

TWO

ATLANTAS

ATLANTA SCHOOL
LANDSCAPE REPORT 2023



EQUITY
in
EDUCATION

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Fellow Atlantans,

Our city is on the cusp of something big. Since 2020, our metro area has shown the fifth-highest job growth in the nation.¹ Between April 2022 and 2023, the City of Atlanta added 14,300 new residents, nearly three times the growth of the previous year. Last year, the city issued nearly 12,000 building permits for single- and multi-family housing.

All the numbers tell the same story: we're growing. We're embarking upon greatness.

But we face big challenges to ensure our children's future in up-and-coming Atlanta. Are our schools keeping pace with our city's acceleration and growth? Can every child access the opportunity to experience all that Atlanta has to offer?

Equity in Education (EiE) was founded to answer these very questions. Finding those answers starts with a hard look at the unequal outcomes for our students by race and economic status. As matters stand now, Atlanta has not escaped the educational inequities holding our entire nation back. For example, as of 2022, just 37% of district students tested proficient in reading.

It does not have to be this way. This report points out opportunities for new collaborations among city government, schools, families and communities. But they won't happen until the adults leading Atlanta Public Schools come together with the rest of the community and put data, democracy and organizing to work creating real change for Atlanta's children.

Equity-minded leadership in our city and on our school board can make a tremendous difference for young people who might otherwise be locked out of Atlanta's bright future.

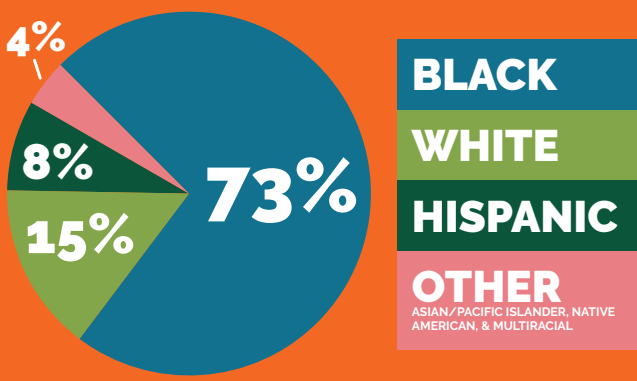
That's why EiE is creating opportunities for civic education and investment. We believe an engaged, motivated community can empower leadership that will take action to open educational opportunity for all of Atlanta's students.

Anthony Wilson, II

ATLANTA PUBLIC SCHOOLS, BY THE NUMBERS

According to the Georgia Department of Education, in 2022 the Atlanta Public Schools served 54,559 students. Their demographics were: 73% Black, 15% White, 8% Hispanic, 4% other categories: Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, and multiracial.

ATLANTA SCHOOLS DEMOGRAPHICS



Across the district, 73% of students were considered economically disadvantaged, 13% were identified as having a disability that qualified for special education services, and 4% were English learners.

While Atlanta's high school graduation rate—84%— is approaching parity with state and national rates, test scores show serious concerns remain about whether students are building the academic skills they need for success beyond high school.^{2,3}

Georgia Milestones high school test results for 2022 show that only half of the district's high school students attained overall mastery of content, compared to 65% statewide. By subject, Atlanta high school students performed best in U.S. history, with 63% of students reaching proficiency, and worst in math (algebra), with only 34% reaching proficiency.

Even in areas like North Atlanta and Midtown, where there are larger numbers of white and affluent students, gaps remain between graduation rates and proficiency rates in reading and math. For example, in North Atlanta, 90% of students graduate from high school, but only about two-thirds of them are proficient readers. Only one-quarter are proficient in math.

Meanwhile, students who attend Mays, Therrell and Washington high schools show some of the widest gaps between graduation rates and academic skill as measured by test scores.

These results show the district has yet to achieve the levels of excellence and equity our young people need and deserve. While our city moves toward greatness, our children are not being prepared to take part in Atlanta's bright future.

TWO ATLANTAS

“Atlanta Influences Everything.” That’s what we’ve come to live by as a city. We are known for our rich Civil Rights history, contributions to hip-hop and political acumen. As a sports town, we’ve gone from Soccer in the Streets to hosting the 2026 World Cup.

