

# The Mississippi Monitor

## Return 'Em Right releases practices manual

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# Mississippi's 2022-23 graduation rate of 89.4% marks all-time high; dropout rate falls to 8.5%

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) has released the 2022-23 school year graduation and dropout rates, showing an all-time high 89.4% graduation rate and a decreased 8.5% dropout rate.

Rates are based on students who entered ninth grade for the first time during the 2019-20 school year. Among students with disabilities, the graduation rate increased to 70%, and the dropout rate decreased to 17.7%.

MDE's latest figures mark a continuing impressive trend for Mississippi's public school students. The statewide graduation rate was 74.5% in 2013 and has increased annually. The rate does not include students who earned a GED or a certificate of completion.

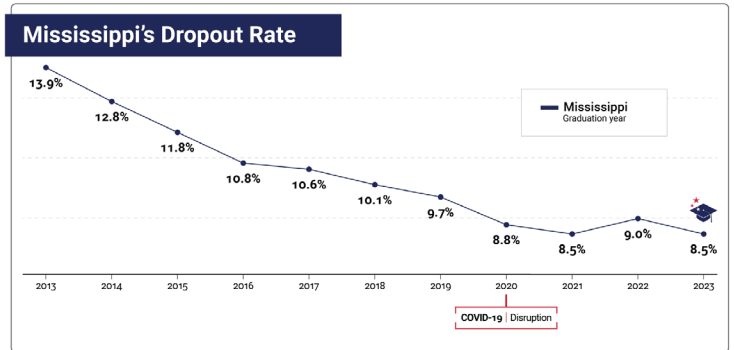
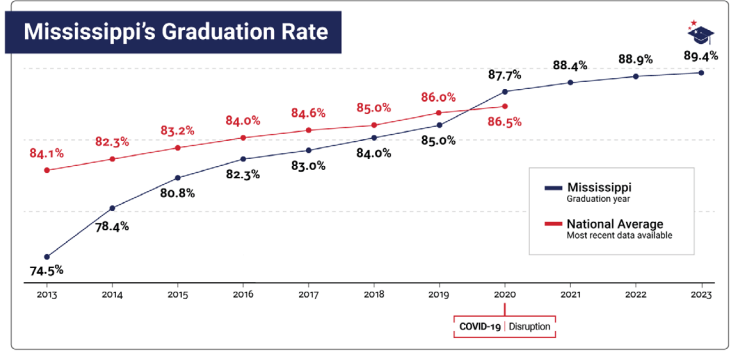
Pandemic disruptions affected the graduation rate in recent years. Due to COVID-19, passing requirements were waived for high school end-of-year assessments in Algebra I, English II, Biology and U.S. History in 2020-21. The waivers have had a positive impact on the graduation rate, but that impact should diminish for the 2023-24 school year.

Mississippi's graduation rate exceeds the latest U.S. rate of 86.5% from 2019-20 reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

The statewide dropout has decreased from 13.9% in 2013. The current dropout rate figures reflect a .5% decrease from 2021-22 and a 1.6% decrease among students with disabilities.

"The hard work of students, parents, teachers, counselors and administrators across Mississippi continues to produce outstanding outcomes," said Dr. Raymond Morgigno, interim state superintendent of education. "The MDE is proud of our students' continued achievements and remains committed to ensuring all students graduate ready for college and career success."

View the 2023 Graduation Rate Report at [mdek12.org/OPR/Reporting/Accountability/2024](https://mdek12.org/OPR/Reporting/Accountability/2024).



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## Progress continues on central Mississippi infrastructure improvement projects

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Commissioner Willie Simmons, Central Transportation District, has announced updates to several Mississippi Department of Transportation (MDOT) projects across central Mississippi.

“Lots of progress is being made across the central area of our state and many critical infrastructure improvement projects are wrapping up as we bring this year to a close,” said Simmons. “This is the kind of investment we need in our state’s transportation network. It will go a long way in improving safety and efficiency across central Mississippi. Please do your part by slowing down and staying alert for roadside workers throughout these work zones.”

### State Route 18 bridge replacement project finishes ahead of schedule

Crews have completed the replacement of the State Route 18 bridge over Dabbs Creek in Rankin County ahead of schedule and reopened the roadway the day before Thanksgiving. In addition to safety benefits, the new bridge provides better access to businesses and residences in the area. The nearly \$3 million project was awarded to Ste-Bil Grading, Inc. of Waterford.

The work required the bridge to close for eight months, but favorable weather conditions allowed crews to wrap up the replacement project a month ahead of schedule. Although the new bridge is open for travel, crews may still be out or near the bridge cleaning up and performing final work items in the coming weeks. Motorists should slow down and stay alert when approaching the bridge until fully complete.

“I applaud crews for working diligently to get this vital corridor opened back up ahead of schedule and before the holiday season,” said Simmons. “We appreciate everyone’s patience throughout this closure. Residents and the business community now have a safer and more reliable bridge to travel.”

### State Route 19 expansion continues in Neshoba County

Work continues on the 4.6-mile expansion of State Route 19 from two to four lanes between Tucker and Philadelphia in Neshoba County. Phase I work is complete and included construction of the new northbound lanes, reworking side roads onto the west side of the existing SR 19 and construction of the new intersection at Tucker Elementary School.

Phase II work is underway. Work includes clearing and grubbing, milling the southbound lanes of SR 19, removing old box culverts and bridges and constructing box culverts and bridges. Other work items include rehabbing portions of the existing SR 19 and reconstructing other areas that require new cross drains and box culverts.

