

Key Takeaways: June 2018

Between 2017 and 2018 Atlanta Public Schools deepened its commitment to improving persistently low-performing schools, took steps to increase school-level autonomy, and put new strategies in place to support families through the school choice process. However, a number of barriers still stand in the way of all families to having access to high-quality school options. Increasing citywide engagement in education marks a positive direction for Atlanta, and sets the foundation for addressing persistent student achievement gaps. The district has formed new partnerships with funders and businesses, and a new nonprofit is helping to launch talent, school supply, and community support initiatives.

Challenges Ahead

► Developing citywide responsibility for improving student opportunities

Atlanta Public Schools (APS) is working to address persistent achievement gaps and inter-generational poverty through early literacy, social-emotional, and post-secondary scholarship initiatives. These new programs were only possible through new partnerships with funders, nonprofits, and businesses. Given the interconnected issues at play, citywide efforts must continue to focus on improving student opportunities for success. The election of a new mayor, Keisha Lance Bottoms, provides an opportunity for education to be a bigger part of the civic agenda. For example, civic and education leaders could work together to develop progressive transportation policies that help families access new school options. Nonprofits could step in to help families who are outside of the [Go Team](#) school governance structure to engage with APS and charter sector initiatives. Along with sharing responsibility, more engaged local groups will help push for continued accountability on district improvement.

► Expanding high-quality options where they are most needed

APS has a multi-pronged school improvement strategy. Over the past year, 16 schools received targeted assistance from the district or were put under the management of charter operators like [Kindezi Gideons](#) and [Purpose Built Schools](#). Fifteen of these schools have [achieved subject-level gains](#). [New data](#) also show that charter schools outperform the local neighborhood option in many parts of the city. We have two recommendations as APS moves forward. First, APS should develop a common school performance framework with clear and transparent criteria for school turnaround or consolidation so all its schools are held to high standards. Second, the district should—through intentional charter authorization and district school redesign—encourage the replication of what works. APS can use an RFP process to ensure charter applicants and district redesigns meet research-based standards and are a good fit for family needs. Colocations, facility supports, and cross-sector advocacy for better charter school funding will build a more desirable environment for charters, increasing the range of operators who might apply. And APS can take the lead in helping school teams leverage new school autonomies to incubate innovative, proven models.

► Improving school information and making the application process easier

In the past year, APS has made great improvements in communicating with families about the administrative transfer process and school quality by arming them with information. Through CRPE's parent surveys, [we know that](#) finding a school that is a good fit and finding enough information are common barriers for families. To ensure that the choice process is equitable and easy to use, we encourage APS, local funders, and engaged nonprofits to work on these two remaining barriers. First, Atlanta has no consolidated resource where families can find curricular, programmatic, and student service information for each school. Second, application processes are still disjointed: there is a [new application](#) for APS' administrative transfer process, but it is still separate from the district online platform that helps families enroll in their neighborhood school. Consolidating these two applications is a logical next step. Also, each charter school has its own application and lottery process. Education leaders can consider developing a common application or enrollment system for charter schools.

Spotlight

Data Dashboard, Blog, and Training Help Communities Assess School Quality

By making data public and accessible, APS is demonstrating its commitment to transparency and public accountability. In September 2017 the district launched [APS Insights](#), a user-friendly data dashboard with testing and school culture data for all APS and APS-authorized charter schools (state-authorized charter schools were not included).

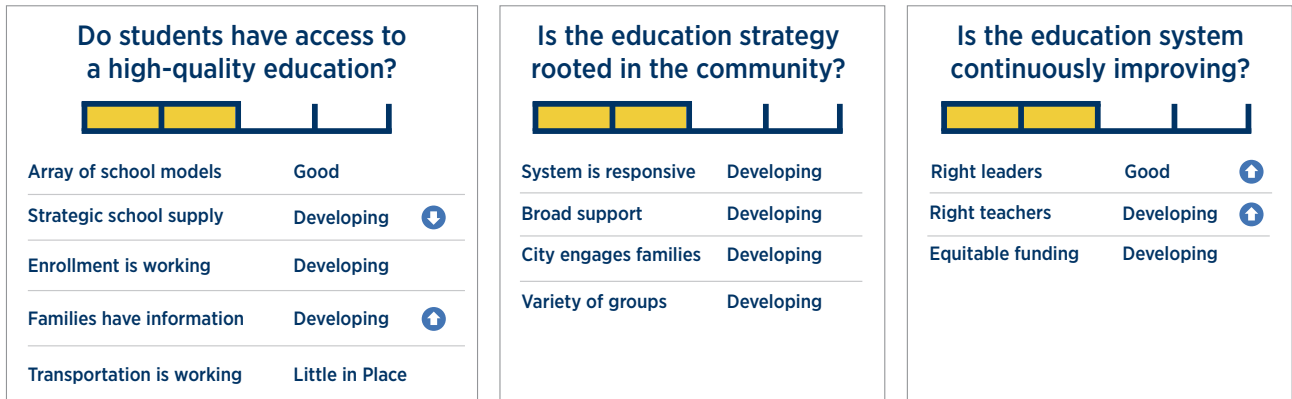
Families can compare metrics by school and look at school quality by feeder pattern. Blogs, like [this one](#) about the relationship between performance and poverty, help families and community members digest the information. APS trained local school governance teams in how to use the data. Communication flowed two ways: the district also added college readiness metrics in response to community feedback. APS is currently making updates to the software so they can share the template with other districts.

