

# The Mississippi Monitor

**MISSISSIPPI  
MADE**

**“Mississippi Made” exhibit  
traces the impact of the  
Magnolia State as part of  
America 250 celebration**

Pages 10 & 11



# Gavel passes to new president of IHL Board of Trustees

*Special to The Mississippi Monitor*

Leadership of the Mississippi Board of Trustees of State Institutions of Higher Learning changed at the Board's monthly meeting on April 16, 2026, as the gavel was passed from outgoing president Gee Ogletree to incoming president Dr. Steven Cunningham. The term for a Board president is one year.

"Serving as president during these challenging times in higher education has been a privilege," Ogletree said. "The opportunity to help lead this Board and advocate for Mississippi's public universities is an honor for which I will always be grateful."

Cunningham thanked Ogletree for his efforts over the past year and noted the work the Board of Trustees will be addressing over the course of the next year.

"Gee Ogletree's leadership has kept our state's public university system on a steady path toward continued growth and success," said Cun-

ningham. "He has set a high standard for me to follow in the coming year, and I am grateful he will continue to serve with us through the course of his term."

Ogletree is counsel with Adams & Reese LLP in Madison, where he founded and leads the firm's forestry team and coordinates the firm's real estate work throughout Mississippi. He was appointed in 2018 by Governor Phil Bryant to represent the First (Central) Supreme Court District. His term will officially end in May 2027.

Cunningham is a board-certified diagnostic radiologist and a full partner and current president of Comprehensive Radiology Services, PLLC. He was also appointed by Bryant in 2018 to represent the First (Central) Supreme Court District. His term will also expire in May 2027.

Cunningham will chair his first meeting as president of the Board on May 21, 2026.



*Special to The Mississippi Monitor*

*Pictured are Dr. Steven Cunningham (left), the new president of the Mississippi Board of Trustees of State Institutions of Higher Learning, with outgoing president Gee Ogletree (right).*



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105 E. Main Street  
Clinton, MS 39056  
[news@themississippimonitor.com](mailto:news@themississippimonitor.com)

Clay Mansell  
Publisher

Stephanie Tracy  
Editor

Brad Henderson  
Designer

Angie Delaughter  
Sales  
[Angie@OurHomeTownPaper.com](mailto:Angie@OurHomeTownPaper.com)



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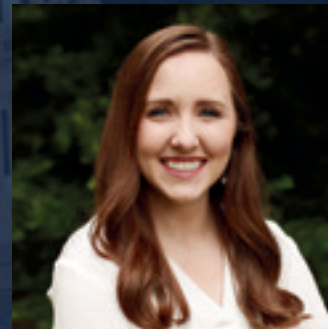
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# State leaders cut ribbon on new Public Safety headquarters



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Ribbon cutting of the new Mississippi Department of Public Safety Headquarters, April 21, 2026

By Daniel Tyson

State leaders gathered in late April in Pearl to unveil the Mississippi Department of Public Safety's (DPS) new 146,000 square foot headquarters.

For the first time in the department's nearly nine-decade history, all major divisions are now in a single building.

Governor Tate Reeves (R) said the building represents an "investment in the people who help keep our state safe." He said the new investment also shows that Mississippi "backs the blue," noting for Mississippians it is not merely a slogan, but a deep commitment.

"It's a promise that we will stand with law enforcement just as you stand for us," the governor said.

The Pearl headquarters will house the newly consolidated units of DPS, Highway Patrol, Bureau of Investigation, Bureau of Narcotics and Office of Homeland Security.

DPS Commissioner Sean Tindell said the new facility will help public safety by improving efficiency and coordination, calling it a new chapter for the agency and the future of public safety in Mississippi.

"For the first time in agency history, this building brings all of our divisions under one roof," Tindell said. "A major milestone that strengthens coordination, improves efficiency and enhances how we serve and protect communities across our state."