Phase III will place traffic in the four-lane configuration, place the final lift of asphalt and provide permanent striping. The \$36 million contract was awarded to W.G. Yates and Sons Construction of Philadelphia. Remaining work is expected to wrap up in 2024.

### Removal of OGFC pavement in Jackson-metro continues

A project to remove open-graded friction course (OGFC) pavement on interstates in the Jackson-metro area is making headway. This includes I-20 from McRaven Rd. to the I-20/I-55 split and from the I-20/I-55 split to east of State Route 468 and I-55 throughout Hinds County.

Additional work consists of milling and overlaying the Gallatin St. connector ramp to I-20 westbound and the Gallatin St. loop ramp to I-20 eastbound. A portion of the project consists of placing high-friction surface treatment on the ramp from I-55 south to I-20 west.

Current work includes milling the I-20 eastbound mainline and repaving the tie-ins and asphalt failures on I-20 westbound. The \$11 million contract was awarded to Dickerson & Bowen, Inc. of Brookhaven.

### Emergency bridge repair on frontage road bridge underway in Jackson

A project that consists of repairing the I-55 south frontage road over

Cont on page 9



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# Free transportation to health appointments available

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH) recently announced a new program, Transportation to Health, an effort to address transportation barriers in both rural and urban areas in the state.

The new federal grant-funded demonstration program, which began November 1, will provide patient transportation to and from county health departments and offices for health services. In addition, patients will have the opportunity to pick up prescriptions at partnering pharmacies if they were prescribed during their health department appointment.

"Improving and protecting the health of all Mississippians is the mission of our agency," explained State Health Officer Dr. Edney. "This new program will assist us in achieving the mission. Creating access to health care is always the best choice."

For new or existing appointments, patients can contact the MSDH call center at 855-767-0170 to request transportation. The Office of Health Equity will coordinate an Uber ride at no cost to the patient, and the patient does not need to download the Uber app.

"Transportation to Health can eliminate delayed or missed appointments by the most vulnerable people in Mississippi," said Victor D.



Sutton, Chief of Community Health and Clinical Services at the Mississippi State Department of Health. "With Mississippi being a rural state, this initiative will also allow the opportunity for community and economic development by creating jobs. Uber will support MSDH in creating a plan to support driver availability within the program service area," he said.

For additional information, visit MSDH at [HealthyMS.com/connect](https://HealthyMS.com/connect).

## TWISTED pretzel

### PRETZELS

#### ORIGINAL FLAVORED PRETZELS

(Twisted Cinnamon, Almond Crunch, Sour Cream, and Onion)

#### BAKED CHEESE PRETZELS

(Three Cheese, Twisted Pepperoni, Jalapeno Cheese)

#### TWISTED YUM YUM

### BITES

#### TWISTED BITES GOURMET BITES

(Twisted Cinnamon, almond crunch, sour cream, and onion)

#### TWISTED PEPPERONI BITES

#### TWISTED YUM YUM BITES

#### TWISTED DOG BITES

### DOGS

TWISTED DOG  
TWISTED CHEESE DOG  
TWISTED PEPPERONI DOG

### MAKE IT A COMBO!

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# New year, new books, new you

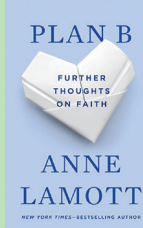
By Guest Columnist Taylor McKay Hathorn

We all make New Year's Resolutions: the gym, healthier eating, working less. However, all of our biggest changes start from within - by changing how we think, we slowly become more able to make those changes that affect how we behave. These books can help you change your mindset, get you out of a rut, or just plain motivate you to finally motivate yourself to keep those resolutions.



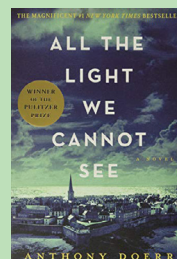
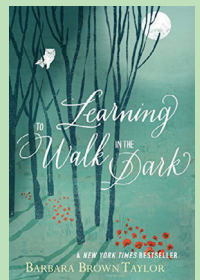
- **Untamed** by Glennon Doyle: A trip to the zoo led famous “mommy-blogger” Glennon Doyle to write this fiery memoir, inspired by her horror at watching a majestic cheetah stalk an enclosure for which it was far too large. *Untamed* is Melton’s raw challenge to herself and her readers to find the places in their life that reduce them and to “untame” themselves out of stagnant marriages, unhelpful thought patterns, and the female desire to shrink to fit societal expectations.

- **Plan B** by Anne Lamott: So many of us end up on our “Plan B” for our lives (or plan C, D, E...), and Lamott’s faith-based memoir recounts the way the author dealt with her own carefully-laid plans having gone awry, as she copes with a terminally-ill friend, single motherhood, and addiction recovery. Lamott’s advice is practical and down-to-earth, and she adds levity to the gravity of her topics with humor and a keen eye for observing the underside of life.



- **Feed These People** by Jen Hatmaker: If your goal is to spend more time in the kitchen in the new year, then Jen Hatmaker’s new cookbook is the perfect addition to your reading repertoire. Hatmaker, a devoted Texan, fills her cookbook with “food for real people,” as her recipes call for ingredients all Mississippians are sure to have on hand: hot sauce, ranch dressing, gravies of every variety. Her funny, down-to-earth instructions make her recipes approachable for any cook, whether novice or expert.

- **Learning to Walk in the Dark** by Barbara Brown Taylor: When Barbara Brown Taylor, a lapsed Episcopal priest, began to struggle with feelings of darkness and loneliness, she began taking very literal “walks in the dark” to learn more about the nature of physical darkness: she ventured into caves and into forests around her home, seeking the connection between the darkness she felt within and the darkness that was an inevitable part of the natural world, guiding herself (and her readers) into the discovery of the unquenchable light within.



