therapist, donated her breast milk, and tried to find meaning in her circumstances. She spent a year feeling isolated, she said, often because people don’t know what to say.

Mellon said wearing one of the wristbands would have been a painful reminder of her loss.

Now she works as a doula in Asheville. Mellon said what she thinks new moms need most is community and emotional support. The wristband could help encourage that for some patients, she said, but isn’t for everyone.



FILE PHOTO

Environmental activists applaud a federal court decision that leaves in place Biden era rules that strengthen federal air quality standards.

OK to exhale after court upholds Biden soot rules

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succeeds in its efforts to roll back these standards, it invites more pollution back into our state, and it's going to erase many of the hard-won gains that we've seen across North Carolina."

The moves by the Trump administration were part of a major deregulatory push aimed at rules the administration believed burdened companies and aimed to lower operational costs and expenses for corporations.

As the first lawsuit played out, the Trump administration missed a legal deadline to put the standards in place. It led to a lawsuit when a coalition of 17 environmental, faith and community groups and 10 different states sued to force the administration to move forward. The coalition won the case in July and the administration now has until February 2027 to make

progress on implementation. The administration must map communities failing to reach the clean air standards and later bring restrictions on which polluting facilities can be placed in an area.

Caroline Cress, senior attorney at the Southern Environmental Law Center, one of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit, explained what the ruling means for the government.

"They have to install better pollution controls, and they have to offset any increases in emissions that they would cause," Cress said. "The idea is that you don't have an increase in emissions in an area where you already have poor air quality."

EPA studies from the Biden years estimated the new soot standards would prevent more than 4,000 premature deaths annually while generating more than \$40 billion in net health benefits.

NC Medicaid red tape goes further than US demands

By Zamone Perez

NC NEWSLINE

Misinformation and distrust are among the challenges facing public health workers in the Democratic Republic of Congo as they confront the second-deadliest Ebola outbreak on record.

Even though the virus has faded from U.S. headlines, key organizations are still at work providing medical care and training to counter the spread of the disease.

Since the World Health Organization's May 17 declaration of a public health emergency, over 5,200 cases of the Bundibugyo strain of the Ebola virus have been confirmed and more than 2,500 people have died in Congo, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

More than 550 people were in isolation with Ebola in Congo as of Aug. 7, the country's National Public Health Institute said. Twenty cases and two deaths were reported in neighboring Uganda as well, but no new cases have been reported there since June 21, the World Health Organization said.

The worst Ebola outbreak in history, which hit several countries in West Africa from 2014 to 2016, claimed over 11,300 lives.

The current outbreak is only the third of the Bundibugyo strain in central Africa. Congo officials are reporting a 44% fatality rate for the rare strain, which does not yet have a vaccine. Military conflict in eastern Congo, where the outbreak is centered, has made the medical response more difficult.

"When everybody became aware of what was happening, we were already months behind where we should have been as a global community in stopping the spread of this disease," said Erica Tavares, a senior director of the International Medical Corps.

The U.S. has pledged \$512 million in direct aid in response to the outbreak and enacted a travel ban, temporarily preventing non-U.S. citizens traveling from the affected region from entering the country.

Meanwhile, public health workers in Congo continue to toil against Ebola.

New Medicaid eligibility rules passed by North Carolina last spring go further than

what President Donald Trump's spending package required and health advocates are distraught by the compounding effects of the policies.

Trump's House Resolution 1 budget bill targeted Medicaid recipients who receive benefits under the Affordable Care Act's Medicaid expansion. Starting next year, adults between the ages of 19 and 64 will have to work or volunteer for 80 hours a month to qualify for benefits.

While federal rules require applicants to verify one previous month of work history, North Carolina's Medicaid funding bill increases the verification period to three months.

Rebecca Cerece, director of the health advocacy project at the North Carolina Justice Center, said lawmakers are failing to recognize life is not always clean-cut.

"People's lives are complicated. People in rural areas sometimes have lower employment opportunities. People can get sick or have an accident at any time that can complicate matters or make it that there's a month that you can't work like that," Cerece observed.

