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KENTUCKY FAILS TO STOP ABUSE OF KIDS

A Courier Journal investigation found at least 80 cases of alleged child sexual misconduct by middle- and high-school coaches in 15 years

Stephanie Kuzydym Louisville Courier Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

On the final afternoon of July 2023, an ex-high school girls basketball coach stood in Jefferson circuit court as a judge arraigned him on charges of sexual abuse of a former player. • Earlier that same day, across the street in Jefferson district court, a judge arraigned a high school football coach on charges of sexual abuse of a student. • Both men were around age 40. • Both faced the same two additional charges: rape and sodomy. • Both alleged victims were 17.

Despite these striking similarities, their cases weren't connected. But two Louisville-area coaches formally charged on the same day is more than a coincidence.

Instead, The Courier Journal has found it's part of a pattern that plays out across Kentucky and the nation year after year ... and part of a problem that thrives on the silence of children, secrets of perpetrators and blindness to its warning signs by lawmakers, school administrators and even entire communities.

• • •

High-profile sex abuse cases, such as those involving Penn State's Jerry Sandusky or USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar, have rocked the national sports landscape, but when they happen at the middle- and high-school level, they're often anything but high-profile.

There's no central clearinghouse or database that lists all youth coaches who have been investigated or charged over their behavior with a minor. And the U.S. Center for SafeSport, a nonprofit created by Congress following Nassar's case, focuses solely on abuse in Olympic and Paralympic sports.

To determine the scope of the problem in the commonwealth, The Courier Journal combed through news reports, school personnel records, lawsuits, settlements and police investigations. The newspaper found at least 80 cases of alleged child sexual misconduct by Kentucky middle- and high-school coaches during the past 15 years.

The latest came just last month, when State Police arrested Estill County High School girls soccer and track coach Samuel Beeler on charges related to two players, including the rape of one.

In the last two years alone, at least six former Kentucky school coaches were indicted on charges related to child sex abuse for a total of 120 counts:

- Jefferson County Public Schools' Noe and Conway middle schools boys basketball coach Christopher Morris: 37 counts
 - JCPS's Manual High football coach Donnie Stoner: 20 counts
 - Christian Academy of Louisville's girls basketball coach Clarence Moore: 15 counts
 - Bardstown City Schools' football coach Jeremy Dale: six counts
 - Floyd County Schools girls basketball coach April Bradford: 19 counts
 - Rowan County High School girls soccer coach Andrew Zaheri: 23 counts
- In the same time period, at least two

▼ **Donnie Stoner appears in court Aug. 7, 2023, to plead not guilty to multiple counts, all related to allegations of sex with a female juvenile student. Stoner was removed as Manual's head football coach. Stoner appeared before Judge Melissa Logan Bellows in Jefferson Circuit Court to be arraigned on the charges. His attorney, also pictured, is Rob Eggert.**

MATT STONE/COURIER JOURNAL

others were charged with sending or showing obscene material to athletes:

- Bullitt East soccer coach Brian Davis, for allegedly showing nude photographs of himself to two female students during a school soccer camp in June 2023.
- JCPS's Butler High School assistant girls basketball coach Austin Williams, for allegedly sending a photo of his penis to a 16-year-old player and texting: "You want this d--- yet or what?"

A widely accepted, but now 20-year-old study on the prevalence of sex abuse in U.S. schools shows about 9.6% of students will experience "contact or non-contact sexual misconduct" by a school employee by graduation day.

That translates to about 4.5 million students.

Psychologists from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice and other universities compiled an updated study in 2022, finding 11.7% of recent high-school graduates had experienced some form of sexual misconduct by a school employee, with coaches/gym teachers

making up nearly 20% of those. "(Coaches') offices are located outside the main areas of the school, right? Their offices are by the gym. There's not a lot of people around," said Elizabeth Jeglic, a child sex abuse expert and professor of psychology at John Jay who took part in the study. "They also get to see kids outside of school time, where it's less structured, and they have more informal interactions."

Jeglic said the abuse often starts casually with boundary-crossing behaviors that raise red flags, also known as grooming. That can include asking questions about the athlete's sexual experiences and relationships, or becoming close with a family to gain access to a child.

"We're seeing it start with texting, and that's when the boundaries start crossing," Jeglic said. "We see a lot of male coaches with female athletes, and they kind of use the guise of a romantic relationship to abuse the minors."

California Polytechnic State University professor Billie-Jo Grant has been collecting data through Google Alerts for 10 years to better understand the problem in real time. Google Alerts aggregates internet headlines with certain keywords, allowing her to collect news stories about arrests of school employees related to sex abuse.

From that data, Grant analyzed a single year of alerts and found offenders were most often male with an average age of 36, while the average age for victims was 15.

There are about 5,000 names included in her data. Nearly a quarter of those identified as a coach, the largest of any district employee subset.

But Grant said those 5,000 are just "the tip of the iceberg, because it's only those that are in the newspaper, not those that are handled internally."

Or never handled at all.

There are no safeguards in place within the Kentucky High School Athletic Association to track an abusive coach.

According to the association, issues related to a coach's employment are a personnel matter and are handled by the school district.

In an investigation spanning more than a year, The Courier Journal found:

- During each of the past 15 years, at

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SILENCE AND SECRETS

How we reported this series

Stephanie Kuzydym
Louisville Courier Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

On July 31, 2023, Clarence “Mo” Moore pleaded not guilty to sexually abusing a girls basketball player he coached.

At the same time, The Courier Journal learned dupont Manual High’s football coach Donnie Stoner had turned himself in to police, just days after we reported on a leaked warrant for his arrest on child sex abuse charges.

In the newsroom, reporters and editors worked to compile the stories.

Each time an editor had a question, they started it with: “Regarding Donnie Stoner’s case ...” or “Regarding Clarence Moore’s case...” in order to make sure we were assigning the correct facts to the correct case because of the similarities between them: Two 17-year-old female victims; two Louisville-area coaches; both arraigned in Jefferson County on the same three charges.

The stories published within 15 minutes of each other.

As we sat looking at The Courier Journal’s website, with those side-by-side headlines, an editor said: “Let’s hope that doesn’t happen ever again.”

But it begged the question, how often does it happen? Soon after, we began trying to find out.

We started by gathering any news reports we could find for the past 15 years through internet searches and newspaper archives, and built a database of coaches who were charged with improper sexual conduct with a minor.

Those examples came from all across Kentucky. And those coaches stood on every sideline — from golf and fishing to



In Paducah, Courier Journal reporter Stephanie Kuzydym watches tapes of John Parks being interviewed by the McCracken County Sheriff’s Office on Feb. 20.
SCOTT UTTERBACK/COURIER JOURNAL

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football and baseball.

The coaches charged in Kentucky were often teachers, as well, so we requested their personnel files from each school district. From there, we found lawsuits and court cases, and arrest citations that led to local law enforcement and Kentucky State Police investigations. If it had paperwork attached to it, we requested it through the Kentucky Open Records Act from clerks of courts, KSP or local law enforcement.

We also followed House Bill 275 through the legislative session. It would have provided a framework to help head off cases of sexual abuse by school employees. But when it failed at the last minute, it made us wonder what laws were already in place in other states — but not in Kentucky.

There was a provision in House Bill 275 that would prohibit schools from signing a non-disclosure or confidentiality agreement with abusers. So, we re-

quested them from schools. From sex abuse insurance policies to Title IX compliance to school district sexual misconduct procedures, we used the Kentucky Open Records Act to better understand the problems in the system.

In all, we sent more than 700 records requests to agencies statewide.

From Paducah to Prestonsburg, we traveled nearly 1,000 miles to meet with survivors and law enforcement, lawyers and child sex abuse advocates to ask: Where are the protections for Kentucky’s middle- and high-school athletes? And are the ones in place being put to use?

In our 15-year sample, we found Kentucky coaches at the middle- and high-school level accused of improper sexual conduct with minors multiple times each year, and inaction on the part of legislators, school districts and sometimes entire communities helping the problem to persist.

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HIGH SCHOOLS ARE “A PETRI DISH FOR ABUSE.”

MARCI HAMILTON

founder of Child USA, a nonprofit devoted to ending child abuse and neglect

Continued Page 10A

least two and as many as 11 Kentucky coaches at the middle- and high-school level have been accused of improper sexual conduct with a minor.

- Legislators in Frankfort have repeatedly declined to pass proposed laws designed to safeguard children from sexual abuse by teachers and coaches.

- Multiple Kentucky school districts have been sued by families who alleged the districts turned a blind eye to the grooming and/or sexual abuse of their athlete by school employees, sometimes resulting in substantial insurance payouts.

- School districts across Kentucky routinely fail to abide by basic federal Title IX rules that require them to display their Title IX administrator and contact information online for those seeking to file a complaint.

“Child sex abuse in sports is a huge problem,” said Marci Hamilton, the founder of Child USA, a nonprofit devoted to ending child abuse and neglect. “... It’s one of the arenas where child sex abuse prevention has not been a priority.”

Hamilton called high schools “a Petri dish for abuse,” partly because coaches at that level get more opportunities to be alone with teens after school and at away games.

“... The screening (for coaches) is not strong enough. The policies are not strong enough. So, children are at risk.”

Advocates, lawmakers were confident the bill would pass ...

