



Atlanta Public Schools Superintendent Meria Carstarphen at MLK Jr. Middle School. (Photo courtesy of Perkins+Will)

## Turnaround Strategies

*Superintendent Meria Carstarphen outlines challenges to come for Atlanta Public Schools*

By Collin Kelley

Atlanta Public Schools Superintendent Meria Carstarphen said she expects the 2016-17 school year to be one of the system's most challenging as it continues to rebuild from the cheating scandal and faces some of its facilities being taken over by the state for underperformance.

When residents go to the polls in November, they will vote on creating the Opportunity School District (OSD), which would allow the state to take over chronically failing schools. There are more than 20 APS schools that fall into that designation.

Carstarphen promised last year that she would make aggressive moves to transform APS, which include shuttering some schools and putting others under the management of charter school groups. She said that pay parity for educators, facility quality, security, and working to turn around the overall culture of APS was part of the turnaround strategy.

One thing is for sure: APS is not going back, but forward.

"Perhaps the major problem with APS in the past is that it was not child centered, but adult oriented," Carstarphen said. "There was so much bureaucracy, so much politics. We

lost our core purpose."

Since her arrival two years ago, Carstarphen has spent much of her time on the job "rebuilding and fixing problems that were never addressed," including a \$30 million proposition to arrive at pay parity for teachers. Replacing teachers and administrators with the best and brightest has been a hallmark of Carstarphen's time at APS. She said it's all part of the rebuilding of APS's integrity.

"You can't talk about the future if you don't fix the past," Carstarphen said.

Carstarphen said she is hopeful that recent comments by Gov. Nathan Deal will keep APS schools out of state hands if the OSD measure passes. "Gov. Deal said meeting achievement targets is the fastest way to get off the OSD radar, but if a school district is showing progress, that might also prevent a takeover."

However, Carstarphen is also realistic.

"We're not going to hit those targets immediately," she said. "You can't make a 30 percentage point gain in test scores without cutting corners, and we're not going back to those days."

Another significant change for APS is the creation of its own police force. Carstarphen

said the police department was another component of shifting the culture at APS.

“The idea is to rethink a school model that goes beyond physical safety and adds a component of emotional safety,” Carstarphen commented. “The concept is that the officers are not only enforcing laws, but counseling and mentoring children as well.”

The new APS police force has a

chief of police and 68 officers, who have been trained specifically by grade level, and will work with students to prevent bad behavior and decisions before they happen.

“If we want to break the pampers to prison pipeline for black and brown kids, which is really an issue in APS, we have to have people who do the preventive work so the bad decisions never happen,”

Carstarphen said. “I don’t want our kids to fear the police, I want them to respect police. They need to have a school environment where the police are seen as an ally and not an enemy.”

There are also big changes ahead for Intown’s “Grady cluster” of schools. The defunct, sprawling Howard High School campus in the Old Fourth Ward will be transformed into a new middle school

for students currently attending Inman Middle School. Morningside Elementary School will take over the Inman building for more capacity.

Grady High School will see an estimated \$22 million vertical expansion to create 18 new classrooms, three new laboratories and a new administrative suite. **IN**

## Fresh Look

*MLK Jr. Middle School gets colorful revamp for new year*

When students arrived last month for the first day of class at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Grant Park, they found a freshly redesigned campus created by local architecture firm Perkins+Will.

“Middle school is a vital bridge between elementary school and high school – it is also a period when students, often for the first time in their lives, begin actively seeking a sense of purpose and place,” said Paul Brown, principal of Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School, which serves sixth to eighth grade students. “Our new facility is a physical representation of our entire school community’s purpose and place.”

Originally built in 1973, the school features the Brutalist style of architecture that was popular in educational facilities at the time: emphasizing large, exposed concrete exteriors and minimizing windows and exposure to outside light. The new design approach recognizes the original architecture style, while giving the school a fresh and open look.

The revamped campus includes 175,000 square feet of renovated structure and 17,000 square feet of newly built facilities. Major upgrades include a more defined and completely reoriented main entry, new athletic fields and a new administration building, a new auditorium/theater space, a new student commons, and bringing more natural daylight into existing classrooms. Additionally, the facility was redesigned with energy efficiency in mind. The revised structure now consumes 35 percent less energy compared to an average existing building of same type and location.

A silhouette of Dr. King’s face is subtly incorporated in the windows of the school’s administration wing, while one major hallway has an extensive, hand-painted mural of the faces and quotes of civil and human rights leaders. **IN**



Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Grant Park got a serious summer makeover, lead by local architecture firm Perkins+Will (who also provided all of the colorful photos you see here). Bold murals of the school’s namesake, historical civil and human rights figures are emblazoned on walls and hallways, while the circa-1973 building has been upgraded throughout for its next 40 years. In the center photo above, APS Superintendent Meria Carstarphen poses with school Principal Paul Brown, and below with students during the first day of school last month.