It will serve as the nerve center for the department's operations, as DPS modernizes its systems and upgrades technology. A central location will be vital in the state's efforts to combat crime, drug

trafficking and emergency responses, state officials explained.

"This is a great building," Tindell said, "But the greatest asset that we have in this state is our state employees, especially our first responders on the front lines."

Many of Mississippi's statewide and legislative elected officials were on hand to help cut the ribbon to officially open the building. In addition to Reeves, also attending the event were Speaker of the House Jason White (R), Lt. Governor Delbert Hosemann (R), President Pro Temp of the Senate Dean Kirby (R), Senator Don Hartness (R), Agriculture and Commerce Commissioner Andy Gipson (R), and State Rep. Shanda Yates (I).

The new DPS headquarters is named after Col. David Huggins to recognize his service to law enforcement. He was a DPS Commissioner from 2000 to 2004 and earlier served as a Colonel with the Mississippi Highway Patrol from 1988 to 1992.

"His leadership helped shape this agency, and his impact continues to guide our work today," the department noted Tuesday.

Commissioner Tindell said the department's facility is now at a prime location on Woodrow Wilson Blvd. in Jackson as was decided by legislators.

"That's obviously a very premier corner in the state of Mississippi,"

he said.

The \$70 million building was designed by Eley Guild Hardy Architects of Jackson, and construction was done by AnderCorp.



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

EDITOR'S NOTE: Article courtesy The Magnolia Tribune.

# New 471 area code added for northern Mississippi

*Special to The Mississippi Monitor*

With new telephone numbers in high demand, the Mississippi Public Service Commission recently approved the implementation of a new 471 area code to overlay the existing 662 area code region. The 471 area code will serve Southaven, Tupelo, Greenwood, Greenville, Oxford, Horn Lake, Starkville, Columbus, Corinth and Memphis, as well

- Telephone numbers, including the current area code, will not change.
- Telephone numbers with the new 471 area code will only be assigned for new services after the existing 662 area code is exhausted.
- The price of a call, coverage area, or other rates and services will not change due to the overlay.
- What is considered a local call now will remain a local call.
- Customers will continue to dial 10 digits for local calls within and between the overlay area codes and 1-10 digits for long distance calls.
- Customers can still dial just three digits to reach 911 and 988, as well as 211, 311, 411, 511, 611, 711, and 811 if those are currently available in their community.

as many other smaller communities.

As of January 30, 2026, customers in the 662 area code overlay region may be assigned a number in the new 471 area code when they request new service or an additional line, but only after the 662 area code is exhausted. The 471 area code will co-exist everywhere in the region with the 662 area code. Customers receiving a 471 area code will be required to dial 10 digits (area code + phone number) for all local calls, just as customers with telephone numbers from the 662 area code do. Because dialing 10 digits is already established in this region, the addition of the new 471 area code will not require any changes to the way telephone calls are dialed, aside from using the new area code when necessary.

Customers should ensure that all services, automatic dialing equipment, or other types of equipment recognize the new 471 area code as a valid area code and should continue to store or program telephone numbers as 10-digit numbers.

For more information, Mississippians should contact their local telephone service provider or visit the Mississippi Public Service Commission website at [www.psc.ms.gov/psc/areacode](http://www.psc.ms.gov/psc/areacode).

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# Teams cook under pressure at Mississippi ProStart Invitational

All photos Special to The Mississippi Monitor



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High school students from across Mississippi showcased their culinary and restaurant management skills at the Mississippi ProStart Invitational for a chance to advance to nationals.

High school students from across Mississippi gathered in Flowood for the Mississippi ProStart Invitational.

The competition, held at US Foods, challenged students from different high schools to apply their classroom training in a real-world setting. Participants competed in two categories: culinary arts and restaurant management.

In the culinary category, teams prepare a three-course meal under a strict time limit and without much access to electricity or running water.

