THE DAILY CLIPS

June 6, 2008

News, commentary, and opinion
compiled by the East Carolina University News Bureau from:

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House budget wins bipartisan support

By Gary D. Robertson
The Associated Press

RALEIGH — The House didn't do enough to improve education in North Carolina during uncertain economic times, Senate leaders said Thursday as they received the other chamber's budget proposal, which received strong bipartisan support.

The response of Senate Democrats should console fellow party member Gov. Mike Easley, who penned the House's $21.3 billion plan before it passed by wide margins Wednesday and Thursday. Easley said it retreated on teacher pay, preschool and university enrollment.

"The message of how you move North Carolina (forward) is really not in the House budget, and we're going to have to look at that very carefully," said Sen. Linda Garrou, D-Forsyth, one of the Senate's chief budget writers.

The House voted 104-10 in favor of the budget, with a majority of Republicans backing the spending plan for the second time in as many days following debate that had little partisan rancor.

"This is one of the best budgets we've ever brought forward," said Rep. Curtis Blackwood of Union County, one of the few Republicans to oppose the measure.

The bill included no new taxes, would raise year-to-year spending by just 3.3 percent, give 3 percent raises to teachers and begin the phase-out of a controversial transportation fund transfer.

It was the largest number of 'yes' votes for the House's own budget proposal since 100 votes in 2004, during the co-speakership of Democrat Jim Black and Republican Richard Morgan.

"This was an historic vote. I hope the governor sees the numbers," said Rep. Mickey Michaux, D-Durham, senior co-chairman of the House Appropriations Committee.

Easley, facing his final test with the Democratic-led General Assembly before leaving office in January, had said Tuesday he was puzzled by House leaders for "stiffing the teachers." His office declined further comment Thursday.

Garrou said senators, who want to pass their own version of the budget within two weeks, will be looking for cost savings to try to beef up areas that Easley said were lacking. Targets may include $37 million in planning funds for UNC campus facilities or $16 million in dropout prevention grants, both in the House budget.

House and Senate Democrats ultimately will negotiate a compromise measure that they hope will reach Easley's desk before July 1 and that he would be willing to sign into law.

"Maybe some projects in the budget that the House has that we're not going to be able to do," she said. "We're going to say it's more important to provide for the teachers and provide for children entering school."

The House gave $14 million to teach several thousand additional students entering the University of North Carolina system this fall, but Easley and UNC officials said $20 million more were needed.
Factors influencing growth include international competition and a wave of baby boomer retirements.

By Rob Goldberg
Special to The Daily Reflector

Dr. Scott Ralls, newly-elected president of the N.C. Community College System, was the featured speaker Wednesday as Pitt Community College kicked off its annual Leadership Institute at the Hilton Greenville.

Ralls, who replaced retired NCCCS President H. Martin Lancaster in May, told Leadershhip Institute participants that there has never been a more important time for community colleges and for leadership within those institutions.

The former Craven Community College president cited several factors in support of his assessment, including a rapidly increasing number of retirements among baby boomers, producing workforce shortages nationwide, particularly in the area of health care.

Ralls said increasing international competition also is placing emphasis on the educational services provided by the state's 58 community colleges. He said foreign countries, such as China and Singapore, are "focused on education like a laser."

But at a time when America must recognize the importance of developing a skilled workforce by "stepping on the gas educationally," Ralls said, the country was, instead, "sputtering."

Opportunities for individuals to achieve middle-class status with less than a high school education are nearly extinct, the 43-year-old Ralls said, adding that, for the first time in American history, today's youth would be less educated collectively than their parents' generation.

Though stiff tests lie ahead for educators across the country, Ralls said North Carolina community colleges can take steps to meet the challenges by helping their employees develop effective leadership qualities, he said.

Ralls said PCC's Leadership Institute and programs like it play a pivotal role in helping community college personnel develop the competence, inspiration, forward thinking and integrity necessary to "walk the walk and talk the talk."

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Ultimately, Ralls said, community college leaders must constantly ask themselves one question: What's in the best interest of students?

Developed four years ago, PCC's Leadership Institute encourages employees to consider ways they can contribute their leadership qualities to the college's educational mission. The three-day program features seminars and team-oriented activities designed to foster interaction among participants while helping them grow personally and professionally.

"The philosophy behind the Institute is that leadership is measured by contribution, not position," said Dr. Brian Miller, who helps coordinate the event as Pitt's Assistant to the President and Director of Institutional Effectiveness.

