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Why No Cell Phones In WC Schools?



The Answer Might Come As A Surprise

During the most recent session of the Kentucky General Assembly, state legislators introduced and passed legislation prohibiting cell phone use in classrooms during instructional time (HB 208). The move has sent school districts and school administrators scrambling to implement a plan for cell phone use that will work despite the children who have to follow that plan having been born and continue to live in a world driven by technology. As early as 2005, students were beginning to bring cell phones to school; now it is not unusual for children of all ages—even first graders to have a cell phone in their backpack.

It is also not unusual for parents to text or call their children during the school day, nor has it been unusual for students to text each other, bully others, instigate rumors or use their phone as a distraction when they should be learning, so in many ways eliminating cell phones being out during instructional time should create a more meaningful learning environment.

Recently, Webster County High School principal Jarrod Hankins presented his school's plan for deterring cell phone use, and while the plan does not eliminate phone use altogether, it is hoped that students will adhere to school's new guidelines and adhere to state law.

In his presentation, Hankins showed a locking aluminum case with foam inserts that students will be asked to place their phones into as they enter their classrooms. Teachers will be able to lock the case until class is ready to dismiss. Should the school have to be evacuated for a fire drill, an actual fire or other catastrophic event, the case has an easy carry handle and the teacher can carry the case out as the students exit the building.

For Hankins and other administrators, there is a need to provide justification for the law and explain that to students and parents, so he recently attended a workshop called "The Phone Free Experience." The program was presented by personnel at Fern Creek High School in Louisville, and according to Hankins, his experience at the session clarified much of why House Bill 208 may be a good thing.

While Fern Creek prohibits phone use the entirety of the school day, Webster County has opted to allow phone use during breaks (between classes during lunch), but Fern Creek's plan seems to be working on several levels.

First the workshop provided information related to determining exactly how much screen time a child gets each day on a device—the evidence of that is in the phone's settings for any parent to monitor, and it might be surprising to know the number of hours—not minutes—a student spends looking at the screen of their phone.

Why does that matter? Because studies show that excessive screen time is related to increased internalization of problems, reduces working memory of a student to transfer information to long term memory and clearly shows a decline in academic performance.

Fern Creek implemented their "no phone" policy in the 2024-25 school year, and already they have seen marked improvement in many aspects of school life. The 'no phone policy' begins each day at 8:40 at Fern Creek and ends at 3:20 with phones brought to school placed in locked pouches—there are also no headphones, air pods or other speakers allowed. Shortly after phones are placed in their pouches, the teach-

ers conduct a "phone sweep" and non-compliant students are sent from class for disciplinary action.

There are exceptions to the policy but those must be cleared through school administration and include medical monitoring, accommodation plans and pre-approved special class projects.

Initially at Fern Creek the school created phone safe zones that could be accessed during lunch, but the students themselves chose not to use their phones during that time, so now the school day is totally "phone free."

Data shows that grades for Fern Creek students improved in just one year. The number of students making A's jumped by three percent as did B's and C's while the number of students making D's declined and the number of failures reduced by 5 percent while the GPA average improved by over two percentage points.

The academic difference is also noted in the school's benchmark scores with 40 more students meeting benchmark in math than two years prior and 26 more meeting the reading benchmark. Eighty-seven more students met the English language skills benchmark. In English that is a 7.5 percent increase while math is a 7.3 percent increase and reading is a 7.1 percent increase. Science scores came up by 4.4 percent.

Fern Creek also saw an improvement in behavior with incidents down by 11 percent and phone violations down by five percent. The school also experienced fewer major infractions with fights, and other class four violations reduced by several hundred. Drug incidents and assaults have also declined.

To ensure their data was presented correctly, the school went directly to students for them to weigh in on the policy through a student and teacher survey (the survey was used three times during the year) From the spring of 2024 to the spring of 2025, 85 percent of teachers indicated on their survey that that felt more positive about their job—that was a 17 percent improvement. 88 percent of teachers noted that the rules are facilitating student learning. Teachers also noted that they believe the school will improve even more this year and that positive attitudes among teachers will continue to rise.

Sixty-five percent of students expressed a positive attitude about the policy and 71 percent said they now feel like they are part of the school community. Sixty-six percent said they are more engaged in their classroom and 58 percent feel less anxious at school with 66 percent enjoying school more since the policy's implementation. Sixty-nine percent of students said they now feel more socially connected.

