



**SPORTS**

The good, bad and ugly top HBCU sports moments of 2025.



**COMMUNITY FOCUS**

Wake County principal named Wells Fargo regional top principal.

# The Triangle Tribune

THE TRIANGLE'S CHOICE FOR THE BLACK VOICE SINCE 1998

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## Wake County Sheriffs Spread Christmas Cheer

The Wake County Sheriff's Office spread joy one cart at a time to dozens of families in December with three Shop with the Sheriff events. Nearly 70 children received between \$100 and \$200 each and were paired with a WCSO deputy, detention officer or admin employee to shop for toys, clothes and any item on their list. Shop with the Sheriff is made possible thanks to the partnership and generosity of Learning Express Toys and Gifts, Walmart, Target, and the Wake County Sheriff's Office Charitable Foundation.



WAKE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE



KYLIE MARSH

A packed forum listen on ways Durham can reduce community gun violence.

## Durham hosts first violence reduction public session

By Kylie Marsh

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DURHAM - The city of Durham hosted the first of a series of crime reduction strategy sessions last week.

Bringing forward longtime violence reduction researcher, Thomas Abt of the Violence Reduction Center at the University of Maryland, Durham kicked off a six-month process of crafting a plan to save lives in the Bull City.

Mayor Leo Williams emphasized the community should work together to form the

strategy. "The challenge of violence in our community is very real. This is not something that any government or any agency can do alone," he said. "I cannot take another child dying. I cannot take another trigger being pulled."

Abt began his career as a teacher in Washington, D.C. After one of his favorite students was murdered, he became a prosecutor in New York City. Abt served as chief of staff to Office of Justice Programs under the Obama administration.

The national trend Abt pre-

sented to a standing-room only audience of engaged community members is that gun violence is the leading cause of youth deaths in the United States (ages 1 to 20 years old). Suicide by gun tops the category, but VRC focuses on "community gun violence," which accounts for approximately 70% of gun homicides.

"It's happening outside amongst unrelated individuals," Abt said (quoting from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), "mostly between

Please see **DURHAM/2A**



The U.S. Congress declined to vote on subsidies.

## Disparities in health care predicted to worsen as ACA subsidies end

By Lynn Bonner

NC NEWSLINE

North Carolina's infant mortality rate, already one of the worst in the nation, will continue to rise with the expiration of tax credits that kept ACA insurance coverage affordable, an OBGYN said last week.

Black babies in North Carolina die at three times the rate of white infants, a key factor that drives the state's high overall infant death rate.

"Losing health insurance means that we're going to see an increase in the racial disparities among maternal mortality and infant mortality," said Dr. Makunda Abdul-Mbacke, who practices in Rockingham County and southwestern Virginia.

Abdul-Mbacke spoke to reporters in a news conference organized by the Committee to Protect Health Care.

Federal tax credits approved in 2022 that subsidized Affordable Care Act premiums are expiring, and ACA health insurance marketplace premiums are rising. The tax credits made health insurance affordable for millions of Americans. Now, millions are expected to drop their health insurance because they can't afford it.

More than 975,000 North Carolinians have health insurance through an ACA marketplace health plan this year, compared to 670,223 in 2022, according to KFF.

A U.S. Senate vote to extend the subsidies failed last week. House Speaker Mike Johnson has scotched a vote in his chamber on extending ACA subsidies, States Newsroom reported. Republican leaders have said the subsidies are too expensive to continue.

Dr. Rob Davidson, executive director of the Committee to Protect Health Care and an emergency physician in west Michigan, said he blames leaders in Washington for failing to help people keep their coverage.

"They voted to let premiums skyrocket," he said, rather than ensuring their constituents could continue to see their doctors.

Abdul-Mbacke also anticipates worsening health care disparities in cancer and heart disease.

"Access to care is the very basic first step in dealing with any of these health equity issues," she said. "You can't have equity if you have no access."

## Alumni sponsor staff appreciation at SE Raleigh High School

By Kylie Marsh

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RALEIGH - Smiles were abundant at Southeast Raleigh Magnet High School's teacher appreciation luncheon last week.

Alumni Carlton Pulley, '04, and his wife, Kendra Pulley, '06, hosted the lunch, catered by Raleigh Meat Market. Carlton Pulley said he had a great experience at Southeast Raleigh

Magnet High, which shaped him into the man he is today.

"This is just a way to say thank you," he said. "Teaching can often be a thankless job, but we just wanted them to have a Merry Christmas."

The school is rooted in one of Raleigh's most historic Black communities. Raleigh City Councilman Corey Branch, who grew up not far from the school, was in attendance, as well as

Wake County Commissioner Tara Waters.

"Of all the schools I visit, there is a deep connection between staff, educators and students," Waters said, appreciating the special attention staff give to "meet students where they are."

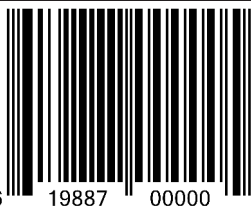
Principal Eddie Harden and his five assistant principals dug into their own pockets to purchase prizes like Tupperware con-

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# Durham hosts first session on community violence

**Continued from page 1A**

two men who don't have a lot of opportunities or hope."

