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JULY 15, 2004

## Communities Lighting the Way Back to Neighborhood Schools

BY [THERESA WOODGEARD](#)

Urban renewal is not a new phenomenon. A drive through most any older neighborhood close to Atlanta reveals block after block of carefully remodeled homes, those in the middle of a transformation or those that will be.

But when it comes to the neighborhood elementary school, more often than not, parents in transitional neighborhoods choose other educational options such as private schools, home schooling or moving to another school district. Low test scores coupled with a high number of transient students are commonly cited as reasons for leaving local public schools.

But change is afoot. Many in-town neighborhoods are beginning to question the wisdom of abandoning their small schools that are often within walking distance of their homes. Recently representatives from Atlanta Public Schools, DeKalb County and city of Decatur schools representing five school districts attended a roundtable to network and share ideas on revitalizing their local schools.

Denise Reidy-Puckett, head of the Forrest Hills Education Community Coalition, plans on sending her 21-month old daughter to her DeKalb County neighborhood school in 2007. "Investing in local schools is good for property values, stabilizing neighborhoods and is much less expensive than private school," said Reidy-Puckett. "We realize it won't happen overnight, but if we want change, we have to start now. There are 250 homes in our neighborhood and not a single elementary age child attends Forrest Hills. There is a lot of misperception about the school. Test scores have increased and we have a wonderful principal, but we need to reach out into the community and let people who have younger children know what we are doing."

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Making sure test scores continue to rise will take investment by the entire community, said Reidy-Puckett. "We've recruited tutors and PTA members with and without children. Getting people into the school, whether they have children, plan to or are retired will create ambassadors and help us spread the word about the school."

Adrainne Gray, who heads the Kirkwood School Coalition, said the results of a survey about Toomer Elementary, an Atlanta public school, revealed no one, including parents of students currently attending, were impressed with the school. "We have a very economically and racially diverse population. But most upper middle class families are not sending their children to Toomer and others were snatching their kids out."

"When we found out our principal was leaving, our school board representative told us about a program that enabled us to help choose a new principal. Having a voice in what's happening in our school strengthens the community."

"The coalition can act as a communication outlet for parents. We have a lot of single parents in our district that may not have time to go to meetings. We want people in the neighborhood to know what is going on and that they have options," said Gray who plans on sending her 19-month-old daughter to Toomer when she reaches school age. "We have a long way to go academically, but by staying in the district we can improve."

Co-founder of Avondale Education Association, Sondra Elek, said that from September through March of this year, their 80-member group studied different options including starting a charter or a cooperative school.

"We surveyed Avondale and Avonwood parents whose children were born from September 2000 through now, because we're taking the long-term approach. Now we have a good feel for how many children are out there." The results revealed that 39 out of 45 voting members preferred sending their children to Avondale Elementary, a DeKalb County school.

"We realized we have a buy-in from parents. From there, we formed committees that will focus on fundraising to bring in money to buy instructional and art supplies to the school. We have a group that will focus on beautification and we have a group that will volunteer to help the teachers. We even have parents who are sending their children to parochial school that are helping us."

East Lake resident Tina Pippin, whose daughter will attend East Lake Elementary, is excited about her child's first year in Atlanta

Public Schools. "After having a good pre-school experience at the Frasier Center at Decatur High, we were wondering, what next? Most people in our neighborhood either move out or send their children to private schools. We wanted to invest in the neighborhood, so we investigated schools in the area." After touring East Lake, Pippin said she and her husband were amazed.

"The neighborhood school was everything we wanted. The classes are small, there is a family atmosphere and the test scores are good."

Pippin's daughter will be one of the few white children attending East Lake. "There is a lot of race and class-based misinformation about what is happening in public schools." For example, East Lake whose population is majority black has a long line of knowledgeable, involved parents, said Pippin. "The same thing is going on in lots of neighborhoods. It's all about perception."

Julie Rhame, who represents Oakhurst Elementary in the city of Decatur, started reaching out to her community three years ago, long before her daughter was to begin school. "What I saw was a lot of disconnection. People belonged to different groups and sent their children to different pre-schools and didn't know each other. There were also a lot of rumors going around about Oakhurst. I wanted to get the facts out."

"One of the reasons I wanted to do this was to stabilize the neighborhood. Kids would reach school age and their families would move out. We have a jewel of a school in the middle of our neighborhood, but because it is majority black the perception was that it wasn't a good school. It's about communication and keeping people informed."

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**MORE BY [THERESA WOODGEARD](#)**

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