

Re the Latin Honors system

Morehead City, N.C.
May 29, 2019

TO THE EDITOR:

I salute all the valedictorians and salutatorians over the years who have earned this great honor. Students who perform well in school deserve to be recognized for their success and achievements, and it is good to acknowledge the very top performers.

I was upset when I first heard about our school system's change from valedictorian/salutatorian to the "Latin Honors" system, which recognizes multiple top tiers of students (e.g., in Carteret County: summa cum laude, 4.5 GPA, top ~2% of class; magna cum laude, 4.4 GPA, top ~5%; and cum laude, 4.3 GPA, top ~10%).

I was afraid this might be another attempt at devaluing intelligence, hard work and success, in the misguided quest to "give every kid a trophy." I oppose the elimination of special tassels, cords, etc., which allow outstanding students to stand out and be recognized, and I disapprove of cases where academic awards ceremonies have been discontinued because some kids won't be recognized (and get their feelings hurt). Thus I initially worried that the removal of honoring valedictorians might be for similar reasons.

Changes in our local school system policies need to be viewed with scrutiny; however, not all changes are attempts to dumb down our students, lower our standards or dis-acknowledge our top performers.

Carteret County's change to the Latin Honors system several years ago was made in direct response to legislative changes to the State BOE policy outlining standards for calculating GPA on high school transcripts across North Carolina. One of the (questionable) N.C. legislation changes included a switch to the 10-point grading scale with no "pluses and minuses" ... which unfortunately leads to less distinction between student grades, a higher possibility of GPA ties, and overall grade inflation. (Grades of 90-100 get an A and 4.0, 80-89 gets a B and 3.0, etc.)

This unfortunate change aside, the more I pondered the reasons behind our own county's switch to using the Latin system, the more I began to recognize its advantages, to the point that I now support the change. (Although I confess I still do have mixed feelings about it.)

In years past, the honor of valedictorian did a good job recognizing the top student in a particular graduating class. But for many reasons, this is not necessarily the case any longer. In the "old days" students in a graduating class took most of the same classes throughout their time in high school. Therefore, typically the student with the highest grade point average was indeed the top student in that graduating class. But now, with the huge mix of class options available to students, it becomes much more difficult to compare apples to apples with regards to student GPAs.

When a few of the very top students in a particular class are vying for the honor of valedictorian (or salutatorian), these students often obsess over their GPAs. They may avoid more challenging classes (or classes in which they are interested), instead opting for easier classes or

those that would protect their GPA. So rather than the honor of valedictorian reflecting the top student in the graduating class, it might instead reflect the student who best played the "GPA game" and strategically chose only classes that would benefit her GPA.

Weighted classes can somewhat address this problem, as more challenging classes are deservedly assigned a higher weight and thus higher GPA points. But which classes deserve additional weighting and how much? Appropriate weighting of classes can get complicated and also lead to undesired behaviors. An example often provided is the case of two students signing up for the same four classes (and earning the same grade in each). But if one of these top students were to take a fifth class with a lower weight (e.g. band), then even if the student aces the class, he/she will have a lower weighted GPA because of the extra class taken (even though the two students receive the same grades in all their other classes). As a result, the very top students may unfortunately feel pressured to pick all their classes based on the amount of quality points awarded.

Another problem arises with student transfers. A student can transfer to Carteret County from another school system and might immediately jump to the top of their graduating class because of weighted classes offered and taken at their previous high school ... classes possibly not offered in our own county. This could put hometown students vying for valedictorian at a disadvantage compared to students who transferred in.

Yet another problem with the valedictorian/salutatorian recognition has to do with class size. Earning valedictorian status at a large school with 350 students in its graduating class may be significantly more of an accomplishment than being valedictorian at a small school with only 50 students in its graduating class. With the Latin Honors system, the number of students honored can be proportional to the class size. Smart students sometimes come in "waves" where the top five students in one class might all outshine the valedictorian in another class. Honoring more than two students motivates more students to maintain high grades, as each tries to achieve the highest Latin Honors distinction possible.

None of these arguments in support of the Latin Honors system is meant to diminish the great honor our valedictorians and salutatorians have received over the years. Class ranks will continue to be calculated and provided to colleges. (Although most UNC universities either don't use class rank within their admissions rubric or use class rank on a lesser scale than other factors GPA, test scores).