Republicans argued the new compliance measures will help cut costs and push people to enter the workforce. While the funding package received bipartisan support, Democrats denounced certain provisions related to Medicaid coverage. Federal Medicaid work requirements take effect for most states on Jan. 1 of next year, including North Carolina. The state's Medicaid bill bans self-attestation, where a recipient signs a document saying information provided is true under the penalty of perjury.

Cerece argued tying health insurance coverage to working is counterproductive, and other workforce training programs could perform better.

"I am all for programs that encourage people to get skills and get good living wage jobs but we should not be tying that to health insurance coverage because health insurance coverage helps people stay healthy so they can actually be productive and they can be there for themselves and their families," Cerece emphasized.

More than 3 million North Carolinians receive a Medicaid benefit each month. Nearly half of them are children.

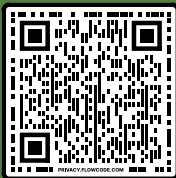
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After Leandro, we rally for purpose

For the first time in three decades, North Carolina educators headed back to school without the court case that had become a rallying cry for public schools known as Leandro.

On April 2, the state Supreme Court dismissed Leandro, a lawsuit that asked for what North Carolina's Constitution has promised: a sound, basic education for every child. The case became the argument for the courts forcing what the General Assembly has refused to do, allocating the money and resources necessary to improve our schools, creating opportunity for every child.

The court didn't say the underlying problem was solved. It said the courts were no longer the venue to fix it. There is no more multibillion-dollar remedy plan working its way through the system. No more waiting on a court order. No one is coming to write the check.

So, we need something else to rally around. I'd argue we already have it, and it's not a case number. It's the work itself.

Here's the thing about a courtroom loss: it doesn't touch the state constitution. Article I, Section 15 of the North Carolina Constitution says: "The people have a right to the privilege of education, and it is the duty of the State to guard and maintain that right."

Our demand to uphold the constitution matters most this year, because what our kids need to succeed is shifting under our feet.

Every corporate partner who walks into a school talks about workforce readiness, about building "the workers of tomorrow." It's a fair goal, but I keep coming back to a harder question underneath that phrase: which kids get to be the workers, and which get to be the ones who design the work?

That's not a hypothetical divide. It's the same haves-and-have-nots fault line Leandro spent 30 years trying to close, just wearing new clothes, this time drawn along who has access to real technology instruction and thoughtful AI integration paired with meaningful discourse and critical thinking, and who gets a locked-down device and a worksheet.

There's a bigger transformation happening underneath all of this, and it isn't unique to North Carolina. Schools everywhere are being pushed toward AI as the answer to almost everything, and parents and communities are pushing back, not really about screens themselves, but about a quieter fear: that kids are losing the muscle to think without one.

That fear is producing a real call for social and interpersonal skills, the human parts of learning that no algorithm can replace. North Carolina already has language for this. The state's own Portrait of a Graduate names seven durable skills our students need: adaptability, collaboration, communication, critical thinking, empathy, a learner's mindset, and personal responsibility. None of those come from a screen. They come from a classroom where a highly qualified teacher is paying attention and building meaningful learning.

I think about two kinds of students, and I want to be clear that both matter equally. There's the kid who was counting on a stable factory job, the kind that used to be there for a hardworking 18-year-old with a diploma, and finds that field automated out from under an entire graduating class before commencement even happens. And there's the kid who did "everything right," went to college, trained for a field, and still walks the stage to find that field reshaped underneath them, all of it moving faster than a four-year degree can keep up.

Neither of those students is a cautionary tale. Both reflect the labor market our students are entering. That's why public schools can't sort kids early into "college kids" and "workforce kids." The skills that serve both are the same: the ability to pivot, learn new tools quickly, even help build a field that doesn't exist yet. Thirteen years of public education aimed at one fixed destination is not a plan for either kid. It's gambling with futures that aren't ours to risk.

