

Commission Rejects Poll Watcher Restrictions

By Hannah Schoenbaum

Associated Press/Report for America

North Carolina's Rules Review Commission has rejected two temporary rule changes recommended last week by the state Board of Elections that would have tightened restrictions for partisan poll watchers in the November elections.

The decision follows a unanimous elections board vote to more clearly outline the code of conduct for party-appointed election observers in response to more than a dozen reported conduct violations during the state's May primaries.

The proposed rules would prohibit poll watchers from standing too close to voting machines or pollbooks where they could view marked ballots or confidential voter information. Elections officials would have authority to remove observers who try to enter restricted areas, interact with voters or disrupt election proceedings.

Appointed by political parties as their eyes and ears inside voting facilities, poll watchers are permitted by state law to take notes from designated areas and

report concerns to a precinct manager.

Though the elections board

approved tightening restrictions on poll watchers with bipartisan support Aug. 16, the decision

required final approval from the rules commission—a 10-member panel appointed by the Republi-

can-controlled state legislature.

The commission rejected the board's proposal Thursday, arguing in its staff opinion that the rules were "not reasonably necessary" and "ambiguous and unclear," legal counsel William Peaslee wrote.

Commission Chair Jeanette Doran did not respond to calls seeking further explanation of the commission's reasoning.

The decision comes as North Carolina is preparing to vote this fall in several tight races, including a high-profile U.S. Senate contest, two state supreme court races and several critical state legislative elections that will determine whether Republicans gain the few seats they need to

nullify the Democratic governor's veto.

Elections board spokesperson Patrick Gannon said the board believes these rule changes are necessary to "provide better guidance immediately to poll workers and partisan observers" and "protect the integrity of the voting process." The board has not yet decided its next steps, Gannon said, but may consider modifying and resubmitting the rules to the commission or appealing the decision in court.

The Rules Review Commission is a panel little known outside of state government circles. Commissioners decide whether

(See **COMMISSION**, P. 2)



SPACEX, T-MOBILE TRY TO CONNECT REMOTE AREAS WITH SATELLITES

Elon Musk's SpaceX and T-Mobile are teaming up in an attempt to connect mobile devices through a network of satellites, providing coverage to even the most isolated places.

Under the plan, T-Mobile's wireless network would be routed through SpaceX Starlink satellites that are in low Earth orbit.

T-Mobile said that the vast majority of smartphones already on its network will be compatible with the new service using the device's existing radio.

The companies are looking to provide text coverage, including SMS, MMS and participating messaging apps, nearly everywhere in the continental U.S., Hawaii, parts of Alaska, Puerto Rico and territorial waters starting with a beta in select areas by the end of next year. They want to add voice and data coverage at a later time.

T-Mobile and SpaceX say they are ready to partner with other carriers to help expand the service worldwide.

"The important thing about this is that it means there's no dead zones anywhere in the world for your cellphone," Elon Musk said during a live event at a SpaceX facility in Texas on Thursday.

The billionaire and Tesla CEO who is engaged in a legal battle with Twitter, emphasized that one of the key benefits of the service will be that it can help people who are in life threatening situations in remote areas, potentially saving lives.

SOUTHEASTERN NC COULD SEE NEW 472 AREA CODE THIS FALL

(AP)—A new area code assigned to future phone service in southeastern North Carolina could begin getting issued as soon as this fall, the state Utilities Commission says.

The new code—472—will serve the same geographic area currently served by the 910 area code, which is running out of available numbers. The area includes places like Fayetteville, Jacksonville, Lumberton, Wilmington and Pinehurst.

The new area code will overlay the existing 910 area—meaning current 910 phone numbers won't have to change.

Phone customers seeking new services or an additional line in the 910 region may be assigned a number beginning with 472 starting Oct. 7, the commission said. But the commission decided that no new 472 numbers would be assigned until the 910 numbers are completely exhausted. The North American Numbering Plan Administrator estimates that will happen in early 2023, according to the commission.

FACEBOOK PARENT CULLS LARGE PROUD BOYS NETWORK FROM SITES

MENLO PARK, Calif. (AP)—Facebook parent Meta says it has removed a network of accounts linked to the Proud Boys, a far-right extremist group it banned in 2018.

Meta said on Thursday that it recently uncovered and removed about 480 Facebook and Instagram accounts, pages and groups linked to the Proud Boys. That brought the total number of Proud Boys assets it has removed to around 750 this year, it said.

Although the group has been banned from Meta's platforms, the company said it has seen repeated attempts by its members at evading the ban. People behind the efforts are not identifying themselves as Proud Boys openly, creating front groups and using Facebook or Instagram to steer people to other, less moderated platforms, it said.

Such tactics are commonly used by extremist groups and those spreading misinformation as they try to evade social media companies' crackdowns.

While the Proud Boys and other extremist groups have at times found homes on smaller internet platforms that cater to right-wing audiences, none come close to the reach of Meta's properties, where they can recruit members more easily.

The former leader of the Proud Boys and other members of the group were charged this summer with attacking the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021 to stop Congress from certifying President Joe Biden's 2020 electoral victory.

Henry "Enrique" Tarrío and four others were charged with seditious conspiracy for what authorities say was a plot to forcibly oppose the lawful transfer of presidential power during the joint session of Congress on Jan. 6, 2021.

The seditious conspiracy indictment alleges that the Proud Boys held meetings and communicated over encrypted messages to plan for the attack in the days leading up to Jan. 6. On the day of the riot, Proud Boys members carried out a coordinated plot to storm past police barricades and attack the building with a mob of Trump supporters, the indictment says.

The trial is scheduled to start on Dec. 12.

DEMOCRATS: NC EDUCATORS NEED FINANCIAL AND MORAL SUPPORT

(AP)—As many traditional public schools return to class next week, North Carolina Democratic legislative leaders called on colleagues Thursday to support providing more financial resources to recruit and retain educators.

Districts across the state trying to fill thousands of teacher and

EPA To Crack Down On 'Forever Chemicals'

By Matthew Daly

Associated Press

WASHINGTON, D.C. (AP)—The Environmental Protection Agency moved Friday to designate two "forever chemicals" used in cookware, carpets and firefighting foams as hazardous substances, a step that would clear the way for quicker clean-up of the toxic compounds, which

have been linked to cancer and other health problems.

Designation as a hazardous substance under the so-called Superfund law doesn't ban the chemicals. But it requires that releases of PFOA and PFOS into soil or water be reported to federal, state or tribal officials if they meet or exceed certain levels. The EPA could then require cleanups to protect public health

and recover cleanup costs.

PFOA and PFOS have been voluntarily phased out by U.S. manufacturers but are still in limited use and remain in the environment because they do not degrade over time. The compounds are part of a larger cluster of "forever chemicals" known as PFAS that have been used in consumer products and industry since the 1940s. The

term is short for per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, which have been used in nonstick frying pans, water-repellent sports gear, stain-resistant rugs, cosmetics and countless other consumer products.

