

essentials

News from Gwinnett County Public Schools

Meeting the needs of our students

When Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS) announced school closures due to COVID-19 in March of 2020 who could have imagined the impact of the global pandemic on our families, our schools, our community, and the wider world. All of us have been touched by COVID in some form or fashion, but we know that the pandemic is affecting our students in uniquely personal ways. Supporting our students—academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally—is the job of every staff member. And we know that students all over Gwinnett County and in every single school are struggling. GCPS has developed a broad range of programs and crisis interventions to support students' social and emotional wellness from kindergarten classes through graduation. We've also developed innovative approaches to address learning loss due to the pandemic and help to close existing achievement gaps. Read on to learn more about how GCPS is meeting the needs of our students.

Support to live, learn, and thrive

Success in life requires a range of skills, attitudes, character traits, and values. While GCPS' core business is teaching and learning, we know that social and emotional development is the foundation on which our students will build academic success, grow as individuals and members of the community, and prepare for success in life.

"Our focus on social and emotional development is not a 'distraction' from academics and it's not a new method or tool," says **Dr. Tinisha Parker**, executive director for Student Services. "It's how instruction succeeds, because kids are ready and able to learn and grow."

Our teachers work to create safe, caring, well-managed, and welcoming learning environments. Studies show that when students feel a sense of belonging at school, they are less

likely to display risky behaviors and more likely to become responsible and motivated students and caring members of the school community.

In our schools, activities to support the well-being of our students are woven throughout the school day—from skill-development sessions and advisement lessons to Kid Talks and age-appropriate lessons on

abuse and suicide prevention. Mindful Minutes and Wellness Wednesdays help build coping skills. Peer leaders guide their classmates to become "upstanders," not bystanders. Classroom meetings set community expectations. Buddy Benches and diversity celebrations help ensure that all students are engaged and feel welcome at school. Parent workshops help families support their child at home.

Counselors, social workers, and other specially trained adults provide additional services and supports to meet the needs of students, including crisis interventions,

continued

Skills for success in school, college, careers, and life

- **Self-awareness**—Recognizes emotions, confident in abilities, sense of control of self, resilient, optimistic, mindful
- **Self-management**—Manages stress and anger, controls impulses, sets and achieves goals, self-motivated
- **Social awareness**—Empathetic, kind, respectful of others from diverse backgrounds and cultures
- **Relationship skills**—Communicates clearly, cooperates with others, resists peer pressure, resolves conflict, seeks and offers help, adaptable and flexible
- **Responsible decision-making**—Identifies and solves problems, develops personal and social responsibility and integrity, makes ethical and responsible decisions

Fall 2021

VOLUME VII, ISSUE 1

In this issue...

Need-to-know info

Superintendent's message

Bulletin Board



Meeting needs *(continued)*

mental health check-ins, trauma support, home visits, small-group and individual counseling, mentoring, services for children in foster care and those experiencing homelessness, training for staff, and informational sessions for families.

In the third school year affected by the pandemic, support is needed more than ever. GCPS is hiring 24 additional social workers (for a total of 46) and creating a department focused on addressing students' social and emotional needs.

"The focus on social-emotional wellness helps students build the soft skills that employers and parents tell us students need for their future success and well-being"

Dr. Calvin J. Watts, superintendent, says of the districtwide effort. "They are not just beneficial to *some* students. They benefit *all* students. And when our children thrive, our community thrives as well"

Targeting learning loss and gaps with supports and interventions

Without a doubt, the pandemic has had an impact on teaching and learning in the last 18 months. Every GCPS student has experienced some gaps in their learning due to interrupted instruction while some students have experienced more significant learning loss. To ensure that students receive the support they need—when and how they need it—the district is pursuing a multi-year approach to help them overcome losses and accelerate learning of our Academic Knowledge and Skills (AKS) curriculum, particularly in the core academic areas of language arts and mathematics.

A team looking at closing the achievement gap identified three levels of needed academic supports. GCPS is implementing plans to address each level.

"Every day and with every lesson, our teachers are evaluating whether students need more support so they can be successful in learning the AKS," says **Dr. Clay Hunter**, associate superintendent for Curriculum and Instructional Support. "Our plan to handle learning loss begins with daily classroom instruction and builds on a framework of supports, based on what each individual child needs."

Intermittent Supports are available in the classroom to help students with learning loss that hampers their ability to master an element of the AKS. Every student gets this level of support to reinforce content or provide more practice in a foundational skill taught in a previous year. We anticipate that the majority of our students will be able to make up their learning loss, with this level of support providing student-specific learning opportunities such as small-group instruction in the classroom and before- and after-school programs. Back in **June**, nearly 27,000 students received this type of targeted support with our [Summer Enrichment + Acceleration \(SEA\) program](#).

