

Charting a Leadership Course

Georgia's Fulton County Schools turned charter school flexibility to its advantage

Del Stover

Put high-quality teachers and principals in your schools. Give them the freedom to make decisions that meet the needs of their students. Engage parents and the community in the work of your schools, and put academic achievement at the top of your priorities.

This has been a winning formula for Fulton County Schools. With more than 96,000 students, Fulton is the fourth-largest school system in Georgia, unique in that its boundaries are bisected by the city of Atlanta. Serving a mix of suburban and urban communities, the district also serves a sizable number (nearly half) of students living in poverty.

Yet the district also boasts strong test scores. For example, more than 90 percent of elementary school students meet or exceed the state standard in English/language arts. Meanwhile, graduation rates

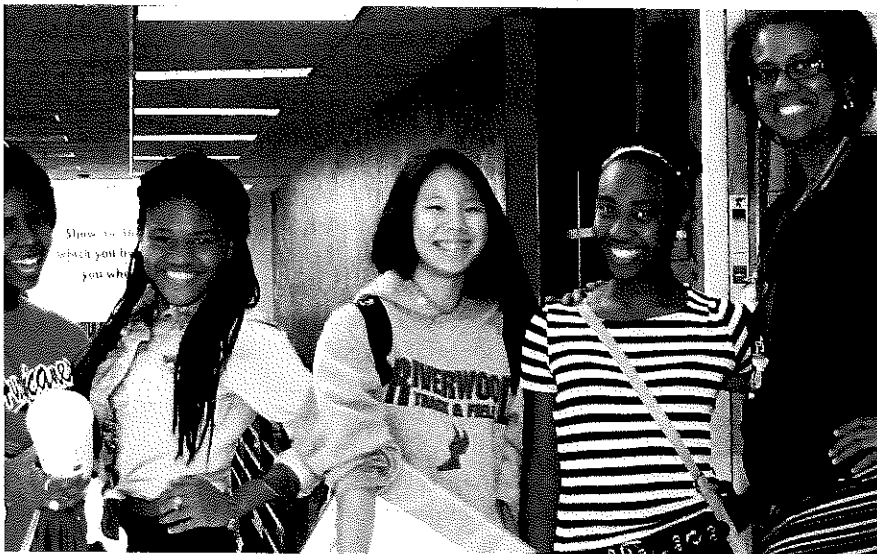
are up, with impressive gains for black and Hispanic students, as well as for those living in poverty. Scores on ACT and career-readiness tests also are rising.

"This didn't happen overnight," says Superintendent Robert Avossa. "We had to make some dramatic changes and invest some significant time and money to make it possible."

The district is earning recognition for its bold leadership: It was one of two districts that received the 2014 Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence from NSBA's Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE). The district also was a Magna Award winner in 2013.

A CHARTER SYSTEM

Indeed, the district's leadership team—seven board members and the superintendent—has revealed a willingness to be bold and transformative in their





A charter system
Fulton's schools have the flexibility available to charter schools, but the district maintains control over the schools.

decision-making. In 2012, for example, school leaders voted to convert their district to a "charter system," a designation under state law that frees the school system from many state education rules.

"It's not that every school is an individual charter," school board President Linda Schultz emphasizes. "The district still maintains its control over schools, but we can push some of the flexibility [available to charter schools] down to the local schools."

Coupled with this regulatory flexibility has been a greater emphasis on site-based management—a policy decision that mirrors the leadership's belief in how to push school reform, Avossa says.

"We know that a central office does not have the capability or capacity to direct and manage 100 different schools. There are too many issues that are site-specific, too many variables for one centralized approach. So we decided to relinquish more decision-making and authority to the schools, and we're starting to see pretty dramatic results."

A lot of work was needed, of course, before these results started to reveal themselves. It's taken upwards of three years, for example, to implement the site-based management plan and train the school governance councils that will shepherd the instructional and funding decisions at each campus. These teams—consisting of the principal, teachers, parents, and community members—only now are beginning to turn their planning into practice.

Pushing this decision-making down to the school site has made it all the more important for the district to focus on raising the quality of its teachers and principals, Avossa says.

"That's been a major focus for us. Over half of our principals have changed in the past few years. Some folks who didn't buy into the way we wanted to reform our schools left because this approach is very dependent on our school leaders."

This focus also is important, of course, because the quality of instruction in a school is determined by its human capital, Avossa says. So the administration has put a lot of energy into recruiting good teachers, providing relevant professional development, and offering a variety of supports for new teachers. The district partnered with the New Teacher Project, for example, to completely revamp its teacher selection process to ensure that principals can identify the best candidates for their schools.