The chemicals can accumulate and persist in the human body for long periods of time, and

(See **EPA**, P. 2)

Berger Prefers First Trimester Limits

By Gary D. Robertson

Associated Press

North Carolina's most powerful state senator said Tuesday he would prefer to have approved restrictions on abortion after roughly the first three months of pregnancy.

Senate leader Phil Berger, speaking before convening another round of no-vote General Assembly sessions last week, also said he would support exceptions to any prohibition following the first trimester, such as in situations of rape and incest or when the mother's life is in danger.

The views of Berger, a Rock-

ingham County Republican, would appear to represent a more tempered effort compared to GOP legislators in North Carolina and other states who want to outlaw abortion or dramatically scale it back following a U.S. Supreme Court decision in June to overturn Roe v. Wade.

A federal judge last week reinstated a North Carolina law that prohibits abortion after 20 weeks of pregnancy save for urgent medical emergencies. Incest and rape exceptions currently are not granted in state law. The first trimester is usually defined at 12 or 13 weeks of pregnancy.

"I would say that after the first

trimester, the state has an absolute interest in regulating the incidence of abortion," Berger told reporters.

House Speaker Tim Moore, a Cleveland County Republican, reiterated Tuesday that he personally supports legislation that would ban abortions once an ultrasound first detects fetal cardiac activity. That's typically around six weeks after fertilization and before some patients know they are pregnant.

The Republican leaders cautioned that their views are theirs alone and the opinions of General Assembly colleagues, constituents and others will have a lot to say about finding a consensus in

2023.

Moore, who also said he supports exceptions for rape, incest and for protecting the mother's life, said he did not want to "interject what I personally believe right now" until the House had a process in place to debate the idea.

"I suspect that we'll be very deliberative and very thoughtful on this legislation," Moore said, adding that he'd also like any final bill to receive support from Democrats. "My hope is that we try to find a way to make it as much as possible a consensus bill."

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Children Of Katrina Are Coming Of Age

By Drew Costley

AP Science Writer

Edward Buckles, Jr. was 13 when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and completely upended his life. Buckles and his family

moved from New Orleans to Lafayette, La. for several months while their hometown began to recover from the catastrophic storm.

He told The Associated Press he doesn't remember much from

those months living in Lafayette, grasping for a sense of normalcy in the aftermath of one of the most destructive hurricanes in American history.

His community was experiencing so much destruction. Now as

an adult, he views that blank spot in his memory as a response to the trauma of what he witnessed.

Buckles' parents asked him at the time if he was okay, but he wasn't quite able to figure that out for himself in the moment. Later the trauma resurfaced. With kids, he said, "what's responsible and what's important is that you set them up to deal with that trauma once it surfaces."

But the filmmaker said in his new documentary *Katrina Babies* that not all the children who were traumatized by living through the hurricane and its aftermath had adults checking in on them. So that's what he set out to do, capturing several New Orleans residents as they reconcile with a childhood marred by Hurricane Katrina.

The documentary, which has garnered critical praise, became available for streaming on HBO Max on August 24 and debuted on HBO the same day, 17 years and a day after the hurricane formed in the Atlantic Ocean.

It shows how New Orleans and its people were changed by the storm. It depicts the childhood trauma it caused for a generation coming of age after one of the United States' first major climate-related disasters. New Orleanians featured in the documentary share stories of seeing

(See **KATRINA CHILDREN**, P. 2)



EDWARD BUCKLES, JR. WAS 13 WHEN HURRICANE KATRINA HIT NEW ORLEANS

STATE BRIEFS

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staff positions would benefit from the General Assembly approving additional pay increases and spending beyond what was agreed to in the state budget law, speakers at a Legislative Building news conference said.

But “it’s about more than just money,” said Senate Minority Leader Dan Blue, a Wake County Democrat. “Educators are underpaid, overworked and importantly, underappreciated.”

Rep. Robert Reives of Chatham County, Blue’s counterpart in the House, said there are several billion dollars in state coffers left unspent that could address a “crisis of resources” in the schools. Both he and Blue said schools also are having trouble filling vacancies because too many people are unfairly “demonizing” public education as well as teachers for curriculum or other hot-button social issues.

Republican legislators in charge of the General Assembly have defended their commitment to public education, pointing to marked increases in K-12 state spending in recent years. Teachers received average pay increases of 4.2 percent during this fiscal year. GOP lawmakers also have continued to expand taxpayer-funded grants for families to send children to K-12 private and religious schools.

The Democrats’ news conference came as the House and Senate leaders adjourned a week of no-vote floor sessions. The General Assembly is next scheduled to return for potential action on Sept. 20.

PLAN AIDS NC PRINCIPALS OTHERWISE PENALIZED FOR PAY CHANGE

(AP)—North Carolina’s schools chief unveiled a plan on Wednesday that would prevent some public school principals from facing pay cuts in 2023 due to an alteration in how performance-based compensation is calculated.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Catherine Truitt said about \$4.5 million in federal COVID-19 relief funds for education would be spent to ensure that about 360 principals won’t see a reduction in their portion of pay that’s based on student achievement at the schools they have led. The State Board of Education will consider the plan next week, the Department of Public Instruction said in a news release.

An update to this year’s state budget enacted last month declares that starting in January, performance pay won’t be based on three years of performance data, but rather just one: the 2021-22 school year, when schools and students were challenged greatly by COVID-19 restrictions.

While many principals would benefit financially from the change, roughly 15 percent of them could otherwise take pay cuts from \$7,200 to \$18,000 over 12 months, the department said. The General Assembly completed its chief work session for the year in July, and it’s unclear if lawmakers would have addressed the issue by the end of the year.

“We are thrilled that we can hold our principals harmless given the incredibly challenging and extenuating circumstances that the pandemic brought into our schools,” Truitt said in the news release. “Their paychecks certainly shouldn’t be dictated by the uncertainty they absorbed and yet heroically managed through the 2021-22 school year.”

Once the proposal is approved, the Department of Public Instruction will develop a policy for the funds to be distributed. Another state budget provision giving across-the-board 4 percent salary increases to principals this fiscal year isn’t changing.

NC SCHOOLS AGENCY HIGHLIGHTS LITERACY GAINS IN EARLY GRADES

(AP)—Early-grade students in North Carolina’s public schools made marked improvements in reading and literacy skills during the past school year, outpacing students in other states evaluated with similar testing, the Department of Public Instruction said Thursday.

The gains came during the first full school year of a new initiative contained within a 2021 state law designed to improve reading proficiency.

The “Excellent Public Schools Act” emphasizes scientific methods to teach children how to read that emphasize phonics, vocabulary and spelling. Many teachers are still working through a two-year professional development program to master this instruction.