- **All the Light We Cannot See** by Anthony Doerr: If you always wanted to read more but need a book to remind you how much fun picking up a novel can be, Doerr’s double-narrative about a French girl living in Nazi-occupied Paris and a German boy living as an orphan in a mining town is poignant, elegantly written, and will keep you reading until the very last page – and you can reward yourself by watching the TV adaptation that’s available on Netflix!

## AROUND THE CORNER

# Chris Shepherd



By Gloria Wright

Clinton has been blessed with an abundance of talented individuals, musicians, painters, sculptors, writers and craftsmen. Among these individuals, we find Chris Shepherd, who is well known in Clinton for his paintings and his love of trains.

Shepherd was born in Augusta, Georgia, the eldest of five children. Because of his father's active status in the military, Shepherd spent his early years traveling to and living in different parts of the country, including Washington State, up-state New York, and finally Clinton, when he was in the sixth grade.

At a very young age, Shepherd displayed an aptitude for drawing and painting, and his parents encouraged this talent by providing him with all of the supplies he needed. While in high school, his talent came to the attention of art teacher Karen Fowler, who also encouraged and guided him towards expanding his talent and facilitated his admission to the arts program at Hinds Community College. In high school, he received the Gold Key award for painting.

Shepherd's preferred medium is oil, and he uses the palette knife rather than brushes for his paintings. He likes to work in the early morning or late afternoon when the light is better, especially in the spring. His favorite subjects are trains and old houses. The first house he ever painted was the Landrum House in Clinton. He has also painted the Tanglewood House on Jefferson Street, as well as many others he was commissioned to paint, including Karen and Doug Fowler's home and the Quisenberry home.

Shepherd's work can be seen at the Olde Towne Depot in Clinton where, in addition to framed pictures, there are large rocks with his art depicting trains and houses. In the Olde Towne courtyard, there is a mural of a butterfly and caterpillar, along with a painted bicycle, both Shepherd's art pieces. Benjamin's Custom Framing in Raymond is currently showing his paintings of Raymond.

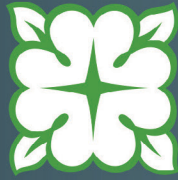
In addition to participating in numerous art shows, Shepherd takes part in arts and craft markets, including the Clinton markets, where he also sells glass Christmas ornaments painted with birds and houses.

When he is not painting, Shepherd spends his time watching trains going by. He has a YouTube channel where he posts news about trains. He attributes his love of trains to his grandfather, who was an engineer with the Union Pacific Big Boys in Wyoming, and to his uncle, who worked for the Norfolk Southern Rail. He is a charter member of the Olde Towne Rail Club that meets quarterly and provides leadership and guidance for model exhibits at the Olde Towne Depot. According to Jackie Massey with the Depot, "Chris is very dependable and eager to share his talents."

When asked about his talent and his love of painting, Shepherd states, "My parents played a big role in the development of my talent through their encouragement."

The Olde Towne Depot is located at 281 East Leake street in Clinton. For more information call 601-924-0113





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## Progress continues on infrastructure improvement projects in central Mississippi

Hanging Moss Creek in Jackson is underway due to a fire that occurred underneath the bridge. The scope of repairs includes removal of the existing asphalt overlay, removing and replacing voided deck slabs and railing, repairing spalls and other damage with epoxy mortar, and applying hybrid polymer concrete overlay to the deck.

The bridge was closed on November 27. Detour signage is in place to route traffic around the work area. During the closure, all side and local roads (for the exception of Northside Dr. currently closed at the frontage road for a City of Jackson repair) will remain OPEN. Motorists can route their way around to closure to get to businesses or schools nearby using Google or Apple maps.

The \$828,000 project was awarded to Key, LLC of Madison. Work is on track to be completed by spring 2024.

### Mill and overlay of U.S. 49 in Rankin County continues

A major project providing the mill and overlay of 9.2 miles of U.S. 49 from the Simpson County line to just south of Florence is making headway. Work includes repairing failed areas, releveling underlying concrete pavement with pressure grouting, widening the turn lanes at Star Rd., and upgrading deficient guardrail.

Work in progress includes a ditch repair work past Star Rd. on the southbound side of U.S. 49, concrete pavement pressure grouting and pothole patching throughout the project. The \$11.4 million project was awarded to APAC-MS, Inc. of Jackson. Remaining work is on track to wrap up next spring.

### Mill and overlay planned on I-20 in Scott County

A mill and overlay of 17 miles of I-20 from the Rankin County line to 0.35 miles east of State Route 501 is set to begin soon in Scott County.

The scope of work includes repairing failed areas in the existing pavement, pressure grouting and repair of longitudinal joints, removal of debris from existing drainage structures, tree clearing, replacement of deficient guardrail, upgrading traffic signal detection radar at the State Route 35 interchange, epoxy repairs and resealing joints on various bridges throughout the project.

The \$28 million project was awarded to APAC-MS, Inc. and the estimated completion date is summer 2025.

### Mill and overlay of State Route 18 in Hinds County wraps up

A mill and overlay of 18 miles of State Route 18 from the end of the Copiah County line to the beginning of the four-lane section near Raymond is wrapping up. The scope of work included repairing failed areas, repairing and replacing damaged cross drain pipes and widening portions of the roadway.

The contractor is completing final punch list items. The nearly \$8 million contract was awarded to Superior Asphalt, Inc. of Byram.

