Meeting the needs of our students

When Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS) announced school closures due to COVID-19 in March of 2020 who could have imagined the impact of the global pandemic on our families, our schools, our community, and the wider world. All of us have been touched by COVID in some form or fashion, but we know that the pandemic is affecting our students in uniquely personal ways. Supporting our students—academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally—is the job of every staff member. And we know that students all over Gwinnett County and in every single school are struggling. GCPS has developed a broad range of programs and crisis interventions to support students’ social and emotional wellness from kindergarten classes through graduation. We’ve also developed innovative approaches to address learning loss due to the pandemic and help to close existing achievement gaps. Read on to learn more about how GCPS is meeting the needs of our students.

Support to live, learn, and thrive

Success in life requires a range of skills, attitudes, character traits, and values. While GCPS’ core business is teaching and learning, we know that social and emotional development is the foundation on which our students will build academic success, grow as individuals and members of the community, and prepare for success in life.

“Our focus on social and emotional development is not a ‘distraction’ from academics and it’s not a new method or tool,” says Dr. Tinisha Parker, executive director for Student Services. “It’s how instruction succeeds, because kids are ready and able to learn and grow.”

Our teachers work to create safe, caring, well-managed, and welcoming learning environments. Studies show that when students feel a sense of belonging at school, they are less likely to display risky behaviors and more likely to become responsible and motivated students and caring members of the school community.

In our schools, activities to support the well-being of our students are woven throughout the school day—from skill-development sessions and advisement lessons to Kid Talks and age-appropriate lessons on abuse and suicide prevention. Mindful Minutes and Wellness Wednesdays help build coping skills. Peer leaders guide their classmates to become “upstanders,” not bystanders. Classroom meetings set community expectations. Buddy Benches and diversity celebrations help ensure that all students are engaged and feel welcome at school. Parent workshops help families support their child at home.

Counselors, social workers, and other specially trained adults provide additional services and supports to meet the needs of students, including crisis interventions, mental health check-ins, trauma support, home visits, small-group and individual counseling, mentoring, services for children in foster care and those experiencing homelessness, training for staff, and informational sessions for families.

In the third school year affected by the pandemic, support is needed more than ever. GCPS is hiring 24 additional social workers (for a total of 46) and creating a department focused on addressing students’ social and emotional needs.

“The focus on social-emotional wellness helps students build the soft skills that employers and parents tell us students need for their future success and well-being” Dr. Calvin J. Watts, superintendent, says of the districtwide effort. “They are not just beneficial to some students. They benefit all students. And when our children thrive, our community thrives as well”

Targeting learning loss and gaps with supports and interventions

Without a doubt, the pandemic has had an impact on teaching and learning in the last 18 months. Every GCPS student has experienced some gaps in their learning due to interrupted instruction while some students have experienced more significant learning
loss. To ensure that students receive the support they need—when and how they need it—the district is pursuing a multi-year approach to help them overcome losses and accelerate learning of our Academic Knowledge and Skills (AKS) curriculum, particularly in the core academic areas of language arts and mathematics.

A team looking at closing the achievement gap identified three levels of needed academic supports. GCPS is implementing plans to address each level.

“Every day and with every lesson, our teachers are evaluating whether students need more support so they can be successful in learning the AKS,” says Dr. Clay Hunter, associate superintendent for Curriculum and Instructional Support. “Our plan to handle learning loss begins with daily classroom instruction and builds on a framework of supports, based on what each individual child needs.”

Intermittent Supports are available in the classroom to help students with learning loss that hampers their ability to master an element of the AKS. Every student gets this level of support to reinforce content or provide more practice in a foundational skill taught in a previous year. We anticipate that the majority of our students will be able to make up their learning loss, with this level of support providing student-specific learning opportunities such as small-group instruction in the classroom and before- and after-school programs. Back in June, nearly 27,000 students received this type of targeted support with our Summer Enrichment + Acceleration (SEA) program.

As a supplement to regular classroom instruction, Strategic Supports help students who have more extensive learning loss that is a roadblock to mastery. Strategic supports provide additional time for learning, with a focus on accelerating learning of the foundational AKS for language arts and math. Strategic Supports usually are provided during designated intervention/enrichment periods and in small-group settings so these students get the additional time and attention they need to master grade-level AKS and catch up to their peers.

For some students, missed opportunities to learn have resulted in extensive gaps across several skills or areas of learning, perhaps a year or more of lost learning. In order to learn the AKS for their current grade level, these children will need Intermittent and Strategic Supports as well as Intensive Supports, which may include high-impact tutoring during the school day, before and after school, and/or online.

“The bottom line is this… After the learning disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly every student needs some level of support and many students will need support over time, even a period of years,” says Dr. Hunter. “Whether students need the occasional learning boost or extensive support, they will get what they need to succeed so they can learn the AKS and be successful in the classroom.”