

Key Takeaways

Over the last ten years, Atlanta Public Schools has faced a bruising cheating scandal and repeated school closures. Despite these challenges, the city's schools have made gains in reading and math proficiency rates compared to state averages. Atlanta has a solid school improvement plan, district and charter schools are working together to provide high-quality options to families, and there is increased funder and community interest in the city's education system. Moving forward, education leaders must pay close attention to the experience of all families so everyone benefits from Atlanta's progress.

SPOTLIGHT

Investing in District Schools by Using a Contract Model

APS has closed or consolidated schools yearly to address underenrollment, a remedy that has hit low-income areas the hardest. When schools are slated for closure based primarily on performance, families understandably want their schools to improve rather than close, and APS is listening.

Last year, APS turned over one of its poorest-performing elementary schools to a local charter operator on a renewable annual contract. The school continues to be a neighborhood school.

This is the start of a long-term strategy by APS to improve school quality and increase enrollment by using nonprofit operators to turn around district schools. An existing district office oversees the Partnership Schools to monitor for quality. Although not fully operational yet, the office hopes to be a touchpoint for families in these schools—providing information about systemwide changes, hearing grievances, and collecting feedback.

While the community is concerned about using outside operators to turn around district schools, Atlanta's thoughtful and community-focused approach helped the district usher in this ambitious strategy.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

► Increasing collaboration among education and city leaders

Atlanta Public Schools (APS) and charter schools generally have a good working relationship. Charter leaders meet quarterly with the district superintendent, and in one feeder pattern, charter and district schools are working together on a vision for school feeder patterns. APS should build on this foundation to make headway on systemwide education issues. The city should consider bringing education, civic, and community leaders to the table; a neutral third-party nonprofit can play the convening role and push for progress. This group should identify a few shared high-priority issues to work on, such as a citywide school information guide or a facility plan. Other local issues ripe for collaboration include safe passage to school or affordable housing for teachers.

► Improving school- and community-level engagement

APS and local organizations understand that community engagement must improve. As city leaders establish new systems, they must ensure that the engagement strategy works for all families. Providing multiple opportunities for public, ongoing engagement is a key strategy. Newly instituted GO Teams—school-level governance boards of families, school staff, and community members—are not yet fully utilized as a community engagement tool. GO Team members need training to support low-performing schools and turnaround efforts, understand basic school operations, and advocate for family and student needs. APS should also invite local organizations already working in communities to give input on strategies before they are publicly announced.

► Making sure quality schools are available to all students

School quality and student opportunity are unevenly distributed in Atlanta, as in many cities across the country. APS is starting to address this by implementing a turnaround strategy in a low-performing feeder pattern and authorizing only high-quality charter applicants. But the school choice process must be more transparent and streamlined or the historic gaps in student access and outcomes will continue. Many families still do not understand the administrative transfer process that allows them to enroll in better district schools outside their neighborhoods. High-quality charter schools have long wait lists, while some district schools with comparable performance are underenrolled. APS has no consolidated information guide that would allow families to compare performance, school culture, and curriculum to find high-quality, good-fit schools, whether district or charter. The district's new data dashboard, which shows performance across all district and district-authorized charter schools, is a good foundation to build from. Not providing free transportation to all schools is a major barrier to choice in Atlanta, but the city should weigh options only after gathering better data about family choice patterns.

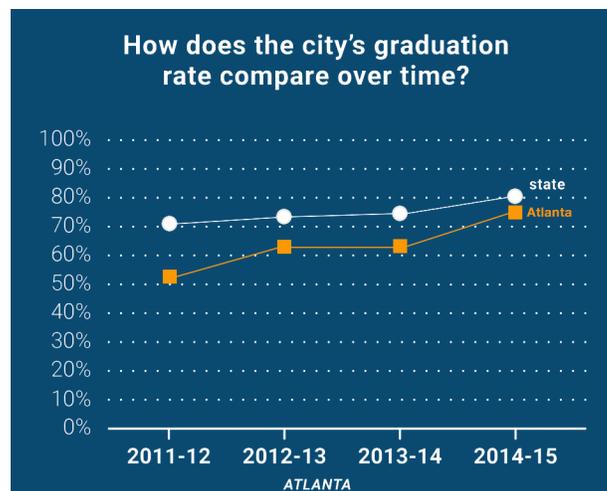
► **Continuing to raise the bar of excellence**

