

THE CARRBORO
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The
Republicans’
education
problem

CHRIS FITZSIMON

Republican leaders in North Carolina have a problem. People are beginning to understand that dismantling public education is an important part of their agenda. And that is not a popular position. People still believe in public schools, despite years of misleading but well-funded attacks on them by the think tanks on the right in Raleigh and Washington.

The General Assembly has provided ample evidence of the disdain for public education this session. The budget fired teachers and teacher assistants, slashed funding for textbooks and supplies and locked thousands of at-risk kids out of nationally recognized preschool programs. Funding for mentoring and professional development for teachers was drastically cut.

The overall cuts dropped North Carolina to 49th in the nation in per-pupil spending. Funding for public schools as a percentage of the state’s general fund is the lowest in more than 40 years.

Senate President Pro Tem Phil Berger responded to criticism of the budget last summer by claiming that Republicans reformed education.

But disinvesting in education is not reform. It is a damaging blow to a system already struggling with a shortage of resources that makes it difficult for teachers to do their jobs.

And while it’s tough for Republicans to dance around their disinvestment in schools, that’s not their only problem in their appeal to voters. They just don’t want to cut funding – they want to destroy traditional public education. And that’s not hyperbole.

House Speaker Thom Tillis confirmed it at a recent town hall meeting in Asheboro. Here’s how Tillis responded to a question about teachers and public schools. “I understand that Majority Leader Stam has said that his goal would be to ultimately eliminate public schools, and I categorically disagree with that for a variety of reasons. Right now with him being majority leader and me being speaker, I like my chances.”

Bizarre as it is, that’s Tillis actually confirming that the elected majority leader of the Republican House wants to eliminate public schools.

Stam introduced a voucher scheme last year that he promises to revisit next session.

And Tillis has more than Stam to explain. The Republican majorities in the House and Senate not only lifted the cap on charter schools, they voted to allow for-profit companies to set up virtual charters in North Carolina.

The Cabarrus County Board of Education recently voted to approve a virtual charter school run by K-12 Inc. An audit of K-12’s virtual charter in Colorado found the state paid \$800,000 to the company for students who never enrolled or who lived out of state.

That’s a funny way to show support for traditional public schools, to give taxpayer money to for-profit corporations to educate kids online with little or no accountability.

Republicans’ only worry is that the public figures out what they are doing. That’s why you can expect more disclaimers and flowery speeches from Tillis and his colleagues about how much they really do support public schools.

But nobody’s buying it. Their record is disturbingly clear.

Chris Fitzsimon is the executive director of N.C. Policy Watch.

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The anarchists’ dilemma

DAN COLEMAN

The anarchists are their own worst enemies. This was my thought watching the aftermath of the occupation of the Norina/CVS building on Feb. 4. In cities around the country, such occupations have been met with indifference at best from mayors and with often-brutal crackdowns by police. In Carrboro, Mayor Mark Chilton spent two hours in the building with the occupiers and worked with the police to allow everyone the opportunity to leave the building without arrest.

In return, the mayor faced a level of foul-mouthed rudeness and disrespect not seen in downtown Carrboro other than from the occasional late-night drunk. The anarchists have their own analysis of why the mayor is their class enemy, but few in Carrboro are listening. Ironically, while it was police action that overshadowed the anarchists’ objectives in the Yates incident, in this case it is their own behavior that will do so. And throughout, the political philosophy that informs their occupations is lost in the shuffle.

This is unfortunate, as we live in a time when we all need to think broadly and deeply about our economic and political problems. The anarchist belief that private property lies at the root of injustice is the radical and challenging assertion that lies at the heart of both the Yates and Norina/CVS occupations.

The concentration of ownership and the prerogatives of private property are also fundamental concerns posed by the Occupy movement as it examines the disparities between the 1 percent and the rest of us. When well-meaning Americans of all stripes are horrified that profit-hungry bankers can throw millions out of their homes, we are questioning not only the justice of our private-property system but its morality as well.

This question of whether there are more just and more humane ways to conceive of property relations is not really so foreign. In Carrboro, we have cooperative housing, cohousing and community gardens. All of these suggest there are ways of sharing and cooperating that can lead to a more wholesome and sustainable way of life.