“We still have a long way to go, but the results we’re seeing from last year are clearly pointing in the right direction,” state schools Superintendent Catherine Truitt said in a news release.

The 2021 law sought to address shortcomings following a 2012 law designed to set the goal for all children to meet proficient reading levels by third grade.

Children in kindergarten through third grade were formally assessed at both the beginning and the end of the 2021-22 school year on how they were doing on literacy skills, such as identifying phonetic sounds in spoken words.

Those results were compared to how well more than 1 million students in other states performed in the same assessment, according to a department contractor that provides the assessment. The results showed that North Carolina students made greater gains over the year compared to the students in other states, DPI said.

For example, the percentage of North Carolina kindergarten students who scored at or above the benchmark for literacy proficiency grew from 27 percent at the beginning of the school year to 67 percent at the end of the year. Elsewhere in the country, the jump in proficiency was from 36 percent of kindergarteners to 60 percent.

The news release also provided data on North Carolina first- and second-graders outpacing peers elsewhere with the growth in the percentage of children deemed proficient in literacy.

Details on third grade proficiency weren’t released Thursday to avoid confusion with broader third-grade test results set to come out next week, DPI spokesperson Blair Rhoades said. But she said the third-grade literacy assessment improvements aligned with the K-2 comparisons.

DPI also cautioned that similar assessment results from past years weren’t compatible with the 2021-22 testing because last year’s assessment more closely followed several key elements in the “science of reading” model.

Commission Rejects... —CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

to approve or reject temporary or permanent agency rules—details that lawmakers have delegated to government departments.

Approval can be based on whether the rules are clear and unambiguous and whether the state agency proposing them has the authority to carry them out.

A 2020 lawsuit filed by Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper challenges the commission’s composition, saying he has no meaningful control over the panel, which undermines the executive branch’s authority to establish policy. The governor believes he should be able to appoint a majority of its

members. A hearing in the lawsuit is set for this fall.

At the time the lawsuit was filed, the commission had blocked roughly 200 rules from taking effect in the previous two years, according to Cooper’s attorneys.

The Republican National Committee and the North Carolina Republican Party wrote a letter to the commission earlier this week arguing that the proposed rules “do not ensure the integrity of the election process” and instead “restrict the ability of North Carolina voters to observe and report election fraud.”

Former President Donald

Trump’s debunked claims that the 2020 presidential election results were fraudulent have prompted thousands of his supporters to scrutinize elections operations nationwide.

A state board survey of county elections directors in late May found violations in 15 North Carolina counties, where officials observed poll watchers harassing voters and attempting to enter restricted areas to view confidential voting records.

Gannon said the issues identified in the survey “were not limited to any particular political party’s observers” but demonstrated a need for tighter rules

statewide.

The elections board had pushed for temporary rule changes this election cycle with the hope that the commission would approve them before in-person early voting begins Oct. 20, said Paul Cox, associate legal counsel to the state board.

Hannah Schoenbaum is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues. Follow her on Twitter at twitter.com/H_Schoenbaum.

EPA To Crack Down... —CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

evidence from animal and human studies indicates that exposure to PFOA or PFOS may lead to cancer or other health problems.

“Communities have suffered far too long from exposure to these forever chemicals,” EPA Administrator Michael Regan said in a statement Friday. “The action announced today will improve transparency and advance EPA’s aggressive efforts to confront this pollution.”

Under the proposed rule, “EPA will both help protect communities from PFAS pollution and seek to hold polluters accountable for their actions,” Regan said. The rule is expected to become final next year.

The Superfund law allows the EPA to clean up contaminated sites and forces parties responsible for the contamination to either perform cleanups or reimburse the government for EPA-led cleanup work. When no responsible party can be identified, Superfund gives EPA money and authority to clean up contaminated sites.

The EPA’s action follows a recent report by the National Academies of Science that calls PFAS a serious public health threat in the U.S. and worldwide. It comes after an EPA announcement in June that PFOA and PFOS are more dangerous than previously

thought and pose health risks even at levels so low they cannot currently be detected.

The agency issued nonbinding health advisories that set health risk thresholds for PFOA and PFOS to near zero, replacing 2016 guidelines that had set them at 70 parts per trillion. The chemicals are found in products including cardboard packaging, carpets and firefighting foam and increasingly found in drinking water.

The EPA said in a statement that it is focused on holding responsible companies that manufactured and released significant amounts of PFOA and PFOS into the environment and will not target individual landowners or farmers “who may have been inadvertently impacted by the contamination.” The agency also said it is committed to further outreach and engagement to hear from communities affected by PFAS pollution.

Erik Olson, a health and food expert at the Natural Resources Defense Council, called the announcement an important step to clean up hundreds of contaminated sites across the country and protect millions of families exposed to the toxic chemicals.

“Listing PFOA and PFOS as hazardous under Superfund law should allow EPA to hold pollut-

ers responsible for that contamination,” he said. “Ratepayers and public utilities should not be footing the bill for industry’s decades of wanton use of these dangerous chemicals.”

Attorney Rob Bilott, an anti-PFAS advocate, said the EPA’s proposal “sends a loud and clear message to the entire world that the United States is finally acknowledging and accepting the now overwhelming evidence that these man-made poisons present substantial danger to the public health and the environment.”

Bilott, whose work to uncover the widespread presence of PFAS chemicals in the environment and in human blood was highlighted in the 2019 film *Dark Waters*, said the EPA must work to ensure that costs of cleaning up the toxins are borne by PFAS manufacturers that caused the contamination—not the innocent victims of this pollution who didn’t create the toxins and were never warned any of this was ever happening.”

Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., said she supports strong action to address PFAS contamination in West Virginia and across the country but was concerned about “the unintended consequences that today’s proposal could have.”

If finalized, “property owners,

farmers, employers, essential utilities and individuals may be liable for unknowingly having PFAS on their land, even if it was there years or even generations prior to ownership and came from an unknown source,” Capito said.

She urged the EPA to develop an enforceable drinking water standard to promote the health and safety of all Americans.

The American Chemistry Council, which represents major chemical companies, called the EPA’s proposal “an expensive, ineffective and unworkable means to achieve remediation for these chemicals.”

Listing the chemicals under Superfund could harm local fire departments, water utilities, small businesses, airports and farmers, the group said. “The proposed (Superfund) designation would impose tremendous costs on these parties without defined cleanup standards,” the council said in a statement.

The EPA said it expects to propose national drinking water regulations for PFOA and PFOS later this year, with a final rule expected in 2023.

Follow the AP’s coverage of the Environmental Protection Agency at <https://apnews.com/hub/us-environmental-protection-agency>.

Berger Prefers 1st Trimester —CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Moore and Berger have said no potential action on abortion would occur until next year, after a new edition of the 170-member General Assembly takes office in January. Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper, a strong abortion-rights advocate, has issued vetoes of abortion-related measures that Republicans have been unable to override largely because they’ve lacked veto-proof margins.

