

Birdwatching program set at Boyle County Public Library

By JOSELY LABARRERE
Advocate Messenger
Local birdwatching enthusiasts will host a free public program on birding Saturday, Feb. 7, at the Boyle County Public Library, according to a press release. The event will begin at 3 p.m. in the library's community

room. Several experienced birdwatchers will be on hand, including Danielle LaLonde, who will speak about the appeal of birdwatching and share tips for those interested in getting started, the release said. The program is open to the public and geared toward beginners as well

as those with some birding experience. The event will also include information about upcoming birding opportunities in the area. One of those is the annual Great Backyard Bird Count on Feb. 13–16. The worldwide event encourages participants to observe and report birds

seen around their homes or communities. Observations are submitted through a free website and shared with individuals and scientific organizations across the globe, according to the release. Additional information about the count is available online at birdcount.org.

Another opportunity highlighted in the program will be a new series of guided bird walks planned for Boyle County and nearby areas. The walks will be led by Jeff Sole, with the first outing tentatively scheduled for a Saturday in March. Specific dates, locations and times will be

announced later, the release said. Those interested in receiving updates about local birding events or joining an email list may contact Patsi Trollinger at pbtrollinger@gmail.com or Preston Miles at preston.miles@centre.edu, according to the press release.

Balancing life is challenging

Keeping our lives balanced is a bit like standing on one foot (which requires a different kind of balance). It's hard to do for very long. Life throws things at us that draw our attention away from the safeguards and healthy habits that we build into our lives. When things get out of balance, we lose perspective and feel overwhelmed or underwhelmed, depressed, or anxious. I am driven by responsibility. In other words, I am obsessive. So, I have to remind myself daily what it takes to stay on an even keel. Three words remind me of the kinds of activities I need to stay mentally, emotionally, and spiritually healthy. Those three words? Create. Relate. Recreate. They are my daily mantra and the things that feed my soul by keeping me calm, purposeful, loving, peaceful, and refreshed. •Create. I get great joy from writing and lighting design. You can check out the lighting design at doodads.com. Writing something that gives words to my thoughts and is clarifying for myself and, hopefully, others is incredibly rewarding. •Relate. Many of my activities are solitary. So, I have to remind myself to break out of the bubble and engage with people, whether it is a neighbor, a service provider, or a checker at Walmart. Something about this

lightens my day. When we are inwardly healthy, we tend to be outwardly healthy too. In other words, when we take care of ourselves, we are nicer people. And when we are nicer people, it is personally rewarding. •Recreate. There is great value in goofing off. It clears out the cache of preoccupying thoughts and worries like a mental reboot. It might take time for a hobby we enjoy, getting out in nature, physical exercise, or visiting a friend, or anything where we are totally present in the moment. We cannot be helpful to other people if we don't take care of ourselves. Years ago, I was listening to a radio program about happiness. As it got to the very end, the host asked the guest for one last quick bit of advice. Here is what he said: Read a book. Take a walk. Call a friend. It really is the same mantra. Staying inwardly happy and healthy is the best thing we can do for ourselves and others. Honestly, we will probably need to remind ourselves of this countless times throughout our lives. Contact Glenn at glennhager1@gmail.com, glennhager.com, or on Facebook.



GLENN HAGER

GOP senators prioritize public ed

By MCKENNA HORSLEY
Kentucky Lantern
FRANKFORT — Kentucky Republican senators have introduced a slate of bills they say show their commitment to bettering public education in the commonwealth. Some of the proposals are getting support from Democrats and educators, but others are more contentious. Two of the priority bills passed out of the Senate Education Committee Thursday. Senate Bill 1, sponsored by Senate President Pro Tempore David Givens, of Greensburg, mirrors a 2022 law deemed unconstitutional by the Kentucky Supreme Court that attempts to shift powers from the Jefferson County Public Schools Board to the district's superintendent. The other, Senate Bill 3, sponsored by Sen. Lindsey Tichenor, R-Smithfield, would require school districts to post various financial reports online as a means to increase transparency over public dollars spent following headlines of budget shortfalls in the state's largest school districts, JCPS and Fayette County Public Schools. JCPS officials told lawmakers they opposed the shift in governance outlined in SB 1, but see SB 3 as a way to better hold them accountable. "It seems that you want to give me more authority, but I'm here to tell you I shouldn't have it," said JCPS Superintendent Brian Yearwood, adding that the original law was proposed before he joined the district last year and he could not speak to the dynamic of the school board and superintendent before he arrived. He said the "collaborative relationship" he has now with board members is "necessary for us to succeed." He later said SB 1 would be a "distraction in our community" when the district needs a common vision for students to succeed. "If we don't have that, if I'm running against or they're running against each other, we stand still, we go nowhere and our children cannot afford that," Yearwood said. The board's vice chair, James Craig, said SB 3, the legislation requiring posting of financial information, would be a solution to "avoid what has happened in the past, going forward in the future." In recent months, the school district has faced a projected \$188-million budget shortfall. Asked about the swath of priority education bills from Senate Republicans

after the meeting, Givens said lawmakers must be "responsive to the people and the crises that are presented to us." Several of the top 10 priority bills are responses to crises "around education leadership and education governance," he added. "It's in response to what we've seen over the course of the summer, not just in FCPS and JCPS, but even in rural districts. We're hearing financial concerns about management of funds, roles and responsibilities across the commonwealth," Givens said. "So, while we owe it to every student to provide a quality education that can move his or her life forward, we also owe it to every taxpayer to be certain their monies are spent wisely and with adequate oversight." Other Senate GOP priority education bills are: Senate Bill 2, sponsored by Sen. Julie Raque Adams, of Louisville, would prohibit pay raise percentages for school administrators from outpacing those for teachers in school districts. Senate Bill 4, sponsored by Sen. Steve West, of Paris, would create a five-year professional development path for new principals. Senate Bill 5, sponsored by Sen. Jason Howell, of Murray, would allow Kentucky school districts to buy produce for meals from local farmers. Senate Bill 6, sponsored by Senate President Robert Stivers, of Manchester, would fund his previously passed endowed research consortium for Kentucky universities with \$150 million. The goal of the endowment is to encourage universities to collaborate on research projects.

