

SUPER SIX FOOTBALL, B1

LSU recruit Geralds the latest star for Collins Hill



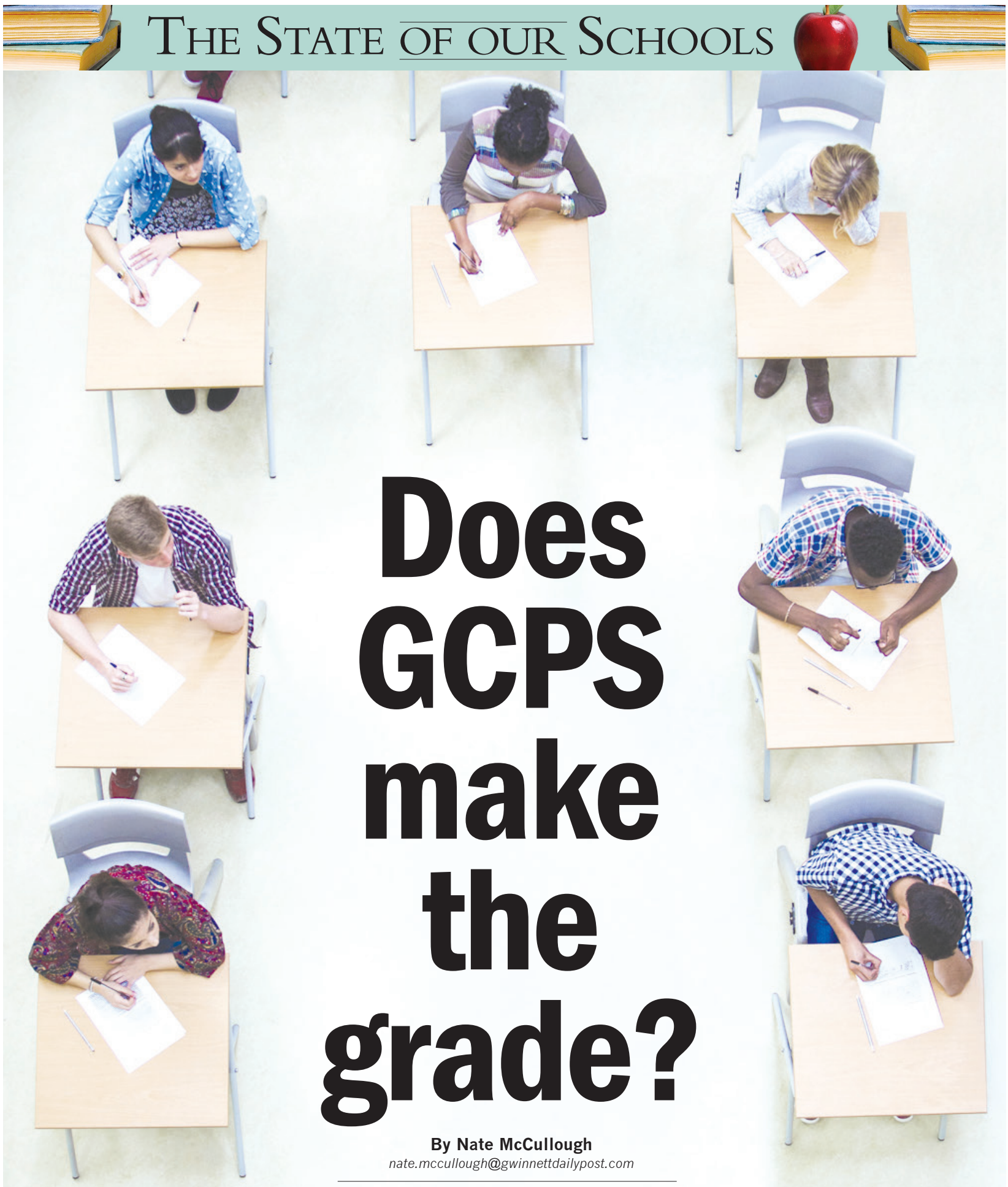
WEEKEND EDITION

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THE STATE OF OUR SCHOOLS



Does GCPS make the grade?

By Nate McCullough
nate.mccullough@gwinnettdailypost.com

"Get a good education." It's a phrase repeated so often by parents and sages it's become cliche. But what does it mean? What does it take to get one? And how well positioned is Gwinnett County Public Schools to deliver it?

The answer is another phrase repeated often in song lyrics, movie titles and Facebook statuses:

It's complicated.

SEE **SCHOOLS**, A7

PART TWO OF THREE

In this three-part series, the Daily Post takes a look at the state of Gwinnett County Public Schools. In the first part of this series, we recounted recent political history. In this installment, we focus on where the system is succeeding, where it's lagging, and what's being done to fix it.

COMING UP NEXT In the third installment, we take a look at the search for the next superintendent and what stakeholders are hoping for in a new leader.

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WEATHER

HIGH 82
69 LOW

For the full forecast, see **PAGE B3**



THE STATE OF OUR SCHOOLS

PANDEMIC'S WAKE

GCPS has faced choppy waters the past few years. Politics and leadership decisions played a role, but one headwind was stronger than anyone could have anticipated: COVID-19.

The pandemic brought school into the home in an unprecedented way. Every aspect of how education is administered and received was on full display on computer screens.

