

North Georgia News

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Two UCHS seniors earn STAR Student honors

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Union County High School Class of 2025 has two new STARs in Gunnar Ingram and Turner West, who are tied for highest GPA in their class.

The seniors received schoolwide STAR Student recognition with an intercom announcement on Jan. 23 after they informed their chosen STAR Teachers, Howard McCombs and Dixie Conger, of their victory.

STAR is a program of the Professional Association of Georgia Educators, or PAGE, sponsored at the local level by the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce. STAR stands for Student Teacher Achievement Recognition – a prestigious accomplishment, to be sure.

“To be nominated as a

STAR, Georgia high school students meet several criteria, including having the highest SAT score at their schools on any single test date through November of their senior year and being in the Top 10% or Top 10 students of their class based on grade point average,” per PAGE.

When Turner West reflects on the kind of student he’s been over the years, he sees definite growth. He admits that, in the past, he wasn’t the best test-taker, but he overcame his anxiety by working hard. Indeed, he believes that earning STAR Student isn’t just about good grades.

Gunnar Ingram agrees that persistence pays off. He finds that working toward his goals is all the motivation he needs to reach them. School itself was always something he enjoyed; he can remember

being so excited about attending that, in middle school, he made a routine of setting out his clothes the night before.

“It’s not about the test scores but just making sure you get the information down and trying to put your all into it,” Ingram said as West nodded in affirmation.

Both think that it’s not just the studies one pursues, but the people around them – whether that means getting involved in extracurricular activities or turning to teachers for advice.

According to the PAGE Foundation, a high school STAR Student is asked to name a STAR Teacher who has had an outsized impact on his or her educational career.

In terms of teachers who have made their school years worthwhile, West said that Conger played a vital role in



L-R: Chamber President Steve Rowe, STAR Student Turner West, STAR Student Gunnar Ingram and STAR Teacher Howard McCombs. STAR Teacher Dixie Conger could not attend the Jan. 23 school announcement.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

how he envisions his future. “I chose Mrs. Conger because I’m eventually going to major in biological science at (the University of Georgia), and I want to go into the dental field,” West said. “I feel like she’s taught me and prepared See STAR Students, Page 2A

Ex-TCSO deputy accused of lying in shooting case

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Former Towns County Sheriff’s Deputy Austin Bradburn was arrested last week for allegedly lying to investigators about the December shooting that sent him to Northeast Georgia Medical Center in Gainesville with a bullet hole in his leg.

He was reportedly shot around 2 a.m. on Friday, Dec. 13, in Young Harris. He told the Georgia Bureau of Investigation that he and a driver from a traffic stop on Plottown Road got into a struggle over his handgun that caused the injurious discharge before the suspect drove away.

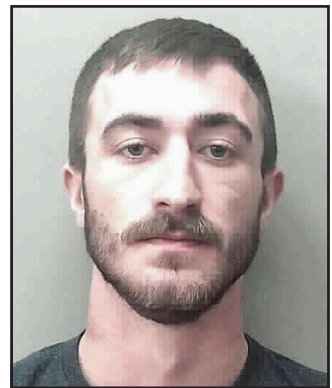
But the GBI, which routinely investigates officer-involved shootings around the state, has now accused Bradburn of falsely reporting what happened, resulting in 10 criminal charges being filed against him in three county jurisdictions.

“The GBI conducted a thorough and independent investigation which revealed information to support the charges against Bradburn,” according to a GBI news release from Jan. 21, the day of his arrest.

Per his Towns County arrest warrants, which include misdemeanor false report of a crime and felony violation of oath by a public officer, Bradburn’s testimony about the incident “was later refuted by his patrol car’s laptop GPS data and other evidence obtained” in the investigation.

Bradburn is also facing charges in Union County, where he lives, and in Hall County, where he received medical treatment. He is alleged to have made false statements to GBI in both counties over the course of the investigation, in turn violating his oath as a deputy.

