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# Ethics complaints target White, BESE members

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July 27, 2014



8 Comments

A longtime critic of state Superintendent of Education John White said Friday she and others plan to file an ethics complaint next week naming White and four members of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

White disputed the comments.

Lee Barrios, a former school teacher in St. Tammany Parish who often testifies at BESE meetings, spelled out plans by her, parents and education “activists” in a news release and a telephone interview.

What the complaint will say is unclear.

“As far as the details, I don’t think that it is appropriate to the specifics in the press release,” she said.

However, the prepared statement said one of the concerns is that White accepted more than \$700 for his appearance at a **Teach For America** gathering last year in Connecticut.

White’s office provided copies of an ethics disclosure form that White filed on Oct. 29, 2013, that detailed expenses associated with the trip, which he said is clearly allowed by state law.

The tally includes \$402.36 for transportation to Old Greenwich, Connecticut, \$229 for lodging, \$58 for meals and \$68.95 in miscellaneous expenses — \$758.31 in all.

Officials such as White are allowed to accept complimentary admission, lodging and other expenses to and from educational gatherings if the invitation comes from a civic or nonprofit group, the conference is related to the official’s job duties and the gathering is held in the U.S. or Canada, according to documents provided by Joan Hunt, executive counsel for the state Department of Education.

Barrios said BESE members named Monday in the complaints will be Chas Roemer, president of the board, Holly Boffy, Jay Guillot and Kira Orange Jones.

Barrios noted that Roemer’s sister **Caroline Roemer Shirley** is president of the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools.

Critics have questioned whether that is a conflict of interest.

She said she wants ethics officials to take another look at the job of Orange Jones, who the Louisiana Board of Ethics ruled in 2012 could keep both her elected seat on BESE and her job with the New Orleans branch of Teach for America.

A spokesman for BESE said Friday he did not think any of the four wanted to comment about Barrios' statements.

Complaints filed with the Louisiana Ethics Administration are generally shrouded in secrecy.

They are first checked by staff officials, who then forward any findings to the full board.

The board then decides whether to launch a full-scale investigation.

Once that is done the panel decides whether to file charges, which would be decided by a three-member Ethics Adjudicatory Board.

Jane Smith, who is Gov. Bobby Jindal's key ally on BESE, has cited the work of Barrios and others in saying that the battle over Common Core could spark ethics charges against White.

**In a letter to BESE** on Wednesday, White said he is being unfairly targeted personally for possible wrongdoing by the Jindal administration and its allies.

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**Jim Richardson** · ★ Top Commenter · Southeastern Louisiana University

Oh what a dangerous webb we weave when we (the whold bunch in Baton Rouge) conspire to deceive. From the Governor to the last conspirator, the house of cards is falling.

Reply · Like · July 29 at 8:34am



**Patrick Robinson** · ★ Top Commenter · McNeese State University

Robert Burns, you are so correct! I was told by one of the Ethics Board's Staff Attorneys that an investigation can be initiated under the following scenarios: 1.) A citizen may file a complaint. 2.) Complaints may be forwarded from the Attorney General's Office or the State Auditors Office. 3.) Media coverage of possible infractions that are brought to the attention of the Ethics Board Staff. 4.) Individual Board Members can direct the Ethics Staff to bring the issue up in front of the full Board for a vote.

# 4 is open to abuse and is the one that scares me. The Governor's Office can make anyone's life miserable by having them investigated. Having an Ethics Investigator ask leading questions to your coworkers and business associates concerning a "complaint" is a sure way to have your reputation ruined! The very fact you are being investigated leads one to wonder, "He must have done something wrong or he wouldn't be going through an investigation!" When I asked the lead Ethics Attorney, "Who investigates Ethics Board members for possible wrongdoings?", she stated, "We investigate ourselves!"

Reply · Like ·  2 · July 27 at 5:49am



**Robert Burns** · ★ Top Commenter · Vice President at Louisiana Association of Professional Auctioneers

Thanks, Patrick, and that's an incredible post. I'm sure you won't mind, and since The Advocate can never seem to fix this problem, I'm going to copy and paste your comments beginning with where readers can't access the reminder on a mobile device: "leading..... leading questions to your coworkers and business associates concerning a "complaint" is a sure way to have your reputation ruined! The very fact you are being investigated leads one to wonder, "He must have done something wrong or he wouldn't be going through an investigation!" When I asked the lead Ethics Attorney, "Who investigates Ethics Board members for possible wrongdoings?", she stated, "We investigate ourselves!"

Reply · Like · July 27 at 1:02pm



**Lee P. Barrios** · ★ Top Commenter · Abita Springs, Louisiana

Will - To be clear, my press release was precipitated by White's own comments in your paper which said he uses his personal credit card for these expenses, then is reimbursed by LDE and then the organization makes a "donation" to LDE to cover the costs. There are several questionable events filed including a KIPP event in Disney World, but the TFA occasion is described as a fundraiser. Call me purple, but I find the idea of TFA making a donation of \$700 to LDE when LDE gives TFA million\$ plus every year (taxpayer money) ludicrous. I have asked for the documentation and receipts but failed to receive them within the legally prescribed time frame. Waiting and always ready to offer up an apology if wrong!

Reply · Like ·  11 · July 26 at 6:34am





**James Finney** · ★ Top Commenter · LSU

Give 'em hell, Lee!

Reply · Like · 2 · July 25 at 9:12pm



**Trapper John** · ★ Top Commenter

Disagree with the governor and you will be punished. Nothing like the Tyranny of Louisiana.

Reply · Like · 6 · July 25 at 6:49pm

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