### Bridge preservation on State Route 39 in Kemper County complete

A bridge preservation project on the State Route 39 bridge over Straight Creek is complete. The scope of work included bridge deck repairs, replacement of bridge bearings, resealing of bridge joints, cleaning bent caps, installing of fiber reinforced polymer wraps on bent caps and overlaying the bridge with a hybrid polymer concrete.

The project has been released to maintenance. The \$445,000 contract was awarded to Key, LLC.

### Mill and overlay of State Route 19 complete in Lauderdale County

A mill and overlay of five miles of State Route 19 from 0.5 miles north of North Hills St. to 0.2 miles north of State Route 494 is wrapping up. The scope of work included safety improvements to the intersections of SR 494 and SR 19 and State Blvd. Extension and SR 19, removal of debris from existing drainage structures, random clearing of trees on right-of-way to improve sight distance, repairing failed areas in the existing pavement, replacement of guardrail, replacement of signs and resealing of bridge joints.

APAC-MS, Inc. was awarded the \$5.5 million contract. All pay items are complete.

### Mill and overlay of State Route 16 makes headway in Madison

### County

A mill and overlay of 11 miles of State Route 16 from State Route 43 to Farmhaven is making progress in Madison County. Work includes repairing failed areas and replacement of guardrail and signage. Another portion of the project provides for the removal of asphalt and installation of a concrete inlay on sections of State Route 43 and SR 16.

All items have been completed with the exception of asphalt grinding and the placement of rumble strips and thermoplastic stripe. Remaining work is expected to be completed by spring 2024. The \$4.7 million contract was awarded to APAC-MS, Inc.

### Mill and overlay of State Route 16 begins in Leake County

A project consisting of the mill and overlay of five miles of State Route 16 from the Madison County line to west of State Route 25 will soon be underway. Work includes repairing failed areas in the existing pavement and replacing guardrail and deficient signs.

The \$2.8 million project was awarded to Dickerson & Bowen, Inc. Work is scheduled to wrap up next spring.

### Intersection improvements on U.S. 51 in Madison County

Dirt work is underway on a project aiming to improve the intersection of U.S. 51 and Green Oak Ln. The improvements consist of widening the roadways, installing intersection channelization, and installing a traffic signal system. The project will help provide the U.S. 51 tie-in necessary for the adjacent Reunion Parkway.

The \$2.2 million contract was awarded to prime contractor Hemphill Construction Company, Inc. of Florence. The estimated completion date is spring 2024.

### Mill and overlay of State Route 14 underway in Noxubee County

A project to mill and overlay 13 miles of State Route 14 from the Winston County line to west of State Route 145 is underway in Noxubee County. Work includes repairing failed areas in the existing pavement and the replacement of guardrail and deficient signs.

Crews have completed the repair of failed areas in the mainline and shoulder, mainline milling and paving and placement of temporary stripe. Work underway includes the overlaying of county roads and driveway pads.

The \$8.2 million project was awarded to APAC-MS, Inc. Work is expected to wrap up next summer.

### Mill and overlay of State Route 15 in Neshoba County complete

The 8-mile mill and overlay of State Route 15 from County Road 461 to the Winston County line is complete. Work included repairing failed areas, upgrading deficient guardrail, minor bridge repair work and adding a centerline rumble strip throughout the project limits.

The \$6.1 million project was awarded to Dickerson & Bowen, Inc.

“We’re going to continue this momentum in 2024 when it comes to improving our state’s infrastructure,” said Simmons. “Together, we’re paving the way towards a better, safer and more connected Mississippi.”

### Work zone safety

Highway work zones are meant to protect the traveling public and the highway workers on the side of the road. Highway work zones can be found throughout the state and often present unfamiliar traffic conditions. Examples of common work zones found on Mississippi highways and a complete list of tips can be found at [GoMDOT.com/drivesmartms](http://GoMDOT.com/drivesmartms).

### MDOT project website

MDOT recently launched a new project update webpage that aims to keep the public informed regarding significant, active projects. The webpage provides up-to-date information on project timelines, progress, and any potential road closures or detours that may be associated with the project. Access the MDOT projects webpage by visiting [www.GoMDOT.com/Projects](http://www.GoMDOT.com/Projects).

In addition to the projects webpage, drivers can stay updated with live travel information by downloading the MDOT Traffic mobile app, visiting [www.MDOTtraffic.com](http://www.MDOTtraffic.com) and following @MississippiDOT on Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram and YouTube.

# Mississippi ranks third in FAFSA completion

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Mississippi now ranks third in the nation in completion of the 2023-24 Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion. According to the National College Attainment Network's Form Your Future national FAFSA Tracker, 70.1% of Mississippi's 2023 graduating seniors have completed their 2023-24 FAFSA. The FAFSA is the federal application processed by colleges that provides access to various federal funding options such as need-based aid such as Pell, Federal Work-Study, and, if needed, Federal student loans. The Mississippi Office of Student Financial Aid and some private scholarship providers also use information from the FAFSA.

"This ranking continues to validate the work that many educators, teachers, counselors, advisors, career coaches, and mentors are doing to support Mississippi's high school graduates' next-step plans after high school graduation," said Jim McHale, President and CEO of Woodward Hines Education Foundation (WHEF). "Our Get2College program offers a unique resource in the state that supports education professionals, students, and families to create a college-going culture, including education and support in completing the FAFSA."

Get2College is WHEF's flagship program, which provides free college counseling to anyone in Mississippi who requests it. The program also offers professional development for educators in College and Career Readiness (CCR), FAFSA, and college access.