The GBI did not note in its news release what aspects of Bradburn’s testimony are believed to be false, and GBI



Austin Bradburn
Towns County Jail

Region 8 Special Agent in Charge Kim Williams said, “The release is all we are putting out.”

Many unanswered questions remain about what exactly happened on the side of Plottown Road Dec. 13, such as who is responsible for injuring Bradburn, but the GBI has declined to comment on what it believes took place the morning of the shooting.

See Bradburn Arrested, Page 6A

Parents claim students, mother harassed at school

By Shawn Jarrard
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Five people signed up for public comment at the Jan. 23 regular meeting of the Union County School Board, including Simon and Naveela Philbeck, who alleged a pattern of discrimination against their daughters and professional retaliation by Superintendent John Hill for reporting it.

“I’m here to speak on behalf of my young children who attend Union County Schools and were targeted by a teacher at the Primary School,” Naveela said. “This teacher targeted them after learning that our children did not share his faith.

“The teacher, over the course of the last four years, repeatedly targeted my daughters by engaging in inappropriate religious conversations, suggested they will not go to heaven, and then learned I had filed a complaint See Harassment Claims, Page 12A



Naveela Philbeck leveled accusations of discrimination and retaliation at Union County Schools, pictured here with her husband Simon in last week’s School Board meeting.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

School Board celebrates students, discusses snow impacts

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Union County Board of Education members and Board Office staff acknowledged student success and vital school partnerships in their first regular meeting of 2025 on Thursday, Jan. 23.

To start, UCMS seventh-grader Sadie Cochran received recognition for having been chosen in a competitive process to be the featured artist on the School System’s 2024 holiday card, which was mailed to more than 200 people in the county.

Cochran painted a lovely mountain snow scene of a deer with a cardinal to wish everyone a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

Next, the 2024 UCHS Softball Team was given major kudos for having a successful season that ended in a Sixth-Place finish in the AA State Tournament.

“They had an incredible season – they fought very hard all year,” Athletic Director Mandy Hunter said. “They started off strong and it got kind of rocky through the middle, but they definitely came together at the end when it counted in a crunch time.” Softball players receiving

certificates that evening were: seniors Lily Collins, Sloane Dyer, Lily Helton, Reese Kelley, Jordane Mullanack, Mikala Southern; juniors Peyton Grisham, Ayla Jamison, Zady Ludlum, Delaney Moses, Jade Passmore, Jaslyn Roberts; sophomores Ella Akins, Izzy Anthros, Jules Dyer; and freshmen Stella Collins, Lexi Davenport, Alani Gibson, Leighton Hunter, Kensley Payne and Addison Whitener.

Softball coaches were also recognized: Robby Roxbury, Kaitlyn Payne, Wade Hodges and Laken Boyett.

For its Partners in Education Awards, the board welcomed North Georgia Technical College Blairsville Campus Director Matthew Mashburn, as well as University of North Georgia Blue Ridge Campus Director Sandy Ott and Assistant Director of Academic Advising and Achievement Suzanne Jabaley. A Young Harris College representative was unable to attend.

“I wanted to talk about these folks, they are representative of our closest colleges, our Partners in Education that we work with,” School Director of Teaching and Learning CT Hussion said. “They’re on our College



The 2024 UCHS Softball Team and Coaching Staff were celebrated in last week’s School Board meeting for their hard work this season.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

& Career Academy Board; they’ve been there since the very beginning and helped us get that going. They send student teachers to us all the time.”

Showcasing the impact of these partnering post-secondary institutions, Hussion asked people in attendance to stand up if they or their child

had taken a dual enrollment course at Union County High, and at least half the room stood.

“We really appreciate everything that you all do – we couldn’t do it without you,” said Hussion, to which Superintendent John Hill added, “Anytime we call these guys, they answer the phone, they help us. They will move

mountains for our children, and we truly appreciate you so much.”

Moving along, Hill spoke about the challenges of the extended school closure associated with the Jan. 10 snowstorm, adding that he had heard very positive feedback from parents who took advantage from the optional

day on campus Jan. 17.

