

SCHOOL ROUNDUP



Top row, from left, Yilan Cheng, River Dewberry and Taylor Dillard. Middle row, from left, Saahil Doshi, Cashton Isaac and Elle Newbury. Bottom row, from left, Clara Pierce, Zane Taylor, and Marin Torres. Not pictured is Emily Peng of OCHS, who was named an alternate in world languages. [Photos and graphic courtesy Oconee County Schools]

# OCS students named Governor’s Honors Program finalists

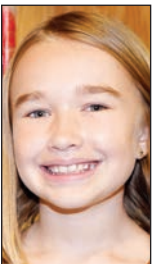
**BY STAFF REPORTS**  
Oconee County Schools has nine Governor’s Honors Program finalists:

- Yilan Cheng (mathematics), NOHS.
- River Dewberry (computer science), OCHS.
- Taylor Dillard (dance), NOHS.
- Saahil Doshi (engineering), OCHS.
- Cashton Isaac (engineering), OCHS.
- Elle Newbury (science), OCHS.
- Clara Pierce (social studies), NOHS.
- Zane Taylor (music), NOHS.
- Marin Torres (communicative arts), OCHS.

And Emily Peng of OCHS was named an alternate in world languages.  
The finalists will head to Georgia Southern June 15-July 12 for classes and additional

opportunities in their areas of interest.

**Literary honors Emerson and DeBoer**  
Amelia Emerson of Colham Ferry Elementary School and Kate DeBoer of North Oconee High School were selected as Northeast Georgia RESA winners in the 2025 Young Georgia Authors competition.  
In other news, OCS fourth and fifth graders participated in the Oconee County Literacy Expo at the Civic Center last week. Students saw a life-sized whale inflatable



Emerson



DeBoer

and took a story walk with Will Dodd of the Oconee River Georgia Youth Science and Technology Center. They had marine biology student Ellie Adams speak about her love for animals.  
They heard from North Oconee High School author Emory Shepherd and listened to author Shelli Johannes talk about science. They also shared their own projects from their favorite Page Turners books.

**Volunteer efforts**  
During Senior Mission Week, a group of Prince Avenue Christian School seniors volunteered their time and efforts to partner with local agencies.  
Students worked at FISH Monroe thrift store and food pantry, Chosen for Life Ministries in Watkinsville, and The Bigger Vision of Athens community shelter.  
Students organized donations, packed meals, and learned more about the important role these agencies play in the community.

# Artmaking leads to understanding

Freshman year, as friends all around me spiraled into depression, I read Ocean Vuong’s “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous.” I’d already read his poems. I knew the imagery would be stunning, but this book provided far more than beauty. It provided me with a map for walking toward peace.  
To maintain his sanity, it seemed, within painful cultural divides and poverty, the protagonist fixated on common objects or body parts: pink nail polish, blinking sneakers, his mother’s spine. He followed these things to staggering insights—the shoes resembled tiny ambulances and the spine became “ellipses no silence translates.”  
His extraordinary ability to love despite the complexities and dangers of his relationships seemed to stem from this devotion to presence, observation and art. When I finished the book, I decided to make a commitment to this way of living.  
Initially, it made me more aware of my body—how my feet tread and how quiet footsteps are still weighing on the world, hurting it. I began to listen intently. I wrote until complicated ideas began to make sense, and I painted from life until the intimacy rattled me. These labors lead to an affinity for



**Britta Nilsson**  
*Young Scholar*

this broken world and everyone in it.  
Sunsoaked moss. Mushroom buds unearthed. The sky reflected in the water. The red, yellow and purple in any green. My heartbeat quickens.  
People have asked me why I’d devote myself to antiquated forms of art, and the answer seems obvious to me. Artificial intelligence might write papers or design images, but it will never provide the dazzling interior awakening that happens when, in the process of making art, we arrive at insight.  
Presence, observation and artmaking lead to understanding and understanding leads to inner peace. I’ll always love these labors.  
*Britta Nilsson is a junior at Oconee County High School who loves both art and writing.*

# Legislation bans cellphones in state public elementary and middle schools

**BY TY TAGAMI**  
If the legislation is signed by the governor, children in public elementary and middle schools won’t be able to use personal cellphones starting next fall. The Georgia General Assembly overwhelmingly supported banning the devices in elementary and middle schools.  
House Bill 340 passed the Georgia Senate Tuesday 54-2 after the state House of Representatives passed it with strong bipartisan support in early March.  
The “Distraction-Free Education Act” requires schools to

develop policies that allow parents to reach their kids, for instance, by calling the principal’s office, and it provides exemptions for students with disabilities or medical conditions that require them to use a cellphone for learning or for health reasons, such as checking their glucose level.  
But starting in July 2026, all other kids would have to hand over or lock up their device from the first bell of the school day until the final ring. The ban applies even during emergencies, when experts testified that cellphones pose a dangerous

distraction, even if parents wish they could still contact their children during, say, a mass shooting.  
Many suggested during weeks of hearings on the bill that the cellphone ban should also include high school students.  
Rep. Scott Hilton, R-Peachtree Corners, the chief sponsor of HB 340, said after the vote that the ban could be extended to those schools in coming years.  
*Ty Tagami is a writer for Capitol Beat News Service, a nonprofit news service.*

# North High Shoals citizens voice concerns over code enforcement of ordinances

**BY SHWETA KRISHNAN**  
Kip Jones and Julie Memler, two North High Shoals residents, voiced their concerns over what they believe is a lack of enforcement with the Unified Development Code (UDC) from Oconee County.  
Memler claimed there was a fire next door to their home because “ordinances weren’t being followed.”  
The ordinances that she is referring to are 12.6.2, regarding permitted activities of a home office, and specifically section 9-1, where the activities are “extending and aggravating blight; or resulting in a hazard to public health, safety, comfort, convenience, or welfare of the residents of the town.”  
“When I spoke to Councilman [Eric] Carlson, he said that if I thought there were things going on that were not following our ordinances, I should bring it to the town hall, so I did,” Memler said.

The citizens said they are concerned with the daily impact from a neighbor who is running a business from home.  
“Our lives are being disrupted daily, even on the weekends,” she said. “And we just want to know how that’s going to be dealt with.”  
Memler said in an email following the meeting that the neighbor parks his truck, flatbed trailer and equipment less than 50 feet from their house.  
“He also brings junk back from the places he works and puts it in the yard next to our house,” Memler said in an email following the meeting.  
Memler noted that the couple first approached the

council last May, and they feel like nothing has been addressed since. The May 2024 meeting minutes have no note of this, the town clerk said after the meeting.  
Mayor Stephen Goad said that he understood the couple’s frustrations, stating, “It’s just a matter of having enforcement.” Adopting a UDC for the town would allow them to have an agreement on using county enforcement.  
North High Shoals does not have a UDC, so it follows the county code. However, the Oconee County Planning and Code Enforcement Department received a draft of a version for the town a month ago, he said.  
“And when I read over it, it had a lot of stuff that did not pertain to us,” Goad said. “I sent it back to the Planning Department and haven’t heard anything since.”  
The mayor said he is not aware of any way to go about making any significant changes until the town can adopt the code. He said after the meeting that they could adopt the county version that is scaled down to fit the other towns.  
*Shweta Krishnan is a Fink Fellow in the Cox Institute’s Journalism Writing Lab at the University of Georgia.*

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