This public violence can have significant impacts on multiple levels - not just the psychological impact on community members but the quantified costs, Abt explained.

Thirty-three homicides have occurred in Durham this year. Abt said that's about \$10 to \$19 million per death lost in "social costs," including medical care, criminal justice systems and other costs. Accounting for Durham, that's an estimated \$330 to \$627 million lost this year for the city. "We don't feel all this cost evenly," he said.

The most disadvantaged are youth. The lasting trauma has real costs that

make it harder to focus in school and harder to find gainful employment later on in life. But Abt was also clear. This is simply the lasting impacts of racism's legacy, including neighborhood disinvestment, which has led to concentrated poverty.

"We didn't get here by accident," he said. "It would happen to any community" that has experienced the systematic disadvantages that communities of color have. Crime and violence are also operating in a cyclical nature, regenerating that concentrated poverty by depressing property values.

Abt also presented that "crime thrives on injustice." When folks don't trust the criminal legal system, they don't use it, even

if it is a nonviolent resolution of disputes. "When someone beats up your cousin, you don't call the police, you call your boys," he said. "And then a beating becomes a stabbing, and a stabbing becomes a shooting."

To address the violence, Abt said there needs to be a balanced approach. He's worked in conservative cities and progressive cities and hasn't seen one strategy proven more fruitful over the other.

"I don't know a city that has arrested their way out of violence or just programmed their way out of it," he said. "I don't believe it's either blue lives matter or Black lives matter; that is a false choice. You need teamwork. You need cops and communities working together."



# Burton IB's growth reflects empowerment and community involvement

By Crystal Roberts  
DURHAM PUBLIC SCHOOLS

DURHAM - Burton IB Elementary School is making history as student academic growth continues to grow and exceed expectations.

Student scores increased 11% over 2024, and 7% this year, earning the school a B grade, the highest report card in the history of the school. Students not only met but exceeded growth expectations over school year 2024.

Principal Tiffany Boss credits her entire staff for not just creating an environment that prepares students for success but one that is a welcoming, safe space for students and staff. "We don't dread coming to work," said Amy Sanchez, Burton's IB PYP Magnet coordinator. "It's all hands on deck."

The annual Teacher Working Conditions survey notes that a strong relationship has been built among staff, students and administration, which translates to a common mindset and vision for Burton. "We want the same thing," Sanchez said.

Input is solicited from staff to include the

school's specialists, global language teachers, treasurer, trained interventionists, Spanish interpreter, bookkeeper and parent liaison. One teacher from each classroom is assigned for 30 minutes each day for interventions.

Perhaps this is because Boss invites her staff and students to contribute to the daily lesson planning. "I have a really strong distributive leadership model," Boss said.

Burton's faculty has worked collaboratively and strategically to align instruction with IB standards while incorporating rigorous academic practices. Students take ownership of their academic journeys, which results in higher engagement and measurable achievement gains.

The school's growth is also tied to a strong sense of community. Families are active partners in the learning process, and Burton's teachers routinely collaborate across grade levels to ensure a cohesive and supportive environment for every child. Even families who leave the school for one reason or another return for events, says Destiny Chevis, who serves as Burton's teacher and learn-

ing coach and principal intern.

Burton hosts a variety of family engagement opportunities at least once a month in person, a major piece of the school's culture, to include Dads in Action and schoolwide boys mentorship programs. Parents also volunteer weekly at the school as well.

Sanchez added that a collaborative, celebratory culture is extremely important. "It's about more than test scores," she said. "It's about developing confident, curious learners who are prepared to make a difference in the world. That's what the IB program is all about."

Meeting students where they are and learning their interests is equally as important, said Robert Oechslein, AIG specialist. "At Burton, there are opportunities across the board for everyone. We have a soccer team, basketball and track. We have athletics, Odyssey of the Mind, Battle of the Books, Science Olympiad, chorus, cheer, dance, Scouts, all of the ways children have to try different things and see who they are that they may not have an opportunity to do until middle school."



Southeast Raleigh High teachers and administrators listen to praise from alumni couple Carlton and Kendra Pulley at an appreciation luncheon.

# Southeast Raleigh High alumni honor school staff

**Continued from page 1A**

tainers, coffee mugs, gift cards and picture frames for games.

"We do more with less," he said.

James McCullers is in his first year as a substitute teacher. He said he likes conversing with the different personalities of students. Of the staff, he said, they're "like a family."

"We laugh, we joke, and we agree to disagree, but we're still on the same page," he said.

Sue-Hellen Brown has taught at Southeast Raleigh for five years. She teaches AP Language and Composition, AP Literature, English 3, and Creative Writing 1 & 2.

"I love the students," Brown said. "They want to learn, they want to be loved, they want to be un-

derstood." She said the teacher appreciation event, which is an annual event to kick off the winter break, is a way for staff to "de-stress."

"It's a family," she said.

Chris Hathcock is in his second year teaching engineering to freshmen and juniors and has become heavily involved in the athletics program.

"We had a good run in the football playoffs," he said. "There's a good sense of community like, 'we're all in this together.'"

Meghan Martinez is the career academy coordinator for the engineering and IT program. Students apply for the program in the eighth grade.

"We help them figure out if they want to do engineering and IT before they graduate," she said.