Issues of private property can stymie those seeking to improve the well-being of our communities. As far back as 2005, the *News & Observer* concluded that “Riddle’s vacant properties [which include the Yates building] have become a primary source of frustration for those who want a more robust downtown.”

Before we trash the rural buffer ...

The following is an op-ed submitted by the Justice United Environmental Team.

Thanks to our elected officials for recognizing that whatever we decide to do with our trash, dumping it on the Rogers Road community is no longer an option. The county landfill is closing in 2013. Our elected officials also agreed that a community center fulfills the promise made when the landfill was originally sited, although the details, including funding, remain up for discussion. Sewer may also be forthcoming, after a task force first determines the parameters for the community center.

It’s progress – good progress – but clarity is needed around commitment, dates and responsibilities. As community leaders, we will remain involved until this important work is done.

There’s still the question of what to do with our trash after the landfill closes. The towns have known for years that the landfill was at the end of its life and that the county was unable to find a suitable site for a transfer station. In early 2009, county leaders decided to truck their trash to a waste transfer station in Durham – a decision that they confirmed last year. It’s not an ideal solution, but it’s the only one that the county or its Solid Waste Advisory Board has been able to come up with.

At the last minute, Carrboro leaders began to lobby for a transfer station at the northwest corner of I-40 and N.C. 86. The site is not in the town’s jurisdiction. It is in the rural buffer, which was established more than 20 years ago to contain sprawl and to keep projects like this one out of the rural community.

The proposed site is close to the trash and it’s not in the Rogers Road community, but there are other challenges. It compromises the rural buffer with unwanted municipal development. There’s no water or sewer infrastructure to capture the runoff from the trucks and chemicals used to clean the facility. It’s adjacent to a residential area that relies on well water.

There are solutions to the issues with the site, but those solutions add cost and complexity to an otherwise straightforward project. The site may be worth a look, but there are better alternatives, and town officials appear to be poised to look at them.

Chapel Hill leaders plan to hire a consultant to look at options, a plan that we applaud given the issues in-

Community leaders called them an “eyesore” and “a blight on our downtown.” Yet state law has constrained town leaders and concerned citizens alike from any recourse.

After years of such complaints, it was the anarchists who took action, occupying the building to present what they described as “one possible blueprint among many.” They envisioned the building enlivened with a daycare, a clinic, a library/media center and meeting space.

A few months later, a similar action led to a similar plan being suggested for Norina/CVS. Many in Carrboro have a different vision for that site and might have been receptive to a message as to how the concentration of capital puts control of the property in distant hands. As one participant told the *Independent*, “It’s my personal hope that the community reclaims our vision for this land and makes it clear that multinational corporations and their money are not more important than people.”

Any such idealism was undermined when, on leaving the building, the anarchists laid out the possibility of a clinic or school one moment and angrily shouted down and cursed the mayor the next. I doubt any parents who heard the masked anarchist tell a Carrboro police officer he ought to commit suicide would entrust their health care, let alone their children, to this group.

The anarchists lack what Saul Alinsky called “the most elementary grasp of the fundamental idea that one communicates within the experience of his audience.” Their repertoire consists of a critique, an ideology and a confrontational style that in its urgency to reclaim private property and denigrate the state tends to leave the human beings around them out of the picture. They forget, or have never learned, that for people to hear you, they must be respected and treated decently. And, consequently, their good works like the Really Really Free Market or the Prison Books Collective (prisonbooks.info) tend to be overlooked.

Those who know the anarchists only from these high-profile occupations will be surprised to learn that, within Occupy Chapel Hill, the anarchists have contributed positively to a sense of community, inclusiveness and consensus-building, constructive work undone by their autonomous actions. It’s sad that like other Saturday night revelers, these folks, drunk on political self-righteousness, succeed in little more than offending the community around them.

Dan Coleman is a member of the Carrboro Board of Aldermen.

involved in hauling their waste to Durham. They are not just looking at the next three to five years, but also at long-term options for converting waste to energy. They appear to have the ear of UNC, which has strong expertise in managing power plants and feedstocks. In the short term, Chapel Hill may want to build a small transfer station of its own. The town has several good locations with water and sewer that are not in anyone’s backyard. These sites are adjacent to commercial and retail centers or part of upcoming development projects. If Chapel Hill works with UNC, the town can share the costs with the university and possibly use a utility site on the Carolina North campus. Carrboro has been invited to join them. Together, the two towns and the university produce nearly 70 percent of the county’s trash.

