

*****SPAM*** For Immediate Release**

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From the Office of Sen. Joyce Waddell, NC Senate
Mecklenburg County

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Greetings:

School is returning and I am sure "safety" is on the minds of most. I believe we all want an environment that the students can become successful and most of all to learn and prepare to be better in the community. Safety is key to keeping the students in an in-person environment. We can do our part by adhering to masking, social distancing, and hand washing.

Sincerely,
Joyce Waddell

Highlighted Bill of the week

HB 78
Various Education Changes

House Bill 78 would (i) allow additional standardized tests to satisfy 9th grade private school testing requirements and (ii) make changes for in-State tuition for veterans to comply with federal law.

The Budget

The Senate completed its budget process on August 11th and the House just had its third and final vote on the budget Thursday. Then the Senate will likely vote on the House's version on August 16th, and reject it. The budget will go into "conference" which will be days - or weeks-long negotiations between the chambers before they reveal, vote and pass a compromise budget to send to the Governor. He has indicated he likes the House version better than the Senate version, but neither mirror his proposed budget that he announced in March.

Election Districts

Republican lawmakers proposed rules this week that would bar them from using racial demographic and election data to draw political maps that will be used for the next decade of North Carolina elections. That proposal is one of the first of many steps in the map-drawing process, also known as redistricting, which can begin in state legislatures across the country when the U.S. Census Bureau releases a fresh batch of decennial population data Thursday.

States usually redraw their maps after the census releases that data once every 10 years. The process has not worked that way in North Carolina in recent years as the state has been embroiled in court battles for the last decade over districts Republican lawmakers drew in 2011.

The legislature's joint redistricting committee proposed rules Monday that, if adopted, will serve as guideposts throughout the map-drawing process. They also indicate what factors the Republican-led state legislature will and will not prioritize when they draw new districts. Since those rules, known as redistricting criteria, were released Monday, Democrats and voting rights advocates this week have critiqued them, saying eliminating the use of racial data, in particular,

will make it difficult for the state to comply with the Voting Rights Act.

Since Republicans proposed the new redistricting criteria Monday, members of the public have pointed to numerous other changes that should be made before the proposal is adopted. The committee held a hearing Tuesday to allow the public to comment on the proposed rules, where most who spoke critiqued the 10-point list. “These redistricting criteria are unfortunately so vague that I worry that they do not actually constrain the map drawing in any meaningful way,” said the North Carolina state director of the National Democratic Redistricting Committee led by former U.S. Attorney General.

Republicans have argued, though, that the criteria proposed are the same as what was proposed in 2019, when the court again ordered the legislature to redraw some districts. Both Democrats and Republicans that year said it was the most transparent of redistricting processes, though Democrats have said this year that the process could still be improved.

This year’s criteria is not exactly similar to 2019’s, however. One rule, known as “incumbent protection,” demonstrates such a difference. In 2019, the criteria said, “mapmakers may take reasonable efforts to not pair incumbents unduly in the same election district.” This year’s proposed language, by contrast, says “member residence may be considered in the formation of legislative and congressional districts.” Members of the public and voting rights advocates also criticized the guideline that would mean legislators could consider where current lawmakers reside as a factor in how they draw districts. If adopted, this means Republicans will try not to draw a district that incorporates two incumbents, also known as “incumbent protection.”

Lawmakers also included several required criteria in the proposal, including grouping counties together and ensuring each district is connected to other parts of the district and equal or nearly equal to the population of other districts. Democrats have criticized Republicans for not prioritizing those criteria in the proposal. Each of the criteria should be ranked, so if there are two rules in conflict “you default to the higher level,” a member said.

After the committee considers amendments Thursday morning, they will vote to formalize the redistricting criteria, but the criteria is not legally binding. Like any legislative rule, the committee could in

theory change them at any time.

Expunction Eligibility

The House voted unanimously on Wednesday to make more people eligible to have their criminal records expunged. Senate Bill 301 builds on last session's "Second Chance Act" by adding additional offenses that could be expunged — allowing expunctions for breaking and entering a vehicle, but not breaking and entering a home. The bill now goes back to the Senate for a concurrence vote.

Student Masks

The majority of North Carolina's public school students will be required to wear face masks when they return to class this month, many children in smaller, rural counties will be unmasked. In the absence of a statewide school mask mandate, North Carolina's 115 school districts have split nearly down the middle in terms of who are requiring face coverings and who are not. As of Aug. 11, 58 school districts representing 59% of the state's 1.5 million public school students are mandating mask usage in schools.

The mandatory mask districts include most of the state's large urban areas, such as Wake County, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Guilford, Forsyth and Cumberland counties.

Another 53 districts representing 30% of the state's students are not requiring masks. Most of these districts are in smaller and/or rural counties. Many have low COVID-19 vaccination rates, too.

Four school districts have not yet decided on masking policies for the 2021-22 school year. It's not clear how many of the state's 200 charter schools, which account for around 9% of the public school students, are requiring masks.

As the months of summer come to an end, I have been reflective of the months behind. It began to look as if we might be out of the woods in

regards to this pandemic. Sadly, the numbers continue to rise. We have to practice what is best for each other. Our lives are better when we help our neighbor and remain thoughtful about their safety. We truly are our neighbor's keeper.

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