

## Gwinnett County Public Schools, Ga.

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### District Profile\*:

Rank among U.S. school districts (by size):	14
Number of schools:	123
Number of students:	159,298
Number of teachers:	11,000
Per pupil expenditures**:	\$8,859

Superintendent: J. Alvin Wilbanks was named chief executive officer and superintendent of Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS) in March 1996. He had previously served as the district's assistant superintendent of human resources and continuous improvement and as president of Gwinnett Technical College.

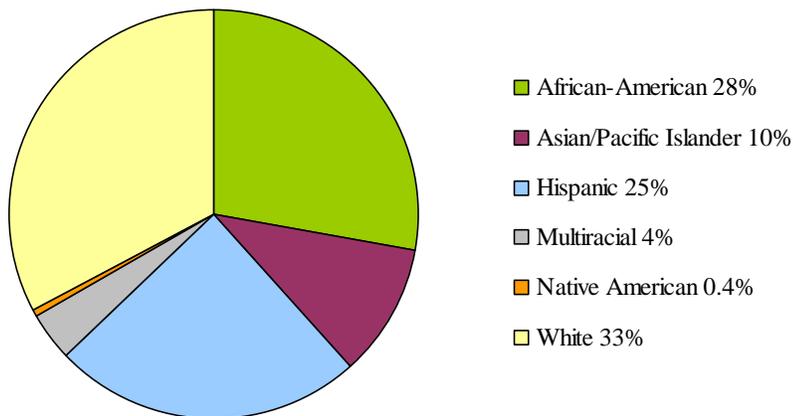
Governance: The board of education is comprised of five elected members who each serve a single-member district and serve staggered four-year terms.

Teachers Unions: Georgia is a non-union state.

### Student Characteristics:

Percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price school lunch:	50%
Percent of students designated as English language learners:	16%

### Student Demographics:



\*2009/10 data, unless noted otherwise

\*\*Total expenditures per pupil in 2006-07. Source: Common Core of Data

## Student Achievement

In 2009:

- Gwinnett *outperformed* other Georgia districts that serve students with similar family income levels *in reading and math at all school levels* (elementary, middle and high school), according to The Broad Prize methodology.
- The *achievement gaps between African-American and white students in Gwinnett were among the smallest in the state* in reading at all school levels and in elementary and middle school math.
- *A greater percentage of Gwinnett's African-American, Hispanic, and low-income students performed at the highest achievement levels* (Accelerated and Advanced, combined) on the state reading and math assessments at all school levels compared with their counterparts statewide.
- Proficiency rates in reading and math at all school levels for Gwinnett's *African-American students ranked in the top 30 percent of the state* when compared with African-American students in other Georgia districts. In addition, in 2009, proficiency rates in reading at all school levels and in elementary and middle school math for Gwinnett's low-income students also *ranked in the top 30 percent* compared with low-income students in other Georgia districts.
- *Ninety-nine percent of schools in Gwinnett made AYP*, compared with 86 percent of schools in the state.

Between 2006 and 2009:

- In recent years, Gwinnett has *narrowed achievement gaps between both African-American and Hispanic students and white students in reading at all school levels and in elementary and middle school math*. For example, between 2007 and 2009, the gap between Gwinnett's African-American and white students in middle school math narrowed by 8 percentage points.
- Between 2006 and 2009, *participation rates rose for African-American and Hispanic students taking the SAT, ACT and Advanced Placement exams*. For example, between 2006 and 2009, the participation rate for African-American high school seniors on SAT exams increased by 9 percentage points.
- Between 2006 and 2009, Gwinnett *showed better than expected improvement than other Georgia districts* that serve students with similar family income levels in reading at all school levels and in elementary and middle school math, according to The Broad Prize methodology.
- In recent years, *Gwinnett narrowed achievement gaps between its Hispanic students and the state's white students in reading at all school levels and in middle and high school math*. For example, between 2006 and 2009, the gap between Gwinnett's Hispanic students and the state's white students in elementary school reading narrowed by 9 percentage points.

## **High-Impact Factors Behind Improved Student Achievement**

- **GCPS has a rigorous curriculum that is relevant to students' lives.**

When Gwinnett County Public Schools first developed its own curriculum, known as the Academic Knowledge and Skills (AKS), it was designed to be aligned with—yet be more challenging than—state standards. In 2006, the district raised expectations for classroom instruction through the implementation of research-based “Quality-Plus Teaching Strategies.” In addition to the annual review of AKS changes by an oversight committee, the district took steps to better integrate curriculum, instruction and assessment by increasing school leaders’ and teachers’ understanding of Bloom’s Taxonomy and Webb’s Depth of Knowledge.

District officials don’t want their vision statement—“to become a system of world-class schools”—to be another meaningless platitude. So leaders benchmark the district and its results against the nation’s 25 highest-scoring districts—based on standardized test scores, SAT scores, graduation rate, and the percentage of students scoring a 3 or better on AP exams, while controlling for poverty level. To help increase students’ readiness for post-secondary education, the district has strengthened its curriculum and instructional practices to better prepare students for the writing sections on Advanced Placement exams. For example, the strategy of using a variety of sources to inform and draw conclusions about a specific topic is introduced in non-AP classes as well as in the lower grades to prepare students for this task.

The district’s higher academic standards were approved by the state. Superintendent J. Alvin Wilbanks was a leading advocate in favor of Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue’s initiative to grant school districts freedom from some state education regulations as long as schools perform at high levels. The Investing in Educational Excellence legislation was passed in 2008, and Gwinnett was the first district to have a contract approved by the state education department under this law.

