

TURNAROUND SCHOOL: APS' FORMIDABLE CHALLENGE

AN AJC SPECIAL REPORT

FIGHT FOR THE FUTURE

Inside the daunting quest to improve an Atlanta school.



Schools and their communities are always linked. Successful communities support and invest in the education of children. Strong schools use that support to set high expectations and to execute bold, cutting-edge initiatives. Not every school in Atlanta can claim such success. For some city schools, the challenges seem too great to overcome. Students at Harper-Archer Elementary School come to class each day from Atlanta neighborhoods struggling with the harmful side effects of generational poverty. They also suffer from inconsistent parental engagement and many of these children lack basic reading skills — the foundation for academic accomplishment. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution wanted to know: Just how do teachers, principals, counselors, and other school staffers try to give these children the proper education they'll ultimately need to compete with their peers for adequate jobs, and to be responsible, productive citizens in our communities? Atlanta Public Schools gave the AJC unprecedented access to the inner workings of its efforts to turn around this school. The stories inside this special section are the result of our reporter and photographers spending dozens of hours at Harper-Archer through several months. If the folks at Harper-Archer are successful with their bold plans, the school will serve as a template for other urban schools struggling to meet basic standards. We interviewed school leaders, teachers, community residents and parents to get the full picture of the magnitude of the challenge and of those who are trying to find solutions. These are stories of determination and hope.

— TODD C. DUNCAN, SENIOR EDITOR, LOCAL GOVERNMENT & EDUCATION



Bryandra Bell's first-grade class.

AT AJC.COM
Most of this project was reported before the coronavirus shut down schools. To see how Harper-Archer was impacted, read our story on the front page of today's AJC. For more on this project, visit [AJC.com/schools](https://www.ajc.com/schools).

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ABOVE: Unique Neal, a student in Keisha Johnson's third-grade class at Harper Archer Elementary, is eager to share her answer during an interactive session. Students were given a question based on a portion of "Treasures and Trees," and paired up for a "think, pair and share" activity. BOB ANDRES / ROBERT.ANDRES@AJC.COM

TURNAROUND SCHOOL: APS' FORMIDABLE CHALLENGE

HIGH HOPE,
HIGH BAR

Atlanta
confronts
failing schools
with intense
effort.



APS Superintendent Meria Carstarphen (center right) chose Dione Simon Taylor (center, with large scissors) to lead Harper-Archer Elementary because Taylor has “the grit and the heart and the experience of the leader.” This photo was taken at November’s ribbon-cutting ceremony at the school. BOB ANDRES / ROBERT.ANDRES@AJC.COM

By Vanessa McCray
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Dione Simon Taylor directs traffic in a Harper-Archer Elementary School hallway as an avalanche of children pours through the doors.

It’s a tick after 7:30 a.m. Dawn’s first pinpricks brighten the dark sky. Breath turns thick in the late October chill.

Yellow buses had arrived after winding through Atlanta’s west side, picking up students from some of Georgia’s poorest neighborhoods. The children start their school day with a hug or shoulder pat and a “Good morning” from Principal Taylor, free breakfast, gentle reminders to get in line, go to their classroom.

The parade of backpacks – pink sparkly ones, Spider-Mans, cheetah prints and Batmans– stream past her each morning. Attached to each: a child, a challenge, an opportunity.

Harper-Archer opened in August after the merger of two academically troubled elementary schools and an \$11.6 million building renovation. Atlanta Public Schools identified it for the deepest level of help, as one of the schools with students the furthest behind. Taylor was charged with a task that some days feels almost impossible: Turn it around.

“My heart’s desire is that we revitalize the community and change generations to come, and I may or may not live to see it, but we are going to try,” Taylor said.

It took years to get to this moment, the starting line. It could take years longer to see big improvements.

Experts say chronically low-performing schools need three to five years to achieve major gains. Even then, success is fragile, susceptible to backslides.

APS Superintendent Meria Carstarphen calls the district-wide turnaround effort, aimed at lifting Harper-Archer and about two dozen other Atlanta schools, a “20-year proposition.” Even then, she said, there are systemic problems – chief among them intergenerational poverty – that schools can’t solve alone.

This is year one at one turnaround school.

In August, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution obtained permission to observe the daily triumphs and struggles at Harper-Archer. Over six months, a reporter and two photographers got an up-close look at the work of teachers and leaders, spoke with parents, and witnessed the early effort to boost student learning.

In March, the coronavirus shuttered Georgia’s school buildings. For Harper-Archer, the closure threatens to hinder academic progress and hurt the vulnerable children who depend on the school as a lifeline for services as well as learning. On the day before the shutdown, Taylor sprang into action. She made sure parents knew where to get free meals, sent iPads home with some students and told teachers to keep in constant contact with families.

Still, she worried it would not be enough.

MEET THE PRINCIPAL



Dione Simon Taylor checks in frequently with her staff members. BOB ANDRES / ROBERT.ANDRES@AJC.COM

- **NAME:** Dione Simon Taylor
- **AGE:** 45
- **HIRED BY APS:** 1999
- **FIRST APS JOB:** Math teacher at Mays High School
- **OTHER APS JOBS:** Mays High School assistant principal, Coretta Scott King Young Women’s Leadership Academy middle school principal, Towns Elementary School principal
- **APS PRINCIPAL OF THE YEAR:** 2017-2018
- **EDUCATION:** Bachelor’s degree in mathematics education and a master’s degree in mathematics from Southern University; doctorate in education from the University of West Georgia

“We have worked really hard, and any kind of bump in the road like this can derail everything that we’ve planned for and hoped for, regardless of how long it’s going to be,” she said.

She’s always understood the magnitude of the turnaround battle and also the urgency.

“I want us to be excellent today. I don’t care what the research says,” she said, weeks before the closure. “That keeps me up at night. How do we get better, quicker?”

She had seen the challenges as principal of Towns Elementary, which, along with Fain Elementary, closed at the end of the 2018-2019 school year. Both received failing grades on Georgia’s school report card. The majority of the schools’ attendance zones lies in the poorest 10% of census tracts in the state.

The new school to serve those students opened in a renovated midcentury building on Collier Drive that had started out as a high school and then became a middle school.

It would now be Harper-Archer Elementary.

Hopeful leader, harsh realities

The principal had to be a dynamo, someone who could knit together two school communities with decades-long histories, hire and inspire staff, and develop a plan to help students catch up.

The big job keeps Taylor’s days full. On a blur of an autumn afternoon just before classes dismissed, she paused outside her office after a second staff meeting. She’d spent the day strategizing with teachers, observing classes, honoring the students of the month, answering emails and discussing the carpool lane and cheerleading squad. In between, she’d discreetly comforted a crying staff member and popped by the gym to say hi to hula-hooping kids. She did all of it while wearing striped socks for Wacky Sock Day.

Erick Metzger, a social and emotional learning coach, stopped to ask if she had eaten. No. He gave her a slice of pizza.

Choosing the right principal for this school, Carstarphen said, “really came down to the grit and the heart and the experience of the leader, and being able to bring a staff along with them.”

A strong leader might not guarantee success, but without one, turnaround is very unlikely, said Kerstin Carlson Le Floch, managing researcher at the American Institutes for Research.

Taylor, 45, had won the district’s Principal of the Year award at Towns. Test scores rose, though the school remained significantly below state averages.

In Towns’ final year, 13.2% of third graders scored proficient or above on the state reading and writing test. That’s considered a critical academic marker, since students who haven’t mastered reading by that point are likely to struggle in later grades.

At Fain, the problem was more dire. Only 3% of third graders could read proficiently at the end of the last school year. That put Fain in the bottom three of more than 1,200 Georgia elementary schools.

Taylor came to Harper-Archer – where she enrolled her stepdaughter – with a plan and with hope.

Her new school would grapple with two harsh realities. In addition to being far behind academically, most students live in poverty.

