

The Journey to Sustainable Success: The City Schools of Decatur Charter Story





City Schools of Decatur (CSD) is a unique independent Georgia school system, ten minutes from the city limits of Atlanta. The system serves approximately 3000 students in seven schools in the county seat of suburban DeKalb County. Students come from within the 4.2 square miles of the Decatur city limits, and the district accepts tuition-paying students from DeKalb County. In the 2010-2011 school year, over 120 students paid tuition. The CSD school system is attractive to a broad range of students, gifted as well as challenged. Its location, in a small, diverse, thriving metropolitan community, its suite of thoughtfully-selected educational processes, policies and structures, and well-implemented interventions which target students' needs, provide a high-quality public education with a broad base of community support.

The system, as a whole, and all of its schools make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), a measure of year-to-year student achievement on statewide assessments required by the Federal No Child Left Behind Act. Schools serve a student population that is 39% Black/African Americans, 52% white, 5% multi-racial, 2% Hispanic/Latino, and 2% Asian/Pacific Islander. 28% of students come from homes that qualify for free and reduced price lunches, and 11% qualify for special education services. 2% speak English as a second language.

The district operates a Early Childhood Learning Center, serving primarily children from birth to age four. Those students move into three primary schools, on to one 4th/5th grade academy, to one middle school, and finally into one high school. A Career Technical and Agriculture Education (CTAE) program is embedded within the high school and middle school, preparing students to pursue careers that require post-secondary training and college degrees, with opportunities for joint and dual enrollment with DeKalb Technical College. 69% of high school students participate in CTAE, with more than a third taking two or more CTAE classes per year. Both the Early Learning and CTAE programs have been designed, developed and implemented, with community support, since 2004. Over the past four years CSD students' SAT scores have stood between 1534 and 1577, well above the state and national averages, and higher than any school district in the state with similar student demographics. For two years running between 2007 and 2009, Decatur High School won the Governor's Cup in Class AA for high schools for greatest gains on SAT scores. DHS was also named an Advanced Placement Challenge and Advanced Placement Merit School in Georgia (Only 10 high schools in Georgia were honored in more than one category.) The district's graduation rate, 88.7%, is well above the state average, with about five percentage points of difference in the graduation rate of white and African-American students, a gap that CSD continues to focus on closing.

95% of CSD 3rd graders and 94% of 5th graders meet or exceed state reading standards. 81% of 3rd graders and 92% of 5th graders meet or exceed math standards. 94% of students meet or exceed the standards on the Georgia High School Writing Test. The district continues to close the gap in achievement. In 2009 70% of black students in 7th grade met or exceeded standards in math, compared to 98% of white students in the same grade. Closing the achievement gap is, and has been, a continued and deep strategic focus of the district.

In 2004, CSD transformed its K-3 elementary schools to an Expeditionary Learning (EL) reform model, a unique educational approach using applied, hands-on methods of learning. The model supports students at every skill level in mastering rigorous academic standards while taking active roles in the classroom and in their own learning. The students are prepared to succeed on high-stakes tests, while engaging as critical thinkers, problem solvers and active citizens. Elementary students then move into the Glennwood Academy for 4th and 5th graders, an International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years Programme, which connects to Renfroe Middle Schools' Middle Years IB Programme. Decatur High School continues the Middle Years Programme through 10th grade. These comprehensive academic programs emphasize mastery in the traditional academic disciplines while encouraging an international perspective. After implementing these high-impact academic programs, in 2008, the district made the bold decision to become the state's first charter school district.



"The offer of flexibility attracted us to the Charter District opportunity in 2008," recalls Dr. Phyllis Edwards, a veteran superintendent, with a strong track record of effective and innovative district leadership in Florida, who assumed leadership of the system in 2003, amid a host of challenges:

When we began to think about Charter district status we were already into accountability, and were not afraid of it. We had successfully implemented changes like the EL and IB models and wanted to do more to serve our unique student population. We were deeply focused on closing our achievement gap, and had learned what else we needed to do. We needed to make changes to accommodate our unique student needs, changes that normally would have required special approval by the state.