The restaurant management teams present detailed business plans and pitch their concepts to industry professionals. Students were evaluated on creativity, teamwork, cost control, and execution.

"I'm really excited to just jump in and cook and



make a beautiful dish," student Emma Romig said.

Braylen Spann, another student participant, shared his team's approach to preparation.

"We just practice every small detail," he said. "The walk-in, the product check-in, the burner time, and just focus on those little things and getting those down first before trying to rush and make sure everything is perfect."

Organizers of the event said it helps prepare students for careers in the restaurant and hospitality industry, even before they graduate from high school.

In addition to playing football, Spann has dreams in the culinary business.

"My goal in the future is to be independent one day and, you know, have a Michelin-star restaurant," he said.

The winning teams from the Mississippi ProStart Invitational advance to compete at the national level in Baltimore. Last year, Mississippi placed fourth out of 46 states, marking the state's highest ranking to date.

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# From darkness to independence:

## Coast man rebuilds his life through MDRS' EMERGE Center



Cortez Tyler

*Special to The Mississippi Monitor*

Just a few years ago, Cortez Tyler was working as an electrician when something small didn't seem quite right.

"I thought it was just my contacts," he said.

Instead, it was something far more serious.

After noticing his vision darkening, Tyler went in for an eye exam. What followed was a series of appointments and tests that led to an unexpected diagnosis—a brain tumor behind his eye.

"It was a shock," he said. "You never think it

could happen to you."

The tumor was successfully removed and later determined to be benign. But in the months that followed, his vision continued to decline until he could "almost not really see anything."

What came next wasn't just recovery—it was learning how to live life in a completely new way.

### Losing independence—and determined to get it back

Before his diagnosis, Tyler lived independently and worked full-time. After losing his vision, even everyday routines became difficult.

The hardest part wasn't just physical—it was mental.

"Blindness... it messes with you mentally really bad," he said.

But one challenge stood out above the rest: losing control of his own time.

"Having to be on someone else's time... that bothered me the most," he said.

Relying on others to get places or leave when they were ready was a difficult adjustment for someone used to doing things on his own.

"I didn't want that part of me to disappear," he said.

### A different approach to independence

That determination led Tyler to the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services (MDRS) and the EMERGE Center in Long Beach.

Unlike traditional training models, EMERGE focuses on immersive, real-world experiences designed to rebuild independence through hands-on learning—everything from cane travel and Braille to technology and daily living skills.

For Tyler, that approach was exactly what he needed.

"I wanted to get back to that level of independence I had before I lost my sight," he said.

He describes the program simply: "A rewarding challenge."

The training pushed him outside of his comfort zone—especially when it came to navigating the world independently again.

"Cane travel... it made me want to get back out and start interacting with people," he said.

### Learning from those who understand

One of the most impactful parts of the program was the people. At EMERGE, many instructors are blind themselves—something Tyler says made a difference.

"You've got the blind teaching the blind," he said.

That perspective gave him confidence.

"It made me feel more motivated... knowing I could get back out and do something as a blind person," he said.

### The moment everything changed

For Tyler, a turning point came during a national convention in New Orleans, where he was surrounded by other individuals who are blind and living independently.

"I didn't feel alone," he said. "It felt like I was back to normal again."

That moment shifted his mindset—and his confidence. Now, just days away from graduating (at press time), he says he feels like himself again.

A future focused on giving back

Today, Tyler defines independence in a new way.

"Being your own person... not letting anyone stop you from doing what you want to do," he said.

After graduation, he plans to continue advanced training through a certified program and pursue an apprenticeship, with the long-term goal of becoming an orientation and mobility instructor. His hope is to one day return to Mississippi and help others who are blind regain their independence—just as he has.

### A message for others

For those facing vision loss or unsure of what comes next, Tyler has a clear message:

"If you want to take your life back... come do it."