Working with Principals as Funds Increase for Schools with Highest-Needs Students

Since instituting the [Charter System of Schools](#) in 2016, APS has been slowly rolling out school-level control over budgeting. Starting in the 2018-19 school year, schools with the highest-needs students will receive more money to support them: 33% of funds will go directly to traditional district schools using a student-based allocation formula.

An open process helped develop buy-in from principals. APS held meetings over six months with school and district staff to define the role of the principal and identify appropriate funding weights. Once the formula was set, the district provided training to principals and school-based Go Teams. Moving forward, APS recognizes that it will need to collect data to understand how principals are using their funds. The district must also continue to support school staff, especially program managers, to help them understand their new roles.

System Reforms



Each indicator is scored with a rubric on a 4-point scale. We added the scores for the indicators to get an overall goal score. An arrow shows increase or decrease from the 2017 score.

Key Takeaways: System Reforms

Atlanta Public Schools (APS) has improved choice supports for families, expanded school-level autonomy, and continued its turnaround strategy to improve the quality of district schools. Transportation remains a major barrier to choice, and strategic engagement of families outside the school-based Go Teams is still nascent.

Do students have access to a high-quality education?



Do school choice and supply meet family needs? This goal addresses how well the city is doing with providing families access to quality schools, what the city is doing to ensure quality schools are in every neighborhood, and how well the choice process is working for families that want to use it.



Does the school supply represent an array of models?

Over half the schools that opened, expanded, or restarted in Atlanta since 2014-15 have had nontraditional instructional models. APS opened a dual-enrollment technical high school, and some new charter operators have personalized, project-based, or dual-language models. Despite recent developments, the overall charter supply in the city is still dominated by a small number of charter operators with a college preparatory focus.



Is the city strategically managing its school portfolio?

APS has continued to expand its [Partnership school strategy](#) to turn around low-performing district schools. By 2019, [Purpose Built Schools](#) will operate four district schools in the Carver feeder pattern, while [Kindezi Gideons](#) will enter its second year of operating a district elementary school. APS released its [APS Insights](#) in fall 2017, which displays school

quality by feeder pattern. The district has criteria to guide school closure, consolidation, and turnaround decisions. But this criteria is not public, so community members do not perceive the process as transparent. Funding and local politics remain barriers to the opening of individual charter schools, despite generally high [performance relative to neighboring schools](#).



Is the enrollment process working for families?

By using an administrative transfer, families can enroll in any district school on a space-availability basis. However, a large majority of high-performing district schools were not accepting transfers. In 2017 APS piloted a [choice application](#) and improved its communication with families about the administrative transfer process. All charter schools have different applications and timelines, and in 2017 interviewees noted that some families have concerns about the quality of individual charter school lotteries.



Do families have the information they need and know how to use it?

APS [publishes](#) performance metrics for all district and APS-authorized charter schools. This includes a state-developed “beat the odds score” and school climate data. However, there is no consolidated format for families to access information about curriculum, school programs, or special education and English language learner services. In 2018 interviews, finding enough information and making sense of information were cited as barriers for families.



Is transportation working for families?

Transportation is still a major barrier to families using school choice in Atlanta. Few charter schools and no out-of-boundary district schools offer free transportation to students. The public bus system is not consistent, and many families do not have the means to drive their children to school. In 2017 interviews, safe passage to schools was identified as a major concern.

Is the education strategy rooted in the community?



Is the whole community engaged? Education is a citywide endeavor. When families, community organizations, and city leaders have the opportunity to provide feedback and share in the vision, the strategy is more likely to be sustainable and meet the needs of all students. In this goal, we look at how well the city is doing with engaging key stakeholders across the city.



