



# **The Flexibility Advisory Committee**

## **Executive Summary**

**March 17, 2014**

## **Introduction**

Georgia law mandates that all school districts must notify the Georgia Department of Education (GA DOE) of their intent to seek waivers from state laws and DOE policies and regulations on or before June 30, 2015.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, districts also have the option not to seek any waivers, and none will be provided by the state to Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) after the June 30, 2015,<sup>2</sup> date except in cases of natural disasters.

The Department of Education refers to this decision as *school system flexibility*. This flexibility allows LEAs the opportunity to obtain waivers from state laws and regulations that may currently be seen as preventing districts from being innovative in how children are educated.<sup>3</sup> The DeKalb County School District (District) chose to begin its response to this flexibility opportunity through the creation of the Flexibility Advisory Committee (FAC).

## **The Flexibility Advisory Committee**

At the start of the 2013-2014 school year, the DeKalb County School District began the process of redeveloping its strategic plan. A major part of this process was the development of a fifty-member Strategic Planning Committee comprised of individuals from across all of the District's five Regions. These individuals all had diverse backgrounds that would contribute to the creation of a new mission, vision, motto, set of beliefs, and strategic goals for the District. The Strategic Planning Committee was comprised of teachers, parents, principals, leaders of parent councils, community members, central office employees, and a representative from the District's Board of Education. The committee developed long-range goals that would guide the DeKalb County School District for the next five years, and at its December 2, 2013, Business Meeting, the Board of Education adopted the District's new mission, vision, and strategic goal areas.

Because the members of the Strategic Planning Committee had worked to develop goals that would direct the District for the next five years, they were asked to continue

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<sup>1</sup> O.C.G.A. §20-2-84.3

<sup>2</sup> O.C.G.A. §20-2-80

<sup>3</sup> Georgia Department of Education's *School System Flexibility and Charter Schools in Georgia: Overview and Comparison* presentation, September 2013

with their long-range planning for the District by becoming members of the new Flexibility Advisory Committee (FAC). Out of the original fifty-member Strategic Planning Committee team, forty-seven individuals were able to continue their work with the District.

The FAC was charged with three major tasks:

1. Review the elements associated with the state's recommended flexibility options, including, but not limited to, waivers from Title 20, fiscal impact, governance implications, accountability and performance evaluations, and consequences;
2. Build the knowledge base to develop an Executive Summary for the Superintendent detailing these options and their impact on the DeKalb County School District; and,
3. Monitor the District's drafting of all final documents associated with the Superintendent's recommendation.

The FAC held its first meeting on December 13, 2013, with subsequent meetings occurring on January 10, February 7, February 21, and March 7, 2014. During these meetings, the FAC closely reviewed the three major flexibility options that the Georgia Department of Education was presenting to LEAs as viable choices for districts. These options included the Investing in Educational Excellence (IE<sup>2</sup>) System, the Charter System, and the Status Quo System. The GA DOE had also included three additional options in prior presentations to LEAs, but had removed those options in more recent presentations.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to reviewing the three flexibility options described above, the FAC reviewed performance data from the only three IE<sup>2</sup> Systems in Georgia<sup>5</sup> as well as three metro-Atlanta Charter Systems<sup>6</sup> out of the nineteen that are currently in operation across the state. Reviewed data included district performance on the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI), Georgia's new accountability system, SAT performance,

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<sup>4</sup> Georgia Department of Education's *School System Flexibility in Georgia Summary* presentation to Richmond and Columbia County Boards of Education, January 15, 2014

<sup>5</sup> Gwinnett County Public Schools, Forsyth County Schools, and Rabun County School District

<sup>6</sup> Fulton County Schools, Marietta City Schools, and City Schools of Decatur

and each system's graduation rates using the new cohort calculation. The data were also examined against data from the DeKalb County School District and the overall performance for the state.

During these first three meetings, the FAC was also presented with information from guest speakers from Fulton County Schools that detailed how their district had chosen to take advantage of the flexibility option being provided by the state, and they engaged in group activities that focused on root cause analysis and consensus building. For each of the District's five Regions, a Community Engagement Session occurred in which the District provided information detailing the flexibility options and then took the time to answer questions and gather input. Each question and comment at all five of the Community Engagement Sessions was summarized and provided to the FAC so that the larger community would have input in building the necessary knowledge base for the FAC to complete its charge.