The Kentucky General Assembly has had multiple opportunities over the past decade to establish laws to help prevent sexual abuse by coaches and teachers.

Bills have been proposed, sometimes repeatedly, with bipartisan support.

Bills about student training and sexual abuse awareness. Bills addressing school employees who avoid punishment for sexual abuse by switching school districts. Bills that every state bordering Kentucky have already passed into law.

But, ultimately ... bills that failed to pass.

What was perhaps the most comprehensive bill along these lines breezed through the legislative process just this year, during the most recent session of the General Assembly.

Advocates and lawmakers who backed the bill were confident it would pass as the session came to a close in April.

It didn’t.

In interviews with legislators about why the bill suddenly languished at the last minute, they all gave a version of the same sentence: “It ran out of time.”

But a review of the final days and hours of the legislative session paint a different picture.

House Bill 275, brought by Rep. James Tipton, R-Taylorsville, who is the chairman of the House education committee, passed unanimously in the House on the 27th day of the session,

Feb. 8.

After some tweaks and a few amendments that were proposed and later withdrawn, the bill passed unanimously in the Senate on the 57th of the 60-day session. Because of those tweaks, the bill was sent back to the House for concurrence before it could be sent to the governor.

The bill contained several measures and safeguards, including:

- Requiring a school district to complete a sexual abuse investigation into any district employee, even if the employee resigns and takes a job in another district.

- Prohibiting schools from allowing non-disclosure (confidentiality) agreements regarding misconduct involving a student.

On that point, The Courier Journal sent open records requests to all public Kentucky school districts for non-disclosure and settlement agreements from the past several years.

Fifty-one districts out of 171 provided records to the newspaper. Twenty-three of those provided settlements containing confidentiality agreements prohibiting discussion of the settlement terms. At least five of those cases included sexual abuse of minors.

Jefferson County Public Schools did not provide records to the newspaper, saying the request was “an unreasonable burden.” Court records show the district entered into a confidential settlement regarding former Moore High school assistant football coach Victorino Vasquez in 2019. Vasquez faced charges related to a 14-year-old student and was sentenced to probation.

The bill would also:

- Require school district applicants

About the series

Part 1: Coaches are sexually abusing kids, and Kentucky is failing to stop it.

Part 2: The death of John Parks: Fishing coach sex abuse case one of many drawing schools into court

Part 3: ‘I should have done something’: When a community chooses a coach over a child

Part 4: Potential solutions and the local lawyers who go to bat for survivors of child sex abuse

▼ **Kentucky Rep. James Tipton, R-Taylorsville, looks over some documents on the House floor on the first day of the 2024 Kentucky General Assembly in Frankfort on Jan. 2.**

JEFF FAUGHENDER/
COURIER JOURNAL



to disclose being the subject of any allegations or investigations in the previous 12 months and consent to a reference check — and require school districts to conduct those checks.

- Require all records relating to an allegation of abusive conduct to be retained in an employee’s personnel file unless the allegation is proven false.

- Require all school district applicants to list all schools of previous and current employment on their application.

- Require all public school personnel to submit to a state criminal background check every five years.

Speaker of the House David Osborne gavelled the House in at 12:08 p.m. on April 15, the last day of the legislative session.

For 37 minutes, guests were introduced and constituents were honored. The House then took a 74-minute recess, resuming at 1:59 p.m.

Two hours later, House Majority Floor Leader Steven Rudy, R-Paducah, walked to the microphone and sighed loudly:

“Mr. Speaker, this is going to shock you all, but the Senate is still honoring its retiring members,” he said, prompting laughter from House members.

“And we’re at a place now where we have to reevaluate where all the things are in the status of the bills. So, we hope to take a brief recess and be back shortly.”

During that afternoon, the House passed a few measures and performed formalities such as recognizing Miss Kentucky Basketball and new University of Kentucky basketball coach Mark Pope and his four daughters, who are all athletes.

On the final night of the session, lawmakers can conduct business until the clock strikes midnight.

House Bill 275 needed just one last call to the floor. One final thumbs up from House members.

But when 6 p.m. came, Rudy stepped to the mic again: “Mr. Speaker, we find ourselves in a predicament. The members are hungry, and we quite possibly have considered the last bill of the session...”

House Bill 275 was dead.

It was the second year in a row Tipton had presented a version of the bill. He’ll try again in 2025 — though that will be a “short session,” meaning lawmakers will have half the time to pass the bill.

“We go into session on January 7th,” he told The Courier Journal. “It’ll be filed on the first day, and since I’m chair of the House Education Committee, it’s going to get a very early committee hearing.”

For a few dollars per student

Jenna Quinn knows about a bill running out of time.

For more than a decade, she and Erin Merryn, a fellow sex abuse survivor, have pushed for state legislatures across the nation to adopt an age-appropriate child sex abuse prevention program for schools.

It’s a program that came directly from Quinn’s own experiences.

As a young teen attending a private school in Texas, she had been making good grades and playing on a junior Olympic travel basketball team.

Then things began to change. Twice, her entire body broke out in hives. Her grades plummeted.

She was tested for anemia, thyroid issues and learning disabilities.

Then, the day after Christmas when Quinn was 16, her older sister asked her: “Has anyone ever hurt you?”

That one simple question was like an epiphany for Quinn.

For the previous three years, her basketball coach, who was also a family

Continued on next page

SILENCE AND SECRETS

Continued from previous page

friend, groomed and then sexually abused her.

Because no one had ever spoken to her about body safety as a young child, she “concluded this must be something that’s better left unspoken.”

Her parents took her to a child’s advocacy center to receive a sexual assault exam by a nurse. While her mom was in the waiting room, she read a pamphlet about the warning signs of child sex abuse.

She used a pen to check off the signs Quinn had displayed for years. She checked off more than 80% of the list.

“I was all summed up on one page of bullet points, basically,” Quinn said.

Quinn began advocating for students to have the type of body safety conversation she never received. Her work resulted in a 2009 Texas measure that became known as Jenna’s Law, which requires age-appropriate sex abuse prevention training in kindergarten through 12th grade.

A version of that law, named for Merryn, passed in the Illinois legislature in 2011.

Since then, Jenna’s Law and Erin’s Law have served as a model for legislation passed in 36 states, including every state that touches Kentucky — but not Kentucky.

In the commonwealth, the proposed laws have been introduced in the legislature every year since 2016. They made it to the committee level twice — in 2017 and 2022 — but never advanced.

“We have research that shows that prevention works,” Quinn told The Courier Journal. “Why anybody would want to hinder a survivor from receiving freedom from abuse is something I’ll never understand.”

Quinn said Kentucky legislators expressed concern about the costs behind Jenna’s Law. The training is seen as an unfunded mandate.

But Quinn said legislators and school districts might be surprised to find out how inexpensive the training really is.

In fact, 30 schools operated by the Archdiocese of Louisville, which has claims of child sexual abuse in its past, pay just \$2.25 per student for “Speak Up, Be Safe,” a training program from Childhelp, a nonprofit focused on prevention and treatment of child abuse.

The program, which meets the parameters of Jenna’s Law and Erin’s Law, is available in English and Spanish and consists of two lessons a year. It covers body safety conversations and potential risks — both from digital and in-person interactions.

“... Child protection is very simple,” Quinn said. “It’s not complicated, and it comes down to priorities. Do you prioritize the safety of that child or youth first? Or do you prioritize your own time, your own institution and your own agenda first?”

“There can also be a lot of denial. But we don’t expose, we empower. Sexual abuse thrives in silence, and it thrives in secrecy.”

‘So many people failed us. So many systems failed us’

In Jefferson County Public Schools — the state’s largest school district — at least seven coaches have been charged with child sex-related crimes since 2013. The charges range from rape and sodomy to distributing obscene material to minors.

In February, Alyssa Foster stood outside a Jefferson County school board meeting with a sign that read: “Need proof — just ask us.”

“You can’t keep us quiet,” another sign read.

Alexis Crook and others joined Foster at the protest to call on the district to terminate the employment of Ronnie



▲ **Alyssa Foster, right, protests outside the Jefferson County Public Schools central office in Louisville on Feb. 13, calling for the firing of former duPont Manual High School football coach Donnie Stoner and his brother, Ronnie.**

MICHAEL CLEVENGER/
COURIER JOURNAL

▼ **Jenna Quinn has advocated for survivors of child sex abuse since 2009 when she helped Texas become the first state with legislation requiring age-appropriate sex abuse prevention training in schools. Here, she speaks at the Women of Courage Luncheon in Midland, Texas, on April 12, 2022.**

PROVIDED BY JENNA QUINN



Stoner and his twin brother, Donnie.

“Stand with survivors,” Alexis and Alyssa shouted. “Uncover the cover-up.”

They held a similar rally outside duPont Manual High School during dismissal a week prior to the school board gathering.

They passed out 200 red shirts to students that read, in part: “Stand with child victims from duPont Manual and other JCPS schools ...”

The Stoners coached football and worked at duPont Manual High School and several other schools throughout the district during the past 20 years, until they were reassigned to positions within the district with no student contact in the summer of 2023.

In July of that year, police charged Donnie Stoner with multiple counts of first-degree sex abuse, third-degree rape and third-degree sodomy, for allegations of sex with a 17-year-old female student. At the time, Stoner was 39.

