



20-mile pursuit ends in crash along Watauga Road A3

Town manager signs support for Main Street without funding A2



Washington County News

Wednesday, May 22, 2019 ♦ Washington County News www.swvatoday.com ♦ Vol. 74, No. 20 ♦ \$1.00

COMMUNITY



Plumb Alley Day kicks off this weekend in Abingdon

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AGRICULTURE



Farmers market opens season in Glade Spring with music, vendors

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BUSINESS



Man readies retail store for beekeeping supplies

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Families press for answers in three Mendota murders

BY ROBERT SORRELL
 WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Family members and former colleagues want answers on why three women were killed in the Mendota area of Washington County News, according to

charges filed by the Sheriff's Office.

James Michael Wright, 23, confessed to detectives on May 9 that he shot and killed Elizabeth Marie Vanmeter, 22, Joslyn M. Alsup, 17, and Athina Hopson, 25, all in

an 18-day period in late February and early March.

Vanmeter is believed to have been shot and killed around Feb. 28, Alsup is believed to have died on or about March 9, and Hopson is believed to have died

More information
 » Mendota community responds to killings B1

See **MURDERS**, Page A3

SUMMER FOOD SERVICE PROGRAM



Summer food programs help serve children who qualify for reduced lunch prices all year round, including when school isn't in session. But the program still offers challenges in getting the food to as many kids as possible.

Summer of service

Getting food to kids during summer can be tough for school nutritionists

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
 FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — For many kids, summer break may not be all sunshine and fun times.

It may mean going hungry. Many children throughout the country — and even in this region — will not have enough to eat at home when schools are not in session.

According to Valerie Cupp, director of child nutrition for Washington County Public Schools, 3,217 Washington County students were eligible for free meals, and 399 students were eligible for reduced meals during April.

"That's 51% of the student population," she said. "Families depend on

See **SUMMER**, Page A5

Abingdon senior dies in I-81 crash day before graduation

BY JOE TENNIS and DAVID MCGEE
 WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — A hush fell over the crowd of 2,000 assembled Friday night at Falcon Stadium when Kirk Nairn's name was called out over the loudspeakers.

Then the audience rose to their feet, cheered and delivered a standing ovation that lasted nearly a minute. The crowd and students roared with applause, and air horns blasted as if it was a football Friday night.

But it was Abingdon High School's emotionally charged graduation ceremony.

Two empty chairs stood out on the field as the class of 2019 received their diplomas. One was for Connor Bartz, who died in February after a long battle with cancer. The other was for Kirk Nairn, who perished suddenly less than 24 hours before the ceremony in a Thursday night traffic accident on Interstate 81.

Students and AHS Principal B.J. Lasley made mention of the fallen students during the opening segments of the graduation ceremony. A moment of silence was followed by a round of applause, echoed by emotional tones of hushes in the

See **CRASH**, Page A6

Donated property will be used for new fire/rescue

BY JOE TENNIS
 WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Washington County's Board of Supervisors moved ahead this week with a plan to establish a fire and rescue substation near Whitetop Mountain by accepting a land donation at Green Cove, Virginia.

"The first thing we need is some land to put something on," Supervisor Mike Rush told the Board of Supervisors at its Tuesday meeting last week.

Rush said he explored the area, looking for potential property.

"We didn't come up with much," he said. "Then we approached Annette Goode to do-

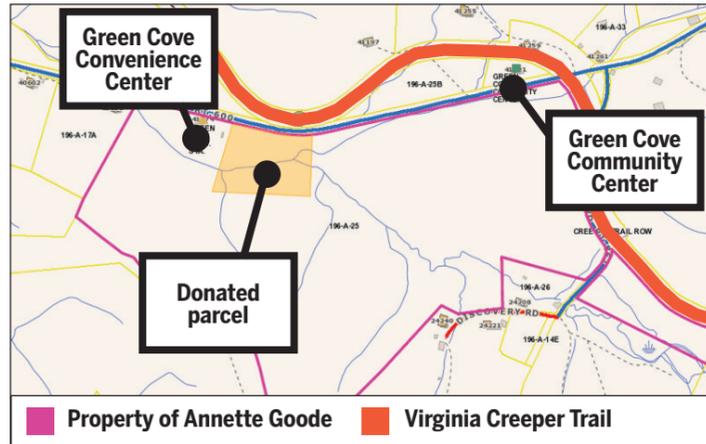
nate this, and she did."