As a supplement to regular classroom instruction, **Strategic Supports** help students who have more extensive learning loss that is a roadblock to mastery. Strategic supports provide additional time for learning, with a focus on accelerating learning of the foundational AKS for



language arts and math. Strategic Supports usually are provided during designated intervention/enrichment periods and in small-group settings so these students get the additional time and attention they need to master grade-level AKS and catch up to their peers.

For some students, missed opportunities to learn have resulted in extensive gaps across several skills or areas of learning, perhaps a year or more of lost learning. In order to learn the AKS for their current grade level, these children will need Intermittent and Strategic Supports as well as **Intensive Supports**, which may include high-impact tutoring during the school day, before and after school, and/or online.

"The bottom line is this... After the learning disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly every student needs some level of support and many students will need support over time, even a period of years," says Dr. Hunter. "Whether students need the occasional learning boost or extensive support, they will get what they need to succeed so they can learn the AKS and be successful in the classroom."

Low-cost access
to **technology**
and internet

More
money
for your
school

It's
MORE
than
MEALS

Discounts for
college tests
and
applications

Complete meal application by
Oct. 21 for added benefits

It's more than meals...

While breakfast and lunch will be provided at no charge for all GCPS in-person and digital students this school year, it still pays to complete the [Free and Reduced-price Meal Application](#). Confirmed eligibility establishes a number of benefits for individual students such as free or discounted college-admissions tests, AP exams, and college applications; scholarship opportunities; and no- and low-cost access to technology and internet plans. In addition, the percentages of qualifying students at a school are used as a measure to secure additional federal funding (Title I) to support students and their education, promote family engagement, and provide additional technology and internet access at school. Title I funds pay for additional teachers, Parent Centers, additional learning opportunities for students, extra resources and devices, and more.

Coming home... ready to lead and learn



Dr. Calvin J. Watts
Superintendent

We begin this new school year with many new students, teachers, programs, and, yes, even a new superintendent. I am so excited

to return to Gwinnett County Public Schools, and thank the Board, our staff, and our community for the trust you have placed in me.

As an educator, I refer to GCPS as my professional home. I spent 13 years in Gwinnett before becoming a superintendent in Washington, near my hometown. In my six years leading the Kent school district, I partnered with others to pursue academic excellence and overcome challenges, making decisions based on the needs of students. Equally important, we conducted district business with integrity and transparency. Know that these traits—integrity and

transparency—coupled with my love of learning and a focus on inclusion and belonging, are central to my core values... as a leader, educator, and person. They are a part of who I am and key to how I conduct myself and how I will lead GCPS.

My role is one of servant leadership... taking care of people, leading with love and empathy, and being accountable. Some may look at accountability through a negative lens. However, I believe that accountability is about doing the *right* thing in the *right* way for the *right* reason. In our school district, we have nearly 180,000 “reasons”... our students.

In this issue of *Essentials*, you will read about many ways GCPS is accountable to its stakeholders... from our work to safeguard the well-being of children and address learning gaps experienced during the pandemic to our resolve to ensure student and staff safety while keeping schools open for in-person learning.

Accountability permeates the district, extending to the work the Board and I are doing as a governance team. Recently, Cognia—the agency that accredits GCPS—conducted a [special review](#), which resulted in no change to the district’s accreditation, but highlighted a few areas in which we can improve. That is the nature of accountability, allowing us to learn and grow so that we can better fulfill our responsibilities.

As part of my focus on accountability, I want to learn more about the GCPS community. I hope to meet many of you during my [Look, Listen, and Learn Tour](#) as I visit our schools and other facilities. More importantly, I look forward to working with you to strengthen our ongoing improvement efforts. Our work to improve this very good school district will have a positive impact, benefitting our students, schools, and community.

It’s good to be home!

Superintendent Dr. Calvin J. Watts



New Seckinger HS to anchor theme cluster

Gwinnett’s newest high school will open in **August of 2022**, anchoring the district’s first theme cluster. The feeder pattern for [Seckinger HS](#) will include **Harmony**, **Ivy Creek**, and **Patrick** elementaries, and **Jones MS**. Most students in the new cluster are coming from the **Mill Creek Cluster**, with some students from the **Mountain View Cluster**.

Seckinger HS will offer a next-generation learning experience in which students can excel in academics, athletics, and the arts. Students will choose an area of concentration for their learning within three broad areas—the humanities, international business, and advanced sciences and technology (with a focus on *artificial intelligence*, also called AI)—or they can choose a more personalized high school course of study.