We had learned to work together as a school system over the first five years, rather than acting as a system of schools. We managed such difficult changes as reconfiguring the district, closing schools and in 2007 providing the federal government the evidence needed to lift the desegregation order that had been in place since 1965.

The challenges to the school system in 2003, when I began my tenure, included funding seven extremely small elementary schools. The millage rate was rising and little to no attention was paid to the functioning of the middle school or high school. In fact, CSD was losing 25% of the enrollment by fourth grade, as parents took their children out to private school early so they would not have to attend the middle school.

There was no emphasis on moving children into a quality learning experience as early as possible and little continuity among schools in how or what students were taught. The system was losing enrollment year to year and the concern was whether the CSD would be able to survive as an independent city school. Academically, CSD white students were performing well on state tests; however, drilling down in the district performance data showed me that a major gap existed between the results for white students as compared to African American/black students, reflecting a nation-wide achievement gap that has existed for over two decades. I knew that re-

search showed that academic performance is not a factor of race, but of expectations, support, economic resources and other resources, and especially equity in access to quality teaching. (EdTrust, 2003). I knew we could do better, for all CSD students.

The move to Charter District began in January, 2007 when the state announced its plan to grant charter status to districts with a petition deadline of November 15. Dr. Edwards wanted to bring a draft to a Board retreat in August. She challenged her central office team to pull together a draft of the 78 questions the state Board of Education required.

The team worked furiously to answer the multitude of requirements, providing evidence of the districts' ability to function effectively under the new arrangement. As the first district in the state to apply, and one of only two districts in the nation that had attempted this change, the team did not have a sample application to guide their work. Dr. Van Soelen recalls, "We were compelled by the opportunity to do the right things for our kids. We wanted to use interventions and arrangements that fit their distinctive needs and potential, requirements that we and their parents and community understand better than anyone outside our district. We were willing to work to gain a charter that would allow us to do that without asking the State Board of Education or Department of Education for permission each time we wanted to make an improvement, while maintaining state funding for each student."

In their August 2008 School Board retreat, the governance team discussed the merits of the flexibility of charter status, given the unique needs and strengths of their small school district. The board discussed one of the central tenants of the charter proposition: giving up some board control on decisions to each School Leadership Team (SLT) and a new System Charter Leadership Team (SCLT) in return for more flexibility granted to district by the state to operate in ways that would better benefit students.

The School Board held two hearings, giving the local community information and gaining input. Edwards and her team offered education sessions at the school system office on several evenings beginning 6:30 p.m., sometimes not ending until after 11:00 p.m. One room was open for the team to provide information and education about the proposed changes. In an adjacent room the team accepted and recorded comments and input, and kept a running list of questions, which were continuously and transparently posted on the website. The team conducted nine evening sessions and developed 25 pages of Frequently-Asked Questions. Questions ranged from concerns that students would have to change schools, impacts on teachers, budgets, operations, and the continued ability for students to attend and pay tuition. The system leaders answered questions, allaying concerns and pointing citizens to potential tax legislation and other factors that could impact the district far more negatively than the charter. Benefits and potential trade-offs were examined and communicated widely through the CSD web-site and other district-wide communications.





“The community input and engagement up front helped us get it right.” Dr. Edwards affirms.

This was an opportunity to lead in an unknown area. Most people were struggling with what it meant and might look like to become one of the first state approved Charter systems. After 22 drafts, we had a final charter petition, and our School Board approved it.

After a tremendous amount of work the 500-plus page petition was ready to submit by the November 15 deadline. The district has asked for a blanket waiver from all state Board rules and policies. Some practices were deliberately kept in place, one example being Fair Dismissal of Teachers, not desiring to negatively impact its solid teaching staff.

After receiving feedback from districts that the process was challenging and time-consuming, the Georgia State Board of Education extended the deadline to January 2008. The time extension allowed CSD to conduct additional meetings, resolve last minute challenges and submit the petition on December 21, 2007. From January to July, 2008 the state reviewed the CSD application, which was the only petition submitted that passed the GaDOE Charter Division review with no revisions, a testament to the effort and meticulous detail of the plan and quality of the process proposed by CSD.