Now a resident of Folsom, California, Goode, for years, operated the Buchanan Inn, a bed and breakfast along the Virginia Creeper Trail near the historic Green Cove Station, about a half-mile from U.S. Highway 58.

Goode's donated property contains 150 feet along Green Cove Road near the county's Green Cove Convenience Center.

County Administrator Jason Berry visited the 2-acre property on May 10 and said, "It will make a nice site for a station."

See **DONATION**, Page A2



A 2-acre piece of property owned by Annette Good along Green Cove Road will be donated to Washington County to build a new fire and rescue station to serve the Whitetop community.

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Summer

From Page A1

this service to help feed their children.

“Many children are fed breakfast and lunch throughout the school year, and when summer comes, they may not receive nutritious meals at all.”

That’s something that worries Cupp.

In her second year as director, Cupp is coordinating a Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) offered through Washington County Public Schools and funded by the United States Department of Agriculture. The program is a federally funded, state-administered program that reimburses program operators who serve free healthy meals and snacks to children and teens.

Beginning June 3, free, healthy meals will be available to all children during the summer at designated sites throughout Washington County. The meal pattern offers milk and foods with grains, vegetables and proteins, all prepared at local high school cafeterias.

“A typical lunch might consist of a chicken sandwich, salad, apple and milk,” she said.

The program concludes Aug. 2, with each meal site operating with different ending dates and times.

“If we can reach children and provide them with meals when school is out, we are answering a desperate need in our community,” said Cupp. Last year, the pro-

gram served about 230 children, which included children who were already at the sites for camps and summer school. This year, she anticipates serving 450 children.

“The number of walk-in children who were not involved in these programs was minimal,” Cupp said.

Cupp said the program went well during last year’s trial, but she is certain there are many children who are not being served. She is expanding the program this year to offer more opportunities for children to benefit.

The program works by setting up sites in the community where meals are delivered during certain times and days. The program is open to all children 18 years and younger, even those who do not reside in Washington County. No proof of income is required. Parents and guardians pay \$3 if they choose to eat a meal with their children.

Despite the many benefits of the Summer Food Service Program,

Cupp said meeting federal guidelines sometimes poses challenges.

All meals must be eaten on-site — one of many regulations Cupp must follow.

Unfortunately, the families who may need the service the most may lack transportation to the sites.

This year, Cupp is offering additional site locations in hopes of reaching more children.

She’s also partnering with sites that offer activities for children during the summer, such as Hayters Gap Library, which hosts a Summer Reading Program.

Living Faith Television was also chosen because of its close proximity to Sugar Hollow Park where children come to play. Both breakfast and lunch will be served at Emmanuel Baptist Church each weekday.

“We’re learning as we go along and seeing what works and what doesn’t,” said Cupp.

Carolyn R. Wilson is a freelance writer in Glade Spring, Virginia. Contact her at news@washconews.com.

If You Go

The following is a list of open sites in the county and the days and times of operation.

Meals are free to all children, and no sign-up is required.



COURTESY OF SUMMER FOOD SERVICE PROGRAM

» Patrick Henry High School

Address: 31437 Hillman Highway, Glade Spring, Virginia

Times: Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday, June 3-July 18 (closed July 1, 2 and 4), 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

» Hayters Gap Library

Address: 7720 Hayters Gap Road, Abingdon, Virginia

Times: Tuesday and Thursday, June 4-July 2, 1-2 p.m.