While a growing trend in state legislation across the country has been to mandate FAFSA completion for graduation or access to free college programs, Mississippi has taken a different approach. The College & Career Readiness class, required as a graduation requirement in Mississippi public schools since the class of 2022, includes financial aid education and financial literacy as units. The staff at Get2College create the workbook that accompanies the CCR courses in schools annually.

"Mississippi's FAFSA completion rates for high school seniors have been impressive for as long as I've been tracking the FAFSA," says Bill DeBaun, Senior Director at the National College Attainment Network in Washington, D.C. "The Woodward Hines Education Foundation and its Get2College program have been a model for how to achieve high levels of FAFSA completion statewide."

Research conducted on Mississippi high school graduates in 2019 by the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University found that the leading indicator of Mississippi's student enrollment in any form of postsecondary was completing the FAFSA. Students who completed their FAFSA were four times more likely to enroll in a postsecondary program following high school graduation.

Nationally, seniors who complete the FAFSA are 84% more likely to immediately enroll in postsecondary education, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. For students in the lowest socioeconomic quintile, FAFSA completion is associated with a 127% increase in immediate college enrollment.

## FAFSA Changes This Year

Each year, the upcoming aid year's FAFSA opens on October 1. Due to the FAFSA simplification changes required by federal legislation under the FUTURE ACT, Federal Student



Aid announced the 2024-2025 FAFSA application will open by December 31, 2023. The high school graduating class of 2024 will be the first group to have a more streamlined FAFSA to complete in exchange for less time to complete the form. According to Federal Student Aid, the October 1 opening date will resume in 2024.

Get2College is ready to help the class of 2024 with their 2024-2025 FAFSA when it becomes available in December, but there are a few things that students and parents can do now to ensure they are ready.

- The Mississippi Aid Application (MAAPP) is open and ready to be completed. All Mississippi high school seniors can complete this single application to apply for the four state grants: MTAG, MESG, HELP, and FAITH.
- The Federal Student Aid username and password (FSA ID) is critical to the new simplified FAFSA. Students and parents should create their unique usernames and passwords now to allow enough time for the identity verification process to be completed by the time the FAFSA opens this month. This process takes at least three days to confirm information before the FSA ID can be used to log into the FAFSA.
- With the change of the FAFSA form, understanding who contributors are and which people will need access to be a contributor to a student's FAFSA has changed. Federal Student Aid has several resources available that students and families can review to be prepared once the form opens.

Get2College will be available to assist families in completing the FAFSA in-person or online in our three centers across Mississippi when the FAFSA opens by December 31. Resources on all things college planning and financial aid are available at [get2college.org](http://get2college.org), including Cha-Ching, Get2College's 24/7 chatbot.

**get2college**

Woodward Hines Education Foundation

## Asbury Foundation awards \$7 million grant to WCU Health Sciences

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

A major gift from the Asbury Foundation will help ensure that William Carey University's College of Health Sciences can attract and retain high-quality faculty members to train the next generation of health care professionals.

"The Asbury Foundation has taken the unprecedented step of awarding a \$7 million grant that will enable us to provide faculty salaries that are more equitable when compared to the salaries of health care providers in clinical areas, like hospitals and clinics," said Dr. Janet Williams, WCU vice president of health sciences.

"This wonderful gift, given in the form of trust funds, allows us to make immediate salary adjustments and then sustain them over time through earned interest."

The grant has already produced positive results.

WCU's nursing program was able to hire several new faculty members soon after the grant was received. Williams said this made it possible to launch an LPN Advanced Placement



The Asbury Foundation has awarded a \$7 million grant to the WCU College of Health Sciences. Pictured from left are: Dr. William Ray, president and CEO of the Asbury Foundation; Dr. Janet Williams, WCU vice president of health sciences; and WCU President Dr. Ben Burnett.

program for the fall 2023 trimester – resulting in an immediate enrollment increase of 102 students over the previous year. There are plans for another new nursing program in spring 2024.

"This increase in enrollment will place more nurses at bedsides in our communities. The grant is a phenomenal example of the Asbury Foundation's willingness to act to change health care in our area," said WCU President Dr. Ben Burnett.

Dr. William Ray is the Asbury Foundation's president and chief executive officer.

"We just want to be a small part of providing more well-trained health care professionals in southern Mississippi," Ray said.

Established in the 1984, the Asbury Foundation awards grants to non-profit community organizations that offer education and health initiatives to improve the quality of life

in Forrest, Lamar, Jones, Marion, Covington, Perry, Pearl River and Jefferson Davis counties.

## Flight attendant's final pass down the aisle provides gift of \$1.8M for Manning Family fund

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Brickell Williamson had an adventurous spirit that carried her all over the world during her years as a flight attendant – but family and friends already knew that, and they loved her for it.

What they found after her death in November at age 66 was a mindful spirit of generosity and a plan to help make lives better for others to live out their own bold ventures.

Williamson, of Scottsdale, Ariz. and a Meridian native, left \$1.8 million from her estate upon her death to the Manning Family Fund for a Healthier Mississippi. She began donating to the fund in 2013 after the death of her father, Lester F. Williamson Sr., a former district attorney and longtime judge in Meridian who also played football at Ole Miss in the early 1940s before serving in World War II.

"When daddy died and gifted us money, she earmarked it for the Manning family," said Adele Graham, one of her four siblings. "I think she chose it because daddy idolized Archie Manning. Another reason was her love of medical research. She had donated to another charity for research out in Arizona."

The donor-supported program is a partnership between the Medical Center and the Manning family. Funds support a wide variety of work to support UMMC's missions of education, research and health care.

"Olivia and I are honored and truly humbled that Ms. Williamson shared our passion for building a healthier Mississippi," said Archie Manning in a statement this week. "Her generous gift to the Manning Family Fund will be felt for years to come and is a win for Mississippi."