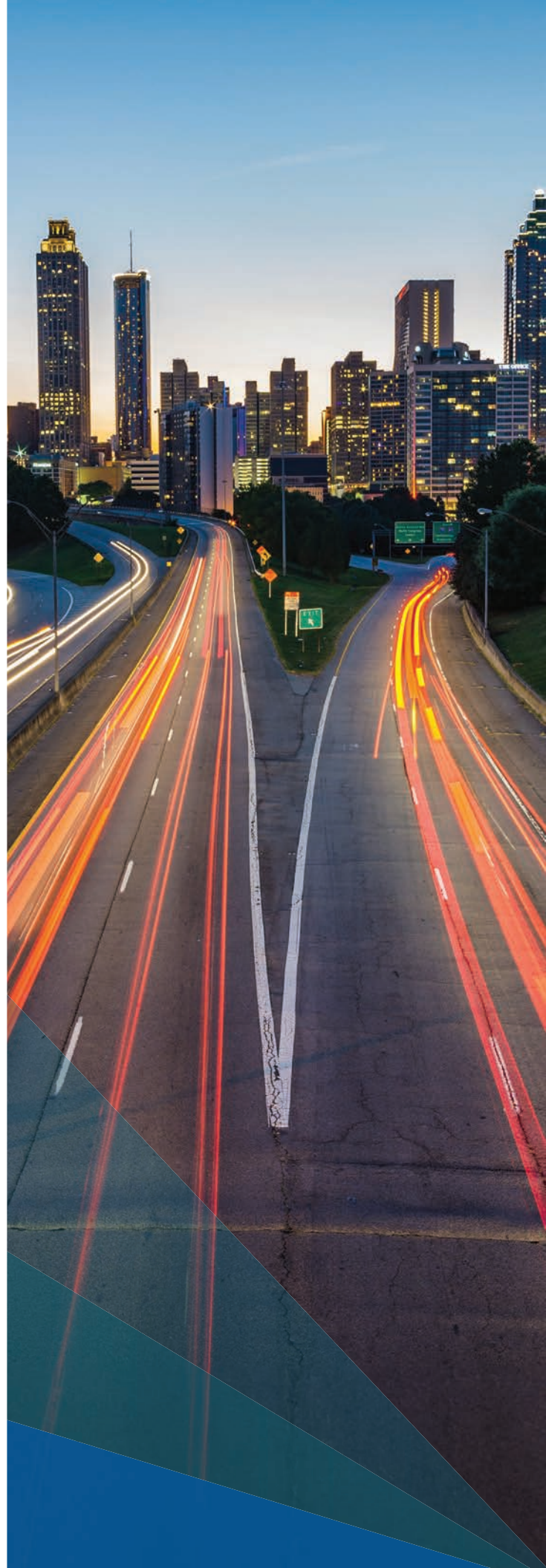
What most people might not know is that Atlanta also has a long history of influencing education. Last school year, Atlanta Public Schools celebrated its 150th anniversary. Our district is one of the country’s oldest public school districts, serving the students of Atlanta since 1872.⁴

Today, Atlanta Public Schools oversees 87 learning sites, including 58 neighborhood schools, 5 partner schools, 19 charter schools, 2 citywide single-gender academies, and 3 alternative programs.⁵

District leaders say they want to ensure every student graduates college- and career-ready. In 2021, the Board of Education adopted a set of guardrails intended to push the district closer to the goal of strong, equitable outcomes for every student.⁶ The first guardrail, focused on equity, says, “The Superintendent will not allow inequitable treatment of students,” whether in academics, discipline, or access to financial resources.

But actions speak louder than words, and data show that Atlanta students are still not getting equitable access to educational resources. Nor are they being treated impartially when discipline issues arise. While Atlanta youth from every corner of the city are endowed with great talents, not every school in Atlanta is equally well-prepared to nurture those talents. These inequities stifle the potential and future life outcomes for young people.