Whether Republicans can enact their preferred abortion restrictions in 2023 probably will depend on whether the GOP can gain in November’s elections three additional seats in the House and two in the Senate to regain veto-proof majorities they last held in 2018.

U.S. District Judge William Osteen ruled last week that the Supreme Court decision in June overturning *Roe v. Wade* erased

the legal foundation for his 2019 ruling that had placed an injunction on the state law banning abortions after 20 weeks, which was passed in 1973.

When the injunction was in place, abortions had been legal until fetal viability, which generally falls between 24 and 28 weeks of pregnancy.

Legislative Democrats and other abortion-rights advocates called last week’s reinstatement

of the 20-week ban, which Moore and Berger had urged Osteen in a legal brief to order, a first step by the GOP toward eliminating the right to abortion in the state.

Berger said Tuesday he has never supported a total abortion ban and suggested Democrats should be specific about when they believe how late in a pregnancy abortions should be permitted without exceptions.

Children of Katrina... —CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

dead people and pets, of leaving home and returning to communities destroyed, while they were still children.

The film looks at climate past and present and, the filmmakers hope, sounds alarm bells for the climate future.

“I hope this is a local and American story that will motivate people to want to do better and care about human beings, and about how intrinsically linked we are with nature and that the future is clear: There is going to be more of this,” said Audrey Rosenberg, lead producer of the film.

Buckles said that while Hurricane Katrina might have been a formative experience for him and the youth of New Orleans at the time, more waters have come through since. Though he isn’t a climate scientist, he knows firsthand the repeated damage

wrought on his hometown by hurricanes and tropical storms made more intense by climate change.

“My grandmother lost her home due to flooding from Hurricane Katrina,” he said. “She has been flooded seven more times just from tropical storms.”

Cierra Chenier, 26, was featured in the documentary and also knows people who have had to rebuild multiple times since Hurricane Katrina due to subsequent hurricanes and storms.

She said the loss of culture and history in New Orleans due to repeated climate-related disasters like Hurricane Katrina shaped her decision to become a local historian and writer.

“I got into wanting to preserve our history because of how quickly I felt my childhood became history,” she said. Even

though the storm was 17 years ago, she said, it continues to shape the present.

“In preserving our stories, writing about those stories and narrating those stories, it’s always connected to the present and we can form better solutions for the future,” she said.

Chenier, Buckles and the other youth affected by Hurricane Katrina have a lot to say about the future, having experienced years of government inaction to limit climate change or prepare and recover from climate disasters. Year after year, New Orleanians and the state and federal government know that hurricane season is going to come and be potentially catastrophic because of climate change, Buckles said.

And still, he said, Hurricane Ida, which hit New Orleans 16 years to the day after Hurricane

Katrina, affected people in his community in eerily similar ways to the 2005 storm. The relief measures, he said, were nearly as slow.

As a result, people in his community have become more resilient. But he said he wonders whether government agencies are relying on those harmed by climate-related disasters to help themselves when what they really need is public planning and preparation.

“The youth are tired of dealing with this, myself included,” he said. “And we cannot forget to hold accountable those who need to be held accountable.”

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Appeals Panel Blocks Law’s Use In Ad Case

By Gary D. Robertson

Associated Press

(AP)—A federal appeals court last Tuesday blocked a local North Carolina district attorney from prosecuting state Attorney General Josh Stein or anyone else for his 2020 campaign ad through a criminal libel law.

The majority of a three-judge panel of the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond, Va., granted the request by Stein’s campaign committee and others associated with his campaign to prevent enforcement of the law while they sue to attempt to have the law overturned as unconstitutional.

The 2-1 decision came the day after a Wake County grand jury formally asked the Wake district attorney’s office to submit an indictment against Stein and two of his advisers or any one of the three for jurors to consider. Wake County DA Lorrin Freeman said

Monday that could have happened as soon as next month.

Any formal charges could harm the political future of Stein, a Democrat and possible 2024 gubernatorial candidate.

The law, which dates back to at least 1931, makes it a misdemeanor to circulate “derogatory reports” about a candidate with the intent of hurting that candidate’s chances in the election.

Earlier this month, U.S. District Judge Catherine Eagles refused to issue a preliminary injunction, saying the law was constitutionally permissible because it criminalized “false defamatory speech about public officials made with actual malice.”

But Tuesday’s order from the majority—U.S. Circuit Judges Toby Heytens and Albert Diaz—says Stein’s campaign and other lawsuit plaintiffs are likely to succeed on their challenge that the law violates First Amendment free-speech protections.

The law’s language says a violation occurs when a person knows a derogatory report “to be false or in reckless disregard of its truth or falsity,” the order said. So the law could actually criminalize someone who makes a true statement, according to the judges.

“Candidates running for office in North Carolina might well be chilled in their campaign speech by the sudden reanimation of a criminal libel law that has been dormant for nearly a decade—harming the public’s interest in a robust campaign,” the order read. Heytens was nominated to the 4th Circuit by President Joe Biden, while Diaz was the choice of President Barack Obama.

The probe stems from a complaint that Stein’s Republican opponent in 2020, Forsyth County District Attorney Jim O’Neill, filed with the State Board of Elections against Stein’s campaign.

O’Neill’s complaint cited the law while demanding that the board

investigate a political ad that accused the Republican of letting more than a thousand rape kits go untested. O’Neill said the ad was false because police agencies, not prosecutors, are responsible for testing the kits.

Stein and his allies have said the ad is truthful and was designed to counter false statements that O’Neill made during the campaign that Stein had failed to act on more than 15,000 untested rape kits since becoming attorney general in 2017.

A lawyer for Freeman, whose office took over the campaign ad investigation in 2021, has said blocking enforcement of the law could scuttle any prosecution because the statute of limitations on the misdemeanor is two years.

But the majority’s order said that such an issue is at least to some extent “self-inflicted” because Freeman hasn’t adequately explained why it’s taken so long to bring charges.

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Business & Finance

Fed Tackles Inflation With Most Diverse Leadership Ever

JACKSON HOLE, Wyoming (AP) — When Diane Swonk first attended the Federal Reserve's annual economic conference in Jackson Hole in the late 1990s, there was a happy hour for women who attended the event. It barely filled a single table.

Now, the "Women at Jackson Hole" happy hour draws dozens of female economists and high-level decision-makers, from the United States and overseas.

"I'm just glad that now there's a line for the ladies' room," said Swonk, a longtime Fed watcher who is chief economist for the accounting giant KPMG.

It's not just at Jackson Hole but also in the Fed's boardroom where its leadership has become its most diverse ever. There are more female, Black and openly gay officials contributing to the central bank's interest-rate decisions than at any time in its 109-year history. Many are also far less wealthy than the officials they have replaced.