### **Noted Considerations from the FAC**

Through its work, the FAC identified several critical areas that must be considered as the District selects one of the flexibility options being provided by the state.

The FAC noted that the District should have a firm understanding of the consequences associated with each of the three choices. For example, a Status Quo System, while not subject to increased student performance measurements, will not receive any waivers after June 30, 2015. This will cause the District to be at the whim of the Legislature and Department of Education. Should either of these entities decide to write laws, policies, or regulations that negatively impact the schools, the District would have no option but to follow those mandates. Additionally, current waivers utilized by the District would no longer be available. Both the IE<sup>2</sup> and Charter District options have consequences associated with not meeting established performance objectives. The Charter District could be converted back to a Status Quo System and thus lose all waivers while schools not meeting performance objectives in an IE<sup>2</sup> district could be converted to charter schools, turned over to a neighboring district, or turned over to a non-profit, private organization.

Of further importance to the FAC are the obligations associated with the IE<sup>2</sup> and Charter District options. Districts choosing the IE<sup>2</sup> option should understand that all waivers must be enumerated on the front end of drafting any contract with the state. They must clearly be detailed in how they will be used to allow for innovation across the district. Systems selecting the Charter System option, on the other hand, should understand that the state is allowing broad flexibility from almost all of Title 20 and GA DOE policies and regulations; however, the focus for a Charter System is on local school governance and autonomy. The FAC noted that a process to phase in this autonomy would be necessary for successful implementation in DeKalb should this option be selected. Furthermore, the District should be very clear in detailing how this autonomy would be provided to schools and at what level, particularly as it relates to the need for increased parental and community engagement and any required training, the possibility for local school governance councils to work collectively (as in a cluster), and the ability for local schools to request school-specific waivers.

The FAC also sees that districts choosing the IE<sup>2</sup> or Status Quo option could maintain a centralized bureaucracy that controls individual schools whereas Charter Systems must structure a centralized office that supports individual schools and their autonomy; however, it is understood that this autonomy would need to be earned under a Charter System option as noted earlier through a robust training and a phase-in process.

Funding elements should also be associated with the decision-making process. For example, districts choosing the Charter option could possibly obtain an additional \$87.00 in funding per student with a cap currently at \$4 million dollars. Districts choosing not to seek any waivers under the Status Quo System option would lose any current waivers associated with minimum and maximum class size for funding purposes.

Of critical importance to the FAC is increased student performance, and any decision made must allow this concern to be the bottom line. The options being provided by the state are put into place to allow innovation and flexibility so as to increase student performance. The FAC noted that metrics should be established to monitor performance at all levels and that the District should dedicate a department to address this need.

## **Noted Considerations from the Community Engagement Sessions**

Citizen comments from the five Community Engagement Sessions allowed the FAC to identify critical considerations that must also be noted by the Superintendent and the District during the decision-making process. In many instances, those considerations mirrored those that were identified by the FAC during its independent work, but in some other cases, important considerations were noticed that had not been a part of the discussion among members of the FAC.

Key considerations for the District that were noted consistently throughout the Community Engagement Sessions focused on how the District's decision would address local school autonomy and governance. With regards to autonomy, citizens stated that the District should be extremely clear in defining autonomy should the Charter District option be selected.<sup>7</sup> They also noted that should this autonomy be granted to local schools through the Charter System option, stronger leadership<sup>8</sup> at the schools and close monitoring of the school by the District may be necessary to ensure that the autonomy is functioning as it should and in an equitable manner.<sup>9</sup> Community comments around school-based governance pointed out that should the Charter System option be selected, the DeKalb County School District should be clear in how local school governance councils are established and trained. For example, concerns arose over the various levels of parental engagement across the District and how the District would address the need to build a strong governance structure at each site.<sup>10</sup> Community members also noted that like autonomy, the District should be transparent in defining the governance structure at each school<sup>11</sup> and how that governance team would interact and operate with each School Council.<sup>12</sup> The possibility of establishing a collaborative council among cluster schools was also mentioned as a consideration should the Charter System option be selected.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Region I Community Engagement Session – Community Member #17, #18, #31, and #41 (also see Region III Community Engagement Session – Community Member #24 and Region V Community Engagement Session – Community Member #4)