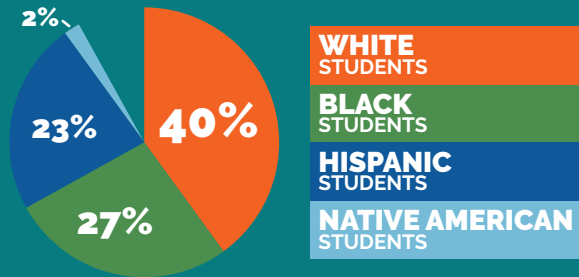
To illustrate what this means on the ground, we invite you to follow the educational journeys of two student profiles we created, based on data from different Atlanta clusters. These profiles bring home how the differences in opportunity, access, and support by geographic area affect young people’s experiences from kindergarten through graduation, and beyond.



STUDENT 1: NORTH ATLANTA

Zack Sumpter was born in Atlanta's Buckhead neighborhood. Buckhead is part of the North Atlanta High School Cluster, where 90% of students graduate from high school.⁷ The cluster's demographics are: 40% white students, 27% Black students, 23% Hispanic, 2% Native American. Overall, only 21% of students in the cluster are economically disadvantaged.⁸ Reading scores are the highest in the city, with 67% of students meeting benchmarks. Math scores are the second-highest, with 25% of students meeting benchmarks.

NORTH ATLANTA HIGH SCHOOL



Here's what those statistics meant for Zack as a student progressing through schools in the North Atlanta Cluster.

Zack started kindergarten at Garden Hills Elementary. The school has resources to support a globally-recognized, high-quality educational program schoolwide and a language program for interested families.⁹ Teachers tend to stay there from one year to the next, creating stability and building relationships with families.

Garden Hills was the first APS elementary to become authorized as an International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years Programme school.¹⁰ All students experience small class sizes and challenging learning.¹¹ Garden Hills also offers a subset of its students an English-Spanish dual immersion program.¹²

Overall, students at Garden Hills are in the top half of Georgia students in math¹³ and the top 30% of Georgia students in reading.¹⁴ All these factors show that Zack started his school experience in a nurturing and academically rigorous environment.

In sixth grade, Zack continued on to Sutton Middle School, which offers all students the IB Middle Years Programme. Students who began in the Spanish-English immersion track at Garden Hills can continue to deepen their language skills at Sutton, while other students may be continuing in French or just starting either language.¹⁵ Reading scores at Sutton are high enough to place the school in the top 20% in the state, and are in the top half of Georgia schools in math.¹⁶

Middle school can be a challenging time for students to stay focused in class and learn how to get along with others. When Zack had behavior struggles at Sutton, he was able to sit down with a parent and his teacher to get to the root cause of the problems. As it turned out, Zack was bored in class, so his teacher found ways to raise the level of challenging coursework to keep him interested. At Sutton, the suspension rate in 2022 was 11%.¹⁷

After receiving strong academic preparation and adult support in elementary and middle school, Zack entered North Atlanta High School, which offers 18 Advanced Placement courses plus the full International Diploma Programme.¹⁸ His parents could access online descriptions for all North Atlanta High School courses, making it easier to stay informed about his academic journey.

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the suspension
rate in 2022 was **11%**¹⁷

Ultimately, Zack graduated from North Atlanta with a 4.0 grade point average. He was accepted to Georgia Tech and his GPA qualified for a full-tuition HOPE scholarship. During his college years, Microsoft hired him for an internship that ultimately led to a job after graduation.

STUDENT 2: SOUTH ATLANTA

Kayla Stanton was born in Atlanta's Lakewood neighborhood,¹⁹ which lies within the South Atlanta Cluster: five district-run elementary schools and one non-traditional elementary, all of which feed into Long Middle School. Long Middle and a K-8 charter school send students to South Atlanta High School. The cluster's demographics are overwhelmingly low-income and Black.

South Atlanta High School's 84% graduation rate approaches the national rate of 87%.²⁰ Yet student reading and math scores in the cluster are among the lowest in the city, with only 9% meeting benchmarks in reading and just 3% meeting them in math.