» John Battle High School

Address: 21264 Battle Hill Drive, Bristol, Virginia

Times: Monday-Thursday, June 3-July 18 (closed July 4), 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

» Living Faith Television

(parking lot is adjacent to Sugar Hollow Park)

Address: 14095 Lee Highway, Bristol, Virginia

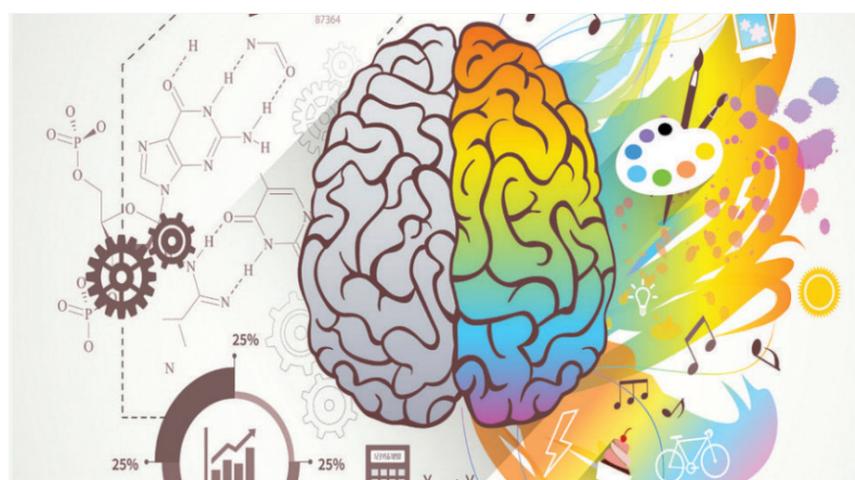
Times: Tuesday and Thurs-

day, June 3-July 18 (closed July 4), 10:30-11:30 a.m.

» Emmanuel Baptist Church

Address: 19383 Lee Highway, Abingdon, Virginia

Times: Monday-Friday, June 3-Aug. 2, 8-9 a.m. (breakfast), 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. (lunch)



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Washington County Fair announces 2019 music lineup B2

Just how important is replacing Abingdon's courthouse? B1



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MUSIC



Lebanon man wins Richard Leigh Songwriting Contest **» A5**

COMMUNITY



Wolf statues installed all along Abingdon Main Street **» B3**

ART



Children in Glade Spring display clay art for Mountains of Music **» B1**

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Work continues on The Sessions

BY DAVID MCGEE
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

BRISTOL, Va. — Nearly 11 months after The Sessions Hotel held formal groundbreaking ceremonies, workers are steadily converting three 100-year-old buildings into the Twin City's second downtown boutique hotel.

The 70-room, \$20 million project will combine the former Jobbers Candy factory and Service Mills building along Goode Street and the Owen Equipment building — formerly Bristol Grocery — at 833 State St., near the intersection with Volunteer Parkway and Commonwealth Avenue. Plans include a restaurant, indoor and outdoor music venues, rooftop space and a luxury spa. It is being developed by Creative Boutique Hotels and MB Contractors.



ANDRE TEAGUE/WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Work continues to bring the Sessions Hotel closer to opening.

Project partner and architect Hal Craddock, of Lynchburg, said work is proceeding inside all three structures.

"We're painting in the Bristol Grocery building, we're dry-walling in the Service Mills, and

we just finished studding out all the rooms in the Jobbers Candy factory. We've got the roof on the Jobbers Candy factory — which will be an outdoor dining deck,"

See **HOTEL**, Page A5

Authorities search for evidence in Mendota murder case

BY ROBERT SORRELL
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

MENDOTA, Va. — More than 70 law enforcement officers from multiple agencies scoured through woodlands and fields last Wednesday and found additional evidence in an ongoing triple murder case.



Wright

The Washington County Sheriff's Office continues to investigate the case involving James Michael Wright, a 23-year-old Mendota man who authorities

said confessed to killing three women near his home over an 18-day period in February and March.

WCSO Capt. Jamie Blevins said officers returned to Mendota last week to search for any possible evidence in the case.

"We have found additional evidence," said Blevins, who spoke with the Bristol Herald Courier outside the Mendota Community Center, where officers coordinated their efforts.