The 17-year-old told police Donnie Stoner kissed her and touched her inappropriately while in his classroom at Manual in May 2023, according to court documents. The girl also told police Donnie Stoner drove her to his home multiple times, where they had sex.

Stoner’s trial is scheduled for March

11, 2025, and he remains in a non-student-contact role in the supply services division at JCPS, according to spokesperson Carolyn Callahan.

No formal charges have been brought against Ronnie Stoner, but he remains in a non-contact role at JCPS’ in-house print shop, Callahan said.

Since Donnie Stoner’s arrest, more than a dozen women have reached out to Foster and Crook, some anonymously, with related allegations, they told The Courier Journal.

JCPS conducted investigations of Ronnie Stoner in 2014 and again in 2022, both related to allegations of inappropriate conduct with female students.

The first was found to be inconclusive. The second was found to be unsubstantiated.

Ronnie Stoner’s lawyer, Charles Miller, did not return a message offering him or Stoner the opportunity to comment for this story. Donnie Stoner’s lawyer, Rob Eggert, also did not return a message seeking comment.

Foster and Crook both posted related TikTok videos in September, with Crook saying in hers: “...We’re doing this for one reason and one reason only: Because we don’t want this to happen to anyone else.”

“It’s gone on for two decades. That’s insane. So many people failed us. So many systems failed us.”

An alleged victim, who is now 19, filed a civil lawsuit against JCPS and both Ronnie and Donnie Stoner in Jefferson Circuit Court in September. The details of the suit are sealed.

That suit is one of at least four active cases in Jefferson Circuit Court of alleged sex abuse by a coach:

● Austin Williams, the former Butler High School assistant girls basketball coach, is charged with sexting a 16-year-old player in October 2022.

● Christopher Morris coached basketball at Conway and Noe middle schools. He also coached the Quinn Anvils, a Louisville Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) team. In June 2022, he was charged with multiple counts of sexual abuse and sodomy of two players. He pleaded guilty on Oct. 7, but withdrew that plea on Dec. 4.

A lawsuit filed on behalf of one of Morris’ victims stated the coach groomed the boy from seventh grade to his junior or senior year of high school.

When forcing the boy to perform sexual acts on or with him, sometimes on JCPS property, he’d tell the boy, “God would want you to do this.”

● Clarence “Mo” Moore, a local basketball trainer and former girls basketball coach at Christian Academy of Louisville, was charged in July 2023 in Oldham and Jefferson counties with rape, sodomy and sexual abuse of a 17-year-old female basketball player from November 2022 to June 2023. His Jefferson County jury trial is set for June 23.

Moore is the ex-coach who was arraigned in Jefferson County on the same day as Manual football coach Donnie Stoner.

According to allegations detailed in court filings, both coaches were alone with the victims in their car.

Both were accused by their victims of engaging in oral and sexual intercourse — for Moore, inside and outside his personal gym, and for Stoner, at his home.

“I do cases all over the country and there’s a lot of similarities between them...,” said Grant, the California Polytechnic State University professor who has been an expert witness in about 150 sex abuse cases.

“You’re the last person there at the end of the day, and there’s nobody else there to see you give that ride home or see you go into that weight room or leave last...”

“It’s like a playbook.”



Still unclear if or when JCPS will restore magnet bus routes

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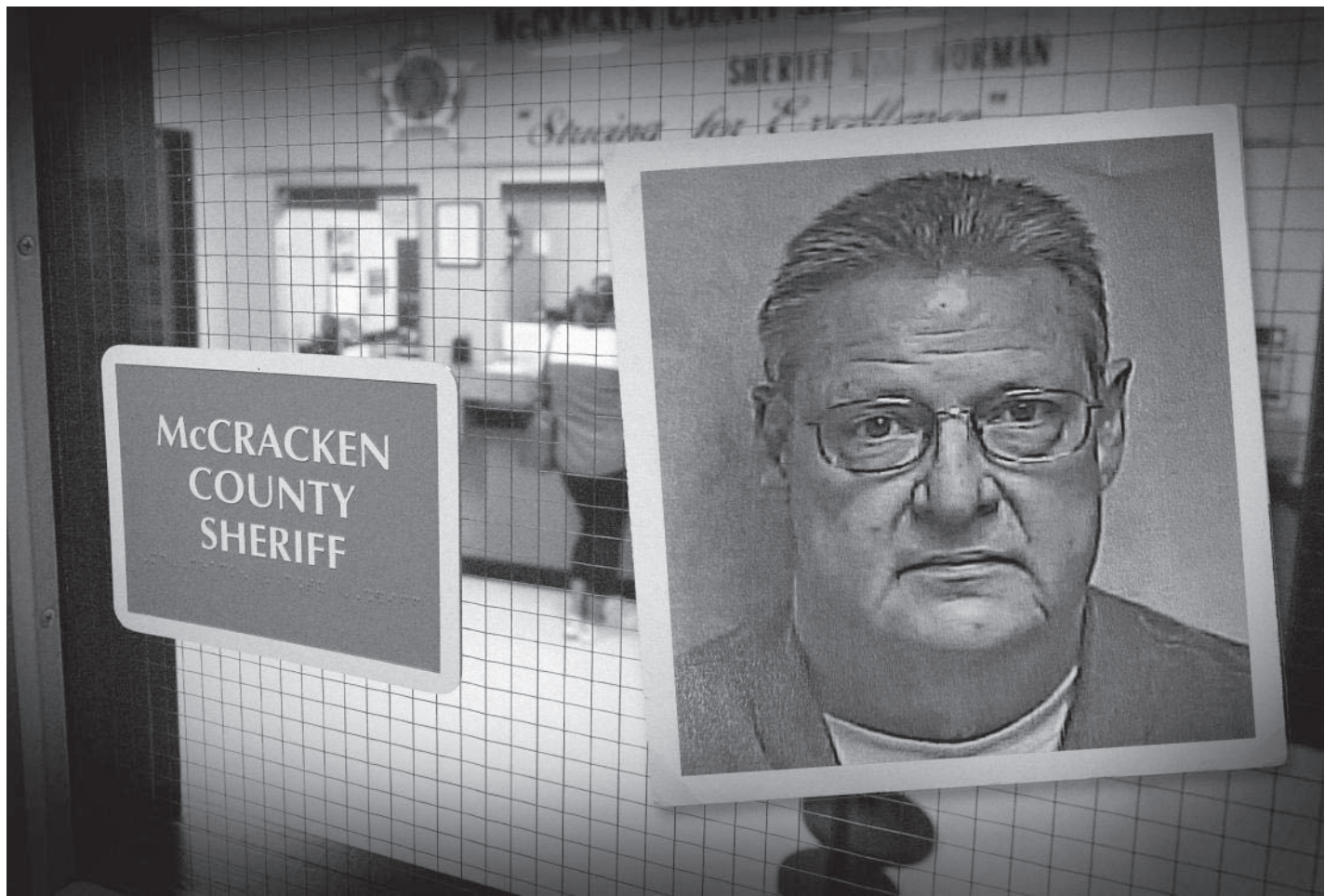
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Coach case one of many

More lawsuits claim school districts, administrators failed to stop abuse



John Parks, a former high school bass fishing coach, was convicted of attempted sexual abuse of a 16-year-old student and possession of child pornography. PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY SCOTT UTTERBACK/COURIER JOURNAL; KYLE SLAGLE/USA TODAY NETWORK

When it comes to child abuse, we're all 'mandatory reporters'

Stephanie Kuzydym
Louisville Courier Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Kentucky law requires anyone to report child abuse, even if it's just suspected.

That report can be done either orally or written.

It's known as mandatory reporting — and it is meant to protect children from abuse and neglect.

A Courier Journal investigation found at least 80 cases of alleged child sexual misconduct by a Kentucky coach over the past 15 years, including instances where mandatory reporters — like school districts, teachers, peace officers, social workers and, even, anonymous community members — reported child sex abuse.

When is a report required?

When someone knows or has “reasonable cause” that a child was sexually abused.

Who is a mandatory reporter?

Any person.
The following persons are required to also submit written reports, if requested, in addition to an oral report:

- Child care worker
- Chiropractor
- Coroner
- Dentist
- Emergency medical technician
- Health professional
- Medical intern
- Medical examiner

See REPORTERS, Page 2A

Stephanie Kuzydym
Louisville Courier Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

PADUCAH, Ky. — John Parks sat in silence at his stepfather's house, considering the path that led him to this point.

His sentencing hearing was two days away.

The 57-year-old had sold nearly all his possessions: his car, his home, his furniture. The little that remained was upstairs in the attic.

It was just after 4 p.m. on that day in June 2020 when Parks sent a question by text to a person he had never met:

“When u wanna meet. And where”

“Oaks mall,” the reply read.

“Ok. You're brave. Busy place,” Parks

texted.

“That's the least suspicious. And if anything would happen it's easier to hide,” they responded.

Parks walked out to the Silverado he had borrowed from a fishing buddy and headed for the mall.

He needed to get a fake ID so he could disappear. Leave Western Kentucky for good.

It was either that or spend time behind bars — and, as he had told a long-time friend, he was not going into a cage.

Parks was awaiting sentencing on possession of child porn and attempted sexual abuse of a minor from McCracken County High School, where he had been the coach of the bass fishing team.