Kayla started kindergarten at Dobbs Elementary. Students here rank in the bottom half of Georgia students in both math and reading test scores.²¹ Currently, Atlanta Public Schools offers a lottery for preK that does not guarantee every child a seat. Kayla's family applied but did not get a spot, so Kayla missed out on preK, which can make a big difference in school readiness.

The cluster's demographics are overwhelmingly low-income and Black.

The district also does not ensure all schools help children learn to read using science-based curriculum that focuses on phonics, so early readers can understand how sounds and letters correspond. Without that foundation, many children struggle to make sense of even the simplest written words, the first step toward reading with ease and understanding.

Kayla was one of those struggling readers. By third grade, it was clear Kayla had fallen behind in reading. Searching for a better option, her parents transferred her to a charter school in the cluster, but without bus service, they could not get her there consistently. Then, in search of lower rent, the family moved farther south and enrolled her in Heritage Academy, where student achievement is higher than Dobbs, but not by much.²²

Kayla continued on to Long Middle School, where the suspension rate is **23%**, more than double that of Sutton.

Kayla continued on to Long Middle School, where the suspension rate is 23%, more than double that of Sutton. After the bumpy ride through elementary school, Kayla, like other mobile students, had trouble trusting adults.²³ Without the confidence to tell her teachers she already knew some of the material because she had learned it at her previous school, she, like Zack, grew bored in class and struggled with behavior. But, unlike Zack, she was frequently sent out of class for her misbehavior. As a result, she was suspended multiple times, which caused her to fall further behind academically.

But assets in her neighborhood supported her. The South Atlanta neighborhood was established in the late 1800s by Clark Atlanta University, a prominent Historically Black University or College (HBCU), and became a booming economic community for Atlanta's Black elites. Today, Atlanta Thrive organizes parents to demand better from their schools. When Kayla's parents connected with Thrive, they learned about a community-based mentoring program. Kayla received significant mentoring from successful Black women, which helped her stay motivated in school.

As an eighth-grader, she was accepted into South Atlanta High School's STEM program, which accepts rising ninth-graders regardless of prior academic and behavioral record.²⁴ The program accepts students based on interviews and their performance on activities that allow teachers to assess their STEM dispositions, which include traits like curiosity and perseverance. In the summer after eighth grade, she attended South Atlanta High School's STEM summer bridge program.

In high school, things began to turn around for Kayla. Starting in her freshman year, she began to succeed in math. But, because very few students take algebra in eighth grade at Long,²⁵ Kayla was a year behind the standard college preparation track in math that leads to Advanced Placement calculus.

Because the South Atlanta High School website does not offer online course descriptions, parents can have more trouble understanding courses and how to get questions about their children's academics answered. Neither Kayla nor her parents knew that for her to be a strong candidate at her dream school, Georgia Tech, she needed to accelerate by taking geometry over the summer after ninth grade. At the same time, she continued to struggle with reading, which affected her grades in English. Kayla spent the summer after ninth grade retaking English rather than accelerating in math. Through hard work, she recovered her English grade and managed to maintain a 3.0.

When Kayla applied to colleges, her counselor advised her to apply to Georgia State and then transfer to Georgia Tech. Georgia State accepted her and, like Zach, she qualified for a HOPE Scholarship. But, due to her placement test scores, Kayla started college in remedial English. Like many first-generation college students, Kayla struggled in her first semester and failed to earn the grades she needed to keep her scholarship. She took on student loans to stay in school, but the time and money she spent to move through the remedial English sequence proved so frustrating that she dropped out of college.

Everyone in Atlanta must take a hard look at this question:

While Zack became a college graduate in a high-demand career in tech, Kayla left college with debt but no degree. How is it possible that two students educated in the same school district could have such different, inequitable experiences?

We also want to note that many Atlanta Public Schools students have even **more harmful school experiences** than Kayla's story illustrates.