Times change and we need to be able to adapt to changes thrust upon us. I think our school system's adaptation is appropriate. I understand some of the reasoning behind legislative changes at the state level which forced our hand here in Carteret County, but I still have concerns with many of these changes and feel that some legislation may be moving us in the wrong direction. But that is another rant for another day.

TRAVIS DAY, Chairman
Carteret County Board of
Education



News isn't all 'gloom and doom'

MOREHEAD CITY — By and large, May 22, 2019, was a very "good news day" in Carteret County. The top 10 news items in that day's edition of the *Carteret County News-Times* (as selected by this writer) were 90% positive.

One. Let's dispense with the primary sad news story in the May 22 issue of the *News-Times*. It was a report compiled by staff writers Brad Rich and Mike Shutak announcing the death of a 48-year-old Jacksonville man who was caught in an ocean rip current near Bogue Inlet Fishing Pier in Emerald Isle. He was one of four swimmers pulled out of the water by local surfers, but the only one who didn't make it.



Mike Wagoner

Reporters Rich and Shutak respectfully commented that a family member of the deceased (Robert Ray Patterson) communicated via social media about his kindness and sense of humor. It also sparked dialogue about the need to heed ocean condition flags and to respect the power of a roaring ocean.

Thankfully, all of the Crystal Coast beach towns have responded to the apparent increased frequency of rip current threats this season. Any drowning is one too many.

Two. To lead off the "good news" side of the ledger, Brad Rich reported on the deliberations of the Carteret County Beach Commission. The panel voted unanimously to proceed with a beach nourishment project to bring 2.6 million cubic yards of new sand to Pine Knoll Shores and Salter Path and to portions of Emerald Isle and Atlantic Beach.

Three. Rich also reported that the town of Cedar Point gave the green light to the establishment of "western Carteret County's first large scale, open air farmers' market," an expansion of an existing business known as The Market at Cedar Point, which is owned and operated by Jeff and Mary Miller. Folks are drawn to

what's authentic, home made and home grown.

Four. Mike Shutak covered a special public hearing that was organized by the North Carolina Division of Coastal Management on the subject of "seismic surveying in federal waters in the Atlantic Ocean." He reported that 20 individuals made comments at the hearing held at the Crystal Coast Civic Center in Morehead City.

The good news is found in Shutak's summary — all 20 speakers voiced opposition to seismic blasting and offshore drilling off the coast of North Carolina. Shutak quoted Randy Sturgill of the Oceana organization, which seeks to protect the oceans of the world, saying:

"North Carolina should find seismic air gun blasting inconsistent with our environmental protection laws ... noise from dynamite like air gun blasts can injure and kill marine animals."

Perhaps all this solidarity in opposition to activity associated with offshore drilling can be a wedge for the scientific community to use with the Carteret County Board of Commissioners to help persuade the board to wise up and join the movement of "Not Off Our Coast."

Five. The seven county commissioners do seem to have an understanding now that tourism can be a form of economic development. Staff writer Dean-Paul Stephens reported that the commissioners agreed to release \$600,000 from its economic development pot of funds to help create a "new N.C. Maritime Museum and campus" at Gallants Channel in Beaufort.

"I see (the museum complex) as being the anchor," said Commission Chair Mark Mansfield, to "solidify us as a tourist destination." Even more bullish was Commissioner Ed Wheatly. He called it "a game changer" for Beaufort and the county, "having the same effect that the aquarium did on Pine Knoll Shores." (This could be a clip-and-save comment.)

Six. Tourists are also drawn to com-

munities that preserve their heritage and culture. An organization that excels in this regard is the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and Heritage Center. An art exhibit is now open at the museum store at 806 Arendell St., Morehead City, featuring the Down East drawings of artist Bruce Tarkington. Thanks to staff writer Megan Soult for making it the "cover story" in the Coastal Living section of the *News-Times*.

Seven. A letter to the editor in the May 22 edition qualifies as newsworthy, as a lot of folks are unaware that the town of Emerald Isle is on the verge of opening a dog park. Pet owners will be able to unleash their dogs to let them run and be free. Thanks to Joseph Russick for sharing.

Eight. We're blessed with good public schools that still value the importance of scholastics and athletics. Sports writer J.J. Smith reported that the East Carteret High School girls track and field team took second place in its quest for a 1A state championship. The margin was a scant two points. Good job, Mariners.