Police said he had touched the butt and upper thigh of one of the teenage boys on his team between 75 and 100 times, but Parks called it “horseplay.”

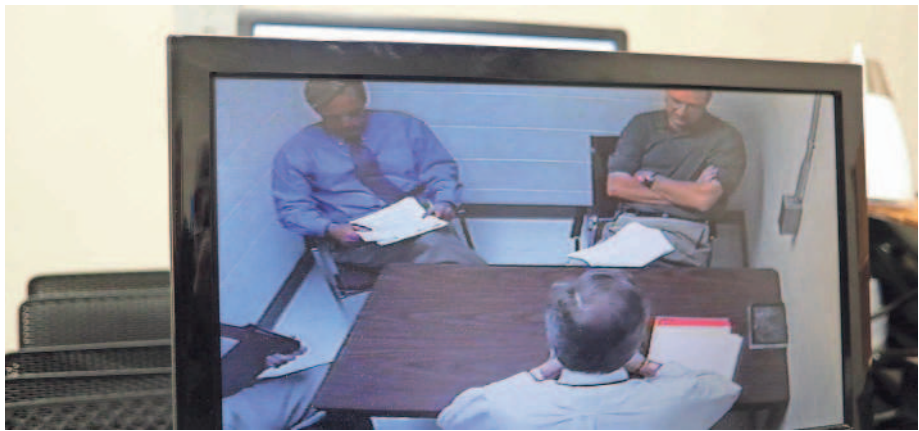
His plea agreement called for 18 months in prison.

But the charges didn't stop at Parks. Then-McCracken County High School principal Michael Ceglinski and the district's director of pupil personnel, Brian Bowland, were charged with one count each of official misconduct after a McCracken sheriff's investigation determined they failed to report sex abuse allegations involving Parks and the teenager.

Ceglinski was also charged with failure to report child abuse.

As part of a yearlong investigation, The Courier Journal found and tracked at least 80 cases of alleged child sexual misconduct by Kentucky middle- and high-school coaches during the past 15 years. In those cases, multiple lawsuits targeted school districts and personnel, claiming they turned a blind

See ABUSE, Page 2A



John Parks, then a deputy for McCracken County Sheriff's Office, is interviewed for alleged misconduct in 2004. The video was included in the investigative file related to Parks' 2019 case. SCOTT UTTERBACK/COURIER JOURNAL

Killing highlights anger with health system

Work-related violence a problem in industry

Ken Alltucker, Jeanine Santucci and N'dea Yancey-Bragg
USA TODAY

The brazen murder of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson has elicited an outpouring of vitriol on social media toward health insurers, grievances over denied claims and complaints about perceived greed in the insurance industry that serves as gatekeeper to the nation's \$4.5 trillion health care system.

One social media post complained, “CEOs are making money hand over fist- by DENYING care. I feel terrible for his family, but can't say I'm surprised.”

“It's sadly misplaced anger,” said Wendell Potter, a former CIGNA executive who became a whistleblower against the health insurance industry. “The system is rigged against Americans who need care, people who have health insurance, and it is largely because of the role that Wall Street plays in our health care system.”

Investigators are still working to locate the shooter who killed Thompson as well as determine a motive. Officials found three bullet casings inscribed with the words “deny,” “defend” and “depose,” multiple news outlets reported. The words evoke the title of a book critical of the insurance industry published in 2010: “Delay Deny Defend: Why Insurance Companies Don't Pay Claims and What You Can Do About It” by Jay M. Feinman.

Before President Barack Obama's signature Affordable Care Act took effect last decade, health insurers often denied or limited coverage based on a person's medical history and retroactively canceled plans when a person became sick with a costly disease such as cancer.

Such “rescissions” are not allowed now except when a person commits fraud or intentionally misrepresents facts.

But other consumer aggravations remain. Denied claims and trouble finding a provider in network are among the most common reportedly problems faced by Americans who say they've had trouble using their health insurance, according to a 2023 poll from KFF, a health policy nonprofit.

Problems with health insurance can be complex and confusing to navigate, which leads people to put off getting care and “could lead to very long-term and detrimental health impacts,” said Ashley Kirzinger, director of survey methodology at KFF. “We know that it causes a lot of anxiety for people.”

Others say the private health insurance industry is a function of the design of the U.S. health care system.

“Insurers get maligned for a lot of things that are really decided at a much higher level,” said Loren Adler, associate director of the Center on Health Policy at the Brookings Institution. “The way the U.S. set up our health system, it designates insurers to make the unpopular decisions on denying some care, having prior authorization and trying to control costs. And no one likes cost control.”

UnitedHealthcare does not publicly

See KILLING, Page 6A

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Abuse

Continued from Page 1A

eye to the abuse. Under state law, school administrators and teachers are part of a long list of “mandatory reporters” when it comes to child sex abuse. The law requires them to report immediately, even if the abuse is only suspected, using federal Title IX guidelines.

Title IX is the federal civil rights law that prohibits sex discrimination in schools. It also covers sexual abuse and violence.

Each school must have a Title IX coordinator to assist students and parents if they suspect abuse.

The Courier Journal’s investigation included a review of one of Title IX’s most basic requirements: prominently displaying the name and contact information for their coordinator on their websites.

Compliance among Kentucky schools was spotty, at best.

While it’s rare for school officials to face criminal charges in sex abuse cases like in McCracken County, and even more rare for them to stick (Ceglinski and Bowland’s charges were later dropped), victims’ families have often turned to civil suits to hold school administrators and districts accountable for allowing the abuse on their watch.

But even in those suits, districts have often avoided liability by claiming “governmental immunity.”

Things are changing, though. That immunity defense, which dates to the early days of Kentucky, is narrowing.

While Kentucky legislators have been slow to adopt laws that might prevent child sexual abuse before it happens, a little-known change they made in 2021 opens the door for additional accountability.

The new law limits the immunity shield for schools, churches and others who ignore their duty to children in crisis.

In August, three years after the legislature’s action, Bardstown City Schools agreed to pay \$200,000 to two former students who alleged sexual abuse by assistant football coach Jeremy Dale. A lawsuit for two more victims is ongoing.

Each suit claims it wasn’t the first time Dale crossed the line with students and that administrators knew or should have known and failed to follow mandatory reporting laws.

Among the complaints lodged against Dale: “Pinning down a (student), lifting her shirt, and blowing raspberries on her stomach while (she) pleaded for help.”

A distraught mom turns to the principal ... then police

The McCracken County mom looked through her kitchen window, watching as the high school fishing coach pretended to handcuff her son in the driveway.

McCracken High’s fishing coach John Parks spent 13 years with the county sheriff’s office. If she was going to trust anybody, she later told a sheriff’s detective, it would have been him.

Still, something seemed odd. Ever since joining the bass fishing team, her son’s demeanor had improved. He’d been bullied off the soccer team and needed a positive male figure. Now, he was often going to the movies or out to eat with teammates and the coach.

Parks said he felt like her boy was his adopted son.

But within the first year of joining the team, in September 2018, Parks tried to convince the 15-year-old to spend the night at a cabin in Livingston County after a bass fishing team camp. The teen-



Detective Sarah Martin, of the McCracken County Sheriff’s Office, talks about John Parks, a former McCracken County High School bass fishing coach who was convicted of attempted sexual abuse of a 16-year-old student and possession of child pornography. Parks had previously been in the McCracken County Sheriff’s Department before stepping down in 2004. SCOTT UTTERBACK/COURIER JOURNAL



Former Bardstown City Schools coach Jeremy Dale leaves his pre-trial conference on March 15 at Nelson County Circuit Court in Bardstown. CLARE GRANT/COURIER JOURNAL

ager declined.

Parks began to text asking for nudes and calling him pumpkin. He sent 67 texts telling the boy he needed a spanking. He sent 14 more showing a Disney fairy being spanked and started referring to the boy as “Tinkerbell.”

By December, the boy stopped talking to anyone on the team. In January, he told his mom that Parks had taken their friendship too far.

On Jan. 24, 2019, the boy told police he spoke with Ceglinski, then the McCracken County High School principal, telling him he was “uncomfortable” with Parks’ conduct. Emails obtained by The Courier Journal between the boy’s mom and Ceglinski show her asking for an update on Feb. 8.

Ceglinski responded: “I’m still gathering some information and have been delayed because of some other things here at school as you could imagine but I have a time set up to complete everything early next week.”

On Feb. 12, Ceglinski provided an update: “I have had some discussions with John and feel it would be best if we could get together. Would you be willing to meet with myself and John? Just want you to be able to hear his side of the situation.”

A day later, in an email, he wrote “...In my conversation with John he felt like there was some misunderstanding that he would like to clear up.”

The mom responded: “(my son) tried to meet with you yesterday to show you the text messages but you were unavail-

able. Last night was the first time we have read them. To say the least we are absolutely (disgusted) and there is (definitely) no misunderstanding and I feel confident you will totally agree when you read them. ...”

On the afternoon of Valentine’s Day 2019, the boy and his mom went to the McCracken County Sheriff’s Office to talk with detectives.

At 10:31 that night, the department arrested Parks and charged him with first-degree sexual abuse.

In examining the Parks case, The Courier Journal reviewed hundreds of pages of court, police and school records, including video and audio interviews from the sheriff’s investigation, body cam footage and more than 700 text messages between Parks and the teen.

