

SCHOOL, from 8

In 2024, 67% of Kentucky’s fourth graders weren’t proficient in reading. That’s up from 65% in 2019. That same year, most — 76% — of eighth graders in the state weren’t proficient in math, up from 71% in 2019, the Lantern previously reported.

This law’s implementation varies by school — some have banned cell phones all day, others have allowed them during lunch, for example.

“While we knew that there was a lot of inappropriate communication going on during school, we may not have realized the level or depth of toxicity,” Brooks said.

In 2023, the United States surgeon general said social media use among youth can have both positive and negative effects. For example, youth may be able to find community and connection through social media that they otherwise lacked. But their mental health can decline with that use, and they can have increased anxiety and depression.

“You know that every adolescent thought that the world would end as we knew it, and they survived, and maybe they’re even thriving,” Brooks said of HB 208’s cell phone limits. “They may not be able to admit it, because that’s probably not cool, but I think it’s almost given them a sense of freedom and protection during the school day.”

Jim Flynn, the executive director of the Kentucky Association of School Superintendents, said that schools are already seeing students opt out of using phones during down time when they’re permitted, choosing instead to talk to one another.

“The results will be more clear as we do this longer,” he said. Some schools have already seen “fewer fights and fewer conflicts and disruptions that oftentimes are fueled by their phones and social media apps and that sort of thing.”

In some cases, kids turn in “burner” phones and keep their cell phones.

“But, if they’re keeping it out of sight and not using it, then that’s really the desired outcome, right?” Flynn said. “They can focus and not be distracted by the phone.”

TEACHER AND STUDENT COMMUNICATION

Senate Bill 181 mandates that all electronic communication by employees and volunteers at public schools with students be limited to traceable systems. Its aim is to combat sexual

grooming and cut out inappropriate communication between adults and children.

Brooks with Kentucky Youth Advocates called this law the “make a lot of noise bill.” More than 13,000 have signed a petition asking for enforcement of the law to be paused.

In August, Gov. Andy Beshear, who signed SB 181 into law, said he is “taking their concerns seriously, the Lexington Herald-Leader reported.

The petition says that SB 181 “infringes upon fundamental rights and freedoms guaranteed to all Kentuckians,” including “the right to communicate digitally with friends, family and social networks outside of work,” “the ability to seek and maintain secondary employment or supplemental income beyond school hours,” and “the freedom to engage with civic, cultural, religious or political groups not affiliated with their roles as educators or school staff.”

The petition’s creator did not respond to an email from the Lantern about the concerns.

“I’m very bifurcated in the sense that I do not want to hear that ‘this is a hassle, and therefore we shouldn’t do it,’” Brooks said. “I don’t want pragmatics to override the principle involved.”

Still, there are some “common sense concerns” out there, Brooks said, and he fully expects to see a 2.0 version of the law in 2026 “that adjusts at the margins of this legislation without diluting or abrogating the important intent at play.” “Adult convenience should never take precedence over the well-being of kids,” Brooks said. “And there is more than a little of that notion driving much of the discussion. Yes, this bill does disrupt the pattern and habits of many. Yes, new processes always carry hassles and hiccups. But let’s not lose sight of the seminal issue here — the safety of young people.”

Flynn’s organization, the Kentucky Association of School Superintendents, supports the intent of SB 181 but has raised some concerns about unintended consequences of the law as it’s written. For example, the organization is worried that in restricting communication between students and school employees, the state is hindering the ability of children to have mentorships with trusted adults.

“That’s one of our chief concerns — is that, unintentionally, we’re going to make it harder for those kinds of relationships that are so critical and so important, while in essence, bad actors might just find other

avenues,” Flynn said. While “we want to make it harder for the bad actors” to harm children, he said, it’s important not to “stifle” positive relationships and mentorships.

The Kentucky Association of School Superintendents is also concerned that the law doesn’t take into account jobs or volunteer work outside the school system that might lead students and teachers to interact — babysitting, youth groups and more. Additionally, the cost of purchasing safe communication technology can detract from other needs in schools.

The organization is asking Tichenor to make reforms in the 2026 session.

Additionally, Flynn said, the General Assembly should find a way to pay for the cost of safe communication technology, so it doesn’t remain an “unfunded mandate.”

Tichenor said in a statement shared with the Lantern that “I have a working draft and have been in conversation with stakeholders taking their suggestions and input into needed changes. I am hopeful time will allow for a presentation of the changes in one of the upcoming interim committees.”

