Today marks the first day of school for Savannah-Chatham County Public Schools. Our teachers and school leaders, along with district leadership and support staff – and indeed the entire community – are cheering today as our scholars walk through the doors of their classrooms – many for the first time in nearly 18 months. We made it through last year. Now, we now look forward to a bright year together.

The past year was a difficult one for most of us. Yet, amid all the challenges we faced, I remain extremely grateful for how the Savannah – Chatham County Public School community pulled together, resulting in many silver linings along the way. The strength of our commitment to meet the needs of children and staff in the safest manner possible never faltered and successes were abundant. We had four first days of school, experienced at least three instructional models, implemented flexible working conditions, used innovative strategies in every operational area, responded quickly, thoughtfully, and responsibly to ever changing public health guidance, and became better prepared for almost anything under the sun.

We would not have made it through the last year without the support and encouragement of our staff, students, and community. I am profoundly grateful to our families who carried a tremendous weight this past year, supporting a greater-than-ever-before home instruction workload while also helping children to understand and to respond to the uncertainty about and the loss of our typical schooling and life experiences. I want to thank our teachers and staff; I could not be prouder of the patience, compassion, and persistence demonstrated by these professionals who redefined the way they worked with and for students during this particularly challenging time. Our entire staff – from the front office staff to the central office staff to the campus police to the school nutrition team to our school nurses to our bus drivers – everyone stepped up to support students, families, and each other. Our Board of Education members, business partners, elected officials, and community leaders gave of their time and their treasure to keep teaching and learning moving forward. We are truly blessed by a great community! Everything we do – everything we hope to do – is built upon the relationships we have with each other. Students and teachers. Teachers and parents. Parents and students. If there’s one thing we learned during the pandemic, it’s that we need to value and nurture relationships. The gains in achievement and in social and emotional development that live inside all our students depend on our relationships.

Since last year, we’ve been preparing for this day. We have made extensive preparations and implemented protocols to limit the spread of COVID-19 in our schools as students return. Our multi-layered mitigation approach provides the surest path to keeping our schools open 5 days a week for in-person instruction. We will continue to monitor transmission rates in our area and will work in concert with local health officials to address any changes in protocols or instructional approaches.

Many innovations will continue. The strides we made in 1:1 device deployment when it was vitally necessary to stay in contact with our students will pay big dividends now that we are in person. Every child will have a device to use in and out of the classroom, and to use should we have to pivot to remote learning. We are approaching this new academic year – a year later, a year better informed, and a year stronger – with excitement, hope, and a sense of relief. We have worked diligently to create a safe, engaging environment for students and staff, where students can actively participate in learning, build positive relationships, renew friendships, and make academic gains while having their physical and social-emotional needs met. We are prepared and ready to move FORWARD to SCHOOL.