Contributions to the fund often come from across the nation, which helps to shed light on health care challenges in Mississippi.

"We are so appreciative of the selfless contributions Ms. Williamson made to the Manning fund and her support in general for medical research," said Dr. LouAnn Woodward, vice chancellor for health affairs and dean of the School of Medicine. "Our needs are always great, and the fund is geared specifically to handle those challenges."

Williamson earned a Juris Doctorate from the University of Mississippi in

1982 and moved to Houston with the initial aim of practicing law. A roommate at the time suggested they get jobs with a relatively new air carrier called Southwest Airlines so they could travel while studying for the bar exam.

In a way, her first flight never really landed. Air travel became her career and she settled in Arizona, where she rode horses like she used to while growing up and became an avid skier and golfer. Being a law degree-holding flight attendant was something she embraced, said longtime best friend, Loraine Wegmann, of Houston, who first met Williamson in the third grade.

"She'd say, 'I don't want to do the law – I want to do the world!,'" Wegmann said. "She never got bored. She was still a Mississippi girl and true Southerner no matter where she went. Always cheering for Ole Miss. And a private person who liked being private about it, so it fits her to a T to have wanted to honor her father with the donation."

Melissa Robinson, director of principal gifts and strategic planning at UMMC, said Williamson remarked in 2022 on charitable giving for both medical research and continuing her family's support of the university, as part of Robinson's doctoral research project in the Doctor of Health Administration program, in the School of Health Related Professions.

"Brickell supported causes with which she had a passion and a deep connection," Robinson said. "She was connected to Ole Miss and the Mannings and wanted to ensure others could live their best active lives. So, donating to the Manning Family Fund made sense to her. She was never concerned with receiving recognition or praise. She just wanted to make a difference where she could. Her legacy gift will truly make a difference for so many Mississippians."

During a portion of Robinson's interview with her, Williamson said the Manning fund "would be perfect to give some of daddy's money to; he would be happy with that."

"I work as a flight attendant for Southwest airlines and I mean, I make a good living," she said. "But when my parents died, I suddenly had more money. So, I started giving because it's a good thing to do."

## State Board of Education names Dr. Lance Evans State Superintendent of Education

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The Mississippi State Board of Education (SBE) has named Dr. Lance Evans, the superintendent of the New Albany School District, the next state superintendent of education.

The SBE selected Dr. Evans after conducting a national search. He will assume the position on July 1, 2024, succeeding Dr. Ray Morgigno, who was appointed to serve as interim state superintendent of education from July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2024.

A 24-year veteran educator, Dr. Evans has led the New Albany School District since 2017. Under his leadership, the district achieved its first A-rating for the 2018-19 school year and maintained its A grade for all subsequent years. Dr. Evans previously served as principal and assistant principal of New Albany High School and principal of New Albany Elementary School. Prior to joining the New Albany School District in 2006, he served as a teacher, coach and administrator in the Oxford and Itawamba County school districts.

Dr. Evans is the 2023 Mississippi Association of School Administrators' Superintendent of the Year and serves as the state representative on the organization's national governing board. He holds an associate degree from Itawamba Community College, a bachelor's degree from Mississippi State University, a master's degree from the University of Mississippi and a specialist degree and doctorate from Delta State University.

"Dr. Evans is a visionary leader who is committed to continuously improving student achievement," said Glen East, SBE chair. "The Board sought broad public input about the qualities and priorities the next state superintendent of education should have, and Dr. Evans meets all of our expectations."

The SBE worked with the firm McPherson & Jacobson, LLC to lead the search process and issued a statewide survey to collect public input about the



desired characteristics of the next state superintendent. Board members used the survey results to help evaluate candidates, which included applicants from Mississippi and several other states. The SBE interviewed four semifinalists before selecting Dr. Evans as the finalist. Senate confirmation during the 2024 legislative session is required to complete the appointment process.

Dr. Morgigno will continue to lead the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) as the interim state superintendent of education until Dr. Evans assumes the role.

"The Board is deeply indebted to Dr. Morgigno for stepping in to lead the MDE during a critical time," Chairman East said. "His steady leadership has kept up the momentum of continued student achievement and his initiatives are advancing the goals of the State Board Strategic Plan. The Board is grateful for Dr. Morgigno's continued leadership throughout the remainder of the school year."

Dr. Morgigno credited the MDE staff for keeping high standards for students and educators and providing the support to help them meet high expectations.

"The MDE has an incredible staff who are laser-focused on our mission to improve opportunities and outcomes for every child in the state," Dr. Morgigno said. "We will be pressing forward on all of the agency's priorities and initiatives over the next six months to ensure Dr. Evans is set up for success."

"I am deeply honored and humbled to accept the position of State Superintendent of Mississippi. My commitment to fairness, equity, and innovation in education aligns seamlessly with the values of this great state. I look forward to collaborating with educators, stakeholders, and communities to forge new pathways for our graduates, ensuring every student has the opportunity to thrive and succeed," said Evans

## State board considers revoking charter of new school with just fifteen students

by Julia James, Mississippi Today

The Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board is considering revoking the charter of a Canton school that opened its doors in August due to low enrollment.

SR1 College Preparatory and STEM Academy was approved in 2020 with plans to serve 150 students in its first year between kindergarten and first grade. But the school reported an enrollment of 12 students to the Mississippi Department of Education earlier this fall and reported recently that number has risen to 15. School leaders also said the school currently has six full-time teachers and 11 employees overall.