Martinez has lived in the area for 10 years and came to Southeast for the culture and community feeling.

"Teacher appreciation is nice. It's nice to be recognized for the work," she said. "Southeast does a really good job at trying to provide opportunities for students and teachers."

Harden says Southeast Raleigh is a "hidden gem" - not just the school but the community.

The school is one of Wake County's smallest, with around 1,400 students.

"It's kinda cliché," he said, "but [the staff] is dedicated to supporting my vision of the whole family concept and promoting the academic focus to help our students grow. We also support with love and compassion."

# Report examines policies to reduce incarceration in NC

By Liz Schlemmer  
WUNC

As 2025 ends, a new report looks at criminal justice reforms the United States could pursue in 2026, including in North Carolina.

The Prison Policy Initiative has released its annual "Winnable Criminal Justice Reforms" analysis to provide recommendations on how cities and states can reduce incarceration. In its section on expanding alternatives to responses to social problems, the report included the example of Durham's Holistic Empathetic Assistance Response Teams or HEART program, which dispatches mental health professionals rather than police officers for

nonemergency calls.

Wanda Bertram, communications strategist for the initiative, said other cities have similar programs.

"It's an excellent solution for cities that are in states where the legislature may not be getting a lot done or might not have that much of interest in criminal justice reform," Bertram said.

The HEART program was established in 2021. The report had other suggestions, including decriminalizing drugs in order to take a more health-centered approach to substance use. While nearly half of states have legalized marijuana for adult use, North Carolina still criminalizes the drug.

The report also advised

states to reduce the number of people going to jails and prisons for low-level offenses. North Carolina is among only five states to not increase its felony theft threshold since 2000 and is one of 17 states criminalizing minor traffic violations. Bertram noted other states have made progress in this area.

"These are offenses that we think police departments should be issuing citations for, certainly, holding someone accountable," Bertram said. "But there is no reason to jail someone, to throw their life into disarray, to put their health at risk for things that are so, so minor."

Please see **REPORT/3A**

# 52 Weeks of Black Brilliance

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LaTasha Hibbert is CEO and founder of LTH Accounting Services in Towson, Maryland.

# Year-end moves that could boost your 2026 tax refund

By Megan Sayles  
AFRO STAFF WRITER  
As the year winds down, many taxpayers may assume it's too late to make decisions that will change their tax refund next spring. But the final weeks of the year offer a time for individuals to seize opportunities to lower their taxable income, claim overlooked credits and prepare for a smooth tax filing season.

LaTasha Hibbert, CEO and founder of LTH Accounting Services in Towson, Maryland, spoke with the AFRO about the most effective last-minute moves, the biggest mistakes she sees each December and how households can still take steps to yield a larger refund before the year ends.

**AFRO:** What are the most effective last-minute steps individuals can still take to potentially increase their tax refund for 2026?

**LaTasha Hibbert:** Even toward the end of the year, there's still a lot people can do. A few simple moves include putting a little extra into a 401(k) or individual retirement account, making charitable donations before Dec. 31, using or adding to your Health Savings Account or flexible savings account and checking your withholding to make sure it reflects any changes from this year. These aren't complicated steps, but they really can

make a difference when tax season rolls around.

**AFRO:** What are some common tax mistakes you see people make around November and December that end up hurting their refund the following year?

**LH:** A big one is waiting until the last possible minute to think about taxes; that's when people miss opportunities. Others include not adjusting your W-4 after changes like a new job or new baby, forgetting to use their FSA funds before they expire, not keeping track of deductible expenses, especially charitable donations or mileage, and freelancers missing their estimated tax payments.

**AFRO:** For middle- and low-income households especially, what credit or deduction opportunities often get overlooked?

**LH:** There are some really valuable credits that people don't always realize they qualify for. These include the Earned Income Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, Saver's Credit, which rewards people for contributing to retirement even in small amounts; education credits like the American Opportunity Tax Credit; and more energy-efficient home improvement credits than people realize. Tax credits can add up quickly and make a big difference in a family's refund.

**AFRO:** For freelancers or

gig workers, what year-end financial moves should they be making now to avoid surprises and possibly improve their refund?

**LH:** For freelancers, the end of the year is a great time to get organized. I recommend making sure their final estimated tax payment is on track; gathering all business receipts, mileage records and expenses before they get lost; buying equipment or supplies this year if they know they'll need them early next year; and considering a Simplified Employee Pension IRA or solo 401(k) if they want to save on taxes and build retirement savings.

Freelancers have a lot more control, and responsibility, over their taxes, so good record-keeping really pays off.

**AFRO:** What's one piece of advice you'd give someone who thinks it's "too late" to make a difference in their taxes now?

**LH:** It's not too late. Even in December, there are still plenty of options. You can increase retirement contributions, make charitable donations, organize receipts and plan for next year. A few small steps now can absolutely reduce stress and possibly increase your refund when tax time comes. The key is just not waiting until you're actually filing your taxes. A little attention now goes a long way.

# Should I claim Social Security early or late?

STATEPOINT  
Retirees become eligible to claim Social Security benefits at age 62, but the timing of when you claim can drastically impact your benefit amount.

Still, when to claim will be entirely dependent on your unique situation. As you approach retirement, it's important to understand the impact that timing has on your benefits.