The heart of the charter petition is represented by a three-column chart (Figure 1) which shows the specific responsibility of the Board of Education, the School Leadership Team (SLT) of each school and the Charter School Leadership Team (SCLT).

FIGURE 1

City Schools of Decatur: No School Leadership Team (SLT) may make decisions that affect other schools within the system.

The following chart summarizes the roles and responsibilities of the governing bodies:

School Board	System Charter Leadership Team	School Leadership Team
<p><i>The Board will continue to make decisions in the following areas and have final jurisdiction over:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall fiscal management (including but not limited to purchasing and contracting) • Final development and approval of the annual system budget • Fiscal expenditures beyond the school’s allocations • Legal oversight • Fair/non-discriminatory personnel practices • System Strategic Plan, including overall goals and objectives of the charter system • Final approval regarding school improvement plans • Calendar • Curriculum, assessment, and school reform models • Overall safety/maintenance of buildings • School nutrition • Transportation • Decisions related to one school that will impact another school (The Impact Principle) • Existing and future Board policy • Final approval regarding personnel, including hiring and termination • Attendance zones • Appeals • Facilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessing the effectiveness of the system charter; • Sharing information and innovations from each school; • Focusing on system goals and outcomes; • Providing oversight for the systemic nature of the School Leadership Teams; • Developing an Administrator appraisal process; • Mediating between School Leadership Teams and other entities; • Discussing possible charter revisions; and • Provide oversight and recommendations to the Superintendent on issues submitted by the School Leadership Teams with a scope and impact beyond the local school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommend personnel for submission to the Superintendent for hire; • Determine use of funding for school operations, other than personnel and benefits; • Develop, approve, and monitor the continuous school improvement planning process (three year plan with annual reviews and updates that includes plans to foster student and teacher development); • Review assessment data and use it for decision-making purposes; • Assist with school accreditation and improvement reviews and assessments, such as SACS; • Review and approve the implementation of any state waiver (within the School Leadership Team’s purview) considering the following impacts impact will be considered in this order: impact on the student(s) in question, students in the affected class, students in the affected grade, teacher in the affected class, students in the entire school, teachers in the entire school, and the families in the entire school. • Review and approve changes to its bylaws; and • Recommend school needs to the Board during the annual budget process.



The change to allow more local decision-making, without applying a totally site-based decision model, was widely supported, but it also caused community concern that the schools would shift back to being “silos” like they were before Dr. Edwards arrived. Working with the School Board, Dr. Edwards and her Central Office Leadership Team (COLT) devised two interventions. The first was intensive training of the SLTs, SCLT, COLT, principals and the School Board, and the second was what Dr. Edwards termed *The Impact Principle*:

I told them that they cannot do something that impacts another school. This helped them focus on the implications of their local actions. A central office member was included on each SLT to ensure good communication and consideration of intended and unintentional impacts of actions and outcomes at each school upon other schools.

The first year we trained everyone. We brought in Debbie Pepin, a private charter school consultant from Austin, Texas. She helped train team members to realize they have legal responsibility to keep CSD open and meeting standards, with a commitment to taking school leadership seriously. She told us that the first years of governance are difficult, and we would have to take baby steps to make big changes later.

Looking back, we took a leap of faith based on the vision of our School Board, our employees’ capabilities and our strong community base. We worked to balance loosening authority at the top against becoming too diffused in our focus.

The SCLT (System Charter Leadership Team) and SLTs (School Leadership Teams) were trained how to address “chatter”, the term the CSD team used to define the continual local discourse about education. They learned that charter status does not allow private deals with parents, community members, or other teachers or leaders. Principals and team members became aware of the boundaries of talk outside meetings, so they did not violate Open Meeting laws. All in leadership roles were taught that being good spokespeople for their schools is the best role they can play, speaking in a united voice with all other members. The duties and authority of SLTs were made clear: 60% governance, 20% advisory and 20% participation.

Dr. Edwards recalls the early indicators of successful adoption of the charter model:

A high point came in the first year when we saw each school start to choose their area of focus. The middle school chose to focus on gifted service. The high school SLT did all the research on school scheduling to develop a hybrid block schedule that was well accepted. Clairemont Elementary focused on Math, which ultimately resulted in forming the Clairemont Saturday Math Academy.