The organization that operates the school, SR1 (Scientific Research), was founded by Tamu Green in 2005 and collaborates with public and private partners to decrease disparities in Mississippi, specifically among minorities. The group applied to open a school in 2017, 2018 and 2019 but was denied.

Charter schools are free public schools that do not report to a school board like traditional public schools. Instead, they are overseen by a local governing board and held accountable by the Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board. They have more flexibility for teachers and administrators when it comes to student instruction.

Traditional public schools and charters both receive funding based on the number of students they serve, but the method of calculating enrollment can vary between the schools. Traditional public schools are funded based on enrollment in the previous school year, while new or expanding charter schools get state dollars based on their projected enrollment since the number of grades they serve is changing.

For SR1, the projected 150 students resulted in a public funding allocation of \$940,000 for the 2023-24 school year. If charter schools do not enroll the anticipated number of students, the excess funding they received is subtracted from their allocation for the next year.

The authorizer board voted in October to begin the revocation review process, which allows the board to review a school's paperwork and daily func-



tioning, working with schools on goals to address issues. This is the highest level of intervention in Mississippi's charter school system, as it can lead to a charter being revoked if goals are not met.

At the meeting Monday, board members discussed some elements of the plan submitted by the school and decided to reevaluate the status of the charter at the March board meeting. Board members also set a goal that the school has 100 students by the March meeting, either currently enrolled or committed for the 2024-25 school year.

While school leaders say they are actively working to recruit more students, authorizer board members said in discussion Monday they were concerned about the school's continued ability to operate when funded at the appropriate level next year.

Leaders for the school said in a statement that they do not expect financial issues in the 2024-25 school year because they have saved much of the extra money they received this year, allowing them to continue operating smoothly when the education department adjusts their funding.

The statement also addressed recruiting new students and said the school is advertising using social media, direct mailers and print media. It added that the school's initial recruitment efforts were hampered by "uncertainties surrounding its opening," but now have more staff devoted to recruitment.

The school is currently building a new campus to focus on incorporating science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) into the classroom experience, according to an article shared by school leadership. In the interim, the school is currently operating at the St. Paul AME Zion Church, according to the address listed on the authorizer board's website.

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# Return 'Em Right releases practices manual

*Special to The Mississippi Monitor*

Each year, millions of reef fish are caught and released, and many die from the impacts of barotrauma. Barotrauma is a pressure-related injury fish experience when reeled up from depth. These dead discards negatively impact the health of the fisheries. Anglers have the ability to reduce mortality of released fish by learning and using best practices to support the fishery, the objective of the Return 'Em Right program.

“Research shows using best release practices can dramatically increase the survival of reef fish. This manual is yet another tool anglers can add to their tacklebox,” said Dr. Marcus Drymon, Marine Fisheries Specialist, Mississippi State University, Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant.

In December of 2021, key experts from the recreational fishing community identified the best strategies to reduce mortality of released reef fish at a two-day workshop. The manual, a product of this workshop, guides recreational anglers through choices they make during a fishing trip to maximize the chances of fish surviving release.

“The decisions we make on the water can significantly impact the current and future status of our fisheries. There is no single best practice that can be used in every situation, so this manual serves as a guide to help anglers make informed decisions that lead to the greatest chance of survival for each fish they catch and release,” said Captain Dylan Hubbard, owner and operator of Hubbard’s Marina, Madeira Beach, Florida.

Return 'Em Right is an angler-driven program that provides training and free release gear to Gulf of Mexico reef fish anglers who are committed to using best release practices and helping the future of the fishery. To date, the program has reached nearly 30,000 offshore anglers. The Best Release Practices Manual, and accompanying fact sheets summarizing pertinent information on catch and release, can be found at [ReturnEmRight.org](http://ReturnEmRight.org).



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# Mississippi native promoted to Lieutenant General

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Surrounded by family and friends, Maj. Gen. Thomas L. James of Petal, Mississippi, was promoted to the rank of lieutenant general, Friday, Dec. 15, 2023, at the Mississippi National Guard armory in Hattiesburg. It was at this same armory that James took his initial Oath of Enlistment joining the Mississippi National Guard in November 1982. He started his military career serving with the 2nd Battalion, 20th Special Forces Group (Airborne), as a Team medic.

"This location is important to me for this promotion ceremony, because it all began here," said Lt. Gen. Thomas James, deputy commanding general of U.S. Space Command.

Established in August 2019, the U.S. Space Command (USSPACECOM) is the 11th and newest unified Combatant Command. The headquarters is located at Peterson Space Force Base, Colorado, with components and tactical formations spread around the world. USSPACECOM is comprised of more than 18,000 service members, civilians, and contractors operating ground and space-based systems. USSPACECOM is responsible for defending the U.S. and its allies' interests in the space domain while providing space-enabled combat effects to joint warfighters to ensure there is never a day without space presence.

"This place is representative of what I want around me for this ceremony today. The engine room that generates the torque and power of the U.S.



*Family and friends of U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Thomas L. James participated in his promotion ceremony at the Mississippi National Guard armory in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Dec. 15, 2023. James, a native of Petal, Mississippi, celebrated his promotion to lieutenant general in the same location where his military career began 40 years ago. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Spc. Amber Miisap)*

military. That provides the protection that defends our freedoms and way of life," said James. "This armory is like so many others where soldiers prepare every day for the worst our potential enemies can throw at us."

Retired Army Lt. Gen. Kevin Mangum, a friend, mentor and senior Army aviation officer to James, served as the senior officer hosting the promotion ceremony. Mangum completed 35 years of distinguished service, a legacy which includes a 2015 selection by the Chief of Staff of the Army to lead the Holistic Army Aviation Task Force (HAATF), designed to shape the future of Army Aviation. His final U.S. Army assignment was as Deputy Commander of Training and Doctrine Command.

