

The Post and Courier
OPINION

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Editorial

Raise your hand if our school boards aren't partisan enough

Four years ago, it was Lancaster County that wanted to force everybody into tiny little partisan boxes. Today it's Lexington County, which used to bill itself as the most Republican county in the Deep South — back before just about every county tried to claim that title.

Last week, the Midlands county's only resident senator, freshman Carlisle Kennedy, introduced a bill to force school board candidates for the three districts located entirely inside Lexington County to run in partisan elections. If you blinked you missed it. Mr. Kennedy introduced S.1020 on Tuesday, it went straight to the debate calendar without the bother of vetting in a committee, the Senate gave it second reading with no debate on Wednesday and then gave it third reading and sent it over to the House Thursday.

You'd have thought it was another effort to hide how USC's athletics department is spending public money. Except, lawmakers did seem to know what the USC bill was about, and they spent a few minutes debating it.

We'll get back to the procedural problems with single-county bills in a moment, but first the substance. Republicans outside the Statehouse — and a few inside — consider it an outrage that people can get their names on the November ballot, and even get elected, without swearing their allegiance to the party.

So in 2022, after Gov. Henry McMaster vetoed the Lancaster bill over those procedural problems we'll come back to, the party slapped an advisory question on its June primary ballot and then claimed that 76 percent of S.C. voters wanted to require partisan school board elections. Apparently that's not what legislators are seeing, because all the efforts since then to inject more mandatory partisanship into our school board elections have failed.

In reality, since turnout in pri-

maries is abysmal, only about 8 percent of South Carolina's registered voters actually said "yes" to the 2022 advisory question, which didn't actually ask if they wanted to require partisan elections. Instead, it asked if school board candidates should be allowed to run as a Republican or Democrat, which no one can stop them from doing under current law. Apparently, the party hacks were afraid of the answer they'd get if they were straight with voters about their aims.

The Post and Courier's Ian Grenier reports that Mr. Carlisle said in a statement that partisan elections give voters "a clearer understanding of candidates' values, principles and priorities."

In fact, knowing which party primary someone is running in tells you nothing about that candidate's values: It tells you which party label candidates think they have a better chance of winning under. If you want to know a candidate's values, you have to read up on the candidate and talk to people who know the candidate and attend political events.

The main thing S.1020 would accomplish is to reduce the number of people deciding school board elections, and push candidates on the left further to the left and those on the right further to the right, to appeal to the extremists who dominate the primary electorate. The bill even requires candidates who are midway through their terms to declare a party in order to serve out the remaining two years that voters already elected them to serve. It's worth noting that Senate Republican Leader Shane Massey reported that he opposed the bill, although he did nothing to try to stop it.

Now, let's talk about the process that our legislators pretend is an acceptable way to upend the operations of three school districts. So-called "local bills" don't go to committee, so there's no opportunity to work through constitutional or moral or practical problems, no opportunity for input from

subject-matter experts, unless they happen to be members of the county delegation. Under a constitutionally troublesome tradition, legislators from the 45 other counties avert their ears when a local bill is being discussed; although they sometimes vote, it's always with the local majority. The result is less-than-robust debate.

Here is, literally, the transcript of the Senate non-debate of S.1020, starting when Senate President Thomas Alexander recognized Sen. Kennedy to speak from his seat on the back row:

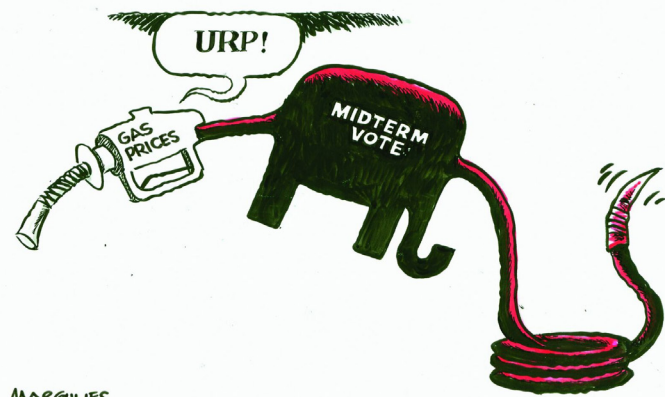
Sen. Kennedy: "Thank you, Mr. President. This is a local bill, 1020. Lexington County partisan elections for school board, districts one, two and four."

