

Gwinnett County Public Schools, Ga.

District Profile:

Rank among U.S. school districts (by size):	15
Number of schools:	110
Number of students:	155,618
Number of teachers:	11,760
Budget:	\$1.59 billion
Per pupil expenditure*:	\$8,851

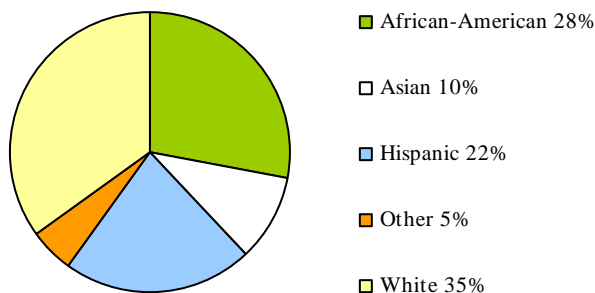
Teachers unions: Georgia is a non-union state.

Superintendent: J. Alvin Wilbanks was named chief executive officer and superintendent of Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS) in March 1996. At that time, he served concurrently as the district's assistant superintendent of human resources and continuous improvement and as president of Gwinnett Technical College, which he had opened and led since 1984.

Student characteristics:

Percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch:	46%
Percent of students designated as English language learners:	14%

Student demographics:



* Total expenditures per pupil in 2006-07. Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Student Achievement

- In 2008, Gwinnett outperformed other districts in Georgia serving students with similar family income levels in reading and math at all school levels (elementary, middle and high school), according to The Broad Prize methodology. In addition, between 2005 and 2008, Gwinnett showed greater improvement than other Georgia districts serving students with similar family income levels in reading at all school levels and in elementary and middle school math. Only four other Broad Prize-eligible school districts (out of the 93 with comparable data) did this well on both performance and improvement when compared to other districts in their states serving students with similar family income levels.
- In 2008, a higher percentage of Gwinnett's African-American, Hispanic and low-income students performed at the highest achievement level on the state assessment than their state counterparts in reading and math at all school levels, where a comparison was possible. Gwinnett's performance on this measure was the best of the 95 eligible districts with comparable data.
- Between 2005 and 2008, participation rates rose for African-American and Hispanic students taking the SAT, ACT and Advanced Placement exams, as did average scores for Hispanic students. For example, during this period, participation rates for African-American and Hispanic students taking the SAT exam increased by 9 percentage points and 7 percentage points, respectively.
- In recent years, Gwinnett has narrowed achievement gaps between both African-American and Hispanic students and white students in elementary and middle school reading and math. For example, between 2006 and 2008, the gap between Gwinnett's Hispanic students and their white peers narrowed by 9 percentage points in elementary school reading.

High-Impact Factors Behind Improved Student Achievement

- **Gwinnett focuses district-wide resources to support teachers in maintaining high expectations for students.**

“There are two kinds of people in this district,” says Gwinnett CEO/Superintendent J. Alvin Wilbanks, “those who teach and those who support those who teach. You don’t want to find yourself in another category.” At Gwinnett, the push for excellence starts with Wilbanks, who is backed by a like-minded school board that helped shape the district’s reforms over more than a decade.

A key Gwinnett philosophy is the refusal to accept low academic performance that may result from poverty or native language. Accepting low performance only dooms students to a school career of remedial lessons, Wilbanks believes. “I don’t know why schools ever got so far into remediation. Unless we get students who are behind into higher-level classes, such as AP, you’re never going to close the gaps. Forget remediation: talk acceleration.”

The proof of that philosophy is evident in the rates of poor and minority students in Gwinnett taking Advanced Placement courses. For example, in spring 2008, 12 percent of African-American students were enrolled in at least one AP course, compared to 8 percent in the state overall. At Berkmar High School, where 71 percent of students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, more students are accepting the AP challenge. The school’s AP participation climbed from 864 students in 2006-07 to 1,022 in 2007-08. During that same time period, the number of students scoring a passing score of 3 or higher went from 46.5 percent to 50.8 percent.

- **Gwinnett’s challenging curriculum meets the community’s needs and gives teachers the tools they need to succeed.**

In the mid-1990s, a new board and new superintendent decided to push for standards that exceeded state expectations and laid out what children should be learning in every subject and every grade. That curriculum, developed by more than 3,500 staff and community members, is called the Academic Knowledge and Skills (AKS). It is constantly updated and serves as the focal point for an intense drive to keep academic achievement high, even as the district undergoes dramatic demographic shifts.

“For any teacher here, instruction starts and lives and breathes through the AKS,” says the district’s director of science Mary Elizabeth Davis. “It’s the culture of the curriculum.”

In many school districts, the curriculum remains shrouded, but in Gwinnett County, most parents appear to be at least somewhat familiar with the AKS, which can be accessed online. “They get material about [the AKS] in backpack mail, online, in school news pages,” says School Board Chair Daniel Seckinger. “They are inundated with it.”

While some districts maintain common curriculum for core subjects, Gwinnett maintains AKS for *every subject in every grade level*. A modified AKS also serves English Language Learner (ELL) students. The AKS include state-mandated objectives (the state standards are listed in the AKS documents), as well as additional content standards for excellence.

To update the AKS, Gwinnett's teaching and learning department coordinates annual curriculum reviews, soliciting input from teachers, administrators, parents, community members, and representatives from local colleges and universities. The group's findings are presented to the Gwinnett Education Management System (GEMS) oversight committee, a group of 35 to 40 people, including teachers, principals, administrators, parents and community members. The GEMS committee then makes recommendations to the superintendent.

