

# Retiring county school superintendent reflects on 20 years of service

By SHOSHANA BRACKETT  
Starkville Daily News

The Oktibbeha County School District's long-time superintendent stepped down this week after 20 years on the job.

Dr. Walter Conley, who served as superintendent since January 1988, was the first elected black superintendent for the county.

He is succeeded by James Covington, principal of East Oktibbeha County Elementary School, who beat Conley in the August Democratic primary and won the election for county superintendent in November.

Conley is actually a product of the Oktibbeha County School District and graduated in 1964 from B.L. Moor High School (now East Oktibbeha County High School).

Conley went on to graduate with a bachelor's degree in mathematics from Tougaloo College in 1968. He also received a master's degree in mathematics education from Mississippi State University in 1974 and a doctorate in educational leadership from MSU in 1996.

## The road to the superintendent's office

"It really was, I guess, a dream come true having graduated in 1964 ...," Conley said of becoming superintendent of the county schools.

Conley began his teaching career in the OCSD as a math teacher at B.L. Moor Attendance Center (now EOCES) in 1968 and worked there until 1977.

"As I taught, I saw a need to get in a position to make changes in the district," Conley said.

To get into such a position, Conley continued with his own education, receiving a master's

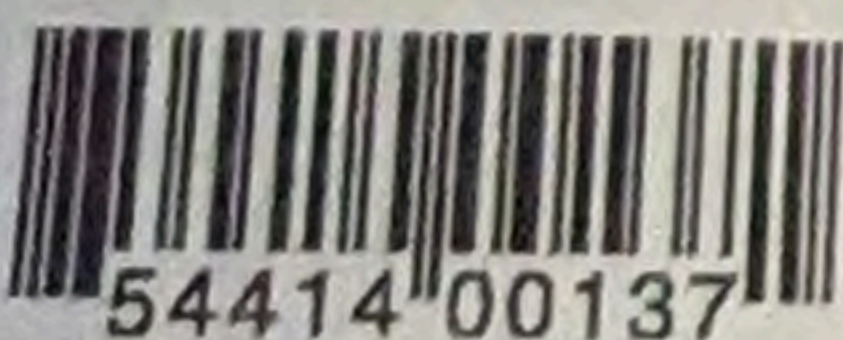
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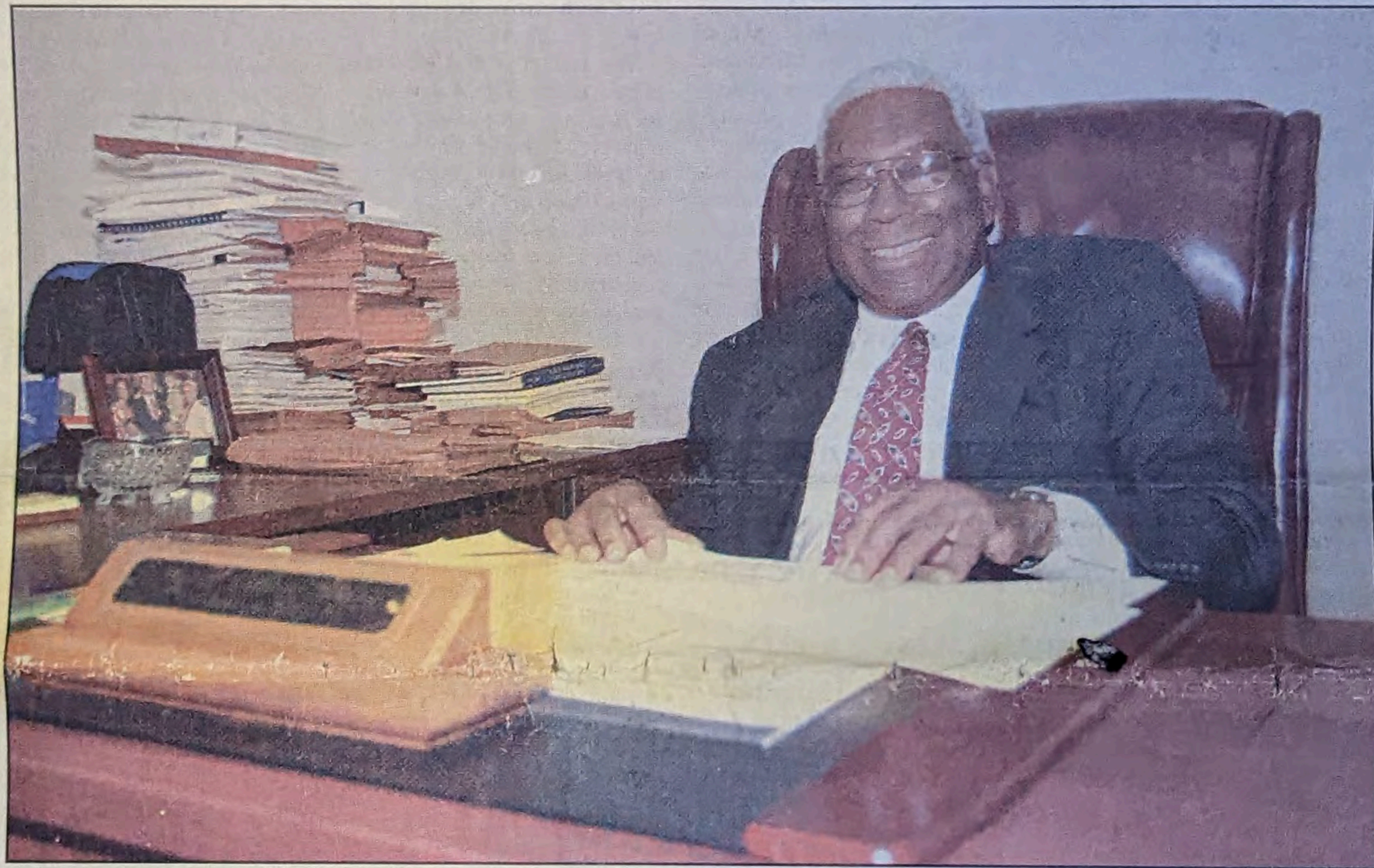
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"One thing I want to make clear — though I have been superintendent for the past 20 years, without the help of the community, none of this would have been possible. It was a team effort."