I am a humanities teacher in my 21st year, a field some say we don't need because it doesn't relate directly to a job. When I ask my colleagues what they're really teaching, they'll tell me that underneath the annotation and essays, students are really learning far more: how to read a situation, build an argument, revise under pressure, and adapt when the first draft doesn't work. These are the most valuable skills in an uncertain economy.

Critical thinking isn't a soft skill anymore. It's the whole game.

This is where I think North Carolina public schools can actually lead. We don't need to rally around Leandro this year. We get to rally around each other, around kids who are watching more closely than we know, to see whether they'll get real instruction or a screen and a script, whether they'll be handed the work or taught to help design it, and around a constitution that still says what it always said. That's still worth showing up for, with purpose, resolve, and joy.

Kimberly Jones is a 21-year public school educator and the 2023-24 North Carolina Teacher of the Year. She teaches English and AP African American Studies at Chapel Hill High School.



KIMBERLY JONES

Improve sports medicine for women

As the primary care sports medicine doctor for the New York Liberty - and a former Division I athlete - I've seen more sports injuries than I can count.

It's easy to get injured doing what we love - injury prevention, treatment, and recovery are natural parts of any athlete's journey. But even as more eyes turn to women's sports, and female athletes surge in popularity, there's still a great deal that sports medicine doctors don't know about actually treating women.

We need increased investment in women's sports science - not just to improve outcomes for elite athletes, but to improve care for women and girls across the healthcare system.

Women routinely undergo significant hormonal and bodily changes that can dramatically affect their movement. I've pre-

viously written, for instance, about how pregnancy affects women's movement - and that we need intentional and individualized approaches to optimize postpartum recovery. Many are familiar with the hormone-induced changes that occur in pregnancy. Similarly, the aging woman experiences musculoskeletal changes. Some are directly due to hormones, and many are entirely unique to women. As women age and eventually enter menopause, their estrogen levels decrease. That decline can lead to reduced muscle mass and bone mineral density. Women can lose about 2% of bone mass each year before menopause - and at least 3% after. As a result, women face a greater risk of osteoporosis. With a weakened bone anchor system, they are also at an increased risk of musculoskeletal in-

juries like tendon injuries - such as rotator cuff tears - and stress fractures. Women are now competing and working out at high intensity levels for longer than ever before, both at the professional and recreational level. We need to expand our understanding of how best to support them and aid injury prevention and longevity. Now's the time to push for more research efforts and funding. Women's sports have never been so popular. Media coverage for women's sports reached a record 15% in 2024. We're entering a new era for women's sports. It's time for women's medicine to catch up.

Dr. Ashley Austin is a primary sports medicine physician in the Women's Sports Medicine Center at Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City.

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TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Carolina Panthers right tackle Albert Reese IV (76) earned the start in the preseason finale against the Houston Texans on Aug. 28, 2026, at Bank of America Stadium. Reese, an undrafted rookie, earned a spot on the initial 53-player roster.

Reese undrafted, not overlooked

Panthers rookie offensive tackle is on the verge of adding to family’s football legacy by making roster

By Jeff Hawkins
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Nearly six minutes into his NFL debut on Aug. 6, Carolina Panthers offensive tackle Albert Reese IV was flagged for a false start.

Less than 30 seconds later, the undrafted free agent attracted the officials’ attention again on a holding call. That mishap was declined, but Panthers coach Dave Canales reacted, summoning the rookie to the bench.

“I wasn’t proud of that at all,” Reese

said after last week’s joint practice with the Houston Texans. “I didn’t let it rattle me. I didn’t let it carry on. I slowed down, warmed up (and) got the blood flowing and then I was able to finish the game and help my team.”

In a big way.

The 6-foot-7, 330-pound Reese anchored an offensive line comprised of third- and fourth stringers that drove the Panthers to a walk-off victory against the Arizona Cardinals in the preseason opener. Entering the preseason finale against the Texans at Bank of America Stadium, Reese earned the start for his final audition for a roster

spot.