The EMERGE Center in Long Beach is located at 310 North Cleveland Avenue. For more information or to learn more about the services provided in Long Beach for Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind, visit [www.mdrs.ms.gov](http://www.mdrs.ms.gov) or call Macauley Beasley at 228-241-2240.



*Special to Long Beach Breeze*

The EMERGE Center is located at 310 North Cleveland Avenue in Long Beach.



**The Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services (MDRS)** is a state agency that provides resources to help Mississippians with disabilities find new careers, live more independently, overcome obstacles, and face new challenges. For more information more about MDRS services, visit [www.mdrs.ms.gov](http://www.mdrs.ms.gov) or call 1-800-443-1000.

# “Mississippi Made” exhibit traces the impact of the Magnolia State as part of America 250 celebration



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

By Susan Marquez

In celebration of America’s 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, a special exhibit will be on display at the Two Mississippi Museums in Jackson.

Mississippi Made traces more than two centuries of innovation, craftsmanship and cultural influence through approximately 250 artifacts. The exhibit spans from the early 19th century to the present day, reflecting Mississippi’s role in agriculture, manufacturing, music, fashion, science, literature and the arts.

Katie Blount, director of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, says the stories featured in Mississippi Made illustrate how Mississippi’s people and ideas have made a lasting impact on both the nation and the world.

“This exhibit offers visitors an opportunity to understand better those contributions through the objects that document that legacy,” said Blount.

Objects on display range from a 19th-century cotton spinning gin used on small plantations to patent models and tools tied to Mississippi inventors. Visitors can even see a Lindsey eight-wheel log wagon developed in the early 20th century to support the state’s timber industry. All are objects that illustrate how Mississippians responded to local needs with ingenuity that often made a major impact on a national and global scale.

Innovation in music and literature by Mississippians is also highlighted in the exhibit. Elvis Presley’s bathrobe and a Velvet Elvis wall tapestry are among the artifacts, along with those tied to music icons B.B. King and Jimmie Rodgers, and records associated with artists such as

famed opera singer Leontyne Price. Literary contributions are represented through portraits of William Faulkner and Richard Wright, painted by Mississippi artists, and Eudora Welty’s typewriter.

Design, craft and cultural expression are featured through pottery by George Ohr, textiles by Ethel Wright Mohamed, a loom and a coverlet woven on that loom, and garments designed by Vicksburg native Patrick Kelly and a gown worn by Miss America Mary Ann Mobley. Film and popular culture are reflected through set pieces from *A Time to Kill*, a film based on John Grisham’s novel of the same name. The movie was filmed primarily in Mississippi.

Mississippi’s connections to science, transportation and industry are explored through objects such as a NASA flight jacket worn by astronaut Richard Truly, along with vehicles manufactured by Toyota and Nissan in Mississippi.

Artifacts tied to tourism and leisure highlight Mississippi’s mid-century coastal tourism and hospitality culture.

“Mississippi Made brings together objects that tell a broader story about the state’s creativity, industry, and innovation,” said Michael Morris, director of the Two Mississippi Museums. “Each artifact reflects how Mississippians responded to local needs in ways that shaped life far beyond the state.”

Mississippi Made is sponsored by Wayne-Sanderson Farms and will be on exhibit through November 6, 2026.

“As a company with deep Mississippi roots, Wayne-Sanderson Farms has a long history in the state—beginning with the separate legacy operations of Sanderson Farms and Wayne Farms and combining to become the industry leader we are today,” said Wayne-Sanderson Farms President



and CEO Kevin McDaniel. “It’s exciting to see the progress we’ve made together in Mississippi as business partners and as neighbors, and we’re proud to sponsor this exhibit and share that story.”

Museum hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission to the museums is free every Sunday. The Two Mississippi Museums

are located at 222 North Street in Jackson. Free parking is available along North Street and in the visitor garage on Jefferson Street.

For more information, visit [www.mdah.ms.gov](http://www.mdah.ms.gov). The museums are located at 222 North Street, #2205, in Jackson.

