

# **Pockets of Promise Amidst Widespread Inequity:** The State of Atlanta Public Schools in 2019

**December  
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 **GeorgiaCAN**

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## Introduction

To grow up in Atlanta today is to unwittingly play a game of chance.

Will you be part of a family that lives in a neighborhood where the median family income is **\$148,480**, as it is in Buckhead, or **\$27,525**, as it is in Thomasville Heights?

Will your home be zoned for a high school like Grady, where **90 percent** of students graduate in four years, or like Douglass, where **64 percent** of students graduate on time?

Will you be White, Black, or Latino? The difference is more than skin-deep. Take reading, for instance: **76 percent** of White students are on grade level by fourth-grade, compared to **23 percent** of Latino students and **16 percent** of Black students.

Taken together, these facts pose a question to not only the Board of Education and Atlanta Public Schools but to every resident of the City of Atlanta: **are we comfortable with the quality of education our children receive coming down to a game of chance?**

For us, the **Latino Association for Parents of Public Schools** and **GeorgiaCAN**, parent-powered non-profit organizations that work to drive improvements across city schools, the answer is no. We are working not for equality — every school gets the same — but equity — every school gets what it needs. We are working to rid Atlanta of the distinction of being **one of the most inequitable cities** — home to **one of the most inequitable school districts** — in the country.

This report gives our version of the State of the District for 2019. Atlanta is a large city, of course, and it's difficult to reduce a district of more than 52,000 students to a single report. We believe there is much to be proud of across Atlanta Public Schools, and we also believe there is much that needs to be brought to the forefront and discussed by all stakeholders. Ultimately, we believe there are pockets of promise amidst widespread inequity, and we believe more must be done — and done now — to give all students, in all parts of the city, the chance to earn an excellent education.



*Image taken at Sara J. Gonzalez Park Neighborhood Clean-Up Initiative by Adhoc Agency*

## Deep-rooted Inequity

In 2002, the first year Atlanta Public Schools started participating in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation's Report Card, there was a **59-point gap** between the percentage of White fourth-graders who could read on grade level and the percentage of Black fourth-graders who could read on grade level.

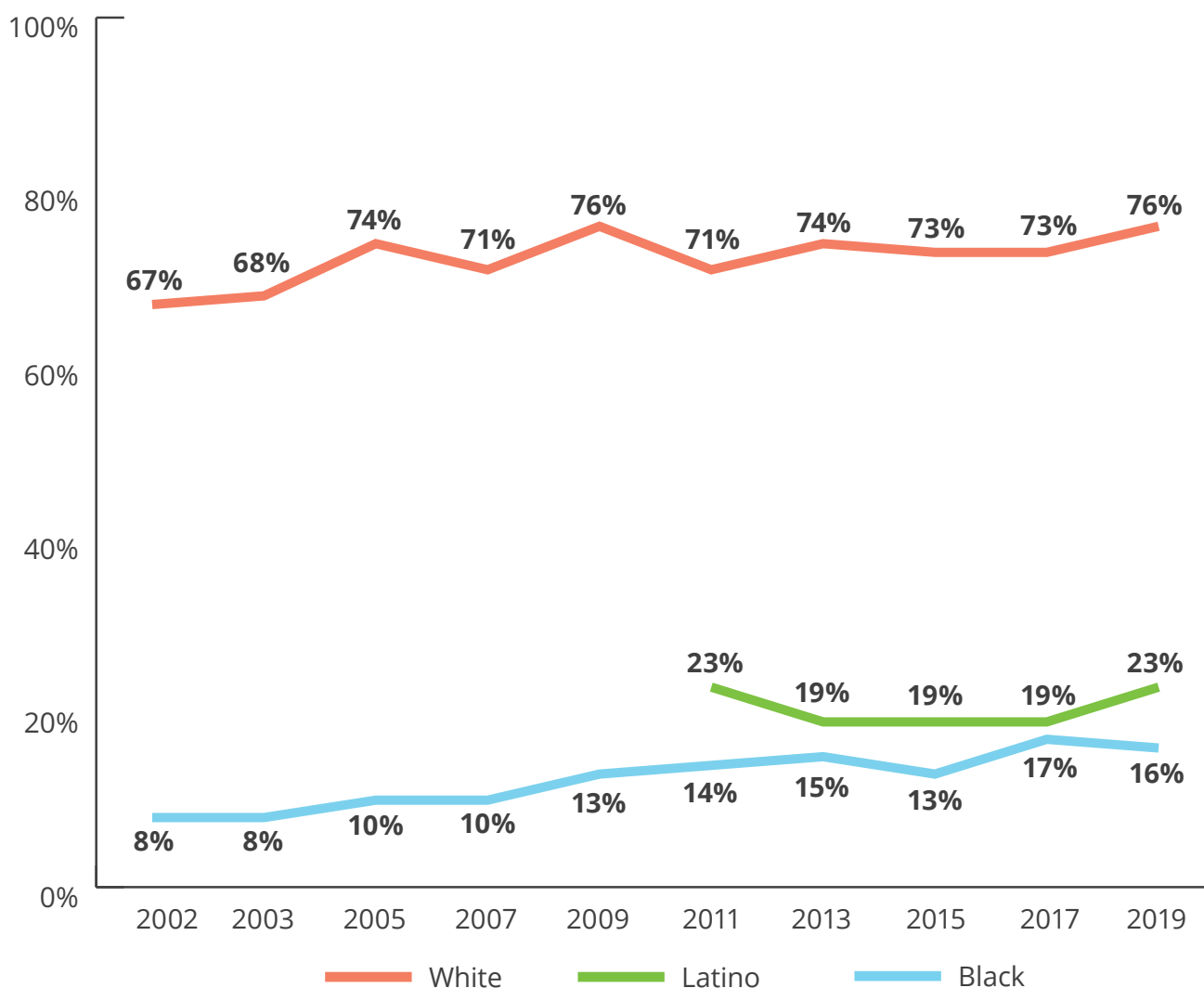
In 2019, the gap between White and Black fourth-graders was **60 points**.