“I just want to reiterate that I appreciate the grace that parents have shown us,” Hill said. “When we make these decisions ... I want you to know the level of ownership and thought we put into making a weather-related decision.

“Because your children See School Board, Page 6A



Vol. 116 No. 06

Arrests - 9A Legals - 8B
Church - 5B Obits - 6B
Classifieds - 8B Sports - 2B
Opinion - 4A

Rabies Update from District 2 Public Health

See Page 2A

NASCAR Race Schedule for 2025 Season

See Page 1B

Western North Carolina Relief Drive Jan. 31

See Page 5B



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STAR Students..from Page 1A

me well for my career in life and eventually becoming what I want to be.”

For her part, Conger said West was a “truly wonderful young man,” ever willing to help others – a diligent and hard-working student who “is always actively listening and participating in each lesson.”

“Turner is one of the most respectful students I’ve had the opportunity to teach,” Conger said. “Over his past four years at UCHS, I’ve witnessed Turner time and time again exhibit genuine acts of integrity and honesty.”

McCombs describes Ingram, in a word, as “driven.” Diligent and self-motivated, Ingram never seems to have a problem getting his work done insofar as McCombs has seen, and in fact finds the time to manage his own business while maintaining his studies.

It helps that McCombs’ business and entrepreneurship class offers Ingram a way to practice his endeavors. McCombs has noticed that Ingram uses what he learns in class to reinforce what he does outside of school, and in turn brings insight to the table as a budding businessman.

Still, he wasn’t expecting Ingram to choose him when it came time to pick a teacher who has made a major difference in

his life.

“CTAE teachers are not typically at the top of the food chain for STAR Teacher; I was very, very surprised and grateful, and it means a lot to me,” McCombs said with a humble smile. For what it’s worth, Ingram views McCombs as going above and beyond teaching, and readily refers to him as a leader.

As mentioned previously, West hopes to graduate from UGA, which he chose for its campus environment, before going on to dental school. As for his career of choice, he credits his experience shadowing an oral and maxillofacial surgeon last summer.

“I have no doubt that Turner’s future will be a bright and successful one,” Conger said. “I wish him the absolute best as he continues his education and begins his career. However, my biggest

hope is that he enjoys his time along the way and continues to make positive impacts to those around him.”

Ingram will be attending UGA as well. He expressed a desire to earn a bachelor’s or master’s degree in business and possibly minor in nutritional, exercise or clinical science. Thanks to his media business, Ingram Productions, and McCombs’ class, he’s discovered a love for business and helping other people.

As the Class of 2025’s new STARs ready themselves for exciting new chapters, they both had some advice for younger students who will eventually rise to take their place.

“Work hard in school (and) do what you like, most importantly,” suggested West. “There’s things that you (miss) out on, but in the long run, it’s going to be worth it.”

“Do the hard work first,” was Ingram’s bottom line, though he added also that one should

always be true to themselves. “If you have many assignments, and there’s one you’re really ... scared or have anxiety about, go ahead and get it out of the way. Don’t push it off, don’t wait until the last second.”

Along with their family and STAR Teachers, both young men want to credit STEM Advisor Alecia Frizzell with their success, along with Mrs. April Krieger and Coach Kelly.

“It’s a big honor; I’m very happy,” said West of his achievement, while Ingram said of himself, “It means a lot – definitely the defining achievement of high school so far.”

The two STAR Students and STAR Teachers will receive formal recognition at the annual Evening with the STARs Banquet set for Thursday, Feb. 13, at 6 p.m. inside the Community Center, where other high-achieving students from Union County High and Woody Gap School will be recognized as well.

Structural Fire Control Course

Union County Fire Department would like to congratulate Firefighters Morgan Schmidt and Kyle Mead on their completion of the 16-hour Structural Fire Control course.

This course is designed to give firefighters the basic knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to control and extinguish structural fires. Students participated in firefighting drills at all stages of fire progress and learned to recognize the various fire conditions and dangers associated with interior structural firefighting. Practical drills included a live fire demonstration of fire behavior, single room drills, and multiple room drills.

