



Facts vs. facts in education debate

by [Ferrel Guillory](#) | February 26, 2016





Keith Poston and James Ford of the Public Schools Forum of NC. Photo Credit: Alex Granados/EdNC

To provide more in-depth coverage on schools in North Carolina, EdNC will shortly launch the EdData Dashboard. Our editor, Mebane Rash, and her staff have produced a handsome, easy-to-use, and substantive “dashboard” that they will up-date quarterly. We trust you will find the data charts, graphs, and packages informative, enriching your perspectives on education in our state. We welcome your comments and suggestions. I often repeat the time-honored wisdom that “data without analysis is junk.” Yes, we have to put the facts down. But we also have to array facts, connect dots, and examine time lines to make the facts mean something by which to drive action. This week’s column examines the challenge of dealing with data.

Elections call upon voters to compare and contrast candidates in terms of personality, policy, and partisanship,

as well as ability, priorities, and values. As the education issues play out in campaign 2016 in North Carolina, voters will encounter another dimension of debate: facts fighting facts.

What's an engaged citizen to do as candidates, parties, think tanks, and advocacy groups offer an array of facts, all objectively accurate but telling conflicting stories and leading to clashing conclusions about North Carolina and its schools? There's no easy answer, except to weigh the competing facts and assess which set of statistics offer a story that adds up to reality.

Already, Gov. Pat McCrory and Lt. Gov. Dan Forest, the Republican incumbents seeking re-election, have spelled out a long list of facts in explanation and defense of the GOP record since gaining control of the governorship and the General Assembly by a veto-proof majority in 2012. The governor's list appears under the "record of success" section of [his campaign's website](#).

Forest, who as lieutenant governor serves on the State Board of Education, has emerged as a more aggressive, and charismatic, champion of the Republican message on schools. A few days ago, he stepped before the combined Wake County Republican precinct caucuses and sought to arm party activists with data-points to counter "misinformation (that) Republicans are decimating education." Forest also has posted three education-oriented videos, one entitled "education fast facts," on his [campaign website](#) and YouTube.

Both the governor and lieutenant governor draw a contrast between the education budgets under former Democratic Gov. Bev Perdue and under Republicans since 2012. McCrory points to spending reductions of "almost \$1 billion between 2008 and 2011." Forest says Republicans have put "\$1.5 billion back into education," thus spending "more than ever in the history of North Carolina."

As you consider those facts do so in the context of the Great Recession of 2008-09 that produced a drastic upward spike in unemployment and a downward spike in state revenues. Whoever, Democrats or Republicans, ruled in Raleigh between 2009 and 2012 would have had to slash state spending or raise taxes or both, to produce a balanced budget as the iron-clad law provides. As the economy recovered over the past three years, Republicans have appropriated more in total dollars to K-12 education.

Independent analysts and advocacy groups, some of which are critics of the current administration, offer other facts. Some draw on data from before the Great Recession. Others focus on growth in enrollment.

For example, a [recent report](#) by the nonpartisan Public School Forum of North Carolina presents a state-by-state chart showing that North Carolina's per pupil spending, adjusted for inflation, declined by \$855 from fiscal 2008 to 2015, the sixth largest decline among states.

The 2016 [Facts and Figures](#) publication by BEST NC, a nonprofit formed by business leaders, reports that "North Carolina ranked 46th in the country in total K-12 per-pupil spending in 2014-15 in constant dollars, but 39th in cost of living adjusted dollars."

The McCrory campaign website says that "in 2014 the average salary for teachers in North Carolina increased more than any other state in the nation." A Forest video says the state's previous leadership had "frozen" teacher pay for years, then Republicans raised teacher pay an average of 11 percent.

The legislature's website has a [chart of pay raises](#) for teachers and state employees going back to 1973-74: It shows substantial teacher pay raises before the Great Recession. Teacher pay raises averaged 8.2 percent, 5 percent, and 3 percent in the last three years of Democratic Gov. Mike Easley's administration. Then came no pay raise for three consecutive fiscal years – "frozen" from 2009 to 2012 – budgets hard hit by the recession. Teachers received a 1.2 percent raise in 2012-13 and then, as the legislative staff calculated, raises ranging from .5 percent to 18.5 percent (a 7 percent average) in 2014-15.

Republican legislators have targeted raises on early-career teachers, while also revising the career "step-increase" pay system. The most recent pay legislation gave some experienced teachers a step increase, again increased new teachers' pay and provided a one-time \$750 raise across the board.

The BEST NC report has a chart comparing North Carolina teacher compensation to the national average. In 2001, the North Carolina average was \$41,496, just below the national average of \$43,378. The gap widened to more than \$10,000 by 2014. The latest pay raise brings North Carolina up to about \$50,000, still below the

national average.

The Public School Forum reports that North Carolina ranks 42nd among the states in teacher pay, up from 47th a year earlier.

In his talk to Wake Republicans, Forest declared, “Teachers are not leaving North Carolina in droves; how many of you know that?” In one of his videos, the lieutenant governor deconstructs a state report on teacher turnover to make the point that 6.8 percent of teachers fully left the profession last year, well below the 14.9 percent turnover rate widely reported. Only one percent has gone to other states, he said.

The Public School Forum reports that the overall turnout rate, including teachers moving to administrative positions or to another school, jumped from 11.2 percent in 2010-11 to the 14.9 percent of 2014-15. It reports that 312 teachers left North Carolina for other states in 2010-11, rising to 1,028 departures in 2014-15. Teachers who resigned out of dissatisfaction or for a career change went up from 640 in 2010-11 to 1,209 in 2014-15.

Forest has an argument that teachers are not leaving “in droves” – one thousand departures represent about one percent, as he said.

Still, the teacher pipeline trend-lines go in the negative direction: the University of North Carolina data dashboard showing a decline in education majors at the public universities from 23,641 in 2010 to 17,111 in 2014.

The education sector, to be sure, produces such a torrent of statistics as to drown anyone seeking quick-and-easy answers. The election debate – facts vs. facts – calls for a massive exercise in civic critical thinking.

Friday with Ferrel

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