Does the education system respond to community feedback?

Improving responsiveness to families is a priority for APS; it has made recent improvements to its community engagement strategy to include multiple opportunities for input. District and charter schools are also trying to improve engagement with their families. Interviewees from 2017 and 2018 noted concern about relying on [Go Teams](#) for input because they do not necessarily represent all voices in the city.



Does the city engage families in educational decisions that impact them?

CAPS and charter schools have made improvements in how they engage with families. The process of closing or consolidating district schools is public and provides opportunities for families to give input, but there is still a perception that this process is not transparent. Families helped shape the turnaround strategy by giving input on charter operators for Partnership schools. However, engagement around charter school openings and closures is not yet consistent.



Are a variety of groups engaged in education?

APS has developed a number of partnerships with funders, companies, and post-secondary institutions in the past several years, enabling the district to launch an early literacy initiative and provide scholarships to students enrolling in post-secondary institutions, among other initiatives. A new nonprofit, [redefinED atlanta](#), is focused on education strategy, and local funders have good relationships with APS. However, interviewees identified that more coordination is needed to address the needs of Atlanta’s students. APS currently relies on school-based Go Teams to represent the family and community perspective. Interviewees in 2017 and 2018 expressed concern at overreliance on Go Teams since they still vary widely in efficacy and representation of the local community.



Is there a strong and deep coalition of support for the education strategy?

The superintendent and APS district staff regularly attend school board meetings and public forums, particularly for school closures and consolidations. However, strong civic support for education in the city and clear alignment among local leaders are not yet in place.

Is the education system continuously improving?



Do schools have the resources they need? School improvement happens at the school level, but making sure resources are available requires sound, citywide policy. Having the right talent in a city is critical for schools to be able to provide students with a quality education. Schools should also have control over their budgets so they have the resources to address the needs of their student population.



Do schools have the kinds of leaders they need?

In 2017 interviewees noted that some candidates in charter and district schools were transitioning to leadership roles before they were fully ready, while aspiring quality candidates struggled to find placements. Over the past year, APS has put in place homegrown leadership pipelines, new placement procedures, and a new definition of leadership excellence. The [Rensselaerville Institute](#), which specializes in turnarounds, provides support to school leaders in 10 APS schools. The district is positive about the new strategies in place.



Do schools have the kinds of teachers they need?

There are few teacher vacancies in Atlanta, but quality and fit of candidates is an ongoing concern. New strategies have been put in place over the past several years. A charter-district teacher residency program in the Maynard cluster, [CREATE](#), is now in its third year. APS revised its recruitment and selection processes within the past year, and [Relay is opening](#) a teacher residency program in 2018-19. The [Metropolitan Atlanta Policy Lab for Education](#) will analyze teacher retention and recruitment programs as one of its initiatives with APS. However, there is not yet citywide data to guide ongoing talent work.



Does funding equitably follow students?

In 2017-18, APS schools had flexibility in staffing allocations, but did not use a student-based allocation (SBA) formula. Starting in 2018-19, all traditional district schools will use an SBA formula that allocates 33% of district funds directly to schools. Principals will be able to develop their own budgets with input from school-based Go Teams. Partner schools (charter operators managing district schools) already have full flexibility over their budgets.

Data & Scoring

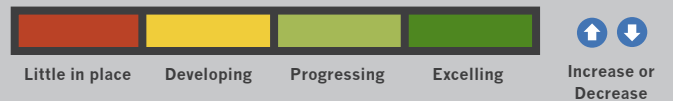
Where did we get this information?

- ▶ Interviews with district, charter, and community leaders
- ▶ Policy documents from district, charter, and state websites
- ▶ School data from each city
- ▶ A 400-parent survey administered in March, 2017 in Cleveland, Denver, Indianapolis, Memphis, New Orleans, Oakland, and Washington, D.C.

How did we score the system reforms and goals?

- ▶ Each indicator is scored with a rubric on a 4-point scale. We added the scores for the indicators to get an overall goal score. See the [Methodology & Resources](#) page for details.