The median household income in Harper-Archer’s overwhelmingly black neighborhoods is an estimated \$27,175 a year. That’s less than half of the city and state’s medians, according to an AJC analysis of census data. By contrast, in the most affluent Atlanta elementary school attendance area, the mostly white northside Jackson Elementary, it’s \$159,001, according to available data.

In the Harper-Archer zone, at least three-quarters of households where parents are raising their own children are likely headed by single parents, the AJC analysis found – an enormous number that puts it among the highest of all Atlanta elementary attendance areas.

Far fewer people who live in the Harper-Archer

In some schools, students just don’t have the same foundation for learning as others. It’s a problem Atlanta’s school district has confronted for generations, and the district is now in a multiyear, multimillion-dollar project aimed at helping.

Some steps, such as turning over six schools to charter groups to run, have been controversial and watched nationally, because educational inequity is a problem all over the country, not just in metro Atlanta.

Teachers know that, whatever they do in the classroom, they can’t control some factors – parental involvement and intergenerational poverty, for example – that have powerful influence on their students’

WHY THE AJC IS WRITING THESE STORIES

ability to learn. Atlanta’s results so far underscore just how difficult turnaround is. Schools have seen some gains, but there’s minimal evidence it’s because of the turnaround investments.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution wanted to know: Just how does the school give students the proper education they’ll ultimately need to compete with their peers for adequate jobs, and to be responsible, productive citizens in our communities?

In order to answer that question, we knew we had to be in the classrooms and hallways of a school trying to

find solutions to these challenges.

Harper-Archer Elementary, the “turnaround school” the district selected when the AJC proposed this project, is new. The west Atlanta school opened this year to serve neighborhoods that are among the poorest in Georgia.

Over several months, AJC reporter Vanessa McCray and photographers Alyssa Pointer and Bob Andres spent many days observing, interviewing and recording the efforts and the motivations of the dozens of people who are trying to ensure that what’s in store in the lives of the children there can be brighter than their beginning.

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Principal Taylor's morning routine includes gentle encouragement to make it to class on time, and hugs. Lots of hugs. BOB ANDRES / ROBERT.ANDRES@AJC.COM

school zone have graduated from college than in the city overall and Georgia. Some students are hungry or homeless. They may be angry or upset about things that happened at home or in the neighborhood. Those problems don't disappear when they walk in the school doors, and can lead to behavior issues in class.

"We've got to figure out a way to help meet those needs and educate children at the same time," Taylor said. "We knew what we were up against. The question is: 'How do we change this?'"

Seeking joy in the mission

One of Taylor's first tasks was to hire her staff.

She had a \$9.1 million budget, including more than \$600,000 the district provided for turnaround work.

Taylor said it would be the people in the building that would make the biggest difference.

Most principals don't build a staff from scratch, but Fain and Towns teachers had to apply to work at the new school. Taylor sought out strong teachers who could engage students, solve disagreements with parents and show data to prove they were effective instructors.

She also looked for something tougher to measure. She wanted joyful teachers willing to put in the work. She found many staffers willing to do more than their job description.

"I cannot coach you into believing that our children can learn at high levels," she said. "You can teach anywhere, but teaching at Harper-Archer is different, and I wanted people who wanted to be a part of that difference."

Harper-Archer enrolled 698 students as of Oct. 1, and employs 115 people. The typical lower-grade classroom has 20 to 22 students, while some upper grades have classes in the mid-20s to high 20s. Many teachers have an aide.

Taylor hired three assistant principals, more than usual for an Atlanta elementary. The school's three deans of culture focus on disciplinary issues and work with students, staff and parents to set behavior expectations. A team of instructional coaches help teachers craft and improve lessons, set goals and review data to see what works and what doesn't.

After the first few months, some students had begun to adjust to the larger school. Fifth grader Simora Gaines previously attended Fain, and said she most often sees her new principal in the morning, keeping students in order.

Simora said she has seen fewer students fighting at Harper-Archer "because there's a lot of adults around in the building" and in the hallways.

Harper-Archer extended the school day with a robust after-school program. Students take etiquette, chess and fencing lessons and do science experiments.

"You are special. You are privileged,"

the young fencers were told as they picked up practice swords that first week. Taylor watched from the bleachers. "So many things will come out of this," she said. It's about learning focus, not just a new sport.

That same day in a science classroom, a boy in goggles watched baking soda and vinegar erupt. "My hands smell like chips now," he said.

The school received hundreds of applications for the free after-school program, but this year's budget only covered about 80 kids. They eat a snack and dinner and get a ride home at 5 p.m.

Taylor aims to lead with love

Providing extra support to help students and families is a key part of the district's overall turnaround strategy. At Harper-Archer, a social worker provides resources for housing, food and clothing. Two school counselors offer students individual and small group counseling. A mental health nonprofit provides therapy and crisis services.

Early in the year, Harper-Archer doubled as a food pantry site, giving away boxes full of cereal bars, macaroni and cheese, condensed milk, potatoes and apples. The school provides uniforms and personal hygiene items to needy students, and there's even a washer and dryer used sometimes to launder students' clothes. A mobile medical clinic that regularly visits 10 Atlanta schools is often parked outside the front door to treat students with asthma, and a dental van also stops by.

Getting parents involved in their children's academic success would be critical, but also tough since many parents are stretched thin. Some work multiple jobs, have children in different schools or don't know how to help their child with school work.

The school has a parent liaison to make connections, and staff also visit surrounding neighborhoods to seek out parents.

Harper-Archer, like other Atlanta schools, focuses on social and emotional learning. Students learn decision-making skills, how to manage their emotions and to be caring.

At a September event for grandparents, Metzger explained the approach. He asked each grandparent to introduce themselves by naming a food they like that begins with the same letter as their name.

"My name is Erick, and I love éclairs," he began.

Despite some initial shyness, the game took off. Kimberly liked kiwis, Henry liked honey.

After each grandparent had a chance to share, Metzger asked who remembered the most food pairings. Several rattled off a long list.

"How many minutes did it take us to feel like it mattered? Not very many, did it?" Metzger said. "We want the kids to know that they belong."

Taylor wants to lead with love. Her reason? "I was loved as a child. I was loved by my teachers. I was loved by my parents."

She's quick to laugh, generous with hugs. She calls her students sweet angels and superstars. After school, she rides along on a bus full of students who earned a reputation of being "very energized."

"They just need a little bit more love, and they need my love on the bus," she said.

'Most meaningful work'

More people are watching what happens at Harper-Archer than just those who work and learn there.

The Georgia Department of Education's school improvement team is monitoring efforts. Because Fain had been among the state's lowest performing, high-poverty schools, Harper-Archer is now one of 104 schools flagged for the state's most intensive support.

The school received \$150,000 from the state and is assigned a school effectiveness specialist. Devonne Harper meets weekly with Taylor and coaches her on leadership and teaching practices.

Opening a new school that's also designated for turnaround is an extra challenge.

"I do see that they're on the right track, and I tell her constantly when we talk: I cannot wait to see how things are this time next year," Harper said.

In November, Taylor stood alongside school board member Erika Mitchell, Carstarphen and other officials as they cut a shiny blue ribbon to celebrate the school's opening. The moment marked a fresh start built from a rich legacy, Taylor told the applauding crowd. She tipped her head back and laughed when the ribbon fell.

Taylor led a smooth transition, Mitchell said as the second semester got underway in January. Mitchell joined the board after the decision to close Fain and Towns, which drew neighborhood opposition. Residents in her Westside district want to make sure that kids are getting the resources they need.

School isn't just a place to learn, Mitchell said. It's a safe haven. She and others say APS needs to evaluate its turnaround plan and carefully track the results.

First-year teacher Jocelyn Davis wanted to work with students who don't have the same advantages as her son.

A few years ago, she quit her job with the American Cancer Society where, during a 16-year career, she'd advanced to the level of managing director. Her son was struggling a bit academically, and Davis, ready for a change, decided to stay home and help him catch up.