Children had to learn a whole new way of learning in the digital remote environment. Teachers had to learn how to teach in it. And parents, some of whom had never paid much attention to what went on while their kids were in school, suddenly took keen interest.

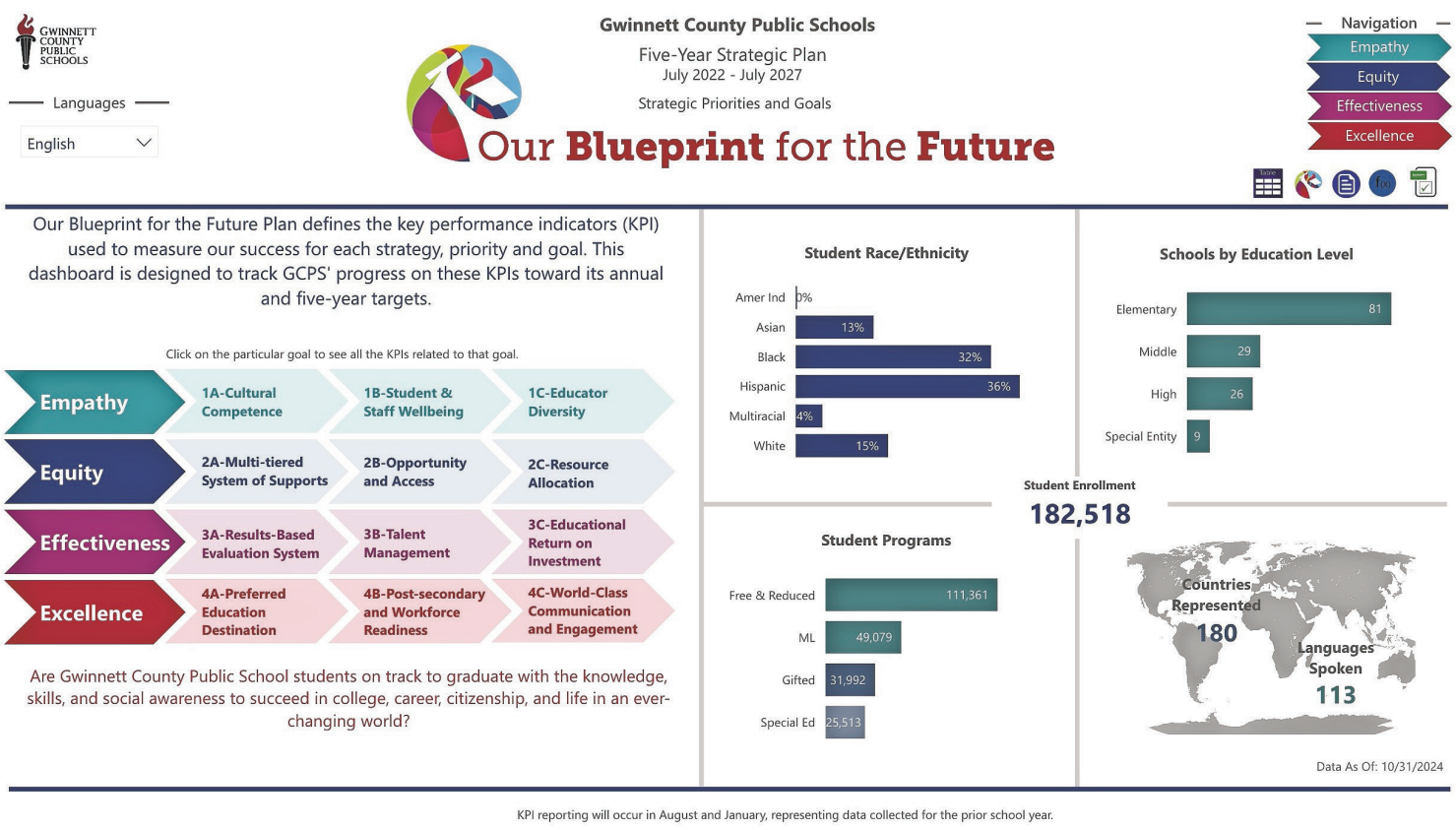
Access to technology, what and how teachers taught, the importance of group activities and socialization, mental health and safety were all topics of debate and placed school leaders under intense scrutiny.

The effects still linger as GCPS educators try to help students recover from learning loss while trying to stem behavioral problems and chronic absenteeism.



Al Taylor

Interim Superintendent Al Taylor said there was opportunity in a challenging situation, that GCPS' efforts to create a support structure by investing in social workers, behavioral coaches and other programs helped teachers and students when they returned to school.



"I think you've seen these past couple of years a very intentional focus, which came at the perfect time in the midst of the pandemic, when we knew integrating students back into this school environment … was going to require some supportive community spaces," Taylor said. "(Students had) been removed — some upwards of a year and a half, maybe even longer — from direct interactions with their peers. We couldn't just expect them to be able to walk in and acclimate. And so those supportive community additions and enhancements, I think, came at a perfect time to help us in that post-pandemic reacclimation period."

That approach is part of the system's Blueprint for the Future, its strategic educational plan.

