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NCSU leaders to testify on Easley

Chancellor and outgoing provost are subpoenaed to talk about former first lady's job.

BY J. ANDREW CURLISS, Staff Writer

Federal prosecutors Tuesday ordered the chancellor and provost at N.C. State University to appear before a grand jury this week, making it clear that investigators have opened a wide-ranging criminal probe of dealings surrounding former Gov. Mike Easley.

The FBI served subpoenas to Chancellor James Oblinger Tuesday afternoon as he left the main administration building, Holladay Hall, to appear at an event across campus.

"This university will do everything to cooperate fully," Oblinger said.

Investigators want to talk with Oblinger and Provost Larry Nielsen about the hiring, promotion and salary of former first lady Mary Easley, according to the court documents.

Grand juries investigate matters and weigh possible criminal charges; their proceedings are secret. Subpoenas become public records when served to state agencies or officials.

Legal experts said that a demand for testimony and documents does not indicate wrongdoing. The former governor, a Democrat who left office in January, said in a statement last week that he is "comfortable" with any review of his years in office. Mary Easley has refused numerous attempts to speak with her.

Mary Easley secured a job at N.C. State in 2005, and last summer got expanded duties and an 88 percent raise, bringing her salary to $170,000.

Her hiring took place after former board chairman McQueen Campbell suggested it to the chancellor, UNC system President Erskine Bowles said, citing a conversation he had last week with Campbell. Oblinger said he is embarrassed he doesn't remember it, but acknowledges his practice would have been to pass such a suggestion to the provost, who is the university's chief academic officer.

Campbell, 38, a Raleigh real estate broker, is a longtime Easley friend and supporter whom the former governor twice appointed to the N.C. State Board of Trustees. Campbell, who was chairman of the board the past two academic years, resigned his trustee position late last week. Nielsen also resigned as provost last week, effective Friday. Both deny wrongdoing.

Top university officials on Monday began publicly seeking Mary Easley's resignation, saying it would be for the good of N.C. State. By late Tuesday, she had not agreed.

Gov. Beverly Perdue, a Democrat, was asked Tuesday whether Mary Easley should step aside. She said only that she wants the situation resolved quickly.

Questions about hiring
Federal agents want Nielsen to provide testimony Thursday, as well as documents about Mary Easley's job. Nielsen has publicly said and written in e-mail messages that he created the position for Easley and that it was his idea.

"When I created the first position," Nielsen wrote in an e-mail message on July 23, "I was convinced that NC State could seize an exceptional opportunity by employing Mrs. Easley to create and direct a new university-wide seminar series -- an idea that I had been considering for some time."

A News & Observer series published May 9 and May 10 showed that Nielsen was the interim provost at the time the Mary Easley position was created. Nielsen met with Campbell days before Mary Easley faxed her resume to Nielsen at N.C. State. A phone call was made to Campbell's cell phone from the Easleys' home in Southport. Nielsen then created the job, waived a job search and hired Mary Easley on May 26, 2005.

At the time, four candidates were in the running to become permanent provost and had already appeared at campus forums. Nielsen was not among them. Oblinger later announced Nielsen would be a candidate and hired him for the job, citing widespread support.

Several months after he was made provost, Nielsen gave a speech on campus and said he had little autonomy to make decisions on his own as provost. He said he had to constantly navigate a "clinging environment" of vice chancellors, trustees, legislators and others.

But university officials said that Nielsen alone conceived of the big raise last summer for Easley; he expanded her job to include creating a public safety leadership center. The raise, along with about 30 others, was offered in violation of UNC system rules and was the subject last year of a review by the UNC Board of Governors. The board ultimately approved Easley's five-year, $850,000 contract.

"I am convinced that this decision was Larry Nielsen's -- and Larry Nielsen's alone," Bowles said at the time.

Federal authorities also have conducted interviews or requested documents related to private air travel of former Gov. Easley, his family's use of cars and a land deal for a waterfront lot in Carteret County. The state Highway Patrol is expected to deliver records today; Alan Melvin, former head of Easley's protection detail, has been subpoenaed to testify today.

State elections officials have opened a criminal investigation of the Easley campaign related to the flights and use of a car. A lawyer for Easley says the campaign is working to update disclosure forms.

Staff writer Benjamin Niolet contributed to this report.

