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For Immediate Release
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Harlan County schools open Wednesday; new policies, procedures in place for enhanced student health, safety

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Harlan County students, parents and guardians, along with employees, will encounter some significant changes this school year resulting from new state laws designed to improve the health and safety of students.

The Kentucky State Legislature passed Senate Bill 1 earlier this year. Governor Matt Bevin signed it into law for the 2019-2020 school year, which opens in the Harlan County School District on Wednesday.

“There were a lot of requirements placed on schools and districts,” said Roark. “We have spent much of the summer planning and putting into place actions necessary to meet our responsibilities. Some are more drastic than others, but all were adopted with the goal of increased health and safety for students and staff.”

A major change is that the use of smoking, chewing tobacco and vaping materials is prohibited. Previous designated smoking areas are now smoking and vaping free zones as well. This regulation governs students, staff and all visitors to any indoor or outdoor facility and vehicles owned by the Harlan County School District.

“We are now tobacco free on all campuses,” he said. “This does affect our employees, students and fans attending our sporting events. Signage is in place. We are required to enforce this regulation.”

Repeated staff violations will lead to termination, he said. Repeat violations of visitors can lead to a ban from school events.

Principals and administrators have the protocol in place to address violations, including information cards on Kentucky Revised Statue 438.305 to give violators.

“I can’t emphasize enough how important it is that our community members and visitors work with us as we enforce this regulation,” he said.

In addition, any visitor to a school cannot enter the building until presenting valid photo identification. This can be a driver’s license or other government issued photo identification.

“If going into the building for any reason, you must report to the reception area in the front office and show an acceptable photo i.d. and state the purpose of your visit,” he said. “This impacts me, my staff, parents, and anyone else entering a school.”

Central office and school administrators have spent many hours this summer training and preparing for other significant changes that will continue to enhance school safety “that our district has worked hard on over the past two years,” said Roark.

While sheriff's deputies will continue to provide security on a daily basis, Roark said there are new initiatives behind the scenes that parents and visitors will not see firsthand -- all to make buildings and campuses even safer.

He stressed his the staff worked hard to become much more fluent in warning signs and early detection for potential problems.

"We have spent a significant amount of time and money to help ensure the physical and psychological safety, the well-being of our students," he said.

Teams from each school, the central office and the Harlan County Sheriff's Department trained together to learn extensive knowledge of threat assessment in the school settings.

Dusty Phelps, a licensed psychological practitioner behavioral specialist with the Southeast/South Central Kentucky Educational Cooperative, presented the program entitled Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines and developed by Dr. Dewy G. Cornell.

"The purpose of the program was to provide practical guidelines for school based teams to conduct threat assessments of students and other individuals who threaten to commit an act of violence," said Harlan County School Psychologist Stephanie Chitwood.

She said the goals are to prevent violence and to resolve conflicts or problems that underlie threatening behavior.

She said violence prevention is the first goal of threat assessment, but it is important to determine why anyone made a threat and to address the conflict or problem motivating the threat. This helps the school achieve its broader goal of helping students be successful in school.

"Resolving the student's conflict or problem is the first step of preventing violence," she said.

Each school has a threat assessment team trained in the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines, an approach originally developed and implemented by the FBI and Secret Service for matters of national security.

In addition to protecting the physical safety of students, HCPS is committed to protecting and securing the psychological safety of students.

Teachers and administrators from across the district attended a Youth Mental Health First Aid workshop. YMHFA is designed to teach how to help an adolescent (age 12-18) who is experiencing a mental health or addiction challenge or is in crisis, said Harlan County School Psychologist Leah Coots.

"The course introduces common mental health challenges for youth, reviews typical adolescent development, and teaches a 5-step action plan for how to help young people in both crisis and non-crisis situations," said Coots.

Topics covered include anxiety, depression, substance use, disorders in which psychosis may occur, disruptive behavior disorders (including AD/HD), and eating disorders.

Instructors Sarah Hansford and Amanda Smith, certified with the National Council for Behavioral Health, led the workshop

The district has staff who are certified YMHFA responders in most schools throughout the district.

Additionally, each school has created a trauma informed team to help implement strategies to build resilience and implement evidence based trauma informed practices in each school.

Teams were trained by the University of Kentucky College of Medicine Center on Trauma and Children.

"Our teams are also part of a learning collaborative, and have developed a plan to implement trauma informed approaches in each school," said Jill Harris, district school psychologist.

Teams learned how to identify effects of trauma, and how trauma can cause physiological changes to the brain and body, and how to build trust and corrective relationships through collaboration and empowerment of students.

Also, visitors to our district's schools will see "In God We Trust" signs placed near the entrance as required by the state legislature.