

Schools try to balance cellphone bans, safety

By Natasha Sokoloff  
STAFF WRITER

From locking phones in pouches to the “off and away” approach, more Connecticut school districts have implemented policies to get cellphones out of the classroom, but have been forced to balance their restrictions

with widespread concerns about school safety. “I fully understand, because of the number of shootings that occur in schools, that parents are going to continually be concerned about that... It’s a scary time in the world in schools. It just is,” said Manchester Public Schools Superintendent

Matthew Geary. “Unfortunately, we are balancing that with the vast majority of the time, where we’re trying to keep kids engaged and on task in schools.” Since the state published its guidance around cellphone restrictions last year, Connecticut education officials have had

some conversations about what lines of communication in crisis situations look like, said John Frassinelli, director of school health, nutrition and family services at the state Department of Education, at the Sept. 3 meeting. “But we haven’t had calls questioning the implementation.” **Phones continues on A6**



Courtesy of Stratford Public Schools

**Stratford high school students store their cellphones in secure boxes in each classroom. Cellphone use in an emergency can actually make things more dangerous, some experts say.**



Photos by Dave Zajac/Hearst Connecticut Media

**U.S. Marine Corps veteran and Yale student Evangel Baxter, 31, of New Haven, gets a kiss from service dog Thunder at Yale University in New Haven. Baxter recently received the canine through the Puppies Behind Bars program.**

Campus canine

Yale student, Marine veteran finds help through Puppies Behind Bars program

By Cris Villalonga-Vivoni  
STAFF WRITER

When Evangel Baxter wakes up each morning, he is met by a pair of chocolate eyes staring back at him and a wagging tail gently tapping on the bed. Those eyes belong to Thunder, a 20-month-old black Labrador retriever, who excitedly welcomes him to a new school day. A second-year student at Yale University, Baxter goes to classes with Thunder, and they play on the quad or walk around New Haven. Despite his name, Thunder is a calm and attentive service dog helping Baxter, a Marine Corps veteran, on his mental health journey. He was trained through Puppies Behind Bars, a nonprofit where incarcerated individuals raise and train service and facility dogs inside New York prisons. Baxter says hanging out with Thunder helps him feel grounded and keep calm, even when he’s stuck **Thunder continues on A6**



**U.S. Marine Corps veteran Evangel Baxter with his service dog Thunder at Yale University in New Haven.**

HADDAM

Town official alleges clerk drank alcohol on the job

First selectman releases file just before primary

By Mary Ellen Godin  
STAFF WRITER

**HADDAM** — The town clerk, who lost a GOP primary Tuesday, said he is seeking legal advice after First Selectman Robert McGarry released a 100-page personnel file alleging alcohol use on the job. McGarry said he had been collecting observations about Town Clerk Bob Siegrist since 2023, one year after Siegrist was elected to the post and, according to McGarry, staff began claiming Siegrist was drinking on the job and making errors. “It’s sad he did this six days before a primary,” Siegrist said. “To my knowledge it was an ethical issue and a legal one. There was a medical issue.” In a Sept. 3 post on the town’s Facebook page, McGarry said he couldn’t fire Siegrist because he was an elected official but after consulting with town and labor attorneys, McGarry said he was instructed to document. **Allegation continues on A6**



McGarry

Premiums for state-regulated health plans set to skyrocket

Double-digit increases expected for next year

By Liese Klein  
STAFF WRITER

The 224,000 Connecticut residents covered by state-regulated health plans will see double-digit hikes in their premiums next year as insurers price in looming cuts to federal subsidies. The seven companies offering health coverage got approval from the state’s Insurance Department for increases averaging 16.8% for individual customers on the Access Health CT exchange to an average of 11% for small-group coverage. That’s much less than the companies wanted, Insurance Commissioner Andrew Mais said in announcing the new rates. The higher prices reflect upcoming cuts to federal subsidies. **Premiums continues on A4**

State seeks to dismiss school vaccine exemption lawsuit

By Paul Hughes  
STAFF WRITER

A state lawsuit challenging the 2021 repeal of a religious exemption for required school vaccinations in Connecticut continues to slowly play out as the heated national debate on vaccine policy is picking up steam again. The potentially momentous case was scheduled to

proceed in state Superior Court in Stamford on Sept. 30, but will not go forward on that date now because of renewed state legal efforts to get the suit tossed out before a trial. Parents from Orange, Greenwich and Stafford Springs are suing to reinstate the religious exemption because they allege its 2021 repeal violated state and federal protections on

the free exercise of religion, including the state’s Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Each family has older children that fell under a grandfather clause in the 2021 public act that allows unvaccinated children who had a religious exemption to continue to attend public and private schools, but they have younger children who are

not exempt. This is also true for Lindy R. Urso, the Stamford attorney representing the families. “I have two older kids that were exempted, and my younger ones are not,” Urso said. “So, it’s rough.” The remaining defendants are Gov. Ned Lamont, Department of Public Health Commissioner Dr. Manisha Juthani, and Education Commissioner

Charlene Russell-Tucker. The Orange and Greenwich boards of education and the private, independent Whitby School in Greenwich were also named as defendants, but were later removed. If there is a trial, a Superior Court victory for the families or state is certain to be appealed. The case went to the state Supreme Court once before after the

denial of an earlier state motion to dismiss to suit. The ruling issued last August dismissed claims of state and federal constitutional violations, but allowed the case to proceed on the remaining state law claim that the repeal of the religious exemption violated Connecticut’s 1993 religious freedom law. The state Religious **Vaccines continues on A4**