Your benefits are based on your top 35 years of earnings, adjusted to account for changes in wages from the year they were earned.

The Social Security Administration then applies a formula to those figures to arrive at your specific benefit amount at full retirement age, also referred to as your primary insurance amount.

There are three options for when to claim your benefits: claim early, claim at your FRA or claim at age 70. Each comes with its own benefits and risks.

You can begin claiming your benefits as early as age 62, but your benefits will be permanently re-

duced. Still, there are instances when claiming early makes sense:

**\* You're in poor health.** The benefit of receiving Social Security early may be worth it, particularly if you're unsure if you'll live beyond your break-even point.

**\* You're maximizing benefits with a spouse.** Timing your claim to Social Security with your spouse can help you maximize a long-term benefit, while fulfilling cash flow needs in the present.

**\* You no longer want to work.** The lifestyle benefits of not working may outweigh a larger future financial benefit from Social Security.

**\* You want to preserve assets with growth potential.** Claiming Social Security early may preserve investment or savings accounts.

The primary benefit of waiting until your FRA is that you are then entitled to 100% of your benefits, without possibility of reductions over time.

Your FRA for purposes of Social Security is based on

the year you were born. For those born between 1943-1954, their FRA is 66. For those born between 1955-1959, their FRA is 66 plus two months for every year after 1954 until 1960. For those born 1960 and later, their FRA is 67.

You can delay claiming your benefits until the maximum age 70, with the primary advantage of increasing your benefits for the remainder of your life. Delaying a Social Security claim may make sense if:

**\* You have other forms of income.** You may realize tax benefits from pulling from sources such as retirement accounts or savings.

**\* You're still working.** Working beyond your FRA may allow you to meet lifestyle expenses while increasing your future benefit.

**\* You're concerned about spousal or survivor benefits.** When you delay claiming your Social Security, your spouse may be entitled to a larger spousal benefit and/or survivor's benefit as well.



COURTESY

States and cities are increasingly exploring alternatives to incarceration for offenses that don't threaten public safety.

# Report examines policies to reduce incarceration in NC

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The report also suggested states stop charging and sentencing youth as adults and eliminating life without parole for young people. North Carolina is among 22 states to allow life sentences without a chance of parole for people

under age 18.

Bertram also suggested criminal justice reforms face strong headwinds as "tough on crime" policies are becoming popular narratives for lawmakers again, even in blue states. She does not want to see states backslide to the policies which fueled mass in-

carceration in the 1990s.

"There's been tremendous progress made in a lot of places around getting people help," Bertram said. "People who are struggling with substance use, with mental illness, people who have disabilities, people who are homeless."

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# Managing the impact of inflation, AI in investments as a North Carolina business

As the boom in artificial intelligence and ongoing inflation continue to shape our global economy, communities, businesses and investors across the U.S. should be open to new opportunities generating from AI while hedging against risk in their investment plans for 2026.

According to J.P. Morgan Private Bank's 2026 Global Investment Outlook, like most global trends throughout history, AI and inflation will likely have ripple effects that hit close to home.

"In 2025, uncertainty defined the market narrative," said Christopher Nolan, Head of Investments and Advice for the Carolinas at J.P. Morgan Private Bank. "Today, we have major themes setting the agenda, reflecting a fundamental shift in how economies operate. Those looking to reconfigure their investment portfolio in 2026 should consider a refreshed investment playbook that blends discipline with flexibility."

**The age of AI: Promise and paradox**

Artificial intelligence is transforming industries, driving productivity and reshaping labor markets, fueling a surge in investment and speculation about a potential AI bubble. This current AI boom is anchored by solid fundamentals, and that the greatest risk is a lack of understanding how to integrate this technology, which could impact your business.

AI is a tech sector rapidly becoming more competitive, and investors should find the balance between capturing the potential of the AI revolution while managing the risk of overexuberance. Although AI investments currently account for less than 1% of U.S. GDP, large U.S. tech companies have tripled their annual capital expenditures from \$150 billion in 2023 to a projected \$500 billion or more in 2026. This surge in AI-related investments has already contributed more to U.S. GDP growth than consumer spending this year. Over half (58%) of small businesses say they use generative AI—up from 40% in 2024 and more than double the adoption rate in 2023, according to U.S. Chamber of Commerce's latest Empowering Small Business Report.

If you're running a small business, you know your organization

inside and out. That deep understanding will become your strongest asset in navigating the world of AI - how to use it safely and effectively and knowing how to include it in your investment portfolio.

**Beyond bonds: Navigating inflation's structural shift**

The sharp rise in inflation since 2022, coupled with increased government deficits, has redefined the investment landscape, replacing stability with ongoing price pressures and heightened uncertainty. Today, inflation's gradual yet significant impact is a central consideration for long-term portfolio performance.

In your own business, inflation has likely driven up costs, affected your supply chain and added pressure on labor expenses. You've likely had to integrate the effects of inflation into your bottom line - inflation doesn't appear to be going away any time soon.

Factoring inflation into your investment portfolio is vital in 2026. Investors will need to look beyond traditional fixed income investments to address persistent inflation and build portfolios for strength and stability. Other investment options that can hedge against persistent inflation and provide portfolio diversification include commodities, real assets and hedge funds.