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**Telling their side**

Scheduled to testify before the grand jury:

TODAY: Capt. Alan Melvin, N.C. Highway Patrol, former head of Easley security detail

THURSDAY: N.C. State Provost Larry Nielsen and Chancellor James Oblinger

**Related Content**
Future teachers in area as part of six-day tour of the state

Suzanne Ulbrich
May 19, 2009 - 5:24PM

Thirteen Onslow County students, who each received a 2009 N.C. Teaching Fellows Scholarship, can look forward to taking the Discovery bus tour when they are sophomores. They are:

- Dixon High School: Sara Ann Brown, Shayna Renee Hines
- Jacksonville High School: David John Nawrocki, Christopher Daniel Perez, Edward Thomas Walsh
- Northside High School: Ashley Marie Thomas
- Swansboro High School: Carrie Elizabeth Dail, Jacob Shane Wolf
- White Oak High School: Ashley Renee Harrell, Hannah Letrea Hill, Justin Graham Jones, Hannah Beth Moehrke, Rachelle Monique Roy

Richlands - Jessica Pierce discovered this week how geography shapes schools.

"It has been interesting to see how schools located in rural areas and schools located in more urban-metro areas - how location influences the school," she said. "I really liked to do a comparison of different schools and the different dynamics."

Pierce, a Dixon High School graduate attending the University of N.C. Chapel Hill, was one of about 500 sophomore N.C. Teaching Fellows from 17 state college campuses taking part in a weeklong tour of the state. The Teaching Fellows Program, a state-funded scholarship program administered by the Public School Forum of North Carolina. Host the trip annually to introduce the future teachers to the economy, schools and people in North Carolina.

Richlands Primary School and Richlands High School hosted about 50 of the future teachers Tuesday as part of the "Discovery" bus tour through the N.C. Teaching Fellows Program.

"I'm learning a lot about different places in the state where we can possibly teach, which is nice, because I don't really know much about other places in the state - and I'm from here and didn't even know Richlands (Primary School) was the only K-2 school in Onslow County," said Jileen Dixon, who graduated from Southwest High School and is currently enrolled at East Carolina University.

Dixon and other Teaching Fellows majoring in elementary education listened to a presentation by Richlands Primary School's teaching staff about a variety of programs, were escorted on a tour of the school by eight student ambassadors and enjoyed a musical production.

Secondary Education Fellows students visited Richlands High School. Before their tour of
the school they listened to a presentation by several staff members about the school's programs including its Freshman Academy, Engineering Academy, Denmark Partnership and KNECT-smartphones for math program.

The students were then given a map of the classrooms and invited to visit and "hang out" in any of the classrooms of their choosing.

"This has opened my eyes to the different types of high schools and the different programs they are offering," said Katlin Curtis, from Carteret County and currently a student at Queens University of Charlotte. "Listening to the program using the smartphone and the Denmark Partnership - it's nice to see schools going places."

Another Fellows Queens University of Charlotte student, Alicia Hancock, who graduated from Southwest High School, said she is most looking forward to touring Charlotte area schools, because even though she lives in the area she has not been able to visit the schools there.

"They're very different from Jacksonville and Onslow County ... I am looking forward to seeing the (socio-economic) diversity of different schools within the same school system and how they all work together," she said. "I hope to be able to find something I want to teach in Union County."

After lunch the students planned to tour Sturgeon City, and if the weather cooperated, take a boat ride on the New River, before departing for UNC-Pembroke.

Groups of Fellows will visit 41 school districts, four charter schools, two community colleges, 17 businesses, 19 cultural and historic sites, four state parks, one federal school and Camp Lejeune Dependent Schools as part of the six-day tour.

Contact education reporter Suzanne Ulbrich at sulbrich@freedomenc.com or 910-219-8454.
Foundation awards two nursing scholarships

Sun Journal Staff
May 19, 2009 - 10:42PM

Two nursing scholarships will be awarded Wednesday night by the Craven Regional Medical Center Foundation.

This year's recipients are Cherry Point native Lysandra Serrano and New Bern native Jessica Scharbrough.

The foundation supports CarolinaEast Medical Center, the hospital formerly named Craven Regional Medical Center. Ben Bunn, the foundation's executive director, said the foundation will be changing its name in the future.

Tickets are available for the $50 per person dinner, which begins at 6:30 p.m. at the New Bern Golf and Country Club. Call 633-8247 to order tickets.

Serrano is the daughter of John Serrano and Nilsa Melendez and was raised in Havelock.

A 2006 graduate of Havelock High School, she is a junior at the University of North Carolina and completing her first year as a nursing student.

"I would like to say that my mother inspired me to become a nurse because she is also a nurse and an amazing woman that has been an important influence my entire life," Serrano told the foundation.

She said an experience during high school allied health completed her decision.

"One day during clinical at the Cherry Point Naval Hospital, I was able to witness a child being born by caesarean section and I knew from that moment what I wanted to do for the rest of my life," she said.

