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North Fulton County Market Report

Fulton begins transition to charter district

Viewpoint

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As you may have heard, this past year, the Fulton County Board of Education applied to become a “Charter District.”

In the spring of 2012, the state Board of Education approved our charter application, with Fulton becoming the largest charter district in the country. Charter schools, and the concept of charters in general, have generated much national discussion. So you might ask, why did Fulton’s board seek this designation, and what is a “charter district?” How does that differ from a typical charter school?

Our board and superintendent began asking the question, what barriers are there to student achievement? We found that although there are many creative solutions to our problems, often state and federal rules and regulations prevent those innovative solutions from being implemented.

With a district the size of Fulton, each of our schools has issues that may be unique to that community. In that past, solutions have always been implemented on a systemwide basis. What works in one community may not work in another. As we all know, one size does not fit all.

As a board member, it has been one of the larger frustrations — to see that implementing the same solution for all really means no targeted solutions, and seeing talented leaders frustrated by the constraint of the vast amount of state regulations. Our charter application requested flexibility and waivers from state law, not federal law. There is no opportunity for a relaxing of federal law or regulations.

A charter district or system is still one unified district with one elected Board of Education and one superintendent with accountability for student achievement. Existing attendance boundaries remain in place, with open enrollment based upon space.

Our basic curriculum remains the same, but with options for schools to specialize in an area of community interest. Funding formulas will still be determined systemwide by the Board of Education in an equitable manner, with additional spending flexibility available at the local

school level. Employees will still be hired and managed by the system according to a salary schedule.

A charter district is not a collection of individual charter schools.

Individual charter schools each enter into a separate contract with the local board and the state. Instead, the Fulton County Board of Education has entered into a contract with the state, outlining a system of accountability in return for flexibility and waivers from state law. Under this system, each of our schools will go through a process to elect a School Governance Council, which will participate in training and become certified councils.

These councils, together with the principal, will form a shared leadership team that will have the freedom to look at individual, community-based, innovative solutions to their school's specific needs. Within the framework developed by our charter, each school will have the support and training necessary to engage its individual community in participating in these solutions.

So how are we planning for success of this new model of governance?

During this first year, there are 20 schools across the district have stepped up as our first group, our first cohort. Each of these school communities held elections for their first School Governance Council.

This year, the School Governance Councils have focused on training and working with each school's strategic plan to identify the school's needs. Plans are underway to develop a Request for Flexibility to meet those needs in an innovative way. The requests for each school will go through a review process that includes the local community, the area superintendent and our superintendent, Dr. Avossa.

There will be two additional cohorts over the next few years. Local school councils, primarily an advisory body, will be phased out as School Governance Councils are elected.

The model supports and extends the board's and superintendent's belief that decisions are best made close to the school. Innovations and requests for flexibility will be managed with pressure and support to help each community achieve its unique goals and targets.

As we move forward, each of our school communities will be looking for active partners in the business world, to serve on governance councils, offer possible internships, or help support training or innovation.

We look forward to Fulton's future as a charter district and invite you to join us on this journey.

Reeves is a member of the Fulton County Board of Education, District 2.