



Committee on Education and Labor
United States House of Representatives
Hearings on
Challenges and Successes in Urban Education Reform

**Testimony by
Dr. Beverly L. Hall, Superintendent
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Chairman Miller, ranking member McKeon and members of the Committee, I have great respect for your work and for the work of my colleagues who join me today. Thank you for the opportunity to speak. Seeing the academic gains that urban schools are making nationally is inspiring.

First, let me say that I accepted this invitation to share with you the coming together of an entire community, including the mayor, around a school system that was broken and now is being fixed. Since 2000, the district has posted academic gains every year with no slippage, even as the state has raised the bar. Our schools are also closing gaps with the state.

Let me give you four facts:

- **Eight years ago, just 47 percent of our fourth graders met or exceeded standards in reading. We trailed the state by 18 points. Today, this gap has nearly disappeared—86 percent of our fourth graders met or exceeded standards, trailing the state by just 2 percentage points. I am especially proud that 32 percent of our students *exceeded* the standard, *leading* the**

state by half a percentage point, with standards much more rigorous than those in place in 2000.

- In 2006-07, every one of our 62 elementary schools made Adequate Yearly Progress.
- Graduation rates are also up. At Carver High School, one of our lowest performing schools, the graduation rate nearly tripled from 23 percent in 2003 to 66 percent in 2007.
- Our success has been validated with the National Assessment of Educational Progress. On the Trial Urban District Assessment, APS has demonstrated significant improvement in all grades and subjects tested since 2003. In writing, our schools have made gains that are *seven times* the national rate.

Demographically, Atlanta looks a lot like other urban districts. Our student body is racially diverse: 84 percent black, 9 percent white, 5 percent Hispanic and 1 percent other. Three in four of our students are approved for free or reduced-price meals—22 percentage points more than the state—and the vast majority of Atlanta’s students receive *free* lunch. Almost 36,000 of our 50,000 students live near or below the poverty line.

Even with so many students facing challenging odds, each year, these academic gains have spread to more and more students in more and more grade levels, and the gains have spread from reading and mathematics to other subjects as well.

When I arrived in Atlanta in 1999, it was clear that our goal had to be nothing less than total district transformation. We've found that what works is a set of steps that are simple to describe, but complicated to implement in a system with so many constituents and moving parts.

First, a powerful coalition of business and community leaders and parents came together. They understood that comprehensive reform was critical to Atlanta's revitalization and economic health. This coalition focused on recruiting quality candidates for school board and supporting the board, the Superintendent and the schools.

As the fifth Superintendent in 10 years, having this coalition of supporters with a firm grasp of the work ahead was crucial in making my tenure stable enough to get the job done. It's one of the reasons I chose Atlanta in the first place. This coalition also understood that in the case of school district reform, patience really is a virtue. Sustainable reform takes time and, at first, the rewards are incremental. Eventually, these increments add up to dramatic improvement.

Second, we improved the quality of our staff including those in central office, principals and teachers through hiring, clear expectations, meaningful evaluations and continuous professional development. We have replaced 89 percent of our principals since 1999.

Third, we created tailored accountability targets for each school and based my annual evaluation and those of the principals and staff on meeting them. These targets focus not just on increasing the percent of students that *meets* standards,

but also the percent that *exceeds* them. At schools that meet 70 percent or more of their targets, the entire staff shares a performance incentive.

Fourth, we implemented comprehensive, research-based instructional reforms districtwide.

Fifth, we continually evaluate and refine our programs based on feedback from central office, principals, teachers and students.

The Atlanta Public Schools are still climbing the tough path to total transformation, but with achievement gaps melting away and the strong support of our community, our goal is in sight.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to share Atlanta's story with you today. I am pleased to respond to any questions you may have.