“Structural fire control training is the backbone of a fire department’s readiness—



Morgan Schmidt

equipping firefighters with the skills, strategy, and confidence to face the most intense challenges and protect lives, property, and their fellow crew. We are proud of FF Morgan Schmidt and FF Kyle Mead



Kyle Mead

for their dedication and excellence in this critical training,” said Union County Fire Chief David Dyer.

Union County Fire Department ~Our Family Protecting Your Family~

River City Bank supports Technology Students

The Union County High School Georgia Technology Student Association (TSA) is a group of students who consistently distinguish themselves as aspiring technologists in the areas of science, technology, engineering and math. These students often become successful inventors, entrepreneurs, designers, and creative problem solvers.

“The dedication of the students participating in TSA is remarkable. They are very bright and have a wonderful future ahead of them. We are proud to support their efforts,” said Scott Nanney, Market President for River City Bank, Blairsville.

Union County High School has participated in TSA for more than ten years. Students involved in the STEM program, which concentrates on science, technology, engineering, and math, have the opportunity to excel in TSA as they challenge themselves, collaborate with peers, and showcase their talents. TSA conferences consist of state and national level competitions which involve projects



Union County High School Technology Student Association members, Turner West and Mikala Southern, receive the sponsorship check from River City Bank.

centered around programs like cybersecurity, coding, electric vehicles, vex robotics, manufacturing prototype, structural engineering, flight, data science, analytics, engineering design, digital video production, and software development.

River City Bank is a very proud supporter of the students in our community, and we enjoy celebrating their successes both inside and outside of the classroom. Way to

go, Panthers!

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Rabies Update in District 2 Public Health: Precautions to Protect Yourself and Your Pets



There have been two recent accounts of rabies in District 2. On January 8th, a raccoon in Franklin County tested positive for rabies after a dog was exposed. A second case on January 13th involved a raccoon that tested positive in Dawson County and exposed two dogs and their owner to the virus. Because rabies incidents occur in our area, it is crucial to take precautions to prevent infection.

Rabies is a fatal, but preventable virus that primarily affects wild mammals, including raccoons, skunks, bats, and foxes in Georgia. It spreads to other wild animals, pets, livestock, or humans, through bites, scratches, or exposure to the saliva of an infected animal. It can also spread if saliva from an infected animal enters the mucous membranes such as eyes or nose of another animal or human. Once contracted, the virus spreads to the brain, causing inflammation that is usually fatal once symptoms appear. However, if treatment is sought immediately after exposure, rabies can be treated effectively.

Preventative Measures: Protect yourself, pets, and children with the CDC guidelines and more below.

Ensure your pets and livestock have received the

most current rabies vaccination.

Seek medical care promptly if you suspect potential rabies exposure.

Avoid interacting with wild or unfamiliar animals. If you find an injured animal, refrain from feeding or attempting to help it.

Encourage children to “love your own, leave other animals alone” as the Georgia Department of Public Health recommends.

If you feed your pets outdoors, remove any leftover food to prevent attracting wild animals.

If you believe you’ve been exposed to rabies, clean any wounds with soap and water and seek medical care immediately. Rabies post-exposure prophylaxis is a highly effective treatment if administered quickly after exposure. It includes a vaccine series that is serviced at all major hospitals in District 2. Your local Environmental Health Office has information regarding vaccine access programs. If untreated, the virus is almost always fatal.

In humans, symptoms vary but may include fever, headache, and general malaise. As the virus progresses, symptoms of brain damage (encephalopathy) may develop, such as insomnia, anxiety, confusion, paralysis, hallucinations, excessive salivation and more. Once symptoms manifest, rabies is almost always fatal within a few days.

A common myth is that animals that drool or have foam at the mouth are always

rabid. In reality, these symptoms may not appear until the later stages of the disease. Infected animals may display behaviors such as restlessness, aggression, trouble walking, or seeming unusually friendly. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has rigid regulations that prohibit the keeping of wild animals. If you see a wild animal acting strangely, avoid the animal and contact the DNR Ranger Hotline at: 1-800-241-4113.

