



LEGISLATIVE NEWSLETTER LEGISLATIVE NEWSLETTER

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New State Superintendent Weighs In

New Schools Chief Backgrounder: Republican Mark Johnson, who'll succeed June Atkinson as state schools superintendent, wants to challenge the status quo and is something of a non-traditionalist, according to news accounts. Johnson, an attorney for a technology firm in Winston-Salem, has been on the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County school board for two years or so. In this month's election, Johnson defeated Atkinson, a Democrat and CTE ally, who has been the state's education chief for 11 years and worked at the NC Department of Public Instruction for roughly 28 years before winning statewide office.

Johnson's outlook on education has been shaped by two years as a Teach for America corps member at West Charlotte High School. He likes "hands-on solutions." He taught earth science to ninth graders in a school where many students are poor and struggle with classwork. Some students didn't know whether they would have enough to eat, he said, and one student lived in a motel.

Some of Johnson's students were held back and older than typical freshmen. He said a 17-year-old student, who did not regularly attend class, came in one day eager to do the assignment. The student sat down for the silent reading exercise, but admitted to Johnson he could not read it. "I realized that I was ready, if given the opportunity, to devote my life to making sure in my lifetime that all students have the opportunity to succeed," Johnson said. "Through my experiences, I realized that opportunity is not available to every student in this country, and it needs to be." He said "more of the same" won't improve public education in the state.

Issues: Johnson, in his work on the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County school board, concluded that local districts needed more support from DPI for their ideas. He also thinks the state requires too much testing. A new federal law has empowered the state to evaluate its testing program and focus on tests that help students, he said. The DPI is working to finalize a plan on how the state will measure student knowledge and school quality. Johnson will take office in January before the state sends the final version to Washington.

Johnson touts the work the Forsyth district has done to improve one of the state's lowest-performing schools, Cook Elementary, by giving it flexibility afforded charter schools in hiring,

pay and setting the school calendar. The school has a new name and new teachers. It uses some of the "outside-the-box" elements Johnson supports. Employees make more money than their counterparts in other schools and members of the "design team" for elementary literacy were paid stipends. The school gave teachers the chance to be leaders in the school and earn more money for taking on extra responsibility.

Background: Johnson grew up in Louisiana the oldest of four sons. He attended public schools there, graduating from that state's public residential high school, Louisiana School for Math, Science and the Arts, which he said is like the N.C. School of Science and Mathematics. He went to college at Emory University in Atlanta. After two years teaching, Johnson attended law school at UNC-Chapel Hill. Johnson is leaving his job as corporate counsel for technology firm Inmar in Winston-Salem, and moving to Raleigh with his wife, Rachel, and their 3 1/2-year-old daughter for his new job running the state department that employs more than 1,000 people, the News & Observer reports.

School Funding Eyed

Update: The system that channels billions of dollars to run the state's K-12 public and charter schools is hurt by complexity, sometimes favors wealthier counties and avoids transparency, according to a non-partisan legislative research report released last week. North Carolina's public school funding system depends on 37 different categories, including separate classifications and funding formulas for classroom teachers, textbooks, administration, and transportation. For fiscal year 2014-15, about \$8.4 billion was spent through this system, with about 70 percent of K-12 funding coming from state and not federal sources, according to state researchers.

The 65-page-report, prepared by the Program Evaluation Division, took 10 months to compile and describes inequities throughout the system such as the state's wealthiest school districts often receiving better teacher pay. The report also notes that poorer districts, disabled students and those who speak English as a second language receive less funding because money is spent at a flat rate that does not consider the severity of a disability or the setting.

In addition, the report critiques the systems' "patchwork of laws and documented policies." Its authors call for significant reforms or adopting a weighted student funding model, which would distribute money to school systems based on the number and types of students.

Members of the Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee debated adopting the weighted funding model, with Republicans arguing for quick change. "This is a huge deal," said Rep. Craig Horn, R-Union. "These are people's lives we're dealing with here. It's the future of our state."

Democrats argued that caution was needed before launching a major overhaul. Rep. Becky Carney, D-Mecklenburg, warned that reform could ignite a political fire, especially if school administrators didn't have significant input. Committee members asked researchers to draft

legislation to study replacing the current system with extra money available for specific student needs, the Insider reports.

House Speaker Challenge

State House Speaker Tim Moore faces a challenge to keep the job from a fellow Republican at a time when the GOP appears to have maintained its veto-proof majority in this month's elections. Three-term Rep. Harry Warren of Salisbury said recently he's a candidate to lead the chamber. The nominee chosen by the House Republican Caucus — meeting soon to organize for the next two years — would be the overwhelming favorite when the General Assembly convenes in January, since Republicans are likely to hold 74 of the chamber's 120 seats.

Warren has been aligned with the more conservative wing of the caucus, representing about 20 members who have accused Moore of negotiating with the Senate or the governor without enough of their input. Getting enough caucus support to defeat a sitting speaker would be a long shot. Rep. Jason Saine, a Moore ally, said he believed Moore would win the nomination for a second term as speaker. Warren wrote to current and incoming House Republicans that it's time for a "clean slate" and Donald Trump's election signals a rejection of "business as usual." One thing may be a sure bet: With Warren challenging a sitting Speaker, if he loses, don't look for Warren to get any major legislative committee chairmanships.

Other Election, Local News

Gubernatorial Outcome Limbo: The counting was supposed to be over last Friday, but North Carolina's too-close-to-call governor's race remains up in the air, the State Board of Elections said late last week. Election officials say delays in receiving information from the Department of Motor Vehicles are the source of many of the problems. Officials must comply with a federal judge's order that the votes of people who signed up at DMV offices should be counted unless the agency can prove they refused to register. Lots of formal local challenges also are postponing final totals as the State Board of Elections figures

By the end of last week, all 100 counties were supposed to decide whether to count or set aside more than 60,000 mailed-in absentee and provisional ballots statewide, unseal the voters' choices and send updated vote totals for dozens of races to the State Board of Elections. More than half of the counties, including the highest-voting Wake County, held meetings to work through piles of ballots

By late last Thursday, board spokesman Pat Gannon said "many, if not all" of the counties would not be finished before by Friday's canvass deadline. Counties are still working through formal election protests, supported by Republican Gov. Pat McCrory's campaign, that question early in-person vote totals and dispute whether some mailed-in ballots were forged by supporters of Democratic candidates. Roy Cooper, the current state attorney general who is about 5,000 votes ahead of McCrory, declared himself the winner on election night, saying he

expects the final certified results to favor him. Cooper's spokesman, Ford Porter, noted Thursday that McCrory's DMV is to blame for the latest delays.

Superintendent of the Year: Wake County Superintendent Jim Merrill was named the 2017 North Carolina Superintendent of the Year recently, marking the third time he's won recognition as a state's top school administrator. The N.C. Association of School Administrators gave the award to Merrill, who was one of eight regional finalists for the honor, at a ceremony in Greensboro. Merrill will represent North Carolina in the national Superintendent of the Year competition. Wake school board Chair Tom Benton said it is a well-earned honor for Merrill. Benton said Merrill, who became Wake's superintendent in June 2013, has returned stability to the state's largest school system.

Quote of the Week

"Is it important this time? Sure, but it's important every time."

- Wake County Board of Elections chairman Ellis Boyle, on counting mail-in ballots and damaged ballots for the governor's race (The Associated Press, 11/17/16)

Happy Safe and Relaxing Thanksgiving!



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