She is quick to acknowledge the privilege of her position: "I was living in my little bubble."

Her family lived in East Cobb. Her child went to a well-regarded public elementary school where parents and supporters give more than \$150,000 annually to a foundation that pays for additional instructors, iPads, teacher training and science labs.

Davis, who had entered the U.S. Army after high school, decided to go back to college and become a teacher.

"I just started looking at it through his journey and thinking that it was really unfair that he had so many people in his court, fighting for him, and that that wasn't true for kids who lived 20 minutes away," she said.

Teaching is the hardest job she has ever had. Nothing prepared her for how helpless she'd feel when she called to find out why a child wasn't in school

OUR JOURNALISTS



Vanessa McCray is an education reporter at The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. She moved to Georgia in 2017 to join the AJC's education team and cover Atlanta Public Schools. Previously, she wrote about K-12 schools, colleges and universities for The Blade newspaper in Toledo, Ohio. She worked for more than a decade at newspapers in her home state of Michigan.



Bob Andres has been an AJC staff member since 1998. A native San Franciscan, he also worked as a photographer and photo editor for newspapers in California and Florida. A graduate of San Francisco State University, Bob has also worked as the AJC's metro photo editor, and has taught photojournalism at UGA and Cal State Hayward.



Alyssa Pointer has been an AJC staff member since 2017. She spent time documenting communities in Wisconsin, Kentucky and Illinois before relocating to her home state of Georgia. Pointer spares no effort when tasked with creating impactful images of people and places within their communities. Alyssa is a proud graduate of Western Kentucky University.



Jim Pelfrey has been with the AJC for 12 years, the last six as an editor working mostly on education stories. He had worked as a reporter or editor on newspapers in Virginia, Washington state and Tennessee before coming to Georgia.



Todd C. Duncan is the senior editor for the AJC's Local and Education team and has been an editor here for more than 27 years. Before coming to Atlanta, Todd was a reporter with The Advocate in Stamford, Conn. A graduate of the City University of New York, Todd also produces the AJC Classic Cars video series, and he has taught journalism at Clark Atlanta and Georgia State universities.

Jennifer Peebles and Nick Thieme are newsroom data specialists.

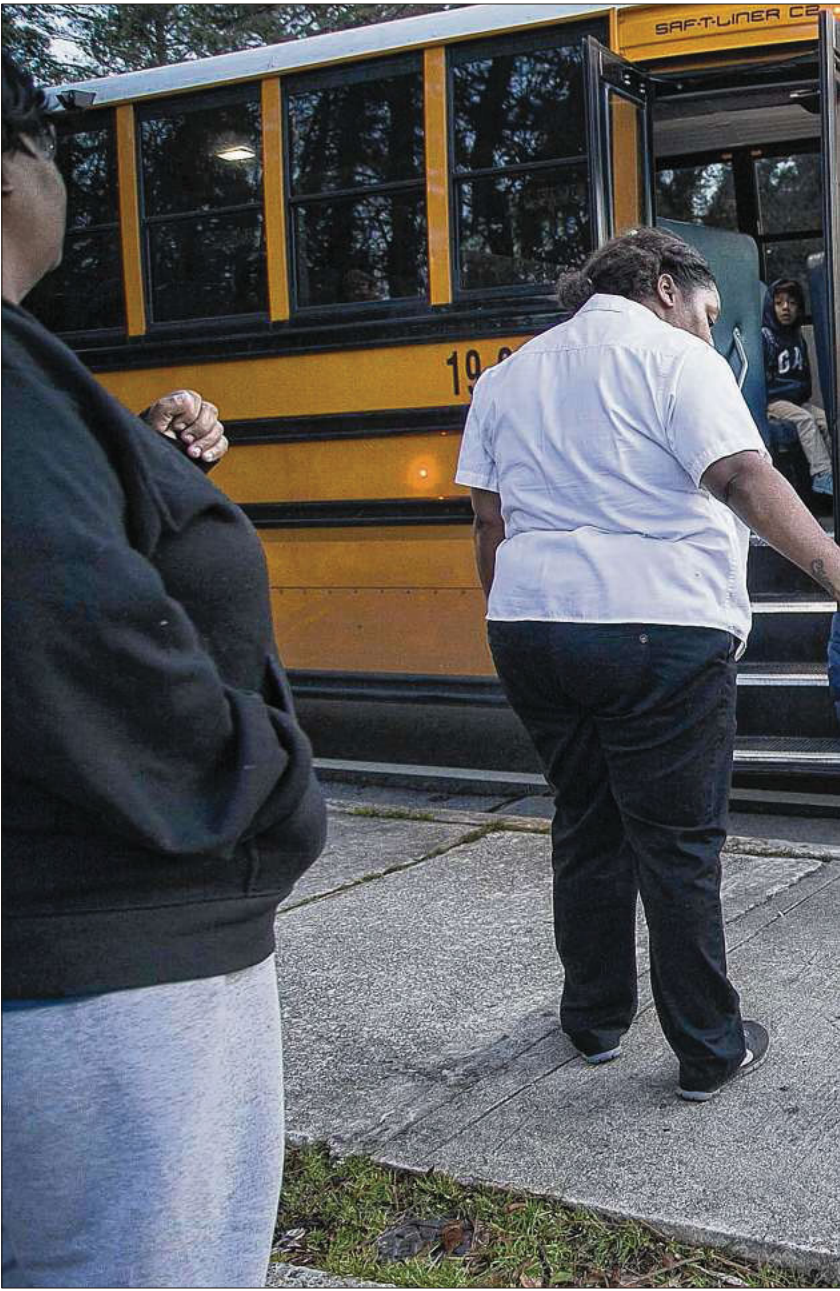
This special section was designed by **Tom Gries**; edited by **Jenny Zimmerman** and **Sabrina Starrett-Wolff**.



Third graders David Barber (left) and Skylar Benton work on a science experiment after school, part of Harper-Archer's STEAM program — Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math. ALYSSA POINTER / ALYSSA.POINTER@AJC.COM

Hope continued on S8

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TOP LEFT: Pearl Lilly attempts to get her grandson, Corbin, out of bed so he can wake up in the uniform. **MIDDLE:** Pearl watches as her oldest daughter, Chandra (second from left), goes over homework with Corbin at home. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Pearl reads to Corbin.

Parental involvement is key piece of puzzle

By Vanessa McCray | vanessa.mccray@ajc.com

In a first-grade classroom, teachers hand out alphabet letters printed on yellow paper and call out a word for everyone to spell. “Your first word is ‘any,’” a teacher announces. Scrambled piles of letters are dumped onto desks, and fingers sift through them. The teacher tells everyone to write a sentence using the word. Start with a capital letter and end with a punctuation mark. The school day ended hours ago. The people learning to play this game aren’t students, they’re parents.

Parent engagement is a key driver of student success, and in schools with many poor families, such as Harper-Archer Elementary, it’s a priority that requires removing barriers and changing mindsets. The school offers extra services to parents, teaches them how to help their children at home and emphasizes the importance of learning.

“We’ve got to make them value education as much as we do, and a lot of them don’t because (they’re) in survival mode,” said Lajuana Ezzard, the partnerships and programs director who works to increase family engagement.

She needs parents to know that education gives children a way out of poverty.

Parents are responsible for making sure their child comes to school. They set behavior expectations at home that carry over to the classroom. Because instructional time in school is only about 12% of students’ year, parents can greatly help their academic progress by reading books at home and playing educational games like the one they learned at that January parent night.

Principal Dione Simon Taylor calls parent engagement an Achilles heel for Harper-Archer: Research shows that without it school turnaround will be almost impossible.

Numerous obstacles make it difficult. Some parents work multiple jobs or night shifts that keep them from after-school events and homework coaching. Many are busy single parents, or grandparents raising grandkids. They don’t all have transportation.

Some parents mistrust teachers and schools because of their children’s previous bad experiences. Some may feel lost in the shuffle amid Atlanta’s many school closures and mergers.