Atlanta struggles with having the right kind of talent more than having enough talent. School turnaround and district school autonomy under APS's Charter System of Schools will require even more emphasis on finding teachers who are the right fit for challenging school-level improvement efforts. As the city builds out a talent strategy, it must pay close attention to not only preparing new recruits, but also training current teachers. APS is starting to work on improving teacher quality by focusing on the instructional leadership of principals, but schools could also increase teacher planning time or provide on-site mentors. Atlanta should consider working across charter and district schools to set a citywide bar of excellence in teaching.

Key Takeaways: Student & School Outcomes

School proficiency rates in math and reading improved across the city. However, progress has been uneven. Proficiency and graduation rates remain below the state average, and some high school students have had inequitable access to advanced coursework.

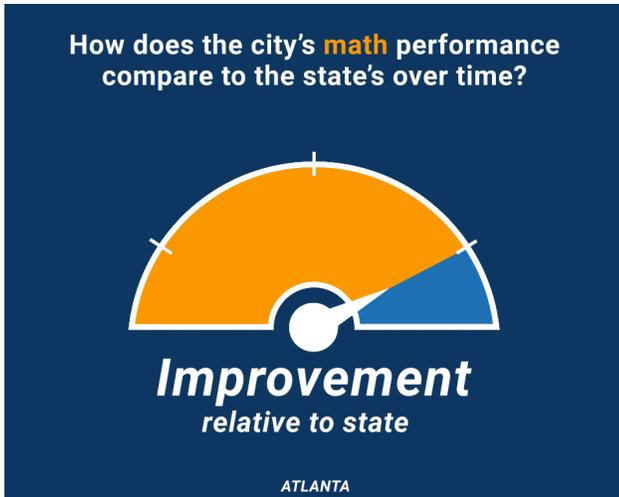
Is the education system continuously improving?



► **In 2014-15, the city's graduation rate was behind the state's.**

Data: Percent of first-time 9th grade students graduating in four years, citywide and statewide.

Source: EdFacts Initiative, U.S. Department of Education, Assessment and Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates Data, 2011-12 to 2014-15.



► Between 2011-12 and 2014-15, the math proficiency gap between the city and state was closing. In 2014-15 the city's proficiency rate was below the state's.

Data: The city's estimated gains in proficiency rates across elementary and middle schools, standardized at the state level and controlling for student demographics.

Source: U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection 2013-2014.

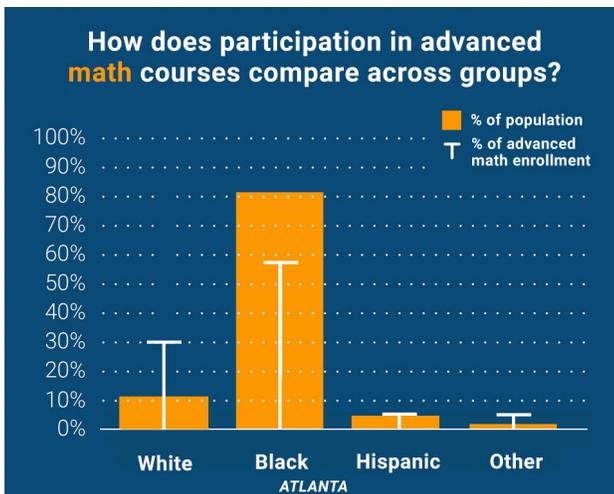


► Between 2011-12 and 2014-15, the reading proficiency gap between the city and state was closing. In 2014-15 the city's proficiency rate was below the state's.

