

About the Finalist

Gwinnett County Public Schools Georgia

DISTRICT PROFILE

Superintendent

J. Alvin Wilbanks has been superintendent of Gwinnett County Public Schools since 1996 and is one of the nation's longest-serving schools chiefs. Wilbanks started as an industrial arts teacher in Georgia's DeKalb County in 1964, rising to assistant principal and principal. He joined Gwinnett County in 1982 as director of vocational and technical education before transitioning to assistant superintendent while simultaneously serving as founder and president of Gwinnett Technical College. He gave up the college presidency upon his appointment to district superintendent. Wilbanks was named 2005 Georgia Superintendent of the Year and was one of four finalists for the 2005 National Superintendent of the

Year. He earned bachelor's and master's of education degrees from the University of Georgia and an education specialist degree from Georgia State University.

Governance

Five-member board, elected by geographic region to serve staggered, four-year terms. The board is marked by its members' long tenures—the newest member has served for nine years, and the longest-serving member has been on the board since the early 1970s.

Teachers Union

Georgia is a right-to-work state.

\$1.76 billion

annual budget

\$7,548

per pupil expenditure

14

rank among U.S. school districts by enrollment

169,150

students

11,580

teachers

132

schools

16%

English Language Learners

55%

eligible for free or reduced-price
school lunch

Student Demographics

31%

black

28%

white

27%

Hispanic

10%

Asian

4%

other

(reflects 2013-14 school year data)

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Gwinnett County outperforms similar Georgia districts in all subjects and grade levels.

In 2013, Gwinnett County outscored other districts serving students with similar family incomes in elementary, middle and high school reading, math, and science, according to The Broad Prize methodology, which estimates expected proficiency rates given poverty levels of students within the district.

A greater percentage of black students are reaching advanced academic levels in Gwinnett County than in other districts in Georgia.

In 2013, Gwinnett County ranked among the top 10 percent of districts statewide for the percentage of black students at all education levels who performed at the highest achievement level (advanced proficiency) in reading, math and science on state-mandated tests. For example, 40 percent of Gwinnett County's black elementary school students reached the advanced academic level on the state science assessment, compared with 20 percent of black elementary school students in the rest of the state.

A greater percentage of low-income students are reaching advanced academic levels in Gwinnett County than in other Georgia districts.

In 2013, Gwinnett ranked among the top 20 percent of districts statewide for the percentage of low-

income students at all education levels performing at the highest achievement level (advanced proficiency) in reading, math, and science. For example, 33 percent of Gwinnett County's low-income middle school students reached the advanced academic level on the state math assessment, compared with 19 percent of low-income middle school students in the rest of the state.

Gwinnett County high school seniors had the highest SAT participation rate among the 75 Broad Prize-eligible districts.

In 2013, 88 percent of all Gwinnett County seniors took the SAT, including 90 percent of black seniors and 70 percent of Hispanic seniors. This compares to an average participation rate of 43 percent for black students and 40 percent for Hispanic students among all eligible districts.

Gwinnett County ranked among the top 10 percent of eligible districts in AP participation.

In 2013, 37 percent of Gwinnett County juniors and seniors took at least one Advanced Placement exam, a statistic that placed the district among the top 10 percent of districts eligible for The Broad Prize. While higher participation usually yields lower passing rates, Gwinnett County ranked in the top 30 percent among eligible districts, with 58 percent of AP exams earning passing scores.

EXEMPLARY PRACTICES RELATED TO STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

The district is led by a highly effective superintendent.

Gwinnett County Public Schools has enjoyed rather unprecedented stability in leadership. The superintendent, J. Alvin Wilbanks, is one of the nation's longest-serving school leaders, with a 18-year tenure and counting. The composition of the school board—a frequently changing governance body in most school systems—has remained unchanged in nine years, with one member serving since President Nixon was in office. That continuity of leadership—due, in part, to the decision by school board members to run for multiple terms rather than seek other political office—has resulted in consistent improvement in Georgia's largest school system.