One official notes that the district’s emphasis has been on “closing gaps at a high level—not just raising performance at the minimum level.”

The teachers, administrators and parents who have been involved in crafting and updating the AKS also have worked to make the instruction that flows from it relevant, which they define as students applying their knowledge and giving real-world examples of their knowledge and skills.

- **The central office serves as a model and guide for instructional effectiveness.**

Whether speaking to Superintendent Wilbanks or a school secretary in Gwinnett, you are likely to hear the following statement: “There are two kinds of employees in the district—those who teach and those who support those who teach.” It’s a firmly held belief evident in the energy that exists throughout the school system around improving student performance.

Staff members at all levels are treated as part of a leadership team. At the central office level, top administrators teach in the “Quality-Plus Leader Academy” program, which teaches aspiring and practicing leaders effective ways to lead and manage change. And district personnel are widely considered to be experts in the AKS as well as in understanding and using data to make instructional decisions. There is a strong perception that leaders are always available to provide support and create solutions to instructional challenges.

At the classroom level, the district has implemented “Quality-Plus Teaching Strategies”—13 instructional practices that teachers are expected to incorporate into their daily instruction. Posted in most classrooms, the strategies include frequently assessing students’ learning, providing students with opportunities to collaborate, teaching essential content-related vocabulary, and using technology to plan, teach and assess.

- **The superintendent provides skillful leadership, and the board works collaboratively, efficiently and effectively.**

Wilbanks, currently the longest-serving urban school superintendent in the country, has been a leader in the district since the 1980s, and was appointed superintendent in 1996. He has a deep understanding of the schools and the community and has led the district through considerable change. For example, he pushed the district to strive for “world-class standards” before it was a national trend, and he instructed finance and operations personnel to be more cost-efficient in advance of the economic downturn.

Staff, community members and business leaders consider him to be excellent at communicating priorities and presenting new ideas to school staff and the community at large. He is also viewed as effective at solving problems and engaging other stakeholders to take on challenges. Wilbanks routinely invites some of the district’s most vocal critics—such as those who opposed the district setting higher academic standards—to sit on committees and other decision-making bodies.

All members of the board of education have served several terms. The most recently elected member already has almost six years of experience. Members demonstrate a deep commitment to improving achievement in the district and typically ensure that their decisions align with the district’s vision, mission and core beliefs. Wilbanks talks regularly with members of the board, making sure to give all of them the same information, even if only one asks for something. The board relies on the expertise of Wilbanks and his cabinet, but also asks for data or research to back up any recommendations that they will vote on. Instead of forming smaller committees, the board works as a whole.

- **The district’s organizational structure supports student achievement and district goals.**

Although GCPS is a growing district with more than 161,000 students in 2010-11 and more than 100 schools, it is not a district of haves and have-nots. School administrators and teachers widely report that students have equal access to programs—including honors and Advanced Placement courses—regardless of whether they live in the more heavily populated communities near Atlanta or the more rural areas in the northern part of the district. The district, in fact, has taken an aggressive approach toward enrolling minority and disadvantaged students in advanced courses by identifying promising candidates in early grades and strongly encouraging them to aim high.

The district uses organizational tools for its work and to measure results. Among those is a “Results-Based Evaluation System” which measures among other things student performance and ties to principal evaluations. “Operational Management Plans”—an accountability tool used to make sure that everyone is working toward the goals for which they are responsible—list the district’s strategic goals and the departments responsible for meeting those goals, and establishes measurable benchmarks which must be reached. Parallel to the Operational Management Plans at the school level are “Local School Plans for Improvement.” Finally, Wilbanks developed cross-functional action teams to resolve issues that affect the entire district, such as increasing the diversity of teacher candidate pools. Considered effective at solving problems, the cross-functional teams can be convened either for a short period (90 days) or for a longer time span, and are made up of representatives from a cross section of departments and schools. Success is measured by whether student achievement increased as a result of

the teams' work, or whether other challenges, such as increasing teacher diversity, were overcome.

Individual schools are also well managed to directly support student achievement, in part because of the flexibility the central office gives administrators through school-based budgeting. The district's theory of managed performance and empowerment holds all schools to the same high standards, but empowers principals with flexibility in how they reach those standards. As a result, those who are more successful in reaching the standards are rewarded with more freedom and decision-making authority.

"We believe our principals should be given as much autonomy as possible," says Wilbanks.

- **Smart budgeting ensures a focus on students first.**

In Gwinnett, expenditures must be tied to the district strategic plan or to a school improvement plan in order to be approved by the board. Area superintendents often work with local school administrators to make sure budgeting decisions address student needs. This might result in the district providing additional staff development or funding a particular intervention program for struggling students. The district's dedication to student achievement has been evident throughout recent rounds of statewide budget cuts. While other school districts have issued lay-off notices to teachers, Gwinnett has been able to avoid staff cutbacks through carefully managing its resources while continuing to provide the same level of programming to students.

The Results-Based Evaluation System and the Operational Management Plans are also used to evaluate the district's spending decisions—to determine whether programs or actions are indeed having a positive effect on student achievement. Student participation in intervention programs, for example, is compared to the student's performance on the AKS. Professional development is judged by participant feedback from teachers and staff, by assessing gains in teachers' knowledge and skills, and evaluating whether the training truly leads to improvement in student achievement.

"In the middle of the year, we'll change something if it's not working," one official says. "To continue to do it would be malpractice."