Data: The city's estimated gains in proficiency rates across elementary and middle schools, standardized at the state level and controlling for student demographics.

Source: Performance data from the Georgia Department of Education, 2011-12 to 2014-15.

Do students have access to a high-quality education?



► In 2013-14, black students were enrolled in advanced math coursework at a lower rate than the high school population.

Data: Enrollment of students in math courses above Algebra II. Rates calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled in advanced math by the number of students in the school. Sub-group rates determined at the school level.

Source: U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, CivilRights Data Collection 2013-2014.

Data & Scoring

Where did we get this data?

- Publicly available state and federal data, making our results comparable and reproducible.
- The most up-to-date data available for all 18 cities at the time of our data collection. See [Methodology & Resources](#) for more information.

What makes the data citywide?

- We include all charter and district schools within the municipal boundary of a city.
- In Houston, Indianapolis, Memphis, New Orleans, and San Antonio we use school data from multiple districts within the municipal boundary.

Key Takeaways: System Reforms

Atlanta is starting to invest in school improvement and community engagement. The city must make sure data are informing these and other reforms, which should also include increasing access to high-quality schools across the city.

Do students have access to a high-quality education?



Do school choice and supply meet family needs? This goal addresses how well the city is doing with providing families access to quality schools. We look at what the city is doing to ensure quality schools are in every neighborhood, and how well the choice process is working for families who want to use it.



Does the school supply represent an array of models?

Over half the schools that opened, expanded, or restarted in Atlanta since 2014-15 have had nontraditional instructional models. Despite these recent developments, the overall charter supply in the city is still dominated by a small number of charter operators.



Is the city being strategic about opening and closing schools?

Atlanta Public Schools (APS) has been fairly strategic about district and charter school closures. It has also been intentional about selecting schools and high-quality operators for its turnaround—Partnership Schools—strategy. Charter school authorizations are less strategic, but few charter schools have been authorized in the past five years. For the most recent charter openings, APS has not consistently communicated to potential charter operators where new, high-quality options are most needed. Facility issues also get in the way of charter schools being able to open where they are most needed. APS released a new [data dashboard](#) in fall 2017 that maps school quality across the city. This information can help guide school improvement, siting, and closure decisions.



Is the enrollment process working for families?

Through an administrative transfer, families can enroll in any district school on a space-availability basis. APS recently streamlined enrollment for all district schools to help make the city’s administrative transfer process easier for families. However, all charter schools have different applications and timelines, and there are some concerns about the quality of individual charter lotteries.



Do families have the information they need and know how to use it?

APS publishes academic information about all district and APS-authorized charter schools in a format that makes it easy for families to compare across options. However, there is no consolidated information about curriculum, school programs, or special education and English language learner services. Many families still do not understand what choices are available to them; in particular, the administrative transfer process is poorly understood. APS is currently in the process of developing a dashboard so families can better compare their options.



Is transportation working for families?

Transportation is a major barrier to choice in the city. Few charter schools and no district schools offer free transportation to students living outside the walk zone. The public bus system is not regular, and many families do not have the means to drive their children to school. Safe passage to schools is also a concern, even for schools that do have busing.

Is the education strategy rooted in the community?



Is the whole community engaged? Education is a citywide endeavor. When families, community organizations, and city leaders have the opportunity to provide feedback and share in the vision, the strategy is more likely to be sustainable and meet the needs of all students. In this goal, we look at how well the city is doing with engaging key stakeholders.



Does the city engage families in educational decisions that impact them?

Atlanta has made improvements in how it engages with families around district school closures and consolidations. This process is public and provides plenty of opportunity for families to give input and, in some cases, alter district decisions. Families have also shaped the turnaround strategy by helping to select operators for Partnership Schools. However, the criteria being used for these decisions is not clearly communicated, causing confusion. Engagement around charter school openings and closures is not yet consistent.



Are a variety of groups engaged in education?

