

# ATLANTA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

To understand why the Atlanta Public Schools is the winner of the 2009 Council of Urban Boards of Education Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence, you first must understand where the systems has been.

Ten years ago, it would have been safe to assume that Atlanta wouldn't have been in the running for a major education award. In fact, during the 1990s, the district was held up in many circles as an example of what not to do. Student performance on state achievement tests was poor, among the lowest in Georgia. The school board was bogged down with in-

fighting. And the superintendent's office seemed to be equipped with a revolving door: Atlanta went through five top executives in a decade. A state takeover loomed as a possibility.

That was then. This is now. Student performance is on the rise, and the district now outperforms the state on federal Adequate Yearly Progress measures. Atlanta's academic progress on the NAEP earned the system praise and a visit from then-U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, who declared, "You're a model for the country!"

The school board has implemented one of the most sophisticated set of board guidelines in the country, and the once-dysfunctional board now works as a cohesive team. Finally, Beverly Hall, the district's current superintendent, is celebrating her 10th year as Atlanta's education leader, a tenure nearly unheard of in the topsy-turvy world of urban education leadership.

So how did Atlanta make such a complete turnaround?

## The beginnings of reform

No one could dispute that the Atlanta Public Schools faces plenty of challenges. More than 76 percent of the district's students are poor enough to qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The district also is surrounded by the Fulton County Schools, which serves more than 88,000 students and provides a competitive option for parents looking to stay in Atlanta.

Throw in a school board that seemed mired in controversy, and it is no surprise that the district struggled so much during the 1990s. In fact, when the board first contacted Hall about the job, she didn't jump at the opportunity. The district's rapid turnover of superintendents was particularly troubling. Hall, then superintendent in Newark, N.J., didn't want to be the next superintendent to come into Atlanta to be chewed up and discarded in a year or two.

"It was clear to me coming in that all



Kathleen Pattillo, former board chair, greeting a 2009 Grady High School graduate.

of my predecessors couldn't have been poor-performing. In fact, I know several of these people and knew that wasn't the case at all. So it seemed to me there was a systematic issue that prevented anyone from staying long enough to get anything done," Hall says.

The problems extended beyond the superintendent's office. Principals were "hunkered down," Hall says, just trying to ride out the storm of change, knowing that their current boss was almost certainly a short-timer. A number of principals got their jobs through personal connections—Hall has replaced 89 percent of the district's principals since her arrival. The senior staff had been gutted by the superintendent turnover and few administrators with options wanted to work in such a chaotic environment.

However, Hall was recruited by a committee of Atlanta business leaders. The members told her they understood—and shared—her concerns, but assured her that they were in her corner and would stand up for her if she took the job. So Hall came to Atlanta, although still holding reservations.

Those fears proved to be well-founded in her first six months on the job. Hall says she experienced many of the same battles with the school board that doomed her predecessors. She was prepared to serve out until the end of the school year, then leave.

But, as promised, the committee of

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### Atlanta Public Schools Board of Education:

LaChandra D. Butler Burks, Chair  
Cecily Harsch-Kinnane, Vice Chair  
Khaatim S. El  
Emmett D. Johnson  
Yolanda K. Johnson  
Brenda J. Muhammad  
Kathleen B. Pattillo  
Mark B. Riley  
Eric W. Wilson

### Governance structure:

Three board members are elected at-large; six by district. Members serve four-year terms.

### Superintendent of Schools:

Beverly L. Hall

### Student enrollment: 47,789

### Students by ethnicity:

African-American: 82.6%  
Asian-American: 0.8%  
Hispanic/Latino: 4.8%  
White: 10.4%  
Other: 0.1%

### Students receiving FRL:

76.33%

### Average per pupil

expenditures: \$12,189

Staff: 6,438

Website: [www.atlantapublicschools.us](http://www.atlantapublicschools.us)



Vice Chair Cecily Harsch-Kinnane greeting a student at the new Springdale Park Elementary School.



Board Chair LaChandra Butler Burks giving greetings at the inaugural Calvin "Monk" Jones Lecture Series.

business leaders that lobbied for Hall came to her defense. The committee convinced the Georgia Legislature to change the Atlanta Public Schools charter to include a much stronger ethics component. Now, an independent citizen oversight committee has the authority to investigate complaints about individual board members.

The school board also stepped up. New board members were elected and the board consciously tried to change how it did business. Board members agreed to participate in professional development, which continues to this day.

"I see it as an ongoing circle of professional development," says School Board President LaChandra Butler Burks.

One major stumbling block when Hall was hired was the lack of clear delineation between board and administrative responsibilities. When Hall started, the board had seven different committees and board activities dominated the senior staff's time. That number was streamlined to two and the board was charged with setting policy and overseeing the budget. Liaisons were established between the board and senior staff, so that board members could no longer give direct instructions to administrators, as had happened in the past, often contrary to the superintendent's wishes. The board also now cannot overturn the superintendent's personnel recommendations except on a supermajority vote (7 of 9).

Unlike in many districts, the chief financial officer and chief legal officer in Atlanta reported to the school board, not the superintendent. This was amended in 2003, and those two officers were placed under the superintendent's oversight.

The changes prompted a turnaround

in the board's relationship with the superintendent. Now, everyone in the district was ready to tackle the daunting task of improving academics in the Atlanta Public Schools.

### The turnaround

The blueprint for Atlanta's academic reforms isn't anything particularly revolutionary—data-driven decision-making, a focus on literacy and math, improving teacher training, holding principals accountable for results, and increased attention and resources for the lowest-performing schools. Hall also instituted salary bonuses for schools who meet targets in reading, math, and attendance. Most individual schools are given a great deal of leeway to determine their own academic programs, as long as they produce results.

The difference between the current plan and past reform efforts is that Atlanta's education leaders have stayed focused on these goals over the long haul. The school system had tried various reform programs in the past, but Hall says the frequent leadership changes prevented these programs from taking root.

The school board has done its part by ensuring that the money is in place for these efforts. Even during these difficult economic times, Burks says, the board has ensured that core academic programs are protected.

Board members also changed how they evaluated the district's progress. They ditched their lengthy, complex strategic plan in favor of a few easily measured, concrete performance goals. The superintendent is responsible for meeting these goals. The board is responsible for ensuring that funding is in place for these objectives. These measurable

goals also serve as the basis for the superintendent's performance evaluation, which removes the subjective, often personality-driven, evaluation process that had been used in the past.

This steady, focused approach is working. The proof is in the numbers.

Between 2002 and 2007, Atlanta improved its NAEP scores in every subject at each grade level. Every elementary school in the district met federal AYP targets, and Atlanta's students have made great strides in catching up with their peers across the state in reading and math. In addition, 72 percent of Atlanta's students graduated on time in 2008, compared to just 39 percent in 2002.

The schools also have become far more stable. In the fall of 2000, the district opened the school year with 700 teacher vacancies. By comparison, the district had just 18 teacher vacancies at the start of the 2008-09 school year.

In early 2009, Hall was named the nation's top superintendent by the American Association of School Administrators.

"When you look at our reform efforts, there's no way to have that without a superintendent in place and a board that has taken responsibility for these reforms," Burks says.

Moving forward, Hall and school board are turning their attention to middle and high school reform. Atlanta recently opened two single-gender academies at the middle school level and the district is breaking up its large, comprehensive high schools into smaller, more personalized schools of no more than 400 students. The Bill and Melinda Gates and Arthur Blank Family foundations have provided grants for the high school reform project. ■