The Blueprint, developed during the tenure of former superintendent Calvin Watts, aims "to become a national model of a high-performing district serving an incredibly diverse student population" while honoring the "legacy of performance and innovation that has prevailed for more than two decades and directly contributed to the county's economic growth," according to the GCPS website.

"Intended outcomes are to identify goals and objectives and then attach key performance indicators to be able to measure progress over a three- to five-year period," Taylor said.

The system monitors those key performance indicators — or KPIs — on its website and offers a public dashboard to view them. GCPS has revised at times how and what it tracks to align with new policies, conform to changes in law or for practicality's sake. Some numbers have not been updated since August 2024 while others have been updated this year and depend on when the latest data is available.

The KPIs and other data collected by GCPS and the Georgia Department of Education show contrasting pictures in many different areas.

ATTENDANCE

Woody Allen said: "Eighty percent of success is showing up."

Students can't get a good education if they're not in school, and many have not been in recent years. Chronic absenteeism has risen dramatically since the pandemic and not just in Gwinnett. It's worse at the state and national level.

Georgia defines chronic absenteeism as missing at least 10% of the school year, which translates to 18 days. But at some high schools chronic absenteeism is approaching 50% of students, and some are missing a lot more instruction.

"These are kids that have missed at least 18 but could be as many as 50 or 60 days," Taylor said.

Georgia has a compulsory attendance law which requires students to be in school from age 6 to 16. Too many absences can result in difficulty obtaining a work permit or drivers license. However, the law was modified this year to prevent students from being expelled purely based on absenteeism.

"What we have control over at least to some degree is the school environment, and we're really trying to create environments that are engaging," Taylor said.

He said educators could beat students over the head with the negative consequences of missing school, "or we can try to create an environment that … brings just as much enjoyment as whatever they're choosing to do by not being at school."

Elementary and middle schoolers are chronically absent the least while high school students are absent the most with seniors at the top of the list. Across racial groups, Hispanics miss the most school. Multiracial, Black and white all fall roughly in the middle, while Asian students are chronically absent the least. Students with disabilities and multilingual learners are chronically absent much more often than gifted students.

The detriment to performance can't be overstated. The data shows a dramatic drop in performance on the Milestones test for the chronically absent.

Parents can face consequences, too, including fines and jail time if their children miss too much school. GCPS has an ongoing awareness campaign using technology to keep track of absences and sending attendance nudges to keep parents informed.

The attendance law also requires school systems with chronic absenteeism of 10% or higher to establish teams to tackle the problem and to create attendance review teams for individual schools with rates of 15% or more.

GCPS estimates for the most recent year show 27 elementary and six middle schools exceeding the 15% threshold. All but two of its high schools are above 15% chronic absenteeism with Berkmar and Meadowcreek leading at 48.8 and 47% respectively.



Steve Knudsen

But overall, the district's absenteeism rate improved over the previous year, according to data released last week by GDOE.

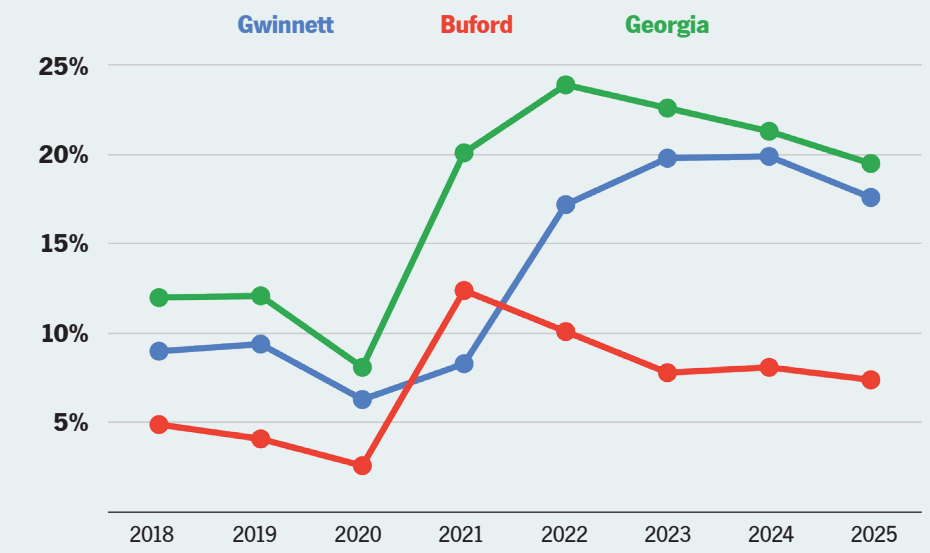
"In terms of some of the requirements the state is making, we've already been implementing a number of those things that help," Board of Education District 2 representative Steve Knudsen said.

SEE **DISCIPLINE**, A8

ATTENDANCE

Georgia's compulsory attendance law requires children aged 6 to 16 to attend school. Parents who fail to comply may face misdemeanor charges, fines or jail time, with schools mandated to intervene after repeated unexcused absences. Students are considered truant after more than 5 unexcused absences. Students are considered chronically absent if they miss 10% or more of their enrolled days — typically 180 — regardless of reason.

Chronic Absenteeism Comparison



Source: GCPS, Georgia Department of Education

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

To view the GCPS KPIs, go to https://www.gcpsk12.org/about-us/our-blueprint-for-the-future/kpi-dashboard and click on Review the Gwinnett County Public Schools KPI dashboard





File Photos

According to data, elementary and middle schoolers are chronically absent the least while high school students are absent the most with seniors at the top of the list.