A number of nonprofit groups are involved in the education strategy in Atlanta, but these efforts are not yet well coordinated. The church and local business communities could also be more engaged at the school and system levels. While the city has some organizations and structures in place for families most impacted by low-performing schools to voice their concerns, these families are not given the tools or support to truly participate, which contributes to inequity in engagement.



Does the education system respond to community feedback?

The district has made recent improvements to its community engagement strategy and has plans in place to further improve responsiveness. However, engagement is still focused on big initiatives, and the city does not yet collect feedback about ongoing issues or report the district’s response back to the community. This leads to a perception that the district is not listening or responding to family concerns. Community leaders report that community-driven school governance teams—GO Teams—are not yet achieving their potential at all school sites.



Is there a strong and deep coalition of support for the education strategy?

The superintendent and APS district staff regularly attend school board meetings and public forums, particularly for school closures and consolidations. However, strong civic support for education in the city and clear alignment among local leaders are not yet in place.

Is the education system continuously improving?



Do schools have the resources they need? School improvement happens at the school level, but making sure resources are available requires sound, citywide policy. Having the right talent in a city is critical for schools to be able to provide students with a quality education. Schools should also have control over their budgets so they have the resources to address the needs of their student population.



Does funding equitably follow students?

The district allocates less than 5% of its budget via a student-based allocation formula. APS allows schools some flexibility in their use of staffing allocations and has plans to further increase school-level flexibilities (based on an analysis of fiscal year 2017-18).



Do schools have the kinds of leaders they need?

Homegrown leadership pipelines are beginning to emerge, although better placement procedures are needed. Some candidates are transitioning to leadership roles before they are fully ready, while aspiring quality candidates have historically struggled to find placements. Moving forward, the city’s turnaround and school autonomy strategies will require a more robust and articulated leadership strategy.



Do schools have the kinds of teachers they need?

While there are few teacher vacancies in Atlanta, quality and fit of candidates is an ongoing concern. Strategies have been fragmented in the past, but APS is starting to formulate a cohesive strategy to improve the rigor of teacher preparation by using a national pipeline provider and to refine the candidate selection process. However, no one is collecting city-wide data on teachers to guide future work.

Data & Scoring

Where did we get this information?

- ▶ Interviews with district, charter, and community leaders
- ▶ Policy documents from district, charter, and state websites
- ▶ School data from each city
- ▶ A 400-parent survey administered in March, 2017 in Cleveland, Denver, Indianapolis, Memphis, New Orleans, Oakland, and Washington, D.C.

How did we score the system reforms and goals?

- ▶ Each indicator is scored with a rubric on a 4-point scale. We added the scores for the indicators to get an overall goal score. See the [Methodology & Resources](#) page for details.

Score Levels



About Atlanta

Atlanta Public Schools (APS) has been pursuing a number of systemic changes to improve school and student performance. In the 2016-17 school year, APS used a state initiative to launch a Charter System of Schools with the goal of giving district schools greater decision-making authority over time. APS is also pursuing a turnaround strategy that uses charter operators to manage low-performing district schools. These Partnership Schools function as neighborhood schools. New feeder patterns, called Clusters, provide some opportunity for charter and district school collaboration.

School Choice in the City

About a quarter of Atlanta schools have open enrollment, either as charter schools or open-enrollment district schools. Many charter schools in the city give priority to students living near the school. Families can also opt in to any district school on a space-availability basis using an administrative transfer process.

Governance Model

The Atlanta Public School Board oversees district schools, and APS authorizes all but a handful of the city’s charter schools.

