



Office of Senate President Pro Tempore Del Marsh  
Press Clips  
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### **Common sense must prevail in Common Core discussion (Times Daily)**

Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal is the latest Republican state leader to attempt to keep Common Core standards out of public schools, reversing his earlier stance in support of the standards. Jindal is a likely contender for the 2016 GOP presidential nomination, and his about face on Common Core is seen by some as a pander to the tea party.

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There is no end, it seems, to tea party paranoia. The far-right's current suspicions are centered on Common Core schools standards for math and English, standards adopted by 40 states in an effort to improve student performance in those areas.

Contrary to what many in the tea party apparently believe, Common Core was not created by the federal government, though President Barack Obama's administration is rewarding states that use the standards. Common Core was created by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers in 2009, and 40 states adopted the standards in 2010, including Alabama.

But as presidential politics heats up, the standards have become the focus of right-wing outrage.

Common core is now the newest example of "federal intrusion" on states' rights.

Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, a Republican, is the latest elected official to rail against the standards. He issued an executive order last week to the state school board to cease using Common Core. The school board members said they intend to ignore the order, and he does not have the backing of Louisiana lawmakers or business leaders.

Ironically, Jindal was an early supporter of Common Core. Like many other governors back in 2010, he saw the wisdom of adopting math and English standards for public schools. The standards, after all, are intended to improve student performance in those areas and give high school graduates better skills with which to compete in a global economy.

Surveys have shown that U.S. students are falling behind their counterparts in other industrialized countries in basic math and science skills.

Where the tea party sees federal intrusion is through Obama's Race to the Top education incentives. After states adopted Common Core, they became eligible for competitive grants to help them achieve reforms and improvements in curriculum.

We can only surmise that Jindal, like some other Republican governors, is angling for votes from a very conservative GOP base.

The tea party has a mixed record so far in this year's Republican primaries as the party struggles to define itself.

Jindal is expected to be an early contender in the 2016 primaries, and reversing his position on Common Core could score some points with the tea party.

Sadly, Jindal and others like him are unwilling to discuss the merits of Common Core, or the open dialogue with supporters and Democrats that could lead to modifications in the standards.

The tea party doesn't tolerate compromise, and any Republican who actually wants to see the country solve some of its problems through dialogue with Democrats is labeled a "liberal" and banished.

If commonsense doesn't prevail in the Common Core discussion, it will be the next generation of young workers and college students who be the losers.

## [Huntsville growing, Montgomery shrinking: a metro-level look at Alabama's latest jobs numbers \(AL.com\)](#)

May was a weak month for Alabama job growth at the statewide level. Employers added roughly 12,000 jobs, the lowest-such reading since late 2012.

But not every Alabama metro struggled with job growth.

In particular, Alabama's biggest college towns posted strong job growth figures in May. In Auburn-Opelika, employers added an estimated 1,700 jobs, and in Tuscaloosa the gain was even greater, at 2,700 jobs. On a percentage basis, both metros grew jobs by nearly 3 percent -- about twice the national rate of growth, and more than 4 times the statewide rate.

The Huntsville area added about 2,000 jobs, good for growth of about 1 percent. Birmingham-Hoover and Florence-Muscle Shoals each added a substantial number of jobs over the past year as well.

A handful of metros saw flat growth. Mobile's jobs total was more or less the same over the past year, as was the case for Gadsden and Dothan.

Other shrank. Montgomery and Decatur each may have shed jobs over the past year, based on the latest estimate for each economy, although their losses were slight. The Anniston-Oxford metro lost 1,500 jobs, a decline of more than 3 percent.

If you split the metros into two groups, the numbers are a bit easier to read. In Birmingham-Hoover, Huntsville, Tuscaloosa, Auburn-Opelika, Florence-Muscle Shoals, and Gadsden, jobs grew by a combined 1 percent. In Mobile, Montgomery, Dothan, Decatur, and Anniston-Oxford, job growth was essentially zero.

See the table below for full detail.