Some don’t have the education themselves to help their child with schoolwork.

Harper-Archer is trying hard in its first year to make it easier for parents to participate in their child’s academic life.

A parent center just inside the school’s front entrance offers help



Fifth-grade teacher Alecia Westbrooks, formerly a teacher at Fain Elementary, talks with moms and dads during a parent engagement meeting. Harper-Archer’s efforts to educate children includes helping parents.

with everything from job searches to using the online system that tracks students’ grades and attendance.

At parent nights, staffers served pizza and salad. The school provided child care and a Spanish-language interpreter. Teachers gave out educational activities and demonstrated how to play them. They explained data, set student goals and encouraged parents to turn daily events into learning opportunities. A trip to the grocery store? Sound out words on the labels. Driving down the street? Look at license plate letters and numbers. Playing dominoes? Make it a mini math lesson.

The approach, trying to build a partnership between parents and teachers, goes far beyond traditional parent-teacher conferences. Harper-Archer started with kindergarten

and first-grade classes. By the time those children reach third grade and start taking state tests, Taylor hopes the school will see positive results of the effort.

Staff said they try to win trust and to connect in ways that work for parents.

When the mother of a first grader who struggled to read contacted a teacher to explain she couldn’t help her child because she hadn’t finished school, the teacher recorded a video showing how to review sight words. The teacher sent the video to the mom and said the student began to catch up.

When parents call or text with questions, fifth-grade teacher Alecia Westbrooks answers, even if it’s the weekend. You have to prove yourself to them, she said.

Teachers tell parents: We’re not asking you to take over as your child’s teacher, but we need you to be our partner, and here’s how.

Encouraging involvement

Taylor Robinson had never joined a Parent Teacher Association before she was elected as the Harper-Archer group’s first president.

It’s a small PTA, and Robinson, a mother of three, knows growing participation will be tough. She’s starting with a modest goal to sign up 5% of parents.

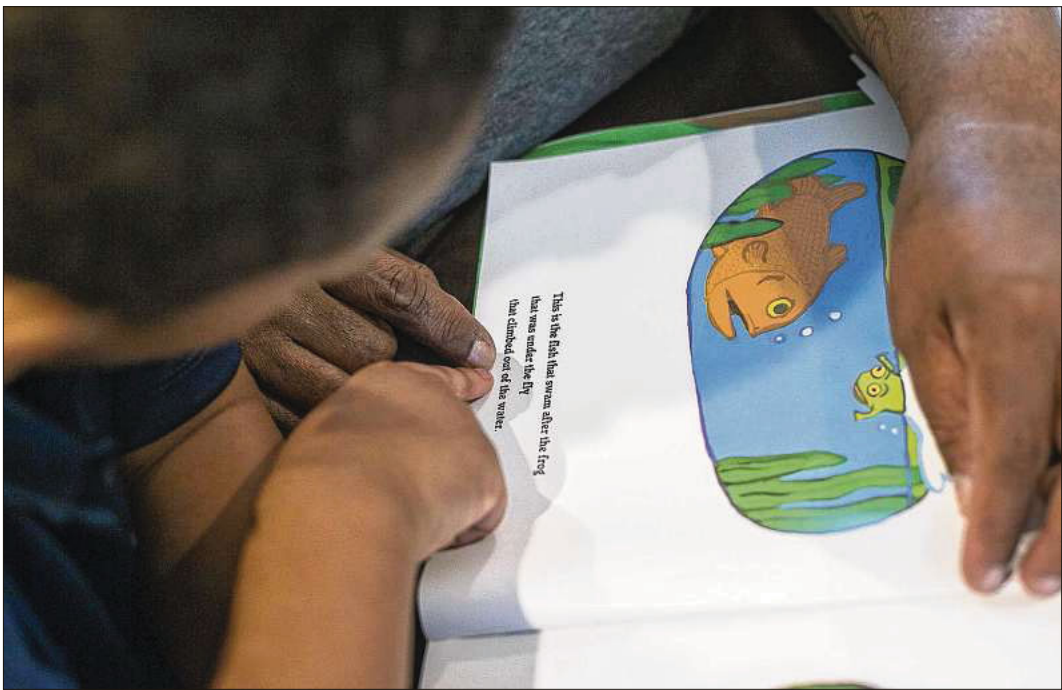
“A lot of times,” she said, “the school’s as good as the parents.”

The association’s rules require a minimum of 25 members to organize. At the first meeting in December, officials kept checking to find out whether they’d hit the magic number.

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an get ready for school. Corbin was recently prescribed medicine that helps morning. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Pearl irons a pair of pants for her grandson's school (m left), is unable to coax Corbin onto the bus with his brother. **TOP RIGHT:** with her grandson after school. PHOTOS BY ALYSSA POINTER / ALYSSA.POINTER@AJC.COM



Several staff and parents trickled in wearing Santa hats or reindeer antlers as the count inched up. Finally, enough people had paid the \$5 dues, and the officers were sworn in.

Amid cheers, someone exclaimed: “Hallelujah, 25!”

Thirty people joined that night, a tally that included many school employees and two officials from the state and Atlanta PTA who came to help run the meeting.

When the group met again in February, however, the first votes were to replace three officers who had stepped aside or weren’t involved.

Robinson is thinking up ways to reach more parents, such as live-streaming meetings or holding them at different times so it’s convenient for parents who work night shifts.

She’s planning events with food – always a draw. She wants to persuade parents who would rather be doing something else to get involved in their child’s education.

For some, school isn’t a priority. “Find that same energy ... you found to get up at 1 o’clock in the morning to go to the club before they closed, find that same energy to say, ‘Hey, let’s read a book before you go to bed tonight,’” she said.

Harper-Archer staff know parents have limited time and money. But in some cases, Ezzard said parents have to make the decision to be involved in their children’s education.

“(I’ve) just got to get you to choose differently, make a different choice for you and your family,” she said.

She said it’s about showing children and their families, some of whom have lived in poverty for generations, that education has the power to break that cycle.

“It’s up to you: What do you want? What do you want? And if you don’t want it, can I give it to your child?” she said.

Adapting tactics

Ezzard, known as “Ms. E” to everyone at Harper-Archer, is constantly dreaming up ways to reach families, and changing her approach if they don’t work.

The school threw one of its first big events in early September. Several dozen visitors met in the media center for Grandparents Day. Joan Francis, the parent liaison, discussed the services available – counseling, therapy and a social worker who helps families find resources to meet basic needs, like housing and food.

Francis stressed the importance of student attendance. “If a child is out for any period of time, that affects their learning, correct?” she said. “We’re a family. We’re here to support you and get them back into the classroom.”

At the end of the event, grandparents visited classrooms, and Ezzard invited everyone to return in a few weeks to join the school’s new Growing Grandparents Club.

“Not only do we want to help your grandchild, we also want you to know we’re here for you as part of this community. So whatever we can do to assist you, that’s what we want to do,” she told them.

On the morning of the club’s first

meeting, a bright tablecloth covered a library table, and beverages and snacks were ready to be served.

Ezzard had promoted the event for about a month. She brought in an expert to lead an exercise class and planned to combine health education for grandparents with information about how they can help improve their students’ learning.

But the room was empty, and the sign-in sheet was blank.

She refused to be upset as she packed up: “This is one disappointment. I’ve had many of these disappointments.” She’d made the effort, now it was time to think about what she could do differently.

Because she knows parents and families will come out to see their child perform or receive an award, the school hosts events with a dual purpose.

In late February, a couple hundred people showed up to the school’s Black History Month celebration. Parents cheered the step teams and stood for the choir’s rendition of “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” At a vendor fair before the event, parents picked up information about health insurance, finances and legal services. Robinson greeted people from behind a PTA table, and Girl Scouts sold boxes of Thin Mints.

“What I’ve learned is that I have got to create a climate where they feel comfortable enough to just come up at any time whether their child is on stage or not,” Ezzard said.

