

The 2018 Milestones... and the Big Picture as featured in [Maureen Downey's Get Schooled Blog](#)

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After the recent release of the 2018 Milestones test results two weeks ago, a curious thing happened— two analyses were released, one from Atlanta Public Schools (APS) and the other from a respected outside commentator, that seemed to draw almost diametrically opposed conclusions on how to interpret the results.

In [her analysis](#), APS superintendent Dr. Meria Carstarphen described important and confidence-inspiring gains including the note that when it comes to performance on the Georgia Milestones tests “all 17 of the District’s Turnaround schools receiving targeted or partnership support – that is, those schools among the lowest performing – have improved since the implementation of the initiative two years ago.”

Meanwhile, the [competing analysis](#) by Jarod Apperson said that there wasn’t actually much evidence that the turnaround efforts and investments are paying off according to Georgia Milestones scores. That article went on to note that in 2017 about half the [targeted] schools saw scores rise while the other half saw scores fall. In 2018, results look a little better, but that picture doesn’t hold up once you control for changes in the [challenge index](#).

So, what are we to make of this? Well, both are right, to a degree. And, both fall a bit short in not asking a bigger, more fundamental question that we should all be asking: *Are our schools improving at a pace that will allow every child in every Atlanta community to receive a high-quality education within the next generation?*

The answer is, not yet.

The recent Milestones data gives us invaluable information with which to evaluate the interventions and innovations that these past several years have brought under the leadership of Dr. Carstarphen. And there are reasons to be excited. In 2016, when the turnaround plan was fully implemented, the majority of students at the 17 schools involved were performing at the lowest proficiency level on the Georgia Milestones exams. In just two years since this initiative was implemented, all (17 of 17) of these targeted and partnership schools have seen a decrease in the percentage of students performing at this level, and six of those schools saw that percentage decrease by 10 percentage points or more. Recent innovations implemented by Dr. Carstarphen with the support of the APS Board are undoubtedly moving us in the right direction. Dr. Carstarphen is stabilizing a troubled system, returning a sense of pride

within the district, and bringing forth a significant focus on improving struggling schools. Those changes are starting to yield fruit.

At the same time, we can't afford to rest on our laurels. The brightest spots in these test scores shouldn't be taken as reason to believe progress is sustainable. Rather, progress should be a beacon for where we expand successful strategies in order to accelerate progress. Sweeping systemic improvement simply does not happen under the watch of one elected school board or Superintendent; rather, it comes over time when community, civic, and philanthropic leadership are invested in scaling innovations that are working.

Viewed through this lens, the Milestones data suggests we:

- **Forge a clear, systematic plan to continue expanding and developing high-quality schools.** Milestones scores are important and serve as indicators of whether schools are improving, continuously failing, or are great schools over time. However, our district will ultimately be measured by how many students have access to high quality schools that are preparing them for success in post-secondary and beyond. It is critical that we hold policymakers accountable to both understanding the trends in the data and acting rapidly to expand the number of quality schools.
- **Continue to invest in school improvement work.** While imperfect, positive results in turnaround schools have led to promising early results. The district's bold decision to delegate leadership to the school and community levels has led to an influx of support from the philanthropic and civic communities. Over the past two years, Hollis Innovation Academy has increased its score on the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) by 18.9 points, and Thomasville Heights saw students in the beginning learner category decrease by over 10 percentage points across all subjects. The results suggest that these bold decisions coupled with community investment may be critical levers for addressing chronically low-performing schools.
- **Continually identify innovative school models, including charter schools, and invest in their startup and growth.** Change in any system is about an evolutionary process in which beneficial innovations drive forward progress. Autonomous schools that have full control over budget, staffing, and curriculum are enabled to respond to communities' needs and innovate to achieve great results. For example, Drew Charter has used this autonomy to implement wrap-around services to meet the needs of their students and families. This has undoubtedly contributed to their students' stronger academic

performance with over half of Drew Charter K-5 and Drew JR/SR middle grades students performing at or above proficient across all Georgia Milestones subjects.

- **Ensure greater equity so that as improvement occurs, it is more equally distributed.** At present, access to great schools is too fragmented and inequitable. To be on a path to systemic change requires moving away from a system where geography is a barrier to equal access. A fairer enrollment system and recognition that neighborhood segregation perpetuates inequity is critical.

The Milestones data is valuable and deserves attention and analysis. But, if our goal is to create a paradigm shift in public education, the community, civic, and philanthropic leaders are best served by examining this data with an eye toward what it tells us about how Atlanta Public Schools should look twenty years from now, as opposed to just a near term progress report.

<redefinED atlanta was founded in 2016 with the vision to transform Atlanta into a place where every student in every community receives a high-quality education. We are working to empower communities throughout Atlanta, strengthen school-level talent for Atlanta Public Schools, and increase the number of high-quality schools. Through advocating for school improvement, redefinED is creating spaces for connection and collaboration among non-profit, government, and philanthropic leaders helping to support citywide transformation.>