In 2011, the first year for which data is available for Latino students, **23 percent** of such fourth-graders could read on grade level.

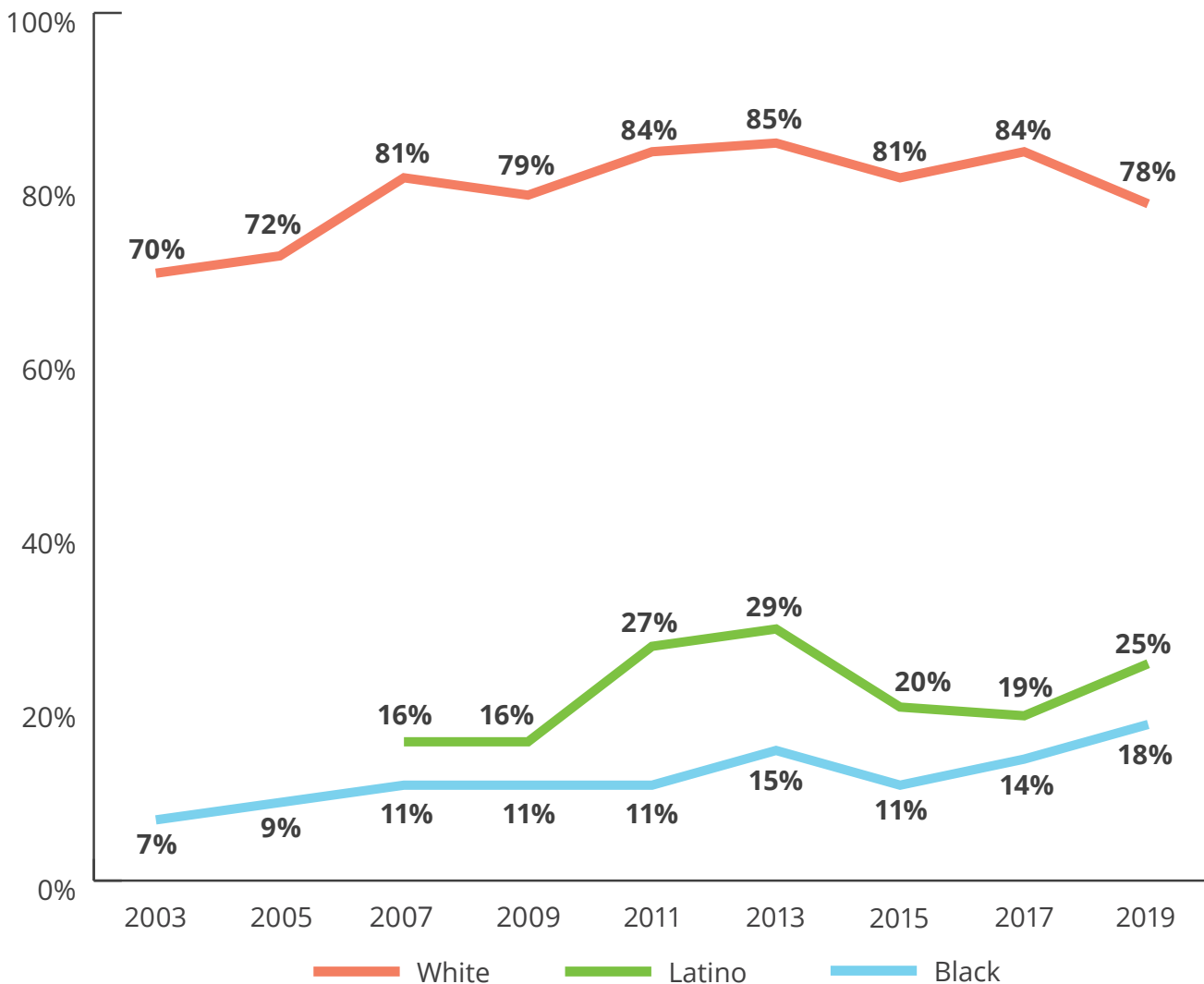
In 2019, only **23 percent** of Latino fourth-graders can read on grade level. *(See charts below for more NAEP data.)*