Teachers said many parents are responsive when they reach out with concerns or updates. Just because a parent doesn’t show up to an event, that doesn’t mean they are disconnected from their child’s education.

But maintaining open communication is key. Teachers need to know what’s going on at home in order to solve problems that crop up in the classroom.

At a family night in November, Westbrooks huddled in her classroom with a handful of fifth-grade parents. She explained she’s not being nosy when she asks about their children’s challenges and personal interests.

“You know them better than I do,” she said. “So the more that you can tell me about them the more that I can help them.”



During an academic parent teacher teams meeting after school at Harper-Archer Elementary School, parents are encouraged to engage their students academically while together at home.

School staff knocks on doors when phone calls and standard communication aren’t enough.

Taylor grew concerned about student attendance in the autumn months. Like other Atlanta schools, Harper-Archer struggles with absenteeism. Some days, more than 40 children were gone. Other days, more than 60, or nearly 10% of the school’s 698 students.

The principal told her teachers to start calling parents of absent children daily, a task previously assigned to the front-office clerk. Hearing directly from the teacher would underscore the importance of coming to school and give teachers a chance to ask whether there are any problems they can solve. The school also sends robo-calls, so parents should be contacted twice when a child is absent.

Fewer kids show up if it’s cold or rainy. When one child is out of school, siblings often are missing too. Sometimes the school finds out a family has moved or there’s been an emergency.

After teachers began calling, attendance initially began to improve. But when it started to slip again Taylor went deeper. Taylor dispatched teams to go door to door after the holiday break. They visited the homes of chronically absent students to ask how they could help. The school can’t solve every problem, but staffers stress the importance of coming to school.

“This is killing me. I don’t understand why we have so many kids who are not coming to school, because when I talk to children they say they love school,” she said in January.

School like a family

Some days, it takes an extraordinary effort for Pearl Lilly to get her two grandsons to school.

She has raised the boys since they were infants, becoming their caregiver because of her daughter’s mental health issues.

Lilly, 49, is used to working, but said she hasn’t been able to lately because of a heart condition. Government aid and support from a foster grandparent program help her squeak by.

Last summer, she moved into a

two-story apartment off Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, about a mile from Harper-Archer. If it weren’t for her grandchildren, Lilly said she would have considered living in her car. But she needed an affordable, stable place for them and the household of relatives who are frequently there. She can just barely cover the \$1,287 monthly rent for the sparse apartment where water seeps in after heavy rains.

She didn’t know what to expect from the newly opened school. Her fears melted away when Harper-Archer staff welcomed her warmly: “It was like a community, a family.”

The school has been especially good for her grandson with autism and behavioral and mental health problems.

Mornings are tough for him. Sometimes he’s so upset he won’t board the bus. On bad days, they drive to school, and teachers and staff coax him inside.

“It’s like I don’t have worries anymore as far as his education. I know that they have him, and they support us,” Lilly said.

School is a respite. At the apartment, she frets about neighborhood crime and what her grandchildren might see if they look out the window facing the parking lot. For a while, she nailed up a large green sheet to block the view. There’s been prostitution and violence, she said.

In 2019, there were 318 police calls from her roughly 120-unit apartment complex, according to Atlanta police records. Fights prompted about a quarter of those calls; more than a dozen were reports of shots fired.

When her grandson hears shooting at night, he asks his grandmother whether they’re going to be OK.

She’s concerned her apartment might be one reason the family has been sick so frequently this year. The sharp smell of bleach lingers, a testament to her daily battle to keep the place clean. She has received letters from nurses stressing the need for her grandson in second grade, who has severe chronic asthma, to live in a mold and allergen-free home.

Despite the struggles, she holds onto encouragement passed down from her grandfather: Keep striving. She knows education can open up more opportunities, so she’s continuing hers by pursuing a doctorate degree in human services. When the boys return from school, they do homework together at their round dining room table.

On a winter afternoon, her grandsons tumble in the door with big grins. They toss a ball around the living room, pull out a basketball hoop and do headstands against the wall.

Their grandmother plays along and then says, “Let’s check backpacks.” They bring out snacks, go over sight words and read a book about frogs.

Lilly said Harper-Archer’s help makes hard days a little easier.

“Wrapping the arms around the child, giving the child a high-five, a smile, it goes a long way,” she said. “I honestly think I wouldn’t be able to make it. Sometimes, I used to feel like just giving up. I’m thankful for them.”

TURNAROUND SCHOOL: APS' FORMIDABLE CHALLENGE

THE CLASSROOM

Teachers try to fill academic, skills gap

To help children use words, books, educators must first build bonds.

By Vanessa McCray | vanessa.mccray@ajc.com



Harper-Archer Elementary first-grade teachers, including Rokeem Pough, here working with Amiya Watley (center) as she reads aloud, find more time for reading and literacy building blocks. ALYSSA.POINTER@AJC.COM

Even before the first phonics lesson or test, teachers at Harper-Archer Elementary marched to a drumbeat: Get better, get better, get better.

The school already bore the “turnaround” label when it opened in August. The designation was also a mandate.

Towns and Fain elementary schools, whose closures led to Harper-Archer’s creation, had both appeared on Atlanta’s turnaround lists before. Fain, in particular, struggled with large numbers of students who were behind in reading and math.

So much depends on a student’s first few years in school. It’s when they build the academic bedrock they need in order to be successful and graduate from high school. It’s when they begin to love and value education.

“That’s the only way that kids have a chance to choose the life that they want to live,” said Harper-Archer Principal Dione Simon Taylor. “Because of that, then Atlanta will be a better place to live.”

Closing the gap in reading

Most Harper-Archer students aren’t reading at their grade level, so the school had to craft a strategy to try to catch them up. Educators also needed to be agile and flexible, shifting quickly when things didn’t work.

About two months into the school year, after analyzing student data, the leadership team sharpened its focus on lower-elementary grades.

The public assessment of a school’s strength is based largely on scores from state tests, which students begin taking in third grade. But large gaps can develop in younger grades, and Taylor said kids’ future success hinges on helping them earlier.

Many Harper-Archer students live in poverty and enter school without foundational knowledge. Some can’t recognize letters and don’t know the sounds they make. Their oral language skills are under-developed, and they’ve heard far fewer words than students from more affluent families, said Justin Browning, a former elementary teacher turned instructional coach who supports the school’s kindergarten and first-grade teachers.

During a weekly meeting with teachers back in October, Browning asked whether students need more time to master a reading concept before moving to the next one. Yes, said the teachers.

Taylor and her team have leaned hard into kindergarten and first-grade classrooms. Investing in early grades and fostering good habits in younger children is generally viewed by turnaround experts as a solid investment.

“If we can really get it right in the younger grades, then we have the opportunity to change the trajectory of our school, but not just the trajectory of our school but the trajectory of their lives, because literacy is foundational to success,” Browning said.

Harper-Archer adjusted schedules to spend more time reading and calling out words, exposing children to text and working in smaller groups to address individual students’ specific needs.

Teachers still weave in social studies and science, but reading is at the core.

Instead of chasing state standards that spell out what students should know in specific grades, teachers focus on the building blocks of literacy.

“We already know they’re coming to school for the most part behind everyone else just because of the vocabulary that’s being used in the home,” Taylor said. “Our bold move was to step back.”

In lower grades, the school decided not to give some of the district’s optional benchmark assessments that aim to measure whether students have learned standards. Taylor has found those assessments mostly test students’ listening skills and not whether they’ve learned the material.

Teachers would test students quarterly to find out whether they’re learning more sight words, and give them literacy screeners to make sure they’re moving in the right direction.

At a January parent night, first-grade teachers explained that they want to be realistic about where students are, instead of expecting them to summarize a story before they can even read the words. But they also want to challenge students and set goals so they are always improving.

Hear the words, know the sounds

Step into BryAndra Bell’s classroom, and the emphasis on reading is apparent. Baskets of books line the shelves, and an illustrated alphabet – A with an apple, B with a bat – stretches across the front wall.

