



Tuesday, March 28, 2023

Re: Superintendent Accountability

Dear Gwinnett County Public Schools Board of Education Members:

As community organizations in Gwinnett County, we aim to hold Superintendent Dr. Watts accountable to “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 signaled that he would lead the district in a new direction. Yet, as we mark a year and a half of his tenure the equity our students, schools, and communities deserve, and demand continue to drip like water from a faucet rather than the stream of a waterfall. In some cases, impactful initiatives have been wholly abandoned instead of making ongoing improvements. ***There has been a lack of progress in realizing equity.***

A majority of Gwinnett County voters spoke in favor of equity and progress when they elected Karen Watkins in District I, Dr. Tarece in District V, and now Dr. Adrienne Simmons in District IV. As elected representatives, our school board must work on behalf of their constituents and objectively hold the superintendent accountable for serving our historically marginalized students. We are concerned with outsiders who do not live or work in Gwinnett County calling upon our school board members to renew Dr. Watts’ contract because he is the first Black superintendent in Gwinnett schools. These outsiders do not know of Gwinnett and should not make being the “first Black superintendent” the litmus test for superintendent quality.

Our coalition supported the ousting of the entrenched former superintendent J. Alvin Wilbanks and the subsequent selection process. We were optimistic yet cautious about selecting 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. Our coalition attempted to regularly meet with Dr. Watts to discuss priorities and request follow-ups. Despite years of community voices demanding better for our families and educators, inaction continues.

We have heard from families, students, and community members who all feel that new leadership has not led to meaningful progress for Gwinnett’s families. ***Our fears are being realized that the district lacks the qualified leadership, direction, and staff to direct the implementation of “The Blueprint for the Future,” our first strategic plan.*** Ironically, a plan developed to address and reduce educational inequities for students. Equity must be integrated and in service of cognitive and academic development, not siloed as it is now. In this way and others, Dr. Watts furthers the status quo – a status quo that the broader Gwinnett community

voted against. A status quo containing remnants of Wilbanks appointees who wreak havoc when progressive change is proposed or enacted.

Dr. Watts kowtowed to the loudest voices leaving the historically marginalized children behind. Initiatives that showed promise became disconnected from the Blueprint's goals and objectives. The over-bloated district administration continues to grow while maintaining mismatched people. A more restorative culture in Gwinnett schools is a pipe dream due to the "course correction" by the Superintendent that erased the changes that were started. Tribunals are back to running as a rubber stamp on the narratives of authority figures, facts be damned. The budget for SROs continues to increase. 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. This does no justice for the rights and well-being of our children.

We demand that as our school board makes a decision regarding Dr. Watts' contract renewal it considers the knowledge, skills, abilities, and record of educational leadership.

Uphold your charge to objectively hold the superintendent accountable, be it Dr. Watts or someone else, for executing the community's vision for an equitable educational system based on data-backed progress monitoring and the ability to manage a system as complex and diverse as Gwinnett. Gwinnett County 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. Your voting constituents will remember who bargained our children's future away for political power. Just like we did before.

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)