Proven waste vendors like Republic and Waste Management are waiting in the wings to provide proposals for service. Such proposals are free and exploit the massive assets and experience of these companies.

Industry consensus is that a town transfer station would cost less than \$3 million to build. With a five- to 10-year contract, vendors are likely to quote a tipping fee that’s lower than the current county landfill fees. There are many service models, including the option of using the transfer station to improve recycling and other waste services. Under-contract vendors can be required to provide living wages. They can even be rewarded for improving recycling rates.

The leading vendors manage large landfills and recycling centers as part of their service offering. By bundling services, they can offer deep discounts. The savings could be substantial and could even fund research into long-term solutions. That’s in addition to streamlining and simplifying our current waste-management system, which is 20 years old and designed around a landfill that is closing.

The issues are complex, and there are good options for the next few years. Our leaders appear poised to start with alternatives that are more promising than dumping our trash in the rural buffer.

This column was submitted by Robert Campbell, David Caldwell, Stan Cheren, Tish Galu, Bonnie Hauser and Stephanie Perry.

LETTERS

Kudos to the Music Loft

On Feb. 1, my house was broken into. The thieves stole a guitar that I had owned since I was 15, and I was devastated. The next day I went to the Music Loft and gave them a picture of my guitar and told them to please keep an eye out for it. Today, the owner of the Music Loft, Jim Dennis, called to tell me that someone attempted to sell him my stolen guitar. Mr. Dennis’ cool head and nerves of steel allowed him to quickly coordinate a sting with the Carrboro Police Department. My guitar has been recovered, and the thief was apprehended.

The Music Loft did not have to go out of their way to help me, and they certainly did not have to disrupt their business by having a ton of police inside and in the front of their store. I think it is a testament to the character of Carrboro that a business like the Music Loft and men like Jim Dennis and Hugh Swaso exist in the community.

WILLIAM DAWSON
Efland

Keep marching mandatory for band

A request to drop the mandatory marching requirement for band at Carrboro and Chapel Hill high schools is under consideration. The concern is that the marching requirement discourages some students from taking band classes. Dropping the requirement is a greater concern to many more students.

Most families are wary at first of what will be required of them in terms of time commitment and money. They realize a vast return on that investment, but students will tell you that without the mandatory marching requirement, they probably wouldn’t have given it the first try. There’s no marching requirement at East. Marching band isn’t offered there.

Why is marching band important to a school community? Social barriers that exist in hallways disappear when students spend time together in a different context, like band camp and competitions. Everybody looks geeky in a band uniform. When assembled on a field, in formation, in tune and in step, suddenly everybody looks really cool.

There already exists the opt-out of the marching requirement if a student participates in a fall sport. It’s a given that a sports team is going to require mandatory practices and appearances at games. To be successful as a team, that is what it takes from each individual on the team. A strong marching program is no different. Marching band needs at least 70 students to make a strong presence on the field.

At a time when our children are spending most of their free time in sedentary isolation in front of a screen, isn’t it a good idea to promote a healthy alternative? Let’s expand their repertoire. Let’s encourage them to do more than sit in a class and learn a few pieces for the quarterly stage performance so they can check band off a list. Let’s teach them what being part of a team requires. For those who prefer to hit a bass drum rather than take a tackle, marching band serves that purpose.

Our youngest child’s experience with the Marching Tiger Band and our eldest child’s experience on CHHS sports teams were equal in terms of demands on time and in terms of expense. What they learned from their experiences was worth every minute on the field, every bus ride to a competition, every hour spent raising money working at the PTA Thrift Shop or a UNC ball game and every dime that came out of pocket.

Marching band deserves administration’s full endorsement. To thrive, it demands continued support of the marching requirement.

CINDY PARKS
Chapel Hill

LETTERS POLICY

Letters should be no more than 425 words in length and emailed letters are preferred.

LETTERS
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