Metro area	May-14	May-13	Jobs added, #	Jobs added, %
Tuscaloosa	99.1	96.4	2.7	2.8%
Birmingham-Hoover	511.5	508.8	2.7	0.5%
Huntsville	217.1	215	2.1	1.0%
Auburn-Opelika	59.4	57.7	1.7	2.9%
Florence-Muscle Shoals	56.3	55.2	1.1	2.0%
Gadsden	37.2	36.9	0.3	0.8%
Dothan	57.2	57	0.2	0.4%
Mobile	174.3	174.2	0.1	0.1%

Montgomery	169.2	169.5	-0.3	-0.2%
Decatur	54.4	54.8	-0.4	-0.7%
Anniston-Oxford	45.1	46.6	-1.5	-3.2%

## **Meet the Alabama senator whose dire economic predications appear to be coming true (Yellowhammer News)**

By: Tom Saunders, General Counsel and Director of Government Affairs, Alabama Forestry Association

June 2015 is one year away and the clock is ticking.

Why is this date important? It's the date that the Education Rainy Day Fund must, by constitutional mandate, be repaid.

Six years ago, Gov. Bob Riley drained this account to the tune of \$437.4 million in order to lessen the impact of proration on the education budget.

Why did he have to do that? Frankly, because of poor fiscal management by the Alabama legislature, which was controlled by Democrats at the time. They knew when they passed that year's education appropriations bill that there was not going to be sufficient revenue to pay for it. But they went ahead and did it anyway out of political expediency.

They had gotten so used to the Federal Government bailing them out with "stimulus" money that they couldn't help themselves.

So fast forward to today, and get ready for some numbers.

We have repaid \$274.8 million to the Rainy Day Fund, but we still owe a balance of \$162.6 million, which again, must be repaid by June 2015 — one short year away.

For the current fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30, the education appropriations bill includes an "absolute appropriation" of \$35 million to repay the fund, and a "conditional appropriation" of \$65 million.

Conditional appropriations are essentially line items in the State's budget that will be paid on the condition that there are funds still available after all the "absolute" appropriations have been covered.

If Alabama's revenues exceed the amount of money needed for "absolute appropriations," and the State is below the spending "cap" created by the Rolling Reserve Act (which we are for FY14), then the difference is spent on the conditional appropriations set forth in the bill.

So how much is going to be leftover at the end of FY14? Good question. It depends on how well the economy performs.

The Legislative Fiscal Office (LFO) estimated during the debate over the education appropriations bill that Alabama's economy would experience 3.5% growth this year. That would give us a budget surplus of around \$100 million, plenty of funds to pay both the \$35 million absolute appropriation and the \$65 million conditional appropriation, and thus leave the need for a \$62 million absolute appropriation in the FY15 bill.

The governor's office predicted that the economy would grow even faster than LFO was estimating, which would lead to an even greater surplus and only require a \$35 million absolute appropriation in the FY15 appropriations bill to make the Rainy Day Fund whole.

This week, unfortunately, the Federal Reserve sharply reduced its forecast for U.S. economic growth down to a paltry 2%, a far cry from the numbers mentioned above.

Among Alabama's 140 legislators, there was one principal voice of reason that opposed the overly-optimistic scenarios.

Sen. Tripp Pittman (R-Montrose), Chairman of the Senate's Education Trust Fund Committee, adamantly opposed anything short of a \$62 million absolute appropriation. He fought for it on the Senate floor, even as legislator after legislator made the argument that massive economic growth was just right around the corner.

The House passed its bill with only \$27.5 million appropriated to pay back the Rainy Day Fund. The Senate, thanks in large part to Sen. Pittman's prevailing leadership, passed its bill with the full \$62 million.

Unfortunately, when the conference committee of House and Senate members met to reconcile the differences between their bills, Sen. Pittman was only one of six conferees on the committee. As a result, the final bill only had a \$35 million absolute repayment for FY15.

So now, without the previously anticipated economic growth, the State of Alabama is projected to come up at least \$27 million short on its constitutionally-mandated commitment to repay the Rainy Day Fund, and that's assuming that the conditional appropriation of \$65 million is fully funded. Remember, LFO was anticipating a 3.5% growth rate for that to occur, but the Fed is now projecting a 2% growth rate for the rest of the year.

June 2015.

It's coming fast.

Where will the money come from?

The legislature will most likely have to pass a "supplemental appropriations bill" during the next legislative session to repay the money. In order to do that, they will have to violate the Rolling Reserve Act, which was originally passed to require the legislature to exercise fiscal restraint.

