Strategic Planning Meeting - Mission and Vision
April 17, 2025
Howard Middle School

1. Comments Related to the Statement: "Empowering Atlanta students to shape the future"

- The phrase resonated with participants in its emphasis on agency and empowerment of Atlanta's youth.
- Strong emphasis was placed on **"Atlanta"** as an identity—highlighting that public schools are the engine for the city's future success (vs. surrounding systems like Fulton or DeKalb).
- Stakeholders agreed the district's future is closely tied to **economic and civic development**, with a shared responsibility between schools, businesses, and families.
- One concern raised was ensuring that **empowerment doesn't become symbolic**—the systems and structures need to truly support student autonomy and future readiness.

2. Comments on the Statement: "Educate with excellence – creating growth, building grit, preparing graduates"

- **Creating Growth**:
  - Interpreted as academic and personal development.
  - Appreciation for a shift from merely expecting growth to the district **intentionally creating** the conditions for it.

- **Building Grit**:
  - This was the **most controversial phrase**.

  - Concerns included:
    - **Negative connotations** (e.g., "just deal with it" or "suck it up").
    - Potential to **trivialize structural inequities**, especially for neurodivergent students or those facing socio-emotional challenges.
    - Seen by some as promoting **toxic resilience** and masking of real needs—leading to push-out into private/home schooling.
    - Suggestions to replace "grit" with **resilience, perseverance, or collective responsibility**.

- **Preparing Graduates**:
  - Applauded for distinguishing between **graduating** and being truly **prepared**.
  - Emphasis placed on **post-secondary readiness**—college, career, or trades—not just earning a diploma.

3. Top Priorities Identified by Participants

- **Whole Child Learning**:
  - Prioritized across elementary and secondary levels.

- Recognized the emotional and developmental needs of students at all grade levels.
- Acknowledged that academic rigor must be paired with emotional and social supports.

- **High Quality Instruction and Rigor**:
  - Strong focus on **rigorous curriculum**, meaningful **assessment**, and **accountability**.
  - Participants emphasized **relevance** in learning—connecting it to real-world paths like careers and college.

- **Student Engagement & Retention**:
  - Especially in elementary schools, building students who are **motivated and curious** to keep learning was prioritized.
  - Secondary schools noted the need to **retain focus on student identity and development** as they mature.

- **Equity & Inclusion**:
  - Concern about loss of equity-focused programs in the face of political/legal challenges.
  - Strong desire to ensure continued **support for diverse learning needs**, including marginalized groups.

4. Top Priorities for the District/System Level

Key Themes:

- **Technology & Infrastructure**:
  - Seen as essential for both access and quality of education.
  - Needs to be robust, equitable, and adaptable to support classroom instruction and operations.

- **Data and Accountability Systems**:
  - Emphasis on using data not just for testing, but for **responsive, equitable decision-making**.
  - Concerns about **over-testing** and misusing assessments.

- **Rigor and Pathways**:
  - A need for **aligned pathways**—college, career, and technical education.
  - Recognition that not all students are on the same trajectory; systems must support **multiple post-secondary outcomes**.

- **Consistency and Coordination**:
  - Discussion about the danger of **too many conflicting priorities** from different departments and stakeholders.
  - Goal: a **simplified, cohesive direction** to avoid overwhelming educators and students.

5. Top Priorities for Families and Community

Key Themes: **Communication and Customer Service**:

- ○ Front-office interactions seen as **critical to family engagement**.
- ○ Parents want **transparent, open lines of communication** across all levels of the school system.

- ● **Family Partnerships and Support**:
  - ○ Importance of **engaging marginalized families**, not just in outreach but in **decision-making**.
  - ○ Emphasis on **shared responsibility** between schools and families to support student success.

- ● **Culture of Openness and Belonging**:
  - ○ Participants noted that culture—of **care, inclusion, and responsiveness**—matters just as much as logistics.
  - ○ Community support structures (like partnerships with local universities or organizations) seen as essential for comprehensive support.