The ceremony included the official publication of the promotion order, the pinning of lieutenant general rank by James' family, the administration of the Oath of Office, and the furling of a two-star general's flag and the unfurling of a three-star general officer's flag, symbolizing the change in rank and responsibilities that come with the promotion. Following the promotion ceremony, James had some assistance with the cake cutting ceremony from the next generation of soldiers at Petal High School's Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps.

James concluded the official portion of the ceremony with words of thanks and gratitude saying, "I absolutely love what I do. It's a privilege and a humbling experience to get the chance to do what I do."

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# Jackson Public School District adjusts plan to consolidate or close several schools

by Julia James, *Mississippi Today*

The Jackson Public School District recently unveiled its adjusted school consolidation plan, adding one elementary school and removing four from its initial list released last fall.

In October, JPS district leadership introduced a plan to close 16 school buildings because of declining enrollment in the district. The district has lost around 9,500 students between the 2015-16 and 2023-24 school years, about a third of its population. The district has also previously consolidated schools.

The following school buildings are on the updated closure or consolidation list:

**Dawson Elementary School**  
**G. N. Smith Elementary School**  
**Lake Elementary School**  
**Lester Elementary School**  
**Marshall Elementary School**  
**Obama IB Elementary (delayed to 2025)**  
**Raines Elementary School**  
**Shirley Elementary School**  
**Sykes Elementary School**  
**Wells APAC Elementary (delayed to 2025)**  
**Chastain Middle School**  
**Whitten Middle School**  
**Wingfield High School**



Jackson Public Schools administrative building Credit: Jackson Public Schools

Clausell Elementary School, Green Elementary School, and Key Elementary School were removed from the list after feedback from the community about enrollment from local neighborhoods and programming at the schools, according to Superintendent Errick Greene.

“We got feedback on many of these schools, if not all of the schools, most of them,” Greene said.

Oak Forest Elementary School was also removed from the list and replaced with Marshall Elementary School. The district did not respond to a request for comment on this move by press time.

Greene said the consolidation of Obama and Wells Elementary schools with the middle schools they feed to (Northwest IB and Bailey APAC respectively) will be delayed one year to allow for renovations at Bailey APAC Middle School to be completed.

Greene elaborated on plans for closed school buildings, identifying three categories buildings will be sorted in: sale/lease, redevelopment, or demolition. He outlined plans for the creation of a Facilities Repurposing Advisory Committee which would make recommendations to the board for each building. A consultant would run the advisory committee and apply for private and public funding to aid in redevelopment efforts.

U.S. Rep. Bennie Thompson has also offered to help the district identify federal funds that could be used to help repurpose closed buildings.

Board President Ed Sivak expressed concern that the repurposing efforts will be sidelined after the board votes on the proposal later this month and said he wants specific goals and plans for the advisory committee.

“I’ve heard that this will take a long time,” he said. “I’ve

heard numbers as long as a decade, that it will take a decade to redevelop this number of properties. We can’t use that as an excuse to not act with urgency.”

When asked about possibly laying off teachers, Greene said the district does not expect many, if any, teachers or school support staff to be laid off because of the amount of turnover the district sees each year and the number of teachers on emergency licenses. Greene said layoffs are more possible for principals or assistant principals. He also restated that the district is planning to reduce the size of its central office in proportion with the consolidation efforts.

Cynthia Thompson, the board member for Ward 6, also brought up renaming high schools in south Jackson to give students a new common identity, something Greene said the district is exploring but did not have concrete recommendations for at this time.

“The whole time my children were matriculating through JPS schools, south Jackson, Wingfield in particular, was not being represented (on the school board),” Thompson said. “I just want to publicly say that and let it be on the record that I know it, I recognize it, I see it, and I have felt it before I ever sat in this seat. I just hate that we have gotten to this place where it’s almost too late to do anything with it except what we need to do. And if we are going to do that, the only way I can see of right-sizing it to make it be fair is for the entire south Jackson to come together.”

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# Real Estate Tips:

## Late Winter and Spring Home Maintenance Tips:

- **Keep your roof cleaned:** Debris allowed to remain on your roof reduces the life expectancy of the shingles.
- **Gutters need to remain clean:** This needs to be monitored throughout the winter to keep gutters and downspouts free from debris. There is no way for them to function properly and move water away from the home when clogged with leaves.
- **Walk around your property and inspect for any holes where water has eroded away the dirt at the foundation level.** It is important to fill these holes in a sloping manner away from the home to keep water from running under your foundation.
- **Inspect and ensure attic areas are free from animal/rodent infestations:** Sealing all entrances from the exterior keeps pests and insects out of your home.



## Tips to ready your home for sale:

- **The importance of hiring an experienced real estate professional:** There are so many facets that go into selling a home. Hiring a seasoned agent to help you navigate this process is a worthwhile consideration. Duties include, walking sellers through the whole process from the initial consultation, pricing, listing, showings, contract negotiations, all the way to closing. I will help you through it all. Also, statistics show that hiring a REALTOR to sell your home increases your net by up to thirty three percent.
- **Repaint to neutral colors:** Every room a different color? Do you have outdated colors? Neutral colors appeal to a wider range of buyers and can help sell your home more quickly.
- **Clean Everything:** A dirty home can turn off a buyer quickly. If you're unable to deep clean, hire a professional. It is money well spent. During the listing period, home should be kept clean and tidy for those last minute showings. If a home can't be shown because it wasn't clean or ready for the day. It can't be sold.



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