Over time, economists say, a wider range of voices will deepen the Fed's perspective as it weighs the consequences of raising or lowering rates. It may also help diversify a profession that historically hasn't been seen as particularly welcoming to women and minorities.

"Broadly, that's helpful," said William English, a former senior economist at the Fed who teaches at the Yale School of Management. "There's evidence that diverse groups make better decisions."

The central bank, as it is doing now, raises its benchmark short-

term rate when it wants to lower inflation, and reduces it when it wants to accelerate hiring. Such moves, in turn, affect borrowing costs throughout the economy — for mortgages, auto loans and business loans, among others.

On Friday, in his speech to the Jackson Hole symposium, Chair Jerome Powell stressed that the Fed plans further rate hikes and expects to keep its benchmark rate high until the worst inflation bout in four decades eases considerably — even if doing so causes job losses and financial pain for households and businesses.

Rhonda Vonshay Sharpe, an economist who is president of the Women's Institute for Society, Equity and Race, said she welcomed the broadening of the Fed's leadership. Sharpe said she's "hopeful that a more diverse group of people will pay attention" to what the Fed does and aspire to high-level economic roles.

Colleges and universities, she suggested, should do more to encourage and prepare students for economic careers, including steering more of them to study mathematics.

The change at the Fed has been a rapid one, with three African Americans and three women having joined the central bank's 19-member interest-rate committee just this year. (Under the Fed's rotating system, only 12 of the 19 committee members vote each year on its rate decisions.)

The Fed's influential seven-member Board of Governors, based in Washington, now in-

cludes two Black economists, Lisa Cook and Philip Jefferson, who were both nominated by President Joe Biden and were sworn in this May. They are the third and fourth Black people on the board. Governors get to vote on every Fed rate decision.

Biden also elevated Lael Brainard, a governor since 2014, to the board's powerful vice chair position.

In addition, two of the presidents of the Fed's 12 regional banks are now Black — Raphael Bostic of the Atlanta Fed and Susan Collins of the Boston Fed. Collins, formerly provost of the University of Michigan, became Boston Fed president this year. Bostic took office in 2017.

Just last week, Lorie Logan, a former senior official at the New York Fed, became president of the Dallas Fed. Five of the regional bank presidents are women.

Nela Richardson, chief economist at the payroll processing firm ADP, noted that the education and experience of the new policymakers are similar to their predecessors, with Cook, Jefferson and Collins all Ph.D. economists — an above-average proportion among new Fed officials, she said.

Richardson suggested that having more women in the Fed's leadership is particularly important now, because many of the problems the central bank faces — including very low unemployment that is fueling wage increases and inflation — are related to women's ability to join the workforce. Fewer women,



Lisa D. Cook, a member of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, takes a break at the central bank's annual symposium on Friday, August 26, 2022, at Grand Teton National Park in Moran, Wyo. (AP Photo/Amber Baesler)

particularly mothers of young children, are working now compared with pre-pandemic trends.

That shortfall is driven, in part, by a drop in the number of childcare workers since the pandemic. With fewer women working or seeking work, many businesses must raise pay to

compete for a smaller pool of labor. Those higher wages are then often passed on to consumers as higher prices, thereby fueling inflation.

Swonk credits Esther George, president of the Kansas City Fed, for driving change at the Jackson Hole conference by inviting

more women over the years, including Cook and Collins, to attend and participate in panels. Each year, about 130 influential central bankers and economists gather at Grand Teton National Park in Jackson Hole at the end of August to network and discuss the economy's challenges.

NASA Prepares Moon Shot 50 Years After Apollo Success

By Marcia Dunn

AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Years late and billions over budget, NASA's new moon rocket makes its debut this week in a high-stakes test flight before as-

tronauts get on top.

The 322-foot rocket will attempt to send an empty crew capsule into a far-flung lunar orbit, 50 years after NASA's famed Apollo moonshots.

If all goes well, astronauts could strap in as soon as 2024 for a lap

around the moon, with NASA aiming to land two people on the lunar surface by the end of 2025.

Liftoff is set for Monday morning from NASA's Kennedy Space Center.

The six-week test flight is risky and could be cut short if something fails, NASA officials warn.

"We're going to stress it and test it. We're going to make it do things that we would never do with a crew on it in order to try to make it as safe as possible," NASA Administrator Bill Nelson told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

The retired founder of George Washington University's space policy institute said a lot is riding on this trial run. Spiraling costs and long gaps between missions will make for a tough comeback if things go south, he noted.

"It is supposed to be the first step in a sustained program of human exploration of the moon, Mars, and beyond," said John

Logsdon. "Will the United States have the will to push forward in the face of a major malfunction?"

The price tag for this single mission: more than \$4 billion. Add everything up since the program's inception a decade ago until a 2025 lunar landing, and there's even more sticker shock: \$93 billion.

Here's a rundown of the first flight of the Artemis program, named after Apollo's mythological twin sister.

The new rocket is shorter and slimmer than the Saturn V rockets that hurled 24 Apollo astronauts to the moon a half-century ago. But it's mightier, packing 8.8 million pounds of thrust. It's called the Space Launch System rocket, SLS for short, but a less clunky name is under discussion, according to Nelson. Unlike the streamlined Saturn V, the new rocket has a pair of strap-on boosters refashioned from NASA's space shuttles. The boosters

will peel away after two minutes, just like the shuttle boosters did, but won't be fished from the Atlantic for reuse. The core stage will keep firing before separating and crashing into the Pacific in pieces. Two hours after liftoff, an upper stage will send the capsule, Orion, racing toward the moon.

NASA's high-tech, automated Orion capsule is named after the constellation, among the night sky's brightest. At 11 feet tall, it's roomier than Apollo's capsule, seating four astronauts instead of three. For this test flight, a full-size dummy in an orange flight suit will occupy the commander's seat, rigged with vibration and acceleration sensors. Two other mannequins made of material simulating human tissue—heads and female torsos, but no limbs—will measure cosmic radiation, one of the biggest risks of spaceflight. One torso is testing a protective vest from Israel. Unlike

the rocket, Orion has launched before, making two laps around Earth in 2014. This time, the European Space Agency's service module will be attached for propulsion and solar power via four wings.

Orion's flight is supposed to last six weeks from its Florida liftoff to Pacific splashdown, twice as long as astronaut trips in order to tax the systems. It will take nearly a week to reach the moon, 240,000 miles away. After whipping closely around the moon, the capsule will enter a distant orbit with a far point of 38,000 miles. That will put Orion 280,000 miles from Earth, farther than Apollo.

The big test comes at mission's end, as Orion hits the atmosphere at 25,000 mph on its way to a splashdown in the Pacific. The heat shield uses the same material as the Apollo capsules to withstand reentry temperatures of 5,000°F. But the advanced design anticipates the faster, hotter returns by future Mars crews.

