



KEA News

The preeminent voice for quality public education

Volume 61 Issue 4: Fall 2025

KEA advocacy leads to anticipated meaningful changes to SB 181, the “Traceable Communications” Law



Sen. Tichenor

Since SB181 went into effect on June 27, 2025, Kentucky educators have raised serious concerns about how the law— which was intended to create transparency and safety in student communications —has instead caused confusion and fear of disciplinary action for simple, everyday interactions.

In response to those concerns, KEA President Joel Wolford, Vice President Jessica Hiler, and KEA staff have met multiple times with Senator Lindsey Tichenor (R–6th District), the bill’s sponsor, to share members’ real-world experiences with SB 181 and propose practical solutions.

Changes Under Discussion

Based on KEA members’ feedback and advocacy by KEA leadership and staff, Sen. Tichenor has agreed to consider making the following proposed changes to SB 181 during the 2026 legislative session:

- Redefine parent/family to include stepparents, step siblings, in-laws.
- Redefine qualified school volunteer to include only those who are in the school on a regular basis, not someone who attends a trip or volunteers for events intermittently.
- Exclude the following: virtual instruction; communication to/with a phone number provided by the parent; communication where parents are included (i.e. group texts chats that parents are included in); public social media posts, comments, likes, etc.; communications that arise from the use of commercial products or services; secure communication from a healthcare provider.
- Expand consent form language to allow one consent form to cover multiple teachers/employees/qualified volunteers for a single student. Every employee and volunteer would need to be listed on the one form the parent submits. Schools or districts cannot require a consent form from the parent as a condition for student participation in a team, trip or activity.
- Allow private electronic communication in emergency situations, but teacher/staff/qualified volunteers must disclose the communication to their district when the emergency passes.

- Make some allowances for communication during a field trip or school sponsored activity.

These proposed updates are a direct result of KEA’s advocacy and members’ input. KEA leaders will continue working with Sen. Tichenor and lawmakers in the upcoming legislative session to advocate for these changes and assure that educators’ voices remain at the center of this issue.

Stay informed:

Watch KEA’s social media channels and check your email for President Wolford’s bi-weekly Leadership Notes Email for continued updates on SB181 and other legislative priorities. Please contact your legislator and advocate for the proposed changes.



Growing Together Through KEA’s Rank Advancement Academy

KEA members know that learning doesn’t stop once you’re in the classroom— lifelong learning is what keeps great educators growing. That’s why KEA partnered with Western Kentucky University to create the Kentucky Rank Advancement Academy, a Continuing Education Option designed *by educators, for educators*.

Through this program, KEA members can earn Rank II or Rank I certification in a way that fits their busy lives and connects their learning directly to their classroom practice. It’s affordable, flexible, and built around the real work educators do every day.

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Growing Together Through KEA’s Rank Advancement Academy (continued from page 1)

Two KEA members who’ve taken this step in their professional journey are Lisa Dobson and Michael Wright. Read what they say about the Kentucky Rank Advancement Academy and how it’s helping them strengthen their teaching, opening new career doors, and making an even greater impact on Kentucky students:



“I chose the Kentucky Rank Advancement Academy (KRAA) for my Continuing Education Option (CEO) because I loved the flexibility to personalize my learning path based on the needs of my specific students. This program supported learning regarding accessible lessons, advocacy for special needs, and technology integration.

“The value that KEA and WKU created through this program is evident by the improved outcomes I have seen from my students. By learning new research-based classroom practices and effective assessment strategies, my students are enjoying more positive classroom experiences. What I enjoyed most about the KRAA process was

implementing my learning on a daily basis in my own classroom with actual students, seeing what worked, and sometimes more importantly, what didn’t.

“What I learned most through the KRAA process is that the most relevant and practical continuing education experience is educator-developed, collaborative, and on the job. It is a practice I will continue throughout my career. My students helped evaluate my process and my growth. Not only did this program give me valuable tools to help students improve learning and retention, my participation in the Academy also showed them the importance of being a life-long learner. Never stop trying to do better!”

— **Lisa Dobson, Math Teacher**
The Academies of Bates Creek High School
Fayette County Education Association



“I chose the KY Rank Advancement Academy for my CEO for several reasons. First of all, this Academy is set up so that the tasks are directly integrated into my current classroom practices. I could easily work through the micro-credentials by adding to what I was already doing within the classroom. This model made the process much more manageable. Also, I was able to work through the program at my own pace. The micro-credentials were not set up like typical classes and classroom hours. Finally, I was extremely impressed by the total cost of this program when comparing it to similar rank change programs.