As with all changes, at times people pushed on issues or initiatives that touched or exceeded their leadership boundaries. "My role was to listen and help them see what they could and could not do legally," Dr. Edwards reflects, "while working to attract, promote and develop the right leadership talent to sustain our progress."

Knowing that the small district might lose talented leaders due to limited promotional opportunities, she approached the Middle School about moving their principal, Bruce Roaden, who had been very effective leading the middle school, to the central office to head up Community Relations, and about promoting a high-performing Assistant Principal, Derrick Thomas, to lead the middle school. "Prior to Charter status I could have made these important decisions myself, with the approval of the School Board; instead, I had to meet with the SLT and plead the case for the change. They backed the appointments."

Teachers, the SLT and community members were pleased with the decision, and each leader is performing well in his new role. "The process is illustrative of how giving up control through the charter process has gained a level of understanding and engagement that adds value to the decision-making process," Dr. Edwards reminds.

There are abundant examples of the work at all levels that is proceeding effectively under the new structures and policies. As the school population grew, reconfiguring schools, yet again, was looming as a need. Dr. Edwards and the School Board reached out to the SLT in each school. Each SLT identified members to join a district team, sometimes tapping community members. The team developed a plan that resulted in repurposing the current 4/5 grade Academy and plans for building a new 4/5 Academy at Fifth Avenue. When the district calendar needed revision, the SLTs each appointed a community representative to work together, crafting recommendations for the School Board. Their work resulted in a new extended calendar schedule for the 2010-2011 school year that was implemented without a single complaint to the central office.

The middle and high school SLTs worked together to support development of a common assessment policy, which became part of the Pupil Progression Plan, a comprehensive set of procedures and requirements for promotion and graduation focused on providing each student with the maximum opportunity to succeed in school and gain an educational foundation to become college and career-ready. The plan sets expectations for practices that allow each student to achieve a level of academic proficiency and social and emotional development each year that will enable them to benefit from instruction at the next higher level.

At the same time the SLTs, Central Office Leadership Team (COLT) and SCLT guided the adoption of standards-based grading and report cards. This change gives students precise ratings against rubrics, or descriptive numerical scales of performance, which guide understanding of progress against the performance criteria of grade-level academic standards of the state curriculum, the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS). The teams helped parents, students and stakeholders understand the shift from decades of letter grades (A,B,C,D or F, or number grades, such as a grade of 93 in Geometry) to a numerical rating with performance descriptions. Before charter status the district would have had to request and receive a waiver from the state to make the change. Under the Charter the district only had to focus internally to make the change, shifting time and effort from filing requests with the state to designing and communicating improved practices.

Aligned with this expectation, CSD tested the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) Assessment as a growth indicator for some students in grades 2-7 for reading, language arts, and mathematics in the 2007 to 2008 school year. All grades 2-8 students were assessed in the 2008-2009 school year. In the 2009-2010 school year, MAP was expanded to all students in grades K-10. The computer-based, adaptive assessments allow the school to determine if students meet or exceed their individual growth targets. Resulting data from MAP guides selection and application of interventions to support each student's growth. Renfroe Middle School, whose SLT had chosen to focus on gifted students, changed the gifted school model to heterogeneously group students in the school so that gifted students were not moving together through the school day without interaction with all their school peers. Using MAP data, they showed through previous year's data that gifted students who were heterogeneously grouped performed better. Based on that data, they found ways to accelerate some of the gifted students, especially those who were very gifted in mathematics, while keeping all students learning together in the same classrooms day to day. The changes served all gifted students well, accelerated the top-performing students, and gave struggling students the interactions with their gifted peers to pull them up to meet standards. The Renfroe SLT made the decisions and supported the changes in the school, presenting the plan to the School Board in an information-only session.

In keeping with its strategic intention to provide meaningful, engaging work for students, the district implemented senior projects. Each 12th grade student is required to develop a "capstone" project which not only demonstrates their mastery of specific standards in the state curriculum, but also shows their proficiency in skills critical for students' college and career success, such as complex communication, problem solving and innovation. Initially some parents and students resisted the assignments, seeing them as extra work. After the students completed their projects, they individually presented them to a four-member panel of community members, also demonstrating their ability to present effectively. As students and community members experienced the shared learning from the presentations and witnessed the students' impressive demonstrations, the value of the projects was recognized, and support for the learning experiences increased dramatically.

