

N & O bossy, blind

It has truly been a long, hot summer for everybody, and that includes businesses, schools, school boards, newspapers, television stations and hard-working Americans.

Media Meditations

by R.L. Taylor



The economy is stalled and nobody expects even a small dividend much less Boom Town riches. In fact newspapers are lucky to creep along and hope their financial reports will show some small profits. The Durham Herald-Sun is about as lively as an old hound dog. In Raleigh, the News and Observer leans to the stiff upper lip approach.

Instead of trying to find new business, the N&O wants to run the Wake County school system. This is not unusual for that newspaper. Any time anything is not controlled by the Democrat party, it incites N&O editors to think they must step in and save a perfectly good organization from certain doom.

This might be some sort of medical disorder that drives editors and reporters nuts. Something clicks in their heads and they come out with blazing headlines suggesting a school system is on the verge of total collapse. Salvation lies only in the NAACP, the Democrat party and President Obama.

The idea that the majority of a five-member board has a right and knowledge to operate the school system does not register in the News and Observer brains. Something kicks in and makes notebooks, computers and probably a couple of old typewriters sizzle with rhetoric demanding immediate justice and the resignation of anyone or anything that disagrees with the N&O. It is fun to watch.

There were some signs late in July that the newspaper actually suspected there might be a recession. The word appeared in a headline and I wondered if the poor person who wrote was fired. The editor has a hard time admitting the Democrats have not done much for business in 18 months.

In the past two years this newspaper has lost about 38,000 subscribers. Although some big papers have trimmed their costs by dropping customers, all the evidence shows the News and Observer circulation department is working hard to keep business.

Weekly newspapers and small publications directed to communities and the people instead of political ideas are doing well. Recently, *Newsweek* magazine, which has been around forever, announced it had found somebody to buy the magazine and keep it alive.

It is well known *Newsweek*, like the N&O, has been "in the tank" for the Liberals for years.

My old ears are also failing. Just last week I heard that one very large and important liberal newspaper would be sold to Pat Robertson just to keep it alive.

It seems logical that newspapers could easily make money merely reporting the news of people instead trying to turn a very sore, long, mysterious business slow-down into The Great and Wonderful Prosperous Good Times that are right around the corner.

R.L. Taylor is a regular contributor to Chatham County Line. He has been a newspaperman for more than 50 years.

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Durham needs to straighten up and fly right

By Julian Sereno

Durham residents can expect to get shellacked to pay for whopping civic expenditures down the road. Wake County is demanding Durham quit polluting Falls Lake, Raleigh's principal water supply. The cost to Durham government for Falls Lake clean up is estimated between \$1.3 and \$3.5 billion to over the next 25 years. Durham's tab to cut its pollution flowing into Jordan Lake and bring it into state compliance clocked in at \$570 million.

Now, 751 South, a proposed mega development close to Jordan Lake, has cleared another hurdle. Durham taxpayers should get ready to shell out some more. Critics contend that the development is inside the protected Jordan Lake watershed, and if Durham allows it to be built, it will increase pollution in the lake. Durham's clean up tab will soar ever higher. The developers, Southern Durham Development, have threatened to sue Durham for hundreds of millions of dollars if 751 South is stopped.

The newest lurch forward for the development came when Durham County attorney Lowell Siler disagreed with the opinion of the NC Attorney General's office over a right-of-way easement that invalidated a homeowners' petition. Residents of Chancellor's Ridge, near 751 South, signed the petition protesting the proposal. A valid petition would have forced a super-majority vote (at least four of the five Commissioners voting yes) for the development to proceed. To invalidate the petition, the developers granted a right-of-way easement to the North Carolina Department of Transportation for enough land to make Chancellor's Ridge technically too far for the petition to be valid.

When the NCDOT found out that the only reason for the easement was to invalidate a homeowners' petition, it asked Roy Cooper, the NC Attorney General,

what to do. He told the NCDOT to refuse it. Siler, Durham's non-elected lawyer, overruled him. With only a 3-2 vote required, 751 South is still on track, with homeowners planning to sue to get Siler's opinion reversed.

This isn't the first time 751 South has benefited from the ruling of a non-elected Durham official. It was then Planning Director Frank Duke, since moved on to Norfolk, Va, who accepted a survey conducted by the property's owner that moved the boundaries of Jordan Lake, allowing 751 South to violate watershed protections. Environmental groups, including the Haw River Association, conducted another survey, which if adopted, would have re-imposed watershed restrictions and limited the development. The developers threatened suit, and the Durham Commissioners voted 3-2 to stick with the original, owner sponsored survey.