One thing was missing from the files, though: a Title IX report. The document is required by federal law to be filed by a mandatory reporter — in this case, school administrators — for incidents that involve sexual harassment or abuse.

Detective Sarah Martin, who led the McCracken sheriff’s investigation into Parks, said that’s because no Title IX report existed.

“I don’t even know who their Title IX coordinator is,” she said of McCracken County Schools.

A basic Title IX requirement

Title IX is a federal civil rights law

that represents equity in sports: An equal number of opportunities for male and female athletes.

But it also prohibits sexual harassment in schools, including sexual abuse.

Under Title IX regulations, schools must prominently display the contact information for their Title IX coordinator on their websites.

A Courier Journal review of the websites for 230 public Kentucky high schools found:

- More than 140 did not list their Title IX coordinator on the school’s website. But of those, 62 did list their Title IX coordinator on the school district’s website.
 - Fifteen of those 62 districts listed a Title IX coordinator on their website who was no longer part of the district’s staff directory.
 - One school district listed a Title IX coordinator who currently serves as the coordinator in a different county.
- Neither McCracken County High School nor the McCracken school district lists a Title IX coordinator on its website.

More lawsuits claim school districts, administrators failed to stop abuse

The Courier Journal’s review of cases involving alleged sexual abuse by a Kentucky coach found several recent examples where school districts and administrators were accused of turning a blind eye:

• Christopher “Ro” Morris began coaching boys basketball in 2011 at Jefferson County’s Noe Middle School, according to his personnel file. In 2018, he transferred to Conway Middle, where he coached basketball. He also was a coach of the Quinn Anvils AAU basketball team.

Morris’ grooming of a seventh-grade athlete included telling him that “having sexual relations ... would make (him) a better basketball player,” according to a lawsuit filed in Jefferson County. The abuse went on for six years.

The lawsuit claims JCPS and Dionte Mucker, Conway’s athletic director, “knew or should have known” of Morris’ actions and that JCPS never investigated the coach.

But because the abuse happened before the 2021 change by the legislature, a judge agreed to dismiss JCPS from the suit on the grounds of governmental immunity. Mucker is still a party to the suit.

In August 2022, Morris was charged with multiple counts of sexual abuse and sodomy of two players. He pleaded guilty on Oct. 7, but withdrew that plea on Dec. 4.

• In September, a sex abuse lawsuit involving another JCPS employee, former duPont Manual High School football coach Donnie Stoner, named Manual’s principal Michael Newman and athletic director David Zuberer. Filed in Jefferson Circuit Court, the lawsuit was quickly sealed under a state statute dealing with minors.

• Beginning in 2019, then-Rowan County High School girls soccer coach Andrew Zaheri asked a 14-year-old freshman athlete about the boys she was dating, according to a 2023 lawsuit. They began to text. He bought her a necklace, earrings and clothes. He sexually assaulted her on school property, off school property, in the classroom, in an office, in a closet, in the locker room. He would ask for colleagues and supervisors to cover his classroom “so that he could sexually abuse (her) during school hours,” according to the suit.

Rowan High principal Jordan Mann and then-superintendent John Maxey are named defendants in the lawsuit.

See ABUSE, Page 4A

Reporters

Continued from Page 1A

Mental health professional

- Nurse
- Optometrist
- Osteopathic physician
- Paramedic
- Peace officer
- Physician

- Resident
- School personnel
- Social worker
- Teacher
- Any organization or agency for any of the above

Who is the report required to be made to?

- Local law enforcement
- Kentucky State Police

- Cabinet for Health and Family Services or its designated representative
- Commonwealth’s attorney
- County attorney

When should a report be made?

Immediately.

Can you refuse to report?

No, except under attorney-client and

clergy-penitent privilege.

What happens if you are a mandatory reporter and you don’t report?

If any person intentionally does not report, it’s a Class B misdemeanor the first time.

The second time it becomes a Class A misdemeanor and a Class D felony if any ensuing incident.

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Abuse

Continued from Page 2A

The suit claims both knew Zaheri had a history of inappropriate relationships. In 2009, a recently graduated Rowan County teen became pregnant with Zaheri’s child.

“School officials turned a blind eye when Zaheri impregnated a female student shortly after her graduation, failing to acknowledge and report that the relationship began while the female was still a high school student,” the suit alleges.

In a court filing, lawyers for the school district, Maxey and Mann denied the charges.

Zaheri declined to comment through his defense attorney Jarrod Beck, who told The Courier Journal: “... It’s been his position from the outset that he won’t be providing any comment about his criminal or civil cases.”

A handwritten note dated Feb. 13 in Zaheri’s school personnel file, obtained by The Courier Journal, says Maxey received an anonymous tip about a sexual relationship involving Zaheri and “this is the first time anything was reported to Mr. Mann of an inappropriate or sexual nature.”

But the suit claims Mann received reports throughout the fall of 2022 made by students, faculty and a community member.

State Police arrested Zaheri on Feb. 15, 2023. The next day, Maxey said he was informed by law enforcement of “misconduct involving a student” and fired Zaheri.

The suit alleges Mann and Maxey were negligent in their supervision of Zaheri and violated their duty as mandatory reporters.

Lawsuits like these, if they are ultimately successful and result in a payout to the plaintiff, are at least partially covered by insurance.

Kentucky school districts routinely pay for insurance that covers sexual misconduct claims against their employees.

In a review of the state’s public school districts, The Courier Journal found policies range in coverage from \$1 million to \$6 million per occurrence. More than half of those policies can apply to claims dating back more than 15 years. And at least six districts’ policies



John Parks, a former McCracken County High School bass fishing coach, was convicted of attempted sexual abuse of a 16-year-old student and possession of child pornography in 2020. SCOTT UTTERBACK/COURIER JOURNAL

also include \$10,000 for public image restoration.

Rowan County’s policy carries a \$5,000 deductible and \$1 million in coverage per occurrence, dating to 1992.

The policy excludes coverage of cases where sexual misconduct is not reported to proper authorities.

Parks drew his handgun

John Parks guided the Silverado into a parking lot near the Kentucky Oaks Mall in Paducah.

Martin, the sheriff’s office lead investigator on the case, and another sheriff’s detective watched from an unmarked vehicle nearby.

They had knowledge of Parks’ attempt to get a fake ID, and Martin had been in on the text exchange that set up the meeting.

As Parks pulled into a spot, the detectives maneuvered their car behind his pickup and activated their emergency lights, ordering Parks to exit the vehicle.

Instead, he fled, retracing his path toward his stepfather’s home as the detectives gave chase. Several other sheriff’s deputies joined the pursuit along the way.

Cpl. Dwayne Pickett was one of those deputies. He didn’t immediately know the suspect was Parks, his training officer when he began with the department 17 years before.

As Parks sped into the half-circle drive of his stepfather’s home, Pickett’s

car was close behind. The truck came to a stop in the yard, knocking over a bird-bath.

Pickett steered his cruiser to the left, blocking the driver’s side of the pickup and jumped out of his vehicle. Sheriff’s department vehicles surrounded the truck.

Parks drew his handgun. He had one 15-round magazine loaded in his 9 mm SIG Sauer, with two more magazines in his holster.

Parks pointed the gun out the driver-side window at Pickett.

And from the opposite side of the truck, Detective Dustin Awbery fired his weapon twice, shattering the rear passenger window and striking Parks.

The SIG Sauer dropped to the ground as blood began to run down Parks’ neck, saturating his shirt collar.

John Parks was dead.

Pickett walked toward the pickup.

He was three weeks away from retirement.

Dismissed and expunged

During its investigation into Parks, McCracken sheriff’s detectives also examined at least three other instances in two months in which they determined school leaders failed to report sexual misconduct allegations to law enforcement.

“We’d much rather them report even things that don’t quite meet the law, (rather) than hesitate ...” said Martin,

the lead investigator. “When in doubt, just report it.”

Ceglinski, through his attorney Jeremy Ian Smith, denied the criminal charges in an email to the Paducah Sun newspaper in February 2019.

“These charges are nonsensical and illogical,” Smith wrote in the email. “Principal Ceglinski has never had any motive to fail to report the abuse of his students.”

The criminal charges against Ceglinski and Bowland, the director of pupil personnel, were quickly dismissed by then-McCracken County Attorney Sam Clymer.

According to the Sun in a September 2019 story, “... Clymer asserted that the statutes had been misapplied and the obligation to report was more nuanced than his office initially determined.”

The cases against Ceglinski and Bowland were promptly expunged.

They no longer exist in court records.

In March 2020, the mother of Parks’ victim took another route and filed a lawsuit claiming negligence by Ceglinski, McCracken County Schools and others.

It was dismissed on claims of governmental immunity.

It went to the state Court of Appeals, which agreed earlier this year that it should be dismissed because of governmental immunity.

In a final try, it’s been submitted for review by the state Supreme Court.

The Courier Journal requested an interview with Ceglinski, Bowland and other McCracken education officials, but received little response. Ceglinski said in an email he couldn’t comment because the case is still pending with the Supreme Court.

Although Parks is gone, buried in a quiet cemetery on the outskirts of Mayfield in nearby Graves County, Martin thinks there may be more to the story.

“I believe there are many victims of John Parks that we will just never know about — unless they come forward.”