Wilbanks' careful and deliberative leadership style has helped shepherd Gwinnett County through a period of dramatic demographic change. As the district's student population went from primarily white to racially diverse and as the average income of Gwinnett families declined, Wilbanks built trust with stakeholders and created a strong leadership team to keep schools on track to attain high achievement for all students.

Much of that trust comes from Wilbanks' insistence on piloting ideas and programs before adopting them. Rather than rushing implementation for new programs, Wilbanks takes the slow-and-steady approach. In 2012, he implemented a new plan for integrating technology into the classroom—eCLASS, the district's digital Content, Learning, Assessment and Support System—by identifying pilot schools to launch the program and slowly building confidence among his teachers and administrators. Teacher feedback has been critical to the success of the program, and the district regularly notifies administrators about updates to eCLASS. District leaders also review usage analytics to monitor the progress of the rollout. By using this method of building and sustaining programs, Wilbanks has been able to implement initiatives for the long term.

Wilbanks also knows when to step aside. He refrains from interfering in day-to-day management unless an issue arises. The superintendent's problem-solving style is characterized as methodical and effective. For example, when the district has too many students in one school, Wilbanks leads a rezoning approach that looks at possible geographic boundaries and balancing student enrollment by maximizing classroom space in facilities, while also including input from the community.

Wilbanks values others who can solve problems themselves, so he tends to hire leaders with strong decision-making skills. He enjoys a very positive, productive working relationship with the county school board, by all accounts a rapport built on integrity and trust.

The district has strong board leadership and organizational coherence.

The stability that Wilbanks provides is matched by Gwinnett County's board of education. The newest member of the board—to which members are elected by popular vote every four years—has served for 10 years, reflecting a deep personal and community commitment to education. The longest-standing board member has served for 42 years who, with a tenure that dates back almost to the civil rights era, is a passionate advocate for students of color.

Given their long-standing working relationships with one another and with Wilbanks, the Gwinnett district's board has developed a strong collaborative spirit and an ability to make decisions efficiently, even on contentious issues. Prior to votes, the board discusses key issues and works to come to a consensus, presenting a united voice to the community.

The board gives the community a voice, as well. Each spring, board members host meetings in each district. These meetings allow the superintendent and board to provide key information about the

school system and its initiatives and allow board members to hear directly from constituents. A key topic in recent years has been the system's growth and plans for technology to support teaching and learning. Since the 1990s, the board has regularly asked for and received voter approval of a special-purpose local-option sales tax for the school district.

The district develops and sustains effective instructional leaders.

Training programs for teachers, teacher leaders and other educators who want to become school leaders in Gwinnett are extensive and evident of the district's commitment to cultivating a strong leadership corps. In addition to subscribing to external leadership training, the district runs its own program, the Quality-Plus Leader Academy, which includes a program for future principals and assistant principals.

An Aspiring Leader Program, tailored for aspiring assistant principals, focuses on instructional leadership and professionalism, school climate, public relations, human resources management, teacher evaluation, planning and assessment and organizational management. Participants review case studies, engage in role-playing exercises and join panel discussions and other collaborative learning scenarios. Upon completion of the program, candidates undergo a leadership screening process that includes interviews by central office staff and current principals.

The Aspiring Principals Program goes even further: candidates collaborate to write school-improvement plans, resolve crisis situations and shape school budgets. Each would-be principal assumes a 90-day residency where they work alongside a successful veteran principal who serves as their mentor. They also work with a leader mentor who serves as a facilitator and supports them through the process. Another Gwinnett County program prepares classroom teachers to be instructional coaches and to assume other leadership roles, like department chair.

Once Gwinnett County's principals are in place, they have several opportunities to collaborate and seek support from their peers. Principals meet at least monthly by education level and school cluster to share pressing issues. Principals often collaborate informally, calling one another to discuss common challenges and even visiting each other's schools to observe effective practices.

