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## Greenwood schools avoid state takeover

Emily Le Coz, The Clarion-Ledger 9:13 a.m. CDT August 1, 2014



Greenwood Public Schools avoided state takeover Thursday after attorney **Jim Keith** blasted the Mississippi Department of Education's case against the district as sloppy, irresponsible and reckless.

The Mississippi Commission on School Accreditation voted unanimously against MDE's findings of an extreme emergency situation meriting the immediate loss of the district's accreditation.

It gave the district until Oct. 15 to come into compliance with all accreditation standards and submit to a full state audit after that time. The findings of that audit will be presented to the commission at a later date.

The sometimes-contentious meeting lasted more than two hours and attracted a large crowd of both supporters and opponents of the district's current administration led by Superintendent Montrell Greene.

"I am not a bully," Greene told the commission in response to MDE audit findings. "I am here to help boys and girls."

MDE had based its findings on the results of an unannounced visit to the district between April 29 and May 2 during which its auditors made observations, reviewed records, interviewed staff and conducted anonymous, online surveys.

Among the allegations in the 46-page report, which MDE issued July 16, are that the district has misspent more than \$95,000, violated three dozen accreditation standards and created an atmosphere of "dissension, fear, low staff morale and distrust of the superintendent and the school board."

The district's 61-page response, filed Monday, contained sharp criticism for how MDE conducted the audit and chided the agency for basing its findings on anonymous hearsay, failing to do thorough research and neglecting to interview district officials.

Of one allegation – that the school board president conducts job applicant background checks while other board members knowingly look the other way – the district expresses shock.

"Such accusations by the audit team are reckless, irresponsible and defamatory," the response states, noting a total lack of evidence to support the claim.

Greene, Keith and school board member Bill Clay said many of the allegations appear to have come from disgruntled employees trying to sabotage Greene's administration because their preferred superintendent wasn't chosen.

Greene was hired by the school board in April 2013 and replaced interim superintendent Jennifer Wilson amid protests from Wilson's supporters.

"There seems to be contention within the Greenwood community and within the schools," acknowledged commission Chairman Lee Childress, superintendent of the Corinth School District.

But Paula Vanderford, MDE's accreditation director, said the agency based its decision on credible sources, not all of whom are disgruntled employees. She also said MDE received a petition signed by 2,681 community members demanding the ouster of Greene and the school board.

Vanderford spent 40 minutes providing examples of the district's numerous violations but ran out of time before she could cite them all. Some of the most damaging findings were the misreporting of personnel data, the misspending of federal dollars, and the misuse of the state's open meetings exemptions.

"It is believed that these violations do jeopardize the safety and security of school district," she told the commission.

Thursday's commission vote comes one week after its initial meeting to decide Greenwood's fate. At that meeting, school district attorneys had argued they still lacked the documentation they'd requested from MDE to be able to respond to the allegations.

So commissioners extended Greenwood's deadline to 9 a.m. on Monday.

But MDE didn't provide the documents until late Monday afternoon, hours after the newly imposed deadline and hours after the district already had hand-delivered 17 bound copies of its response to the office of State Superintendent of Education Carey Wright.

Those binders sat untouched late Tuesday, after MDE issued a supplemental report accusing the district of failure to submit a response.

No one from Wright's office told Vanderford that Greenwood submitted its response, and Vanderford apparently never asked.

Vanderford said her office doesn't handle public records request. It goes to another division within MDE and that division followed the law by making the documents available within the legal time frame.

The supplemental report contained new findings gleaned from yet another unannounced visit to Greenwood that MDE made on Thursday, two days after last week's commission meeting.

Not only did Greenwood lack an opportunity to address those new findings, Keith said, but MDE's unannounced visit caused the district to lose one of the additional days commissioners had granted to work on a response. Instead, district officials spent that day producing records for MDE auditors.

"They have done everything in the world they could to prevent us from being able to respond with reasoned explanations to all this employee griping and complaining," Keith said.

Vanderford said auditors followed the law and MDE policy with regards to how they conducted the audit, and she stood by their findings.