*EDITOR’S NOTE: Article courtesy The Magnolia Tribune.*



*Special to The Mississippi Monitor*

*This bar is from the Sun-n-Sand Motor Hotel and was added after Prohibition was lifted in Mississippi in 1966. The bar is featured in Willie Morris’ book My Cat Spit McGee and has been described as a place where legislators gathered and sometimes conducted business.*



*Special to The Mississippi Monitor*

*This 1980 button, reading “Hogs are beautiful,” was from the Farm Bureau archive collection and is on display in the “Mississippi Made” exhibit*



*Special to The Mississippi Monitor*

*This dress, found in the “Mississippi Made” temporary exhibit, was designed by Patrick Kelly of Vicksburg. His signature style is marked with colorful buttons, inspired by the buttons his grandmother used to mend clothing.*



*Special to The Mississippi Monitor*

*Located at 222 North Street in Jackson, the Museum of Mississippi History and the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum feature a special exhibit, “Mississippi Made,” through early November.*

“I’m double majoring in math & music performance. I’m in the SAE fraternity, play in the jazz band **and** still enjoy running on the track and cross country teams.”



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Jeremy Pittari

# Portrait of former Speaker of the House Philip Gunn unveiled at Mississippi Capitol

By Jeremy Pittari

The Mississippi Legislature gathered on the second floor rotunda of the State Capitol this spring for the unveiling of the most recent portrait to grace its halls, that of former Speaker of the House Philip Gunn, the 61st Speaker of the Mississippi House.

Elected to the House of Representatives in 2004 to represent House District 56, Gunn became the first Republican to be elected Speaker of the Mississippi House in January 2012 after the Republican Party gained the majority the year prior. Prior to Gunn, the last time a Republican was Speaker was in 1876 following the Civil War.

Serving in that capacity for twelve years, Gunn is recognized as one of the longest serving Speakers for the State of Mississippi.

During a speech at the gathering, Gunn said he was proud of the accomplishments the House and Senate made during his time in office, including the passage of HB 1510, which he said led to the overturning of Roe vs Wade.

Other accomplishments Gunn listed among his most notable include the passage of legislation that protected the religious rights of business owners and efforts that played a major role in the movement to change the state flag.

Gunn also cited, in spite of inheriting a \$600,000 deficit,

working in concert with then Lt. Governor, and now current Governor, Tate Reeves to balance the state budget.

“And in two or three years, we dug out of that hole - and we kept spending under control ever since, not spending more than we have brought in,” Gunn said.

He also reflected on bills that led to the current successes seen in the state’s K-12 education system, addressing human trafficking, providing income tax cuts, creating safe haven baby boxes, and providing tax credits to pregnancy resource centers and families who adopt.

“We delivered on the pro-life agenda that we professed,” Gunn said.

Humbled by the attention he was getting before the curtain on his portrait was removed, Gunn added that while he stood on the shoulders of strong leaders, current leaders now stand on the shoulders of those who came before them, and strong shoulders will be needed to carry future generations.

“This portrait represents just a man who once occupied the office of Speaker for a moment in time in our state’s history,” Gunn said. “There were Speakers before me. There will be Speakers and after me. What matters is what we’re going to do with that opportunity that we have while we hold that office.”

*EDITOR’S NOTE: Article courtesy The Magnolia Tribune. Gunn recently announced his candidacy for governor.*



Jeremy Pittari

*Former Speaker of the House Philip Gunn thanks his supporters and lawmakers who helped in the successful passage of many bills during his tenure that resulted in successes for the state of Mississippi, such as those that brought the state from 50th in education to 16th in the nation.*

# Nurses encouraged to apply for student loan repayment

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Registered nurses and licensed practical nurses with outstanding student loan debt are encouraged to apply for up to \$6,000 in loan repayment through the Nurse Retention Loan Repayment Program (NULR).