In Part 3: *When a coach’s abuse of a player is an open secret in a community, that abuse can persist for years and extend to other victims.*

Stephanie Kuzydym is an enterprise and investigative sports reporter, with a focus on the health and safety of athletes. She can be reached at skuzydym@courier-journal.com. Follow her at @stephkuzy.

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Beshear set to lead Dem governors

Phillip M. Bailey
USA TODAY
USA TODAY NETWORK

Gov. Andy Beshear will be a key player in national Democratic politics as the party picks up the pieces after its gut-punch loss to Republican Donald Trump in the 2024 presidential election.

The Kentucky Democrat was selected to be vice chairman of the Democratic Governors Association (DGA) in 2025



Beshear

at the group’s annual meeting Saturday in Los Angeles.

Beshear was also voted to be chair-elect in 2026, which sets him up to lead during a cycle when Democrats will be looking to wage a comeback.

The races in 2026 feature three dozen gubernatorial contests, including swing states Arizona, Pennsylvania and Mich-

igan amid the pivotal mid-term elections for Congress.

National Democrats took a closer look at Beshear after his impressive 2023 re-election bid in state Trump has won decisively three times.

Beshear was consistently mentioned as a possible running mate for Vice President Kamala Harris and has been touted as a possible presidential contender in 2028.

In a statement provided to USA To-

day/The Courier Journal, Beshear said he looks forward to working with Kansas Gov. Laura Kelly, who was elected DGA chair for next year. The Bluegrass Democrat said he will work hard to “grow our ranks of Democratic governors” two years from now.

“In Kentucky, we’ve shown that when you focus on bringing people together and the fundamental challenges

See **BESHEAR**, Page 2A

SILENCE & SECRETS



Mary Prater is a sexual abuse survivor who hopes state lawmakers can pass legislation like the recently failed House Bill 275, which would ban nondisclosure agreements and require schools to complete sexual misconduct investigations even if the teacher resigns. PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JEFF FAUGHENDER/COURIER JOURNAL AND KYLE SLAGLE/USA TODAY NETWORK

‘I should have done something’

When a community chooses a coach over a child

Stephanie Kuzdym
Louisville Courier Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

PRESTONSBURG — Bacon cooking in the microwave? Mary Prater wanted to smash the sizzling plate. A Sprite with a slice of lemon? Instant fury.

Those seemingly mundane things unleashed an anger inside her, an anger

she thought she buried long ago, tamping it down with silence and avoidance.

Prater remembers her middle-school coach bringing her microwaved bacon to eat before morning classes. She recalls her offering the lemon-lime drink across the seat of the pickup.

April Bradford, her Floyd County

See **SILENCE**, Page 6A

Read the entire Silence & Secrets project



Scan the QR code to see all four parts of our investigation into child sexual assault by Kentucky coaches.

Trump can’t say tariffs won’t lift costs

Sarah D. Wire
USA TODAY

President-elect Donald Trump said in a new interview he can’t guarantee American families won’t pay more because of tariffs implemented against some of the country’s top trading partners, one of his signature campaign promises.

Trump said during an interview with NBC’s “Meet the Press” that aired Sunday he disagrees with economists who say that ultimately consumers pay the price of tariffs. But when asked by host Kristen Welker to “guarantee American families won’t pay more,” the president-elect responded, “I can’t guarantee anything. I can’t guarantee tomorrow.”

“But I can say that if you looked at my – just pre-COVID, we had the greatest economy in the history of our country. And I had a lot of tariffs on a lot of different countries, but in particular China,” he added.

Trump has threatened to place tariffs on Canada, China and Mexico.

Trump’s comments came during his first network news interview since winning the election in November. Here are the top takeaways from the

See **TARIFFS**, Page 2A

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South Floyd Elementary assistant principal and coach April Bradford was arrested in 2022, pleading guilty to charges of first-degree sexual abuse and third-degree sodomy committed against two players over a 10-year period. One of those minors was Mary Prater. JEFF FAUGHENDER/COURIER JOURNAL & USA TODAY NETWORK

Silence

Continued from Page 1A

basketball coach and teacher, sexually abused Prater during middle and high school, beginning in 1997 — a crime that ultimately sent the coach to jail. She groomed the girl, working to make her think it was a normal relationship.

“Why would I do that?” she asked through tears, as she recounted her story. “Why would I do that?”

But when she asks that of herself, she always remembers Bradford’s words.

“I played it over and over and over,” Prater said. “I could hear her in my mind. I could hear her saying it.”

Pretend I’m a boy. Just pretend I’m a boy.

Prater said others saw what was happening: teachers, neighbors, her best friend’s mother, her own family. They’ve admitted it to Prater, now decades later.

They saw Prater driving Bradford’s pickup. They accepted the notes Bradford wrote that excused the girl from their class so she could hang out in Bradford’s classroom, or skip school altogether. They gossiped.

While there is no central database that tracks sexual abuse by school coaches, a Courier Journal investigation spanning more than a year found a pattern of related allegations and charges across Kentucky.

The newspaper found at least 80 cases of alleged child sexual misconduct by Kentucky middle- and high-school coaches during the past 15 years. The most recent came just last month, when State Police arrested an Estill County High School girls soccer and track coach on charges related to two players, including the rape of one.

Through its research, The Courier Journal also detailed multiple instances when state legislators declined to pass laws that could help catch sexual abuse by teachers and coaches before it starts. The newspaper also found cases involving accusations of school officials turning a blind eye to abuse.

In some cases, that blindness pervaded an entire community.

“People at school started talking,” Genia Hall, a former Floyd County schools employee, said of the relationship between Prater and Bradford.

In those days, Hall had become friends with Bradford, often eating lunch with her. Hall’s daughter, Staci, was Prater’s best friend.

“(Mary) was in her classroom all the time. It was just obvious to everybody that there was something wrong,” Hall said. “Everybody whispered about it and nobody did anything about it. I talked to some of the other teachers, and they were like, ‘If you can’t prove it, you’re going to ruin somebody’s career.’

“Everybody just turned a blind eye to it.”

That inaction stuck with Hall for years, and she recently posted an apology on Prater’s Facebook page.

“I failed her because I should have done something to get her out of that,” Hall told The Courier Journal. “It bothered me for a long time.”

Floyd County isn’t the only Kentucky community where sexual abuse by a coach festered as an open secret.

In Crittenden County, high school parents heard rumors of abuse over the summer of 2013 from their kids, but “didn’t pay much attention to it,” according to investigations by the school district and the Kentucky State Police.

Administrators in other districts knew. It had been a topic of conversation at a local country club’s board meeting, police learned.

Students interviewed by police said they had seen photos of the 16-year-old golfer and golf coach Blair Winders, 37,

“... Know that although some may not believe you, those of us who were in school, know the truth. We watched it unfold and so did most adults and they didn’t do anything about it. You were failed on many levels.”

Amy, a former classmate of Mary Prater on Facebook after April Bradford’s sentencing

kissing and of his genitals, saying, “Yes, she has lots of pictures on her phone, and she shows them to people.”

Students told police they began noticing it the previous spring, describing how close the two stood next to each other or overhearing them saying “I love you” on the phone.

Lots of people were talking about it, a student told the school district. “Everybody” knows.

Winders resigned on Oct. 24, 2013, two months after the district began its internal investigation and before it was complete.

He spent nearly four years in prison, before his release in 2018.

In Marshall County, the sheriff’s office began investigating a relationship between then-Marshall County football coach Ron Barnard and a 15-year-old cheerleader after the two began communicating under pseudonymous Twitter accounts in 2014.

Once Matt Hilbrecht, now Marshall County’s sheriff, began his investigation, it led him back to Graves County High, where Barnard had coached previously, and the realization that a lot of people knew or suspected what was happening.

In all, Hilbrecht interviewed about 20 people who had knowledge of or sexual allegations involving Barnard dating back two decades. That included a 1995 graduate who alleged she had sex with Barnard in his office when she was a freshman, and a former Graves County cheerleader who told the sheriff she had sex with the then-football coach three to four times a week when she was 14, including in the school weight room.

Barnard spent four years in prison, before his release in 2019.

“A community that’s either pretending something didn’t happen ... or who is just not picking up on the symptoms, can really play a role in helping the predators get more victims and also keeping the victims silenced for longer,” said Marci Hamilton, the founder of Child USA, a nonprofit devoted to ending child abuse and neglect.

Three years after Prater graduated from Floyd County Schools in 2002, Bradford, the girls basketball coach, started the process anew.

She began grooming another player on the team — Jessica Hensley — a teen who had red hair and blue eyes, just like Prater.

“Interactions quickly escalated from basketball events to personal telephone calls at home, then to physical touch,” Hensley said in a court statement. “Confusion consumed me. I was told I was special: a rarity worth the risk of all demise, because she was ‘in love’ with me. *In love*. I was trapped. I felt my options were limited. The consequences of speaking out were dire.”

While The Courier Journal does not normally name victims of sexual abuse or assault, Prater and Hensley have been forthcoming about their experiences for the sake of future children who may be afraid to speak up.

Grooming the community

Most child sex abuse cases in a school setting start with grooming. And not just grooming of the victim, but also the victim’s family and sometimes the entire community.