The district has world-class financial management.

The district is financially sound with strong financial planning, protecting teachers from budget cuts and keeping the focus on student achievement in times of recession.

The Great Recession was difficult on schools across the country, and though Gwinnett County was no exception, the district relied on its smart financial stewardship to weather the crisis. Beginning in 2003 through the current year, the district has experienced state austerity cuts that have reduced education dollars. From 2011 to 2013, Gwinnett survived consecutive years of declining revenues as the state of Georgia reduced education dollars and federal stimulus funding ended. Faced with significant budget cuts, the district froze salaries, cut operating expenses, instituted furlough days and hiring freezes—but saved every teacher job and worked hard to maintain student learning gains. Because Georgia is not a union state, no collective bargaining was required, but the district still had to meet or exceed the state salary schedule. The district has cut costs in recent years by keeping fleet vehicles a year longer than in past years and by moving to online professional development, saving travel costs and speaking fees. Through it all, the district retained its AAA bond rating from Moody's and Standard & Poor's and devotedly maintains a 5 to 10 percent reserve fund.

The Gwinnett district has many checks in place to ensure individual schools do not exceed their budgets: school and district budgets are reviewed monthly, large expenditures are monitored closely, and the district is always hunting for cost savings. Each year, the district engages in an annual

financial forecast based on demographics, legislative processes and other factors, and it finishes its budget three months before the fiscal year begins and makes it available online. Underscoring its financial acumen, Gwinnett County strives to make all budget decisions with student learning foremost in mind.

The district helps educators access data and use it to drive classroom learning.

The Gwinnett district strives to make data as actionable as possible—rather than creating mounds of information, the district focuses on giving educators helpful knowledge about their students—from achievement data to attendance to school climate information—and how best to help them learn.

Gwinnett principals, teachers and instructional coaches receive training on how best to interpret data. Easily accessible webinars help Gwinnett staff learn the nuts and bolts of the district’s data system, as do in-person training and summer sessions. Gwinnett principals offer more specific advice to their teaching staffs. Schools have local technology coordinators on hand to help teachers access and interpret data, and instructional coaches also receive additional data training. All principals can request special coaching in cases of new data releases or any other assistance schools may need.

The training helps Gwinnett educators maneuver through the district’s tailor-made digital applications, MyStudent, MySchool and MyDistrict. Each program is updated daily and varies by level of detail. While MyDistrict helps administrators study graduation and dropout rates, financial metrics and stakeholder surveys, MyStudent gives teachers information updated daily about the academic progress of each of their students, plus pertinent additional information like demographic characteristics. Under the district’s eCLASS initiative, data from a variety of resources

can be provided safely and securely to teachers in manageable formats.

The district has superior facilities and operations management.

Gwinnett County ensures that every aspect of the student learning environment is professional and designed to focus on the classroom experience. Maintenance and operations staff at Gwinnett County Public Schools hold Wilbanks’ motto—“there are those who teach and those who support those who teach”—close to heart. As part of the category of those who support teachers by creating safe and clean learning environments, Gwinnett County’s operations workers have a deep culture of professionalism and dedication. The district’s schools are spotless and secure, leaving educators and students free to focus on what matters most: teaching and learning.

Overseeing 132 schools and 53 support facilities, the maintenance department sets its own performance indicators, working to keep costs low and response times fast—about 90 percent of work orders are completed on time. As a result, parents and students report that Gwinnett school facilities are uniformly immaculate and rarely wanting for repair.

Gwinnett operations are exemplary, with a 99 percent on-time rate for its 7,700 bus routes and an accident rate less than one-third of the state average. Gwinnett won a Georgia USDA Best Practice award in 2010 for promoting a healthy school environment, and another in 2012 for its Farm to School program, which provides healthy food to students while also supporting local farmers.

The district takes special pride in customer service. Staff are trained to make visitors feel welcome when they enter a school; each campus has a welcome desk that emphasizes that every public school is truly a home for the community, open to all.