UTA
(Understand The Acronyms)

School systems across the country use a lot of acronyms, and sometimes it can be difficult to know what educators are talking about. Here's a guide to some of the jargon.

AKS: Academic Knowledge and Skills Gwinnett's curriculum for grades K–12 listing the essential concepts students are expected to know and skills they should acquire.

SEL: Social-Emotional Learning An educational strategy aimed at helping students manage their emotions, achieve goals, build relationships and make responsible decisions.

PBIS: Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports A multi-tiered educational framework meant to reinforce positive behavior, create safe learning environments and promote academic achievement through social, emotional and mental health support and early intervention.

MTSS: Multi-tiered System of Supports Integrates data and instruction within a multi-level system to maximize student achievement and support students' social, emotional and behavior needs.

CTAE: Career, Technical and Agricultural Education A program to prepare students for their next step after high school – college, beginning a career, apprenticeships or the military.

KPI: Key Performance Indicator A measurable goal used to evaluate whether an objective has been met.

JCD: School board policy designation for the GCPS student code of conduct.

JCDI: School board's policy designation for its Theory of Action for Change to Improve Student Behavior and Outcomes.

Sources: GCPS; Georgia Department of Education; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning; Center on PBIS

THE STATE OF OUR SCHOOLS

DISCIPLINE

GCPS got some good news in July when it comes to discipline.

At the BOE work session, Executive Director of Academic Support Eric Thigpen reported that incidents in 2024-25 were down from the previous year with less than 7% receiving a discipline referral. The number of students facing exclusionary consequences (in-school or out-of-school suspension) also dropped from the previous year as did the number of days students spent in both types of suspension.



Eric Thigpen

However, Black and Hispanic students continue to be disciplined at a rate higher than their relative proportion of the student population. Accusations of disproportionate disciplinary action toward minority students have plagued GCPS for years.

Thigpen said GCPS is working with a national expert to address racial, cultural and geographic biases that might be influencing discipline decisions. He said educators need to be "less subjective and more objective."



Tarece Johnson-Morgan

Board Vice Chair Tarece Johnson-Morgan said part of the problem is "anti-Blackness," and not just on the part of white teachers.

"There are studies of Black teachers and Black administrators also engaging in more harsh treatment and punitive consequences than other races," she said. "Part of the multipronged approach is certainly addressing head-on the biases."

When GCPS initially tried in 2022 to move toward restorative practices — a discipline approach that focuses on keeping kids in school and fixing underlying emotional and social issues that spur bad behavior — it did not go well.

The rollout culminated in a "Code Red" community meeting to address rising violence and other behavioral issues.

"There were some offenses that prior to (the change) ... we could take students to a tribunal or provide exclusionary consequences," Thigpen said. "After that, we couldn't. Meaning the local schools couldn't. And so there was some real frustration around that."



John Cox

Gwinnett NAACP 2nd VP and Education Chair John Cox said part of the problem was the board forced the change to restorative practices too quickly.

"It was initially rolled out wrong, and didn't have the support that it needed to have, and that wasn't (Watts), he cautioned against that, but people were ready for a change and wanted to move faster than it should have moved," Cox said.

Cox said Watts wanted to take more time to explain and train everyone better.

"He would have never rolled that out like that because that's not the way he works."

The crisis prompted school leaders to regroup and retrain.

"We listened as a school district," Thigpen said, and developed a "midcourse correction," which gave GCPS time to better train teachers and administrators on restorative practices.

"It was really about timing and rollout and misunderstanding about application, and that was corrected."

GCPS has 11 behavioral coaches to help teachers. The coaches are deployed based on need and assist teachers with student relationships, de-escalation and avoiding power struggles.

"Behavior coaches work with our teachers to ensure that they have effective classroom management skills," Thigpen said.

Gwinnett County Association of Educators President Alison Cundiff said it was about more than just retraining teachers. It was about a lack of response from administrators when it came to students who were out of control.



Alison Cundiff

"We had an entire semester where basically if (a teacher) turned in a referral, (they) just got it back in (their) box with no comment," she said. "From the course correction, I mean, it's kind of like, 'Do I feel safer now that I'm not right next to a bear?' Yes, I do feel safer."

The district's Teacher Advisory Council has asked for behavioral coaches for students as well.

GCPS has now fully reimplemented the restorative approach and has developed a supportive in-school suspension environment.



Steve Smith

Steve Smith, a parent and frequent vocal critic of GCPS who has served on community advisory committees for the school system, doesn't believe it works.

"When it comes to education versus practical life, education has a ton of well-intentioned theories," Smith said. "But then when people who are quote-unquote less educated point out the practicality of the function ..."

Smith then went on to describe a hypothetical restorative practice situation.



Bernard Watson

"We don't do expulsions, we have tribunals. We have advocates come in and say, 'You can't do this because this person has no daddy, and this person has this (problem),'" he said. "That's not my son's problem. My son has to sit next to that kid. Nobody ever worries about the kids who aren't doing anything wrong."

Thigpen and schools spokesman Bernard Watson emphasized that it's not about there being no consequences for bad behavior.

