

SEBREE BANNER



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HATTIE REINHARD, WHO won a local extension office art contest earlier this year, and her parents Keri Beth and O.R. Reinhard made a trip to the Kentucky State Fair over the weekend to take a look at Hattie's drawing that was on display. Her picture of Webster County was on display along with drawings depicting the state's other 119 counties. The drawings created a map of the state with each drawing showing where the county represented is located. Hattie's drawing highlights Webster County's agriculture. Hattie is pictured with her drawing at the state fair display.

Board Approves Policy Changes; Hears From Citizens Concerning Report

The Webster County Board of Education met in regular session Monday night and made quick work of their business agenda that included approval of three policy changes, surplusng playground equipment, a brief update on the 2026-27 enrollment and the approval of a lengthy consent agenda. The board also heard from several residents regarding the OEA report that was released last week.

Monday's meeting opened with Kim Saalwaechter, director of elementary instruction and assessment, providing the board with a assessment calendar that shows the windows for various testing local schools complete each year. Saalwaechter also revisited the district writing plan to answer any questions board members may have. There were no questions.

The meeting then moved to superintendent Michael Gooch's report. Gooch addressed the second reading of three board policies related to employee maternity leave, giving board members the opportunity to ask additional questions about the changes. The superintendent also reported that playground equipment at Dixon Elementary will be disposed of with board approval. He noted that taking out the equipment and raised garden beds will allow space to enlarge the parking lot. New playground equipment was installed at the school recently.

Gooch also provided an update on the opening of school noting "it was a great start to the year." He thanked all of the employees, and added that the only issue was the HVAC at the high school, otherwise, "it was a really great start."

In a brief enrollment

update, the superintendent told the board that enrollment has declined over the last two years with district enrollment dropping from 2182 between September 2024 and September 25 to 2049. This year classes started with an enrollment of 1926. The district has lost almost 260 students in two years. Gooch did not specify whether those students have moved out of the district or are homeschool. He did say he hopes the district sees those numbers stabilize. At WCHS the enrollment had been anticipated to be about 604; presently the enrollment in that school in 501 according to the superintendent.

The superintendent also reported that the district continues to clarify homeschool numbers and he will provide that information at a September meeting.

Monday's agenda included a long list of certified and classified employment names as well as resignations and extracurricular employments.

The consent agenda included multiple field trips and fundraisers, the district writing plan, out of district travel for the superintendent, monthly reports, the superintendent's personal growth plan and FMLA notifications. All of those items were approved with a single vote.

The consent items approved by the board included three policy changes all related to maternity leave. The

board also approved the federal cash statement of assurance, the federal statement of assurance and the FY 20 annual financial report and balance sheets along with the approval to dispose of small Dixon playground equipment.

What appeared to be a short session for the board with business concluded in about 20 minutes, grew to a meeting that lasted an hour and 20 minutes when several community members addressed the board during the public comment section. Over the years that portion of the meeting has been on the agenda for early comments, but in July was moved to the end of the agenda. Monday night during the public comments four or five individuals raised questions about the recent OEA investigation of three board members.

Dr. Karen Hobgood Mackey asked the board "in the spirit of transparency and best practices" that they look at their personnel policy and on future board agendas indicate in the personnel report which employees are new hires and which are transfers. She noted that the agenda makes it appear that every employee listed (approximately 62 listed as employment, resignations, extracurricular are new hires) are new hires when some of them are actually transfers.

Mackey also told the board, "I believe the open meetings and

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OEA Completes Investigation Of WC School Board Members

Through an open records request, The Sebree Banner obtained a copy of the Kentucky Office of Education Accountability's (OEA) months long investigation of three members of the Webster County Board of Education. That investigation started in late 2025 after community members and others began submitting complaints to OEA regarding rumors that then superintendent Aaron Harrell's contract would not be renewed. By the beginning of 2026, those rumors seemed to become a reality as community members, educators and business leaders attended board meetings and addressed the board with their displeasure over those rumors. From February through April, parents, former students and school personnel attended meetings with crowds for several meetings so large the meetings were moved to a larger location. Ultimately, Harrell's contract was not renewed and Michael Gooch was selected in May to fill the superintendent's seat.

In the Banner's open records request the newspaper asked for both the final report and for the total number of complaints the state agency received; however, in the release of the report, OEA Acting Deputy Director Bryan Jones noted that it is the agency's policy to release only the final investigative reports, citing several KRS that support that practice. Other material such as the complaints themselves, investigative notes, and correspondence do not have to be disclosed.