Blevins, who leads Washington County's Criminal Investigations Division, said the evidence will be useful as Wright's court case continues. He wouldn't discuss specifics of the evidence except to say it didn't indicate that there are additional bodies.

Washington County Commonwealth's Attorney Josh Cumbow, who was not present for the search, confirmed that officers were looking for new evidence.

With the assistance of the U.S. Marshals Service, officers from a number of agencies, including sheriff's offices in Scott, Russell, Tazewell and Wise counties, as well as the Abingdon Police Department and Bristol Virginia Police Department, joined the search. The Virginia State Police, National Park Service and other state and federal agencies also assisted.

Tazewell County Sheriff's Office Maj. Harold Heatley said seven officers from his department joined the efforts. Heatley noted that Tazewell County has a good working relationship with the U.S. Marshals and tries to assist whenever requested.

Blevins said a variety of officers, including those with tactical and forensic evidence experience, assisted.

Officers conducted grid searches over a 40-acre area near Wright's home. The search covered some difficult terrain, Blevins said. The officers searched wooded areas and fields, as well as steep hills, all the way toward Pinnacle Road and the Mendota Fire Tower.

Blevins said a limited search

See **MENDOTA**, Page A3

VIRGINIA HIGHLANDS COMMUNITY COLLEGE



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Deborah Ledford, coach for Great Expectations at Virginia Highlands Community College, said the coach model is the key to success for their program. Great Expectations is a program to help foster youth succeed in higher education, uses relationships and trust between students and coaches to bring about academic success.

Fostering TRUST

Community college program gives foster youth the tools to succeed

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — A growing program initiated more than 10 years ago at Virginia Highlands Community College is in the national spotlight for empowering foster youth to succeed academically.

Deborah Ledford, coach for Great Expectations at the community college, said she's been contacted by higher education programs from as far away as California and Colorado since The Chronicle of Higher Education featured the Abingdon commu-

See **FOSTER**, Page A6

Great Expectations students beat the odds at college

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — As a former foster child, MaKenzie Helton knows what it's like to have the odds stacked against her.

When MaKenzie was in third grade, her mother was incarcerated. MaKenzie was raised by her great-grandparents until they died, when she was in middle school.

On top of that, a high school teacher told MaKenzie, who was diagnosed with dyslexia, that she would likely never succeed at higher education.

MaKenzie, 19, defied the odds when she became part of the Virginia Community College's Great Expectations program, offered at 21 community colleges throughout Virginia, including Virginia Highlands Community College in Abingdon.

Great Expectations is a nationally recognized program that helps Virginia's foster youth earn the post-

See **ODDS**, Page A6

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Foster

From Page A1

nity college in an April 26 video titled “Foster Youth Face Extreme Barriers to College. Here’s One Program That’s Helping.”

The Great Expectations program, shared by 21 Virginia community colleges, is designed to help foster youth pursue associate degrees and workforce credentials, transfer to four-year universities and position themselves for employment and life success. The Chronicle of Higher Education chose to spotlight the work being done on Virginia Highlands Community College’s campus, where the program has grown from 10 students in 2008 to 94 in the latest academic year.

“We are ecstatic that The Chronicle of Higher Education — which is to education what Sports Illustrated is to sports — just did a feature on Virginia Community College System’s Great Expectations program, and they chose to use the program at Virginia Highlands Community College as their example,” said Ledford.

Representatives of The Chronicle of Higher Education spent several days on campus earlier this spring shadowing Ledford and interviewing several of the school’s Great Expectations students.

A direct web link to the story can be found at <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Foster-Youth-Face-Extreme/246171>.

“The entire state of Virginia is being applauded for their programs, but we are one of the larger, more successful programs in the state,” said Ledford.

“Owing to Great Expectations’ success, other states and higher education programs are replicating this coaching model to help foster youth and other at-risk communities.”

Connecting foster youth to college success

Great Expectations was created in 2008 by the Virginia Community College System, championed by Anne Holton, former secretary of education and former first lady of Virginia, who recognized a large number of foster youth are more likely to end up incarcerated after aging out of the system — and some of them may even become homeless.