Performance assessment with coaching and feedback is central to the district's ongoing improvement plan. The district has piloted and adopted the CLASS Keys, the state's evolving teacher evaluation system. In addition to using the evaluation system for providing formative assessments with feedback, the CLASS Keys have been adopted as the heart of professional learning within the system. Each teacher has over 30 hours of development annually focused on the 26 elements of the Class Keys, with deep focus on the elements which data analysis shows are areas for improvement. In addition, teachers support each other in observing each other in practice, scoring each other against the rubrics embedded in the CLASS Keys, using copies of the instrument printed on pink paper. Dubbed "pinking", teachers may request their peers share their ratings of their pink visit, or the observing teachers may use the assessment solely as personal learning to identify effective practices they can learn and use. The



SCLT is guiding developing a new principal evaluation, a process that would have been the purview of the central office prior to the change to charter status. Throughout the system, the momentum gained from flexibility is building.

Schools are emphasizing foreign language proficiency as a part of their IB Programme focus on reading, writing, speaking and listening in a foreign language, creating readiness for foreign language requirements in the 10th grade and beyond. CSD claims the distinction as the only school district in Georgia to provide online foreign language assessment in grades 5 and 8. The district added a parent satisfaction assessment in the 2009-2010 school year. During the 2010-2011 school year, the district will pilot the Gallup organization's *Grade 5-12 Student Engagement Assessment* (Gallup's comprehensive research points to strong correlation between engagement in organizations and performance and mission achievement.) This effort correlates to a portion of the Charter that includes a way for stakeholders to "grade" the district on a five-point scale, creating a continuous feedback loop to guide engagement, improvement and innovation. *Parent Portal* through *Infinite Campus*, online resources for students, parents and other stakeholders provide 24/7 access, tools, information and support.

"Looking back, I am proud of the effort, learning and collaboration that were part of our transition to Charter District status," Dr. Edward reflects:

Over the past eight years we have come so far, and implemented the magnitude, scale and quality of research-based practices and innovative solutions that will help us to achieve our vision to be recognized as one of the top ten community schools in the nation. However, I sometimes wish everyone could fully understand the value of those changes and the breadth and depth of our shared progress, relative to other school systems. What we have accomplished together, undergirded by the Charter District change, is tremendous.

My dreams for the future include building our ability and discipline to remain on course, acting as a system, and not ever returning to acting as six small fiefdoms. I want each school to own the power that comes from an effective SLT, using their data to make decisions because they know better than anyone what needs to be done, and what to do next. My sincere hope is that all of us vested in the success of our system, schools and students will embrace the gift of diversity we have in our system. I hope we can reach out to the people who do not yet participate, or who may feel disenfranchised, and draw in their input and engage them.

One of my greatest dreams is to engage parents and stakeholders, with more-than-adequate financial, social and emotional resources to support their own students, in donating resources to apply to equip those students who lack the resources to come to school every day ready and able to learn. In so doing, every student would benefit, and our community. As a superintendent who is in the later phase of my career, I want to build and sustain a legacy of leadership and continuity of direction that will outlast my service, and allow the system to continue on a path that will equip our students for success in the rest of the 21st century.





The essence of the story of the CSD journey to transform to charter status is that the months of development of the Charter Petition helped the district team and its stakeholders to discover “The Why”, They determined *if* they wanted to make the changes, not because they *had* to do it, but because they *wanted* to do it, and *why*. The process, with its deep, purposeful dialogue and development of shared decision making called all concerned to shared purpose. On-going appreciative inquiry, purposeful attention to sustainability and focus on 21st century skills helps to move all involved, not just to find common ground, but to reach together for higher ground for the benefit of every student. Given the freedom to do what they believe to be the right things for students, City Schools of Decatur is building a model that works best for all their students and contributes to long-term community quality of life.



City Schools of Decatur Board