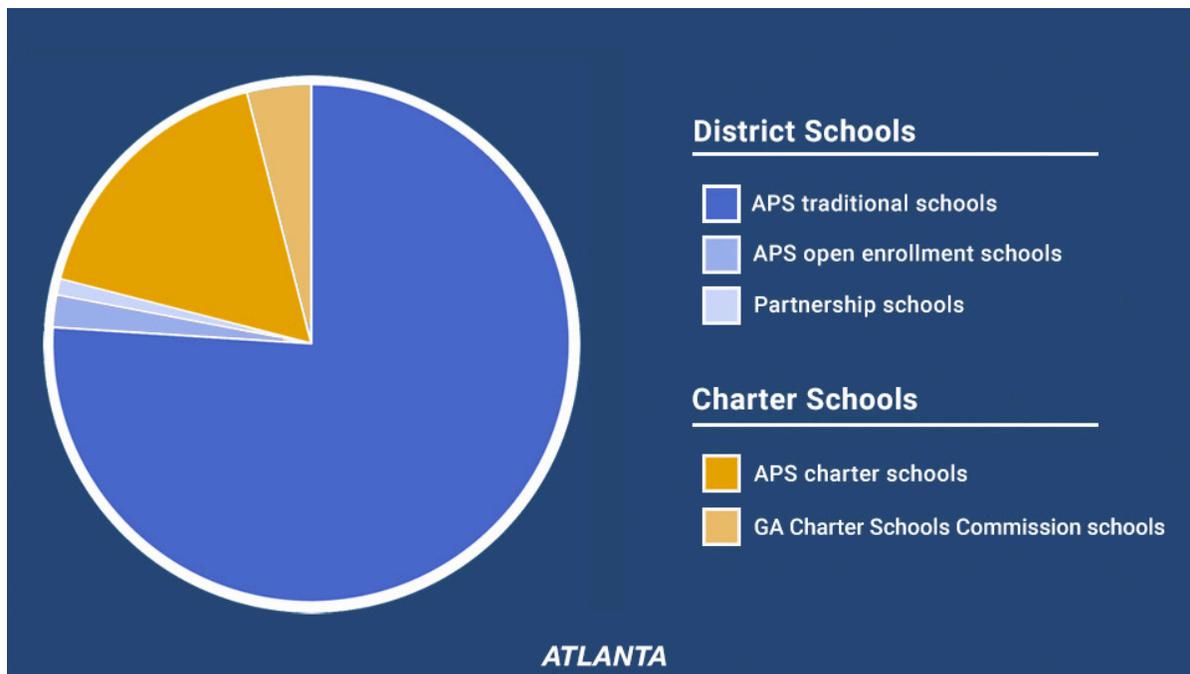
Student Body

Enrollment: 51,927 students

Race and ethnicity: 74% black, 15% white, 7% Hispanic, 3% other

Low-income: 76% free and reduced-price lunch

School Composition



Source: Enrollment data from Georgia Department of Education, 2016. School data from researcher analysis of public records, 2016-17.

About This Project

The Citywide Education Progress Report looks at how a city is doing across three goals:

- The education system is continuously improving
- All students have access to a high-quality education
- The education strategy is rooted in the community

Across each goal we present indicators of what the cities are doing (what we call “system reforms”) and how they are doing (what we call “outcomes”).

Our city reports focus on education strategies from the 2016-17 school year. Our analyses reflect developments through summer 2017. We will update the reports for the 2017-18 school year and publish them in summer 2018.

To understand how well cities are doing, we used state and federal data to track school improvement, graduation rates, and student access to high-quality schools. Our student and school data cover the 2011-2012 to 2014-2015 school years. To understand city strategies and identify early progress, we relied on interviews, surveys, public documents, and news articles from 2014-2015 to the present. This analysis uses data for district and charter schools to look at all schools within municipal boundaries, rather than just one sector or district.

We cannot say that employing a certain strategy will lead to a particular result, or even whether a particular strategy is effective in these cities. But the reports can help us to see how a strategy is working, what problem areas remain, and which cities are seeing promising results.

The 18 cities in this study include Atlanta, Boston, Camden, Cleveland, Chicago, Denver, Houston, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Memphis, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, San Antonio, Tulsa, and Washington, D.C.

To learn more about the project, compare other cities, and read the cross-city analysis, visit:
research.crpe.org/projects/stepping-up



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