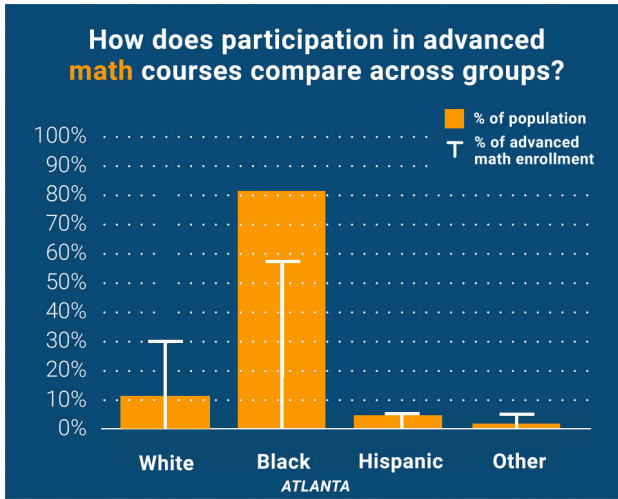
Score Levels



Key Takeaways: Student & School Outcomes

School proficiency rates in math and reading improved across the city. However, progress has been uneven. Proficiency and graduation rates remain below the state average, and some high school students have had inequitable access to advanced coursework.

Do students have access to a high-quality education?

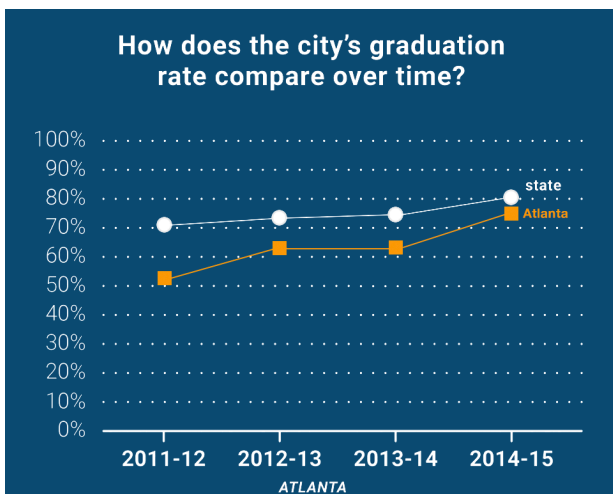


► In 2013-14, black students were enrolled in advanced math coursework at a lower rate than the high school population.

Data: Enrollment of students in math courses above Algebra II. Rates calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled in advanced math by the number of students in the school. Sub-group rates determined at the school level.

Source: U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, CivilRights Data Collection 2013-2014.

Is the education system continuously improving?



► In 2014-15, the city's graduation rate was behind the state's.

Data: Percent of first-time 9th grade students graduating in four years, citywide and statewide.

Source: EdFacts Initiative, U.S. Department of Education, Assessment and Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates Data, 2011-12 to 2014-15.

How does the city's **math** performance compare to the state's over time?



Improvement
relative to state

ATLANTA

- ▶ Between 2011-12 and 2014-15, the math proficiency gap between the city and state was closing. In 2014-15 the city's proficiency rate was below the state's.

Data: The city's estimated gains in proficiency rates across elementary and middle schools, standardized at the state level and controlling for student demographics.

Source: U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection 2013-2014.

How does the city's **reading** performance compare to the state's over time?



Improvement
relative to state

ATLANTA

- ▶ Between 2011-12 and 2014-15, the reading proficiency gap between the city and state was closing. In 2014-15 the city's proficiency rate was below the state's.

Data: The city's estimated gains in proficiency rates across elementary and middle schools, standardized at the state level and controlling for student demographics.

Source: Performance data from the Georgia Department of Education, 2011-12 to 2014-15.

Data & Scoring

Where did we get this data?

- ▶ Publicly available state and federal data, making our results comparable and reproducible.
- ▶ The most up-to-date data available for all 18 cities at the time of our data collection. See [Methodology & Resources](#) for more information.

What makes the data citywide?

- ▶ We include all charter and district schools within the municipal boundary of a city.
- ▶ In Houston, Indianapolis, Memphis, New Orleans, and San Antonio we use school data from multiple districts within the municipal boundary.

About Atlanta

Over the past 10 years, Atlanta Public Schools faced a bruising cheating scandal and repeated school closures. The district has responded by trying to improve community-level engagement and by addressing poor school and student performance. In the 2016-17 school year, APS used a state initiative to launch a [Charter System of Schools](#) with the goal of giving district schools greater decisionmaking authority. APS is also pursuing a turnaround strategy, called “Partners,” that uses charter operators to manage low-performing district schools. New feeder patterns provide opportunities for charter and district schools to collaborate.

School Choice in the City

About a quarter of Atlanta schools have open enrollment, either as charter schools or open-enrollment district schools. However, many charter schools in the city give priority to students living near the school. Families can opt-in to any district school on a space-availability basis using an administrative transfer process.