Since 2008, more than 3,000 foster youth in Virginia have been served through Great Expectations programs.

According to the website for the Great Expectations program, “one in four children who enter Virginia’s foster care system will not find a permanent home before they turn 18. As a result, approximately 500 young people age out of the system each year, which usually means making it on their own — often with devastating consequences.”

For those who voluntarily choose the foster system, turning 18 sometimes means foster youth face an abrupt end to support, which brings with it financial, social and emotional challenges.

“For a lot of these foster kids, everything has been done for them while they were in foster care — they had a case manager, they had a foster care worker and a department of social services worker,” said Ledford.

“Then suddenly when they turn 18, they’re told they are adults. Go live



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Deborah Ledford, coach for Great Expectations at Virginia Highlands Community College, is surrounded by Great Expectations students: (from left) Travis Ferguson, Katelyn Hatcher, MaKenzie Helton, Robbie Murray, Jennifer Kiethan and Cruz Lyons.

your life. So we try to be a bridge for those youth.”

Virginia Highlands Community College adopted the Great Expectations program in 2008, serving as few as 10 students.

“Ten years down the road, we have served more than 200 foster youth. As many as 39 associate degrees and certifications have been conferred on Virginia Highlands Great Expectations students,” Ledford said.

“This academic year, 94 students have been served. Next academic year, we project that more than 100 will be served.”

Diamond Jackson, an alumna of the Virginia Highlands Great Expectations program, will receive her Master of Business Administration in December. “She will be the first from our program to earn a graduate degree,” said Ledford.

“This year, six of our students have earned degrees and certifications. Two of those students are already enrolled as transfer students to four-year universities.

The coach model

“The key to our success, I believe, is the coach model we use,” Ledford said.

Great Expectations is based on a coaching model, which fosters relationships and trust between students and coaches to

bring about academic success.

The program works by pairing each foster youth with an adult coach at one of the 21 community colleges throughout the state. Coaches are there to help the foster youth every step of the way.

“The coach becomes a mentor who helps the students on many levels — career counseling, tutoring, help with applying for college admission and financial aid, help with applying and keeping jobs, financial management and sometimes as a mentor who just sits and listens,” Ledford said.

Along with coaching, Great Expectations students can receive financial assistance with living expenses, textbooks and required school supplies and other assistance in times of emergency.

“This really seems to make a difference in helping them pursue and complete a degree. Just having someone look over their shoulder and listen to them is so important.

“Many foster youth go from home to home throughout their childhoods. Counseling is what makes the difference in building trust and relationships — especially for those kids who struggle with failure.”

Carolyn R. Wilson is a freelance writer in Glade Spring, Virginia. Contact her at news@washconews.com.

Odds

From Page A1

secondary credentials they need to achieve an independent and successful life.

Not only has she completed a certified nursing assistant program at Virginia Highlands Community College, MaKenzie holds a 3.7 grade point average, is active in the college choir and string band and serves as the student activities officer with the Student Government Association.

MaKenzie wants to continue her education at a four-year college, where she will pursue music and special education.

It’s stories like this that offer hope to Deborah Ledford, the Great Expectations coach at Virginia Highlands Community College.

“As a Great Expectations coach, I get to build strong personal relationships with each of my students. I know all of the barriers and additional challenges they face because they are foster youth. I try to be there supporting them every step of the way through their college career, and nothing is more rewarding than watching them succeed.”

For most foster youth, the Great Expectations program is life-changing.

“Being part of the program has helped me with scheduling my classes and getting my financial aid,” said MaKenzie, who credits Great Expectations for keeping her in school.

“If I needed help with homework, Deborah Ledford would help me find tutors. Even if I needed to talk with her about something outside of school, she was there to listen.

“It really is a great program, and it gives opportunities to people that society may look over. Because of Great Expectations, we do have a voice and can better

ourselves so that we don’t follow in the same footsteps of our parents who made bad choices.”

MaKenzie is featured in the 2019 Chronicle of Higher Education’s video news story, “Foster Youth Face Extreme Barriers to College. Here’s One Program That’s Helping.”