Besides three test dummies, the flight has a slew of stowaways for deep space research. Ten shoebox-size satellites will pop off once Orion is hurtling toward the moon. The problem is these so-called CubeSats were installed in the rocket a year ago, and the batteries for half of them couldn't be recharged as the launch kept getting delayed. NASA expects some to fail, given the low-cost, high-risk nature of these mini satellites. The radiation-measuring CubeSats should be OK. Also in the clear: a solar sail demo targeting an asteroid. In a back-to-the-future salute, Orion will carry a few slivers of moon rocks collected by Apollo 11's Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin in 1969, and a bolt from one of their rocket engines, salvaged from the sea a decade ago. Aldrin isn't attending the launch, according to NASA, but three of his former colleagues will be there: Apollo 7's Walter Cunningham, Apollo 10's Tom Stafford and Apollo 17's Harrison Schmitt, the next-to-last man to walk on the moon.

Moderna Sues Pfizer, Biontech Over COVID-19 Vaccines

By Tom Murphy

AP Health Writer

COVID-19 vaccine maker Moderna is suing Pfizer and the German drugmaker BioNTech, accusing its main competitors of copying Moderna's technology in order to make their own vaccine.

Moderna said Friday that Pfizer and BioNTech's vaccine Comirnaty infringes on patents Moderna filed several years ago protecting the technology behind its preventive shot, Spikevax. The company filed patent infringement lawsuits

in both U.S. federal court and a German court.

Pfizer spokeswoman Pam Eisele said the company had not fully reviewed Moderna's lawsuit, but the drugmaker was surprised by it, given that their vaccine is based on proprietary technology developed by both BioNTech and Pfizer.

She said in an email that Pfizer Inc., based in New York, would "vigorously defend" against any allegations in the case. BioNTech said in a statement late Friday that its work was "original" and that it too would defend itself.

Moderna and Pfizer's two-shot vaccines both use mRNA technology to help people fight the coronavirus.

"When COVID-19 emerged, neither Pfizer nor BioNTech had Moderna's level of experience with developing mRNA vaccines for coronaviruses," Moderna said in a complaint filed Friday in the U.S. District Court for the District of Massachusetts.

The mRNA vaccines work by injecting a genetic code for the spike protein that coats the surface of the coronavirus. That code, the mRNA, is encased in

a little ball of fat, and instructs the body's cells to make some harmless spike copies that train the immune system to recognize the real virus.

That approach is radically different than how vaccines have traditionally been made.

Moderna said it started developing its mRNA technology platform in 2010, and that helped the company quickly produce its COVID-19 vaccine after the pandemic arrived in early 2020.

By the end of that year, U.S. regulators had cleared shots from both Pfizer and Moderna for use after clinical research showed that both were highly effective.

Moderna CEO Stéphane Bancel said in a prepared statement that the vaccine developer pioneered that technology and invested billions of dollars in creating it.

Moderna worked with scientists at the National Institutes of Health to test and develop its COVID-19 vaccine. The company said its lawsuit is not related to any patent rights generated during that collaboration.

The company said it believes its rivals' vaccine infringes on patents Moderna filed between 2010 and 2016.

Moderna said in its complaint that Pfizer and BioNTech copied some critical features of its technology, including making the "exact same chemical modification to their mRNA that Moderna scientists first developed years earlier" and went on to use in Spikevax.

Moderna said it recognizes the importance of vaccine access and is not seeking to re-

move Comirnaty from the market. It also is not asking for an injunction to prevent future sales.

Moderna said in 2020 that it would not enforce its COVID-19 related patents while the pandemic continued. But the company said in March, with vaccine supplies improving globally, that it would update that pledge.

It said it still would not enforce its patents for vaccines used in low- and middle-income countries. But it expected companies like Pfizer and BioNTech to respect its intellectual property, and it would consider "a commercially reasonable license" in other markets if they requested one.

"Pfizer and BioNTech have failed to do so," Moderna said in a statement.

The vaccines have swiftly become top-selling products globally.

Classifieds

ATTENTION SUBCONTRACTORS

Clancy & Theys Construction Company is hosting an information session for Felton Grove High School project. Session will be held on Wednesday, August 31, 2022, from 5PM - 7PM at Clancy & Theys Construction Company at 421 N. Harrington Street, Raleigh, NC 27603.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to email Lisa Horton, Supplier Diversity Specialist at lishorton@clancytheys.com.



MODERNA SAYS PFIZER COPIED ITS MRNA VACCINE MODEL

Opinion



Back to School, Back to Fighting Far-Right Attacks on Education

By Ben Jealous

People for the American Way

Just when you thought far-right attacks on public education couldn't get any more absurd, we hear about something new.

For the first time in almost 15 years, Sarasota schools this fall are turning down hundreds of free dictionaries from the local Rotary Club. Why? Because the district is afraid of violating a radical new law that's part of Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis's crackdown on inclusive curricula. The district can't buy or accept any new books until it hires someone to make sure they comply with the state's draconian censorship regulations. So, the dictionaries sit on the shelf.

The idea that dictionaries might be hazardous to kids would be laughable if it weren't so dangerous. This new school year is starting as more states are passing laws to make it easier to ban books. States are also passing laws to stop teachers from talking about topics like racism; according to *Education Week*, 42 states have now enacted limits on what teachers can say about racism or sexism in the classroom.

These same political forces want to make schools teach a white-washed version of our history and our current reality in the name of "patriotic" education. They're trying to take over school boards to impose their political ideology on teachers and students. That's bad for our kids. And it's bad for our country. The freedom to learn is at risk.

This fall, it's more important than ever to stand for the rights of teachers to teach, and students to learn, about the full spectrum of the American experience. That means lessons that include and celebrate diverse communities. It means history that doesn't erase the experiences of Black people, brown people, LGBTQ people, women, immigrants, people with disabilities, and other communities that have been historically marginalized. The director of the nonprofit EveryLibrary warns that the current wave of book bans amounts to "the silencing of stories and the suppressing of information" that will make "the next generation less able to function in society."

Children learn better when they can see themselves in others and see their communities as part of the great American story. At the same time, science tells us that learning how to understand and empathize with people across differences is essential to children's healthy development. Looking honestly at our past helps students develop critical thinking skills that are desperately needed when every smart phone is a gateway to disinformation.

Democracy, too, depends on informed citizens to function. It's no coincidence that the crowd that stormed the Capitol in 2021, was acting on lies and misinformation.

Authoritarianism feasts on ignorance. Election deniers and censors of history are in the same camp, and should get nowhere near our schools.