Scharbrough is the daughter of Joseph and Lisa Scharbrough, and granddaughter of Jim and Ruth Scharbrough of New Bern.

A 2006 New Bern High School graduate, she is finishing her first semester of nursing school at East Carolina University.

"I chose the nursing profession because I believe that nurses have the opportunity to touch so many people's lives," she said in a statement released by the foundation. "I will be the first nurse in my family. I feel privileged to one day be a part of such an honored profession. I will graduate from East Carolina University in the fall of 2010. I plan to continue my education and pursue family nurse practitioner."
This is the third year the Joseph Hageman Memorial Nursing Scholarships have been awarded to students from Craven, Jones or Pamlico counties pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in nursing. Hageman was a nurse at Craven Regional Medical Center, now known as CarolinaEast.

Bunn said it was the first year that two scholarships have been awarded, courtesy of increased public support of the foundation.

The $2,250 scholarship amount is an increase over previous years.
School system makes state pay cuts mandatory for all

By Brock Letchworth
The Daily Reflector

Tuesday, May 19, 2009

Pitt County’s board of education decided Monday to apply a recent executive order regarding furlough hours for state employees to all employees of the school system regardless of how their salaries are paid.

The unanimous vote came days before Gov. Beverly Perdue is expected to sign off on similar legislation which states that the half-percent salary reduction and flexible leave time applies to anyone employed by a state agency, department or institution.

House Bill 917 also says the cuts apply to those employed by the University of North Carolina and North Carolina Community College systems and local school administrative units.

Positions for some employees of local school systems are funded by federal or local money. It was not originally clear in the bill whether those individuals would get the mandatory furloughs.

Heather Mayo, Pitt County Schools spokeswoman, said the decision ensures fairness to all employees and is in line with past practices of applying state salary adjustments to all state employees.

“We are all state employees, regardless of the funding source,” Mayo wrote in an e-mail. “For example, an employee paid from federal or local funds is still a state employee even though their salary does not come from the state of North Carolina. All employees of the school system, which is considered to be a state agency, are a part of the North Carolina retirement system and North Carolina State Health Plan. When the state gives salary increases to employees, this same employee (teacher, teacher assistant, administrator, custodian, facility service worker, etc.) also would receive a salary increase.”

Perdue on April 28 ordered all state workers, public school teachers and higher-education employees to take a half-percent pay cut in exchange for 10 flexible furlough hours that must be completed by Dec. 31.

She said cuts in every state agency and department were necessary to balance the state budget through June.

During a meeting earlier this month, the State Board of Education approved a set of rules for the flexible furlough leave.

The board decided that state employees using the flexible furlough leave can take it in any increment, but they must coordinate their leave times with an immediate supervisor or principal.

Classroom teachers, media specialists and teacher assistants who require substitutes and bus drivers may not use their flexible leave at any time when students are scheduled to be in school, the board said.

Additionally, the furlough time can’t be paid out if an employee leaves a job before taking it.

School employees can begin taking the furlough time anytime.

Pitt County Board of Education Chairwoman Mary Grace Bright said Monday night that she would like to see members of the board take the half-percent pay cuts along with school staff.

Bright recommended that Finance Committee Chairman Michael Dixon include discussion about a potential cut during the committee’s next meeting.
"Nobody has said anything about it, I just think it is the right thing to do," Bright said. "Our employees, the people we set policy for, are having to do it and I don't think we should be exempt just because we are elected officials. For us, it would be a minimal amount of money. It is not like it is an amount of money that is going to make a huge difference to the system or an individual board member. It is just the principle of it."

The board would have to vote on any decision regarding its pay.

Board members currently make $200 a month. The chairperson earns $350 monthly.

Contact Brock Letchworth at bletchworth@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9574.
With Jobs Scarce, Age Becomes an Issue
More Young Workers Are at Risk of Layoffs as Employers Grow Wary of Letting Older Employees Go

By DANA MATTIOLI

Age discrimination in the workplace has long been a concern for the 55-and-older set. In this downturn, however, younger workers may have as much to fear as their more-mature colleagues.

Employees in their 20s and 30s are finding themselves more at risk of a layoff, according to labor lawyers, as employers look to avoid age-discrimination lawsuits by adopting a “last one in, first one out” policy and turn to tenure as a means of conducting layoffs. In some cases, young, childless professionals say they feel they’re being targeted in layoffs, while employees who have families to support are given special consideration.

While no age group is exempt from layoffs, younger workers seem to be shouldering a larger percentage of the burden, according to recent Labor Department figures. The unemployment rate for those between the ages of 25 and 34 was 9.6% in April 2009, up from 4.9% a year earlier. For those ages 55 and older, the unemployment rate was 6.2% in April 2009, compared with 3.3% a year earlier.