These gaps reflect 21st-century data, but they are borne out injustices from the 19th-century, when Atlanta Public Schools intentionally left out minority students. Lest anyone forget, Atlanta Public Schools were segregated as recently as 60 years ago.

Atlanta: Grade 4 Reading Percent Proficient and Above on NAEP



## Atlanta: Grade 4 Math Percent Proficient and Above on NAEP



Today, the scars of segregation and racial injustice are alive and well. To give one example, **Black students in Atlanta Public Schools are four times less likely to be reading, writing, and doing math on grade level than White students.**

We don't mean to paint a negative picture, and it is true that Black students' performance on NAEP has improved over time. For instance, the percentage of Black fourth-graders reading on grade level doubled from 2002 to 2019, and the percentage of Black fourth-graders doing math on grade level more than doubled during that time.

Even with those gains, however, fewer than 20 percent of Black students are proficient in each area. At these rates of progress — if White students' performance remains the same — Black fourth-graders in Atlanta Public Schools won't reach their White peers until 2136.

**127  
YEARS**

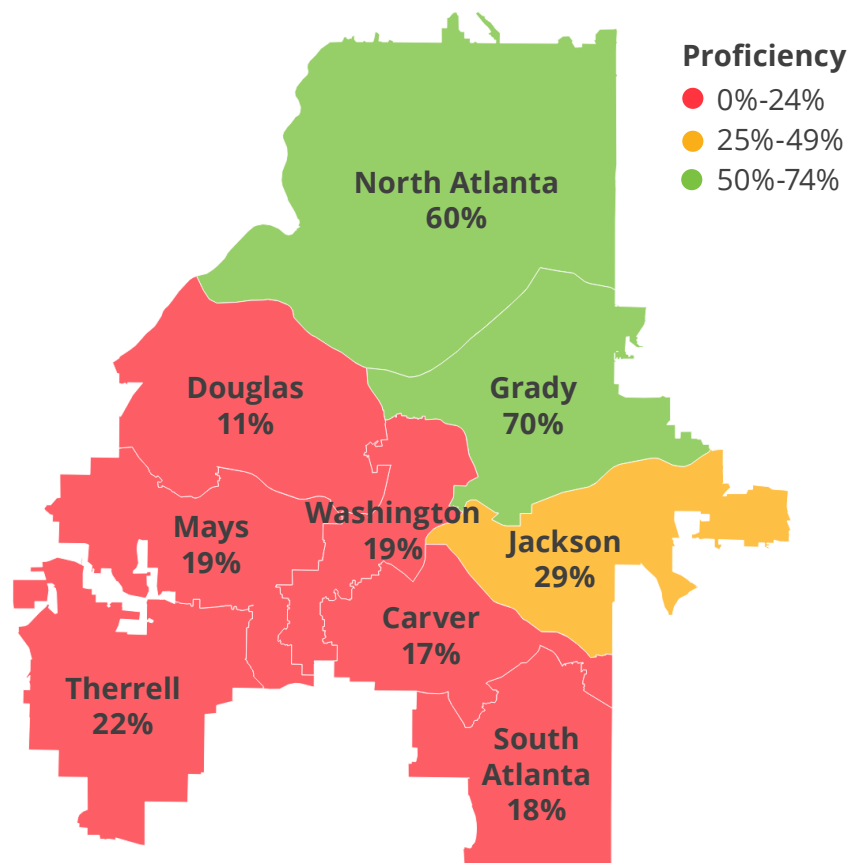
**For Black 4th-graders to catch up to White 4th-graders, at current rates**

## School-specific Realities

As mentioned above, it is difficult to encapsulate the state of a district as large as APS in a single report. There is not one reality, but several realities coexisting amidst each other.