“If you think you might be eligible to apply, don’t wait,” said Dr. Jennifer Rogers, executive director of the Mississippi Office of Student Financial Aid, which administers the program. “2026 is the last year of this program, and funds will be awarded on a first-come, first-served basis through August 31 or until the funds have been spent.”

To be eligible for the loan repayment assistance, nurses must have a current relevant license and work full-time in Mississippi in a skilled nursing home or general acute care hospital that is licensed by the Mississippi State Department of Health. Eligible recipients must also have outstanding student loans in their own name. Awards of up to \$6,000 will be paid directly to the loan servicer after the nurse has completed at least one full year of eligible work.

“We know nurses are in high demand and have options in where they choose to work,” said Rogers. “This program was designed as a way to address the state’s nursing shortage in our hospitals and nursing homes, while also helping nurses quickly pay down any debt they carry from nursing school.”

Nurses may learn more and apply online at [www.msfinancialaid.org/nulr/](http://www.msfinancialaid.org/nulr/).

NULR was created by the Mississippi Legislature in response to the nursing shortage that worsened after the COVID pandemic and is funded with Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds authorized by the American Rescue Plan Act.



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# Children's of Mississippi opens adolescent acute psychiatric unit



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Federal, state and medical leaders watch as, from left: Dr. Dustyn Baker, assistant professor and medical director of the Adolescent Acute Psychiatric Unit as well as program director for the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Fellowship; Rep. Michael Guest; Dr. Mary Taylor, Suzan B. Thames Chair and CEO of Children's of Mississippi; Dr. LouAnn Woodward, vice chancellor for health affairs; Dr. Alan Jones, associate vice chancellor for health affairs; Dr. Mark Ladner, chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior; Dr. Nikki Cowan, Director of Nursing for the adolescent acute psychiatric unit; and Rep. Clay Deweese cut the ribbon on the Adolescent Acute Psychiatric Unit.

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Mississippi teens, like their peers nationwide, are facing increasing rates of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder, creating a growing demand for adolescent mental health services.

To help meet that need, Children's of Mississippi has opened a new Adolescent Acute Psychiatric Unit designed to serve teens ages 13 to 17.

During the 2023 legislative session, the Mississippi Legislature appropriated \$6 million to the project. An additional \$2 million came from federal funding.

"We are deeply grateful to our elected officials for recognizing the urgent need for expanded adolescent mental health services and investing in this project," said Dr. LouAnn Woodward, vice chancellor for health affairs at the University of Mississippi Medical Center. "Their support made it possible to address a critical gap in care and ensure that teens across our state have access to inpatient psychiatric treatment when they need it most."

The new unit includes ten acute psychiatric beds and offers individual therapy, goal-oriented group therapy, recreational group therapy, mindfulness activities, yoga, social skills training and access to

a hospital-based accredited school to support continued education during treatment.

"As Mississippi's only children's hospital, it is our responsibility to provide world-class care to every child who comes through our doors," said Dr. Mary Taylor, Suzan B. Thames Chair of Pediatrics and CEO of Children's of Mississippi. "This unit allows us to deliver that same high level of specialized care to adolescents experiencing mental health crises without sending them elsewhere."

Many adolescents seeking psychiatric treatment arrive through the emergency department following a suicide attempt, overdose or other crisis.

"Being able to admit adolescents directly from our emergency department improves continuity of care and enhances patient safety," Dr. Mark Ladner, chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior at UMMC. "It allows us to begin treatment immediately in a setting designed specifically for their developmental, emotional and medical needs."

Historically, Children's of Mississippi had a child psychiatry unit and an adult psychiatry unit, but no dedicated inpatient space for adolescents. Teens who required hospitalization often had to be transferred to outside facilities.



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

In 1974, pediatric patients received care in UMMC's first children's hospital, built in 1968.