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## EDUCATION



### New Year's Resolutions to Make Kids Sharper at Home and Smarter at School

(StatePoint) Success at school is about more than just what takes place in the classroom. How kids spend their time after the bell rings also matters. Here are four New Year's resolutions you can make at home to help kids excel at school:

1. Unlock their musical creativity: Music education has strong links to academic achievement. Fortunately, it's easy to fill your child's world with music. With a compact keyboard, like the CT-S1 from Casio, they can express themselves and hone their skills anywhere and anytime, with no set-up or storage hassles. This particular model has a slim, minimalist design that fits in any space easily, and pairs with a smartphone or tablet so your student can play along with their favorite songs through the keyboard's speaker system. Plus, a superior sound quality will make playing inspirational and fun; it combines AiX Sound Source – an innovative technology that enables electronic instruments to produce the perfect tones – with an integrated acoustic sound system.


2. Get them active: Physical activity is good for the brain, improving memory and problem-solving skills. Unfortunately, only 21% of U.S. kids and teens ages 6 to 17 meet the guideline of 60 minutes of physical activity every day, according to the Physical Activity Alliance. Participating in competitive sports is a great way to build leadership and teamwork skills while staying active. If that's not your kid's thing, no worries. Family bike rides, weekend nature hikes, and even yoga and dance classes are all great ways to get them moving – and have them gain the many physical and cognitive benefits of exercise.

3. Simplify tough subjects with the right tools: Math is often the toughest subject in a student's course load. The right tools though can foster better engagement with the material, simplify homework routines, and better prepare your student for class each day. It all starts with a learning companion like the fx-9750GIII graphing calculator from Casio. Unlike many graphing calculators with a complex interface that can make learning math even tougher than it needs to be, this model features a Natural Textbook Display and intuitive icon menu that are incredibly easy to use. In addition to features like graph plotting, probability distribution, vector arithmetic and spreadsheets, the fx-9750GIII is capable of programming in CASIO Basic and MicroPython, so that beyond standard math homework, your student can also use their calculator to sharpen other STEM skills.

4. Prioritize a regular schedule: Sticking to a regular schedule can foster higher-quality sleep, improving alertness and mental clarity during class time and throughout the day. Enforce a bedtime that allows your child to get the recommended 9-12 hours of sleep if they are 6-12 years old and 8-10 hours if they are 13-18.

Academic achievement begins at home. In the new year, provide your child with tools that boost creativity and learning and encourage habits that support their health and well-being to help them thrive in all their endeavors, inside and outside the classroom.

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# Bryce Young boosts Panthers' hopes

By Steve Reed  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHARLOTTE — There were plenty of question marks surrounding Carolina Panthers quarterback Bryce Young entering the season, the most obvious being if he could win at the NFL level.

But after going 6-22 as a starter in his first two seasons, the No. 1 overall pick in 2023 has given the playoff-starved organization a reason to believe he's the right guy moving forward. He's 8-6 as a starter this season and has added to his growing reputation as a clutch performer.

Young has led 12 game-winning drives in the fourth quarter or overtime in three seasons — the most of any QB in the league in that time frame.

He did it again on Sunday, connecting on a 34-yard strike with Jalen Coker down the right sideline on a third down play leading to the go-ahead field goal in Carolina's 23-20 win over rival Tampa Bay. The win vaulted the Panthers into sole possession of first place in the NFC South.

While Young is far from a finished product, his confidence seems to be growing with each passing week and his recognition of defenses continues to improve.

"Bryce just was taking what was there and the Bucs did a great job of mixing things up," Panthers coach Dave Canales said after Sunday's game. "They showed blitz looks and popped out to (cover) two. They showed normal looks, brought blitzes and Bryce just did the right thing with the ball. He threw it away when he had to, extended the play when he could. Just the way he's been operating, the confidence, the connection and all the hard work that he's put in with this young group."

Young also showed toughness after getting his ankle stepped on early in the game, fighting through the injury.

Now comes an even bigger test for Young.

The playoff-starved Panthers find themselves on the cusp of their first postseason berth since 2017 — and first division title in a decade — entering the final two weeks of the regular season.

Carolina can clinch the NFC South with a win Sunday over Seattle and a Buccaneers loss to Miami. Any other scenario means the Bucs and Panthers will meet in a Week 18 rematch in Tampa to determine the division champion.

"The playoffs is a couple weeks away. We don't have the luxury to be able to think about that and play 'what-if.' We have to focus on next week," Young said. "Right now it's fun in the locker room, we get to perform, but for all of us, after 24 hours, next week will be the biggest game of the year. That's always how it will be. That's always going to be our approach."

The Panthers emerged healthy from Sunday's win over the Bucs, but concerns remain about starting left tackle Ikey Ekwonu. Ekwonu missed the game with a knee injury after undergoing an MRI earlier in the week.

The Panthers clearly don't want to risk losing Ekwonu to a long-term injury, so they are being cautious. ... Canales also said the team could open the 21-day window this week on guard Robert Hunt, who has been out since Week 2 with a torn biceps. Hunt is considered the team's top offensive lineman.

#### Key number

2015 — The most recent time the Panthers won the NFC South title.

