

# Kentucky state auditor to conduct investigation of Fayette County Public Schools

BY MCKENNA HORSLEY  
Kentucky Lantern

Republican State Auditor Allison Ball announced her office would begin a special investigation of Fayette County Public Schools following public scrutiny of a proposed tax increase.

She announced the investigation Tuesday morning. Last week, Republican Attorney General Russell Coleman’s office said the school district’s board failed to give proper public notice before voting to increase occupational taxes within the district.

“Upon review of publicly available information, as well as listening to concerns from parents and other constituents, I have determined that my office will conduct a special examination of the Fayette County Public School District,” Ball said in her statement.

In May, the FCPS board voted 3-2 to approved an occupational tax increase of 0.25% to take effect in January. The board approved a \$848 million proposed budget with the tax

increase that would cost residents an average of \$13 more per month, local media outlets reported. Following the attorney general’s opinion, FCPS initially planned to reconsider the tax proposal during a June 23 meeting. However, board chair Tyler Murphy said FCPS would pause the proposal, according to the Lexington Herald-Leader.

Ball’s investigation received praise from Republican state Sens. Amanda Mays Bledsoe, Jared Carpenter, Donald Douglas, Greg Elkins, Matt Nunn and Steve West. They all represent parts of Fayette County. Mays Bledsoe previously requested the attorney general’s office review the matter.

In a joint statement released shortly after Ball’s announcement, the senators said they are “committed to the success of our public education system and to standing with the dedicated teachers who serve our students” and have “heard from many constituents who are deeply concerned about Fayette County Public Schools, particularly regarding district spending and the board’s recent

occupational tax vote, which was determined to be unlawful.” The senators said that decisions of the school district carry “educational consequences” as well as “regional economic and workforce implications.”

“Transparency, honesty, and community engagement are essential,” the senators said. “The district must practice these principles, not merely talk about them. A deeper, independent review could clarify how taxpayer dollars are being spent, identify areas for improvement, and help restore public confidence in the district’s leadership.”

“We believe in our schools, we support our teachers, and we believe accountability, openness, and trust are the foundation for moving forward. If the board seeks to rebuild its image in the eyes of the public, we ask board members and district leadership to support an independent review.”

The issue isn’t completely partisan. Democratic Rep. Anne Gay Donworth, of Lexington, addressed the board during its May 27 meeting to express con-

cern about the transparency behind the tax proposal.

Dia Davidson-Smith, a spokesperson for FCPS, said in a statement Tuesday afternoon that the school district “is committed to continuous improvement and, above all, student success.”

“We are proud of the strategic investments we’ve made in our schools, which are leading to stronger outcomes, expanded opportunities, and meaningful progress in closing longstanding opportunity gaps,” Davidson-Smith added. “The State Auditor has the full authority to conduct a special examination at her discretion, and we welcome the opportunity to work collaboratively with her office. We are confident that a fair and thorough review of our operations will affirm our commitment to excellence, equity, and transparency in service to our students and community.”

Previous audits and financial reports for FCPS are published on the school district’s website.

KY United 120-AFT, a teachers’ union, said that it was glad the FCPS board paused the tax

proposal in a statement Tuesday afternoon. The union encouraged board members and the school district to “work together to create change in the budget process and to be better to each other and the constituents they serve” as well as work with Ball in her upcoming investigation.

“We ask them to work with their rank-and-file staff and finally allow a vote on collective bargaining, as the need for formal staff input is much needed. We ask them to embrace the opportunity to highlight the amazing work our district provides to students but also to embrace any criticism as a call to action on how we improve — not as a political attack,” KY United 120-AFT said.

“Trust is easily broken, but even harder to rebuild. As always, we are ready to work and will continue to show up on behalf of our kids, members, and community. FCPS is and can be a beacon for what public education can be when we all work together. Let’s thrive together.”

# UK Extension launches strike teams — a new response and recovery initiative to weather disasters

BY CHRISTOPHER CARNEY  
University of Kentucky

Kentuckians have experienced several recent weather-related disasters, causing significant damage to infrastructure and communities across the state.

“Kentucky has experienced an increase in ‘billion dollar’ weather disasters — a total of 92 impacting the area since 1980, with seven of those devastating events occurring in 2024 alone,” said University of Kentucky senior meteorologist Matt Dixon.

Kayla Watts, who was previously a UK Extension agent in Breathitt County, remembers watching the North Fork Kentucky River in Jackson, Kentucky, in 2022 continue to rise as the flooding began to make its way into town.

“It looked like a wall of water — it was scary because we didn’t know how high it would get, and parts of town were evacuated due to the rising river water,” said Watts, now a UK Area Extension director. “Many folks said that they didn’t have time to get their possessions. Everything was just gone. We just weren’t prepared for something like this.”

Along with ongoing damage caused by recent storms this year in Kentucky, this sparked Watts and other extension leaders to begin assessing local and statewide needs to determine what communities and individuals needed to better prepare, respond and recover.

Kentucky Extension Disaster Education Network is formed

The UK Cooperative Extension Service at the Martin-Gatton College of Agriculture, Food and Environment (CAFE), in collaboration with Kentucky State University, has launched a new initiative to help advance the state’s disaster preparedness and recovery capabilities — developing strike teams to better respond and reduce the impact of disasters through research-based education.

Made possible through a partnership and grant from the Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN), this initiative is helping address the pressing need for a more coordinated and effective disaster response in Kentucky and beyond.

“This initiative will allow Extension leaders to learn from established strike team models and, crucially, implement a pilot strike team program within Kentucky Cooperative Extension,” said Jeff Young, Kentucky

EDEN project team leader and Director of Urban Extension at Martin-Gatton CAFE. “Furthermore, the development of a national toolkit provides a roadmap for other states to build their own resilient disaster response networks.”

These specialized strike teams, composed of trained county agents and staff in Kentucky, will provide crucial on-the-ground support to communities impacted by disasters.

Watts, who worked with Young in writing the EDEN grant proposal and is one of the approximately 40 strike team members in Kentucky, believes that organization is key.

“Many people want to help, but it must be streamlined,” Watts said. “These strike teams are a ready-made, trained group who are ready to help and provide relief. As a strike team member, you are working in coordination with your county’s emergency plan. In our trainings, we are now stressing the importance of preparedness, support and recovery.”

Kentucky strike team member Danielle Hagler, Nelson County Cooperative Extension agent for UK Family and Consumer Sciences, adds that collaboration and working with community leaders is essential.

“Our extension agents that are strike team members all have different passions, skills and talents. Based on everyone’s area of expertise, we can all help each other in areas where we need support,” Hagler said. “Working with our city officials, first responders and emergency management is also crucial to be better prepared and organized. We all must work together.”

Kentucky EDEN is a collaborative multi-state effort supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture and Cooperative Extension Services across the country to reduce the impact of disasters through research-based education. Kentucky Emergency Management and the Kentucky Department of Public Health are also collaborative partners with the

Kentucky EDEN project team.

Visit <https://anr.ca.uky.edu/extensionhelps> to learn more about the Kentucky EDEN initiative, along with education resources in disaster recovery and preparedness.

To learn more about the UK Cooperative Extension Service programs, visit <https://extension.ca.uky.edu> or contact your local County Extension Office.

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