Sen. Alexander: "Second reading for that bill, under the second-reading category. Local calendar, S.1020, the question is second reading, for Lexington County. All those in favor would say I." It took 43 seconds from start to finish.

The next day, the clerk merely read the bill number when he got to it on the calendar, and with nothing said by the sponsor or anyone else, the president declared it passed.

Most single-county bills are prohibited by the state constitution; the S.C. Supreme Court has so far ruled that those affecting individual school districts are not, so bills that make modest or major changes to our schools can be passed with the support of as few as two people. Sen. Kennedy represents only 40 percent of Lexington County's voters, so under the Senate procedure for local bills, he needed one other Lexington County senator to not oppose his bill.

Lexington County House members ought to just ignore the bill, or kill it. Better still, the whole House should rise up in opposition to such an anti-voter bill — and to the tradition of passing these unvetted bills that keep our state a patchwork of unconnected counties.



Letters to the Editor



FILE/GRACE BEAHM ALFORD/STAFF

Despite its protected status, the Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge is severely understaffed.

Protect coastal treasures

I recently volunteered at the Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge on Bulls Island by helping staff coordinate the work of 13 dedicated volunteers from Appalachian State University. I had no idea how much federal funding cuts have impacted the refuge.

It took three attempts just to get to the island, as the refuge's boats kept breaking down. The average age of the equipment is about 25 years, so it's no wonder we experienced such difficulties. It was sad for the student volunteers to witness this degradation.

Staffing is an even bigger problem. When I worked there about eight years ago, I recall there being two maintenance workers, two biologists, a refuge manager, a clerk, a park ranger and a health and safety specialist. Normally, there were between nine and 13 people working at the refuge.

Now, post-federal-funding cuts, there are only three people: a biologist doubling as a refuge manager, a maintenance technician and a part-time resident volunteer. This group is expected to manage 22 miles of challenging barrier islands, thousands of acres of marsh and the mainland's Sewee Visitor and Environmental Education Center. This is a disgrace, and it's dan-

gerous for the workers. They are being required to work alone in the thousands of acres of marsh and on isolated barrier islands.

Why have we abandoned our coastal treasures? I strongly urge readers to contact U.S. Sens. Lindsey Graham and Tim Scott, as well as U.S. Rep. Nancy Mace.

JOHN PTOLEMY
Summerville

Project well done

I have followed The Post and Courier's coverage of the Battery seawall project and have been involved as a vendor with two different companies for the project over the past seven years. Obviously, a project of this magnitude involves numerous people and many moving parts, including subcontractors and tons of equipment and materials.

After reading the front-page article in the Feb. 19 edition, I feel an important piece of the puzzle was left out of the recognition and praise. Jerry Martin was the Gulf Stream Construction superintendent who ran the site and coordinated the job throughout the seven years of the project I was involved with. He not only was managing the site, demolition and construction, but also managing many subcontractors, dealing with all kinds of surprises and trying his best to be a great steward of the neighborhood and folks living there who were inconvenienced.

The last thing this humble, no-nonsense man would want is praise, but I watched him for years handle everything this project could throw his way and remain unflappable, kind and even-keeled. He would be the first to give credit to many others who took part, including those who acted as his seconds-in-command. I want to make sure Charlestonians know this man's name, as the project would not have been as successful without him.