The citywide map on this page showing Milestones proficiency by cluster reveals a true patchwork. There is promise, to be sure, in schools across Atlanta, schools where entire subgroups of students are exceeding the district average, and schools that are making significant gains. But there are also many schools, far too many schools, struggling year after year after year.

**Average 2019 Milestones Proficiency by Cluster  
(ELA and Math combined)**



### THERE ARE LOTS OF POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS IN APS SCHOOLS.

As the chart on the next page shows, there are schools like Morris Brandon Elementary, where the percentage of Latino students reading and writing on grade level is [more than twice](#) the percentage across Atlanta Public Schools.

There are also schools where the proficiency levels are still low but where great progress is taking place. At Barack & Michelle Obama Academy, for example, the percentage of students reading and writing on grade level today has [more than tripled](#) since 2015. At Finch Elementary, the percentage has [more than doubled](#).

Atlanta's charter school sector has real strengths, too. Black students at all but one charter school, for instance, outperform the district average in math. Overall, in 2018 math proficiency rate for Black students at charter schools was [37.5 percent](#), compared to [17.7 percent](#) at traditional schools. And there are individual schools like Drew Charter Elementary, where the percentage of Black students doing math on grade level is [more than three times](#) the percentage across APS.

## THERE ARE ALSO LOTS OF WORRISOME DEVELOPMENTS IN APS SCHOOLS.

Consider the schools, listed on this page, where 15 or fewer percent of students were reading and writing on grade level in 2015. There were 18 such schools.

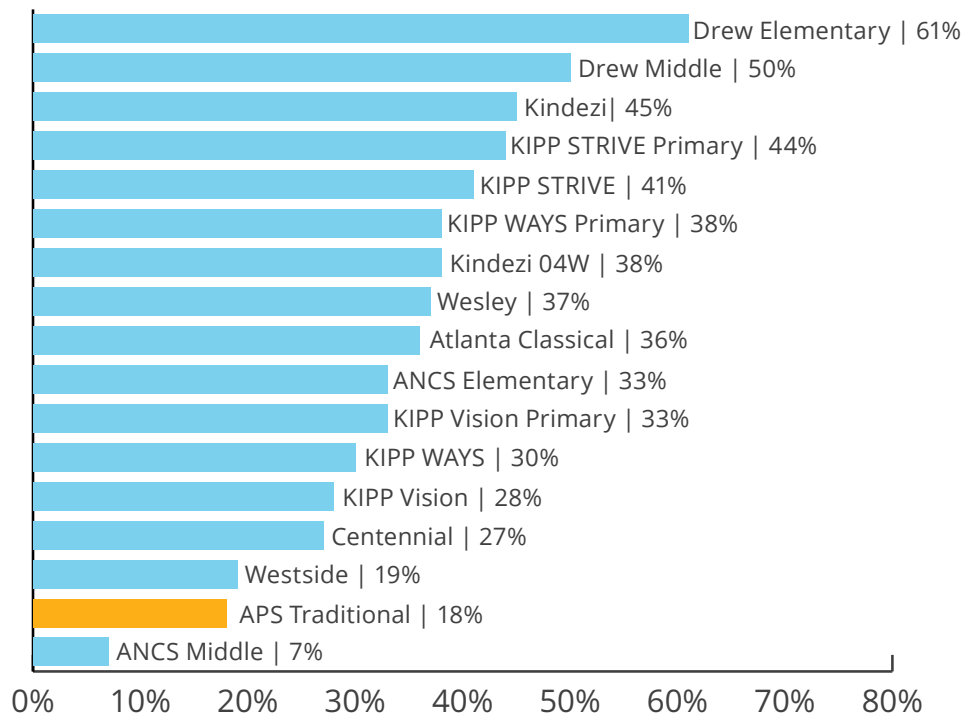
In 2019, shortly after some of these schools were restructured or partnered, 10 of these 18 schools had not exceeded 15 percent proficiency. Of the eight schools where gains passed this threshold, **none exceeded 26 percent proficiency.**

The situation is only slightly better in math. In 2015, there were 22 schools, listed on the next page, where 15 percent or fewer of students were doing math on grade level. In 2019, there were only four schools still stuck below 15 percent. The ceiling for this progress was low, however; of the schools that exceed this threshold, **none exceeded 28 percent proficiency.**

Charter schools are not immune from these types of issues, of course, and some charters are not serving all students well either. The percentage of Black students doing math on grade level at the top-performing charter school is **more than eight times higher** than at the lowest-performing charter school, Atlanta Neighborhood Charter School, where only 7 percent of Black students are on grade level.