Retiring Oktibbeha County School District Supt.  
Walter Conley

Shoshana Brackett/SDN  
Left, Dr. Walter Conley, outgoing superintendent of the Oktibbeha County School District, wraps up some last minute business during his final week of work.

# Conley honored by community during Saturday reception

By SHOSHANA BRACKETT  
Starkville Daily News

Family, friends, colleagues and local dignitaries honored retiring Oktibbeha County School District Supt. Walter Conley with a reception Saturday night.

With nearly 40 years in education and 20 years as county superintendent, Conley was recognized for his many contributions to the district.

Oktibbeha County School Board President Curtis Snell said he enjoyed the long history he personally had with Conley.

Conley taught Snell, a 1975 graduate of B.L. Moor High School, and has worked with him since Snell became a school board member in 1994.

"I think as a leader, most of all he's interested in the children," Snell said. "In my opinion, for the past 20 years, we could not have had a better superintendent."

Starkville Mayor Dan Camp, Ward 6 Alderman Roy Perkins, Justice Court Judge Bernard Crump, retired Starkville School District Supt. Larry Box, District 38 State Rep. Rep. Tyrone Ellis, the county school board, central office staff, Oktibbeha County Board of Supervisors and others waved



Dr. Walter Conley, left, 20-year superintendent of education for the Oktibbeha County School District, was all smiles Saturday night during a retirement celebration in his honor. Conley was surrounded by family and friends during the reception. His wife, Gloria, is seated beside him.

Conley into retirement. "I just wanted to come and welcome you to a new life that is truly wonderful," Box said to Conley. Box retired as superintendent from the Starkville School District several years ago.

"Congratulations and thank you for what you've done for the school district," Box said.

"It is very evident that the district is much stronger now," he said.

Each school presented Conley with plaques and musical pre-

sentations during the reception.

"I thank you so very much for being instrumental in my life and my career," said Dr. Gale Cook, West Oktibbeha County Elementary School principal.

"I just pray that you have a successful retirement and don't

work so hard," she said.

Near the end of the ceremony Conley ceremoniously passed the reigns of control over to superintendent-elect James Covington.

"Being superintendent of the Oktibbeha County School District is not a job, it's more than a job, it's a way of life," Conley said.

"I hired Mr. Covington as principal because I saw great potential in him," Conley said.

Covington, principal at East Oktibbeha County Elementary School, reassured Conley the district will continue to strive for excellence.

"We're just going to take off where you left off and continue to make sure this district continues to be one of the best in the state," Covington said. Covington takes office in January.

With kind words to all his family and friends, Conley expressed hope that the district would continue to strive for excellence.

The retirement reception was put on by the Education Association of East Oktibbeha County Schools, the Oktibbeha County School Board, the Central Office administration and faculty and staff from the four county schools.



# Conley

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degree in mathematics education from Mississippi State University in 1974.

He also held teaching positions at Starkville High School and Fifth Street Junior High School in West Point before becoming assistant principal at SHS in 1985.