#### Next steps

Over the next two games the Panthers face the two QBs they determined weren't good enough to lead their franchise — Seattle's Sam Darnold and Tampa Bay's Baker Mayfield.

# The Triangle Tribune Sports

December 28-January 3, 2026 | 6A



COURTESY

The MEAC defeated the SWAC in both the MEAC/SWAC Challenge and the Cricket Celebration Bowl.



Johnson C. Smith was the comeback story for the ages.

## The good, bad and the ugly in HBCU sports for 2025

I intentionally held my "Best of 2025" column back a week to await the Harlon Hill Trophy announcement. Whatever the outcome, it was going to be my top sports moment.



BONITTA  
BEST

Thankfully, instead of a rant, I can write, "History has been made!"

Curtis Allen waited his turn behind Virginia Union star running back Jada Byers and, while so many Panthers defected to other teams, Allen stayed the course, set the 2025 season ablaze and was rewarded for it with the Harlon Hill Trophy.

The trophy is Division II's version of the Heisman. Oh yeah, no HBCU player had

EVER won. Only two had finished among the top four finalists: Byers in fourth place in 2022 and North Carolina Central quarterback Earl Harvey at third in 1988.

Allen led the entire NCAA — not just DII — in rushing yards, rushing touchdowns, rushing yards per game, scoring and total touchdowns. He ran for over 100 yards in every game he played in.

What a statement for a conference that used to be a football laughingstock.

#### SWAC, who?

The MEAC regained supremacy over the SWAC by sweeping the MEAC/SWAC Challenge and the Cricket Celebration Bowl for the first time since 2021 when North Carolina Central won the Challenge and South Carolina State the CB.



In fact, if my math is correct, the MEAC went 5-0 against the SWAC in football. S-h-h-h-h-h, it's very quiet in Birmingham, Alabama, at the SWAC headquarters.

#### Declawed No More

Johnson C. Smith's football turnaround under Maurice Flowers in three seasons has been nothing short of miraculous.

Folks thought Flowers was insane leaving a good Fort Valley State program to coach a team that hadn't won a CIAA championship since the 1970s, even if it was his alma mater. Just goes to show.

#### End of an Era

St. Augustine's permanent removal from CIAA mem-

Please see **GOOD/7A**

## NC Courage sign Nigerian national team forward

STAFF REPORTS

CARY — The North Carolina Courage have signed Nigerian national team forward Chioma Okafor to a three-year guaranteed contract through the 2028 NWSL season, with a club option for 2029.

Okafor won the 2024

Women's African Cup of Nations with Nigeria, the country's record 10th title.

She signed her first professional contract with the Courage after finishing her collegiate career at Connecticut, where she scored 30 goals and added five assists in 57 appearances across four years.

"I am excited to call North Carolina home and sign with the Courage. From the early conversations with the team, I fell in love with the developmental plan they laid out for me and the drive to build back this club's championship roots. I can't wait to get to work in 2026," Okafor said.

Born in Blantyre, Malawi, Okafor was also eligible to play for Nigeria through her father and chose to represent Nigeria.

She moved to the United States in 2019, playing for and attending the Berkshire School in Massachusetts before head-

Please see **NC/7A**



# The good, bad and ugly in HBCU sports for 2025

Continued from page 6A

bership is still hard to fathom. A track and field stadium named after a legend that will never produce another.

A basketball gymnasium that won't house another rivalry game with Shaw or hang another championship banner.

Why alumni aren't still fuming at the way the university was run into the ground is just mindboggling.

Nine, 10, 11...can we get 12?

By April, 11 schools were looking for basketball coaches, the most at one time in years. J.C. Smith had two openings at the same time, but the biggest news was the release of Fayetteville State championship coach Luke D'Alessio.

The Broncos hired Bluefield State men's coach Devin Hoehn. Then Bluefield said, OK, then we'll take your man and hired D'Alessio.

Other departures, both voluntary and involuntary, were Virginia State, Winston-Salem State, Prairie View A&M, Alabama State and Coppin State on the women's side, and Alcorn State and Grambling State on the men's.

### 'Sisters, Are Doing it for Themselves'

As Aretha Franklin sang back in the day, DI women's basketball teams had one of the best post-season showings in a long time.

Seven teams earned postseason bids, including the two automatics by the MEAC and SWAC in the Big Dance. With the addition of the new NCAA-sponsored Women's Basketball Invitation Tournament, where North Carolina A&T decided to go, more spots opened up in the WNIT. Two SWAC teams and two MEAC teams extended their seasons.

Four of the seven teams won their first-round games: Southern in the First Four, and Howard, Coppin State and Texas Southern in the WNIT. A couple should have kept going, but the officiating got in the way.

Still, the ladies did HBCU proud and gave their programs well-deserved national recognition.

SIAC Rising



Southern won its first-ever NCAA Tournament game.



Tierra Terry has revitalized the Winston-Salem State women's program.

The NCAA DII Football Committee restructuring the regions and giving all conference champions an automatic bid opened up a new world for HBCU teams.

Albany State was the qualifier, and Kentucky State and Benedict earned at-large berths. ASU and Benedict won their first-round matches, then had to meet for a third time. The Golden Rams advanced to the third round before losing to Newberry. Notice has been served.