ADVOCATES SOUND OFF
Earlier this month, Stivers told reporters before the bills were filed that the legislation would reflect how Senate Republicans would "be focused on K-12 education" this session. With the bills now public, not all advocates who agree on how they will impact Kentucky schools. Protect Our Public Schools, a coalition of public education groups, raised concerns about SB 1 and 3, as well as SB 114, which is not among the Senate's top bills, but would make it so the school boards of JCPS and FCPS are appointed by local officials instead of elected by voters. The coalition, which began as a political action committee that advocated against the defeated GOP-backed constitutional amendment to allow the General Assembly to fund nonpublic schools, said

the bills "collectively divert attention away from the real challenges facing Kentucky's public schools." Protect Our Public Schools was also critical of the House's budget bill, which sets per pupil funding at \$4,587 over the next two years, saying it "worsens the crisis by freezing and cutting key education funding, continuing a decades-long pattern of allowing school resources to fall further behind the cost of living." "These bills are being presented as solutions, but they avoid the core issue Kentucky's schools are grappling with: chronic underfunding," said a spokesperson for Protect Our Schools KY. "And now the House budget proposal doubles down on that problem — freezing the SEEK base, cutting transportation funding, and offering no meaningful new investments in educators or early learning." The 2024 budget approved by the General Assembly had per pupil funding at \$4,326 for fiscal year 2024-25 and \$4,586 in the next fiscal year. Richard Innes, education analyst for the conservative Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions, told the Lantern that increasing state spending on education without increasing oversight "just seems silly to me." "The legislators have a responsibility to shepherd those dollars and make sure that they're being spent in an efficient way," he said, noting that the state constitution says the General Assembly must "provide for an efficient system of common schools throughout the state." Innes also said that the Kentucky Supreme Court's 1989 Rose decision also affirms that responsibility of state lawmakers, meaning that they have "the ultimate authority to be making decisions." For the case of SB 1, Innes said it's "very appropriate" for the General Assembly to intervene in JCPS governance. "Policy is made all the time at the state level that is going to impact the freedom of local boards to do things, and sometimes that might be awfully constricting, but sometimes it's necessary," Innes said. "Local boards, for one thing, don't have the resources available that we have at the state level to look into different things that they still are responsible for doing, and they may not be able to make the very best decisions on their own, simply because they just don't have the resources to help them form those deci-

sions. In cases like that, uniform statewide law is probably appropriate." From another perspective, Kentucky Association of School Administrators (KASA) CEO Rhonda Caldwell praised SB 4, the bill that would implement professional development for new principals. She called it "a very much needed positive step in the right direction towards supporting public education." The legislation includes new principals receive mentorship from experienced principals and participate in regular training. "The principal is second only to a teacher when it comes to determining a child's success," she said. "And right now, our teaching pipeline, nor our principal pipeline, is strong when it comes to recruiting and retaining educators into the profession for the short term or the long term." As for SB 2, Caldwell said KASA is "still working to understand what's behind that." The proposal says any superintendent or administrator cannot receive a percentage pay increase greater than the average percentage pay increase for teachers in the district. Caldwell pointed out that some school employees are paid based on a state salary schedule. In other cases, individual school boards oversee the pay of some administrators, such as the superintendent. Caldwell later added that the policy in that bill is already the "current practice." "The concern that I have right now is the Senate Bill 2, it is very clear for superintendents and school administrators. And regardless of the role, it's going to be a matter of what district can pay the most," Caldwell said. "And so as we looked and really examined our teacher shortage very closely, what we clearly see is turnover rates that favor those districts who can provide higher salaries, whereas those who cannot, they constantly lose more teachers to other districts as well as principals." Caldwell added that progress has been made when it comes to education salaries in Kentucky, but work must continue to keep up with a rising cost of living. "Take any aspect of education and consider that salaries require more, the cost of a school bus — that requires more dollars, the cost of eggs requires more dollars. Everything requires (more), and at the end of the day, our students are the ones who are losing out," she said.

Measure strengthening penalties for child exploitation passes House

NEWS RELEASE
FRANKFORT — Last week, the House of Representatives voted to approve HB 366. The measure, sponsored by state Rep. DJ Johnson of Owensboro, is aimed at modifying laws relating to child pornography. "HB 366 would make it clear that Kentucky will take every necessary step to protect children from exploitation," Johnson said. "Safeguarding our kids is one of the most important responsibilities we have as lawmakers." The measure would modify existing laws to include computer-generated images. It also would require an offender to serve at least 85 percent of the sentence before being eligible for probation or parole.

HB 366 clarifies that knowingly possessing or intentionally viewing visual depictions of sexual performances of minors constitutes a criminal offense while maintaining clear protections for accidental viewing and legitimate legal and law enforcement investigations. "As technology enhances, our laws must update with it," Johnson said. "This bill would strengthen accountability and ensure offenders cannot use modern tools to evade justice or victimize children." The measure now moves to the full House for consideration. To learn more about HB 366, visit legislature.ky.gov.