“The abusers are not walking around in a trench coat,” said Billie-Jo Grant, a

friends with her abuser until she told them of the abuse, described the blind eye of a community this way:

“The only thing worse than a wolf in a sheep pen is when the sheep stand in support of the wolf’s appetite, which means they don’t care that the wolf is not a sheep. They like the wolf so much they will let the wolf continue to eat and prey and feed its ravenous appetite on the sheep, simply because they can’t see past their denial about who the wolf really is.”

‘Happy Retirement!’

The messages poured into Mary Prater’s phone and onto her social media pages in the days following April Bradford’s sentencing earlier this year on Feb. 29.

Prater and Jessica Hensley had given victim impact statements. In hers, Prater said: “I was introduced to different substances that later in life became how I coped with this trauma.”

Prater’s substance use added fuel to the community’s lingering suspicions that she wasn’t being truthful.

Others reached out to her in support, often posting on her social media.

“... Know that although some may not believe you, those of us who were in school, know the truth,” Amy, a former classmate, posted. “We watched it unfold and so did most adults and they didn’t do anything about it. You were failed on many levels. 12 year old kids can’t consent.”

Now 41, Prater and her husband have one daughter, and Prater is finishing her degree to be a counselor to help others who have been through trauma and sexual abuse.

She’s still unsure if she wants to practice in a school setting, though.

“If I saw one of those teachers doing something... I don’t know if I could have the self-control,” she said, her voice trailing. “That’s one of the things I worry about and try to avoid because I don’t want to be mean to anybody. I didn’t even want to be mean toward (Bradford). I just wanted to make it stop.”

Prater and Hensley agreed to break their silence when they saw Bradford giving what they considered special attention to another girl who reminded them of themselves.

The Courier Journal called and emailed Bradford’s attorney, Terry Jacobs, seeking comment. He never responded. She is currently serving a 3½-year sentence in the Johnson County Jail, according to the Kentucky Department of Corrections.

Floyd County Schools did not respond to multiple interview requests and emailed questions. They also did not provide Bradford’s personnel records despite multiple open records requests.

In May 2023, South Floyd Elementary School held a retirement party on the last day of school for their departing teachers, music instructor ... and a 51-year-old assistant principal.

A poster made for the event shows Bradford, the assistant principal, as one of seven smiling faces with the words “Happy Retirement!” surrounded by pencils and apples.

At that point, it had been nearly a year since Bradford was charged with 19 counts of sodomy, sex abuse and unlawful transaction with a minor for her relationships with Prater and Hensley.

Six months later, she pleaded guilty to sexually abusing her two former basketball players.

In Part 4: A look at potential solutions to the problem of child sexual abuse by Kentucky’s school coaches.

Stephanie Kuzydym is an enterprise and investigative sports reporter, with a focus on the health and safety of athletes. She can be reached at skuzydym@courier-journal.com.



Brown: U of L volleyball has talent to win title

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Former administrator is suing KCTCS

Claims retaliation, wrongful termination

Killian Baarlaer
Louisville Courier Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

A former Kentucky Community and Technical College System administrator has filed a whistleblower lawsuit against the college system, court records show.

According to the lawsuit filed in Franklin Circuit Court in October, KCTCS's former chief of staff Hannah Rivera claimed her employment contract was breached when she was terminated in July, and that she was retaliated against by the college system's presi-

dent and board chair for reporting mismanagement and waste of resources leading up to her departure in violation of the Kentucky Whistleblower Act.

KCTCS officials have denied the claims.

Alleged retaliation begins after KCTCS names new president

Rivera started working for KCTCS in 2014 and was under contract to serve as vice president and chief of staff from October 2023 through June 2026 and had never experienced retaliation under any KCTCS administration until Ryan

Quarles became president in January, the lawsuit claims.

Rivera was a key player in the presidential search, but disagreement arose between her and Board of Regents Chairman Barry Martin when Quarles was named a finalist for the position. Martin was "intent on keeping Quarles from getting the position" and tried to derail the search by suggesting they consider it a "failed search" and claiming open meeting laws were violated, according to the lawsuit.

When Quarles was named president, Rivera drafted a news release announcing the decision. She sought Martin's approval to release it, but he delayed, citing that he was awaiting approval from the governor, the lawsuit claims.

She eventually released it without his approval after getting requests from news outlets about the decision.

On a phone call, Martin expressed anger at Rivera and asked her to retract the news release, which she declined to do, according to the lawsuit.

Shortly after Quarles took office, he conferred with Rivera and then-General Counsel Pam Duncan. He asked them to act as his "trusted advisors" and to compile a document of KCTCS's "dirty little secrets" not to be shared with anyone else.

Early in Quarles' tenure, Rivera and Duncan voiced concerns that Martin was overstepping as chairman of the

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SILENCE & SECRETS



Kentucky attorneys Tad Thomas, left, and Jonathan B. Hollan are both representing plaintiffs who are alleging child sexual abuse by former high school coaches. SAM UPSHAW JR. AND MATT STONE/COURIER JOURNAL

Solutions and the lawyers who fight for sex abuse survivors

Stephanie Kuzydym Louisville Courier Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

Tad Thomas placed an annotated copy of Kentucky's child sexual abuse law on the podium and looked up at the justices of the state Supreme Court. • The Louisville-based attorney stood before the seven black-robed justices on that October 2023 day to argue a case involving the amount of time sexual abuse survivors have to make claims against their alleged perpetrators. • Thomas was arguing for his client, a single victim. • But in reality, he was presenting a case that could affect child sex abuse victims all across the commonwealth.

Experts and social scientists have found it can take decades to come to terms with sex abuse suffered in childhood, a point highlighted broadly in the Catholic Church sex abuse scandal during the early 2000s.

"A study found that 44.9% of male and 25.4% of female child sex abuse victims delayed disclosure by more

than 20 years," advocacy group Child USA wrote in a brief to the Kentucky Supreme Court. "This translates to a harsh reality: More victims first disclose their abuse between ages 50 and 70 more than any other age."

Under Kentucky law, the statute of limitations for most personal injury claims is one year. Prior to 2017, child

sex abuse was included in that one-year personal injury claim limit. In 2017, Kentucky legislators increased the statute of limitations for child sex abuse survivors to five years. In 2021, they doubled that to 10 years.

But what about cases that precede that 10 years? Other states have addressed this by reforming their sys-

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Read the entire Silence & Secrets project



Scan the QR code to see all four parts of our investigation into child sexual assault by Kentucky coaches.

Man, 26, charged in CEO's murder

Suspect's motive detailed in writings found during arrest

Christopher Cann, Jonathan Limehouse, Chris Kenning and Dinah Voyles Pulver
USA TODAY

A day after Luigi Mangione was arrested in the killing of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson, new details about what police believe drove him to carry out the ambush began to emerge.

An internal intelligence report from the New York Police Department said the alleged gunman saw himself as a martyr against "corporate greed" and the insurance industry, multiple news outlets reported, including The New York Times and CNN.

"He appeared to view the targeted killing of the company's highest-ranking representative as a symbolic take-down and a direct challenge to its alleged corruption and 'power games,' asserting in his note he is the 'first to face it with such brutal honesty,'" the

See CHARGED, Page 4A



Luigi Mangione is seen in a cell after being taken into custody Monday. He has been charged with murder in the killing of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson. ALTOONA POLICE DEPARTMENT VIA GETTY IMAGES

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Solutions

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tems and opening “revival windows” that would apply retroactively to older cases.

That’s what Thomas was seeking for his client, Samantha Killary, whose abuse began in the 1990s.

Thomas argued that window would have allowed victims whose claims had already expired under Kentucky’s previous five-year statute of limitations to come forward. The General Assembly required the law to apply retroactively to claims before June 29, 2017.

Ultimately, though, Kentucky’s top judges overruled the General Assembly and declined to open that window for child sex abuse victims.

“That’s a short-sighted ruling that doesn’t understand why we do these revivals,” said Child USA founder Marci Hamilton. “It’s to put the finger on the scale to give the victims the time they need when they need to come forward.”

For lawyers like Thomas, who take on cases of child sexual abuse against family members, teachers, coaches and others, the demise of the Killary case also saw the elimination of one of the potential solutions for Kentucky’s child sexual abuse problem.

They lost a way to try to get justice for survivors who take decades to muster the courage to come forward.

But for those whose cases haven’t timed out under Kentucky law, the small number of lawyers who take on these clients aren’t backing off.

“The legal framework in Kentucky for successfully handling these cases makes it pretty tough — whether it’s a situation of the time that’s passed or the liability,” said another one of those lawyers, Jonathan Hollan of Lexington.

“... I never imagined the type of work, the level of work that it takes for just one of these cases to prosecute it at a high level — to really go and be able to give a victim, who has been through something few people can imagine, the type of representation that they need,” Hollan said.

Thomas said he takes the cases on because “it helps prevent future victims by taking abusers out of the system, by shedding light on systematic problems ... I take them hoping that we’re going to prevent future abuse.”

Thomas and Hollan are representing plaintiffs in two high-profile child sex abuse claims against former Kentucky high school coaches.

Some of those high-profile cases led The Courier Journal to examine just how often Kentucky middle- and high-

school coaches are accused of child sexual abuse. The newspaper combed through news reports, school personnel records, lawsuits, settlements and police investigations, finding at least 80 cases of alleged child sexual misconduct by school coaches in the past 15 years.