### Goodbye to 2 Legends

The deaths of Abraham "Mr. CIAA" Mitchell and HBCU historian Fred Whitted closed a chapter but not the memories. Mitchell thrilled us all with his outfits at the CIAA Tournament; it just wasn't a true tournament without him.

And Fred, who was a dear friend, kept HBCU history alive with his Black College Sports Encyclopedia, famous HBCU alumni and so much more. We all called Fred with a sports question. But, most importantly, he was a great guy.

### The Curse Continues

As much as Florida A&M folks hate to admit it, former director of athletics Tiffani-dawn Sykes' curse is still in effect.

The Rattlers have gone through three presidents and five athletics directors since Sykes and several others were fired last year. After football coach Willie Simmons left, alumni didn't want Shawn Gibbs because he coached at "lowly" Division II Fort Valley State.

They got the man they wanted in James Cozie III, but he was fired after two seasons. Now they're hiring alumnus Quinn Gray - from a Division II school. Go figure.

### Whose Ice is Colder?

The inaugural Black College Invitational Championship wanted to give HBCU DI and DII basketball teams another option after the NCAA Tournament. Sixteen teams (eight DI and eight DII) were going to compete at Bojangles Coliseum in Charlotte.

Instead, only eight teams participated and all were DII. Teams either rejected the invitation or pulled out over a lack of funding and trust issues with president/CEO Wes Bellamy. Next year, the Invitational will be played on Virginia State's campus.

Hard lesson learned: Black-owned doesn't mean folks will buy your ice. (A Malcolm X quote.)



# NC Courage sign Nigerian national team forward

Continued from page 6A  
ing to Storrs, Connecticut, to play for the Huskies.

Okafor was named First Team All-Big East in each of her final three seasons with the Huskies after earning second team honors as a freshman.

She was also a 2024 MAC Hermann Trophy semi-

finalist and named to the 2025 preseason watch list.

"We're excited to welcome Chioma Okafor to the North Carolina Courage. Chioma is a dynamic, fearless attacker whose pace, power, and willingness to take on defenders bring dimensions we've been looking to add to our

front line," Courage Chief Soccer Officer Ceri Bowley said.

"Beyond her on-field qualities, Chioma brings a competitive edge and a growth mindset that fits the culture we're building. She works, she listens, and she's hungry to develop."



Abraham "Mr. CIAA" Mitchell was a tournament icon.

## KWANZAA

### ACTIVITY SHEET

Hi Everyone!

My time machine, "Sankofa 82" and I took a trip back in time to visit Dr. Maulana Karenga in 1966. He was better known as Ron Karenga during his political activist days. I met with him at the time he was just coming up with the idea and principles of Kwanzaa. Wow, I learned so much. Dr. Karenga gave us so much insight into his beliefs and why he thought it was necessary to create "Kwanzaa".

### WHAT IS KWANZAA?

Kwanzaa is a Swahili word originating along the coast of East Africa. It means "first" and signifies the first fruits of the harvest. The holiday is a seven day cultural celebration period practiced amongst many African-Americans and the Diaspora. This celebration lasts from December 26, through January 1, roughly coinciding with the celebration of Christmas and New Years. Because of its timing many people believe that Kwanzaa is a Christian Holiday. It is not a religious holiday. Kwanzaa is an African American and Pan-African holiday that celebrates history, values, family, community and culture and was founded in 1966 by Dr. Maulana Karenga.

### YOUR BEST GUESS

What do you think the color of the candles represents? Choose from below and write it on the line.

[land and hope for the future, the struggle, people of African descent]

Red: \_\_\_\_\_

Black: \_\_\_\_\_

Green: \_\_\_\_\_

### COLOR THE KINARA

Color the Kinara base brown or black. You will notice that there are 7 places for candles on the Kinara and the candles are 3 red on the left, 1 black in the center and 3 green on the right. These 7 candle place-holders represent the seven principles of Kwanzaa.

### MATCH THE PRINCIPLES

Match the principle with its description and write the correct letter on the line.

_____ Umoja	A. Self-Determination
_____ Kujichagulia	B. Cooperative Economics
_____ Ujima	C. Creativity
_____ Ujamaa	D. Faith
_____ Nia	E. Unity in the Family/Community
_____ Kuumba	F. Purpose
_____ Imani	G. Collective Work and Responsibility

### ?? KWANZAA TRIVIA ??

Where did the word Kwanzaa originate?

What are the dates for the celebration for Kwanzaa?

Who should get the credit for making Kwanzaa an African American holiday?

The device that holds the candles in place is known as what?

### HAPPY KWANZAA!

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SCHOOL NEWS



COURTESY

**Mariah Walker (holding flowers) at her surprise announcement.**

**WAKE COUNTY**  
Mariah Walker, principal of Wake Young Women's Leadership Academy, has been named the 2026 Wells Fargo North Central Region principal of the year by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

Walker was honored during a surprise assembly attended by her family, the WYWLA community, Superintendent Robert P. Taylor, members of the Wake County Board of Education, and 2025 Wells Fargo North Carolina Principal of the Year Jason Johnson.