Environmental Health officials become involved in cases where exposure or potential exposure to rabies occurs. Their role is to ensure that domestic animals are vaccinated against rabies and to ensure the public is educated and informed about rabies. In many counties, Environmental Health is also responsible for collecting specimens from suspected rabid animals and coordinating testing of the specimen with the state lab. Additionally, Environmental Health officials notify individuals who have been exposed to risks and inform them of the need to seek medical care. The disease is tracked through Georgia’s disease surveillance system, and officials may collaborate with Animal Control to ensure public safety.

Ensure your pets are vaccinated for rabies today to prevent future exposure. To learn more about rabies prevention and treatment, visit: <https://phdistrict2.org/environmental-health/7/> and <https://dph.georgia.gov/environmental-health/rabies>.

Bradburn Arrested...from Page 1A

The charges, which SAC Williams said were “self-explanatory” following a media inquiry, do not appear to address what happened in the shooting but instead highlight what authorities believe did not happen, namely, the version of events Bradburn provided to investigators.

Regarding the Dec. 13-announced hunt for an unidentified suspect wanted in the aggravated assault as described by Bradburn, SAC Williams said last week: “We are not searching for anyone.”

Given the nature of the charges involving the false report of a crime and the fact that the GBI is no longer searching for a suspect in the case, the newspaper asked Williams if the investigation had determined whether Bradburn was alone at the time of the shooting.

“We have no information to support the presence of another party,” Williams said the day after Bradburn’s arrest.

Bradburn was booked into the detention centers of Towns, Union and Hall counties over about nine hours between the afternoon of Tuesday, Jan. 21, and early morning Wednesday, Jan. 22, according to the respective Sheriff’s Offices.

The GBI arrested the former deputy at his home in Blairsville that Tuesday, taking him to the Towns County Jail for booking at 3:20 p.m. under the misdemeanor and felony charges listed above.

Bradburn made his \$3,000 bond shortly after 6 p.m. on Jan. 21, and the Towns County Sheriff’s Office transported him to the Union County Jail for booking there under two felony counts of making false statements and two felony counts of violation of oath by a public officer.

He posted his \$7,000 bond in Union County later that evening, after which the Union County Sheriff’s Office drove him to the Hall County Jail in Gainesville, where he was booked in after midnight under the same felony charges filed in Union County.

According to his Hall County booking info, because Bradburn is a former law

enforcement officer, jailers there housed him separately from the general population until his release, and he subsequently made his \$18,900 bond a little before 11 a.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 22.

The Towns County Sheriff’s Office terminated Bradburn’s employment on Dec. 20, 2024, about a month before his arrest; he was a Towns County deputy for roughly two and a half months, having taken his oath of office in early October 2024.

TCSO declined to comment on the reason for his termination, citing confidentiality around personnel matters, but the decision came a week after the GBI began investigating the shooting, and the day after two consecutive days of alleged false statements eventually charged by GBI.

Immediately prior to his TCSO employment, Bradburn served as a deputy in the Union County Sheriff’s Office.

UCSO said Bradburn began working as a jailer on June 7, 2022, and that he became a deputy on Sept. 25, 2023. On Sept. 17, 2024, Bradburn resigned from his position for personal reasons after being confronted with off-duty conduct.

No further information was provided regarding his employment at the Union County Sheriff’s Office, which cited personnel matters.

As highlighted in area media, Bradburn was maintaining his innocence following his arrest, and he is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

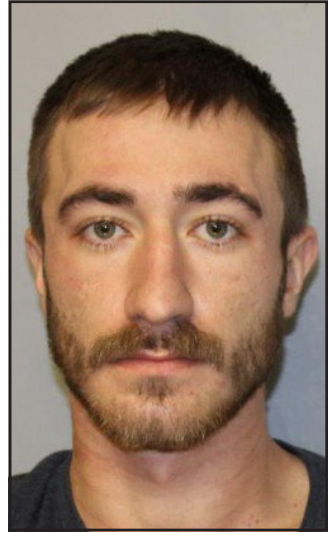
In terms of next steps in the case, Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney Jeff Langley said he could potentially seek indictments during the January terms of the of the Union County and Towns County Grand Juries, which continue through June.