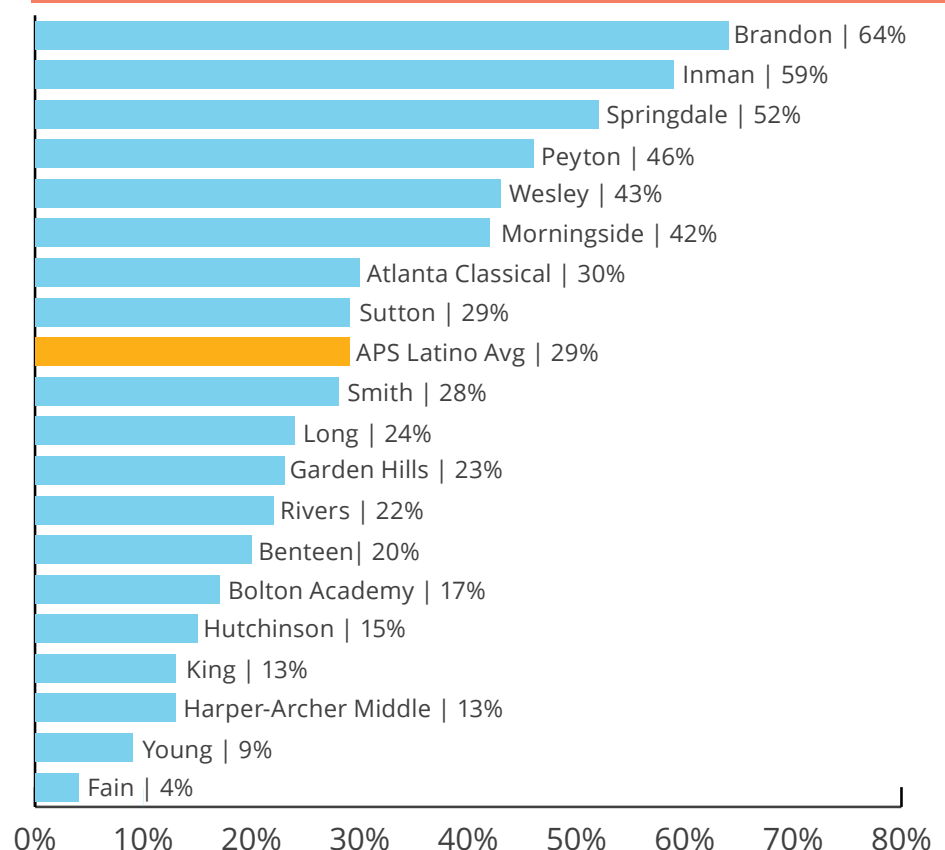
### Black Student Math Proficiency, 2018 Milestones