“Because this program is designed around practical application, there was an immediate benefit to my students. I practiced new strategies which led to higher levels of engagement, and more effective classroom routines. My students became more motivated as I used practices that were more tailored to their needs. This program also helped me to grow as a teacher, to be more confident in using data to guide my instruction, and to set goals for both myself and my students.

“I would say that what I learned the most through the Kentucky Rank Advancement Academy was the importance of continuously reflecting on my teaching. In order to continue to grow professionally, I need to consistently adjust my teaching to meet the needs of my students. This program emphasizes the importance of being a lifelong learner.

“As I began this journey for rank advancement, I had some anxieties since it had been a while since my last college course. However, I received wonderful support from my mentor who helped guide me through this process. I’m grateful for that support and so thankful that I decided to take the plunge.”

— **Michael Wright**
Lebanon Elementary
Marion County Education Association

Visit **KEA.org** and click on the Professionalism tab for more in-depth information and to view our KY Rank Advancement Academy overview video. The next Academy Cohort Class commitment window is October 15-December 15 and begins in January.

If you have any questions about the Academy, please contact Michelle Jones, Director of Professional Excellence, at mjones@kea.org or Beth Shepherd, Legal Services Associate, at bshepherd@kea.org.



Standing Up for Each Other, Standing Up for Public Education

By Joel Wolford, KEA President

I have spent my life in service. I’ve served my community. I’ve served my country. I’ve served as your KEA Vice President for the past six years. But what truly qualifies me to serve as your President is not the titles I’ve held—it’s the people I’ve come to know along the way. I know who drives the buses in Floyd County. I know who teaches kindergarten in Paducah. I know who keeps the schools running in Boone County, who teaches history in Russell County, and who inspires the next generation of scientists in Pikeville. I know administrators, paraeducators, custodians, and countless other colleagues across the Commonwealth. And knowing you—your struggles, your victories, your sacrifices—is what shapes my leadership.

Together, as an association, we have already proven our strength. We stood together to elect and reelect an education-friendly governor. We stood together to defeat Amendment 2 and protect public education funding from being siphoned into private school vouchers. Time and again, we’ve shown that when we unite, we are a potent, positive force for good in Kentucky.

But our work is far from finished. As I begin this new chapter as KEA President, I make only one promise: I will lead with integrity and I will do my very best for you. If it matters to you, it matters to me. I ask one thing in return: that you stand up for public education. Not as an abstract idea or a distant cause, but in the most concrete way possible—by standing up for one another.

Stand up for the bus driver who starts her day in the freezing dark so her bus will be warm for her students. Stand up for the custodian who works just as hard as anyone in the district, yet wonders why his paycheck doesn’t reflect his value. Stand up for the overwhelmed first-year teacher who questions whether she can endure decades in a system warped by testing. Stand up for the veteran educator who still burns with passion but feels battered by endless criticism and political attacks. Stand up for the kindergarten assistant who guides little ones safely through the day, then heads off to her second or third job—when one should be enough.

Standing up for public education means standing up for each other. It means remembering that when you join KEA, you gain another family. A family made up of the salt of the earth—teachers, bus drivers, paraeducators, custodians—people who embody the very best of Kentucky and of America.

Together, we are stronger than any challenge before us. Together, we are KEA. And together, we will continue to stand tall for our students, our schools, and each other.



Strength, Unity, and Bright Years Ahead

By Jessica Hiler, KEA Vice President

Hello fellow KEA members! I want to take a minute of your time to introduce myself as your new KEA vice president.

I taught Kindergarten in Fayette County for 11 years and have been a KEA member since joining EKU’s Aspiring Educators chapter in 1996. For the past 15 years, I led the Fayette County Education Association as president and also served on the KEA Board of Directors.

In my new role as VP, this year brings new challenges and opportunities for me to advocate for the respect, support, and resources each of you deserve for the work you do. Whether you’re in the classroom, office, or working behind the scenes, know that your voice matters, and KEA is here to support you.

I want to thank each of you for your continued dedication to our students, communities, and to one another. Your passion and professionalism make a difference every single day, and as your union, KEA is proud to stand beside you.

