

## Fulton district becomes largest Charter System in Ga.

### Accountability move seen as game changer

By Christina A. Samuels

The 93,000-student Fulton County school district in suburban Atlanta has become the largest district in Georgia to make a pact with the state to create strict accountability standards in return for Georgia dropping some of its regulatory requirements.

Fulton will now be considered a "charter system" starting in June, with more control over issues such as spending, seat time for students, and teacher pay. It joins 15 other districts in the state that have been granted that status since Georgia passed a law establishing charter systems in 2007.

Robert Avossa, the superintendent of the district, said the move could be a "game changer" for the ethnically and socioeconomically diverse district, but acknowledged that the freedom comes with some apprehension: It is easier to stick to rules and regulations that have been long understood, he said.

"I'm going to have to pull people off of this comfort zone of relying on policy and law," Mr. Avossa said.

Fulton student enrollment is about 42 percent black, 33 percent white, 13 percent Hispanic, and 9 percent Asian, with the remaining students multiracial or American Indian. Forty-four percent of its students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, and the district's 2011 graduation rate, under the federal formula that counts freshmen who graduate in four years, is 70.1 percent. The flexibility program in the district will be rolled out over three years.

Georgia is one of the few states where the concept of charter systems or districts has taken a firm hold. Though only 16 out of the state's 180 districts hold charter system status, Georgia is expecting every one of its districts to either become a charter system or to adopt some other type of flexibility from state rules in return for committing to higher student achievement, said Louis J. Erste, the charter schools division director for the Georgia education department.

John D. Barge, who was elected state school superintendent in 2010, campaigned in part on system flexibility,

Mr. Erste said. "But he's insistent that [such flexibility] is not free. You have to do better in increasing educational outcomes," he said.

The districts are expected to shift by 2015, or affirmatively state that they want to remain "status quo" districts—and receive no waivers from state mandates.

### Flexibility with Limits

California, Florida, and New Mexico are among the states that have charter district laws and some charter districts. Texas allows groups to create a charter district from scratch as opposed to converting existing school districts.

Converting an existing district to a charter system does not mean that every school becomes a charter school. Nor does it mean that a charter entity will now run the district.

Instead, much like how charter schools are released from state rules and regulations, the entire district has now been released from some of those rules. It is then up to the district to determine how that flexibility would be implemented at the school level. There are some limits on the flexibility that can be granted to schools, Mr. Erste explained. The state must still meet federal accountability rules, as well as rules related to health and safety. But the charter system concept allows for the creation of governance bodies at the school level that can have input on how money is spent at the school.

For Mr. Avossa, that means a group of his schools could organize to form a K-12 program that stresses science and technology learning from kindergarten to 12th grade. Or, a high school could form blended-learning classes that mix online instruction with a few days of standard classroom lessons.

One major waiver granted by the state relates to teacher compensation. Mr. Avossa said that the district is working on a teacher-salary schedule that can help lure teachers to hard-to-fill areas through increased pay and evaluate teachers through "career ladders" that rely less on tenure and more on teacher achievement or education.

Charter district status also comes with an extra \$100 per student annually, but the state legislature has to agree to place the money in the budget; that has not yet been done for Fulton County.

However, the district is expecting more than \$900 million during the next five years from a 1-cent sales tax that was approved by voters in 2011. The money will be spent on school renovations and technology improvements that can help make some of its proposals for blended learning a reality, Mr. Avossa said.

### Slow to Spread

Todd Ziebarth, the vice president for state advocacy and support for the Washington-based National Alliance for Public Charter Schools and a former policy analyst at the Education Commission of the States in Denver, has followed the charter-district-management structure for several years. He said the concept grew out of assertions from district leaders that if they were granted the same flexibility that was granted to charter schools, they'd be able to achieve better results with their students.

But he said the concept hasn't spread widely. What has become more common, he said, is districts where charter schools and centrally run public schools operate side by side, which some call a "portfolio" model.

Because there are relatively few charter districts, there's little research about their effectiveness.

Alabama, one of nine states that does not have a charter school law, proposed creating a charter-system law in its latest legislative session that would have also allowed charter schools in the state, Mr. Ziebarth said. That law died in the legislature earlier this month. In Kentucky, charter school legislation stalled this year, but the legislature did create charter like "districts of innovation."

One concern, Mr. Ziebarth said, is that even though states can grant flexibility to districts, it's still a question as to how much that ability to change long-running procedures will show up at the schools. "I'm skeptical that the districts are freeing up their leaders at the school level," he said. "There's still kind of a top-down approach."

But Mr. Avossa said he hopes to encourage the school governance teams in the district to be forward-thinking.

"We talk too much about managing the schools from the adults' point of view," he said.