The final report indicates a number of allegations of improper activity committed by board members David Asher, Amanda Coomes and Melony Hobgood were investigated. The report includes the allegations, the findings, OEA's conclusions and resolutions for the issues.

Because of the attention the situation and the board's actions drew from late 2025 to May 2026, and in fairness to community members and Webster County Schools, The Sebree Banner has chosen to run the report in its entirety to their will be no misunderstanding of the outcome of OEA's actions. That report can be found on pages 5, 6 and 7 of this week's paper. A brief summary of some of the allegations and findings appear below, but readers should review the complete document to have an understanding of the issues investigated, the findings, the board members' justifications for their actions and the resolution issued by OEA.

Briefly, complaints against Asher alleged he missed excessive meetings and was no longer a resident of the district which he was elected to represent. Records show he missed nine of 39 meetings but those absences were not consecutive; thus, he did not violate the attendance statute. In regards to his place of residence OEA found no evidence that Asher had changed his residence. The complete conclusions are contained in the report which starts of page five of this issue.

Allegations against Hobgood related to her serving on the board of education and her husband working as an assistant football coach. The timeline for her election, her husband's resignation as a paid assistant and Mrs. Hobgood's roles in the football booster club are also addressed in the report but no violation of the law was found.

Questions were raised and allegations were brought concerning Amanda Coomes impermissibly conducting personal business from

school district property and not being in compliance with school district policy regarding the use of school facilities for the youth basketball league. Questions were also raised concerning Coomes' at home businesses and her management of fundraisers for the Dugout Club, the sale of items with the school mascot designs, and with the use of facilities for youth basketball without a proper contract with the district. OEA found that relevant parts of district policies use were not adhered to. The report indicates the district has not required or enforced the submission of a formal facilities agreement and that both Coomes and the district violated the district usage policy over a period of many years.

Allegations also included Coomes and Hobgood's possible interference with school operations and personnel matters by being overly present in district school buildings, communicating with each other during board meetings, being inappropriately involved in personnel issues and interfering with day-to-day operations. Of major note is the use of the two board members' "swipe cards." Board members' badges allow them access to all district buildings. Records show that from November 30, 2025 to February 28, 2026, Hobgood used her badge 47 times to swipe into the board office, WCMS, WCHS and WCATC within a three-month span. Twenty-six of the swipes accessed an exterior door or classroom door rather than the main entrance with some of those days falling on holidays or weekends.

Records show Coomes used her badge to swipe into the central office, Providence Elementary, WCMS and WCHS 40 days during the three months specified resulting in 199 badge swipes; 69 swipes provided access to a classroom door or an exterior door, not a main entrance. Some of the entries occurred on weekends and evenings. Both board members provided OEA with justifications for accessing the buildings, but interviews with the two reveal they do not sign in to the buildings as a visitor with front office personnel. The report includes questions raised about who issued the badges and provided district-wide access.

Documentation also shows that there are instances of Coomes questioning the superintendent regarding personnel decisions/assignments, professional development programs, and curriculum choices. The findings on all of the above allegations and issues are found in the complete investigative report, along with board policies that related to the allegations.

While OEA found no violations regarding some of the allegations against Asher, Coomes and Hobgood, they did find that Coomes violated district policy regarding use of district facilities for an outside organization, and she is directed to obtain two hours of training from an OEA approved trainer on "Outside Use of District Facilities," with proof required by October 1, 2026. Both Coomes and Hobgood must also obtain two hours of training from an OEA approved trainer on "Appropriate Access of School Property," with proof of training provided to OEA by October 1, 2026. Superintendent Michael Gooch is also required to provide OEA with a copy of a directive indicating which district official(s) are in charge of issuing badges to district personnel. That directive is due to OEA by October 1, 2026.

Plea Entered In Webster County Circuit Court

Michael David Gray appeared in Webster County Circuit Court on August 20, before the honorable Judge Daniel Heady to withdraw his not guilty plea and enter a plea of guilty to five charges.

Gray entered the guilty

plea on charges of first-degree possession of a controlled substance, third or greater offense, methamphetamine; drug paraphernalia buy/possess; no/expired registration plates; failure of nonowner/operator to maintain required

insurance, first offense and improper equipment.

Forty-four-year old Gray was adjudged guilty of all four charges and sentenced to one-year incarceration on count one; 365 days on count two and issued a \$250 fine on count three. He was sentenced to 90

days, 12 months DUI suspension on county four and issued a \$100 fine on count five with the sentences to run concurrently for a total sentence of two years, but run consecutively with any other sentences. Court costs of \$165 was waived per KRS 453.190(2).