In an opinion piece shared online by Senate Republicans, Tichenor said that she is “committed to refining the language while ensuring the law protects students and upholds the integrity of Kentucky’s education system.”

“Clarification may be needed in several areas, including which family members are exempt (such as stepparents, in-laws, and cousins), the definition of ‘school volunteer,’ and guidance on using platforms in group settings, such as texting or social media,” Tichenor’s op-ed says. “Questions have also been raised about how districts should honor parent-written consent for outside communication.”

The Kentucky Education Association issued guidance for its members that included recommendations to never download school-designated apps on personal cell phones and “do not worry about hypothetical situations but do contact KEA if you have a real-life conflict with the new law before you act.”

Meanwhile, several colleges and university spokespeople said they don’t believe this new law applies to dual credit instructors employed by higher education institutions. Dual credit allows high school students to earn a college credit alongside their secondary education.

Blair Hess, the vice president of marketing and communications for the Kentucky Community & Technical College System, told the Lantern that “since SB 181 is a secondary education bill, not a post-secondary education bill, it does not affect KCTCS employees teaching dual credit classes, only secondary education employees teaching dual credit.”

KCTCS has worked with school districts “to make sure platforms we need for dual credit are approved in accordance with SB 181 if a secondary teacher is the instructor for the course administered by KCTCS,” Hess said.

The University of Louisville, too, said the law “only applies to school district employees.”

“High school teachers who teach a UofL dual credit course must use the district’s communication system,” spokesman John Karman said. “However, a UofL instructor who teaches a dual credit course does not need to use the communication system, and students can communicate with the instructor using standard UofL methods. Since the requirement attaches to the personnel teaching a course, and not the location of instruction, it doesn’t matter if a UofL instructor teaches a course at a high school; that instructor is exempt from the bill’s requirements.”

Kristi Willett, a University of Kentucky spokesperson, said employees who “also are employed or volunteering by providing programs and education in K-12 schools are required to cooperate with a school district’s specific requirements under SB 181.”

“The University of Kentucky is committed to complying with the new law and to the protection and safeguarding of all students,” Willett said.

SEXTORTION EDUCATION

During the 2025 legislative session, Kentucky made sextortion a felony and required schools to teach children in an age-appropriate way about the practice. Sexual extortion is when a perpetrator obtains a sexually explicit photo and threatens to release it if the victim doesn’t meet their demands, which could be monetary, sexual or other kinds of blackmail.

Brooks said “it is clearly too early to give a ‘grade’ to the sextortion awareness initiative” since this school year is just beginning “but it is not too early to affirm its importance.”

“I know that schools feel as if they have a lot of mandates on their plate,” Brooks said. “I do not disagree. But I also would respectfully assert that this is the kind of support for kids that schools are uniquely positioned to deliver — and deliver they must.”

Prevent Child Abuse Kentucky created materials for use in educating students about sextortion, including a poster, videos made in partnership with the Kentucky State Police, materials for parents and a coloring book for young children using state police K-9 officers as storytellers to appeal to young children. Schools can either print that coloring book or order it for free.

Emmaline Hoskins, the media relations and digital assets coordinator for Prevent Child Abuse Kentucky, said the materials can help schools not have

to “reinvent the wheel.” “Teachers already have enough on their plate as is, so I wanted to make something that was quick, ready to use and accessible, but at the same time, I did want the resources to really connect with students, whether they’re in kindergarten or high school,” Hoskins said. “I want prevention to feel approachable and relevant to the students and the teachers.”

It’s unclear how many schools are using Prevent Child Abuse Kentucky’s education materials, which are online and were designed to abide by the law’s requirements.

“We want to make sure that teachers know that they are not carrying that burden alone,” Seyfred said. “We hope that teachers are aware of (our resources).”

COACHES GET ‘GAME READY’

TO COMBAT CHILD ABUSE

Senate Bill 120 offers a “quiet but important step of progress” for kids, Brooks said. This law requires that coaches and administrators be informed during training sessions that they have a duty to report instances of child neglect or abuse.

“It recognizes the importance of coaches specifically in combating child abuse,” Brooks said. “And while coaches who are full time teachers no doubt receive critical training already, the formalized training required in this bill is especially important as schools increasingly turn to volunteers, para-professionals and part time employees to staff athletic programs. Every coach regardless of their employment status needs to be ‘game ready’ to spot abuse around their student athletes.”



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