If 70 percent of the committee determines a skill to be essential, it is automatically included. If less than 50 percent consider the skill essential, it is automatically rejected. Items that fall in between are discussed until consensus is reached.

Additionally, the GEMS committee conducts a deeper review of one content area per year, returning to each content area about every five years. The district analyzes student achievement data to identify any curricular gaps the GEMS oversight committee needs to address.

In Gwinnett, the curriculum consists of two primary components: the AKS and instructional calendars that guide teachers through the AKS. These centralized instructional calendars, organized in nine-week cycles, serve as planning guides for teachers in every subject at every grade level. The instructional calendars are developed by teachers—convened by the central office—each summer and may be altered at the school and classroom levels based on student achievement data. For example, if a teacher finds that his students are mastering a concept faster than anticipated, he can move the class ahead to the next topic without being constrained by the timing suggested in the instructional calendars.

Nine-week, district-wide benchmark assessments determine whether students are meeting the AKS at the end of each calendar cycle. Gwinnett maintains an online database for teachers of juried lesson plans aligned to the AKS. The lesson plan format requires teachers to come up with an “essential question” for each lesson and to differentiate instruction for different student populations.

Lessons also include strategies to accelerate learning for those students who have exhibited mastery and a list of recommended and supplemental materials to use in advanced lessons. By using this online system, a teacher can automatically route those materials from the library directly to his or her classroom.

- **Gwinnett relies on a continuous improvement model that empowers all staff to grow professionally and increase student achievement.**

Everyone—from the superintendent to teachers—is held accountable for student results in Gwinnett. Teachers and school leaders set individual goals to improve and are evaluated using the district-developed Results-Based Evaluation System (RBES) that sets measurable goals for student achievement. For instance, student achievement results make up 70 percent of a principal’s evaluation. The remaining 30 percent is based on progress toward internal indicators of quality, such as stakeholder (students, parents, teachers, community and so on) satisfaction and school management.

The degree of Gwinnett’s progress toward its goals at any point during the year is evidenced by a formidable assessment system that measures and tracks student achievement. Gwinnett’s online database, “Elements,” provides all staff constant access to student assessment results for all tests. Data can be aggregated and disaggregated at the classroom, grade, school and district levels.

The district frequently evaluates progress toward goals at the student, teacher, and administrator levels. In fact, one of the district’s teaching strategies is to regularly assess student understanding, even throughout a single class period, using informal methods such as oral student responses. Over the course of the school year, tests range from teacher-developed “mini-assessments”—to determine progress toward specific district standards—to gateway assessments, which are end-of-course/mastery tests used to determine whether students will be promoted to the next grade.

Teachers also group students based on their level of specific AKS, and then adjust the groups as students master the subjects. The Elements database gives teachers the critical information to make those decisions.

- **Individual schools have embraced continuous improvement at the campus level.**

In addition to the AKS and RBES, a third non-negotiable for every school is to develop a Local School Plan for Improvement (LSPI). Far from a compliance exercise, the LSPI is an actively managed, living plan for performance developed by school leadership teams and teachers. Each plan includes data-driven school objectives that support the district’s strategic goals, as well as measurable targets and an implementation plan to achieve those targets.

“The LSPI process enables leaders to keep our actions aligned,” says Kendall Johnson, principal of Berkmar High School. “As anyone could imagine, there are a great many ‘moving parts’ associated with keeping a large school or school district on the path of continuous improvement...assessment, data analysis, instructional strategies, accountability measures, etc.”

“Working from a coherent plan keeps all aspects of improvement moving in one direction, which is crucial for achieving our mission and vision. Our LSPI process guards against unaligned acts of improvement, which many would argue are the enemy of organizational effectiveness.”

The school plans are developed with heavy teacher involvement. “The LSPI process has, I believe, helped make me a more thoughtful and deliberative teacher,” says Berkmar High Science Department Chair Walt Snow, speaking of how measuring his own effectiveness has impacted his teaching. “The process has created a vehicle by which we can actually do some ‘action research’ in our own classrooms and quantitatively measure our effectiveness at helping our students achieve the agreed-upon school-wide goals. This enables us to see what works well for us and what doesn’t and what we need to do differently or more effectively to achieve the desired gains in student achievement.”

These school-by-school plans are so central to planning that one board member considers them “the most important plan in the district.” Adds an administrator, “We have as many strategic plans as we have schools.”

- **The district maintains a strong district-wide—yet school-level driven—commitment to quality teaching strategies.**

Gwinnett has made a very strong commitment to what it calls “Quality-Plus Teaching Strategies,” a direct outgrowth of the district’s commitment to continuous improvement. Quality-Plus Teaching Strategies draw on the work of a number of experts, including author Robert Marzano, who has identified specific, research-based effective instruction methods.

The Quality-Plus Teaching Strategies (assessment, collaboration, modeling and practice, vocabulary, non-verbal representation, summarizing, literacy, background knowledge, questioning, technology, problem-solving, student goal-setting, and comparison and contrast) have been adopted by all Gwinnett schools, and the district provides professional development resources and communications materials on the teaching strategies. For struggling schools, these strategies become a key element of a Local School Plan for Improvement.

In another example of district-wide commitment to high-teacher quality, classroom walk-throughs are conducted regularly by school and district leaders. Leaders rely on rubrics based on the Quality-Plus Teaching Strategies when doing the walk-throughs, although each school may customize their walk-through templates. For example, Berkmar High School has chosen to place particular emphasis on five of the 13 Quality-Plus Teaching Strategies, and that emphasis is reflected in the school’s walk-through rubric.