Governance Model

The Atlanta Public School Board oversees district schools, and APS authorizes all but a handful of the city’s charter schools.

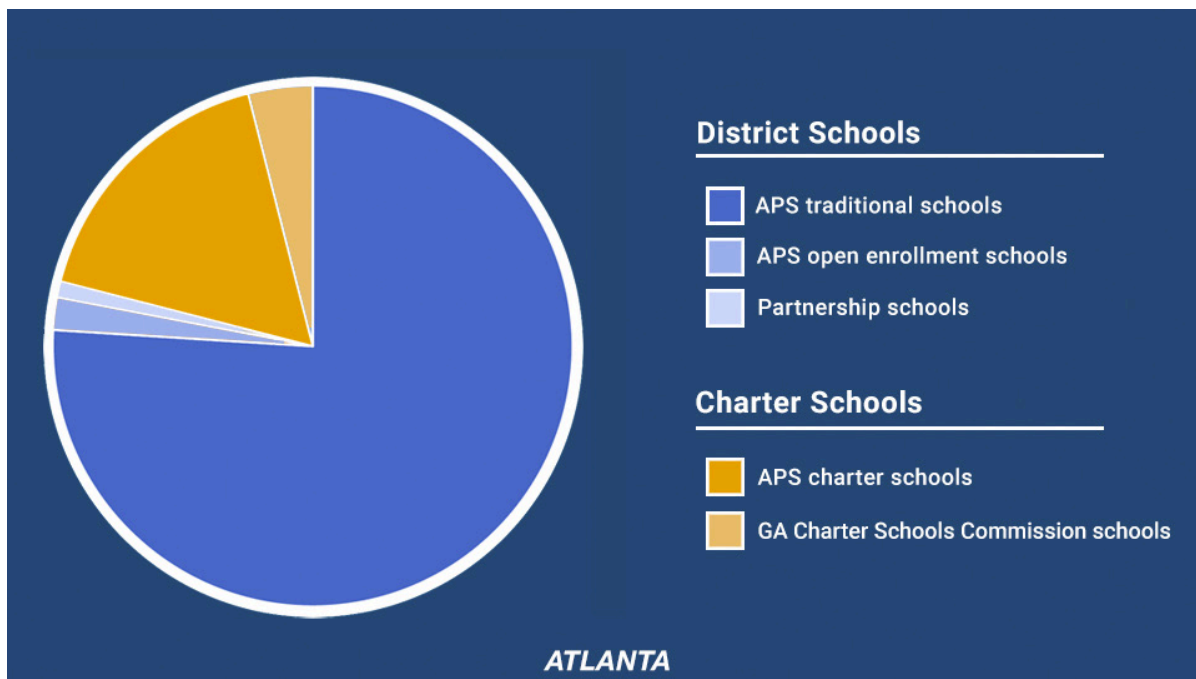
2016 District and Charter Student Body

Enrollment: 51,927 students

Race and ethnicity: 74% black, 15% white, 7% Hispanic, 3% other

Low-income: 76% free and reduced-price lunch

2017 School Composition



Source: Enrollment data from Georgia Department of Education, 2016.
School data from researcher analysis of public records, 2016-17.

About This Project

The Citywide Education Progress Report looks at how a city is doing across three goals:

- The education system is continuously improving
- All students have access to a high-quality education
- The education strategy is rooted in the community

Across each goal we present indicators of what the cities are doing (what we call “system reforms”) and how they are doing (what we call “outcomes”).

Our city reports focus on education strategies for the 2017-18 school year. Our analyses reflect developments through June 2018. These are updates to our original reports from the 2016-17 school year.

To understand how well cities are doing, we used state and federal data to track school improvement, graduation rates, and student access to high-quality schools. Our student and school data cover the 2011-2012 to 2014-2015 school years. To understand city strategies and identify early progress, we relied on interviews, surveys, public documents, and news articles from 2014-2015 to the present. This analysis uses data for district and charter schools to look at all schools within municipal boundaries, rather than just one sector or district.

We cannot say that employing a certain strategy will lead to a particular result, or even whether a particular strategy is effective in these cities. But the reports can help us to see how a strategy is working, what problem areas remain, and which cities are seeing promising results.

The 18 cities in this study include Atlanta, Boston, Camden, Cleveland, Chicago, Denver, Houston, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Memphis, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, San Antonio, Tulsa, and Washington, D.C.

To learn more about the project, compare other cities, and read the cross-city analysis, visit:
research.crpe.org/projects/stepping-up



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