APS Charter Schools



### Latino Student ELA Proficiency, 2018 Milestones

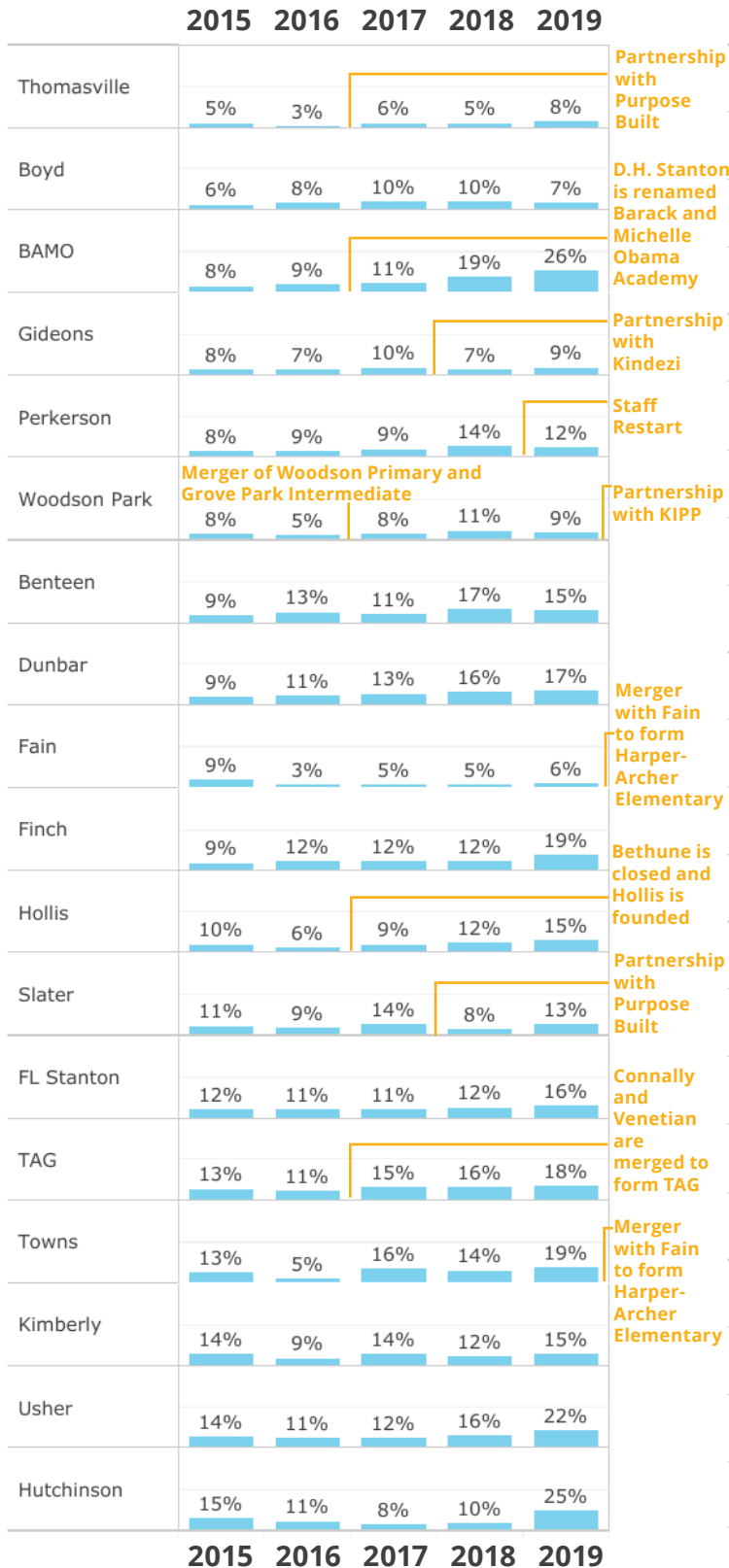
Schools with at least 25 tested Latino students