BRAD WALLACE
Charleston

Commentary

Summer shouldn't be a scramble for South Carolina families

BY AMY KEELY AND ZELDA WAYMER

Across South Carolina, parents are racing to secure summer program spots for their children. Waiting even a day too long can mean missing out on care and enrichment opportunities entirely. And when families do manage to secure a spot, the bill can be staggering — often thousands of dollars just to keep children meaningfully engaged and safe during the long summer months. For many families, the high cost and low supply, coupled with transportation and other logistical challenges, keep summer programs wholly out of reach.

South Carolina has an opportunity — and a responsibility — to strengthen investment in summer and afterschool learning, particularly as federal funding for these programs faces growing uncertainty. Expanding access is not just about supporting working families; it's about strengthening our workforce and ensuring that

young people have opportunities to thrive year-round.

Children spend nearly 80 percent of their waking hours outside the school day. That reality makes afterschool, summer and expanded learning programs one of the most powerful — and often overlooked — tools available to strengthen educational outcomes, improve social skills and civic engagement, and reduce risky behaviors among young people. Longitudinal studies and randomized control trials show that consistent participation in these programs helps students become higher earners, stronger learners and more prepared leaders later in life.

These outcomes reinforce a truth many educators recognize: What we often call an achievement gap is fundamentally an opportunity gap. Students who perform poorly

in schools often lack access to many resources, such as summer camps and the academic and social supports that wealthier families can afford. If made widely available, afterschool and summer programs can create the time and place for all students to benefit.

Beyond offering traditional academic support, afterschool and summer programs offer hands-on ways to explore STEM, integrate learning with high-interest topics such as the arts and digital creation, build youth confidence by providing leadership roles and create opportunities for children to explore hobbies and careers that enrich their lives and inform the future workforce.

These are exactly the kinds of real-life experiences that help students develop the collaboration, problem-solving and communication skills

embedded in the profile of a South Carolina graduate — and they are the skills that teachers and employers across South Carolina are saying high school graduates consistently lack, according to studies commissioned by the S.C. Council on Competitiveness. Public support for these investments is strong. Almost 9 in 10 S.C. parents believe all young people deserve access to high-quality afterschool and summer programs, and 89 percent support public funding for these opportunities, regardless of political affiliation. When families cannot find programs, parents may reduce work hours, miss work or leave the workforce entirely. In 2023, 27 percent of South Carolina's working families reported that child care problems affected their employment.

In spite of this overwhelming public interest and support, federal funding for afterschool and summer programs is increasingly uncertain. Programs such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers — which previously provided \$19.3

million to South Carolina — face ongoing pressure. Any reduction would significantly impact access for thousands of children across our state.

In this moment, South Carolina's policymakers have an opportunity to build a stronger, more coordinated ecosystem of out-of-school-time programs where every child can benefit from high-quality learning and enrichment beyond the classroom, regardless of income, geography or school district.

State leaders can take meaningful steps now to strengthen our wider education ecosystem by:

- Establishing stable public investment in afterschool and summer learning, allowing thousands more children to access high-quality afterschool and summer programs. State funding ensures that communities are not forced to rely on unpredictable or short-term funding.

- Investing in program quality by focusing on leadership development and professionalization of the afterschool and summer

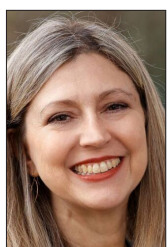
field. Research shows that high-quality programming drives positive outcomes for young people attending these programs.

- Strengthening public-private partnerships that support students' college and career exploration, connect them with hands-on experiences during afterschool and summer hours and prepare them for South Carolina's evolving workforce.

These priorities are not new — but the urgency is.

Families across South Carolina shouldn't have to scramble each summer to find safe, enriching opportunities for their children. Afterschool and summer programs are not a luxury. They are essential infrastructure — for working families, for student success and for the future of our state.

Amy Keely is the director of S.C. Afterschool Leaders Empowered at the Riley Institute. **Zelda Waymer** is the president and chief executive officer at S.C. Afterschool Alliance.



Keely



Waymer