Jarrod Hankins found answers to the questions he believes he will have to answer when a student is caught with a phone during instructional time, and he is hopeful that more students will take advantage of the opportunities classroom activities, instruction and discussion can have on their lives.

Hankins told The Sebree Banner that attending the workshop gives him hope that Webster County staff, students and parents will embrace the "no phone during instructional time" policy and use it to benefit the academic atmosphere at the school.

Perhaps the policy will be a way for students to reconnect with others in face to face conversations and be more "present" in their everyday lives. And perhaps, school districts will soon see the impact that phone free education can have on behavior and learning.

WC Fiscal Court Accepts Tax Rates; Makes Appointments

Following a somewhat contentious public hearing regarding the proposed county tax rate, Webster County Fiscal Court approved the rate for the county as well as rates for five other county taxing districts.

Five residents were on hand to raise questions about the proposed county rate of 18.8 cents per \$100 assessment. The county could have opted to adopt the compensating rate of 18.3 or the four percent rate of 19.0. Richard Leslie asked if the court had considered an increase, but Judge/Executive Steve Henry noted magistrates chose to leave the rate the same as it has been since 2018, a move that requires a public hearing. Henry noted that because the tax rate is based on growth, and the county saw growth, the court prefers to leave the rate as it has been for seven years.

Leslie cited his property taxes as having gone up almost \$4,000 between 2023 and 2024. Moving away from a discussion about the tax rate, Leslie said several people in county government received significant raises and he would like to see their job description. Those kinds of requests can be obtained through an open records request.

Will Leslie asked the court what county taxes are used for. He was told "county service." Those services include law enforcement, ambulance service, road department services as well as other services for the public. W. Leslie also questioned whether or not any "new items" (projects) have been added to the county budget. Henry explained that the county budget is due in Frankfort in June, but it is not until August that the county learns what kinds and how much revenue they will receive from the state. He added that the county does not "take in a significant amount of the taxes (an individual pays)." Those tax dollars are distributed to the state, the county, the school dis-

trict, the health department, the library, the extension service, and the ambulance service, all of which set their own tax rate that is accepted by county government.

Will Leslie also questioned by property owners must pay taxes on the same property year after year with Henry noting that is a legislative issue. Henry also reminded those present at the meeting that for many years the county helped fund programs that are not in the county, but that is no longer the case and those payments have been discontinued.

Questions also arose about health insurance for county employees. The county only pays insurance on employees, no insurance is provided for employees' families, Henry said, adding that the cost of a family plan is about \$1200, an amount not feasible for a county employee to pay. Henry added, "I don't like taxes either, but we (the county) struggle to make ends meet."

Questions were then asked about Canaan Ridge Park and whether it will be self-sustaining "or is it going to be like the golf course in Providence," one individual asked. The need for a park director was also questioned with Henry responding "Whose going to do it?" The judge/executive also emphasized that the county is "not broke, but we must be (financially) careful."

Other questions about the park led Henry to say, "Every dollar put into the park comes out of LGEA (coal severance) and has not come from (the county's) general fund. "This park that should have been one of the best things for Webster County, has received nothing but criticism," Henry said. He added, "I bust my butt for this county going to Frankfort (to seek funding); I've brought in millions of dollars for this county. I'm never home, never with my family."

Some of those present for the

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Pleas Entered In Webster Circuit Court

Webster County Circuit Court convened on August 7, with the honorable Judge Daniel Heady hearing plea from several individuals.

In the case of Blake D. Crawford, the defendant withdrew his not guilty plea and entered a plea of guilty to charges of failure to transfer registration of a motor vehicle; failure of owner to maintain required insurance security second or greater offense; driving motor vehicle while license suspended and failure to report traffic accident. Crawford was adjudged guilty of the charges and ordered to pay fines in the amount of \$100; the court cost was suspended per KRS 453.190(2). Crawford was sentenced to 12 months on count one; 12 months on count two; one year on count three and a \$100 fine on count four with the sentences to run con-

currently with one another but consecutively with any other sentences.

Roger J. Belt appeared before Judge Heady where he was granted an order of pre-trial diversion of a Class D felony; the diversion is for a period of five years. He must pay a monthly supervision fee of \$25; and probation and parole will conduct home visits. Belt is prohibited from possession a handgun or any other firearms and may not consume alcohol or drugs; he is also subject to random testing. Belt is to enter drug court if accepted; complete drug and alcohol assessment and complete all treatment recommendations. Belt was initially charged with first degree possession of a controlled substance, first offense methamphetamine and entered a plea of guilty to the charge.