<sup>8</sup> See Region V Community Engagement Session – Community Member #15

<sup>9</sup> See Region IV Community Engagement Session – Community Member #20 (also see Region III Community Engagement Session – Community Member #26)

<sup>10</sup> See Region IV Community Engagement Session – Community Member #7

<sup>11</sup> See Region II Community Engagement Session – Community Member #13

<sup>12</sup> See Region III Community Engagement Session – Community Member #14

<sup>13</sup> See Region I Community Engagement Session – Community Member #43

Other concerns present at all five meetings focused on the status of current magnet, theme, and conversion charter schools. Citizen comments questioned how the renewals of current conversion charter school contracts could be impacted in light of the flexibility decision facing the District<sup>14</sup> and how each of the options would possibly impact magnet and theme schools.<sup>15</sup> The District should take into account each community's support of magnet and/or theme schools as well as the need to discuss with current conversion charter schools how they may benefit from and contribute to this flexibility decision.

Community members also acknowledged that there are broader concerns that should be addressed by the District. These broad concerns may be independent of any option selected, but they still must be a major consideration during the selection process. One such example was student achievement,<sup>16</sup> and how failure to meet student performance expectations would activate mandated consequences for each option.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, citizen comments addressed the need to make certain that the decision being made allows for an equitable school system<sup>18</sup> that then places as many resources as possible back in the schools.<sup>19</sup> Need-based funding, zero-based budgeting, and/or budget transparency were mentioned as considerations to take into account without regard to any of the flexibility options.<sup>20</sup>

Another broader concern focused on class size. Community members noted that class sizes are currently too large and that the option selected should be the one that best allows the District to reduce the teacher to student ratio.<sup>21</sup> At one meeting, a community member addressed how the Status Quo option may not be able to support lower class

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<sup>14</sup> See Region I Community Engagement Session – Community Member # 19 and #20

<sup>15</sup> See Region III Community Engagement Session – Community Member #17 (also see Region V Community Engagement Session – Community Member #10; Region IV Community Engagement Session – Community Member #24; and Region II Community Engagement Session – Community Member #42)

<sup>16</sup> See Region IV Community Engagement Session – Community Member #2, #4, and #26

<sup>17</sup> See Region II Community Engagement Session – Community Member #4 (also see Region V Community Engagement Session – Community Member #2)

<sup>18</sup> See Region V Community Engagement Session – Community Member #6, # 14, and # 16 (also see Region IV Community Engagement Session – Community Member #15; Region II Community Engagement Session – Community Member #16)

<sup>19</sup> See Region I Community Engagement Session – Community Member #13 (also see Region II Community Engagement Session – Community Member #18 and #34)

<sup>20</sup> See Region IV Community Engagement Session – Community Member #23 (also see Region I Community Engagement Session – Community Member #21)

<sup>21</sup> See Region II Community Engagement Session – Community Member #51 (also see Region IV Community Engagement Session – Community Member #3 and #18)

sizes due to fiscal constraints<sup>22</sup> while at another session, a community member felt that Status Quo may be a better option to address class size since it may require the District to meet maximum funding sizes without waivers or lose funding dollars as a result.<sup>23</sup> Despite the differences between the two comments, the key focus for the District is on the need to look at ways in which the options can best address class size rather than the differences in opinions.

### **Final Considerations**

In closing, the District's decision should consider the elements noted in this document and other corollary materials; however, the final decision, as noted by both the Flexibility Advisory Committee and participants in the Community Engagement Sessions, must focus on one paramount consideration before all others: what is ultimately best for all of the District's 100,000 students.<sup>24</sup> The flexibility decision that addresses this consideration will be the correct one for the future of the DeKalb County School District.

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<sup>22</sup> See Region II Community Engagement Session – Community Member #50

<sup>23</sup> See Region I Community Engagement Session – Community Member #4

<sup>24</sup> See Region II Community Engagement Session – Community Member #53 (also see Region III Community Engagement Session – Community Member #21)