During Carolina’s 34-17 win against the Jacksonville Jaguars on Aug. 21, Reese registered a 91.5 grade, earning the Panthers’ highest offensive mark, per Pro Football Focus.

“I was definitely proud of that,” he said. “It feels good because I felt like I prepared all that week and it paid off. It just makes you want to keep going and take the next step and keep doing my thing.”

Rebound from early mistakes

Carolina’s offensive line, collectively, didn’t do much of anything during the Panthers’ final full training camp ses-

sion. Dominated by the Texans’ top-ranked defense, quarterback Bryce Young struggled, throwing two interceptions and losing a fumble. He was sacked at least seven times. First-round draft pick Monroe Freeling struggled against defensive ends Will Anderson Jr. and Danielle Hunter, yielding at least four sacks.

Canales described the difference between the Texans’ first-team defense against the Panthers’ top offensive unit as “lopsided.”

“It sucks to have a day where you don’t feel like you produced very well,”

Please see **REESE** | 6A



Reese IV

Hough on the attack in time for Providence Day



MATT LACZKO | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Hough High quarterback Ethan Royal passed for four touchdowns and ran for another in the Huskies’ 35-10 win against Cardinal Gibbons at Bank of America Stadium on Aug. 29, 2026. Hough, No. 1 in The Post’s Magnificent Seven, improved to 2-0.

By Cameron Williams
cameron.williams@thecharlottepost.com

Hough High’s offense has awakened.

The Huskies — No. 1 in The Post’s Magnificent Seven rankings — struggled in week one to get going on offense. No such troubles were found in week two – a 35-10 rout of Cardinal Gibbons.

Hough (2-0) quarterback Ethan Royal, who accounted for five touchdowns (four passing), said the season-opening 15-10 win against Rock Hill Northwestern was a fluke offensive performance.

“I just told them that wasn’t us,” Royal said. “We have to play the game the way we play it. We practice Monday through Thursday lights out, and if we don’t do it on Friday then it’s [no good]. So, we just worked on it this week with tempo, and we came out and dominated.”

Hough coach DeShawn Baker said that he feels if the Huskies can get the offense going early, it establishes rhythm for the defense as well.

“Offensively, we came out, ran the ball early on the first drive,” he said. “Ethan threw the ball really well, read the defense really well, and took it down and scored on the first drive.”

Please see **HOUGH** | 6A

It’s win or bust for A&T’s Gibbs

Shawn Gibbs was 16-5 in two seasons at the SIAC’s Fort Valley State.

Florida A&M boosters didn’t care how successful he was on the “lowly” Division II level. He wasn’t coming there, so they pulled the plug on Gibbs possibly becoming the Rattlers’ next head coach in 2024.

After another season at FVSV and a 6-4 record, North Carolina A&T came calling. This was home. Gibbs coached under one of the best in Rod Broadway and played against the Aggies as a star running back at hated rival North Carolina Central. He’s also most responsible for A&T being dubbed “Running Back U” for producing outstanding backs like Tarik Cohen over the years.

Easy peasy, right?

Here’s the thing: Aggies fans are rabid supporters; they love to see coaching hires stay in the family, they love to party, they love their school, but, most of all, they love to win. If teams aren’t winning, parties turn into grumbling therapy sessions, travel plans get canceled, and no one cares which school the coach graduated.

Gibbs hasn’t soured the party, but he did hear his share of grumbings, even in his first season. You’re not in Kansas anymore. You’re in Aggieland.

“I thought I had a firm grasp on what being a head coach is, but last year taught me that I got a lot to learn,” Gibbs said on boxtorow.com. “I spent the offseason talking to a lot of veteran head coaches and finding out how I can improve myself, and then if I can improve myself, I’m sure the team will fol-



BONITTA
BEST

Magnificent Seven’s top three unchanged; Butler moves in

By Herbert L. White
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Mecklenburg County’s best teams are rising to the task against top flight competition.