“It’s a pending case,” Langley said. “I can’t make further comment on it other than what is within the warrants. Probable cause was found. He’s been arrested in each of the counties. The GBI is continuing their investigation.”

“Once that investigation



**Austin Bradburn
Union County Jail**



**Austin Bradburn
Hall County Jail**

is completed, we’ll review that and make decisions about grand jury presentations.”

“This investigation is active and ongoing,” per the GBI. “Anyone with information is encouraged to call Towns County 911 or the GBI Tipline at 800-597-TIPS (8477), online at <https://gbi.georgia.gov/submit-tips-online>, or by downloading the See Something, Send Something mobile application.”

Reportedly, investigators are looking into a GoFundMe account that may have been set up by a third party to assist Bradburn after the shooting. It was not known at press time if he authorized the creation of the account or accessed any of the funds raised. The fundraiser is now inactive.

School Board...from Page 1A

... are the most important things that we have, and we have to keep them safe at all times. But we’ve got to balance that with getting them in school, getting them educated, getting them fed, keeping them warm and taking care of them.”

During the closures, the School Transportation Department purchased and installed a scrape blade on one of its trucks to help clear campuses, and maintenance employees dealt with a busted water pipe at the Union County Primary School amid extended subfreezing temperatures.

Director of Accountability and Compliance Dr. David Murphy gave an update on the nearly complete accreditation process through Cognia. He noted that the accreditation nonprofit is so impressed with Union County Schools that it wants to send staff here to take notes on how the local CTAE programs are run.

Part of finalizing the process is a charter renewal interview coming up Feb. 27, for which Murphy said Union County had been selected as one of two districts to receive an in-person interview, a clear nod to the quality of education available at the 2024 Georgia State Charter System of the Year.

The board watched a video highlighting construction progress at the new Union County Elementary School, which is taking shape nicely. The E-SPLOST project is still on schedule to open by Fall 2025 and continues to be under budget.



UCMS Principal Tammy Hughes with Seventh-Grader Sadie Cochran for the youngster’s recognition of having her artwork chosen for the system’s 2024 holiday card.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Also in the meeting, the School Board gave a vote of confidence in recent board leadership by returning Member Tony Hunter to the chairman position and Member Patrick White as vice chair.

The board also approved the Fiscal Year 2024 Financial Audit, the findings of which were presented by CPA Christopher McKellar of accounting firm Mauldin & Jenkins in the work session that preceded the regular meeting.

McKellar said the audit came back “clean,” that is, the district’s financial statements were accurate and complied with state accounting standards, and he thanked School Finance Director Karen Bundy and her

staff for their assistance during the independent audit.

After hearing a presentation led by Assistant Facilities Director Derrick Pruitt, board members decided to table a decision on a Guaranteed Maximum Price contract to replace the aging bleachers at the UCHS gymnasium, citing the need for additional information on the available options.

The board also approved the 2025-2026 School Calendar and the Fiscal Year 2026 Board Meeting dates, as well as personnel recommendations for the next school year.

Public comments from the meeting are described at length in a separate article in this week’s newspaper.



L-R: Superintendent Hill with Partners in Education Matthew Mashburn of NGTC and Sandy Ott and Suzanne Jabaley of UNG, plus Director of Teaching/Learning CT Hussion in the Jan. 23 board meeting.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Harassment Claims...from Page 1A



In the Jan. 23 School Board meeting, grandmother Sylvia Munson touched on the “untenable” challenges of keeping children of working families home during extended school closures.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

and pulled my 7-year-old aside and warned her that if she was going to be a tattle tale, her tongue would grow too big to fit in her mouth.