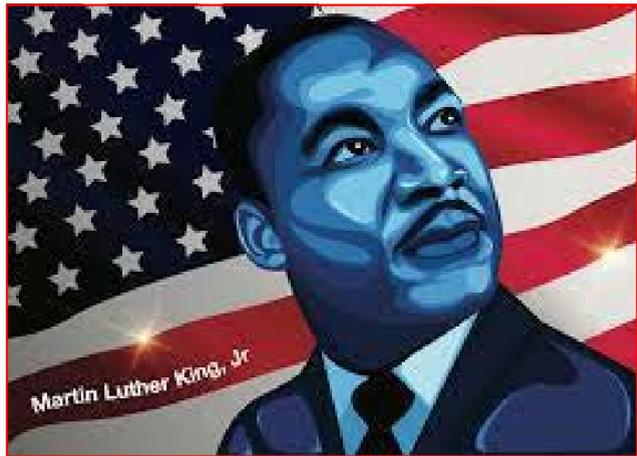
We cannot begin to heal our divisions until we acknowledge and teach our whole history—good and bad. And we know that standing up for the freedom to learn will be a challenging task. This school year follows one in which reports of book bans and censorship reached record levels according to the American Library Association. Far-right groups and politicians are offering rewards and setting up tip lines to "report" teachers who cover "divisive" topics. School board members are receiving death threats.

But we don't shy away from these challenges when we act from a place of love. Loving our children means being advocates for them when political extremists want to limit what they can learn. It means showing up to school board meetings and organizing to make ourselves heard. It means running for the school board.

It means rejecting one of the censors' most harmful assumptions: that students are too fragile to hear the history our people have lived.

Millions of families are getting ready to send their kids back to school. Let's also get ready to defend the freedom to learn. Before the dictionary ends up on your district's banned-books list.

Ben Jealous serves as president of People For the American Way and Professor of the Practice at the University of Pennsylvania. A New York Times best-selling author, his next book Never Forget Our People Were Always Free will be published by Harper Collins in December.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Was An American Patriot

By Dr. Alveda King

BPA LiveWire

Reverend Martin Luther King Junior was an American patriot. In the years since his death, my family has shared the memory of my martyred uncle with the world. More than any figure from modern American history, my uncle and his call to "let freedom ring" unites people from all walks of life and every corner of the political spectrum.

As we celebrate the 59th anniversary of the March on Washington and the I Have a Dream speech, social media will be flooded with excerpts from the address. People will rightly highlight his ever-consistent call for America to honor its promise to all citizens.

His love for America manifests all these years later in the true ex-

ample of patriotism. His expression of love was never ever giving up on this great experiment in Democracy. Yes, all these years later, his model of non-violent protest and servant leadership are examples of excellence that would benefit each of us to study and emulate.

My memory will always be of an uncle who loved America too much to not push her towards becoming her best self. He refused to give up on America living out the true meaning of its creed. The self-evident truth that all men are created equal remains a courageous standard today.

In a speech about Vietnam, he dispelled any confusion about his motives and his love for America. He described his disappointment in America but asserted that "there can be no great disappointment where there is no great love."

Over these past months, I have felt disappointment in America. But like my uncle, my disappointment pales in comparison to my faith in Americans to do what is right. My hope for America's bright future is fortified because I join Dr. King as he believed America is a nation bent towards justice. For all the areas of sorrow that might bring us despair, there are far more reasons that bring hope.

I was 17 years old when my uncle died, and as a guardian of the King family legacy, I remember him well and still have faith in his American Dream. As one blood, one united race, with eyes wide open and not colorblind, we, the people of America, must press on to realize the "possible dream" together, from the womb to the tomb into eternity.



Does Anyone Really Care About African-American Boys and Men?

By Dr. Salvatore J. Giorgianni, Jr. PharmD.

Senior Science Advisor, Men's Health Network

And Dr. Jean Bonhomme, MD MPH.

Founder of the National Black Men's Health Network

Over two and a half years ago, in the article "African-American Boys and Men in America Are Killing Themselves and No One Seems to Care," I wrote about the national disgrace that is the heavier toll of suicide facing African-American boys and men. I said that in minority communities, people often misunderstand what a mental health condition is, and therefore, discussing the subject is uncommon. A lack of understanding leads many to believe that a mental health condition is a personal weakness or a form of punishment.

African-Americans are also more likely to be exposed to factors that increase the risk for developing a mental health condition, such as discrimination, social isolation, homelessness, and exposure to violence.

What has changed—for better and for worse—since then? Do African-American men and boys continue to have a higher death rate from suicide and violence than others? Is the male suicide rate in the United States still far higher than women? Is suicide still a leading cause of death for minority males? Are African-Americans still more likely to experience serious mental health problems than the general population?

Sadly, the answer to all of these questions remains yes. What has gotten worse? As I've said previously, African-American youth who are exposed to violence have a 25 percent higher risk of developing PTSD than non-Black youth. Violent crime rates in U.S. cities have only increased since 2019.2 This is especially true amongst young African-American men. These two facts seem inextricably tied together: violence leads to PTSD; PTSD leads to violence, over and over again.

Minority access to mental health-related diagnoses and care is impeded by barriers and challenges that are also experienced by minorities who need addiction and recovery support and resources. There also seems a strong correlation between mental health issues and overdose rates. A recent JAMA study suggests that during the COVID epidemic, specifically from January 2019 through mid-2020, opioid overdoses decreased 24 percent among Whites in Philadelphia. Conversely, opioid overdoses actually increased amongst Black Philadelphians by over 50 percent.

According to the U.S. Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, only one-third of Black adults diagnosed with mental illness receives treatment. According to the American Psychiatric Association's "Mental Health Facts for African-Americans" guide, Black adults are less likely to be included in research and receive quality care, while being more likely to use an emergency room as primary care.

I recently spoke with Dr. Jean Bonhomme, founder of the National Black Men's Health Network, who relayed to me some other startling recent statistics. In 2020, African-Americans made up about 13.5 percent of the U.S. population, while they also made up over 55 percent of homicide victims, with a more than a 65 percent increase in homicides relative to 2019. Other stark figures that Dr. Bonhomme shared were from a recent CDC study. In the same period—2019 through 2020—drug overdose death rates for non-Hispanic Black persons increased by 44 percent, while for non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaska Native (AI/AN) persons the drug overdose death rates increased by 39 percent.

Other numbers that jump out include the 2020 death rate from overdose among Black males aged 16-65 years (52.6 per 100,000) as being nearly seven times that of non-Hispanic White males of a similar age. Meanwhile, treatment for substance use was at the lowest for Black persons (at 8.3 percent). One factor in the mental health crisis disproportionately facing the Black community is shown in data from the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors. This data indicates that the number of people admitted to psychiatric hospitals (and other residential facilities) in the U.S. declined from 471,000 in 1970 to 170,000 in 2014. This reduction in the availability of a potential intervention opportunity appears to have led to growth in incarceration and similar non-therapeutic interventions, which, in the absence of these other options, take the place of actual psychiatric help.