# MDE names top contributors to schools for 2026

*The Mississippi Monitor*

Dr. Matthew Fulton, Lauren Zarandona and Kristina Carter were recently recognized by the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) as top contributors to the state's school districts.

Dr. Matthew Fulton, principal at Sumner Hill Junior High School in the Clinton Public School District, was named Mississippi's Administrator of the Year for 2026. Lauren Zarandona,



a teacher at Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, was named 2026 Mississippi Teacher of the Year, and Kristina Carter, a mother of four with three students in the Natchez-Adams School District, was named 2026 Mississippi Parent of the Year.

The winners were recognized at a program led by MDE's Office of Teaching and Leading at the Jackson Convention Complex.

The annual Mississippi Administrator of the Year program honors an administrator who demonstrates superior ability to inspire teachers, to employ exemplary leadership practices and to participate as an active member of the



*Special to The Mississippi Monitor*

community. The recipient receives a \$5,000 stipend and shares expertise through various presentations and activities for the improvement of education in the state.

When describing his personal philosophy, Fulton said, "Education is an act of continuous service in which educators do not serve



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*Pictured with Mississippi State Superintendent of Education Dr. Lance Evans (left) is 2026 Mississippi Administrator of the Year Dr. Matthew Fulton (right).*



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*2026 Mississippi Teacher of the Year Lauren Zarandona (left) is pictured with Mississippi State Superintendent of Education Dr. Lance Evans (right).*



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*2026 Parent of the Year Kristina Carter (left) is pictured with Mississippi State Superintendent of Education Dr. Lance Evans (right).*

self but consider the needs of others more significant than their own. The God-given dignity and boundless potential of every learner compel a selfless and steadfast commitment to student growth. The fruit of such service and dedication is the future of our society.”

The annual Mississippi Teacher of the Year program recognizes an exemplary teacher in the state who inspires students, demonstrates leadership both inside and outside the classroom and serves as an active member of the community. The award recipient also receives a \$5,000 stipend and will share expertise through various presentations and activities. Zarandona will represent Mississippi in the National Teacher of the Year competition.

When describing her personal philosophy, Zarandona said, “Learning is more than getting a correct answer or knowing the right information. Learning must lead to understanding for all students; teaching them how to think is far more important than teaching them what to think.”

Carter was nominated for Parent of the Year by her school district for her dedication, service and unwavering support of students, educators and families within the school community, with the district saying, “her consistent involvement and remarkable leadership exemplify the impact parental engagement has on student success.”

Should either the 2026 Mississippi Administrator of the Year or 2026 Mississippi Teacher of the Year be unable to fulfill their duties, alternate candidates for each role have been selected. The alternate 2026 Mississippi Administrator of the Year is Stephanie Shirley, principal at Clarkdale High School in the Lauderdale County School District; and the alternate 2026 Mississippi Teacher of the Year is Cody Eadie,



a teacher at Harrison Central High School in the Harrison County School District.

With research showing that parental involvement is a critical factor in determining the academic success of students, MDE annually asks each district to select an outstanding parent who has made a significant impact on school improvement efforts in the school district. The committee reviews numerous applications submitted by school districts and selects a Parent of the Year finalist from each of the four congressional districts. From those four district winners, Kristina Carter was chosen as the 2026



Parent of the Year was determined.

Carter believes that when parents actively participate in their children’s education, students tend to perform better academically, attend school regularly and demonstrate stronger social and behavioral skills. She works closely with administrators and district

personnel on key initiatives while also remaining an active PTA volunteer in three schools. From assisting in the front office and supporting the library and classrooms to helping counselors and testing coordinators, district officials say she consistently steps in wherever support is needed. Her advocacy for students ensures they receive the encouragement, resources, and care necessary to thrive academically and personally. Since 2015, Carter has been honored with multiple school-level Parent of the Year awards.