“One of the struggles we face is keeping the students enrolled. They often drop out and come back,” said Ledford.

“Our local foster youth report that transportation and housing are the two largest barriers to completing their degrees in a timely manner. The Virginia Highlands Great Expectations program is actively working with other community agencies, attaining grants and seeking out other financial resources to help our students overcome those barriers.”

Katelyn Hatcher, 25, from Bristol, Virginia, graduated this spring, earning an associate of applied science degree in human services — a degree that took her nearly seven years to complete.

Katelyn spent eight years in foster care, removed from her home at 13 even though her siblings stayed behind.

“I was in two facilities because I was told no foster home wanted me. I was in 30 psychiatric hospitals because it’s a good temporary spot to put somebody

because most foster kids face some kind of trauma. So that’s where they put me when they were waiting for a home for me.”

During her childhood, she was placed in at least five different foster homes.

She learned about the Great Expectations program while she was part of the Independent Living Program with the Department of Social Services. However, Katelyn was moved so frequently with the program that she was never able to stay at one college. “I had to drop my classes and start over at a different college,” she said.

She pursued a degree in human services because she wants to help foster kids who are going through the same things she faced as a teen.

“I want to help people who are in the same shoes I was in when I was younger,” she said.

She plans to complete her Bachelor of Arts degree in social work with hopes of one day working for Child Protective Services.

“If it weren’t for Great Expectations, I could never have come as far as I have,” said Katelyn, who received all As and Bs during her last semester at Virginia Highlands Community College, giving her a 3.75 grade point average for the term.

Carolyn R. Wilson is a freelance writer in Glade Spring, Virginia. Contact her at news@washconews.com.



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Bristol student receives Congressional Gold Medal Award B2

Ballad announces staffing changes, plus updates on suit A6

Emory & Henry named College of Distinction B1

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Wednesday, August 7, 2019 ♦ Washington County News ♦ www.swvatoday.com ♦ Vol. 74, No. 31 ♦ \$1.00

COMMUNITY

Residents urge no 'rush' on Abingdon courthouse move



BY JOE TENNIS
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS
ABINGDON, Va. — Speaker after speaker urged the Washington County Board of Supervisors on Monday not to “rush” into moving the county’s court functions to the former Kmart building at a strip mall in Abingdon.

Allison Mays, the board’s vice chairwoman, also suggested that the board consider other options. Still, during the called meeting, Mays joined fellow supervisors in voting “yes” on a motion by Supervisor Dwayne Ball to enter into a purchase option on the former Kmart, now being considered as

a new courthouse site to alleviate crowded conditions at the 150-year-old Washington County Courthouse.

The board now plans to file a court petition to give voters an option with a November referendum:

See **BOARD**, Page A6

Virginia health official dies after crash

BY ROBERT SORRELL
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

A Southwest Virginia physician who recently served as the state’s behavioral health commissioner died Friday following a three-vehicle crash in Augusta County that also killed a high school graduate, officials said.



Melton

Dr. Samuel Hughes Melton, 52, of Bristol, Virginia, died at the University

of Virginia Medical Center, the Virginia State Police and Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam confirmed Friday.

Northam said he and his wife, Pam, were deeply saddened by Melton’s death and extend their thoughts and prayers to his wife, daughters, family and friends — and to the family of Hailey Green, an 18-year-old from Staunton who was killed in the crash.

VSP spokeswoman Corinne Geller said Melton was driving a Hyundai Tucson east on state Route 254 when it struck the rear bumper of an eastbound 2018 Subaru CrossTrek, driven by Jean M. Scheeren, 55, of Waynesboro, Virginia. The Hyundai crossed the center line and struck head-on a westbound Toyota Solara, driven by Green, Geller said.

Investigators believe Melton suffered a medical emergency that may have been a factor in the crash, Geller added.

Green, a recent graduate of Fort Defiance High School, died at the scene. A candlelight vigil was held Saturday evening at the high school.

Green was actively involved as a student athletic trainer for all 12 sports teams at Fort Defiance, Principal Larry Landes said. “Hailey was passionate, loved all and quietly went about the business of helping others,” he said.