In 1987, Conley ran for OCSD superintendent, won and became the first black elected superintendent for the district.

Though he was the first black elected superintendent for the county district, Conley said a black female was previously appointed to serve out the term of a superintendent who resigned in 1983.

"It was extremely exciting for me to teach and (then) to be superintendent," Conley said. "I think I really and truly understood the district as a whole."

Conley continued as superintendent and ran unopposed in most election years.

"Interestingly enough, when I was elected in 1987, I did not have another opponent until 2003," he said.

"It was really nice not having an opponent during that period of time," Conley said.

## A change in education

During Conley's 20 years of service as superintendent, education as a whole has changed which has in turn changed education in the county district.

"One change that has impacted the district is the accountability," Conley said. "When I became superintendent, accountability was there but it was in the background."

Now, schools are often judged based on their annual state test scores, leading toward more emphasis on teaching testable material.

"The testing impact has really changed the mindset ... (of) everybody that's associated with it," Conley said.

Though Conley noted that testing is "extremely important" in assessing students and schools, he also suggested the focus on accountability can be taken too far.

"There must be accountability on any endeavor," Conley said. "I think the way it is used is important."

"I think testing should be for improvement in student achievement, and it should not be used to punish a district ...," he said.

Though students and teachers are held to strict accountability standards these days, Conley said school itself is no harder in the 21st century.

"I don't think school is harder than it used to be, the same information that is available now was available years ago," he said.

Conley did note that some subjects like history continue to grow. But he did note that too much emphasis on testing may be detrimental to learning.

"I think that if we're not careful we require less of students," he said. "With the testing, our focus is so narrow now that all we want to do is prepare for what's on that test. We've somewhat stifled creativity or maybe even eliminated it."

## Notable district items

Within the district, Conley said one of the most significant changes since he became superintendent is a change in the community's attitude.

"I think first and foremost the most significant change has been a change in attitude," he said. "To me, that's 90 to 95 percent of anything."

Since becoming superintendent, Conley said he has instilled the idea that "you are the best, you have the potential" into the district and its community.

"So, you have this change in attitudes that we're no longer losers, we are winners," he said.

Conley also pointed to the district's many accomplishments in recent years — both academic and athletic — as proof the district continues to strive for excellence.

The honors include the naming of the two elementary schools with Closing the Achievement Gap Awards in 2006-2007 out of 12 schools in the state, state championship wins from the boys and girls basketball teams at EOCHS and more.

"Just recently we were one of

only 25 schools nationally to receive a NASA grant," Conley said. "That speaks well for that school and our district."

In the spring, EOCHS and EOCHS received a shared grant as a NASA Explorer School which will provide students with more opportunities to learn about science, mathematics, engineering, technology and geography and potential careers in those areas.

During his years as superintendent, Conley said he has also seen a greater use of technology.

"From a technological standpoint, we're right up there with any district in this state," he said.

The schools have student

computer labs, distance learning capabilities and computerized libraries. Conley also said he is proud of the appearance of the county schools.

"When I became superintendent, I was not impressed with the upkeep and maintenance of our campuses," he said.

Now, Conley said state officials and those from other districts have commented on the pleasant appearance of the schools.

"People judge you a lot based on the outward appearance of your campuses and buildings," he said. "We've seen significant change in all of those particular areas, and I hope and trust that we will continue to improve ..."

We must continue to move toward perfection."

## Looking to retirement

Though retirement has now come, Conley is still considering what he will be doing now.

"I really have not given it a whole lot of thought at this particular time," Conley said of retirement.

"I'm going to take some time off, I have a lot of things to do around my house," he said.

After a few months, Conley said he'll start thinking more about what to do.

"I know I cannot go home and just sit around," he said. "That would drive me crazy."

One thing that may keep him busy is work with his family's bus charter business, Conley Travel Services.

"That's something I'll probably tinker around with for awhile and see if we can improve that," he said.

Conley said he is also looking forward to the flexibility of his schedule and spending more time with family. Conley and his wife, Gloria, have three children — LeVardis, Kristy and Brent — and two grandchildren — Javier and Jourdan.

## Looking back

As Conley reminisced on his years of service to the district,

he stressed the importance of all the district's employees.

"The administration, faculty and staff, they've done just an outstanding job," he said.

Though the district's finances do not allow for incentives and top salaries, Conley said the staff are faithful to the district.

"We've not been able to pay them the types of wages and salaries of surrounding districts, but they're dedicated and they've stayed with us," he said.

"One thing I want to make clear — though I have been superintendent for the past 20 years, without the help of the community, none of this would have been possible," Conley said. "It was a team effort."

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