KEA state and local leaders and staff are hard at work representing you and growing our union membership. Do you know someone who is considering KEA membership? Ask them to join and share what KEA means to you.

I am honored to represent you as KEA vice president. I look forward to working with you to advocate for, and improve, our profession and our public schools. Please reach out if you have any suggestions or questions for me. You can reach me via email at keavp@kea.org.

Here’s to strength, unity, and bright years ahead for KEA!

Show Your Gratitude Through Creativity in the KEA Difference Makers Student Art Contest

Every student has someone in their school who makes a lasting impact. Maybe it's the teacher who believes in you when you don't believe in yourself, the bus driver who greets you with a smile every morning, or the counselor who helps you see your own potential. These are the "Difference Makers." These are the educators who shape lives far beyond the classroom.

KEA invites students across the Commonwealth to honor these inspiring educators by creating a work of art for the 2026 KEA Difference Makers Student Art Contest. This contest gives every student, from preschool through high school, the chance to capture through art the educator who has made a difference in their life. There are four categories: grades P-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12.

Whether it's a drawing, painting, or another artistic creation, your work can tell the story of how an educator has inspired you. Four students, one in each grade band, will be named winners, and both they and the educators they highlight will receive a prize. More importantly, each piece of art becomes a tribute, a lasting reminder to an educator that their dedication matters and that their influence reaches far beyond the school day.

Entries must be original works of art, no larger than 8.5 by 11 inches, and must arrive at KEA Headquarters in Frankfort by 5 p.m. ET on Saturday, January 31, 2026. Each submission must be accompanied by a completed entry form. Entry forms and full contest details can be found at KEA.org.

The KEA Difference Makers Art Contest is more than a competition. It is a chance for students to say thank you in the most personal way possible: through creativity. If you're a teacher, encourage your students to reflect on who inspires them. If you're a student, take the opportunity to show your gratitude through your art. Your voice and your vision can celebrate the people who make Kentucky's schools stronger every day.

KEA DIFFERENCEMAKERS

STUDENT ART CONTEST



Encourage your students to honor the educators who make a difference for them.

SUBMISSIONS DUE JANUARY 31, 2026

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This unique Continuing Education Option is an exclusive partnership between:



KEA NEWS

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Celebrate Excellence:

Nominate a Colleague for the 2026 KEA Teacher of the Year

Every school has that educator—the one who goes above and beyond for students, who lifts up their colleagues, and who makes their classroom a place where learning and belonging thrive. The Kentucky Education Association invites you to recognize that kind of dedication by nominating a colleague for the 2026 KEA Teacher of the Year.

This honor celebrates an educator who exemplifies the very best in our profession through classroom practice, advocacy, commitment to diversity, service to the community, and leadership among peers. The award is more than recognition—it is a statement that extraordinary teaching changes lives, schools, and communities.

The winner will receive a \$1,000 prize, a commemorative award, and will proudly represent Kentucky as KEA's nominee for the prestigious 2027 Horace Mann–NEA Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence.

Nominations open November 1, 2025, and each KEA local affiliate may submit one nomination through the online portal at KEA.org. The deadline for nominations is Saturday, January 31, 2026, at 5 p.m. ET. The KEA Executive Committee, along with past Kentucky Teachers of the Year, will select the recipient.

If you know a colleague whose passion, leadership, and commitment inspire you, don't miss this chance to honor them. Nominate them for the 2026 KEA Teacher of the Year—because their excellence deserves to be celebrated.

Honoring the Heart of Our Schools:

Nominate the 2026 KEA ESP of the Year

Behind every successful school is a team of dedicated education support professionals whose work makes teaching and learning possible. From the bus drivers who greet students each morning, to the food service workers who ensure every child is nourished, to the paraeducators, custodians, secretaries, and countless others who keep our schools running—ESPs are the heart of public education.

The KEA Education Support Professional of the Year Award honors one outstanding KEA ESP member whose dedication, skill, and service go above and beyond. The recipient embodies the very best of what it means to serve students, colleagues, and the community.

Winners will receive a \$1,000 prize, a commemorative award, and nomination for the National Education Association's 2027 ESP of the Year Award, giving Kentucky's winner the opportunity to be recognized on a national stage.

Nominations open November 1, 2025 and must be submitted by Saturday, January 31, 2026, at 5 p.m. ET through the online Members portal at KEA.org. To be eligible, nominees must be current KEA members who will have completed three years of membership by December 31, 2025. The KEA Executive Committee, along with past Kentucky ESP's of the Year, will select the recipient.

