



**UNC System President Peter Hans
Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors
April 16, 2026**

I'd like to go on record saying that we should hold more of these meetings in a barn. I've always thought of the University of North Carolina as a more down-to-earth institution than an ivory tower. This suits us well.

I also want to thank all the fine folks here in Morganton who have been gracious enough to host us. This is such an extraordinary school, and a marvelous example of North Carolina's knack for translating ambitious ideas into effective institutions. No one had tried building a public, residential high school for science and mathematics before this state gave it a go back in 1980. It was a bold experiment, and a response to the urgent needs of the age.

At the time, North Carolina was in the throes of a painful transition, moving from an economy heavily dependent on tobacco, textiles, and furniture to one more focused on sectors like technology, finance, and medicine. Even within farming and manufacturing, the advantage was shifting to those who could use science and engineering to make new discoveries and create new opportunities for growth in fields such as biotech, aerospace and pharmaceuticals. That ongoing transition, sometimes beneficial and sometimes wrenching, is still underway today, and you can see it right here in Morganton and across our state.

The people who envisioned NCSSM saw that monumental shift coming, and they acted on it. They understood that the prosperity of our state would depend on developing the God-given talent of our people and being responsive to the evolving needs of our state. They wanted to keep North Carolina's best and brightest close to home, and that's exactly what the School of Science and Math has done – America's very best residential high school.

This institution was built to be an intellectual accelerator for some of the best students in North Carolina, bringing them together and giving them the chance to work with one of the best faculties ever assembled under a high school roof. I don't know what your high school was like, but I can assure you that mine did not have a lot of PhDs in industrial systems engineering or doctorates in chemistry wandering the halls and overseeing world-class laboratory space. This is a special place, and you can tell that from 90 seconds of conversation with any of the students and faculty we've met.

It's no surprise that NCSSM has been so effective at honing brilliant students and encouraging them to pursue their ambitions in North Carolina.

And it's no surprise that this place, so thoughtfully designed to boost our state's prowess in key fields, has delivered on that mission. Most NCSSM grads go on to study at our public universities, and they earn science, technology, and engineering degrees at a rate more than three times higher than the national average. They not only drive some of the most promising career fields in our state but also grow opportunities for others. A 2020 study found that more than 13% of NCSSM graduates have helped start a new company, many of them right here in North Carolina.

Of course, you can't win them all, and not every NCSSM graduate has remained close to home. As some of you may have read, the astronauts on NASA's Artemis II mission that traveled around the moon last week traveled farther from earth than any human beings have yet ventured. Among them was Christina Koch, who attended White Oak High School in Jacksonville before earning a spot at NCSSM and then going on to NC State for degrees in electrical engineering and physics.

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Christina now holds the record of fleeing farther from North Carolina than any NCSSM grad in history, reaching just shy of 253 *thousand* miles away from here. Truly, though, Christina's story illustrates all that is good and admirable about this place. She made it from Onslow County to the moon on the back of her talent and drive — and the public institutions that recognized those qualities early and helped them grow.

That's partially the business of our public universities, and we continue to look around the corner to help North Carolina meet the demands of a changing world. While the Artemis astronauts were peering at the surface of the moon last week, we were doing our best at the UNC System to peer into the future and anticipate what our economy and our society will need from us in the years ahead. The Workforce Alignment Report that we shared with all of you documents serious growth in the demand for engineers, health professionals, and teachers. With the state growing and our current workforce facing a wave of retirements, there's going to be strong need for many of the vital professions our public universities were designed to fill.

For all the well-deserved reputation that higher education has for being a slow-moving sector, the history of our public institutions is one of near-constant reinvention and enthusiastic response to state needs. Look no further than the school we're sitting in right now, expanded with the support of bond voters in 2016 after it became clear that there was more excellent work to be done in readying North Carolina's young people for the future.

At the same time, in this epic period of technological revolution, we must never lose sight of our fundamental mission in higher education to prepare both the mind and character for much more -- not only roles as future workers but as adaptable lifelong learners, as deep thinkers, and as responsible citizens. To ask the question, what is a human being and what makes us distinct from computers and machines. The talented young violinist from lunch yesterday indirectly poses that query to us. Many more thoughts to come on this topic in the days ahead.

This university has never been complacent in the face of change, and we're not resting on our successes now. There is a great deal of good work ahead of us, and the NCSSM spirit of innovation here should be a guiding light as we tackle it.