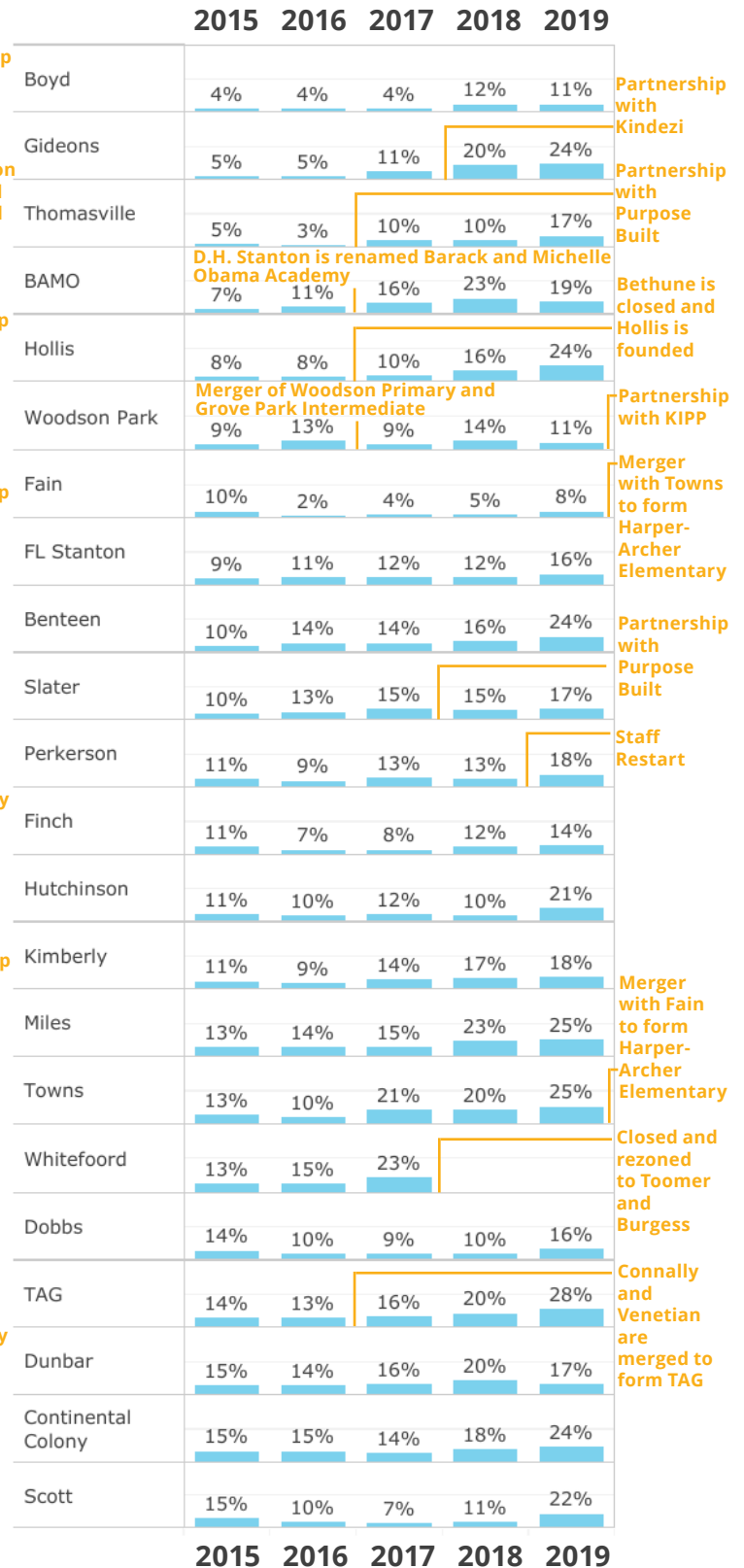
## ELA Proficiency, 2015-2019

APS Schools At or Below 15% ELA Proficiency in 2015



## Math Proficiency, 2015-2019

APS Schools At or Below 15% Math Proficiency in 2015



In addition to the interventions listed above, all schools except Thomasville, Benteen, Hutchinson, and Dobbs began receiving district turnaround supports in the 2016-17 school year. Schools that merged or restarted are noted, and include the data from the original schools in the corresponding years.



## Moving Forward, with Parents

Parents are practical. They know that even when Atlanta Public Schools takes drastic action, progress is not guaranteed, and when there is progress, it typically comes very slowly.

Parents do not expect schools to go from 15 percent of students on grade level to 85 percent overnight. We all remember stories about suspiciously quick gains, and we all know how those stories end.

At the same time, parents cannot understand — and should not be expected to understand — how Frederick Douglass High School hasn't cracked 7 percent proficiency in geometry in five years, or how Boyd Elementary School hasn't exceeded 10 percent proficiency in reading and writing in five years. It's simply unacceptable.

These seem to be issues of will just as much as skill, and there are things we can do about will.

There are three steps we would like to see the Board take to improve APS.

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**Frederick Douglass High School hasn't cracked 7 percent proficiency in geometry in five years, and Boyd Elementary School hasn't exceeded 10 percent proficiency in reading and writing in five years. It's simply unacceptable.**



GeorgiaCAN

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### Expand what's working.

As the graphs on the previous page make clear, some schools get much better results than others. The percentage of Latino students reading and writing at grade level is **seven times higher** at Brandon Elementary than it is at Young Middle School. Why? What is the team of educators at Brandon doing, and what can the team at Young learn from them?

Moreover, if the team at Brandon Elementary, for example, or at Drew Elementary, to use another example, is getting results so much better than the citywide average, how can those educators play a larger role across the city? Maybe instead of leading one school, for example, those teams could lead more than one.

APS is not in a place where it can afford to reject new ideas or outside-of-the-box thinking. **Whether it's instructional practices or whole schools, whether they are traditional district schools or charter schools, APS needs to expand what's working.**