After lunch one fall day, her first graders settled onto the colorful carpet to review high-frequency words displayed on a big screen. They rattled through a list lickety-split: He, his, has, have, is.

When a child flubbed a word, Bell didn’t miss a beat: “Don’t worry. You’re smart. You’re going to get it.”

The teacher went over blending sounds and reviewed digraphs – two letters in combination that make one sound, like “sh” in ship. Everything

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Fain and Towns elementary schools closed last year, and Atlanta Public Schools opened Harper-Archer Elementary in August to serve those students.

Percentage of students who scored proficient or above on state tests, or Milestones, in 2019:

	ENGLISH	MATH
Fain	6%	8%
Towns	19%	25%
APS	37%	40%
Georgia	43%	47%

Source: APS

in Bell’s lesson has a rhythm, a clip she maintains with finger snapping and frequent reminders that the words need to be fluent.

This is Bell’s sixth year of teaching and first in Atlanta Public Schools. She was drawn to Harper-Archer in part because the school had just opened.

“We’re all able to contribute to something that we’re building ourselves,” she said. “It’s having the opportunity to create something new and start something fresh.”

Bell said the decision to add a “double dose” of phonics has been helpful. It gives her more time to hear children reading words and teach them sounds.

Fellow first-grade teacher Jocelyn Davis said her students came in with various reading abilities. Devoting more time to foundational skills has made a difference.

“I can see movement now that we’re doing that. It’s impactful, and it’s meaningful,” she said.

If it doesn’t work, change

Taylor isn’t afraid to make changes when she sees something isn’t working.

Though major instability hinders turnaround efforts, research also shows that adapting and improving teaching strategies can help.

The school shifted the phonics lesson to later in the day in some second-grade classrooms because too many students were arriving late and missing that crucial instruction.

Most fifth graders started the year taking math and science from one teacher and then switching to another classroom for English language arts and social studies.

Weeks into the school year, Taylor decided it wasn’t working. Students were losing too much instructional time as they moved from one class to the next, so she told teachers they would have to teach all subjects.

It wasn’t what they had expected to do, but she told them it was necessary.

“Once we got here and once we realized this doesn’t work, then we’ve got to change because otherwise we are just setting ourselves up to fail,” she said.

As much as leaders try to anticipate, sometimes they are forced to adapt.

In late August, Taylor watched enrollment closely for whether they’d hit the projected 734 students, the number her budget was based on. She was nervous about “leveling” – the process the district uses to balance financial numbers with staff based on actual enrollment. It was one of her first big hurdles, and she ended up losing two teachers because enrollment, at that point, was about 100 students shy of expectations.

That challenge isn’t unique to Harper-Archer, and the district worked to make it as seamless as possible.

“But even two hurts when you’ve built these

smaller classes, and now I’ve got to combine, and I’ve got to move services,” Taylor said.

As the school year wore on, Taylor battled attendance woes and an unprecedented closure because of coronavirus concerns.

She wove the arts into core subjects, a push that made Harper-Archer a pioneer among Atlanta schools. She also included the science, technology, engineering and math – or STEM – program that’s a signature of westside schools that feed into Douglass High School.

First, build a relationship

In a turnaround school where many students lag academically, some might expect teachers to immediately launch into drills and instruction. But fifth-grade teacher Alecia Westbrooks said her top priority in early August was to build a relationship with her students and their parents.

“You have to feel safe in here. You have to feel that you’re valued in here. It’s a lot of that that goes on before I even can say, ‘One plus one is two,’” she said.

Students in her class are, on average, about three grades behind. Westbrooks said she’s building a culture in her classroom where students are willing to try, even if they struggle.

Students shouldn’t dread school, and no child should crawl under a desk because they don’t know an answer, as she had seen at Fain, where she previously taught. She said Fain staff worked hard to address behavior issues that diverted teachers’ time and attention.

At Harper-Archer, she starts every Monday by asking kids what they did that weekend. That gives her insight into potential problems or emotions they might be bringing into the classroom.

Fifth grader T’era Stewart described the school as a fun place with good vibes and lots of activities. Westbrooks “puts things in a way where it makes me understand,” she said.

During a social studies class one winter afternoon, students learned about food rationing in World War II. They assembled a grocery list based on a limited budget and a set number of ration points.

They had to figure out how they could afford balanced meals with fruit, vegetables, grains and protein.

“We’re not getting bread,” said one child, sparking a heated debate at his table.

Earlier, Westbrooks connected the lesson to concepts some of her students might be familiar with: food stamps and Women, Infants, and Children program benefits.

That effort to encourage kids, and keep them engaged, is evident in many classrooms. Third-grade teacher Keisha Johnson runs her classroom at a brisk pace – there’s no time to be bored or to lollygag – and with shared enthusiasm.

“Are you reading to learn?” she asked on an October morning. “Are you ready?”

The students responded with chants and cheers. When a child answered a question correctly, the entire class offered congratulations.

“Let’s give her the slam dunk,” Johnson said. “Slam dunk, in your face,” the class replied in unison.

Johnson makes sure students who don’t know the answer get a second chance to respond, and she let’s them “phone a friend” at another desk for help.

Browning, the instructional coach, said his heart has grown softer for teachers this year. He knows the difficulty of the work they’re trying to do. Success depends on their ability to connect with kids.

“I think that the truth is that we can have the best program, we can have all the curriculum, we can have everything else in place, but ... the one thing that makes all the difference is an effective teacher in the classroom,” he said.



Reading is fun and infectious at Harper-Archer, as students take to reading before class gets started. BOB.ANDRES@AJC.COM

TURNAROUND SCHOOL: APS' FORMIDABLE CHALLENGE

THE ARTS



Harper-Archer dance teacher Lisa Perrymond watches kindergartner Ahlanna Brown play a game of freeze dance during a Michael Jackson song. ALYSSA POINTER / ALYSSA.POINTER@AJC.COM

Dancing inspires learning by leaps

Moments to create through the arts may boost critical areas, such as math, reading skills.

By Vanessa McCray | vanessa.mccray@ajc.com

By the end of the dance rehearsal, Lisa Perrymond was in tears. So was her boss.

Harper-Archer Elementary School Principal Dione Simon Taylor had just watched the former first-grade teacher count the beat as kids twirled across the studio.

Taylor fought hard for this wood-floored, mirror-walled space. She begged officials to include it in the building's \$11.6 million renovation.

"You gotta get this for my kids," she had said.

Her school opened in August. It's the only elementary in Atlanta Public Schools with a dance studio.

A robust arts program— with music, visual arts, drama and dance — is part of Taylor's vision of a well-rounded education. In this turnaround school, where students lag in reading and math, weaving the arts into the curriculum would be a key strategy, not a luxury.

Students who'd never taken a dance class would discover ballet and study opera and play the drums loudly as their music teacher called out each quarter note above the happy din.

Such opportunities can boost academics and attendance and reduce disciplinary problems, some experts have found. The experiences are especially valuable for low-income students.

The arts would get kids excited to come to school and pull parents in, too.

But shortly after the school year started, the dance teacher resigned. An empty studio would mean an opportunity unfulfilled.

Perrymond, 43, energetic and cheerful, is a life-long dancer. She studied jazz, ballet and African dance, though she'd never taught it. Since graduating from Clark Atlanta University, she has worked as an elementary school teacher and focused her master's degree on reading and literacy.

Taylor hired her to teach first grade at Harper-Archer, and ever since, Perrymond had joked that if she went missing from her classroom they'd find her in the dance studio. She was shocked when the principal asked her to step in as dance teacher. She asked, "Are you for real? Don't play."

Two weeks later, near the end of October, Taylor stopped by the studio to check in.

Not only was Perrymond new to teaching dance, but in 14 days her students were scheduled to perform on APS' biggest stage. Superintendent Meria Carstarphen had chosen Harper-Archer as the site of her final State of the District address, an annual event that has grown into a high-profile media showcase.

