

## MLK by the numbers

CHRIS FITZSIMON

- 81 – years** since Dr. Martin Luther King was born on Jan. 15, 1929
- 47 – years** since King wrote “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” on April 16, 1963
- 47 – years** since King led the March on Washington on Aug. 8, 1963
- 42 – years** since King was assassinated in Memphis on April 4, 1968
- 27 – years** since the North Carolina General Assembly voted to establish King’s birthday as an official state holiday in 1983.
- 27 – years** since President Ronald Reagan signed the federal King Holiday into law on Nov. 2, 1983
- 10 – years** since South Carolina became the last state to officially recognize the King Holiday in 2000
- 33 – percent** of employers who give all or most workers a day off on the King Holiday (Bureau of National Affairs, Jan. 9, 2007)
- 7 – number** of statewide elections in North Carolina since the King Holiday was established in 1983
- 9 – number** of members of the N.C. Council of State, all statewide elected officials
- 63 – total** number of elections of Council of State members since the King Holiday was established
- 2 – number** of Council of State elections won by an African-American (Ralph Campbell, elected State Auditor, 1992, 1996 and 2000.)
- 28 – number** of major-party nominees for governor or lieutenant governor since the King Holiday was established in North Carolina in 1983
- 0 – number** of major-party nominees for governor or lieutenant governor since the King Holiday was established who were African-American
- 14 – number** of General Assembly sessions in North Carolina since the King Holiday was established in 1983
- 28 – total** number of elections of speaker of the house and president pro tem of the Senate since the King Holiday was established
- 2 – number** of elections for House speaker or Senate president pro tem won by African-Americans since the King Holiday was established (Dan Blue, elected House speaker in 1991 and 1993)
- 43 – years** since King said in his book *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* that “the curse of poverty has no justification in our age... The time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct and immediate abolition of poverty.”
- 39,108,422 – number** of people in the United States living in poverty in 2008 (U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey*)
- 13 – percent** of people in United States living in poverty in 2008 (Ibid)
- 1,301,929 – number** of people in North Carolina living in poverty in 2008 (Ibid)
- 14.6 – percent** of people in North Carolina living in poverty in 2008 (Ibid)
- 11.2 – percent** of white Americans living in poverty in 2008 (Ibid)
- 24.7 – percent** of African-Americans living in poverty in United States in 2008 (Ibid)
- 9.8 – percent** of white North Carolinians living in poverty in 2008 (*Snapshot of Employment, Poverty, Income, and Health Coverage in North Carolina*, N.C. Justice Center)



## Making the commitment to college-readiness for all

STEVE PEHA

When it comes to “college-readiness,” few people agree on what it is, but everyone seems to agree our high schoolers don’t have it. New work by the Common Core State Standards Initiative is supposed to bring us together on this. But standards have to be implemented by states, which have to develop benchmarks, which have to be measured by tests. This means 50 different definitions, all of which are likely to be compromised by political posturing and the perverse incentive states have under No Child Left Behind to set their standards as low as they can get away with.

But things don’t have to be so muddled. College-readiness simply means you’re ready to go to college, and being ready to go to college simply means you’ve been accepted. Furthermore, since our district has the best schools in the state, let’s agree that when we say that *our* kids are college-ready, we mean they’ve been accepted to four-year institutions.

Many elite private high schools probably have near-100 percent college acceptance rates for their students. Few public schools can match this record. However, I have discovered some that seem to be sending *all* of their kids to four-year schools. There aren’t many of these schools, and they’re all small, but they do exist. What do they have in common? Not a lot. But what interests me most is that some serve primarily poor and minority students.

Now that doesn’t sound right, does it? How in the world can a school with a high percentage of poor and minority students send all its kids to college when right here

in Chapel Hill, with the best schools in the state and a relatively small percentage of poor and minority students to serve, we don’t even come close?

Not surprisingly, schools that send large percentages of poor and minority kids to college are dedicated to that goal. In an odd rebuke to schools that guarantee their students nothing more than a desk to sit at, these schools promise to get every kid ready for a four-year college education and to see that they get in.

I don’t think these schools have better teachers or better curriculum or better anything than we do. But they do have a deeper sense of commitment to their kids. This commitment is more than just a catchy slogan or a school board candidate’s rallying cry. These folks mean business. They say 100 percent college-readiness is their goal and they do what needs to be done to reach it. They may not succeed every year with every kid, but who would fault a school that *only* sent 80 percent or 90 percent of its kids to four-year institutions?