“This harassment then transferred over to me every time I encountered this specific teacher, including asking me, ‘Where’s your husband?’, ‘Here comes Miss Big Brown Eyes,’ ‘I feel bad for you, you don’t have any sons.’ All kind of comments.”

Naveela intimated that she initially tried to have patience and give the benefit of the doubt, but after four years, she finally decided to file a formal complaint.

“I would like to thank the Primary School Principal (Debby Decubellis) at this time because she handled it very well,” Naveela said. “Thank you so much for doing that. Because I have timestamps of her communicating everything to the superintendent.”

“What did (Superintendent Hill) do? Picked up the phone to call my employer. Yes, he called my boss and said, ‘If she doesn’t take this complaint back and if you don’t address this issue, my elected board member will cut all ties with your institution.’”

“When he didn’t get this way, he went to a board member of my job who he’s friends with and his dad is friends with, basically using this personal connections to get this way.”

Naveela said she was so concerned about losing her job that she packed up her office in anticipation of being let go, and she said that she still fears that her termination could happen any day now.

“It was a terrible, terrible day as a parent to learn that I filed a complaint of discrimination, and I was targeted further,” Naveela said. “My box is still packed, because I don’t know what this man is capable of – I have no idea.”

“So, fast forward, when I finally confronted him, I said, ‘Talk to me. I am angry, I’m upset, I’m sad, I’m frustrated at the unprofessionalism that I have never witnessed (before).’”

Naveela said Hill tried to “gaslight” her, responding that he did not know what she was talking about and he had not done anything wrong, but she noted that, “I have timestamps, I have emails – I have been able to get everything from my employer through my policies and procedures.”

“And there’s more,” Naveela said to the board. “There’s a lot more that has come out since I sent you that email (previously notifying you of the situation).”

After talking with Hill about what she perceived as retaliation, Naveela said she reported everything to the Office for Civil Rights and filed a Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act violation regarding private student information shared with people outside the school system.

As her allotted speaking time ran out, Naveela said to those gathered, “Just as a parent, know that if you file a complaint, it will go other places.”

Her husband Simon Philbeck spoke next, highlighting that, while they were there to discuss a personal matter that evening, “it relates to every parent in this room and in this county.”

“If this is how business is handled, it’s a bit disturbing,” Simon said. “I had this whole spiel written up about what the right things to do, what the wrong things to do are, and how when you’re in a leadership position, how you should strive for integrity and doing the right things no matter what the cost is.”

“Whatever your belief system is, it doesn’t really matter. If you treat people incorrectly, it’s going to come back to haunt you in many different forms and karma – whatever you have your belief

where all our students can thrive.”

Pat Donaldson was the next public commenter in the Jan. 23 meeting. Donaldson is the former principal of Union County Middle School who transitioned this school year to a half-time teacher position.

She expressed appreciation for the system’s administration, faculty and staff, adding that she was thankful that her daughter was able to benefit from the optional attendance day on Friday, Jan. 17, in the aftermath of a weeklong closure due to icy road conditions from the Jan. 10 snow.

Morganton resident Sylvia Munson addressed the board next, saying she was a grandmother of children who attend Union County Schools. She said both her and her daughter work full time, and that the extended school closures this month were “becoming untenable.”

“The kids were restless, their mom needed to work to keep her job, and opening schools on Friday was a huge blessing,” Munson said. “It wasn’t a full day, but it was

system rooted in.

“I’m not going to beat a dead horse; I think my wife covered it pretty well. Not really a fan of the lack of professionalism that I’ve seen displayed at the school system. There are those that are doing the right things, such as the principal for the Primary School that was mentioned previously by my wife.”

“With that being said, it’s been tantamount to just incompetence, the fact that it’s gone on this long. You’ve had multiple issues brought to your attention multiple times to address these issues, and the lack of the ability for this administration to solve these issues is dumbfounding.”

“This cannot stand; it can’t keep going. You guys are elected to handle business in a professional and cordial manner, and that’s what I would like to see done.”

