

# State investigates Holmes County school district, appoints financial adviser previously accused of fraud

By Kate Royals  
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A state appointment has stirred up controversy in the Holmes County district, which has been rated as failing every year since 2016.

Following a string of alarming events in the Holmes County Consolidated School District, the Mississippi Department of Education is conducting an investigation and has appointed a financial adviser to oversee the district.

But the appointment of the financial adviser has already stirred up controversy in the district, which has been rated as failing every year since 2016.

The state department approved Shaquita Burke, the former chief financial officer of Vicksburg Warren School District, to serve as the financial adviser. When Burke was in Vicksburg, a 2019 audit not only revealed a host of problems with Vicksburg Warren's finances but also pointed to possible "fraud, waste and abuse" on her part.

A spokeswoman for the Mississippi Department of Education said the position was advertised, and Burke applied and met the qualifications.

But before the state department appointed Burke as financial adviser, the Holmes County school board rejected Interim Superintendent Benjamin Torrey's recommendation to hire Burke as chief financial officer for the district. That district-level position is currently vacant, according to Holmes County school board President Louise Lewis Winters, and the superintendent has not brought forth any other candidates for the position.

## \*Stagecoach

(Continued from page 1.)  
matching grant from the MDAH preservation division for the 1st phase of exterior repairs which will be supervised by Charlie Bowie. In January, the Lundy House property deed was transferred from Holmes County Bank to FOLP.

The Lundy House {Stagecoach Stop} has a long fascinating history in the Lexington community. Not long after Lexington was incorporated as the county seat in 1836, Lot number 44 on Depot Street became an iconic part of Lexington's historic charm. The Lundy House {Stagecoach Stop} is one of the city's oldest existing properties, built around 1860. The striking Queen Anne style home has welcomed many generations as they approached the square from the East.

Winters said after the board voted not to hire Burke, she was surprised to hear last week that the state appointed Burke to serve as the district's financial adviser.

"The board had no knowledge of this person or anything, so when we did get knowledge, you know, we decided to vote it down because of information that came forth," said Winters of the board's decision not to hire Burke.

At the same time the financial adviser is working to set the district's finances straight, the state education department is also conducting an on-site investigative audit of the district, according to an April 22 letter from State Superintendent of Education Carey Wright to the district's interim superintendent. The audit is to determine whether the district is complying with accreditation standards and state and federal laws.

Investigative audits are done following a formal complaint, which is not made public. The department has conducted comprehensive audits for five districts in the past five years, including Holmes County.

Holmes County's investigation comes after a report by State Auditor Shad White that highlighted "widespread problems" in the schools. Those problems included extensive misspending and poor financial management and record keeping in the district.

The audit revealed 25 total findings, including that taxpayers footed the bill for a "B.Y.O.B., adults only" party that cost \$4,200, and that the former superintendent was paid \$170,000 annually even though minutes from

the board meeting show the board approved a salary of \$10,000 less.

A separate financial audit also revealed additional weaknesses, which then triggered the requirement for the Mississippi Department of Education to appoint a financial adviser to oversee the district.

The department may conduct these unannounced audits at any time following a formal complaint made to the Commission on Accreditation. According to Shella Head, president of the newly formed community engagement council in the district and parent of four former students, she believes there were multiple complaints made to MDE about events in the district.

This is in addition to the fact the district has received an 'F' rating for six years straight. Head, an active member in the community who has been involved with the school district for more than 25 years in various roles, says the state of the district is "stressful and heartbreaking" right now. She also said she's been sounding the alarm about problems in the schools for years now and wonders why the state is just now stepping in.

"We have people from outside looking in it, and, to me, it appears (they think) that nobody in the county wants a quality education for the kids, when that's so far from the truth," she said. "The last couple years ... we literally had people, including in the community, that were screaming and throwing red flags up and saying 'Hey, something is going wrong, we need some help.'"

At the end of its audit, the department will produce a corrective action plan for the

tion and the revitalization of our downtown historic district. I know there is a lot of hard work ahead. I look forward to the Stagecoach House project beginning and commend the efforts of all those involved," stated Mayor Robin McCrory.

If interested in joining the renovation project, please contact one of the following board members: Charlie Bowie, Phil Cohen, Leroy Riley, Sterling Starns, Ed Wilburn Hooker, Kathleen Hooker Waldrop, Phil Williamson, Jerry McCrory or Fran Thurmond. For more information, follow the Facebook page, Friends of Lexington Preservation or email: [lexingtonpreservation@gmail.com](mailto:lexingtonpreservation@gmail.com).

