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A publication of Cooke
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Scrutinize merger, but give it time to work

An agreement struck to integrate ECU Physicians and Vidant Medical Group no doubt will raise questions and concerns about the transfer of public interests to a private entity, the closed manner in which the deal was developed and the future of thousands of employees. However, we believe that the leaders who are moving forward with this initiative are doing so out of necessity and a sincere desire to benefit eastern North Carolina.

THE DAILY REFLECTOR

Officials with Vidant Health and East Carolina University signed the 100-page document to unify 80 Vidant and 25 ECU medical practices and combine thousands of employees under a single new company. The new nonprofit organization, currently called VECU Medical Group, will be governed by the leadership of both East Carolina and Vidant. ECU Physicians will transfer all of its state-owned property and assets to the new company, and Vidant will pay ECU an initial \$35 million followed by annual payments of \$14.25 million into an endowment to be directed by the chancellor.

The agreement does not alter the employment status and compensation of current Vidant employees, officials said, and the new corporation will offer employment to all the state workers employed by ECU Physicians — about 400 doctors and 700 other caregivers and support staff. Those who are not vested in the state retirement system may choose to move immediately. Others, according to the agreement, will have the option to be assigned to the VECU group while remaining under ECU employment in order to reach state retirement and benefit milestones — essentially they can be grandfathered.

East Carolina Chancellor Cecil Staton and Vidant Health Chief Executive Michael Waldrum in an interview with The Daily Reflector last week said they would treat all of the employees with fairness and respect during the transition, which could take up to 18 months. They must take that approach because their endeavor requires a dedicated and enthusiastic workforce for it to be successful, they said. To treat their workforce poorly would be self-defeating. That is sound logic and good business sense.

What the two entities are doing, however, is about more than business. It is about continuing the kind of research that has provided the area world class treatment of cardiovascular illness, cancer and even obesity.

It is about training top notch doctors, nurses and therapists for the future at a cost among the lowest anywhere. And it is about providing health care to tens of thousands of east Carolinians, including those among us who are least able to afford its high cost.

Vidant and ECU for decades have been the health care of last resort for the thousands of poor in the region who have no place else to turn. That in part is what has necessitated the merger.

People who can't pay are numerous, the providers have received less in the way of reimbursement from public and private insurers, and support from state and federal government doesn't fill gaps. ECU in particular has struggled to stay in the black.

Together, the leaders of ECU and Vidant say they can face such challenges more successfully and deliver care in the most cost efficient manner. That does not necessarily mean doing more with less, the leaders said, but service at a greater value will allow them to deliver even better service to more people, which may in turn provide jobs for even more service providers.

Their progress at keeping their promises certainly should be scrutinized, but the history of how well these institutions have buoyed the region should earn them some measure of trust and confidence that they will deliver.

Learn more about local Founding Father

Factoids about Dr. Hugh Williamson, one of the three North Carolina signers of the United States Constitution, and the American Revolution:

"Did you know: That in December of 1773, Dr. Hugh Williamson traveled from Philadelphia to Boston in anticipation of his travel to England, and was present for the planning of the Boston Tea Party and helped organize the Boston Tea Party with its leaders; Samuel Adams, James Otis, and Joseph Warren. On December 16th, the Boston Tea Party occurred. Two to three hundred persons, in dress and appearance like Indians, dumped 340 cases of tea into Boston harbor. Williamson, on his way back to London after witnessing the tea party, was entrusted with several letters to Benjamin Franklin.



WILLIAMSON

Upon his arrival in London in January of 1774, Williamson delivered his account of the Boston Tea Party to Benjamin Franklin, who, as the representative of Massachusetts, was called before the British Privy Council to report.

On February 19, 1774, Williamson was interviewed by Lord Dartmouth of the Privy Council about the Boston Tea Party and other colonial matters."

Information provided by United States District Judge Terrence W. Boyle of the Eastern District of North Carolina.



What has happened to kindergarten?

Most of us remember our early days of school with memories marked by fun: playing tag, using modeling clay, painting, learning the alphabet, taking turns, building with blocks, and simple adding and subtracting.

We worked hard in play based centers like blocks and housekeeping, did lots of singing, went outside for nearly an hour each day, clapped erasers, and used our imaginations to be mail carriers and doctors. In the afternoons, we rested after lunch, painted, played a bit more and headed home. Were those the days? Do I age myself by using that all too familiar phrase?

Perhaps, but if lamenting the loss of best practice in the education of our youngest learners helps the cause, then I am your girl. It's not just an opinion. I've heard folks declare that NC children are up the task and well able to learn to read proficiently in kindergarten, name geometric shapes, espouse the differences between fiction and nonfiction. I don't disagree. After all, three of my four children "passed" kindergarten, though they always started "behind."

Of course, they did. I chose a preschool program that taught the way I had been taught as a child and, as a graduate student, how to teach. Yes, my Masters and PhD quite confirmed that learning through play offers children a long term academic advantage success and so, I followed my gut and best practice. He doesn't know all his letters. I know, I said. He needs help, they said. He's fine, I said. And he was fine and he has turned out exactly how the research said he would.