## 2 Take action on what's not working.

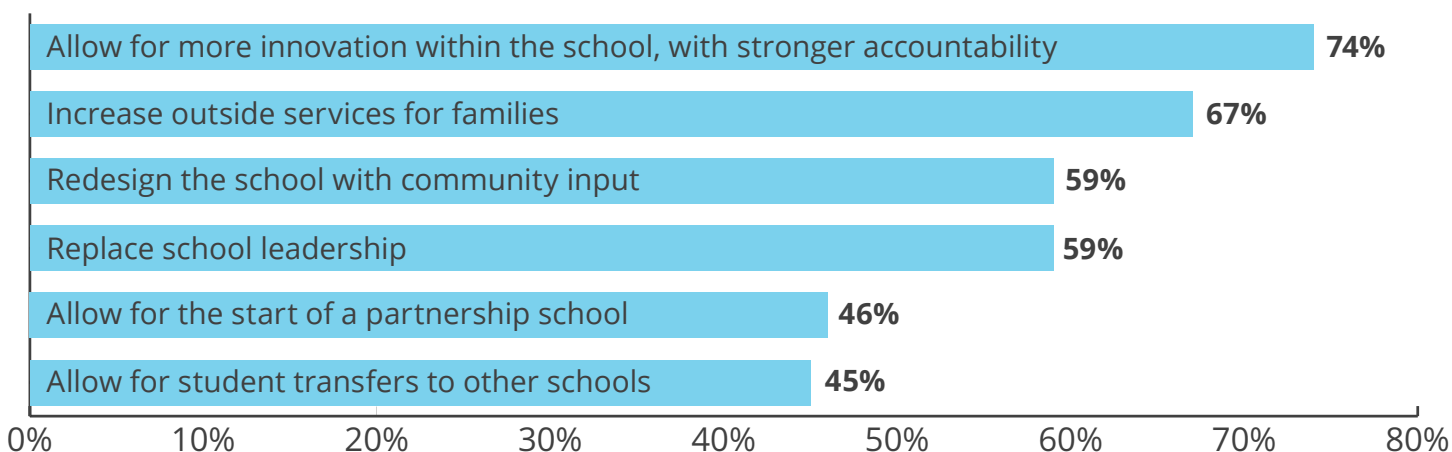
Our groups and our partners have connected with more than 5,000 parents to talk about how we can improve our schools. Recently, we asked some of these parents and community members how long a school should have to improve, and what steps should be taken to improve a school.

The headline is this: **71 percent of respondents think the district should intervene in a failing school in 1-2 years.** Parents believe the Board should be quick to act when schools continue to

struggle, and when one intervention does not move the needle, parents expect the Board to try something else.

Again, parents are practical. They strongly support the exchange of increased autonomy for increased accountability. They deeply understand the need for increased services for families. **The Board needs to hear these parents, and to take action on what's not working.**

**If your school has underperformed for a number of years, what would like to see the district do?**



## 3 Get out of parents' way, and allow parents to do what's best for their children.

APS often talks about the importance of families being involved in their children's education, yet APS's own policies often hinder parents' own preferences.

For instance, APS allows administrative transfer to traditional district schools as a form of

school choice. However, in a curious move, APS does not open access to some of its highest-performing schools.

For the 2019-20 school year, APS allowed administrative transfer to 26 elementary schools. The average math proficiency rate at these

schools in 2019 was 27 percent. Meanwhile, three high-performing schools in North Atlanta — Brandon, Smith, and Jackson — had a cumulative excess capacity of 1,251 seats, **and yet the district did not allow administrative transfer to those schools.** Those three schools had an average 2019 math proficiency rate of 76 percent. We believe parents of students at nearby and consistently low-performing Boyd Elementary, to name but one example, would be interested in enrolling their children at any of these three schools.

Absent an administrative transfer option to a high-performing school, parents have few options. For example, in fall 2018, **APS charter waitlists contained 9,938 applications, which represents 6,500 students.**

## IS APS COMMITTED TO EQUITY?

### 2019 Math Proficiency

27%

at APS elementary schools that accepted administrative transfer in 2019

76%

at three North Atlanta schools that did not allow administrative transfer

1,251

Combined open seats at these three North Atlanta schools

As we publish this report, the Board is developing the next five-year plan and searching for its next superintendent. Decisions that will impact the quality of education the next generation of Atlantans receive are being made right now.

With an eye on 2020 and the years ahead, we hope the Atlanta Board of Education heeds the wishes of these parents, promotes accountability, and takes decision action on the pervasive inequities across the city.

**We hope the Board expands what's working, takes action on what's not working, and lets parents do what's best for their children.**

## Notes

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This report was produced by the Latino Association for Parents of Public Schools and GeorgiaCAN.

The Latino Association for Parents of Public Schools provides a support network for parents to have a voice within schools. Local chapters exist in schools across the city, and each chapter helps to plan integral school activities and support students' academic success. Collaboration with Atlanta Public Schools and individual schools has been central to LAPPS' success. Follow LAPPS on Twitter [@LAPPSGA](https://twitter.com/LAPPSGA).

GeorgiaCAN seeks to identify and advance common-sense policies that put the needs of students first. We engage local stakeholders — from community members to policy makers — to advocate for student success throughout the entire public education system. Learn more at [www.gacan.org](http://www.gacan.org).