Landes said Green was planning to attend Eastern Mennonite University to major in nursing.

Melton was appointed commissioner of the state’s Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services in 2018. He also served as deputy commissioner of the Virginia Department of Health.

See **CRASH**, Page A3

Emory & Henry’s More Than a Vacation brings alumni back to learn » **B1**

BUSINESS



Beef ‘O’ Brady’s invites customers to a feast for their eyes — and tastebuds » **B1**

EDUCATION



Abingdon student credits 4-H for strengthening leadership skills » **B2**

BACK TO SCHOOL



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

From left, Patrick Henry High School student Sarah Tiller gives assistance to Bishop Ratliff, Isaac Coleman and Brandon White, students in Ms. Stoessel’s third-grade class at Meadowview Elementary. The students created coral reef habitats from pipe cleaners and foam while learning how the underwater ecosystem is affected by pollution.

Hands-on learning will shape future of curriculum

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS
ABINGDON, VA — When Washington County students return to school tomorrow, the buildings may look the same on the outside, but on the inside, a whole new culture of learning will change the way students have been taught.

Like many schools throughout the country, the local school system is adopting Project-Based Learning, known as PBL, a teaching method that allows students to gain knowledge and skills by engaging them in solving real-world, modern-day problems or finding answers to complex questions.

The new approach, which gradually will be put in place in all of the county schools, is an effort to produce well-rounded students who take control of their own learning.

It’s all about application.

Students learn by working as team members on projects over extended periods of time, applying their knowledge to solve problems or issues in the community — and even in their own schools.

The adoption of the educational framework matches the Virginia Department of Education’s new approach to instruction, which focuses on key skills for student success.

The new profile of a Virginia graduate must include an education that includes the five C’s — critical thinking, creative thinking, communication, collaboration and citizenship skills.

According to Brian Ratliff, superintendent of Washington County Public Schools, parents may not see big changes this school year, as county educators continue to learn how to

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Buses fixed as schools set for new year

BY ROBERT SORRELL
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

BLOUNTVILLE, Tenn. — Following a spike last year in school bus crash-related injuries in the Mountain Empire, school and law enforcement officials are preparing the hundreds of area school buses for the start of classes this month.

Preliminary data from the 2018-19 school year revealed that 11 people were injured in school bus crashes in the counties and cities of Southwest Virginia, according to information provided by the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles.

There were a total of seven bus crashes in Southwest Virginia, including three in Washington County, two in Bristol and one each in Smyth and Tazewell counties.

Since 2016, Washington County has had the most crashes and most injuries, data reveals.

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From left, Lillian Wright and Nicole Whitt test for haloacetic acid levels in a school's water supply.



From left, students Abigail Street and Julia Street examine the top of a whale's heart during an annual trip to Duke University Marine Lab in Beaufort, North Carolina.

School

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 best implement the PBL model into their own classrooms.

This summer, the school system has teamed up with the Buck Institute for Education and its program "PBL Works" to train one administrator and one teacher from each school in the district.

The ongoing training sessions instruct teachers on how to build projects within their classrooms while also incorporating the requirements for graduation.

"These are extremely positive changes," said Ratliff. "It's what we as superintendents and educators have been waiting on for a long time — for our student learning environment to be more authentic. Students will have real field and hands-on solving experiences."

"The projects actually become the vehicles for teaching the knowledge and skills the students need to learn," he said. "Students will solve real-life problems and issues within the confines of grades K through 12. That's good education."

A philosophy — not a program

"Project-Based Learning is not a program we're implementing. It's a philosophy of learning that will help us meet the needs of all of our students," said Ratliff.

"Teachers are not just disseminators of knowledge. They are facilitators of learning, teaching students to be lifelong learners and leaders in the community."

Ten years from now, the superintendent hopes PBL will be commonplace in every classroom in Washington County from preschool to grade 12.

"Problem-solving will be part of how our students think. We will see very few worksheets, very few rote memorization activities and [fewer] classroom lectures," he said.