Vanessa Cantley, another Louisville attorney who takes on such cases and who also has an active civil suit against a former Kentucky high coach, said the statute of limitations in Kentucky “needs to be abolished.”

Cantley has worked with abuse survivors as part of her degrees in psychology and sociology — and with perpetrators in her work with the Kentucky State Reformatory.

“Anyone who researches this trauma and understands the social science knows the vast majority of survivors are not going to come forward until midlife,” she said. “Their remedy will be gone. So knowing this, how can we keep an arbitrary statute of limitations at age 28? How can we do that?”

In most cases, a child sex abuse victim’s 10-year statute of limitations begins when they turn 18, but can be extended by a related criminal conviction or other limited exceptions.

In September, Cantley filed a lawsuit on behalf of a 19-year-old alleged victim against former Manual High football coach Donnie Stoner.

“The Stoner case is the first lawsuit I have brought against a coach,” she said. “It is not the first case against a coach I have reviewed. ... I’ve only taken so few because the statute has run. And there’s nothing I can do.

“One of the worst things is sitting across from someone who after all of these years, they’ve built up the courage, they’ve been in therapy, they’ve talked to their family — and telling them that there’s no remedy and the time has passed. That’s devastating.”

But Thomas said the moral of the story is no victim should assume they don’t have a case.

“There’s no blanket rule that Jane Smith or John Doe doesn’t have a case,” Thomas said, “You have to dig in and look at the facts and scenario in each one to see what is the statute of limitations in that case and when did it actually expire.”

The state Supreme Court’s Killary decision led to child sex abuse civil claims across the state being scrapped.

“People who should have been held responsible for their conduct are not going to be held responsible for their conduct,” Thomas said, “because the Supreme Court has said the statute of limitations has passed.”

Multiple advocacy groups and survivors have pushed for other solutions



“Anyone who researches this trauma and understands the social science knows the vast majority of survivors are not going to come forward until midlife. Their remedy will be gone. So knowing this, how can we keep an arbitrary statute of limitations at age 28? How can we do that?”

Vanessa Cantley Louisville attorney

beyond the statute of limitations. They include:

Jenna and Erin’s laws

Jenna’s Law and Erin’s Law are similar measures that require schools to provide age-appropriate sex abuse prevention training in kindergarten through 12th grade. The model policy has passed in 36 states, including every state that touches Kentucky — but not Kentucky.

The training helps students identify personal safety skills, potential risks and a safe adult they can approach about unsafe situations.

“It’s just getting school districts to commit to doing it and making it a priority as much as a priority for fire drills or for school shootings, or for all these other things that we require schools to do to keep kids safe,” said Billie-Jo Grant, a college professor who researches child sexual abuse and ways to stop it.

House Bill 275

During the upcoming legislative session, Rep. James Tipton, R-Taylorsville, who is the chairman of the House education committee, will try to get a law passed to prevent sexually abusive school employees from moving out of one district and into another without their history being known.

A similar measure, known as House Bill 275 during the 2024 legislative session, died on the session’s final day.

“We have a responsibility and an obligation to protect our students in our school system to the best of our ability,” Tipton told The Courier Journal.

Following federal Title IX requirements

The Courier Journal found that only half of the state’s public school districts followed a basic federal Title IX law requiring them to display their Title IX coordinator and contact information on their website (and of those, a quarter of the contacts were no longer listed in the district’s personnel directory).

Grant said if a parent sees a district without that information, they can start with the district and try to resolve it.

“From there, there’s a Regional Title

IX office,” she said. “If the regional office doesn’t help, you would go to the federal Office of Civil Rights and you can make a formal complaint. They will investigate what’s going on and if somebody’s not in compliance with the regulations.”

Compassionate Coach

Compassionate Coach is an eight-week virtual course created by The Army of Survivors, a non-profit made up of athlete survivors of child sex abuse, that teaches coaches about barriers and fears in reporting sex abuse.

“It teaches coaches how to be trauma-informed and how to work with children who have been sexually abused or who have endured some type of trauma,” said The Army of Survivors co-founder Danielle Moore, who was one of hundreds who came forward about the abuse by USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar. “They’re over Zoom sessions, so people can actually talk about and process through things.”

Step 1: Believe. Step 2: Report.

During its reporting of Silence & Secrets, The Courier Journal spoke with authors, advocates, attorneys, survivors, law enforcement, child abuse psychologists, pediatric forensic physicians, school board members, Title IX coordinators, legislators and more.

In response to the question of ‘how do you stop child sex abuse predators,’ their answer was often the same: Believe a victim. Then report it to law enforcement so they can investigate the claim.

“It’s kind of the million-dollar question,” The Army of Survivors’ Moore said about why people who are required by law to report child sex abuse sometimes don’t. “It goes back to having institutional courage. Being able to stand up for somebody who is being harmed, which kind of goes against the institution. It’s hard to go up against that type of power.”

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KCTCS

Continued from Page 1A

board, the lawsuit reads, claiming Quarles would excuse himself from meetings to take the chairman’s phone calls, and the two spoke on a daily basis.

Rivera and Duncan also voiced concern that a contract KCTCS had with the Cabinet for Health and Family Services and Primary Care Associates could present a conflict of interest because Martin served on the Primary Care Associates Board of Directors. Rivera and Duncan asked Quarles to address the contract issue with Martin, but he didn’t, the lawsuit claimed.

Lawsuit alleges inaction on audit recommendations

Rivera was also concerned that recommendations resulting from a \$1.2 million audit, performed by Huron Consulting Group and aimed to improve operations, were scarcely implemented, according to the lawsuit.

While members of the Kentucky General Assembly urged implementation of the recommendations, Rivera claims Quarles did not act on the guidance in a timely manner. When Rivera was called before the General Assembly to discuss KCTCS’s progress on implementation, Martin contacted her to tell her to not testify without him, as he would do a better job of “focusing on the positives,” according to the lawsuit.

The lawsuit claimed Quarles created several executive-level positions that he filled with people he had personal relationships with, going against the agency’s protocols. The new hires led to an additional \$1 million in expenses after recent studies advised downsizing the KCTCS System Office.

Rivera was responsible for “finding places” and “making up job descriptions” for the new hires, which she expressed to Quarles could be wasteful management, according to the lawsuit.



Jefferson Community and Technical College is one of 16 colleges in the Kentucky Community and Technical College System, which serves roughly 85,000 students statewide. MICHAEL CLEVENGER/THE CJ

In a statement, KCTCS spokesperson Blair Hess said Quarles “inherited an ongoing state audit and other administrative issues and has spent his first year in office prioritizing compliance, implementing numerous improvement measures, and focusing on the future of accessible and affordable education in Kentucky.”

“To achieve this, Dr. Quarles has built a team which includes higher education professionals,” the statement continued.

General Assembly passes Senate Joint Resolution 179

During meetings with legislators attended by Rivera during the 2024 session, Quarles would call KCTCS a “complete mess,” the lawsuit said. These meetings led to the passage of Senate Joint Resolution 179, which instructs system leaders to identify action steps to address the recommendations made in previous audits. KCTCS officials are set to present those findings to a committee Tuesday.

Rivera claimed in the lawsuit that she wrote the resolution herself, but Quarles told her to remain silent about either of their roles in writing it out of fear of retaliation from Martin and presidents of the system’s 16 individual colleges. Rivera responded by saying she was loyal to the institution and wouldn’t lie about her role in SJR 179.

As work on the resolution began, Martin recommended the board play a direct role in the work. Rivera pushed back against the idea, worrying it could create mismanagement and conflicts, according to the lawsuit. Meanwhile, Rivera was denied a role in the work despite her expertise in the area.

Quarles began telling Rivera that Martin wanted her to leave the college system and that she held too much “power and influence,” according to the lawsuit. He repeatedly told Rivera he had to “figure out what to do with her,” the lawsuit added.

In the spring of 2024, an argument broke out between Quarles and Duncan, the general counsel, in which he told her that Duncan, Rivera and another

er employee “have too much power” and that he’s “got to do something with you three,” the lawsuit alleged.

Duncan eventually took leave and left the college system after reaching a voluntary separation agreement.

Rivera leaves KCTCS, later filing suit

Rivera later noticed her exclusion from important meetings that she had typically participated in and lost her title as chief of staff, according to the lawsuit.

During a six-month performance review in July, Rivera presented a letter outlining the retaliation she had experienced since Quarles took the helm. She told Quarles she felt as though she was being pushed out and suggested she tender a voluntary separation agreement, according to the lawsuit.

When Rivera provided documentation requested by Quarles, he immediately put her on administrative leave, culminating in her termination later that month, according to the lawsuit. During this time, she continued documenting issues with Quarles’ leadership.

The lawsuit claimed Rivera’s departure breached her employment contract, and that KCTCS falsely claimed she had resigned despite being “unilaterally” terminated.

Hess, the KCTCS spokesperson, said the college system “refutes” the claims and officials filed a motion to dismiss the case in November. In the filing, KCTCS argued that Rivera presented a signed resignation letter and voluntary separation agreement simultaneously but “did not condition her resignation upon payment of the severance.” KCTCS denied her demand because her employment contract “expressly disallowed” severance payments for a resignation, according to court records.

The parties are set to appear in court Wednesday.

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