"There's some conflation with restorative practices meaning in lieu of discipline," Watson said. "It's in partnership with it. ... (It's) steps after the discipline happens" to return students to class instead of just expelling them.

"We still believe in a very fair, firm disciplinary approach," Thigpen said.

At a recent Board of Education meeting, District 3 member Steve Gasper said, "93.2 percent, approximately, of all our students did not receive discipline referrals, so we're making big strides."

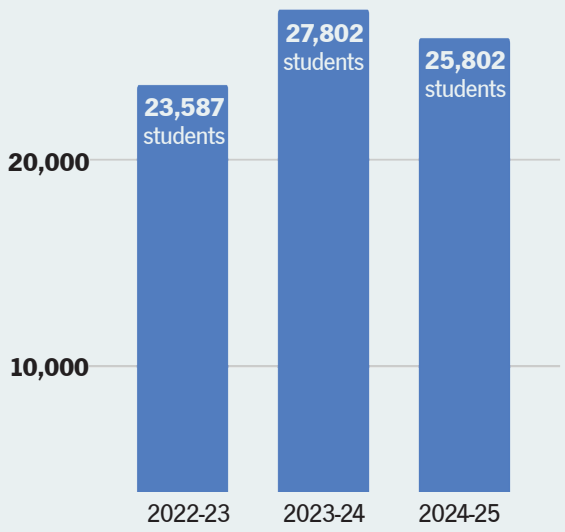


Steve Gasper

DISCIPLINE

The following information is from the GCPS 2024-2025 End-of-Year School Discipline Data Analysis presented to the Board of Education at the July 17 work session. The data represents the number of students receiving exclusionary and nonexclusionary discipline consequences, not the number of incidents.

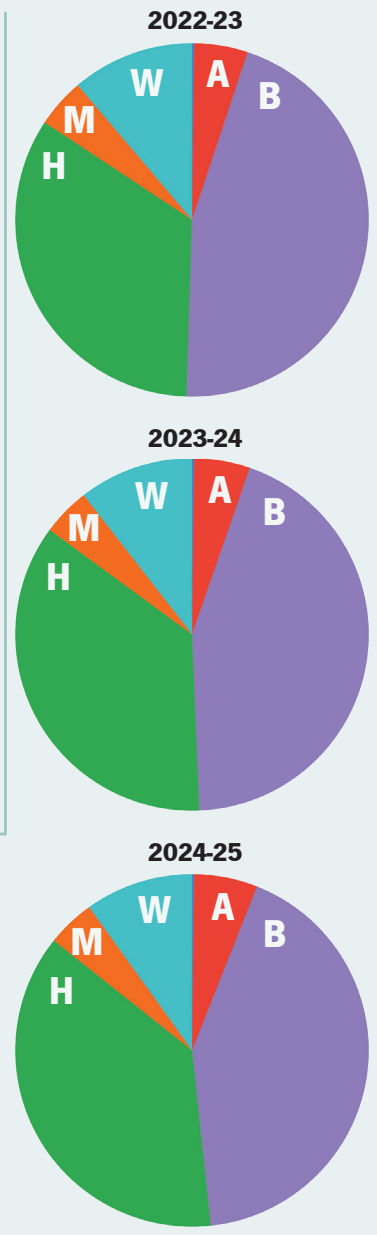
Discipline Consequences



Race/Ethnicity Breakdown of Disciplinary Consequences

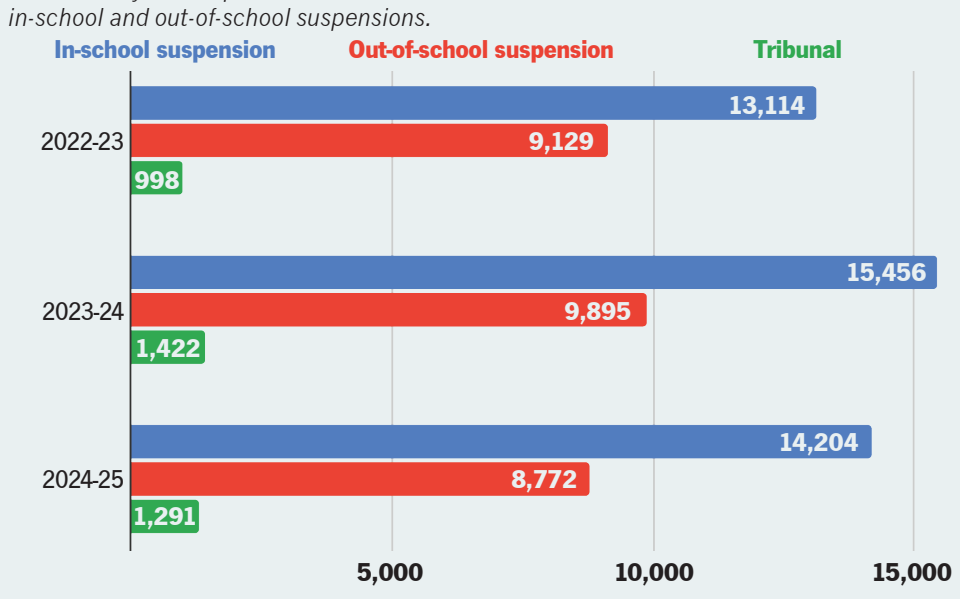
Reflects each group's percentage of students receiving a disciplinary consequence, not percentage of the total student body.