Nine. Staff writer Cheryl Burke's feature story about programs that enable senior and disabled adults to continue to live independently at home is comforting. Offered through the Carteret County Department of Social Services, the programs draw on resources from assorted agencies to ensure that an "individual's safety and well being can be maintained in his or her home as long as possible."

Ten. Carteret County is a great place to work. Business editor Elise Coulter spotlighted Transportation Impact, a home grown Emerald Isle company, which was selected by *Business North Carolina* magazine as its "2019 Best Employer" in the small to medium category.

Community newspapers like the *News-Times* are worth their weight in gold, for they have not abandoned the notion that news stories can be positive and uplifting. Read all about it in today's edition.

Mike Wagoner is a retired chamber of commerce executive and a public relations consultant. maw04@twc.com Blog: wagnabbit.blogspot.com

Mueller should not have held a press conference

In his news conference Wednesday, special counsel Robert Mueller explained why he would not testify before Congress. "Any testimony from this office would not go beyond our report," he said. "It contains our findings and analysis and the reasons for the decisions we made. We chose those words carefully, and the work speaks for itself. The report is my testimony."

This is precisely why Mueller should not have held a news conference.

President Trump's critics are now picking apart his statement, looking for discrepancies with the carefully chosen words in his report, and searching for hidden meaning and secret messages urging them to impeach the president. Like with a verbal Rorschach test, they are reading between the lines to hear what they want to hear.

For example, in his report Mueller

definitively declared his investigation "did not establish that members of the Trump Campaign conspired or coordinated with the Russian government." But in his news conference, Mueller said that "there was insufficient evidence to charge a broader conspiracy."

"Aha!" the Trump-Russia collusion truthers cry, "He's saying there may have been a broader conspiracy, but he just found 'insufficient evidence' to bring charges." No, sorry, that is not what the report says. It says that "The investigation did not identify evidence that any U.S. persons knowingly or intentionally coordinated with [Russia's] interference operation."

The same is true when it comes to obstruction of justice. In his report, Mueller carefully explains both sides of the argument and makes clear that "the evidence we obtained about the President's actions and intent presents difficult issues that would need to be resolved if we were making a traditional prosecutorial judgment." He presents exculpatory arguments on the president's behalf. For example, he notes that

"unlike cases in which a subject engages in obstruction of justice to cover up a crime, the evidence we obtained did not establish that the President was involved in an underlying crime related to Russian election interference" and "the absence of that evidence affects the analysis of the President's intent and requires consideration of other possible motives for his conduct."

Moreover, Mueller also wrote that for the president to have obstructed justice, he must have acted "with a corrupt intention" and "the term 'corruptly' sets a demanding standard. It requires a concrete showing that a person acted with an intent to obtain an improper advantage for himself or someone else, inconsistent with official duty and the rights of others." It's not an easy case. And since Justice Department rulings prohibit the prosecution of a sitting president, Mueller did not come to a conclusion one way or another. His report "does not exonerate him" but also "does not conclude that the President committed a crime."

All that nuance flew right over the

head of House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., who suggested that the reason Trump escaped indictment was "Department of Justice policy prevented the Special Counsel from bringing criminal charges against the President" and so "it falls to Congress to respond to the crimes, lies and other wrongdoing of President Trump."

But Attorney General William Barr has testified, under oath, that "special counsel Mueller stated three times to us ... in response to our questioning, that he emphatically was not saying, but for the [Office of Legal Counsel] opinion, he would've found obstruction." Barr also stated in April that "Rod Rosenstein and I asked Robert Mueller when we met with him on March 5, whether he would have made obstruction a crime but for the OLC opinion. He made it clear several times that it was not his position."

Mueller did not refute Barr's testimony in his news conference, or say that the OLC opinion was the only reason he did not find that Trump

obstructed justice. Indeed, spokesmen for Barr and Mueller told *The Washington Post* that his and Barr's statements were not in conflict. Besides, the fact is the Mueller investigation was not obstructed. He was allowed to complete his work, with unprecedented cooperation from the Trump administration. And Mueller's report concluded that Trump was telling the truth all along: He did not conspire with Russia in its assault on our democracy.

In his statement, Mueller noted that the Russians he indicted are "presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty." Apparently, for congressional Democrats, that presumption of innocence does not extend to Trump. All Mueller's news conference did is muddy the waters. Any congressional testimony would do so 10 times over. He should have heeded his own advice, left the building quietly, and, as he put it in his statement, let "the office's written work speak for itself."

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Marc Thiessen