Other Parent of the Year finalists for 2026 included Congressional District 1 finalist Kassie Isbell, nominated by the Tate County School District; Congressional District 3 finalist Qua’Tessa Ratliff, nominated by the Walthall County School District; and Congressional District 4 finalist Latreaka Rankin, nominated by the Forrest County School District.



Photos special to The Mississippi Monitor

# Amazon continues Mississippi expansion, \$25 billion investment and 2,000 jobs expected



Photo courtesy Amazon

Construction of an Amazon data center

The Mississippi Monitor

In early April, Amazon announced plans to invest an additional \$12 billion in central Mississippi, continuing its expansion in the state. The latest announcement includes a planned \$11 billion expansion of the company's existing data center operations in Madison County, a project that will create seven hundred new jobs. The announcement also includes a new planned \$1 billion project in Clinton that will create one hundred jobs. With these investments, Amazon's total planned capital investment in the state is \$25 billion, and the company expects to create more than 2,000 jobs.

"Amazon is expanding in Mississippi with \$12 billion in new investments, \$11 billion in Madison County and \$1 billion to transform a former manufacturing plant in Hinds County," said David Zapolsky, Amazon's Chief Global Affairs and Legal Officer. "These two projects will create eight hundred jobs and build infrastructure that serves Mississippi for generations."

The Madison County expansion builds on Amazon's 2024 announcement of plans to invest at least \$10 billion and create 1,000 direct jobs to establish data center campuses in the county. The Clinton project, which retrofits the former Delphi Corporation plant, is Amazon's first location in the city.

In November 2025, Amazon also announced a planned \$3 billion project in Vicksburg that is creating at least two hundred high-paying, full-time positions and further expanding the company's presence in central Mississippi.

"Amazon isn't just reinvesting in Mississippi — the company is once again betting on our people," said Governor Tate Reeves. "\$25 billion in two years is providing Mississippians with high-tech, high-paying opportunities, strengthening our communities and showing the world that our state is open for business. This is what transformational economic growth looks like, and it's happening right here, right now. This is Mississippi's time."

Amazon's cloud and data center operations, Amazon Web Services, is the world's most comprehensive and widely adopted cloud, enabling a new era of generative artificial intelligence through strategic investments in advanced infrastructure, machine

learning services and agentic AI applications. The company's Mississippi plans further strengthen investments in generative AI and high-tech cloud infrastructure and reflect Amazon's ongoing commitment to supporting U.S. leadership in AI and helping customers across all industries harness AI-driven solutions to transform operations and accelerate innovation.

Millions of customers, including the fastest-growing startups, largest enterprises and leading government agencies, rely on AWS to advance their AI journey, lower costs, increase agility and drive innovation. Company officials say these strategic investments in advanced computing infrastructure and specialized AI hardware are building the technology backbone for the next generation of generative and agentic AI and helping to secure America's position at the forefront of global innovation.

Mississippi Major Economic Impact Authority funds continue to support Amazon's cloud and data center investments in Mississippi. Madison County, the city of Ridgeland, Hinds County and the city of Clinton also are assisting with this latest expansion.

Additionally, Entergy Mississippi's commitment to meeting long-term power requirements was a key factor in the company's decision to continue its expansion.

"Developing strong relationships with Amazon and supporting their speed-to-market needs helped attract them to Mississippi," said Entergy Mississippi President and CEO Haley Fisackerly. "Showing them we can deliver on our promises is bringing them back, time and again. Our planned investments help support Amazon's newest projects in Mississippi. Our partnership with them is also generating remarkable benefits for all our customers, including helping us strengthen the power grid and improve reliability while keeping customers' future bills lower than they otherwise would have been."

"Amazon is expanding in Mississippi because we get it done," said Mississippi Development Authority Executive Director Bill Cork. "We deliver reliable power, top-tier talent and leadership that doesn't get in the way—just clears the path for companies ready to build and get to work."



Governor Tate Reeves speaks during the announcement of a \$25 billion investment in Mississippi by Amazon.

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