Race/ethnicity	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
American Indian	0.20%	0.20%	0.20%
Asian	4.90%	5.10%	5.80%
Black	45.40%	44%	42.30%
Hispanic	33.80%	35.70%	37.40%
Mulitracial	4.50%	4.40%	4.40%
White	11.20%	10.50%	9.90%



Number of Students Receiving Exclusionary Consequences

Exclusionary consequences is a catch-all term the school district uses that means both in-school and out-of-school suspensions.



ACADEMICS

So how is GCPS when it comes to educating students?

Measured against the rest of the state, it usually does a better job. US News and World Report ranks many Gwinnett high schools in the top 50 in Georgia with the Gwinnett School of Mathematics, Science and Technology being ranked No. 1. Niche.com, a site which specializes in assessing schools, ranks GCPS the 20th best system in the state while ranking Buford City Schools No. 1.

"No one's going to say that the rigor has changed in GCPS," Cox said. "And the rigor is really good with regards to academics."

GCPS students consistently outperform state averages across grade levels when it comes to reading and math scores on the Milestones Assessment tests. However, some of those numbers are still quite low. For example, only two-thirds of Gwinnett's third-graders read on grade level. By eighth grade, that number rises to 78%.

The data is similar when it comes to the College and Career Ready Performance Index, where Gwinnett students consistently score better than the state average in areas such as reading and content mastery. The Governor's Office of Student Achievement also assigns scores to individual school systems on the CCRPI. Gwinnett's GOSA score is 82.5 whereas the overall state score is 78.9.

When it comes to SAT scores, Gwinnett slightly trails the state average while outperforming the national average. And its graduation rate has been on an upward path, including reaching the highest level in a decade in 2024.

By the system's own KPIs, the results are mixed.

While graduation rates are up, the percentage of ninth graders on track to graduate on time is down.

When it comes to percent of students in historically underserved groups meeting or exceeding academic growth expectations overall, the system is eclipsing its goal by nearly 5 percentage points. It is growing the number of minorities in the gifted program and taking Advanced Placement classes. GCPS is also making progress on English language proficiency by multilingual learners, and SAT/ACT participation and performance are improving.

Where it has dramatically fallen off is in reading scores at the third grade level for historically underserved groups. The KPI aimed to improve from 65.6% to 71%. Instead it fell to 62%.

GCPS added an update to the Blueprint for the Future in 2024 which focused on literacy. Among the measures included were dyslexia screening, additional bookmobiles and more training for teachers, especially for kindergarten through third grade. GCPS focuses on the Science of Reading, "a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically based research," according to The Reading League organization.

Taylor said at an area board meeting in the spring that there is impatience because expectations are so high. He echoed that just prior to the start of school.

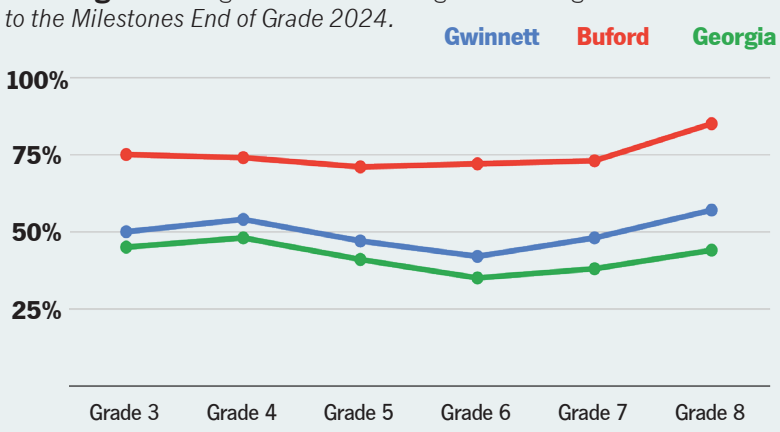
"We're going to continue with the literacy plan we have in place," Taylor said. "It does take a couple of years for staff to really get comfortable with it before you start to see significant improvement."

When it comes to what students do after high school, GCPS is fairly consistent with roughly 60% of its graduates going on to college or technical school, according to GOSA, and the past few years have seen a slight rise in students going directly into the workforce.

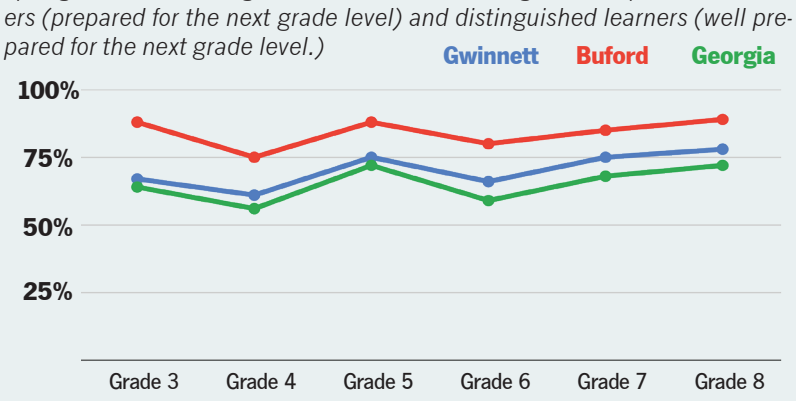
SEE **TEACHING**, A9

ACADEMICS

Reading: *Percentage of students reading at or above grade level according to the Milestones End of Grade 2024.*



Math: *Student achievement on Milestones math assessments end of grade Spring 2024. Percentages combine students categorized as proficient learners (prepared for the next grade level) and distinguished learners (well prepared for the next grade level.)*



The latest data for the most recent school year was released Friday, but not available in time for this report.

