

New Hanover County School Board hires Greensboro-based attorney to conduct independent investigation

By **Benjamin Schachtman** - July 10, 2019



The policies and practices of the New Hanover County School district will be investigated by a Greensboro-based law firm. (Port City Daily photo/Johai

WILMINGTON — After two weeks of speculation about how, exactly, the **New Hanover Board of Education would conduct the internal investigation it announced** in the wake of the sentencing of Michael Earl Kelly, it appears a decision has been made.

On Tuesday, the Board of Education's regularly scheduled meeting stretched long into the night, with two closed sessions. By 9:30 p.m. the media and residents had left, and the NHCS TV service had stopped streaming. At some point after that, the Board voted in open session to hire the Brooks, Pierce law firm.

According to a release sent around 7 p.m. on Wednesday evening from the school district, "The New Hanover County Board of Education voted July 9 in open session to hire the law firm of Brooks, Pierce to conduct an independent investigation of the handling of the allegations surrounding former personnel of the district."

A team of attorneys and staff will handle the investigation, led by attorney Jill R. Wilson, according to the district.

"Jill Wilson, an experienced and well-respected education attorney from Greensboro, North Carolina, will lead the team, which also includes attorney Shana Fulton, a former federal prosecutor.

According to Wilson's [page on the Brooks, Pierce website](#):

"Jill represents numerous public school boards of education, private educational institutions, and colleges and universities on a wide range of education issues and in litigation in state and federal trial and appellate courts. She has advised and/or litigated on all aspects of education and the business of education, including school board mergers, policy generation, funding disputes, civil rights issues, student conduct issues, school assignment, teacher tenure and dismissal, general employment, personal injury, construction and public contracting, and First Amendment issues."

Wilson has also conducted investigations into school districts as well; in [2014 the Granville County Board of Education hired Wilson](#) to audit what appeared to be top administrators approving substantial raises for themselves without board consent.

The district made a point of claiming that many of the issues in question predate the current board members' tenure.

"Now that the criminal investigation of Mr. Kelly has been completed, the Board is prepared to examine its past practices and history, most of which pre-dates the current board members' service," the district stated.

The district's release did not clearly identify what the scope of the investigation would be; however, it should be noted that several of the issues that have been raised concerning the board and administration, including

the actions of Kelly, [the Spanish immersion program at Forest Hills Elementary School](#), and other issues, have in fact happened under the tenure of at least three sitting board members.

Board Chairperson Lisa Estep stated, “the Board felt that there was value in getting an objective, thorough look at our practices and procedures and an understanding of what happened in the past so that we can assure appropriate practices and policies are in place in the future. We value and treasure our students and want the public to know that we take most seriously our commitment to act in their best interests.”

There are now multiple investigations into New Hanover County Schools, including Wilson’s team, the [State Bureau of Investigation](#), and a third-party investigation by attorneys for two [Wilmington-based law firms looking into possible civil liability of administrators and potentially board members](#).

It is not clear how Wilson’s investigation will be funded, or which agency or government body will be in possession of the final report from Wilson and her team.

Send comments and tips to Benjamin Schachtman at ben@localvoicemedia.com, [@pcdben](#) on Twitter, and (910) 538-200

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