The novice dance teacher rehearsed with her students while her boss beamed. Afterward, Taylor turned to face the corner, away from the studio mirror that multiplied all those little dancers and their big dreams. She cried, collected herself and hugged Perrymond.

Eyes brimmed with tears, hearts with pride.

"She's just so happy doing what she loves to do," the principal said. "She loves to teach, but she also loves to dance."

Arts, academics blend

Harper-Archer aims to infuse academics with the arts.



Second grader Jacques Slaton gets in a stretch to start class, a time when Perrymond asks children how they're feeling and sets the tone for the day's dance. ALYSSA POINTER / ALYSSA.POINTER@AJC.COM

More than 200 large color photographs provided by the Besharat Arts Foundation Museum & Gallery hang in the hallways. In classrooms, teachers blend the arts with core subjects.

Harper-Archer's embrace of the arts-integration model made it a pioneer among district schools, according to Sara Womack, the APS fine and performing arts coordinator. She believes in the approach because children come to school for athletics and the arts.

"It hooks them in and engages them into the school culture," Womack said.

Children want to create, said Taylor. She thinks the focus also will bring families into the school to see what their kids are up to.

A volunteer group of teachers is receiving specialized training on how to use the arts to explain and expand upon other academic subjects and make learning fun. Other teachers are encouraged to try small steps. It can be as simple as having first graders draw a picture to illustrate a sentence they wrote or playing a song that helps older students learn historical facts.

In addition to offering dance, chorus, music and band, the school partnered with Atlanta arts organizations such as Alliance Theatre, the Atlanta Opera and the dance program Moving in the Spirit. Experts come into the school to lead multiweek residencies.

Researchers have found that disciplinary infractions go down and writing test scores go up when schools increase arts learning, according to a 2019 study of Houston schools. Those involved in arts programs are also more likely to graduate, Womack said.

Affluent families can pay to give their children after-school dance lessons or send them to music camp. For lower-income students, school may be the only place where they get those experiences.

"I just want them to have the same opportunities as everyone else's kids, regardless of where they live or what their background is," said Perrymond, whose grandmother dragged her down the street to her first dance class at Harlem School of the Arts during one formative summer growing up in New York City.

"I know that other children are going to do well regardless, because they have backup. They have support systems. They have a lot of things that our kids don't have," she said.

She has spent most of her career in APS, but left for a couple of years to teach in Abu Dhabi. When she moved back last spring, she heard about the new school.

"I just want to make a difference," Perrymond said. "This was the best place that I could do that."

Improving students' reading and math skills is a huge and necessary focus at Harper-Archer. Many children struggle in the core subjects they need to master to be successful in school.

Dance offers freedom, Perrymond said. There are no wrong answers in the studio.

"When they come in here ... I don't know what level they are on. I don't know if they're the best reader. I don't know if they don't like science," she said. "All I know is, 'Here's a free space for you to dance. Here's a free space for you to express yourself.'"

'Always dance it out'

On a Thursday in late January, Perrymond began a second-grade dance class with a simple question: How do you feel?

Eager hands shot up. "Excited," said a child. "Happy" and "sleepy," others chimed in. When one little girl said "ignored," her teacher wanted to know more.

"You feel like you're not getting enough attention from people?" Perrymond asked. "What would you like to happen today? How can we change that?"

"Dance," replied the girl.

Half an hour later, after the kids had stretched and lunged and learned new steps, Perrymond asked if anyone's mood had changed. The girl who had felt ignored said she now felt "pumped."

Perrymond tries to use her class to help children who may not have the social and emotional skills to express themselves. Many students seek her out. When they pop by the studio to say hello, she greets them with a "Hi, boo" and a hug.

"Sometimes children can't write what they're feeling, sometimes they can't speak what they're feeling," she said. "But you can always dance it out."

Her love for dance runs deep.

As captain of Clark Atlanta's Essence dance team, she performed alongside the Mighty Marching Panthers band. She danced in the 1996 Olympics opening ceremonies in Atlanta and has traveled overseas to dance. She considers becoming a dance teacher the "biggest break of them all."

A few of her students seem to be falling in love, too.

Second-grader Kimora Parker said dancing makes her feel awesome, that it's one of her favorite parts of school, that she loves learning new moves.

"I want to be a dancer when I grow up," Kimora said after a class that shook the fringe on her bright pink boots.

Back in November, the big performance arrived after weeks of rehearsal.

The Harper-Archer dancers stood fearlessly in front of hundreds as the State of the District drew to a close.

Perrymond crouched on the floor. Taylor clasped her hands to her face. The dancers lifted white-gloved hands, reaching high. Jumping, spinning. Then ... applause.



In November, APS Superintendent Meria Carstarphen delivered her final State of the District address at Harper-Archer Elementary School, where students performed for those assembled. After the event, dance teacher Lisa Perrymond (right) dances joyfully with her students. BOB ANDRES / ROBERT.ANDRES@AJC.COM

TURNAROUND SCHOOL: APS' FORMIDABLE CHALLENGE

THE COMMUNITY

New school, deep roots

Residents weather ups and downs as neighborhood changes through the years.

By Vanessa McCray
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In far west Atlanta, in a curve where two interstates connect, on a Collier Drive corner across from a Baptist church, stands Harper-Archer Elementary School.

The school is tied to this spot by concrete and history, a community anchor since it opened in 1963.

Back then, back at the beginning, it was Harper High School. And to Artie Cobb, it was a beautiful, modern building where he and his classmates were the first to leave their mark.



Artie Cobb

He was struck by the building's futuristic design, unlike the brick high schools that came before.

"Everything was first class; there was nothing second class. And it was the first time that I had attended high school that we did not get books that were coming from a white school. They were all new books," he said.

The school opened in January 1963. Cobb transferred in midway through his junior year and was a member of the first graduating class in 1964.

The district had determined it needed the high school to accommodate a growing west-side population, as middle-class African American families moved into the area annexed the decade before into the City of Atlanta.

Both the school and community have changed since then. It lies amid the poorest 10% of census tracts in Georgia, and the median household income is about half of the state's median.

Atlanta Public Schools' enrollment topped 100,000 in the 1960s. The district began to desegregate in 1961, when nine black students entered all-white high schools. Many white families left the city in the following decades.

In 1995, the school board voted to shut down Archer High School and merge it with Harper. The renamed Harper-Archer High graduated its last class in 2002, and the building became a middle school.

By the time Atlanta Public Schools Superintendent Meria Carstarphen arrived in Atlanta in 2014, the district was half the size it once had been. The city had faced an economic downturn, and housing projects had closed.

APS merged two elementary schools and converted the middle school into Harper-Archer Elementary. It opened last August with colorful murals featuring African American pioneers such as Barack Obama, Gladys Knight and Frederick Douglass.



Georgia State University student Eric Lane (right) plays with his siblings Jacorey Lane (center) and Dilyn Lane (far left) and other Harper-Archer students after school at the C.T. Martin Natatorium and Recreation Center playground. ALYSSA POINTER / ALYSSA.POINTER@AJC.COM

Grandparents of current students remember when the surrounding neighborhoods were more vibrant, when families could afford to stay in one place for years.

This school year started with unrest in one of the apartment complexes where many Harper-Archer students live. In August, residents and a couple of Atlanta council members gathered outside to protest what they said were deplorable living conditions.

The school's attendance zone includes stretches of Fulton Industrial Boulevard and Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, where fast-food restaurants, dollar stores and laundromats line the street. Al Hunter, a real-estate broker who graduated from Harper High School in 1983, recalls when merchants lived in the community and many parents knew each other. He opened Community Realty in a shopping center near several loan businesses because he wanted there to be a "legitimate business that wasn't hurting people" in the neighborhood.

As his generation grew older, people moved to the suburbs, he said. Now, many properties are rentals. The gentrification that has altered other Atlanta neighborhoods while displacing lower-income residents hasn't hit here.