My precious oldest son, a late reader with dyslexia, was in a reading program in kindergarten. He had played with swords and built with bricks and wet sand in our backyard, not done flashcards. It was no surprise to me that he surpassed the majority of his peers academically by the end of third grade and is now a voracious reader. Play is the main ingredient in creating successful learners, though NC pretends it doesn't matter.

Our General Assembly, the Department of Public Instruction, our state School Board, they point fingers at one another and pretend that all this wonderful early learning equals long term success. I call bullshit. If that's true, then why are NC universities and colleges teaching methodologies based in the literature, much of it born

right in our state?

Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute is one of the foremost research institutions in the country and never have they given their stamp of approval on kindergarten curriculum. I can't speak for them, but as an early childhood researcher, I can speak for myself. Never would anyone with any knowledge of child development sign off the ridiculousness found in goals and objectives today, also called Essential Kindergarten Standards by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, guided by the NC General Assembly and state school board. Today's standards are far different. (Put a few here?)



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Instead, research is ignored and pushed aside and a political agenda is destroying our education system. Programs like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top have left our public schools in shambles, teachers are overwhelmed and frustrated that they can't teach the way their Meredith College, UNC or NCSU professors taught them to teach. They are leaving the teaching field, leaving public schools and parents are homeschooling or choosing private schools. I would like to think it's all a big misunderstanding, but I'm not convinced. There are too many people with knowledge that are going along with the nonsense we call education today and families, school administrators and children are the pawns.

NC will soon have a teacher shortage, yet it's not even a concern. Just last year, only 4% of high school graduates headed to college stated they planned to teach. What will happen? What if public schools collapse? Who wins then? I love my children's school. I love their teachers and principals. They are doing what they are told they have to do. Teach children this way and impart this information, to Hell with best practice.

Test scores are king and so it goes, at least according to DPI. As a mom, I wish things were different. I wish kindergartners took naps and had time to play, learned through play, the work of play. My son Amos has special needs and today's kindergarten is set up in a way that discourages inclusion, though it's not Amos's fault he can't succeed.

No one should not "pass" kindergarten. Now, what are we going to do about it? Edenton's Adrian H. Wood, PhD, a mother of four, writes the blog "Tales of an Educated Debutante."

DC should follow NC lead on shrinking gov't

RALEIGH — For decades, the modern conservative movement, and Republicans as an increasingly conservative party, dedicated themselves to the proposition that government was too large, too costly, and too intrusive into matters best left to voluntary associations to address.

With this unifying principle, American conservatives were largely in consonance with American voters, who have usually (but not always) told pollsters they'd prefer a government that cost less and did fewer things to a government that cost more and did more things.

But for both the general public and conservatives as a subset, advocating a smaller government is easier in general than in specific. They exhibit higher levels of support for particular functions of government, such as education or Social Security, even as they disdain government's overall size and expense.

This isn't inherently irrational. You can believe that, say, preschool or immigration enforcement ought to be a higher priority and get more funding, even as you believe that governmental budgets as a whole ought to be smaller. You can also favor a government function in general — such as assisting the disabled and destitute who truly have no other means of support — while believing that programs ought to be run more efficiently, or targeted more narrowly to the neediest populations.

Still, there are tensions to be reconciled. Those who step forward to



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run for public office are, whether they realize it or not, taking on the responsibility to resolve and reconcile those tensions as much as is possible. If the problem were easy to solve, it wouldn't still be a problem. And if leadership consisted of nothing more than polling every issue and plugging the results into legislative voting machines, it would be more properly called followership — and could easily be automated, freeing up politicians to find more gainful employment elsewhere.

When it comes to acting on fiscally conservative principles, there are important differences between Republican lawmakers in Raleigh and Republican politicians in Washington, D.C.

Since the GOP won majorities in the North Carolina General Assembly in 2010, they've enacted a series of budgets that, while expanding programs in high-priority areas, have consistently held spending growth below the growth rate of the overall economy. A new report from the progressive North Carolina Budget & Tax Center projects that by 2019, state General Fund spending will fall to 4.9 percent of total personal income, down substantially from 2010 and below the 45-year average of 6 percent of personal income.

Conservative analysts have observed the same trend. The difference, obviously, is that we think it's good news while the Left thinks it's bad news.

As it happens, federal expenditures have also fallen since 2010, as

the Great Recession-era bailouts and stimulus came and went. But according to official estimates, the federal budget will average about 22 percent of America's gross domestic product through the end of the decade — still higher than the pre-Great Recession average of 20 percent.

It's certainly true that America's total government spending of about 38 percent is below the likes of Italy (50 percent), France (57 percent), and the Euro zone as a whole (44 percent). But all industrialized countries are headed for grave fiscal problems in the coming years as their populations age. Their politicians have all promised government benefits that simply can't be financed at current tax rates.

In America, Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid are unsustainable in their present form, and yet dominate federal budgeting. The federal government has become "an insurance company with an army," as a former Bush administration official once memorably put it. If Republicans can't manage to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act — which was mostly about expanding Medicaid, not creating private insurance exchanges — then it's hard to see how they'll ever be serious about the measures, such as means-testing pension and Medicare benefits, that will be needed to balance federal budgets in the long run.

In some states, such as North Carolina, conservative lawmakers have shown great courage in acting on their fiscal principles. Washington should follow their lead.

John Hood is chairman of the John Locke Foundation.