Walker has served students, families, and educators across the district for more than 20 years. At Wake Young Women's Leadership Academy, she has championed academic excellence and post-secondary access, empowered students to lead with confidence, and built a culture where every student feels seen, supported and capable of greatness.

That leadership was recognized in October, when Walker was named 2025-26 WCPSS principal of the year. Walker is now a finalist for 2026 Wells Fargo North Carolina principal of the year, which will be

named in the spring.

**DURHAM COUNTY**

After completing his evaluation for the 2024-225 school year, the Durham Public Schools Board of Education unanimously voted to extend the contract of Superintendent Anthony Lewis by one year to June 30, 2029, citing several attributes for the vote of confidence in his ability to lead the system.

The board highlighted strengths that Lewis has demonstrated during his 16-month tenure, noted the district's academic growth, and set expectations for the superintendent's ongoing leadership. Upon his arrival, he hosted numerous listening and learning sessions across Durham that built trust. He also demonstrated his ability to navigate challenges, including a budget deficit and transportation issues.

This school year, 90% of DPS have seen growth over last school year, and more than half of the district's schools earned an A, B or C grade, with the highest number of A schools since the pandemic.

Lewis thanked the board for its confidence in him. "I will try to lean into all of the challenges. I don't work



**Anthony Lewis**

in isolation. Most importantly, it's the people in the building, the folks that are closest to the students. That's why I come to work every day to ensure that we are removing barriers, creating systems that support the work that they do. There are challenges that remain. But we have the right people to get this work done. I'm excited about the future, and I'm ready to continue the work," he said.

The board also approved a one-time payment of \$2,500 to an annuity of Lewis' choice and 40 hours of annual compensatory time.



COURTESY

**Jordan C. Jones**

## Former Hillside band director to march in 2026 Rose Parade

STAFF REPORTS

The Saluting America's Band Directors project has assembled over 300 band directors from across North America to march in the Pasadena Rose Parade Jan. 1 under the theme, "America's band directors: We teach music. We teach life."

Former Hillside High School Director of Bands Jordan C. Jones has been selected to join the national ensemble. The Band Directors Marching Band will accompany a colorful, animated float along the parade's iconic 5.5-mile route.

Jones is a musician,

music educator and creative leader. The Hillside alumnus' work spans performance, music education, community engagement and creative consulting. He is building a consulting and collaborative platform designed to help musicians and artists translate their creative skills into sustainable careers while strengthening local and regional artistic communities.

"Music is my magic carpet ride. I encourage others to let it be theirs, too," Jones said.

The ensemble will be directed by nationally recognized music educator and

innovative band director Jon Waters, who will also lead rehearsals and additional performances while the group is in Pasadena. The project is sponsored by the Michael D. Sewell Memorial Foundation, based in Pickerington, Ohio.

"Marching in the Rose Parade is more than an honor, it's a responsibility," Jones continued. "It represents what's possible when young people see someone from their hometown, from Durham, from Hillside, stand on one of the world's biggest stages and lead with excellence."

## Cary Omegas set course with new leadership

The Xi Mu Mu Cary Chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity recently held a swearing-in ceremony for members. The chapter, one of the largest in the fraternity's Sixth District (North Carolina and South Carolina), selected members who are excited to carry the momentum established by past chapter leaders.



COURTESY

**Seated l-r: Abdul "Reef" Cole, keeper of records and seal; Anthony Gayles, vice-basileus; James Collins, basileus; Wes Wills, keeper of finance; and Eric Curry, reporter.**

**Standing l-r Larry Coe, assistant keeper of records and seal; Patrick Curry, immediate past basileus; Alvin Thompson, keeper of peace; Charles Wright, assistant keeper of finance; and Eugene Hawkins, talent hunt chair. Not pictured: Greg Hutton, protocol chair.**



**Exercise is crucial for healthy aging, according to experts.**

## Advice for healthy aging as NC's population grows older

By Eric Tegethoff  
PUBLIC NEWS SERVICE

As North Carolina's population ages, the focus turns to preventive health strategies that can add quality to later years.

Experts stress that regular physical activity and proper nutrition are critical for managing chronic conditions and protecting brain health.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, physical activity can help prevent or manage many health issues common in older adults, such as heart disease and diabetes, while also boosting cognitive function.

John E. Lewis, founder of Dr. Lewis Nutrition, a plant-

based nutrition and supplement company, and an adviser for the Medical Wellness Association, said the power to change one's health trajectory remains firmly in an individual's hands, regardless of age.

"If you've been diagnosed with some type of cancer or heart disease," he said, "you still, as long as you are alive and in control of yourself, have the ability to change that by using proper nutrition and exercising every day and using key dietary supplements."

Lewis said that despite a national trend toward sedentary lifestyles, even small amounts of daily movement can start a positive chain reaction for health.

North Carolina's older

adult population is expected to double by 2040. For those unsure where to begin, Lewis' advice is refreshingly straightforward: Start small and be consistent.

"The easiest thing that somebody can do is have a good pair of sneakers and just simply start walking around in their neighborhood," he said, "even if it's only five minutes the first time."

Beyond exercise, hydration and key nutrients like Vitamin D are also pillars of a healthy aging strategy. Experts agree that a comprehensive approach, combining movement, whole foods, quality sleep and stress management is the true path to vitality after 50.

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