

MEMORANDUM

To: All APS Employees

From: Dr. Meria Joel Carstarphen, Superintendent

Date: May 27, 2020

Subject: My Deepest Thanks Before a Much Deserved Summer Break

Dear Beloved Colleagues,

We made it!

Today, Wednesday, May 27, marks the official end of the 2019-2020 school year and the end of one of the most challenging semesters we have ever faced in our careers in education. For many of us, this moment could not have come any sooner as the past few months have tested every ounce and inch of our being and all that we know about educating our children in the 21st century.

We were tested in academics with virtual learning when COVID-19 forced us to adapt in mere days to teaching at a distance when such changes usually require months and years. We were tested with instructional technology and learned quickly about an emerging civil right to quality devices and high-speed access.

We were tested in nutrition as our district emerged as a primary food distribution network for Metro Atlanta, providing more than 160,000 meals every week to Atlanta students and families. We were tested in wraparound services as we continued to provide health services and social emotional learning support even as our schools were closed for teleschooling and teleworking.

We were tested as a system - teachers, administrators, and support staff – as we faced numerous uncertainties and consequences of a global pandemic.

But because we are Atlanta Public Schools, we not only faced each and every challenge head on, we did it with courage, determination, and resilience. Over the past three months, we experienced so much difficulty, heartache, and challenge that there was considerable pressure to just give up and call it a school year. But we didn't give up, and that will make all of the difference to our students, especially the Class of 2020 that lost so much of their senior year and the pomp and circumstance of a traditional May graduation.

I will never be able to thank you enough for your dedication to Atlanta's children.

As we close the school year today, I have also been facing the sad realization that our work together in Atlanta Public Schools is also coming to an end. When I joined the district six years

ago, I pledged that together we would change a district once embroiled with adult-oriented agendas to one embracing child-focused ones.

Together, we embraced and lived a bold mission to create a caring culture of trust and collaboration so that every student would graduate ready for college and career. Thus, we embarked on this APS Journey of Transformation that sought to turn around underperforming schools so that no matter where our students and families lived they could benefit from a high-performing school district where students love to learn, educators inspire, families engage, and the community trusts the system.

Together, we have journeyed far and changed so much for the benefit of all – our students, their families, our teachers and staff, and our community.

Along the way, you changed a culture.

Across the district, you can see a higher level of dedication from teachers, administrators, and staff directly to the students themselves. You can feel that new energy at our schools, and I've seen it personally in the classrooms, in performance, and on our athletic tracks, fields, and courts. What's more, we can quantify it as you have been engaged like never before. Based on Gallup's Q12 survey, APS employee engagement improved from the 5th percentile to the 64th percentile among K-12 organizations in fewer than six years.

You changed a focus.

We moved to a new operating model that allowed more decisions to be made by principals, educators, parents, and community members, all of whom are closer to students and school needs. We engaged more of you and others in cluster planning, GO Teams, and my Teacher Advisory Council as we directed even more money to our schools, changing the percentage of general fund dollars from 66% when we started to more than 73%.

You changed a look.

Over the past six years, we have improved the physical appearance and environment of every school in every cluster with more than a third of them getting brand new or significantly renovated school buildings. I challenge you to find a district anywhere with school buildings that generate more enthusiasm for learning than schools such as Hollis Innovation Academy, Tuskegee Global Airmen Academy, Gideons Elementary, or the new Howard Middle School set to open next school year.

You changed a mindset.

As a district, we embraced initiatives like our Social Emotional Learning (SEL) initiative to address behavior, good decision-making and self-management for both students and staff.

You changed an impression.

As we evolved our culture and dispelled adult-oriented agenda, partners returned in droves to work with Atlanta Public Schools. We now boast more than 350 partnerships and more than \$72 million in special revenue.

There is simply nothing like Achieve Atlanta, supported by the Woodruff and Whitehead foundations, which provides college advisement and scholarships for thousands of APS graduates. Atlanta Committee for Progress support made our College and Career Academy possible. Chick-Fil-A enabled hundreds of our elementary students to receive vital training with the Orton-Gillingham literacy approach. Delta Airlines provided reading specialists. The Westside Future Fund provides critical support in the west part of our district.

Most recently, the incredible support is represented by the Get Our Kids Connected initiative with Comcast, which puts quality devices and high-speed Internet access into the homes of families who need it most. Thanks to partners like the Intercontinental Exchange, Atlanta Tech Village, and United Way, we raised more than \$2 million toward that effort.

Most importantly, you changed outcomes.

Over the past six years, we grew our graduation rate by an astounding 20.8 percentage points to reach an all-time graduation rate high of 79.9 with the Class of 2018. It's unofficial, but we saw more than 2,580 graduates as part of our virtual celebrations for the Class of 2020, making it the highest overall number of graduates from Atlanta Public Schools in decades!

Across the district, our schools continually saw gains on Georgia Milestones assessments and the College and Career Ready Performance Index until they were disrupted this year by the COVID-19 pandemic. In short, you have given thousands of MORE children a chance at choice-filled lives. I could not be more proud of all of you and the work we have achieved in such a short time! Looking back on it all, I can say that you have changed me.

As a superintendent, I have never been more energized, more driven, and more focused in my own vocation in public education as I have been working with you in Atlanta Public Schools. Because of you, it has become part of my very nature to visit as many classrooms as possible and join performances and athletic events at music rooms, theaters, athletic fields, courts, and even pools (where I even put on a bathing suit in public. UGH!) across the district. It's why I find ways to showcase our talented students at our State of the District addresses, board meetings, and other events throughout the year. It's why I run with teachers and staff. It's why we created the APS Rocks and Runs 5K. It's why I work every single day to support you!

With so much work focused toward this pandemic to get virtual learning and the end of the year as right as possible, I have tried not to think too much about not working in my beloved Atlanta Public Schools. I can tell you that I am I am grateful and humbled for having worked alongside such caring and dedicated people like yourself in service to our students. Thank you for your heart and for continuing your work to ensure every child has choices in college, career, and life.

Bless you all, every single one of you. I love you and will miss you so terribly. Best wishes!

Much love and air hugs,

Meria