The top three Magnificent Seven squads – Hough, Mallard Creek and Chambers – won last week in impressive fashion, paced by the No. 1 Huskies knocking off Cardinal Gibbons and Mallard Creek knocking off Norfolk Maury (Va.) for a massive road victory.

There’s one change in the rankings: Ardrey Kell’s debut at

No. 6 after Charlotte Catholic’s 15-7 loss to Country Day.

This week’s top seven teams:

1. **Hough** (2-0). The Huskies have done everything the state’s top team is supposed to do in rolling Cardinal Gibbons 35-10 at the Keep Pounding Classic. Up next is Mecklenburg’s must-see game of the regular season against Providence Day.

2. **Mallard Creek** (2-0). The Mavericks are a real force with last week’s 31-30 win at Maury, a program coming off its third straight 5A state title. Next is an-

other tough non-conference clash at Buford (Ga.).

3. **Chambers** (2-0). Two games, two easy wins for the potent Cougars. Will Corvian Community amount to another speed bump?

4. **Palisades** (2-0). The Pumas aren’t missing a beat with assistant coach Darrel Wilson leading them to a 32-0 pasting of Olympic.

Next: Clover (S.C.) on the road.

5. **Butler** (2-0). New coach Donald Littlejohn has the Bulldogs looking impressive after a 42-14

win at Statesville.

A third road trip to open the season – this week at Indian Land (S.C.) – awaits.

6. **Ardrey Kell** (2-0). The Knights are off to a good start under first-year coach Carter Greene. Last week’s 20-7 win at Porter Ridge was impressive. Up next is a home date against Marvin Ridge.

7. **West Charlotte** (1-1). New coach D.J. McFadden earns his first win in a 22-20 decision against Monroe. Next: A test against Summerville (S.C.)

JC Smith needs improvement on road to classic

By Herbert L. White
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One game into the season and Johnson C. Smith is already dealing with stress.

The Golden Bulls’ 32-10 loss at Benedict in the season opener exposed their inability – for a game, at least – to master raised expectations. After a record-breaking 2025 that included the

CIAA title and the school’s first Division II postseason berth, JCSU (0-1) is no longer an insurgent program. The Tigers, who advanced to the playoffs’ second round last year, delivered the message in every phase.

“Adversity teaches you a lot and the thing that I do know about our team – whenever we’ve had adversity, we re-

bound,” Golden Bulls coach Maurice Flowers said.

“This is a great lesson for us, a good way for us to learn a whole lot [about] uncharted territory, but now we’ll understand what it’s like to be everybody’s Super Bowl.”



Flowers

JCSU struggled with mistakes both mental and physical. The defense, which has been the cornerstone through Flowers’ first four seasons, allowed 433 yards in addition to the 32 points. The offense, which returns four starting linemen and an All-CIAA receiver, struggled to sustain rhythm. Special teams missed a

Please see **JCSU** | 6A

Please see **IT’S WIN** | 6A

Reese undrafted, but not overlooked by Panthers

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Young said. "But it's a great learning opportunity. That's what these training camp practices are for."

Reese said he wanted "a few plays back" from Wednesday, adding he would use it as motivation for Friday.

"Their defense is absolutely stellar," he said. "At the same time, you can't just blame it on that. It doesn't matter who you're playing. You've got to play to your standard."

Reese said he wanted a few more plays back from the Panthers' 16-13 win at Bank of America Stadium on Friday night. With 30 teammates sitting out, Reese earned the start at right tackle and yielded a sack on the second play to fourth-string defensive end Sabastian Harsh, who reached out with his right hand to sack Pickett for a 6-yard loss.

With under three minutes to play in the first quarter, Harsh beat Reese again, pressuring Pickett into an incomple tion. Reese yielded four quarterback pressures and a sack in the first half along with a false start penalty.

"First of all, I'm glad obviously we got the win," he said afterward. "I definitely have to start a lot better. Once I got things rolling, I felt like I got better as the game went on, but yeah, definitely ran into some trouble early on."

Said Pickett: "Those struggles are going to happen. I think he's done a great job of coming in with a great attitude every day. I think about halfway through camp, he said he started to feel really good (and) you could tell on tape. I think he put his best foot forward and excited to see what happens for him."