If you know an ESP colleague who represents the very best of our profession, don't miss this chance to celebrate their work. Nominate them today for the 2026 KEA ESP of the Year—because their commitment deserves to shine.



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Kentucky Education Association

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KEA Members & Families: Apply Now for More than \$50,000 in Scholarships for 2026

Investing in the Future of Education—Yours and Your Family’s

KEA is committed to supporting educators and their families, both in the classroom and also in their pursuit of higher education. If you or a family member are planning to further your education in 2026, don’t miss out on KEA’s scholarship opportunities.

All applications open Nov. 1, 2025, and close at 5 p.m. ET on Saturday, January 31, 2026. Go to www.kea.org to access the online applications.



KEA Presidents’ Scholarships – Every year, KEA’s 12 governance districts award scholarships to Active certified or ESP members in four categories:

- Rank I (hours beyond Master’s)
- Rank II (Master’s)
- National Board Certification
- Continuing education/advanced certification for ESP members

Up to \$1,000 is available from KEA per award, totaling \$48,000 statewide. Committees in each KEA governance district review applications and determine the winners in each category. The number and financial amount of scholarships awarded can vary from district to district but will not be less than \$250 per winner.

Representative Paul Mason Memorial Scholarship – For any active or retired KEA ESP member or their children or grandchildren. This scholarship honors Kentucky House Rep. Mason’s legacy of championing the less fortunate. The Kentucky Education Support Professionals Association (KESPA) Board of **Directors will award at least one \$500 scholarship to an eligible applicant.**

Marvin Dodson-Carl Perkins Scholarships – For KEA Aspiring Educator members enrolled in teacher preparation programs in Kentucky. The KEA MOVE Committee determines the winners. **Awards range from \$500–\$1,000 per scholarship, totaling \$6,000 annually.**

Marnel Moorman Scholarship – Honors KEA’s first African American president. For high school seniors or college students seeking an education degree. Criteria include financial need, an expressed preference to enter the field of education, ethnic-minority status (preferred but not required), academic performance, is or will be a high school graduate, is seeking their first post-secondary degree. The KEA Diversity Committee selects winners. **Scholarship Award is \$1,000.**

KEA-Retired Tom Denton Scholarship – For Kentucky college juniors, seniors, or MAT candidates entering for the following school year. Preference given to KEA Aspiring Educators with an outstanding academic record, financial need, students with family members who are KEA Active or KEA Retired members, and those planning to teach in Kentucky. Winning this scholarship does not exclude a student from receiving other KEA sponsored scholarships. The KEA Retired Selection Committee selects recipients. **Scholarship Award ranges from \$800–\$1,000 annually.**

Don’t Miss Your Chance!
KEA scholarships provide real financial support for members and their families who are committed to education. Whether you’re working toward an advanced degree, preparing to enter the classroom, or helping a family member follow their dreams, KEA is here to help.
Apply online at KEA.org between **Nov. 1, 2025 – Jan. 31, 2026.**

Step Into Leadership: Run for KEA’s Statewide Delegate Seats at the 2026 NEA Representative Assembly

Do you want to help shape the future of public education at the national level? Here’s your chance.

The 2026 NEA Representative Assembly—the largest democratic gathering of educators in the world—will take place July 3-7, 2026, in Denver, Colorado. More than 8,000 NEA members from across the country will come together to elect national leaders, vote on the budget, and set the priorities that guide our union’s work for the year ahead.

KEA will send a number of statewide delegates, based on our official membership count on January 15, 2026. If you’re an Active KEA member, you can nominate yourself to serve as one of those delegates and represent Kentucky educators on the national stage. Members who are elected as statewide delegates will receive a stipend from KEA to offset the cost of traveling to the RA.

Why Run?

- To be a voice for Kentucky educators with NEA, our national affiliate.
- To shape NEA’s priorities on issues like pay, pensions, student success, and working conditions.
- To build national connections with educators who share your values and commitment.

How to Get on the Ballot

- **Nominations open: November 1, 2025**
- **Deadline to submit: 5 p.m. ET, January 15, 2026**
- **Where: Complete the official online nomination form at KEA.org (Members tab).**
- **Only the first 25 words of biographical information will be included on the ballot, and KEA reserves the right to edit for length. You may include a photo, but it is optional.**

Voting and Results

- Election dates: March 1–31, 2026 (online at KEA.org)
- Results announced: During the 2026 KEA Delegate Assembly in early April.
- This is for Active Members only. Retired and Aspiring Educator members will elect their RA delegates in separate elections.