Is this a fiscal crisis? No. The problem will ultimately be solved. But it will be a messy solution that looks like it will require the legislature to blast through spending caps.

All the more reason to pass a bill to make the Rolling Reserve Act a constitutional provision.

## **[Gov. Robert Bentley announces changes on staff \(AL.com\)](#)**

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- Gov. Robert Bentley is making changes on his staff, filling vacancies and moving some people to other positions, according to Jennifer Ardis, Bentley's director of communications.

Former state Rep. Blaine Galliher, who had been Bentley's legislative director, will move to the position of senior advisor.

Ross Gunnells will replace Galliher as legislative director.

Gunnells had been the governor's House legislative liaison.

Wesley Helton, who had been the governor's aide-de-camp, or travel assistant, replaces Gunnells as House liaison.

Jonathan Barganier, who had been the governor's Senate legislative liaison, will become the deputy chief of staff for policy, which had been a vacant position.

Derek Trotter replaces Barganier as Senate liaison. Trotter had worked on the staff of Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh.

Blake Hardwich will serve as Bentley's deputy chief of staff for administration, a new position, beginning July 7. Hardwich comes to the governor's staff from Manufacture Alabama. She will oversee scheduling, appointments and general administrative functions.

Jake Jacobs, a recent graduate of Auburn University, will replace Helton as aide-de-camp.

Jared White will become the governor's education policy advisor effective July 14. White replaces Emily Schultz, who left the position last year. White is finishing up his work on a doctorate in higher education at Auburn University, Ardis said.

Daniel Sparkman takes over as digital media coordinator in the governor's press office, replacing Kelley Lee, who left in January.

## **[Can gambling be a winning issue for a long-shot Democrat? \(AL.com\)](#)**

Two weeks ago I wrote that Democratic gubernatorial candidate Parker Griffith should forget all that lottery talk and focus on Gov. Robert Bentley's jobs performance on job-creation.

Now, I'm not so sure.

And last Wednesday I wrote that some GOP leaders -- specifically Gov. Bentley, Alabama House Speaker Mike Hubbard and state Senate Pro Tem Del Marsh -- seemed to be softening on the lottery issue. My read of the tea leaves was because the state is facing a budget crunch, not because of stronger support for gambling.

AL.COM OPINION

About the writer

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Now it's my turn to soften like an ice cream cone in an Alabama summer.

Last Thursday, I ran a reader survey on AL.com in which I asked readers to share their views on different types of gambling and whether Alabama should legalize any of them. In particular, I focused on the lottery and casinos.

No, the survey was not scientific, but the respondents were pretty close to where Alabama falls on the partisan divide, maybe even a little more conservative. More than 4,700 readers filled out the survey, and yes, there were protections on our end against anyone rigging the system.

I figured going into it, that there was probably support for a lottery. Even when the lottery failed in 1999, the state was pretty closely divided. Since then, my Spidey Sense has always told me that if Alabama had a do-over, things might turn out differently.

But I wasn't expecting support to be so completely overwhelming.

A few of the results:

Of the more than 4,700 responses, 89 percent said they would vote for a lottery if it appeared on the ballot.

Of the more than 3,000 respondents who said that they more often identified with the Republican Party of the two major political parties, 85 percent said they would vote for a lottery.

Another 71 percent of the total respondents said they supported legalizing a state-run lottery and regulated casinos.

Only 5 percent of the respondents said that gambling should be illegal.

Personally, I've never been hot on the lottery. The best trick the gambling industry ever pulled was convincing the public the only way to pay for education is through gambling. We could just pay for education.

**Parker Griffith: It's time to revisit the lottery**

Democratic gubernatorial candidate Parker Griffith says that Alabama has seen what the lottery can do for surrounding states and it's time to revisit the issue here to fund education.



A bumper sticker I saw once put it more succinctly as I ever could: A lottery is a tax on people who are bad at math. The few times I've played the lottery -- yes, the Georgia lottery -- I've been a little afraid of all the crow I would have to eat if I had won.

And as for vices, I've never felt comfortable with sin taxes because I think they send the wrong message to the public: It's only bad for you if the government isn't getting a cut.

But I'm not here to change anyone's mind on gambling, because that's not a fight I'm going to win. If survey is even in the right ballpark, Alabamians are ready to roll the dice.