Source: Georgia Department of Education

SAT Scores: *Average SAT score 2024*

Gwinnett	1016
Nation	995
Georgia	1030

Source: College Board, GCPS

CCRPI: *2024 College and Career Ready Performance Index comparison*

Category	Gwinnett	Buford	Georgia
GOSA* overall score	82.5	88.2	78.9
Elementary school reading at or above grade level**	72.3	86.4	67.6
Middle school reading at or above grade level**	77.5	87.4	69.1
High school reading at or above grade level**	71.3	87.2	67.4
Elementary school content mastery***	76.3	96.4	67.8
Middle school content mastery***	75.1	93.2	64
High school content mastery***	76	98.5	68.2

**Governor's Office of Student Achievement*
***Percentage of students*
****Weighted average of math, science, language arts, social studies scores*
Source: Georgia Department of Education

Graduation: *Graduation rates 2024*

Gwinnett	84.1%
Buford	95.1%
Georgia	85.4%

Source: Georgia Department of Education

THE STATE OF OUR SCHOOLS

TEACHING ENVIRONMENT

GCPS welcomed more than 1,200 new teachers this year, evidence of its KPI progress on recruitment and retention.

Board Chair Adrienne Simmons said: "There's a teacher shortage in many districts across the country, across the state. And we haven't had that in GCPS. I attribute that to the efforts of our human resources team, (not just in) recruitment, but the retention practices."



Adrienne Simmons

She cited mentoring and leadership opportunities, while Taylor mentioned the retirement system incentives.

Critics have said filling vacancies is easier because hiring standards are lower and point to a 2.5 GPA requirement and not needing a teaching certificate, only working toward one.

Cundiff disagrees.

"I wouldn't say we have lower standards," she said.

Those new teachers range from fresh out of college or people coming from other careers to international recruits, which is by design.

One goal is to recruit new educators from diverse backgrounds, which GCPS has had some trouble doing, although it is making progress retaining experienced teachers from underrepresented groups. It's recruiting in other states and Puerto Rico and accepts accredited degrees from other countries.

Another KPI where progress is stagnant: Staff who feel supported by principals and administrators.

Cundiff said one thing would go a long way toward increasing good will: Change the way teachers are disciplined.



Photo: Curt Yeomans

About 1,200 new Gwinnett County Public Schools teachers and counselors participated in the district's New Teacher Orientation at the Gas South Convention Center on July 15.

"Allow people to have a witness in any disciplinary or HR proceeding," Cundiff said. "Whatever the issue is, right? Because sometimes we do mess up, and we need help. You create an environment where the employee is able to feel safe and learn when you have a witness there."

Pay is another concern. Raises of $1,000 on top of increases for length of service are included in the 2026 budget.

Cundiff said another problem is retaining veterans.

"Losing veteran teachers really hurts your climate, it really hurts your ability to perform. If you've got a team of just brand-spanking-new teachers, and they don't know what's going on, good luck," she said. "Classroom management, that's one of the biggest ones we rely on veterans for, and genuine expertise and understanding how kids just kind of work."

PERCEPTIONS

Sara Gard has two children in Gwinnett schools and is very happy with how things are.

"I'm actually really pleased with the experience my kids are having. They go to two different elementary schools because one has special needs and goes to the school that serves those needs," Gard said. "I'm happy that that's available for my kid. There are plenty of school districts where those needs wouldn't be met because they're not as large or as well equipped as Gwinnett is."



Sara Gard

Gard also loves the diversity.

"My other child gets to spend time with international students, with students that have very different life experiences from her, and just having the diversity of students around her is enhancing her life. I can see that she's thinking as a problem solver from a more global perspective than I ever would have had as a kid," she said. "And I also went to Gwinnett County Schools."

The KPIs echo that and show progress in family and student satisfaction in both how well schools are preparing students for life and how much staff cares.

But not all parents feel the same way.

Chelsea Hutchings has a son with Down Syndrome. When GCPS moved him to another school it said could better meet his needs, Hutchings spent a year and a half fighting to get him moved back. She said it wasn't just about keeping him in school with his siblings but she felt her son had been sorted "into a box" that was behind the times on special education methods.



Chelsea Hutchings

"I still didn't really understand how the school was going to be able to present a special program that would be better than him being educated alongside his peers," which she said federal law allows.

"I started trying to understand more about what the law said and what the research said about what is best for kids with disabilities, especially those with intellectual developmental disabilities," Hutchings said. "I just want what's best for my son. And I feel like being forced into a box against my parental agency and my parental vision for my child felt really horrible and wrong."

Gard, on the other hand, has been pleased with the options offered to her kids.

