



FAIR PAY: Dozens of educators and school employees gathered at a rally March 20 to demand a living wage from both Asheville City Schools and Buncombe County Schools. All received modest wage increases after state and county budgets were passed later in 2023. Photo by Greg Parlier

What did our local governments get right in 2023 regarding the environment?

“Asheville and Buncombe County’s push to ban plastic bags was absolutely the right policy, but the N.C. Retail Merchants Association and N.C. General Assembly, representing big retailers like Ingles and Walmart, decided it knew what was good for our community [better] than we did. That was despite overwhelming support from businesses and the public for this policy. But we aren’t giving up our effort to reduce plastic pollution.”

— **Hartwell Carson**,
French Broad riverkeeper,
MountainTrue

“A brilliant move is supporting the AVL Unpaved projects. They encourage walking, biking and hiking instead of using our personal vehicles, and give us all access to many of the places we would like to [go] without requiring the use of our cars and thus minimizing the damage to our mountains [in a] cost-effective way.”

— **Morgan Albritton**,
owner, Morgan’s Comics

“Maintaining and restoring our tree canopy solves multiple problems. It’s our greatest tool for addressing

flooding, the heat-island effect, air quality and resilient green spaces for human and natural habitats. Thanks to recommendations by our Urban Forestry Commission and community organizing efforts, the City of Asheville responded to research regarding our declining tree canopy by hiring the city’s first urban forester and budgeting for an Urban Forestry Master Plan that prioritizes partnership.”

— **Kim Roney**,
Asheville City Council member

“I’m heartened by the adoption of electric vehicles in local government fleets, even though supply-chain issues have slowed the process. The Merrimon Avenue road diet has been a blessing for [the environment in my neighborhood]. Noise levels have decreased dramatically, even before accounting for the reduction in screeching collisions. It’s a far safer, more pleasant place to walk and drive now.”

— **Dave Erb**,
member, Blue Ridge EV Club

What changes in education in 2023 have benefited or disadvantaged local students?

“Traditional education is under attack. ... If public schools are important to a vibrant community, then we need

to prioritize ways to recruit and retain the people who make these schools strong. What we pay the folks who work with our children is embarrassing.”

— **Lissa Pedersen**,
teacher and vice president,
Buncombe County
Association of Educators

“In 2023, Buncombe County Schools experienced enrollment growth and a stabilization of the faculty. Both of these metrics point to increased satisfaction with the teaching and learning environment in our schools and have resulted in substantial increases in academic results for students across the school system.”

— **Rob Jackson**,
superintendent,
Buncombe County Schools

“K-12 education is heading toward increased segregation along socioeconomic and racial lines as affluent families leave public schools for charter and private options. The “school choice” movement (House Bill 823) is sorting students into “haves” and “have-nots.” These changes paint a future where students go to school with classmates that increasingly resemble themselves, undermining the community-building potential of public education.”

— **Brooke Heaton**,
web architect

“[This year] has been a time of both benefits and disadvantages for local students. This past year, while both the General Assembly and the Buncombe County Commissioners approved millions of dollars of extra funding for schools, the General Assembly also passed the “Slate of Hate,” three laws that affect all students negatively but affect LGBTQ+ students even worse.”

— **Timothy Lloyd**,
school custodian and president,
Asheville City
Association of Educators

What has the community gotten right in regard to promoting equity and inclusion?

“The passion I’ve seen people acting on for the greater good of the community is something that we’re getting right. There’s been consistent energy put

toward taking to the streets, to social media and to City Council to make the changes that we need to see in our community and to educate others on inequities being experienced here. Keeping those conversations going and continuing to make connections is, in my opinion, the most important part.”

— **Allie Daum**,
senior at UNC Asheville

“The single most important thing the community has gotten right was to open honest dialogue to address some of the painful truths that many have chosen to ignore. The establishment of the [Community Reparations Commission] and full staffing of the [City of Asheville’s] Office of Equity & Inclusion were major steps. However, there is much more to be done to address the many challenges that are on the horizon. Community engagement has increased significantly to include input from those most impacted.”

— **Sandra Kilgore**

“I think it is a ‘step forward, step back’ situation. More local institutions are hiring people with lived experiences related to the work and this region to lead efforts. However, if a board or staff doesn’t trust a leader’s way of leading because it is different from their conceptualization, they can do harm. Inclusion and equity need to go beyond seats at the table — to gathering and acting in new ways.”

— **Ameena Batada**,
co-director of the master of public
health program and professor of
health and wellness at UNC Asheville

“Our Pride Festival’s success warms the heart, but needing extra security this year leaves me wondering. Neglecting to promote equity and inclusion puts our diverse community at risk in safety, health care and education. And I mean people of all genders, orientations, religions, etc. Silence ain’t just quiet; it’s deadly. If we don’t speak up and define what equity and inclusion mean, and act on making it happen, there may not be much of it left.”

— **Divine**,
producer, Bearded Lady Productions



TIMOTHY LLOYD



KEITH MILLER



SARA NICHOLS



LISSA PEDERSEN



MATTHIEU RODRIGUEZ



KIM RONEY