

# THE NEWS-ENTERPRISE



**SPORTS**  
Nelson County edges Central Hardin, LaRue for region wrestling title  
**PAGE B1**



**FEATURES**  
Ink, eat, repeat: This 3-day fest is more than tattoos  
**PAGE A4**



**TODAY**  
Mostly cloudy  
**43 - 33**  
**COMPLETE REPORT, A2**

TUESDAY

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## Ky. children keep dying from preventable ODs

BY SARAH LADD  
KENTUCKY LANTERN

This story discusses child abuse. Report child abuse to Kentucky's Statewide Child Abuse Hotline at 1-877-597-233. Kentucky's poison control line is 800-222-1222.

Kentucky children are increasingly ingesting and overdosing on unsafe substances like cannabinoids and fentanyl, with the rate increasing by more than 100% in the last five years, a new report shows.

The annual report from Kentucky's Child Fatality and Near Fatality External Review Panel shows an increase in physical child abuse as well among the 72 child fatalities and 176 near fatalities in fiscal year 2024. The panel only reviews fatal and near-fatal cases. There were nearly 15,000 cases of child maltreatment in Kentucky in 2024, according to a federal report released in January, including several in Hardin County.

At a sentencing hearing last month in Hardin Circuit Court for the man convicted in the 2024 overdose death of their 17-year-old Elizabethtown son, the cries of a mother and father



SARAH LADD/Kentucky Lantern

**Coloring pages for children inside a forensic interview room at the Family & Children's Place, where staff discuss cases of abuse with child survivors on Feb. 11.**

set the tone for how tragic but preventable some of these deaths can be.

"I carry my grief and rage so close to the surface and I have an aching hole in my heart. I feel the trauma has aged me by 10 years over these last 10 months," Kristen Willett testified, telling the court how she

is still filled with grief and rage from the overdose death of her son.

Hayden Willett, a senior at Elizabethtown Independent High School, died on Dec. 18, 2024 after ingesting a fentanyl-laced Percocet pill given to him by another teenager.

"The morning I found Hayden unresponsive in his bed, yelling his

name over and over again – it was the worst day of my life. My son couldn't tell me that he was sorry," Kristen said. "No parent should ever have to bury their child."

Prosecutors in the case said the death could have been prevented.

### BEHIND THESE DEATHS

Findings show a lack of parental and caregiver education around the dangers of routine medications as well as system failures, including packaging of cannabinoids that fails to adequately communicate the risks products pose to children and mistakes made by the state in investigating allegations.

Dr. Christina Howard, a child abuse pediatrician and a member of the panel, said the ingestion and overdose cases investigated by the panel are "absolutely preventable."

While THC and medical cannabis products are available to adults, "we do know that they can be dangerous to children when they're accessed," Howard said. "And I think that's kind of what we want the general population to know: You ... have things in your home that are dangerous. Tylenol can be dangerous

to kids. Making sure that those are stored in a way that children cannot access them is very important."

Packaging and marketing of these products also needs improvement, she said. They need to clearly communicate to consumers that products that may look appealing to children, like a cannabis brownie, can seriously hurt them.

The Child Fatality and Near Fatality External Review Panel was created in 2012 to conduct comprehensive reviews of child deaths and serious injuries from abuse or neglect. The independent panel of physicians, judges, lawyers, police, legislators and social service and health professionals meets regularly to analyze such cases. It produces an annual report on its findings and recommendations for improvements.

### KEY FINDINGS IN THE REPORT

The latest report, which is more than 100 pages, details findings based on incidents in the 2024 fiscal year, which was July 1, 2023–June 30, 2024. The findings include:

- 98 children ingested or overdosed on dangerous substances.

SEE CHILDREN/PAGE A8

## Memories made at the father-daughter dance

BY KODEE BRINEGAR  
THE NEWS-ENTERPRISE

Father figures brought their daughters and granddaughters to the dancefloor at Colvin Community Center in Radcliff on Saturday for a night of fun.

Brandon Welker brought his daughter, Hannah, 10, from Vine Grove to the Father-Daughter Sweetheart dance to enjoy their first dance together.

"I've kind of always wanted to do it, being as I'm a girl dad," Brandon said. "I think we, as dads, get caught up trying to work all the time and we forget that just one-on-one time like this is worth its weight in gold. So I definitely am all for it."

Hannah said she was looking forward to making good memories with her dad and for the giveaways.

Just across the dance floor was Garrien Martin and his 7-year-old daughter, Charlotte, said this was their second father-daughter dance event.

Charlotte said she was looking forward to dancing



KODEE BRINEGAR/The News-Enterprise

**While attending a father-daughter dance in Radcliff Saturday, Garrien Martin twirls his daughter, Charlotte, 7, while on the dance floor at Colvin Community Center.**

with her father.

"I'm looking forward to definitely creating the memories and getting pictures to look back on," her father said.

Some dads brought multiple daughters to enjoy the dance and teach them a lesson in respect.

"I like the idea of doing that and being able to show our daughters what it's supposed to be like and how a man is supposed to treat them," said Tori Bieux, who brought his two daughters, Kaylee, 8, and Mila, 4. "I hope this sets a

SEE MEMORIES/PAGE A6



KODEE BRINEGAR/The News-Enterprise

**Brandon Welker and his 10-year-old daughter, Hannah, enjoy dancing together Saturday at Colvin Community Center in Radcliff for their first father-daughter dance.**

## Officials consider name of new school ahead of groundbreaking

BY GREG THOMPSON  
THE NEWS-ENTERPRISE

Groundbreaking for a new elementary school in Vine Grove, adjacent to the campus of North Middle School, is set for 10 a.m. Thursday on Trojan Way.

The new building will replace North Park Elementary in Radcliff, which was constructed more than 50 years ago.

Naming the new elementary is still underway.

"We traditionally seek input from staff, parents of the children attending the school, students, and community

through a survey," said Hardin County Schools Communications Specialist John Wright, who indicated the name of the new school could be finalized in a month of two.

A survey has already been sent out to suggest names for the 103,000-square-foot facility. The list of names is given to the site-based decision-making council, which selects its top 5, and those are then sent to the Board of Education, which narrows it down and makes the selection.

Board members had their first

SEE OFFICIALS/PAGE A6



Courtesy of HCS/JRA Architects

**An overall front rendering of the new elementary school replacing North Park Elementary in Radcliff. The school will share property with North Middle School along Ky. 313, or Joe Prather Highway, in Vine Grove.**



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### INDEX

CALENDAR, A4  
CLASSIFIEDS, B4  
COMICS, B7  
FEATURES, A4  
OPINION, A7

KIDS PAGE, B8  
MONEY, A5  
PUZZLES, B5  
SPORTS, B1-B4  
WEATHER, A2

### OBITUARIES

Martha Eleanor Clark, 100  
Alma Ruth Colyer, 97

PAGE A6

### SINCE YOU ASKED

Results of The News-Enterprise online poll as of 5 p.m. Monday. Which school are you rooting for in the post-season high school basketball tournaments?

Central Hardin: 22.5% • John Hardin: 17.4% • North Hardin: 15.2% • Elizabethtown: 15.6% • LaRue County: 3.6% • Meade County: 5.1% • Other or none: 27.5%

**TODAY'S QUESTION:** What sport did you enjoy watching the most during the Winter Olympics?

### PUBLICATION SCHEDULE

The News-Enterprise produces a new edition each Monday through Saturday with the exception of some federal holidays. Print editions are available on Tuesday, Friday and Saturday. All six days can be accessed by subscribers at thenewsenprise.com. Call 270-769-1200 for assistance establishing an online account or related questions.