Some do see signs of change. Hunter said real-estate investors are taking an interest in the area. He believes the success of the community and schools are linked: "It's a partnership, and you have to have community involvement."

Carstarphen agrees, but noted a school's community influence has limits: It can't fix all the problems that

come with intergenerational poverty, or the lack of affordable housing and early childhood education offerings.

Because it's so difficult for families to escape deep poverty, Harper-Archer Principal Dione Simon Taylor feels a moral obligation to make sure the school has done everything it can to educate students: "If we do it right here, then we have a better chance of getting it right in the next generation."

The school is trying to get outside groups and businesses to pitch in. Partnership and programs director LaJuana Ezzard has grown the number of partners working with the school from three to 50. They include supporters who assist with after-school programs and donors who help with literacy activities.

Unlike many schools in affluent communities, Harper-Archer doesn't have its own foundation to throw flashy fundraisers. Ezzard said so far corporate sponsors, who have poured money into certain Atlanta schools, haven't flocked to Harper-Archer.

It has been a grassroots effort to tell people about the school. Ezzard hustles to make connections and invites guests to tour the building.

She tells them: "You are entering a place where teachers love what they are doing, and it's a joy to learn. But also, more than anything, we are trying to build a legacy here."

Cobb, president of the Charles L. Harper High School International Alumni Association, knows better than most the origins of that legacy. He remembers how Harper High had a home economics classroom with the

THE NEIGHBORHOODS

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution analyzed census tract data for the areas where students are zoned to attend Harper-Archer Elementary School.

Estimated median household income	
Harper-Archer	\$27,175
Atlanta	\$55,279
Georgia	\$55,679

Estimated percentage of population with bachelor's degree or higher	
Harper-Archer	16%
Atlanta	50%
Georgia	31%

HARPER-ARCHER NAME

- **Charles Lincoln Harper:** Served as the first principal at Booker T. Washington High School, Atlanta's first public high school for African American students.
- **Samuel Howard Archer:** Served as the fifth president of Morehouse College.

most up-to-date kitchen appliances, air conditioning – a novelty at the time – and a demonstration area where students could voice political opinions.

More than a half-century later, at a November ribbon-cutting ceremony, he addressed the crowd gathered to celebrate the building's reopening as an elementary school. The school represents the past, he said, and a foothold on the future: "Dr. Taylor, this is your house. Your house to keep, and your house to continue to build."

Hope

continued from S3

and learned the family was homeless. She realized quickly that she had to unpack all of the emotional baggage that students brought to her classroom, because they couldn't learn if they weren't happy.

"I did not anticipate leaving every single day feeling completely exhausted, but it's also the most meaningful work I've ever done," Davis said, as she sat in her windowless classroom surrounded by child-sized furniture.

When the work gets overwhelming – on days when Taylor says, "You can cry for sadness as opposed to joy" – the team remembers why they do it.

At a teacher meeting on a busy October morning, instructional coach Justin Browning planned to review reading strategies, but first he asked everyone to take three deep breaths. Then, they read an inspirational passage together out loud.

The message was about showing up and doing the work, no matter what anyone says. It was about grit and hope.

Everyone paused to reflect.

"We have to just believe that what we feel like is impossible is going to happen," Browning said.

Taylor reminded the teachers that hope is free. Hope can carry them through.

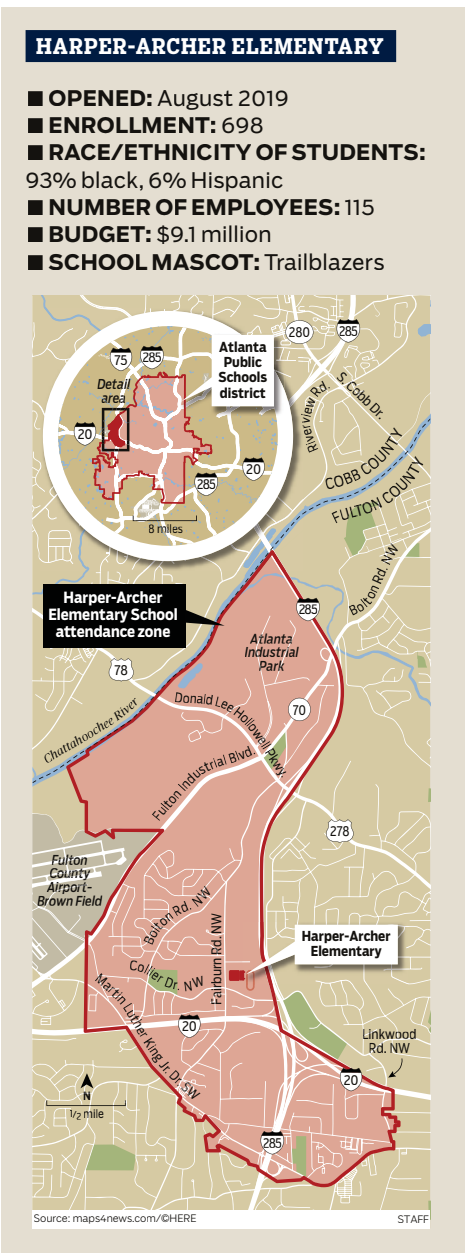
"It gets heavy, and it gets hard, and it seems impossible, and you don't want to get out of bed," she told her teachers. "Being hopeful about the future and about what this could be for our kids is what stuck out to me today. Just maintaining hope. We can do this work."

Harper-Archer will need committed teachers and leaders, engaged parents and focused strategies to pull off the turnaround Taylor wants to see.

She glimpsed what's possible on an evening in late February as a couple hundred students, parents and staffers gathered for a Black History Month celebration. Taylor's T-shirt announced the night's theme: "What will you be the first to do?"

She took a front-row seat in the gym of the school she launched six months earlier. She watched as students sang and danced, recited poetry and performed a play. At the end, she took the microphone.

"I am so proud," she said, stretching out



each syllable, voice quivering, the crowd cheering. "This is what we planned for."

Most days there is no spotlight, no gym full of clapping parents, no costumed kids commanding a stage. In recent weeks, the building emptied as the virus swept the nation. Each morning, teachers clocked in from home.

There's still the work. And hope.

For failing schools, pressure is immense

By Vanessa McCray
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When the Atlanta school district began crafting a strategy in 2015 to strengthen dozens of failing schools, the need was urgent.

Not only did students deserve a high-quality education, but the state had threatened to take over chronically low-performing schools.

"We knew the public didn't have a lot of faith in Atlanta Public Schools at the time," said Superintendent Meria Carstarphen, who was hired in the wake of a cheating scandal that made national headlines, and left the district in shambles and damaged its reputation.

In 2016, the school board unanimously approved a controversial turnaround plan. Carstarphen, currently in her final year at APS, said anything short of bold ideas likely would be unacceptable.

Although Georgia voters later spurned state takeovers of schools, APS still needed to clean itself up.

The district outsourced a handful of schools to charter operators and closed or merged others. In some schools, the district replaced principals and required teachers to reapply for jobs.

In the following years, APS budgeted \$44 million to add social services, enhance math and reading instruction, extend learning outside the normal school day and provide other support in 26 struggling schools.

The results so far have failed to impress critics, and underscore just how difficult turnaround is.

Some parents and activists have pushed for APS to enact tougher accountability measures to assess how schools are performing and to intervene sooner in failing schools. They point to low test scores that continue to plague schools and a wide gap between white students and students of color.

While schools have seen some gains, there's minimal evidence it's because of turnaround investments. Researchers hired by APS found little impact on academics, prompting calls to revise the strategy while continuing to focus on needy schools. Only four district-run schools that received the deepest turnaround support showed "consistently promising results" for those efforts in English language arts and math, according to a recent study.

One of those four was Towns Elementary, where Dione Simon Taylor was principal before her assignment to lead the new Harper-Archer Elementary.