Is it more likely that Republicans are softening because the state needs the money, or because voters want to legalize gambling now?

Maybe both.

And can Parker Griffith persuade voters to support a Democrat with the lottery as his signature issue?

Perhaps we'll find out in November.

## **[Even Ole Miss wants it Built by Bama \(Yellowhammer News\)](#)**

Birmingham, Alabama-based construction juggernaut BL Harbert International will build the University of Mississippi's new \$68.9 million arena, according to a statement released by the university on Monday.

The 230,000-square-foot arena will host 9,600 fans for basketball games. Construction is set to begin immediately and will be completed in late 2015, in time for the 2016 season. This will be the second SEC arena BL Harbert has constructed in recent years. They completed Auburn University's new facility in 2010.

Rendering of the proposed new Ole Miss Arena (Photo: Ole Miss)

Rendering of the proposed new Ole Miss Arena (Photo: Ole Miss)

AECOM of Kansas City, Missouri is the architect for the project. They previously designed the FedEx Forum in Memphis and CenturyLink Field in Seattle.

"We are honored to build a marquee project for Ole Miss that will have a lasting impact on a college campus and its students for the next 50 years," said Gary Savage, BL Harbert's president of U.S. operations. "BL Harbert looks forward to working with AECOM and the University in providing the students with another great SEC Arena."

The arena is the centerpiece of the Ole Miss's recently launched Forward Together campaign, a multi-stage initiative to expand and update the university's athletics facilities. It will include a private student concourse, courtside and baseline seating for students, three premium club areas for fans, and over 1,700 premium seats, all within an intimate seating bowl.

The arena will also include a five story parking garage with 800 spaces that will service the entire campus community.

(Photo: Ole Miss)

(Photo: Ole Miss)

"The placement of the arena is a long-term decision and will allow us to further enhance our athletics complex – better connecting athletics to the heart of the best campus in higher education," the university explains on its Forward Together website. "This centralized location will create an impressive 'front door' for Ole Miss Athletics and a destination point not only on a game day – but every day of the week."

BL Harbert is a privately owned construction company with U.S. and International operations providing pre-construction, construction, design-build and construction management services. It is currently building across the U.S. and in twelve countries around the world. The company reported \$732 million in revenues last year.

## **[10 reasons why Southern health care is nation's biggest challenge \(AL.com\)](#)**

In a recently updated report, Kaiser Family Foundation slices and dices Southern style health care.

The numbers point to the country's most challenging region for delivering quality health care to its people.

Here are 10 reasons why:

Nearly 4 million adults in the South fall into the coverage gap -- making too much money to qualify for Medicaid but not enough to qualify for a subsidy under the Affordable Care Act. The South accounts for 79 percent of 4.8 million people nationwide in the gap.

The South has a larger share of hospital patients who are uninsured than other regions. Seven percent of patients in the South are uninsured, compared to 5 percent in the Northeast, 4 percent in the West, and 3 percent in the Midwest.

A majority of states with the highest obesity rates are in the South.

States in the South have among the highest infant mortality rates in the country.

Most southern states require doctor involvement for nurse practitioners to diagnose treat and prescribe. Nationwide 18 states allow no physician oversight, 7 states require oversight to prescribe and the rest, many in the south, require complete physician oversight.

People in the South are more likely than those in other regions to visit the emergency department for chronic conditions such as hypertension, diabetes without complications and pulmonary heart disease. For example the South saw 5,183 visits per 100,000 population for hypertension, while the West saw 3,501 visits per 100,000.

The majority of states with the highest rates of adult diabetes are in the South.

Southern states have among the highest cancer-related death rates.

Adults in the South are more likely than those in other regions to report difficulty accessing needed services.

Some 22 percent of Southerners reside in areas identified by the government as having a primary health care shortage. Compare that to 9 percent in the Northeast.

Kaiser uses census regions for its comparisons. In this case, the southern region consists of 17 states from Texas to Delaware. For more overall information on the region, fact sourcing and for other data sets go here.

## **[Montgomery VA falsified patient records, report says \(Montgomery Advertiser\)](#)**

WASHINGTON – A pulmonologist at the Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System falsified records of at least 1,200 patients, according to a new investigative report sent to the White House on Monday.