According to Ratliff, the new learning approach will answer needs in the job force.

"The corporate world is demanding this. Industries in the 21st century are asking for jobholders who are self-starters and who have a creative spirit and

teamwork skills."

Washington County teacher Eric Hoffman has already integrated PBL into his science classrooms at Patrick Henry High School. Last school year, his oceanography students studied the quality of different sources of local water.

"Their job was to learn what pollutants may be affecting the water sources in our local area, such as for home owners who depend on well water. So there's that real-world application that solves real-world problems," said Hoffman.

Julia Street, who graduated from Patrick Henry High School in the spring, saw firsthand how some students in Hoffman's PBL classroom changed from exhibiting apathetic attitudes to becoming eager learners. "It was neat to watch them gain interest from the projects," she said.

"Students who lack enthusiasm for learning are put in classes with students who want to learn. They bounce off ideas from each other, and it's a good opportunity for all students. PBL is something I really enjoyed. It allowed me to learn in a better way. It's hands-on, and I learn better that way."

Steve Ahn, a biology teacher at Holston High School, also practices the PBL model in his biology classroom.

Ahn takes his biology students on a coastal adventure each year to Duke University Marine Lab in



From left, Jacob Nichols, Anna Hahn and Catherine Grossman were among 23 county students who collected 500 pounds of trash in three hours while participating in Carteret Big Sweep in Carteret County, North Carolina, last school year. The event educates the public on litter and how everyone can do their part to make a difference.

Beaufort, North Carolina, where they live on campus for a five-day learning experience.

Grassroots effort

Hoffman, Joy Munsey, assistant principal for the Washington County Career and Technical Education Center, and a few other county teachers became involved in the county's grassroots efforts about four years ago, before the new learning approach was issued by the Department of Education.

"A small group of teachers started conversations about what we can do to help our students engage, collaborate, to think critically and problem-solve — and even learn how to get along better with their classmates," said Munsey.

The teachers began their research by visiting schools as far away as South Dakota and Greenville, South Carolina, as well as three

schools in Virginia.

"We've researched different models and consulting firms on how to implement this type of innovative learning into our school system," said Hoffman.

"If students take control of their own learning, we're not faced with trying to get students to learn, we're challenged with how to facilitate the learning of

the students," he said. Munsey said there are vast differences between classroom projects and PBL, which focuses more on the actual process of learning. "Projects do not consist of a pamphlet and a PowerPoint presentation," she said. "These projects could be so in-depth that they could last for weeks."

"Classroom projects start with a driving question. It could be a problem that needs to be solved, such as a community issue or school issue. It could be about an economic or environmental issue.

"It's a whole new culture, but this is going to be a slow process," Munsey said. "It's a new way of thinking about education."

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Buses

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There have been 15 crashes and 18 injuries, according to the DMV.

One of the crashes in Washington County involved a bus from Giles County that crashed on Interstate 81 near Abingdon while en route to a band competition in Bristol. Eight of the 30 students from Narrows High School complained of minor injuries, Virginia State Police spokeswoman Corinne Geller said.

The 40-year-old driver was charged with following too closely after the bus crashed into the back of a tank truck.

Another Washington County bus crash occurred on March 19, when a truck crashed into a bus on Nordyke Road, injuring one student and the truck's driver.

"Our buses go through a safety inspection at the bus garage every 40 to 45 days of operation, using guidelines set up by the [Department of Education]," Washington County School Superintendent Brian Ratliff told the Bristol Herald Courier.

During the summer, each bus goes through a more intense safety inspection, along with updating the Virginia State Inspection sticker, he said.

"We are down to the last six to eight buses, and the summer safety inspections will be done," Ratliff said.

Washington County has 135 buses, including spare buses and extra trip buses. The county owns all of its buses.

Of the districts in Southwest Virginia, the city of Norton and Dickenson County had the fewest crashes. Norton had a crash in 2016 and Dickenson County had a crash in 2018, neither involving injuries.

Tennessee and Virginia bus drivers are required to obtain a commercial driving license with an S endorsement before operating a bus, officials said.

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