Even if you don’t plan to attend the RA, make sure your voice is heard—vote for the delegates who will represent you. Every active KEA member is eligible to cast a ballot.

2026 KEA DA Local Delegate Election Results Due to KEA by November 30, 2025; other DA submissions due by January 15, 2026

The 154th KEA Delegate Assembly will be held at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Louisville, April 2-3, 2026. The Delegate Assembly is the highest governing body of the association. Delegates are elected from KEA local associations.

The delegates to the 2026 DA will vote for the following statewide association office:

- KEA Ethnic Minority Director at Large, Seat 1 – for a full three-year term beginning June 15, 2026, and ending June 14, 2029.

Active KEA members interested in running for the Ethnic Minority Director position must submit the official candidate declaration form in the Member’s section of the KEA website at KEA.org. Candidates must be Active members of the association and must have been a member for at least two years immediately preceding the

election. Candidates for Ethnic Minority Director at Large are asked to self-identify their ethnicity in the application. Nominations are currently being accepted. Nominations close on Wednesday, January 15, 2026, at 5 p.m. (Eastern).

Constitutional Amendments: Assembly delegates will also vote on proposed amendments to the KEA Constitution, if any are submitted. Members wishing to propose amendments must submit them to the KEA Compliance/Constitution Committee at CCC@KEA.org by Wednesday, January 15, 2026, 5 p.m. (Eastern). All proposed amendments must include the name(s) of the sponsoring members, the text of the proposed changes, and the rationale for the change.

Legislative Program Amendments: Delegates may submit proposed changes to

the current KEA Legislative Program, which can be viewed on the KEA website under the “Advocacy” tab. Amendments for possible inclusion in the 2026-27 KEA Legislative Program must be submitted through the online form by Wednesday, January 15, 2026, at 5 p.m. Eastern. You can find the online form in the “Members” section at KEA.org under “2026 KEA Delegate Assembly.”

New Business Items: New Business Items must also be submitted online; that form is also available in the “Members” section of KEA.org under “2026 KEA Delegate Assembly.” Per the KEA Standing Rules, the deadline to submit New Business Items to be considered at the 2026 DA is 12 p.m. eastern time on Thursday, April 2, 2026.

Note: This is one hour before the DA convenes.

KEA Read Across America Grants Bring Literacy to Life in KY Communities



From the mountains of eastern Kentucky to the river towns of the west, KEA members are bringing the joy of reading to students through the Read Across America grant program. This year, KEA awarded \$4,000 in grants to 8 local associations, Aspiring Educator chapters, and retiree groups who designed creative literacy activities for their communities. Each project received \$500, providing resources and opportunities that will inspire children to read, dream, and imagine.

Read Across America, first launched by the National Education Association in 1998, has grown into the nation’s largest celebration of reading. Guided by educators, it promotes literacy year-round by funding activities that connect classrooms, families, and communities. The program highlights books where students can see themselves reflected, alongside stories that open windows into new worlds, people, and experiences.

KEA’s Membership, Organizing, Visibility & Engagement Committee (MOVE) selected this year’s recipients, who demonstrated how a small grant can have a big impact on young readers. Whether it’s putting diverse books into children’s hands, creating reading-centered family events, or sparking excitement through community-wide literacy projects, KEA members are difference makers when it comes to fostering a lifelong love of reading.

If your local association has a vision for a literacy project, now is the time to start planning. KEA will award Read Across America grants again next year, and your idea could be among those chosen to inspire the next generation of readers. Together, we can continue to show Kentucky students that reading not only connects us it empowers us.

2026 Read Across America KEA Grant Award Winners

Adair County Education Association, \$500

Calloway County Education Association, \$500

Campbellsville University Aspiring Educators, \$500

Floyd County KESPA, \$500

Jefferson County Teachers Association, \$500

Middle Cumberland Retired Education Association, \$500

Murray State Aspiring Educators, \$500

Russell County Education Association, \$500

Scott County Education Association, \$500

Grants of up to \$500 available.

Applications open July 2026 at KEA.org





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KEA News

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Attention KEA Members:



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Check out KEA Apparel and branded items at KEAstore.com or scan the QR code.

