

A Growing Voice for Change

April 12, 2019

As schools prepare for their annual Georgia Milestones assessments, marking the end of another school year, I cannot forget the many stories that I have heard at the past several Atlanta Public Schools board meetings. There was the parent who began by speaking in Spanish to the predominantly English-speaking Board to demonstrate how he and other Spanish-speaking parents felt silenced and invisible without access to materials in their language and how their children felt the same way. A local grandmother revealed her worry that two generations of her family might graduate unable to read. Another mother told of her serious consideration of committing a crime by lying about her address so her children could get into a better school. It is hard to hear stories of pain and the extreme lengths that our parents will go through to get a better education for their children, and this school year I have noticed the voices of our parents growing stronger and more numerous. As a principal and educator in Atlanta for the past 19 years, I know that these stories are far from unique – in them, I hear the voices of so many parents I've known, and I see the faces of so many former students I've taught.

Over the past several months, I have been struck by the growing number of parents across the city who are clamoring for the Board of Education and APS leaders to do more now to afford all Atlanta students access to excellent schools. At this week's APS board meeting, I saw parent after parent stand in solidarity and speak out to demand the board act with more urgency around the System of Excellent Schools plan. These parents come from different schools, various backgrounds, and all walks of life. Even when they have vastly different views about what their schools need, they all seem to agree about one thing: the system is not meeting the needs of their children yet. They are calling on the leaders of APS to finish the work they started— to put a timeline on defining excellence and to commit to specific action steps to help schools achieve it.

When a child is gravely ill, parents and doctors work together, urgently, to deliver the course of treatment that the child needs. Every second counts in the medical model of care, and we know our school system should be the same. Dr. Carstarphen and our previous school board brought stability to the district's finances and generated some notable academic improvements. But for students and parents, this simply isn't enough. While the APS high school graduation rate has climbed 20 percentage points since 2014, there is still a glaring gap of over 17 percentage points between the graduation rate of Black and White students. The disparity between student scores on state exams is larger still, with the Black and White achievement gap showing a difference of 60 percentage points in the percentage of all students in 3rd grade through 8th grade who scored proficient or better on Georgia Milestones math assessments in 2017. For the students at the lower end of those gaps, these recent district-wide academic improvements don't hold a lot of meaning. In a city where children born poor are more likely to stay poor than anywhere else in the country, the opportunity crisis faced by our students is more serious than ever before. All parents deserve excellent opportunities for their students and shouldn't have to wait any longer for policymakers and district officials to take meaningful action on behalf of their students.

Every year, too many students move through our city's school system without truly having the chance to attend a high-quality public school. The need to transform our schools is urgent, and

families want us to act like it. Our system has already let down too many bright young minds and the parents at the board meetings— along with countless other families— deserve to be heard and to see real action. They shouldn't have to wait. The future of our children and our city depends on it.

<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.>