In addition to further polluting Jordan Lake, opponents claim that it violates planning directives to concentrate development closer to the center of Durham, to avoid sprawl. Supporters say that it will create jobs and add to the tax base. The developers say they will implement any number of safeguards to protect Jordan Lake.

Durham's downtown is booming and vibrant, with the new Performing Arts Center, the renovated American Tobacco Campus, the Durham Bulls Athletic Park and numerous trendy bistros and galleries. But the area west of downtown seems to have been abandoned by commerce. Acres and acres east of Shannon Road, bounded by Chapel Hill and University Boulevard, once the home of restaurants galore and at least one big box store, is deserted, surrounded by chain link fence displaying lovely plans for a mixed use development that shows no signs of being built.

Durham has the best real estate market in the country, according to a widely publicized survey conducted by a Cary real estate tracking company. But that might change if property taxes skyrocket to pay for the messes that Durham government keeps creating.

Julian Sereno is editor and publisher of Chatham County Line. He worked in Durham from 1985 to 1997 as neighborhood editor for the Durham Herald Company.

Closing the achievement gap

By Don Lein

What organization attracted 46,000 applicants, which includes 12 percent of all Ivy League Seniors, 7 percent of the graduating class at Michigan, 6 percent from Berkeley? These numbers include a quarter of all black seniors at the Ivy League schools, as well as a fifth of the Latino seniors. The organization will send 4,500 of the best college graduates to 100 of the lowest-performing school districts in the U. S this school year.

Wendy Kopp in 1989, then a senior at Princeton, wanted to teach in the New York City School system, however without an advanced degree in education or being certified she was out of luck. She had seen her roommate, a "brilliant first-generation student from the Bronx" struggle inordinately with her schoolwork, while those who were prepared by "East coast prep schools... thought Princeton was a cake walk." Denied the privilege of helping students like her roommate as a teacher, she formed Teach for America (TFA) to help close the achievement gap which she had experienced firsthand.

One of the first things she noted was that there existed the situation where there was one set of institutions which had the responsibility to recruit and train the teachers and another set responsible for affecting student achievement. She set about to change that by recruiting the best talent she could find and training them intensively and being responsible for their classroom performance during their typical two-year stint.

How has this endeavor succeeded? A 2008 Urban Institute study found that "On average, high school students taught by TFA corps members performed significantly better on state-required end-of-course exams, especially in math and science, than peers taught by far more experienced instructors. The TFA teachers' effect on student achievement in core classroom subjects was nearly three times the effect of teachers with three or more year's experience." A UNC study found that middle school math students taught by TFA instructors received the equivalent of an extra half year of learning.

If TFA is so great why isn't it sweeping the country? In the first place there is a supply problem in that for TFA to recruit, train and supervise its teachers, it needs funding. The past support has come largely from the private sector. Although its educational goals are very similar to the federal government's educational goals, it derives a little over 5 percent from that source and even less under the projected budget.

The other half of the problem is the demand side. While teacher's unions tend to dismiss TFA as a "band-aid", they also recognize that if TFA teachers can do better in two years than seasoned professionals, why do we need to protect these under-performing professionals with job enhancements and tenure? Similarly, if these excellent results can be attained without education school preparation, who needs education schools?

Some "reform-minded" districts are nonetheless hiring these teachers. New Orleans will have 435 TFA instructors this fall, the new Detroit

superintendent has invited 100 of them this year, while the Mississippi Delta region went from 280 last year to 500 this fall. While TFA instructors are becoming more widely accepted, Ms. Kopp recognizes that her program is "not meant to solve the teacher shortage or the teacher quality problem" but rather "a leadership program to help ... eliminate educational inequity"

She also recognizes there are examples where the racial gap has been largely erased, already. Indeed, in their 2003 book "No Excuses - Closing the Racial Gap in Learning", Abigail and Stephen Thernstrom describe a number of schools and individual classes that have largely erased the racial gap by using what are normally considered unorthodox approaches.

What are these in the TFA context? To quote Ms. Kopp the objectives for any given class should be "student-achievement based, measurable and rigorous." It is not how well the information was presented, but to be able to quantitatively ascertain how much the students learned. Lastly, the objectives should be rigorous. If students from disadvantaged background are to perform at the same level as students from higher-income communities in college and later life, their objectives must be equally rigorous.

We have enough knowledge based upon the TFA experience, the Thernstroms, among others, to know how to solve the achievement gap. Do we have the will?

Don Lein is a regular contributor to Chatham County Line. A Chatham resident, he is involved in a variety of civic organizations.