Whatever their chosen area of study, all students at Seckinger will have embedded AI learning and skill development throughout their coursework. These learning experiences will promote future-readiness skills like project management, design thinking, ethics in decision-making, and effective teamwork. Students will have the opportunity to apply their learning and skills to a real-world challenge of their choice through a capstone experience.

“Our students will be able to shine in innovative academic programs, athletics, fine arts, extracurricular activities, student associations, leadership opportunities, service organizations, and more,” says Principal **Memorie Reesman**. “We’re excited to be building a new cluster and a strong learning community!”

Seckinger Cluster elementary schools and the middle school will be preparing students for their high school experience by introducing AI and future-ready skills. Because of the clusterwide approach that will be taken, students will be on a K–12 journey that focuses on preparing them to be globally prepared and competitive in a rapidly evolving, technology-rich world.



GCPS wants to hear from you!

You’re invited to take part in an [online survey](#) to identify topics that are of interest to you when it comes to our schools and public education. Later this year, GCPS will launch a new web engagement tool called [ThoughtExchange](#) that will allow district leaders to hear directly from our community on these key topics. ThoughtExchange allows participants to share thoughts confidentially... ensuring that all voices are heard and that diverse views can come to light around a shared topic of concern.

Find the survey on [the website](#) or use this QR code. The survey will remain open through **Oct. 12**.



Gwinnett County Public Schools

437 Old Peachtree Road, NW

Suwanee, GA 30024-2978



THE 2021 GWINNETT COUNTY
BOARD OF EDUCATION:

Everton Blair, Jr., *Chairman*

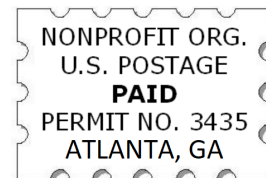
Karen Watkins, *Vice Chairman*

Steven B. Knudsen

Dr. Mary Kay Murphy

Dr. Tarece Johnson

Dr. Calvin J. Watts, *Superintendent*



It is the policy of Gwinnett County Public Schools not to discriminate on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, national origin, age, or disability in any employment practice, educational program, or any other program, activity, or service.

Gwinnett County Public Schools wishes to meet the needs of all of its students and families. If any member of your family needs assistance or has any questions regarding mobility impaired issues or handicapped access, please contact the principal of your local school.

Bulletin Board

Find 2021–22 calendar online

If you're looking for a copy of the current school year calendar, head to the [Calendar section of the website](#). Upcoming dates of interest for students include breaks for fall (**Oct. 7–11**), winter (**Dec. 20–Jan. 5**), and spring (**April 4–8**); a full week off for Thanksgiving (**Nov. 22–26**); and an ending date of **May 25**. Other student holidays include MLK Jr. Day (**Jan. 17**) and a long weekend **Feb. 17–21**. Make sure the remaining scheduled Digital Learning Days—**Oct. 20**, **Nov. 9**, **Jan. 25**, **March 2**, and **March 22**—also are on your radar. On these scheduled DLDs, our bus drivers will be on the road and at every bus stop to deliver meals prepared by School Nutrition Program staff, ensuring that our students have a nutritious breakfast and lunch to fuel their learning during the asynchronous school day. On DLDs, students access lessons in eCLASS but do not have virtual class time with their teachers. Watch for the 2022–23 calendar later this fall.

District continues commitment to school safety

School safety and communication with parents continue to be a priority for GCPS. Safety measures include:





- Rollout of the [Raptor tool](#) to strengthen the visitor management process at the school level, screening school visitors against national sex offender database.
- Expansion of **surveillance cameras** in our high school stadiums.

- GCPS' **91 School Resources Officers** (SROs) monitor campuses; educate students, staff, and families on safety issues; and work with school administrators on school safety plans.
- Our **Confidential Tip Line**—770-822-6513—allows users to call or text information on school safety.
- **SchoolMessenger** is used to notify staff and families of emergencies, school closings, and other school information. (Messages from GCPS come from the number 1-844-248-6644.)

Ready to SHINE as a GCPS employee?

GCPS is hiring for a range of support positions with excellent benefits. Learn how you can SHINE with GCPS as a [special education paraprofessional](#), [bus driver](#), [school nutrition worker](#), [substitute teacher](#), or [custodian](#) and apply today!

connect to Your Schools

- Keep up with news and events on the website and social media. Find these     symbols at the bottom of the home page at www.gcpsk12.org.
- Read [Communiqué](#) online, subscribe to [GCPS eNews](#), and tune in to the [“Teaching Gwinnett” podcast](#).
- Use the [GCPS TV app](#) on Apple, Android, Amazon Fire, and Roku devices to watch live and on-demand content; stream online at gcpsstv.org; and watch programming on cable providers.