Her special needs son had a run-in with a bully, which led to an encounter with the disciplinary system. She appreciated the restorative approach that resolved the issue and allowed him to stay in his school. Gard also said people need to give GCPS time for its new methods to work.

"You can't flip a switch and suddenly everybody's going to be better at discipline."

She also thinks her daughter is getting what she needs.

"I personally feel like she's in a very safe campus. Her teachers have been terrific. Most of them have had long tenures, decades of experience in some cases," she said. "I'm able to contact them, have conversations with them. I feel very comfortable with who they are, with my relationship to them as the teacher to parent, and their dedication to the kids."



Nate McCullough

Nate McCullough is an award-winning journalist with more than 25 years working in community newspapers in Georgia with the majority of that time spent in Gwinnett County. He has served in every role from reporter to editor-in-chief and covered subjects ranging from police shootings to NASCAR.

In addition to his reporting on the State of our Schools, McCullough is also covering the issue of homelessness in Gwinnett County. This reporting is made possible by reader contributions to the Gwinnett Journalism Fund, a 501(c)(3) charitable fund dedicated to preserving local journalism in Gwinnett County.

Working through the Community Foundation for Northeast Georgia, contributions to the Gwinnett Journalism Fund are tax deductible. For questions or feedback about the GJF, email gjf@gwinnettdailypost.com.

GCPS BY THE NUMBERS

183,000
Number of students

181
Countries represented

108
Languages spoken

142
Schools in GCPS

81
Elementary schools

29
Middle schools

24
High schools

1
Charter school

52.5%
Title I

23,000
Employees

12,500
Teachers

10,235
Support staff & administration

$3.4B
Budget for Fiscal Year 2026

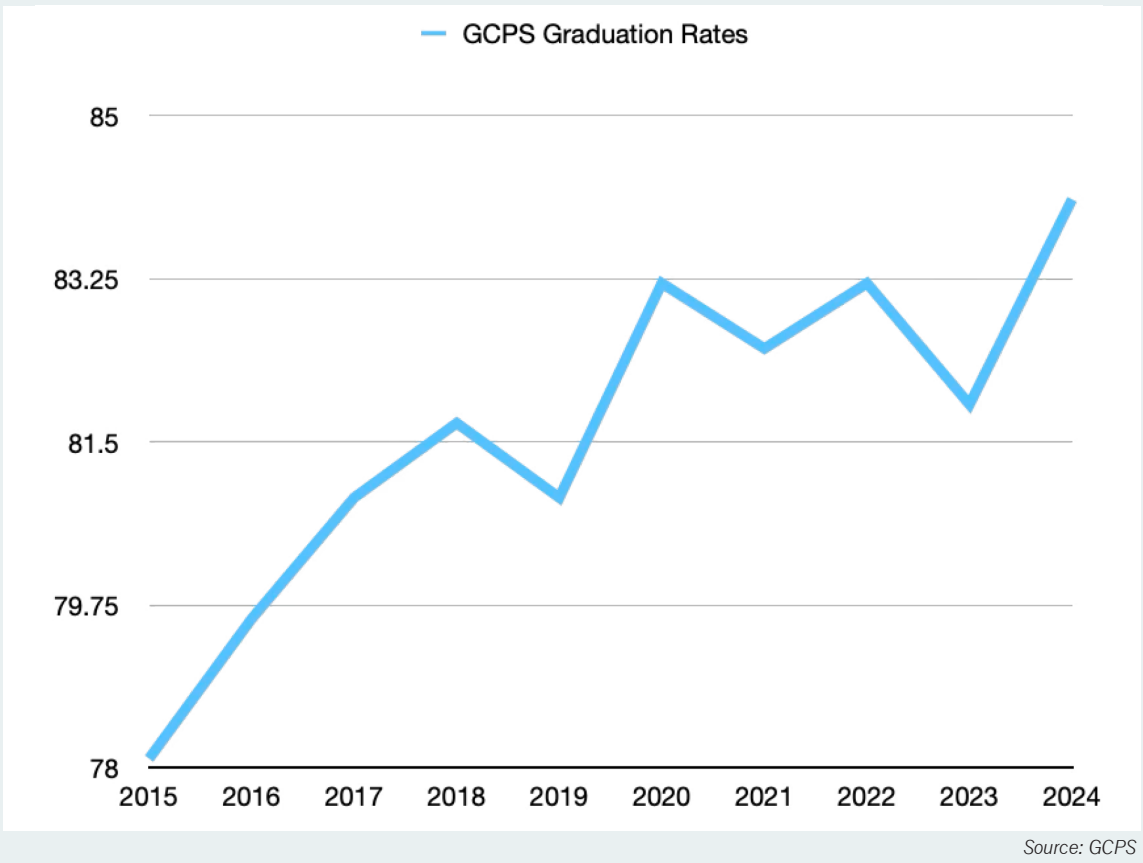
$3.2B
Budget for Fiscal Year 2025

$200M
Monthly operating cost

30M
Meals GCPS serves a year

Sources: GCPS, Georgia Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

GRADUATION PRECENTAGE RATES



Source: GCPS



File Photo

Gwinnett School of Math, Science and Technology students receive their diplomas in this 2018 file photo.

COMING UP NEXT In the third installment, we take a look at the search for the next superintendent and what stakeholders are hoping for in a new leader.