In addition to hearing from the new NCCCS president, this year's Leadership Institute class will benefit from the wisdom of several of their PCC colleagues and Dr. Richard E. Rakin, former chancellor of East Carolina University.
Turkish court upholds head scarf ban at colleges

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkey's top court ruled Thursday that Islamic head scarves violate secularism and cannot be allowed at universities, deepening a divide between the country's Islamic-oriented government and secular institutions.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government had tried to allow the scarves at universities as a matter of personal and religious freedom.

But the Constitutional Court verdict said constitutional amendments passed by Parliament in February went against secularism.

The head scarf issue is an explosive one in Turkey, where the government is locked in a power struggle with secular groups that have support from the military and other state institutions.

The decision is likely to bode ill for the government. Turkey's chief prosecutor is seeking to disband the ruling party on grounds that it is "the focal point of anti-secular activities" in a separate case at the Constitutional Court. The prosecutor — who has asked that Erdogan and other party officials be banned from politics for five years — has cited attempts to allow head scarves at universities as a case in point.

Many consider any attempt to allow head scarves in schools as an attack against modern Turkey's secular laws.
WHEN STUDENTS WALK AWAY

BY VANN LANGSTON

Across the state this month, families are packing gyms, stadiums and arenas to celebrate as about 85,000 high school seniors receive their diplomas.

But these joy-filled venues won't be as crowded as they should be. Since North Carolina's Class of 2008 entered ninth grade four years ago, more than 25,000 of them have dropped out. That's about 30 percent of the class. While each teen who leaves school early has a unique story, together they have one thing in common: Their future looks bleak.

First, they are likely to have trouble finding good jobs. According to the Center for Economic and Policy Research, a "good" job should pay about $34,000 a year and also offer health insurance and a pension. But the jobs dropouts manage to find pay about $16,000 a year.

Poverty isn't the only problem dropouts face. Compared with high school graduates, they're less likely to have health insurance, their life expectancy is lower and their chances of becoming incarcerated higher. About 47 percent of North Carolina's state prisoners are high school dropouts.

It's not only dropouts themselves who suffer. We all pay when our labor pool is shallower than it should be, crime is higher than it could be and medical costs are steeper than they need to be.

The High Five Regional Partnership for High School Excellence believes we'd all benefit if everyone graduated. Our goal of helping the Triangle's 45 high schools achieve a 100 percent graduation rate by 2013 is ambitious. (Although the graduation rate for Triangle school districts is already slightly higher than the state average.) But to set the bar lower would do a great disservice to our kids and the companies that will employ them.

We're helping schools create Professional Learning Communities, or PLCs. A PLC centers on two core beliefs. The first is that by working as a team instead of in isolation, teachers will be more productive, motivated and accountable for student results. The second is that the feedback enabled by frequent assessments throughout a course helps students master the material better and lets teachers know who needs remedial help.

But as promising as these efforts are proving, they don't go far enough. Others who play a role in students' lives also need to get involved:

PARENTS. Children who fall behind in elementary school are at risk of dropping out as teens. So beginning when your kids are young, encourage reading and limit TV viewing and videogame playing. Make sure that school and homework come before activities or after-school jobs. Contact your child's teacher promptly when he has a problem. And lay out a future for your child that includes attending a two-year or four-year college.

BUSINESSES. As a business person or professional, you can help kids make the important connection between school and work. Opportunities range from presenting at career day to talking to teachers about what skills your company needs to tutoring a child in math or science. And volunteers will be needed as mentors and judges for the N.C. Graduation Project, a new graduation requirement designed to make learning more relevant.

CIVIC GROUPS AND THE FAITH COMMUNITY. Although many groups and houses of worship already are involved in boosting student achievement, it would be tremendously helpful if all such organizations opened tutoring labs, provided transportation to school-based tutoring programs, offered parenting workshops or assigned mentors to at-risk students.

LAWMAKERS. Twenty-six states have compulsory attendance ages higher than North Carolina's. If it weren't legal to drop out at 16, all of us would need to work harder to help our children stay in school.

It's time for communities across the state to ask their legislators — as did the Durham County commissioners and the Durham Board of Education — to increase the compulsory school attendance age to 17 initially and 18 ultimately. It would be wise to raise the age over a five-year period so the General Assembly and county commissions could provide school districts with additional resources to increase capacity or provide alternative settings to help at-risk students succeed.

By taking this bold step, legislators would send a message that graduating from high school is critical to our individual and collective success.

The only problem with helping more kids graduate is that North Carolina's meeting venues would be more crowded than ever in the Junes to come.

Vann Langston is executive director of the High Five Regional Partnership for High School Excellence, which works with five local school districts to improve student achievement. The N&O is one of several companies and foundations providing funding for High Five until June 2009. Orage Quarles III, publisher of The N&O, is a board member and co-founder of High Five.