

# GOP senators make education cornerstone of priority bills

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



Sen. Jason Howell, R-Murray, left, and Republican Agriculture Commissioner Jonathan Shell, right, discuss a bill to make it easier for schools to buy produce from Kentucky farmers.

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 Rague 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 regularly watch Frankfort 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 10 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." House Republicans have called the bill a starting point in budget conversations to come.

"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 decisions. In cases like that, uniform statewide law is probably appropriate."

From another perspective, Kentucky Association of School Administrators 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.

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## RiverValley Behavioral Health earns national designation

BY THE JE STAFF

OWENSBORO, Ky. — RiverValley Behavioral Health has been designated a Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic, a nationally recognized model aimed at expanding access to comprehensive, high-quality behavioral health services, according to a release from the organization.

The designation reflects RiverValley Behavioral Health's commitment to providing timely, integrated and person-centered mental health and substance use treatment regardless of a patient's ability to pay, the release said. As a CCBHC, the organization will enhance crisis services, outpatient mental health and substance use treatment, care coordination and integration with physical health providers.

"Achieving CCBHC designation is a significant milestone for RiverValley Behavioral Health and the communities we serve," President and CEO Dr. Wanda Figueroa said in the release. She said the model

will strengthen access to care, improve responsiveness to community needs and support prevention, early intervention and long-term recovery.

The CCBHC model is expected to improve access to coordinated behavioral health care for individuals of all ages while reducing barriers related to cost and transportation, according to the release.

By emphasizing whole-person care, RiverValley Behavioral Health will be positioned to deliver consistent, high-quality services closer to home.

Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics must meet federal standards related to access, quality reporting, staffing, governance and coordination with hospitals, primary care providers and social service agencies, the release said. Through the designation, RiverValley Behavioral Health will expand same-day and crisis services, improve coordination across mental health, substance use and physical health care, strengthen services for

individuals with serious mental illness and substance use disorders, and enhance care for children, adolescents, veterans and underserved populations.

Dr. Figueroa has appointed Dr. Lionel Phelps, vice president of population health, to lead implementation of system enhancements required under the CCBHC initiative, according to the release. Phelps said the designation reinforces the organization's commitment to responsive, equitable and person-centered care.

In addition to expanding access to services, the CCBHC designation is expected to have a significant economic impact across the region, the release said. RiverValley Behavioral Health anticipates creating approximately 150 new jobs and bringing federal funding into local communities to support workforce growth, local economies and sustainable access to behavioral health care.

## WKU online earns national recognition

BY THE JE STAFF

Several Western Kentucky University Online programs are again earning national recognition, with multiple offerings ranked in the 2026 U.S. News & World Report Best Online Programs rankings, according to a WKU release.

WKU's online bachelor's program ranked 77th nationally, making it the second-highest ranked online bachelor's program in Kentucky, the release said. U.S. News & World Report evaluates more than 1,000 programs annually, basing rankings on factors that include faculty credentials and training, student engagement, available services and technology, and expert opinions on academic quality.

These rankings affirm the intentional work our faculty and academic teams have done to continuously strengthen our online

programs," Dr. Holli Drummond, assistant provost for student success and online learning, said in the release. She said the recognition reflects improved outcomes, increased national visibility and student success.

Several individual WKU Online programs also posted strong performances in the 2026 rankings, according to the release. WKU's online undergraduate business program ranked 32nd nationally, while the veteran's bachelor's program placed 47th. The veteran's MBA program ranked 45th, and veteran's graduate education ranked 37th. The release noted the Online Undergraduate Business program improved its position, moving up to 71st after ranking 75th the previous year.

WKU Online continues to stand out for its flexible, fully online programs designed to support working adults, the release said. Courses are taught by the same faculty who teach on campus, ensuring students receive the same quality instruction in an online format.

"Many of our students are working adults balancing competing demands, and these rankings offer added assurance that they are receiving a high-quality online education," Dr. Jay Carroll, assistant director of WKU Online, said in the release. He credited responsive outreach, proactive student support and collaboration among faculty and staff for the program's success.

WKU Online offers a broad range of undergraduate and graduate degree programs, as well as certificate programs focused on in-demand job skills, according to the release. More information about online courses and degree programs is available at [wku.edu/online/degree](http://wku.edu/online/degree) or by calling (270) 745-5173.

## WEBCO

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much interest in second shift childcare so far, Madden continues to advertise it.

"We would just like to get an idea of how many families this could benefit

and in order to make sure we have the right number of staff hired for those hours," she explained.

Their preparations are in hopes that they can meet the needs of all families in our community.

In addition to second shift childcare, Webco Learning Center is also considering

opening on Saturdays for the same reason.

"The best thing about it all is that we accept state childcare assistance to help families that can't really afford childcare," Madden stated.

While the expanded hours create opportunities for future learners, the

Webco team is also planning something special for their current students. Later this month, they are hosting a Valentine's Formal Dance.

"We want them to have a fun, special experience they'll always remember," Madden stated.

The dance, scheduled for Feb. 12, is "a sweet way to

celebrate Valentine's Day with kindness, friendship, and confidence," Madden described.

"A lot of our children don't often get the chance to dress up, take pictures, and feel like they're part of something exciting—so we wanted to create that moment for them," she

added.

The staff are also taking the opportunity to dress up for this special night of celebration. Currently, the Center is organizing food with parent volunteers.

"We want our kids to feel loved, important, and celebrated," Madden stated.