Tax deductible donations are welcome, payable to: Friends of Lexington Preservation, POB 684, Lexington, MS 39095.

district and can recommend the district's accreditation status be downgraded to either probation, withdrawal of accreditation or state of emergency. A determination of a state of emergency, which triggers a state takeover of the district, must be approved by the State Board of Education before being sent to the governor.

Torrey, who has acted as the interim superintendent for the district since January, reassured board members at their April 22 meeting the district is "putting processes in place to make sure we are in compliance" with accreditation standards and state and federal laws.

"Those that we aren't in compliance with, we will continue to work to be in compliance with," he said.



**May 15** - Dwight and Dana Holt, Choyce and Mary Ann Diffey, Sam and Jessica Smith

**May 16** - Jeff and Senora Jackson

**May 17** - Matt and Katherine Riley, Terry and Jennette Moore, Jay and Amber McBride

**May 18** - Tyler and Victoria Wiltshire

**May 19** - Daniel and Cecilia Barnhill, Jacob and Ryan Black, Jake and Meri Stewart Killebrew

# Miss Lily Francesca McCrory Lists Wedding Personnel for Event of Saturday, May 22

Wedding vows will be said at 5:30 p.m. at Clifton Hunting Preserve for Lily Francesca McCrory and Rosario Karl Guastella on Saturday, May 22. The Reverend John Eric McKenzie of Knoxville, TN, will officiate.

Lily Fran is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John Franklin McCrory of Lexington, and Rosario is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Ross Phillip Guastella of Madison.

Music will be presented by Alexandria Joy Paton, harpist, and Victoria Annabeth Paton, violinist, both of Kosciusko. Solo will be sung by Jaqueline Hill of Durant.

The bride, to be given in marriage by her father, has selected her sister, Allison McCrory Townsend, of Starkville as her Matron of Honor and Brooke Christian Bell of Lexington as her Maid of Honor. Bridesmaids will be Coy Ballard Bishop of Sallis, Brett Spell Clark of Jacksonville, NC, Haley Nicole Jenkins of Starkville, Rachael Pepper Lindsey of Sturgis, and Jane Allen McGregor McCrory, sister-in-law of the bride, of Inverness.

Little Miss May Carolyn Fincher of Madison, cousin of the bride, will be the Flower Girl, and William Hawkins Fincher of Madison, cousin of the bride, will serve as Ring Bearer.

Sign Bearers will be nephews of the bride, Crosby Walter McCrory and Nichols Mason McCrory of Inverness and Micah Rory Townsend and Trevor Jason Townsend of Starkville.

John Robert Georgino of DuBois, PA, will attend the groom as his Best Man. Groomsmen will be Angelo Frank Guastella, brother of the groom, of Chicago, Ross Phillip Guastella, father of the groom, of Madison, Ryan Montgomery Johnson of Bridgeville, DE, Strider Madison McCrory, brother of the bride, of Inverness, Aaron Randy McCament Poole of Brandon, and Stefan Robert Simmerlink of Youngstown, OH.

Ushers will be William Byron Fincher, first cousin of the bride, of Madison and Talmadge Jason Townsend, brother-in-law of the bride, of Starkville.

Registry attendants will be sister of the groom, Veronica Noel Guastella, of Madison and Breann Michelle Bell of Lexington.

The reception will immediately follow the wedding ceremony. All friends and relatives of the families are invited to attend both the wedding and reception.

**CITY OF LEXINGTON  
2021 ELECTION CALENDAR SUMMARY  
MAY, 2021**

**MONDAY, MAY 3-7, 2021 – LEXINGTON CITY HALL  
OPEN UNTIL 7:00 PM FOR VOTER REGISTRATION**

**SATURDAY, MAY 8, 2021 - LEXINGTON CITY HALL  
OPEN 8:00 AM UNTIL 12:00 NOON FOR VOTER  
REGISTRATION**

**MONDAY, MAY 10, 2021 – VOTER REGISTRATION  
DEADLINE**

**WEDNESDAY, MAY 12, 2021 AT 5:30 P.M.  
POLL WORKERS TRAINING**

**SATURDAY, MAY 29, 2021 UOCAVA VOTER  
REGISTRATION DEADLINE**

**SATURDAY, MAY 29, 2021 – ABSENTEE - IN HOUSE  
VOTING 8:00 AM – 12:00 NOON**

**JUNE, 2021**

**SATURDAY, JUNE 5, 2021 – IN PERSON  
ABSENTEE VOTING DEADLINE  
8:00 AM – 12:00 NOON**

**TUESDAY JUNE 8, 2021  
GENERAL ELECTION DAY:  
Polling Place will be open  
from 7:00 a.m. until 7:00 p.m.**