The incident is part of a larger, troubling pattern in which Veterans Affairs managers deny that errors uncovered by whistleblowers have compromised patients' health, the U.S. Office of Special Counsel reported.

"This approach has prevented the VA from acknowledging the severity of systemic problems and from taking the necessary steps to provide quality care to veterans," Carolyn Lerner, head of the U.S. Office of Special Counsel, said in a six-page letter to President Barack Obama.

The letter mentions 10 cases, including one involving the VA facility in Montgomery, in which the VA's conclusions contradict its own investigative findings. The Office of Special Counsel has more than 50 cases pending, 29 of which have been referred to the VA for further investigation.

Rep. Martha Roby, R-Montgomery, has asked VA whistleblowers to step forward and provide information about conditions at the Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System.

"How can anyone think that falsifying more than 1,200 pulmonary records does not endanger patient health?" Roby asked Monday. "What good is a 'watchdog' if they are just going to downplay such obviously egregious behavior?"

According to the Office of Special Counsel, an independent federal agency that helps protect whistleblowers, the VA pulmonologist in Montgomery copied old "provider notes to represent current readings," which likely resulted in "inaccurate patient health information being recorded."

The VA's Office of the Medical Inspector confirmed the Montgomery whistleblower's allegations but said it could not substantiate whether the fraud endangered patient health, according to the letter.

"Too frequently, the VA has failed to use information from whistleblowers to identify and address systemic concerns that impact patient care," Lerner wrote.

A spokesman for the the Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System in Montgomery said system officials accepted the special counsel's findings and are awaiting a final report due in two weeks. William Petty said he did not have any information on when the patient records were falsified. The pulmonologist responsible is still employed at the VA, the Associated Press reported.

Lerner has recommended that new top officials at the VA review their process for responding to whistleblowers and designate a high-level official to assess her conclusions and recommendations.

"I am deeply disappointed not only in the substantiation of allegations raised by whistleblowers, but also in the failures within VA to take whistleblower complaints seriously," Acting VA Secretary Sloan Gibson said Monday.

Gibson said there will be a review of the Office of Medical Inspector's operation, which will include "consideration of personnel actions."

The Office of Special Counsel's findings are the latest addition to problems at the VA that have enraged Congress and the American public, including long wait times for veterans to get medical care and fraudulent attempts to hide appointment backlogs.

"In the fantasy land inhabited by VA's Office of the Medical Inspector, serious patient safety issues apparently have no impact on patient safety," said Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee. "It's impossible to solve problems by whitewashing them or denying they exist."

## **[Report: SACS issues warning to Alabama State University for multiple violations \(AL.com\)](#)**

- The accrediting agency SACS has placed Alabama State University on warning for failing to comply with six accrediting standards, the Montgomery Advertiser reports.

[Related: SACS inquiry an example of false accusations causing 'substantial harm,' Alabama State says]

The citations initiate a six-month warning period after which the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, which accredits all universities in the South, will conduct a follow-up visit at ASU.

[Related: Alabama State University responds to SACS inquiry: 'This has been a year from hell,' president says]

The citations included four conflicts of interest among ASU board of trustees members, a federal violation related to student-aid funds, financial instability, and inadequate financial and sponsored-research controls, according to the Advertiser.

[Related: Alabama Attorney General's office to lead Alabama State University audit]

SACS initiated a formal inquiry against Alabama State in November after Gov. Robert Bentley's office initiated a forensic audit at the request of former ASU President Joseph Silver.

[Related: Alabama State University still investigating allegations it wasted more than \$1 million on fumbled Medicaid Contract]

The audit's preliminary findings alleged board member Marvin Wiggins and Elton Dean had improperly secured jobs at ASU for family and friends, though they denied those charges. It also alleged ASU mismanaged a Medicaid-research contract, costing the school more than \$1 million.

[Related: Moody's further downgrades Alabama State University credit rating]

As a result of the investigation, Moody's Investors Service has downgraded the school's bond rating, stating that the school's inability or unwillingness to significantly cut operating expenses was a sign of weak governance.

It also noted several "extraordinary events" it said distract from normal university operations, including the forensic audit, ASU's pending lawsuit against the auditor, a recently concluded sexual harassment lawsuit involving the office of former ASU Chief Operating Officer John Knight, and inquiries from the university's accreditor related to the audit.