

Challenge Academy Helps Make Fall Fest A Big Success

Harlan County Tourism issued a huge thank you to the Appalachian Challenge Academy for helping make the weekend's Fall Fest 2026 a success. From hosting festival games and bringing smiles to families throughout the day, to rolling up their sleeves and helping with cleanup afterward, these cadets went above and beyond. Their hard work, dedication, and willingness to give back to the community was much appreciated.

HCHS Student, Skyler Rutherford, Selected For Prestigious University of Louisville Civics Program

The McConnell Center at the University of Louisville is pleased to host 20 high-achieving sophomore and junior-level high school students from across Kentucky for a selective, year-long experience designed to prepare young citizens for an active role in civic life.

Participants were selected based on their strong academic records and their expressed interest in civic and social studies-related career fields.

Among those is Harlan County High School sophomore, Skylar Rutherford.

"It is refreshing to see so many of our young citizens taking an active role in broadening their civic education," said Meghan Waters, Director of External Education at the McConnell Center. "We will work to equip these students with the tools and skills they will need to be informed, engaged leaders in civic life and to positively shape the future for Kentucky and for America."

The institute consists of six immersive Saturday sessions over the course of the academic year, as well as a summer leadership experience. Students will participate in a variety of activities, including mock trials, legislative debates, policy-making challenges, and diplomatic crisis simulations. They will also engage in advocacy projects addressing real-world issues while developing leadership and communication skills.

Throughout the program, students will be exposed to careers in law, government, public policy, history, economics, international relations, journalism, social studies, education, and public service. Students will use the knowledge, experience, and leadership skills gained to prepare for future careers in civic and social studies-related fields.

This program is offered in partnership with the Center for Gifted Studies at Western Kentucky University. Dr. Justin Mitchell, a former McConnell Center Teacher Scholar and award-winning social studies educator with more than 15 years of classroom experience, has spearheaded the initiative.

In addition to Rutherford, sophomores in the program include: David Abatu (duPont Manual High); Allyson Acuna (South Oldham High); Elizabeth Besik (Mercy Academy); Stella Van Gansbeke (Assumption High); Christopher Helton-Weick (Meade County High); Emily Howton (George Rogers Clark High); Cara Meade (Garrard County High); Vinaya Rajanee (Ballard High); and Blake Spaulding (Frankfort High).

Junior participants include: Chenumi Abeysinghe (Highlands High); Carter Anderson (Ashland Paul Blazer High); Harper Jennejohn (Bullitt Central High); Ethan Koster (Newport High); John Kurtz (Owensboro Catholic High); Stephen Luke Matthies (Ashland Paul Blazer High); Ella McIntosh (duPont Manual High); Nishtha Patel (Atherton High); Rosemarie Purtell (Covington Latin); and Benedict Thacker (St. Albertus Magnus Academy).



HCHS Sophomore Skylar Rutherford

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: *Voters will decide on constitutional amendment*

By Rep. Mitch Whitaker

When Kentucky voters cast their ballots in this year's General Election, they will have the opportunity to decide on a proposed constitutional amendment concerning the governor's authority to issue pardons and commute sentences.

The current Kentucky Constitution is our state's fourth and 135-years old. It is far more detailed than those of other states, with over 260 sections and detailed provisions that other states address through legislation. The document is significant not only for how old and long it is, but also for the way it reflects the social and political priorities and culture of the late 19th century. For example, the original version limited voting rights to white males age 21 and over. And, while it has been amended more than 40 times since 1891, much of its language is still outdated. Voters have considered amendments 12 times (16 proposed amendments) over the past 30 years.

If approved by voters, the proposed amendment on this year's ballot would prohibit any Kentucky governor from granting a pardon or commuting a sentence during the 60 days immediately preceding a general election and during the transition period between an election and the beginning of the next administration. The proposal would not eliminate the governor's existing constitutional authority to grant pardons or reduce sentences outside of that restricted period.

The exact language of the amendment reads as follows:

Are you in favor of limiting a Governor's ability to grant pardons or commute sentences by prohibiting him or her from granting pardons or commuting sentences during the time period beginning 60 days prior to the general election at which the Governor is elected, and ending when the Governor is sworn in for that term by amending the Constitution of Kentucky as stated below?

It is proposed that Section 77 of the Constitution of Kentucky be amended to read as follows:

(1) The Governor shall have power to:

(a) Remit fines and forfeitures; and

(b) Commute sentences and grant reprieves and pardons, except:

1. In case of impeachment; or
2. For the period beginning sixty days prior to the date of the gubernatorial election and ending the fifth Tuesday succeeding the election.

(2) The Governor shall file with each application therefor a statement of the reasons for his or her decision thereon, which application and statement shall always be open to public inspection.

(3) In cases of treason, the Governor shall have power to grant reprieves until the end of the next session of the General Assembly, in which the power of pardoning shall be vested; but he or she shall have no power to remit the fees of the Clerk, Sheriff or Commonwealth's Attorney in penal or criminal cases.

Under Kentucky's Constitution, the governor has broad clemency powers. A pardon can forgive the legal consequences of a conviction, while a commutation can reduce a person's sentence. These powers are separate from the judicial process and can affect decisions made by law enforcement, prosecutors, juries and judges.

The proposed amendment is intended to establish a constitutional restriction on when those powers may be exercised. It would apply to every governor going forward. The proposed amendment does not eliminate the governor's authority to grant pardons or commute sentences. Instead, it places limits on when that authority may be exercised, raising a practical question about timing.

The issue has received increased attention because of the use of executive clemency near the end of gubernatorial administrations. In December 2019, then-Governor Matt Bevin issued more than 600 pardons and commutations shortly before leaving office. Several of those decisions – as well as the decision-making process itself - generated significant public controversy and scrutiny. In the final days of his administration in December 2015, Governor Steve Beshear issued 197 pardons and commuted six sentences, far more than he had issued earlier in his administration. And, in December 2007, Governor Ernie Fletcher issued 101 pardons and commutations as he was leaving office.

Interesting enough, when Governor Paul Patton was leaving office in 2003, he and his staff reportedly determined that almost 200 pardon applications were justified. However, he told a reporter with the Louisville Courier Journal that he chose not to grant them out of caution that it might appear like political favoritism if any were campaign donors.

The proposal has also been considered over multiple legislative sessions. The sponsor of the legislation that placed it on the ballot has pursued changes for several years. The amendment ultimately received bipartisan support in the General Assembly before being placed before voters.

As with any constitutional amendment, the decision ultimately rests with Kentucky voters. The question on the ballot gives voters the opportunity to determine whether these additional constitutional restrictions should become part of the governor's clemency authority.

As always, I can be reached anytime through the toll-free message line in Frankfort at 1-800-372-7181. You can also contact me via email at Mitchum.Whitaker@kylegislature.gov.