Embracing opportunity to add to family legacy

A native of Edmonton, Alberta, Reese's father played in the NFL and Canadian Football League. Albert Reese III competed in 84 career games with the Edmonton Elks and dressed for the

San Francisco 49ers in 1997.

In college, the younger Reese appeared in 48 games, with 22 starts, at Mississippi State. As a senior, he allowed four sacks and committed four penalties, PFF reported.

Reese joined the Panthers not long after the NFL draft, a weekend that still stings.

"Absolutely," he said. "It was definitely an intense weekend. I was expecting [to be drafted on] Day 3. That didn't end up being the case, but I knew I'd end up somewhere. I just felt like (Carolina was) a good fit for me depth-wise, schematically."

With the Panthers' top two tackles sidelined indefinitely, Reese, competing with a "chip on my shoulder," took advantage of the absences of Ikem Ekwonu (knee) and Taylor Moton (blood clots) throughout training camp.

"That's all I've had my whole football career is a chip on my shoulder and trying my best to prove everybody wrong," Reese said. "Just show what I can do, no matter the circumstance I'm in."

Canales didn't commit to keeping Reese off the waiver wire.

"I don't want to make any definitive comments on it, but I know he found kryptonite tonight," Canales said. "We'll be able to get him settled back in."

In his first three preseason outings, however, Reese compiled 140 snaps, all at right tackle and earned a No. 11 ranking among rookies. He registered a 92.6 run-blocking grade, which paced all offensive linemen. In 104 pass-blocking attempts, he surrendered two quarterback hurries.

Has Reese shown enough to make the opening day roster?

"I'm praying," he said. "I'm hoping and we're just going to let God take care of the rest."



BENEDICT ATHLETICS

Benedict running back David Smith rips off a 26-yard gain in the Tigers' 32-10 win against John-son C. Smith on Aug. 29, 2026, in Columbia, S.C. David Smith rushed for 117 yards on 14 carries.

JCSU needs improvement with Albany State ahead

Continued from page 5A

field goal and twice called for fair catches on kickoffs deep in their territory only to attempt a return, which is prohibited. As a result, the Golden Bulls were saddled with poor field position.

"Obviously, it's not what we wanted in terms of the result," said quarterback Parker McQuarrie, who completed 9-of-18 passes for 94 yards in his first collegiate start. "We've got to do better on offense. We've got to put up more points. What we always say is we take lessons when we lose. Obviously, it's a loss, but we've got to learn from it, and we're only going to get better from it."

They'll need to. The defense, with nine new starters, was at a loss to stop Benedict's ground at-tack, which churned out 199 yards on 32 carries. David Smith pounded the Golden Bulls for 117 yards on 14 tries while Caleb Pearson added 63 yards on six attempts while adding 58 receiving yards on two catches. Equally concerning was conceding 234 yards on 12 completions, including a 97-yard touchdown connection between Jett Peddy and Zackery Watkins that expanded the Tigers' lead to 16-0 in the second quarter.

"I know our defense is one of the best ones around," Flowers said. "We don't give up 32 points. We had two starters back on defense. We have very talented guys on defense. That defensive line, very talented linebackers."

"We're very talented, but here's the thing: it's all about the chemistry. You can see

that the chemistry just was not there, so what helps chemistry is just playing to-gether more. I'm not sitting here saying, 'Dang, we're not talented.' We can fix these simple things right here, and we'll get bet-ter."

Offensively, Smith's ground attack was efficient with 243 yards on 44 carries. Fabian Duncan, a North Mecklenburg High alumnus and SIAC offensive player of the year last season at Allen, led the way with 148 yards and a touchdown on 22 carries in his Golden Bulls debut while Kamarro Edmonds added 99 yards on 16 carries. But it wasn't enough to keep Smith in the hunt after closing to 16-10 on Alexis Rasario-Beltran's 42-yard field goal early in the third quarter. The offense by design favored the run to take pressure off McQuarrie, who was sacked twice and intercepted once.

