



Thursday, July 21, 2022

Dear Gwinnett County Public Schools Board of Education Members and Superintendent:

As community organizations in Gwinnett County, we gather to reinvigorate equity efforts in Gwinnett County schools and hold Superintendent Dr. Watts to account for failing to directly confront “systemic programs and initiatives to address and reduce educational inequity, providing students and staff with targeted supports and enrichment that increase opportunities to succeed.” Dr. Watts has signaled that he will lead the district in a new direction. Yet, as we mark one year of his tenure on Monday, August 1, 2022, the equity our students, schools, and communities deserve, and demand has dripped like water from a faucet rather than the stream of a waterfall. We wish to express our disappointment and frustration with 1) a lack of progress in realizing equity and 2) the gaps in the proposed *"Blueprint for the Future."*

In November 2020, a majority of Gwinnett County voters spoke in favor of equity and progress when they elected Karen Watkins in District I and Dr. Tarece in District V. The following January, they used their mandate to retire then-Superintendent J. Alvin Wilbanks. Our coalition supported the superintendent search and selection process. We were optimistic yet cautious about the selection of Dr. Watts as the first Black and equity-centric superintendent, primarily due to his previous tenure in the school system under Wilbanks' and therefore his connection to the status quo. We proceeded to identify and support his vision for equity. Throughout the month of September 2021, our coalition of community organizations met with Dr. Watts to discuss priorities and request follow ups. After several attempts to follow up, organizers met with Dr. Watts in-person in March 2022 to present cases of disciplinary inequities and to discuss priorities. Despite years of community voices demanding better for our families and our educators, inaction continued.

We have heard from parents, students, and community members who all feel that new leadership has not led to new progress for Gwinnett's families. Dr. Watts' strategic plan, *"The Blueprint for the Future,"* purportedly developed to address and reduce educational inequities for students, uses ambiguous language and lacks the focus and qualified staff to direct the implementation of the plan. Further, the plan separates Social Emotional Learning (SEL) from district processes. SEL must be integrated and in service of cognitive and academic development, not siloed from academics. In this way and others, Dr. Watts' furthers the status quo – a status quo which has historically harmed our children and the broader Gwinnett community.

The district commissioned MGT of America Consulting, LLC to perform an evaluation of its organizational structure. One observation noted by MGT is that the district is top-heavy and bloated with mismatched people who have outsized titles and salaries. We agree with MGT; however, Dr. Watts continues to add to an over-bloated district administration and maintain the mismatched people. The reorganization plan for the Curriculum & Instructional Support division reinforces Dr. Watts commitment to growing central office staff at the expense of more school-based supports. For example, the restorative justice (RJ) coordinators the district plans to hire will not be placed at the school/cluster level where they will have greater impact. RJ must be woven into the fabric of GCPS to truly achieve a restorative culture across our district's schools. Dr. Watts has hired only one fresh face during his tenure, despite the community's mandate for leadership and personnel changes to repair the toxic environment from the previous administration.

Further, student discipline and policing continues to be a blind spot for the district. Gwinnett schools' discipline code is as archaic as its practices. The review of the student code of conduct languished on the board's agenda for several months. Tribunals continue to be run as a rubber-stamp on the narratives of authority figures, facts be damned. This does no justice for the rights and wellbeing of our children. Currently, school administrators do not face accountability for railroading students. Parents and caregivers are only permitted to have an attorney to advocate for their student during a tribunal hearing, a high bar for too many families. Per the AJC article 'Gwinnett school discipline incidents similar to pre-pandemic numbers' dated January 25, 2022, at the 2021-22 school year halfway mark, 17% of high school students — more than 10,000 total — were involved in a disciplinary incident. Black students continue to be represented disproportionately in those numbers. GCPS staff have reviewed other school systems' code of conduct but just keep circling it as if waiting for the code to change itself. For several years, the highest number of students are disciplined and/or arrested for fighting, yet the district refuses to implement a community recommended policy to address it or develop one on their own that includes a root cause analysis. In addition, the GCPS discipline dashboard uses an analysis that prevents parents from having an accurate picture of the discipline issues.

It is crystal clear — not only has this administration stonewalled equity but also led in the wrong direction - even as GCPS families and voters demanded progress. During Dr. Watts' tenure, class sizes are still huge, disproportionate discipline of Black students continues, teacher/staff turnover has increased, the budget for SROs has increased by over \$875k per the FY2023 Superintendent's Recommended General Fund Budget, and ineffective assessments like the Gateway continue. District officials who were key to executing Wilbanks' inequitable vision maintain their positions or have received new positions. Despite our best efforts, it is clear that Wilbanks might as well still be superintendent.

As a result of the inaction and feet-dragging that have kept alive the status quo, we demand the following as the *"Blueprint for the Future"* is implemented during the 2022-2023 school year:

- Conduct timely effectiveness, equity, and forensic audits of the entire organization to increase transparency.
- Create a community accountability committee to review interactions with, funding, and role of School Resource Officers (SROs).
- Develop a timely plan of action to reduce class sizes across all grade levels.
- Fund and invest in student-led affinity spaces such as Black Student Unions, LGBTQTIA+ support clubs, Muslim Student Associations, and more.
- Hire more behavior specialists, counselors, and psychologists and invest in greater mental health spaces and resources for students and staff members to meet the guidance set by mental health professionals, including a ratio of one counselor per 250 students.
- Improve resources and services for emerging bilingual and multilingual students, students with disabilities, and other historically underserved students.
- Mandate an ethnic studies course in all high schools, strategize on implementation in lower grade levels, and incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy in all areas of curriculum and instruction in all grade levels.
- Mandate implicit bias and anti-racist professional development and resources for all faculty and staff members.
- Mandate local school recruitment and retention plans for Black educators and administrators.
- Overhaul the student discipline processes and policies which includes 1) rewriting the student code of conduct as well as related disciplinary policies and procedures and 2) the mandated implementation of restorative justice practices in all local schools by highly qualified personnel.
- Replace the executive cabinet with qualified outsiders who have the vision, knowledge, and skills to lead a diverse district such as Gwinnett and reduce the number of district officials.
- Support local school equity audits and teams in all clusters.

The 2022-2023 school year, in the spirit of past years, will certainly bring unique challenges. An absence of courageous, transformative leadership cannot be one of them. In a nod to his predecessor's legacy, Dr. Watts' response to weary educational rightsholders has and will be unequivocal: wait. Still, we maintain hope that slow-walking much-needed changes will end expeditiously. As Dr. Watts implements his *"Blueprint for the Future,"* we will be as uncompromising as ever in holding this governance team accountable for the people's mandate for equity. Our students, educators, and families deserve nothing less than full justice. Another generation shall not wait for their basic human right: equitable opportunities and outcomes in education. We demand action now.

Signed,

Georgia Youth Justice Coalition  
 Gwinnett Educators for Equity and Justice  
 Gwinnett NAACP  
 Gwinnett Parent Coalition to Dismantle the School to Prison Pipeline (Gwinnett STOPP)