One could argue that guaranteeing “college-readiness” is foolish and naive. But at least the schools that do it stand for something rock solid that their students, teachers and families can get behind. What do our schools stand for? What rock do we stand solidly upon? Perhaps it’s the rock of privilege, a vantage point that allows us to look down on our less-fortunate neighbors, or look up so as not to notice them at all.

Then again, our results speak for themselves, don’t they? Large numbers of our kids head off to prestigious schools each year. But many don’t. Some don’t even make it out of

high school. And even before kids enter high school in our district, it’s pretty easy to make predictions about who’s going where, isn’t it? How often have we heard around here, when we think no one is listening, that so-and-so just isn’t “college material”?

Kids who grow up poor in our country tend to get off to a slow start in school and tend to finish far behind their more advantaged peers. But some schools are proving that demographics do not determine destiny. With a strong commitment to a simple goal, they find it easier to rally their students, teachers and families toward a common result. It’s quite an achievement, one made possible, I think, more by the commitment than by anything else.

What are we committed to in our schools? I have no idea. But our commitment to preserve the status quo seems as strong as any other I have found. This is less of an indictment than it might seem. Virtually every school and district in our nation shares this same unspoken resolve.

After years of working in schools across the country, I have come to believe that commitment to a simple, meaningful goal is what separates good schools and districts from their less-effective counterparts. School leaders with the guts to make promises and the grit to keep them are not just on the leading edge of education reform, they *are* education reform. Everyone else is playing the same old game by the same old rules.

And we all know who wins that game, don’t we?

*Steve Peha is founder and president of Carrboro-based Teaching That Makes Sense Inc.*

## FOR THE RECORD

## Out of the deep freeze

The great thing about conspiracy theories is that they knit everything nicely together. Facts, fallacies and fantasy are all rolled together and any challenge from the reality-based world is rebuffed with a simple reminder of the sinister nature of those making the challenge and the evil overlords that control them.

In a world in which many media outlets (particularly those with three- or four-letter acronyms that reside mainly on cable) continue to feature the views of people who just make stuff up, the conspiracy theory has become an easy-to-go-to safe place when facts get in the way. We are very nearly back to the days of black helicopters, One World Order and a UN takeover of Texas. But even that conspiracy is too crude to encompass everything the opposition to the current order wants to oppose. Instead, there’s a kind of unified field theory that the president and his party are “out to destroy America.” With a theory that big and simple, just about everything can be made to make sense. Anything good that comes out of this administration, you see, is just a feint.

This newspaper would never beseech a supreme being to unleash actual lightning upon an individual making an outlandish statement. We are, however, divided on whether it would be best for all if the next person who claims this cold winter means there is no global warming be struck dumb.

Not that we don’t think it is amusing to blame a cold snap on Albert Gore Jr., but it’s nonsense to actually believe that a spell of cold weather is proof of anything.

Alas, we live in a world where a lie can be repeated enough times to be true and among well-paid people who are quite willing to do so. Back in the good old days, conspiracy theorists had to include a little bit of truth in everything. Indeed, some liars are darkly painted. But one of the marvels of 21st-century media is that we’ve gotten beyond that.



Truth is not only optional; sometimes it is damn inconvenient.

It would be wonderful to ignore such things. That was easier to do when the debate was over whether the president was actually born in Hawaii. Now that the truth-optional crowd has turned to flu vaccines, economic policy, health care and climate science, things are a little dicier.

In one example, a host on a three-letter network has repeatedly noted to his millions of viewers that last year was the coldest on record, using that “fact” to bolster his case that climate nuts are conspiring to use junk science to destroy our industries and convert us to socialism.

According to actual scientists, last year was not the coldest on record; it was, in actual fact-fact, the fifth warmest on record since records started being kept on such

things a century and a half ago.

It doesn’t matter though. That last year is the coldest ever has bounced around the echo chamber so many times it qualifies as hard science and another refutation of all these evil, conspiring climate experts.

This is a community full of scientists, some of whom probably have strong opinions and even disagreements on various points in the global-warming discussion. We’d like to invite an open and honest debate as to the nature, pace and possible solutions to global warming. But please, fellow laypeople, don’t confuse a good one-liner about the recent deep freeze with actual science.

And the next time you tune into a cable station with the word “News” anywhere in its title, understand that someone on it will very likely lie to you. And that’s not just a theory.

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Margot Lester, Lucy Butcher, Rich Fowler, Mike Li, Contributors

Charlie Tyson, Intern

Ava Barlow, Photographer

## ADVERTISING

Marty Cassidy, Ad Director

marty@carrborocitizen.com

## OPERATIONS

Anne Billings, Office Coordinator

anne@carrborocitizen.com

## DISTRIBUTION

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Published Thursdays by Carrboro Citizen, LLC.