

Shelby County Schools' Sharon Griffin to lead state-run Achievement School District

[Jennifer Pignolet](#), USA TODAY NETWORK – Tennessee Published 12:00 p.m. CT April 24, 2018 | Updated 6:38 p.m. CT April 24, 2018



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A Memphian will finally lead the state-run Achievement School District, but at a substantial loss to Shelby County Schools.

Sharon Griffin, the SCS chief of schools, will become Tennessee's superintendent of the Department of Education's 6-year-old district that intervenes in struggling schools.

Education Commissioner Candice McQueen made the announcement Tuesday, a surprise that sent shock waves through SCS and the local and state education communities.

"Dr. Griffin is one of the few proven turnaround leaders in the country," McQueen said in a call with reporters.

Griffin was not on the state's released list of finalists, and did not go through a public interview process like another finalist, Rhode Island resident Stephen Osborn, did in March.

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April 14, 2018 - Dr. Candice McQueen, commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Education, speaks during the Memphis Shelby County Education Association's spring education forum at the MSCEA building. (Photo: Brad Vest/The Commercial Appeal, Brad Vest/The Commercial Appeal)

But McQueen said conversations with Griffin started soon after Malika Anderson, the state's second ASD superintendent, announced she was leaving last fall. McQueen said she recruited Griffin, but that Griffin also expressed early interest in the job.

"Because she is a very visible person in Shelby County Schools, we had to have discreet conversations to move us in this direction because of the role that she currently has," McQueen said. "We knew ultimately a full-day interview process did not make much sense because people know Dr. Griffin, they know her expertise, they know the work she is doing."

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She will start the job in May, according to the state. Her title will be assistant commissioner of school turnaround and chief of the Achievement School District. Griffin makes \$165,000 a year now at SCS and will make \$180,000 in her new role.

The job is a redesign from previous ASD superintendents, as Griffin will help advise schools performing in the bottom 5 percent academically across the state, even if they aren't part of the ASD. Under the new federal education law, the state and local districts can partner on interventions to help improve schools.

"This new role is an opportunity to bring what I've learned to a greater scale and to support all of our highest-need schools in Memphis and across the state," Griffin said.

Griffin will oversee an ASD tasked with educating 12,000 of the most-vulnerable children in the state at a time of heavy scrutiny after years of unfulfilled promises of improved schools.

Griffin will be the first person from Memphis to lead the ASD, a quality the community has long demanded given that 30 out of 32 schools in the ASD are in Shelby County.

Griffin managed the district's Innovation Zone schools, the SCS counterpart to the ASD. She was Tennessee's 2015-16 Supervisor of the Year.



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December 4, 2015 - Shelby County School's Dr. Sharon Griffin greets students lunching at Treadwell Elementary School Friday morning. Griffin, who won administrator of the year for Tennessee, is the regional superintendent for the iZone schools. "I miss being a principal and a teacher," states Griffin. "I try to make sure that I visit schools on a weekly basis so that I don't ever forget when I'm at the district office making a decision what it's like, first of all, to be a student, to be a teacher, and to be a leader in a school. Every single decision that we make is driven with those three components in mind." (Yalonda M. James/The Commercial Appeal) *(Photo: Yalonda M. James, The Commercial Appeal)*

The iZone schools saw significant gains under Griffin with initiatives like adding an extra hour to the school day and increasing the amount of coaching that teachers receive.

The ASD, however, outsources most of its work to charter organizations, and as a result, those kinds of decisions are made on a school level. Griffin will head the umbrella organization that pledges to hold those charter organizations accountable for their work.

As chief of schools, Griffin essentially serves as SCS Superintendent Dorsey Hopson's second in command. She's previously sat in his place during board meetings when he was not present.

SCS released a statement saying Angela Whitelaw, the assistant superintendent of schools and leadership will assume the chief of schools role until the district completes a search for a permanent replacement.

"The outstanding innovative turnaround work in our district continues to garner regional and national attention, so it's no surprise that our team members are often sought after," the statement said. "Dr. Sharon Griffin has served our district well in various capacities for over 20 years and built a strong academic roadmap that would allow the work to continue, even in her absence. While we don't want to lose her, we are supportive of her desire to reach her personal and professional goals of supporting students across our state."

SCS board chairwoman Shante Avant said board members learned of the news Tuesday as well.

"We're, of course, sad to see Sharon leave because we feel like she's been an asset to SCS and the turnaround work that we've done," Avant said.

Griffin recently completed a year's work on a new academic plan for the district. It's set to launch July 1, including a dashboard tracking data for every major initiative in the district.

Avant said the board's role will be to make sure Hopson has the right people in place for the work to continue.

"The plan is bigger than Dr. Griffin," Avant said. "It's about all the folks in between."

Griffin, a former teacher in Memphis, is the youngest of 11 children and graduated from Hamilton High School in 1986. She stayed in Memphis to earn her bachelor's from LeMoyne-Owen College and her master's and doctorate degrees from University of Memphis.

"Understanding the community and having the cultural awareness of what's going on in our city is such an asset in general," Griffin said.



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March 21, 2018 - Education Commissioner Candice McQueen, center, speaks during a meet and greet with ASD superintendent candidate Steve Osborn, not pictured, and the Frayser Exchange at Martin Luther King Jr. College Preparatory High School in Frayser on Wednesday. *(Photo: Yalonda M. James/The Commercial Appeal)*

Just one name on the list of the state's semi-finalists, Keith Sanders, was from Memphis. Sanders was told he was a finalist, but that was withdrawn after the search firm employed to find the next superintendent told McQueen several concerns arose in his reference checks.

A state spokesperson said that list was intended to reflect the candidates the search firm recommended should move forward in the process, not to be a comprehensive list of everyone under consideration.

The superintendent appointment is up to McQueen and Gov. Bill Haslam, as the ASD does not have an independent governing board.

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