Wary of Lawsuits
While younger workers tend to earn the lowest salaries, making them the least-expensive workers to retain, companies are becoming wary of laying off older, better-paid workers. In fact, Gerald Maatman, co-chairman of the class-action litigation practice at Seyfarth Shaw LLP, which represents employers, says he has been fielding more inquiries about laying off younger workers than in years past, especially from companies in states like New Jersey and Michigan that have laws to protect workers as young as 18. Age-discrimination lawsuits brought by older workers can cost more than the salary of the worker who was laid off and can hurt the company’s reputation, according to Andria Ryan, partner at Atlanta law firm Fisher & Phillips LLP.

"Younger people, in general are a lot less of a risk [for lawsuits] when you do a reduction in force,” says Ms. Ryan. While most states protect employees 40 and older from age discrimination, only a handful of jurisdictions extend this protection to employees as young as 18, she says.

"Companies don’t like [layoffs by seniority], but [they’re] also the easiest to defend,” says Gerald Hathaway, co-chairman of the business-restructuring practice group with employment law firm Littler Mendelson. "If you have a bona fide seniority system it’s a defense for any type of discrimination,” according to the law, he adds.

Seniority in Education
This is particularly true in the education field, where many colleges and schools are taking measures to protect tenured teachers and professors. David Schauer, superintendent of Kyrene Elementary School District No. 28 in Tempe, Ariz., sent layoff notices to 68 teachers in anticipation of budget cuts. The cuts target only first-year continuing teachers, most of whom are in their 20s, says Mr. Schauer. "My worst fear is that really good people will leave teaching,” he says.

Nicole Ryan, a 24-year-old sixth-grade math teacher for Fox Lane Middle School, in Bedford, N.Y., received such a layoff notice. The notice was sent out to teachers and staff based on their seniority. So, despite strong performance reviews, budget cuts mean
she may not have a job to return to in the fall. "I knew it was coming because, based on seniority, I was lower on the totem pole," she says. "It didn't make it any easier."

The emotional impact of layoffs can affect a manager's decision when it comes to choosing who gets the ax -- and that can also disproportionately affect younger workers. "It takes a tremendous toll on managers," says Mitchell Marks, a professor of organizational change in the College of Business at San Francisco State University. Mr. Marks says when layoff decisions come to a tie breaker, personal and family situations often come into play.

"I've had plenty of managers sit me down and say 'Joe's spouse just got diagnosed with cancer but Jane's spouse is an M.D.,' " says Mr. Marks of the explanations of how a layoff has been decided. The same decision-making process can occur when choosing who is let go between a single 20-something employee or, say, a 50-year-old employee with two kids in college.

Svetlana Gelman, 24, worked in the marketing department of a law firm until December when she was laid off. She feels strongly that her age and the fact that she doesn't have a family to support put her at greater risk before the layoff. Ms. Gelman says she was competing head-to-head with another employee who was hired just a few months after Ms. Gelman and the firm would use her sacrifices as a parent to tout her dedication to the firm. "The person was very tactical, she would bring the child in, spoke about him all the time and would say things like 'My child is sick but I'm still here,' " says Ms. Gelman.

And as work became more scarce and layoffs loomed, Ms. Gelman says she was let go while her colleague remained, despite the fact that Ms. Gelman earned less and often worked longer hours because of her co-worker's child-care responsibilities.

**Staying Safe**

Still, there are ways younger workers can go about safeguarding their jobs. High-maintenance attitudes typical of younger workers also make them more prone to the chopping block in a down economy, says Bruce Tulgan, author of "Not Everyone Gets a Trophy." Twentysomething professionals tend to demand flexibility, responsibility and high pay, he says -- all things that aren't going to be well-received in this environment.

"This is a really great time to come in early, stay late, dot your i's and cross your t's," says Mr. Tulgan. He says young employees should volunteer to do grunt work, take advantage of free certifications their companies offer and be compliant, rather than demanding.

**Staying Valuable**

Ms. Ryan, the attorney, says now is the time to make yourself as invaluable to a company as possible. She recommends cross-training in another department, learning as much as possible about different areas of the company and expressing a willingness to relocate to less desirable locations (something those with families often can't do).

You might also try to align yourself with someone in senior management. This could be in a mentor relationship or as a volunteer on a big project a manager is working on. Although executives are busier these days, they often view being asked to mentor as a compliment, says Mr. Marks. And if it should come to layoff decisions, "It doesn't hurt to have someone in the executive conference room on your side," he says.

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