

A bolder path forward: Reflections on accelerating Milestones progress

August 16, 2019

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Like so many of you, “back to school week” is one of reflection for me. As a former teacher and principal, back to school week has been a time to hold a mirror to myself to applaud past successes while also acknowledging failure and contemplating growth opportunities and future action. As I reflect upon Atlanta Public Schools (APS), the district has much to celebrate and be proud of this past year. The recently released 2019 Georgia Milestones scores indicate that APS has achieved their highest rates of proficiency since the state first implemented the test in 2015. In addition, APS has seen principal turnover decrease from 30% in 2014 to 5% this year and there were only 10 teacher vacancies at the start of this school year compared to almost 250 vacancies 6 years ago. These indicators undoubtedly demonstrate that the district has found more stability and is starting to move in the right direction. The hard work of students, parents, teachers, and school leaders should be-- and is being-- praised and encouraged. Yet, I can't help but come back to the notion that students today are facing many of the same barriers to opportunity and achievement that my students from 20 years ago were plagued by and that affected generations before them.

While it's worth celebrating these successes, we also have an obligation as a city to recognize the challenges we still face and the amount of work still left to ensure that all children are educated equitably. Despite overall gains for the district, the English Language Arts (ELA) proficiency rate on the 2019 Milestones remains below 40%. Even more concerning is the proficiency gap between African American and White students, which came in at a shocking 58.8%. As a citizen and educator, I'm grateful for the courage and charge of our Superintendent, Dr. Carstarphen, in calling out this racial achievement gap publicly. Atlanta Public Schools is improving, and that's encouraging. But how quickly is this change taking place and how long are we willing to wait?

The truth is, if APS continues to improve at their current rates, tens of thousands of students will be left behind. To quantify, APS' current growth trajectory means that it will take almost 12 years for half of the students in the district to be proficient in reading. When we consider the achievement gaps already present between students of color and White students, it will take much longer. In fact, multiple generations will pass through Atlanta schools before the majority of our Black and Brown children are reading on grade level. How can the APS Board and district leaders accelerate progress to fulfill their promise to the families they serve?

Atlanta already has some bright spots that we can learn from. There are schools enacting bold change, more rapidly addressing the needs of students and families, and yielding dramatic results. Consider Barack and Michelle Obama Academy (BAMO) as an example. BAMO has seen significant improvements since Robin Christian became the principal in 2015 as part of the

APS turnaround plan. Since then, the school has exceeded district growth by 370% year-over-year. BAMO is operating as a collaborative partner in the neighborhood and changing the lives of students every single day. Another outlier school is Resurgence Hall, a state authorized charter school serving a predominantly low income student body in South Atlanta. In its second year of operation, Resurgence Hall has incredibly strong proficiency rates in ELA and Math. The school outperformed every single APS school, both charter and traditional, on students earning Developing or higher on the Georgia Milestones and has proficiency rates of 61.5% and 69.2% in ELA and Math, respectively, which puts it on par with the highest performing middle schools in Atlanta.

The performance and progress at BAMO and Resurgence Hall show what's possible when school leaders are empowered, the status quo is challenged, and innovative approaches and models are allowed to flourish in partnership with families and the community. When these conditions exist, it can create opportunities for students in all neighborhoods, regardless of race or income, to attend an excellent public school. We cannot allow these successes to be the exceptions. They must be taken from outlier to scale and sustainability across the district. The APS Board and district leaders must not only continue the hard work and progress of the past several years but also forge a bolder path – urgently and aggressively – in order to accelerate real change for all Atlantans.