



Atlanta Public Schools is one of 35 school districts serving the metro area. Although the City of Atlanta's population has remained relatively static, declining birth rates in the city have lowered enrollment from about 60,000 students during the mid-1990s to our current level of 50,000 students.

The racial make-up of our student body is relatively stable at 84 percent black, 9 percent white, 5 percent Hispanic and 1 percent other. Three in four of our students are approved for free or reduced-price meals, and of these, 94 percent receive free meals—that's roughly 36,000 of our 50,000 students living near or below the poverty line.

The introduction of the Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests in 2000 gave us a needed, if depressing, baseline for student performance.

- In grade 4, 47 percent of our students met or exceeded expectations in reading, compared with 65 percent statewide.
- In grade 6, 40 percent of our students met or exceeded expectations in language arts, compared with 61 percent in the state.
- In grade 8, 36 percent of our students met or exceeded expectations in mathematics, compared with 54 percent statewide.

Atlanta Public Schools trailed the state by 14 or more points in every tested subject and grade level.

Our students were also not performing as well as those in the state in writing. In 1999, Atlanta fifth- and eighth-graders trailed the statewide percentage of students who met or exceeded the standard on the state writing assessment, and two out of every three eighth-grade students did not meet expectations.

Although graduation rates rose by 10 percentage points between 1996 and 1999, by the end of 1999 a full 40 percent of those who had entered ninth-grade four years earlier did not receive diplomas.

What does APS look like today?

Using our focus on instruction and student success, proven, research-based methods and an accountability system tailored to each school, more than eight years after initiating our comprehensive reform agenda, I am pleased to say that the transformation initiatives are paying off:

- The district has demonstrated continued steady improvement as evidenced by increasing test scores over time. There has been no exception to this trend since 2000.
- In 2008, APS students posted meaningful academic gains on the state assessments for the eighth consecutive year. In fact, our preliminary data suggest that in all grades and subjects tested last year, our students met or exceeded their 2007 performance.
- The number of APS schools making Adequate Yearly Progress continues to increase. This year all 62 elementary schools, including our charter schools, met AYP for the first time in history. No other large urban school district can make that claim, according to the

Council of Great City Schools. Venetian Hills Elementary, which was in Needs Improvement status in 2002, was named a 2007 “Blue Ribbon” school by the U.S. Department of Education—a total transformation.

- Secretary Spellings recently called APS “a model for the country,” based on our students’ performance on the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress. APS was the only one of the 11 districts voluntarily participating in the Trial Urban District Assessment to demonstrate significant, consistent improvement in all grades and test areas since 2003. The most recent NAEP writing assessments show that Atlanta’s scores have grown at *seven times* the national rate.
- The local donor community stands behind me and my reform efforts.
- Since 1999, I have implemented system-wide reform at each school level:
 - Elementary: APS maintained or closed the gap with the state on 28 of 30 comparable subject area assessments, and 100 percent of our elementary schools made Adequate Yearly Progress.
 - Middle school: Transformation of all middle schools is about to launch with a tailored strategic plan for each.
 - High school: by 2012, all APS high schools will be transformed into small, personalized learning environments focused on college and careers. Carver High School, now the four New Schools at Carver, has experienced a 50 percent increase in the number of neighborhood children enrolling, and the graduation rate has jumped from 23 percent in 2003 to 66 percent in 2007. The system’s overall graduation rate is 68 percent which is comparable with the state and exceeds the national average of 50 percent for students of color. The number of students attending college in our Project GRAD target schools has increased by 400 percent.

How was this remarkable turnaround accomplished?

The impetus for change came from the business community and the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce in the 1990s when, after realizing the direction in which the district was moving, and the negative impact it was having on economic development, they made a conscious effort to turn things around.

First, a coalition of business and community leaders set out to improve the caliber of those running for school board. They did so by helping recruit candidates and holding seminars regarding effective boardsmanship.

The second step was to hire a superintendent (for the 1999-00 school year) who was reform-minded and had a sense of what needed to be done to turn things around.

I made a comprehensive series of changes to reform the district, none of which can be discounted.

1. Reorganized central office and revised central office job descriptions and annual staff evaluations in ways that signal (to the incumbents) that their major task is to

support school-based staff in their efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

2. Incorporated the extent to which students perform at higher performance levels directly into central office staff and school-based staff annual evaluations, assuring that they all focus on this ultimate outcome.
3. Did not tolerate the presence of chronically ineffective staff (at any level) who did not, or could not, benefit from professional development.
4. Upgraded the quality of school principals through more effective recruiting, mentoring once they were hired, and through holding them accountable for the performance of their students. Those principals who were deemed not to be qualified were removed from those positions. Approximately 89 percent of our schools have gotten new principals since 1999.
5. Required the development of a district-wide Strategic Plan, as well as individual School Achievement Plans, that required staff to specify how they were going to address system-wide initiatives. These plans also provided a roadmap by which supervisors could judge the progress of their staff and suggest program improvements.
6. Established mechanisms for gathering input from central office staff, principals, teachers, and students regarding how the district was functioning and ways how it could be improved.
7. Provided principals with the tools they needed to effectively monitor and adjust the quality of instruction in their schools.
8. Provided schools with various forms of technology and taught staff how to use it to improve school efficiency and/or student learning.
9. Set clear expectations for what constitutes “best practices” by teachers, and provided on-going training for teachers regarding how to meet those expectations at the highest levels.
10. Improved the overall quality of teaching through aggressive recruiting techniques, and the use of alternatively prepared teachers like Teach for America corpsmembers.
11. Upgraded the quality of classroom teaching by designing and implementing (on an on-going basis) targeted professional development
12. Introduced a variety of specific program initiatives to give staff the necessary structure to help them address specific teaching and learning issues. These initiatives included the Comprehensive School Reform Models, Project GRAD, High School Learning Communities, etc.

13. Conducted, on an on-going basis, special studies to respond to areas identified by data as problem areas. For example, data indicated weaknesses at the middle school level, the high school level and in science. Based on these analyses special program efforts were designed to address the weaknesses.
14. Solicited, on an on-going basis, grants and other support from outside organizations to finance efforts that were beyond the funding that was raised locally.
15. Provided public recognition (and bonuses) to staff in schools that were unusually effective.
16. Taught staff at all levels (central office and in the schools) to access and use a wide variety of data for making resource allocation decisions, and for adjusting instruction for individual students.
17. Enhanced security operations in the schools to assure the best possible environment for effective teaching and learning.
18. Worked, in an on-going manner, with business, civic and parents groups to gain support for several tax levies that were used to enhance the reform efforts.
19. Elevated the professionalism and quality of the school district's business functions in order to build and maintain the public's confidence in the district to wisely spend and account for public tax dollars.
20. Improved the physical character of the schools, making them safer, more functional and more attractive.

The Atlanta Public Schools hasn't claimed victory yet. We are still climbing the tough path to total transformation, but with achievement gaps melting away and the strong support of our community, our goal is in sight.