After the meeting, Naveela Philbeck told the North Georgia News that the School Board had been delaying coming up with a resolution, essentially “buying time” by only communicating on the matter right before meetings before going silent for weeks at a time.

“They are at this point aware of everything and yet nothing has happened,” Naveela said. “We are now forced to speak publicly to get them to address the matter and inform other parents so they know what can happen if you simply ask them to follow policy.”

“Our children will be attending Union County Schools for years to come, and this is very serious to us and even more concerning that the superintendent and board members have resorted to just ignoring us.”

“They are playing the victim after attacking me first, and my responses stating I will seek legal remedies is not something they have taken well to.”

Regarding those legal remedies, Naveela said there are currently multiple investigations in the works, including for her civil rights and FERPA complaints, and she said she has reported Hill and the Primary School teacher in question to the state’s education standards board.

“(The) Civil Rights office did start an investigation and asked if I’d be open to mediation, and I agreed,” she said. “The investigator was waiting for weeks and only heard back the day before the board meeting, and even then, the district did not agree to mediation but wanted more specifics before they would agree.”

“We unfortunately cannot sit here and wait forever because they have made it clear they have no intention of moving forward with good faith. I notified (the) Civil Rights investigator I’m no longer interested in mediation after the board meeting.”

Naveela added that every agency she has reached out to about this “requested additional documentation and proof and determined my complaint had validity, yet (the) board has done nothing!”

“We have no choice but to file a lawsuit, so we are working on that now,” she said. “I do have more to share at the next meeting. I want it all on the record for public meetings, so we will be there next month.”

By press time, School Board members either did not respond to requests for comment or declined to comment on the Philbecks’ accusations from the meeting, however, Superintendent Hill did provide a statement Friday.

“The School District does not comment on ongoing or potential legal matters,” Hill said. “However, we remain committed to maintaining an open and nurturing environment, free of discrimination of any type,

a big relief and let her get to work.”

Munson said that online learning days should not replace snow days, which is difficult for families because snow days come with a lot of distractions, home upkeep and kids who “want to play.”

She also said she attended the January commission meeting and heard concerns about children at risk of not receiving sufficient food during school closures, “and that’s another reason that the schools need to be open whenever possible to take care of those kids.”

Offering a “possible solution to consider,” Munson asked that the system limit online learning days “in every way possible,” as they are difficult to deal with for working parents, and students are not receiving a full day of learning anyway.

“Regarding the snow days that the school can’t open, call it a snow day,” Munson said. “And then, if the school can open, as soon as possible, like you did last Friday, even with reduced staff, one of the things you could do is provide the modified bus routes like you do for summer.”

Attendance for the

optional school day was open for families who could bring their children to campus, but buses did not run on Jan. 17, as too many routes still contained icy spots, and Munson was asking that modified bus routes be used in similar future situations.

“In our case, we could get out of our driveway,” Munson said. “Our next-door neighbor could not. So, we can pick up our next-door neighbor’s kids and take them to the location that the modified bus routes

go to.”

Resident Beverly Iler spoke last, stating that she, too, was a grandparent and supported everything Munson had said. Iler remarked it was important that kids are in class doing hands-on work as often as possible, especially after the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Coverage of the business portion of the Jan. 23 School Board meeting appears in a separate article in this week’s newspaper.

Blairsville PTO Annual Strawberry Fundraiser

The Blairsville PTO is having their annual strawberry fundraiser. All proceeds benefit Union County Schools. 1 flat consist of 8 (1 lb.) containers. The price of 1 flat is \$27.00 1/2 flat consist of 4 (1 lb.) containers. The price of 1/2 flat is \$14.00. Please make checks payable to Blairsville PTO, Inc. Mail payment to Blairsville PTO, Inc., P.O. Box 1476, Blairsville, GA 30514; Attn. Michelle



All orders must be placed by February 12, 2025. Orders will be delivered by the end of February or the beginning of March. If you need more information contact Michelle (770) 503.4094. Thank you for supporting Blairsville Parent/Teacher Organization.