"Coach Flowers is a great head coach," McQuarrie said. "I believe in whatever scheme he has schemed up for a game. Whether he wants to run the ball 50 times or throw 50 times, we're going to do what he tells us to do because we believe in him. ... Whatever he decides to do, we're going to do it, and we're going to execute to the best of our ability."

Said Flowers: "That was by design. No way did we want to just come out and just start throwing the ball all around, plus, we said we're going to lean on the run game, which we do. We've got a very strong of-fensive line, and I really do like our re-ceivers. But we'd be doing our quarterback a disservice to just come out and start throwing the ball around."

Hough High attack roars to life

Continued from page 5A

And once we do that, if we score before our defense is going to feel like it's going to be a long night, or if our defense comes out and gets a stop and we score, it's going to be a long night [for the opponent]."

Baker feels Hough has the makings to be extremely special from a historical perspective if they continue to clean up the little things.

"The sky's the limit for this team," Baker said. "You know, once we get rolling, everybody hits on all cylin-ders, and our offensive line gets going... I thought they got better this week than they were last week for sure, but you got to keep trusting the process. We still have a lot of stuff we

need to clean up, especially goal line stuff.

"We have to clean it up. I thought that's what we kind of did really well last year within the red zone, goal line area. We scored the ma-jority of the time."

Hough will host Provi-dence Day (2-0), one of the best private schools in North Carolina and Max-Preps' 71st ranked team in the country next week. Hough is ranked 17th in the nation.

Baker understands the challenge Providence Day will present, but he plans on going through the same routines to get his team ready.

"[The key] is going to be execution," Baker said. "They're a really good team;

they have athletes all over the field as well, but I think we've got tempo, so we've got to get up and down the field.

"One advantage that I think we do have is that they go both ways a lot and we're going to use our tempo and get on the ball, set the ball and go quick to get them out of rhythm. I think that is going to be the biggest key."

Royal is confident that if Hough plays to ability, it won't be close.

"I'll start thinking about that game when we game plan tomorrow morning," he said. "I just feel like if we come out there and do as we should and play Hough football, it's not going to be close."

It's win or go home for Gibbs

Continued from page 5A

low."

One thing Gibbs quickly learned last season was don't talk "outta the side of your neck," as the Cameo song goes. Gibbs talked plenty of trash early on in his weekly press conferences, especially lead-ing up to the Aggie-Eagle Classic in Greens-boro.

Best friend and fraternity brother coach Trei Oliver welcomed him back into the fold with a 62-20 spanking that had Gibbs backtracking faster than a politician caught in a lie on video. A&T finished the season 2-10 with wins over Hampton and Camp-bell.

Lesson learned.

"Obviously, it was disappointing. ... A lot of times you learn a lot of things through failure," Gibbs said. "Failure taught us a lot last year. We've revamped the way we're doing things. We went out and got some better players, and I think we'll be better this year."

The Aggies left the MEAC in 2020 as the three-time defending HBCU national cham-pion. The conference wasn't good enough

for them anymore. There were bigger fish to fry, both academically (think research grants) and athletically (time to beat up on the white folks).

Here's the thing: HBCUs get research grants, too, and are producing some amaz-ing results. Just ask NCCU, Howard, Mor-gan State, etc.

And as far as athletics goes, football com-piled a 12-10 record in two seasons in the Big South but is 4-31 in three seasons in the CAA. Women's basketball and women's and men's track and field have had the most success so far.

Gibbs nabbed 20 transfers out of the portal. Four quarterbacks return with a wide receiving corps he's calling the best in the CAA. "Ain't going to be 3 yards and a cloud of dust."

The Aggies lost to Morgan State Aug. 29 in Greensboro, their first season opener at home since 2019. Homecoming sold out last month. The Blue and Gold Marching Machine is a showstopper.

Failure is not an option.

Bonitta Best is sports editor at The Trian-gle Tribune in Durham.



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