We must also consider that the life circumstances of young Black men must also be the driver of many of these differences and disparities. Out of decency alone, the U.S. needs to find a way to identify and target systemic changes to benefit these populations, which have the most urgent need. Data like this can seem overwhelming, but this only highlights how disparities tend to cascade through any system, like an engine with one worn part eventually damaging another.

The United States has deferred system-wide maintenance in the places that have needed them most for far too long: the health and mental health care systems. The outcome is predictable, yet we remain shocked when the situation worsens.

Are there any positives the can impact minority mental health? Absolutely! The new nation-wide 988 crisis number launch went live July 16th of this year, and text-based services will be included. Studies suggest that over 75 percent of those using text on existing crisis services are under 25. Minority populations in the USA have a higher

percentage of people in younger age groups than Whites. Therefore, better serving an underserved community is an outcome that is a clear improvement on the current situation.

Post-pandemic societal trauma, proper focusing on framing gender equity, gender identification, and gender expression are all areas of special concern within minority communities. For example, a Black teen in a city school district might not find the same resources and support as a White teen in the suburbs. This can trigger high mental stress that may follow them into and throughout adulthood.

Issues like these, and the struggle to keep issues relevant to mainstream media, are just the tip of the iceberg of challenges facing any effort to improve the existing situation surrounding minority men's mental health. What can be done? The ACA (Affordable Care Act also known as Obamacare), as passed by Congress, does not provide for Well-Man visits. I continue to urge insurance companies and other payers to include adequately-reimbursed Well-Man medical visits similar to the yearly Well-Woman Visits available under the ACA.

Men's Health Network redoubles its recommendation that those charged with the health and social welfare of boys and men consider the following:

1. Acknowledge the heterogeneity of boys and men and the unique needs of diverse populations.

2. Develop culturally appropriate male-focused screening tools.

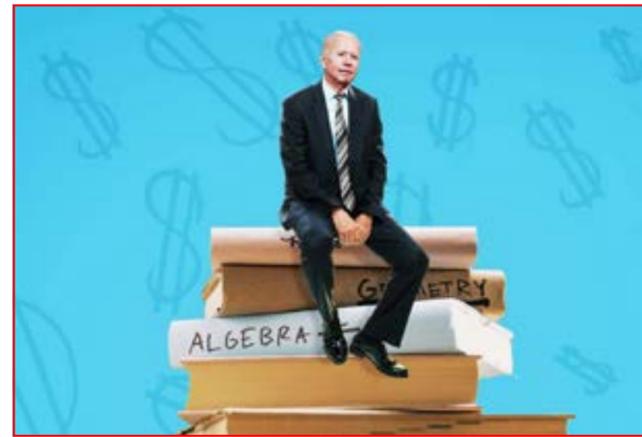
3. Develop guidelines that recognize the need to regularly and routinely screen boys and men for both physical and mental health issues.

4. Address the poor reimbursement for behavioral health clinical services.

5. Establish culturally and gender-appropriate programs to identify, interrupt, triage, and manage mental health issues in African-American boys and men, providing education and training for those in the community who interact with boys and men.

With this said, Men's Health Network, Healthy Men, Inc., the National Black Men's Health Network, and the Men's Health Caucus have launched a public awareness campaign, "You OK, Bro?" <https://cts.vresp.com/c/?MensHealthNetwork/ff5ca8b8c0/14a5f5f9ce/17c13d87b5> and will be hosting a workshop summit on Thursday, Oct. 13, at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. to build awareness of the mental health crisis now erupting in the male population of the U.S. This important event will be live-streamed. The goal of the summit is to examine and return recommendations to help reverse the recent increase in mental health crises. Behavioral experts from multiple organizations will share research, trends and discoveries, and supply information to men, boys, and their loved ones to help them identify the signs of mental distress, and recommend ways to improve mental and emotional fitness.

"You OK, Bro?" is the beginning of a dialog that can start with those words, whether between just two men, or at a national scale. We hope "You OK, Bro?" can change the way the U.S. sees and talks about men's mental health. MEN'S HEALTH NETWORK Men's Health Network (MHN) is a national non-profit organization whose mission is to reach men, boys, and their families where they live, work, play, and pray with health awareness and disease prevention messages and tools, screening programs, educational materials, advocacy opportunities, and patient navigation.



Student Loan Forgiveness: Politics, Not Problem-Solving

By Thomas L. Knapp

William Lloyd Garrison Center

On August 24, the Biden administration finally announced what pretty much everyone (including me) had been predicting for months: A new round of "student loan forgiveness" and an extension to the COVID-19-justified "payment pause."

Quick details of the current plan: More than 40 million borrowers will receive some relief. About 20 million will have their debt completely forgiven. Individuals who earn less than \$125,000 per year (or couples earning up to \$250,000) will have up to \$10,000 taken off their tabs. Lower-income individuals who qualified for Pell Grants are eligible for double that amount.

While the details are new, the timing was never much in doubt, because helping out existing student borrowers is the effect, not the intent, of the plan. The intent is to motivate 40 million voters (and their parents, spouses, and children) to vote for Democrats less than three months from now in the midterm congressional elections.

Similarly, the intent behind Republican howling over the measure is to motivate everyone who feels ripped off because they didn't borrow money for college, or paid that debt off without such assistance, but who will be taxed to cover the check for Biden's generosity, to vote Republican.

My guess is that the Democrats have the upper hand here: The beneficiaries are going to be very happy; taxpayers in general are barely going to notice in the long term, and probably not get nearly as up in arms as the GOP hopes they will in the short term.

The total amount involved (in this round, anyway) comes to "only" \$329.1 billion over 10 years according to the Penn Wharton Budget Model.

Yes, that sounds like a lot of money, and it is. On the other hand, it's less than half (again, spread over 10 years) as much as each of us gets ripped off for every year, year in and year out, for a supposed "national defense" that consists largely of writing welfare checks to Raytheon, Boeing, and friends, and workfare checks to kids who go into uniform instead off to college.

Say what you will about some of the more seemingly useless courses of study: At least your average "gender studies" student probably isn't torturing prisoners at Guantanamo Bay or murdering eight-year-old American girls in Yemen. So there's that, anyway.

As someone whose tiny student debt was paid off long ago (I dropped out midway through my first semester of college and have paid cash for the credit hours I've slowly accrued since), the idea neither enthralls nor upsets me.

On the other hand, this "forgiveness" does nothing to address the underlying problems with the high costs of higher education. It's just a Democratic Party vote-buying scheme that Republicans are hoping to use as a BOGO for their own base.

If our political class actually wanted to address the real problems, they'd get government out of the student lending business, and allow student debt to be discharged in bankruptcy on the same terms as other debt.

Unfortunately, solving problems is the opposite of what politics is about.

Thomas L. Knapp (Twitter: @thomaslknapp) is director and senior news analyst at the William Lloyd Garrison Center for Libertarian Advocacy Journalism (thegarrisoncenter.org). He lives and works in north central Florida.