WHAT'S BEHIND INEQUITABLE STUDENT OUTCOMES

Atlanta's public school system has never served children equitably without a fight. William Finch, born enslaved and elected to City Council in 1871, led the charge to ensure Black students had access to primary schools and could learn from Black teachers. In 1926, Atlanta's Black leaders united to demand a high school for Black students, leading to the creation of Booker T. Washington High School.²⁶

Black leadership in the Atlanta schools passed from Finch and his contemporaries to pioneering educators like the district's first Black school board member, Benjamin E. Mays, and first superintendent, Alonzo Crim. Thanks to those leaders and frontline teachers like Charles Lincoln Harper²⁷ and Lucille Palmer Perrino,²⁸ Atlanta Public Schools has supported many leaders to greatness in a variety of fields: from historic icons like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gladys Knight to current celebrities like Killer Mike and Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens.

Yet the same civil rights and equity struggles that plague public schools across the nation are part of Atlanta's history, too. Like cities all over the country, Atlanta continues to struggle with the history of redlining, which affects everything from air quality²⁹ to school quality and access to educational resources.³⁰ At the same time, Atlanta's history of leadership in civil rights offers an opportunity to build the leadership to redress historical wrongs.

In 2020, Atlanta's school board committed itself to prioritize student outcomes in all its governance work. The board set five-year proficiency goals to increase achievement in literacy, numeracy, and college and career readiness. But the targets set for literacy and numeracy by 2026 still leave more than half of Atlanta students lacking proficiency in the fundamentals. Atlanta Public Schools must hold itself and its students to higher expectations.

The 2026 goals also fail to address systemic inequities. With top-performing schools too deeply concentrated in more privileged areas of Atlanta, too many children in other parts of the city remain behind.

While Atlanta has met some of its targets for academic achievement, there remains deep educational inequities that persist by community. Students who attend Mays, Therrell and Washington high schools show some of the widest gaps between graduation rates and academic skill as measured by test scores.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENSURE ALL STUDENTS SUCCEED

To increase opportunity equitably across Atlanta, Equity in Education has developed three key recommendations for Atlanta Public Schools to implement, in partnership with city government and local communities. They are:

- 1 Provide Wraparound Services**
- 2 Prioritize Literacy**
- 3 Adopt Restorative Discipline Practices**

WRAPAROUND SERVICES

Today, more than a quarter of Atlanta's children live in poverty. Many city agencies and local nonprofits are working to help them, but their efforts are not coordinated.

Coordinated wraparound services can help families solve problems: find pediatricians and affordable child care, create more affordable housing, address mental health or substance abuse issues, and get job training that leads to higher-wage employment.

Equity in Education's polling showed 90% of respondents believe Atlanta schools should provide more mental health services for students. Highly-trained social workers and community liaisons can help families enhance their ability to care for their children without telling them what to do or taking away their dignity.

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

For too many Atlantans, the road to prison starts in schools, where adults too often rely on punishments like out-of-school suspension. In Atlanta's public schools, data shows that Black students are more likely to be

“If you want kids to be successful and to focus on one plus one and two plus two, you've got to feed them, house them, clothe them. You've got to make sure they're in safe learning environments,

— Courtney English, chief policy officer to Mayor Andre Dickens

Atlanta's city officials know they have a place in this work. “If you want kids to be successful and to focus on one plus one and two plus two, you've got to feed them, house them, clothe them. You've got to make sure they're in safe learning environments,” said Courtney English, chief policy officer and senior advisor to Mayor Andre Dickens. Last spring, a \$100 million gift from two philanthropies laid the foundation for a \$300 million affordable housing initiative.³¹ Launching this initiative required unprecedented cooperation between the city and the school district. For all of Atlanta's children to succeed, much more cooperation like this will be needed in many other areas.

LITERACY

All Atlanta children deserve the right to read. But as of 2022, just 37% of district students tested proficient in reading. Georgia's new science of reading laws create an opportunity for the district to transform how it teaches reading. Schools across the state are now required to teach students using all five components of evidence-based reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.³²

By adopting a literacy plan that expands the use of evidence-based reading instruction, the district can increase reading achievement across the district and liberate thousands of Atlanta's children from a life of stunted potential.

suspended than any other student demographic.