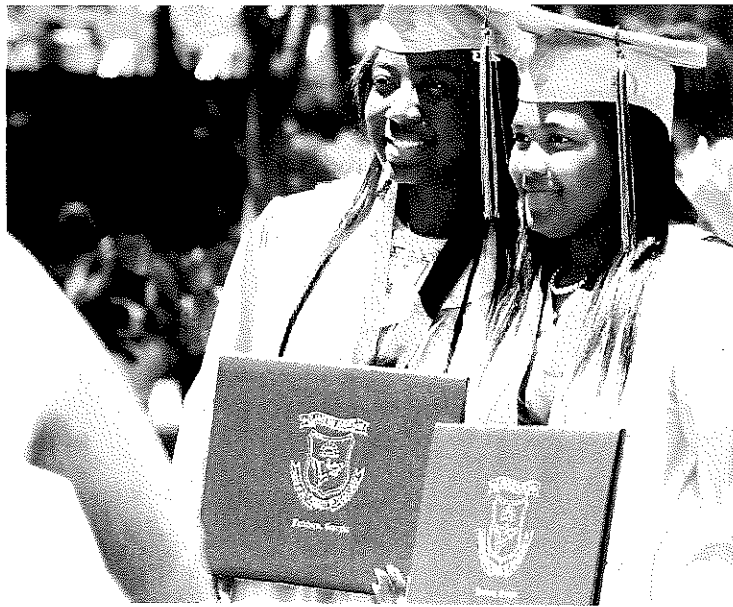
"Another piece of this is making sure our teachers feel valued," he adds. "That's especially true in the whole onboarding and orientation process in the first two years a teacher is here. We take great care of our new teachers, because we know that about 40 percent of teachers nationwide leave after their fifth year in the profession. Far too many teachers leave, but many of them will stay if they feel rewarded and their administrators work well with them."

FISCAL STEWARDSHIP

Some of the most difficult work for any school board is fiscal stewardship, and the Fulton County board has steered a responsible course. By maintaining a responsible financial reserve, the district limited the lost instructional time and employee layoffs that plagued many school systems during the recent economic downturn.

Meanwhile, in the face of falling tax revenues and shrinking state funding, the district last year made a bold change in its budget development. It launched a modified zero-based budget process that seeks to align spending to the school board's strategic plan. This led to the elimination of unnecessary or inefficient spending and allowed the board to put together a budget that was \$17 million lower than the previous year.

That, in turn, allowed the school system to provide employees a 3 percent raise, the only district in the Atlanta metropolitan area to provide raises in 2013.



District snapshot



Superintendent

Robert Avossa

Board of Education

Linda Schultz, President

Linda McCain, Vice President

Julia C. Bernath

Linda P. Bryant

Gail Dean

Catherine Maddox

Katie Reeves

But, while the district is moving in the right direction, the school district cannot rest on its laurels, district leaders say. The rate of students living in poverty is approaching the 50 percent mark, which means more students are coming to school with academic challenges. Schools serving communities with high concentrations of poverty are going to need more help to ensure student success.

"We have schools that are high fliers ... some of the best in the state," Schultz says. "And then we have some that are challenged, with high poverty rates, lots of student mobility, and homelessness. These are just very difficult schools to help."

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

If the school system is going to meet this challenge—and maintain its momentum—it's going to need the support of the community, Schultz says. And that means the school board has to put energy into its communications and outreach. One strategy already under way has school board members hosting monthly community meetings where parents and community members can ask questions and offer feedback and ideas on the issues facing the district.

"You get a real good pulse of what people are thinking about the schools" in these meetings, Schultz says. "In a large district, you need that on-the-ground feedback. When we have these community meetings to talk about the big issues of the day, not only for the district but at the state level, people have an opportunity to talk, and they're very thoughtful. They bring up things we need to consider."

In the end, of course, much of the success of the Fulton County schools can be attributed to the working relationship between the superintendent and the school board. This leadership team doesn't always agree, Schultz says, but its focus is consistently on strengthening the school system financially and academically.

"We've worked at building that governance team, worked at consensus," she says. "If your team at the top—which includes the superintendent—is all on the same page, then some of the difficult work you're doing to drive change, to drive reform, can get done, and you can have people follow you."

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Student enrollment: 96,297

Economically disadvantaged students: 45.84 percent

Limited English proficiency: 8 percent

African American: 43 percent

White: 31 percent

Hispanic: 14 percent

Asian: 10 percent

Native American/other: 2 percent

Number of schools: 101

Operating budget: \$878 million

Per-pupil spending: \$9,111

Graduation rate: 75.5 percent

Online resources

For more information about Fulton County Schools, go to www.fultonschools.org.

Information on the 2013 CUBE award winner, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, is available at www.asbj.com/topicsarchive/school-board-success-stories/an-urban-school-board-gets-the-job-done.html.

Read about how another North Carolina board and superintendent engaged their community in a new student reassignment plan: www.asbj.com/topicsarchive/school-board-success-stories/boundary-issues.html.