The district can break this school-to-prison pipeline by shifting from suspensions to restorative discipline practices that help students solve conflicts peacefully, take ownership of their behavior, and learn to extend empathy and forgiveness to themselves and to others in their communities to repair any harm done. Restorative practices include co-creating group norms with students, making community circles a routine part of the school day, and holding restorative conversations with students to repair harm when relationships are ruptured.

In Chicago, restorative discipline practices have improved school climate, reduced violent and nonviolent offenses at school, and reduced arrests on campus.³³

These recommendations provide a clear road map for positive change in Atlanta's schools. But just handing district leadership this road map won't make it happen. Creating real, sustainable change requires community members taking leadership and winning school board seats. Community leadership on the Atlanta Public Schools Board of Education can set priorities and hold district leaders accountable for following through.



EQUITY IN EDUCATION: INVESTING IN LEADERSHIP, INVESTING IN COMMUNITIES

Equity in Education invests in bold community leaders through our Candidate Training Fellowship, preparing educators to fight for equity by joining the school board. Our Candidate Training Fellowship helps a cohort of community leaders develop the knowledge and skills to run, staff and resource a winning school board campaign. Two current candidates for Atlanta's Board of Education have completed our fellowship: Nkoyo Effiong Lewis and Ken Zeff.

In addition to training candidates, EiE founded The Village PAC to pool community resources and support bold leaders committed to ensuring every Atlanta student has access to a high-quality education. In elections, money talks. Last election cycle, Atlanta's three richest ZIP codes contributed 30% of all dollars given to

Georgia political candidates. The Village PAC brings together Atlanta's communities to invest in bold, equity-focused leadership for Atlanta Public Schools. When people pool their collective economic power, they can create positive change.

Bold leadership can be most effective when the community understands the issues and demands real change. To educate the community and build the appetite for change, EiE's advocacy arm gathers and highlights data to underscore the need for educational equity in Atlanta and cultivates community leaders through the Model Atlanta Academy. Monthly interactive workshops challenge Atlanta voters to deepen their knowledge of how the city works and learn to influence city and district policymakers.



TAKE ACTION

Of course, the most important action every Atlanta voter can take is to vote in the school board election on November 7, 2023.

To become an educated and engaged voter, EiE encourages everyone to attend Model Atlanta Academy to test their knowledge of the city and learn more about how to influence city leaders to adopt equity-driven policies that give all Atlantans access to an excellent education.

To grasp the big picture affecting Atlanta schools, EiE also encourages Atlantans to attend meetings for their local Neighborhood Planning Unit, and local school board meetings across metro Atlanta. To invest in the bold, equity-focused leadership Atlanta schools need, Atlanta residents and business owners can join The Village PAC by making a small, recurring monthly contribution.



KEN ZEFF, CANDIDATE FOR DISTRICT 3

Ken is the father of three students in Atlanta Public Schools. He is also the founding executive director of Learn4Life, a nonprofit partnership among eight metro Atlanta districts dedicated to finding and scaling what works to help kids learn. Ken serves on several nonprofit boards in metro Atlanta, including Junior Achievement, the Atlanta-Fulton County Library Foundation, and the Get Georgia Reading Cabinet. He is an alum of the Aspen-Pahara Fellowship and of Leadership Atlanta.



NKOYO EFFIONG LEWIS, CANDIDATE FOR SEAT 9 AT-LARGE

Nkoyo is an innovative problem-solver and leadership strategist, with more than 13 years of experience advancing excellence, equity and education justice in schools. She has a proven track record of advancing sustainable systems-level change without sacrificing culture, capacity, or compliance. Nkoyo is adept at leading teams, navigating disruption, and collaborating across lines of difference to reach ambitious goals.

Though the Atlanta Public Schools Board of Education election is an important milestone for equity in education, EiE will be here long after the election is over. Our work to help create a school district that lives out the values of equity and excellence for all Atlanta's children will continue, and we will need your support. To stay connected, follow us on social media, sign up on our website, and join The Village Community PAC to invest in bold, community-based leadership.

EQUITY in EDUCATION

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