

U.S. Department of Education
2021 National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

[X] Public or [] Non-public

For Public Schools only: (Check all that apply) [X] Title I [] Charter [] Magnet [] Choice

Name of Principal Mrs. Dena McCord
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., etc.) (As it should appear in the official records)

Official School Name Atlanta Elementary School
(As it should appear in the official records)

School Mailing Address 902 ABC Lane
(If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

City Atlanta State TX Zip Code+4 (9 digits total) 75551-2299

County Cass County

Telephone (903) 796-7164 Fax (903) 799-1018

Web site/URL https://aes.atlisd.net/ E-mail dmccord@atlisd.net

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date _____

(Principal's Signature)

Name of Superintendent* Mr. Sidney Harrist E-mail sharrist@atlisd.net
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

District Name Atlanta Independent School District Tel. (903) 796-4194

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date _____

(Superintendent's Signature)

Name of School Board President/Chairperson Mrs. Charlotte Stanley
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date _____

(School Board President's/Chairperson's Signature)

The original signed cover sheet only should be converted to a PDF file and uploaded via the online portal.

**Non-public Schools: If the information requested is not applicable, leave blank.*

PART I – ELIGIBILITY CERTIFICATION

The electronic signature on the first page of this application (cover page) certify that each of the statements below, concerning the school’s eligibility and compliance with U.S. Department of Education and National Blue Ribbon Schools requirements, are true and correct.

1. All nominated public schools must meet the state’s performance targets in reading (or English language arts) and mathematics and other academic indicators (i.e., attendance rate and graduation rate), for the all students group, including having participation rates of at least 95 percent using the most recent accountability results available for nomination.
2. To meet final eligibility, all nominated public schools must be certified by states prior to September 2021 in order to meet all eligibility requirements. Any status appeals must be resolved at least two weeks before the awards ceremony for the school to receive the award.
3. The school configuration must include one or more of grades K-12. Schools located on the same campus (physical location and mailing address) must apply as an entire school (i.e. K-8; 6-12; K-12 school). Two (or more) schools located on separate campuses, must apply individually even if they have the same principal. A single school located on multiple campuses with one principal must apply as an entire school.
4. The school has been in existence for five full years, that is, from at least September 2015 and grades participating in statewide assessments must have been part of the school for at least the three years prior to September 2019.
5. The nominated school has not received the National Blue Ribbon Schools award in the past five years: 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 or 2020.
6. The nominated school has no history of testing irregularities, nor have charges of irregularities been brought against the school at the time of nomination. If irregularities are later discovered and proven by the state, the U.S. Department of Education reserves the right to disqualify a school’s application and/or rescind a school’s award.
7. The nominated school has not been identified by the state as “persistently dangerous” within the last two years.
8. The nominated school or district is not refusing Office of Civil Rights (OCR) access to information necessary to investigate a civil rights complaint or to conduct a district-wide compliance review.
9. The OCR has not issued a violation letter of findings to the school district concluding that the nominated school or the district as a whole has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes. A violation letter of findings will not be considered outstanding if OCR has accepted a corrective action plan from the district to remedy the violation.
10. The U.S. Department of Justice does not have a pending suit alleging that the nominated school or the school district, as a whole, has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes or the Constitution’s equal protection clause.
11. There are no findings of violations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in a U.S. Department of Education monitoring report that apply to the school or school district in question; or if there are such findings, the state or district has corrected, or agreed to correct, the findings.

PART II - DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Data should be provided for the current school year (2020-2021) unless otherwise stated.

DISTRICT (Question 1 is not applicable to non-public schools.)

1. Number of schools in the district (per district designation):
- 2 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
 - 1 Middle/Junior high schools
 - 1 High schools
 - 0 K-12 schools
- 4 TOTAL

SCHOOL (To be completed by all schools. Only include demographic data for the nominated school, not the district.)

2. Category that best describes the area where the school is located. If unsure, refer to NCES database for correct category: <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/> (Find your school and check “Locale”)

- Urban (city or town)
- Suburban
- Rural

3. Number of students as of October 1, 2020 enrolled at each grade level or its equivalent at the school. Include all students enrolled, in-person, participating in a hybrid model, or online only. If online schooling or other COVID-19 school issues make this difficult to obtain, provide the most accurate and up-to-date information available:

Grade	# of Males	# of Females	Grade Total
PreK	0	0	0
K	0	0	0
1	0	0	0
2	0	0	0
3	79	65	144
4	64	62	126
5	61	69	130
6	0	0	0
7	0	0	0
8	0	0	0
9	0	0	0
10	0	0	0
11	0	0	0
12 or higher	0	0	0
Total Students	204	196	400

*Schools that house PreK programs should count preschool students **only** if the school administration is responsible for the program.

4. Racial/ethnic composition of the school (if unknown, estimate):
- 0 % American Indian or Alaska Native
 - 1 % Asian
 - 30 % Black or African American
 - 10 % Hispanic or Latino
 - 0 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - 53 % White
 - 6 % Two or more races
 - 100 % Total**

(Only these seven standard categories should be used to report the racial/ethnic composition of your school. The Final Guidance on Maintaining, Collecting, and Reporting Racial and Ethnic Data to the U.S. Department of Education published in the October 19, 2007 *Federal Register* provides definitions for each of the seven categories.)

5. Student turnover, or mobility rate, during the 2019 - 2020 school year: 11%

If the mobility rate is above 15%, please explain:

This rate should be calculated using the grid below. The answer to (6) is the mobility rate.

Steps For Determining Mobility Rate	Answer
(1) Number of students who transferred <i>to</i> the school after October 1, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year	21
(2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year	18
(3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]	39
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2019	355
(5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)	0.11
(6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100	11

6. Specify each non-English language represented in the school (separate languages by commas):

Spanish

English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 2 %
6 Total number ELL

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 70 %

Total number students who qualify: 280

8. Students receiving special education services: 16 %
62 Total number of students served

Indicate below the number of students with disabilities according to conditions designated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Do not add additional conditions. All students receiving special education services should be reflected in the table below. It is possible that students may be classified in more than one condition.

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <u>7</u> Autism | <u>1</u> Multiple Disabilities |
| <u>0</u> Deafness | <u>1</u> Orthopedic Impairment |
| <u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness | <u>6</u> Other Health Impaired |
| <u>0</u> Developmental Delay | <u>16</u> Specific Learning Disability |
| <u>2</u> Emotional Disturbance | <u>43</u> Speech or Language Impairment |
| <u>1</u> Hearing Impairment | <u>0</u> Traumatic Brain Injury |
| <u>13</u> Intellectual Disability | <u>0</u> Visual Impairment Including Blindness |

9. Number of years the principal has been in her/his position at this school: 3
10. Use Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs), rounded to the nearest whole numeral, to indicate the number of school staff in each of the categories below. If your current staffing structure has shifted due to COVID-19 impacts and you are uncertain or unable to determine FTEs, provide an estimate.

	Number of Staff
Administrators	2
Classroom teachers, including those teaching high school specialty subjects, e.g., third grade teacher, history teacher, algebra teacher.	18
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher etc.	8
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	10
Student support personnel e.g., school counselors, behavior interventionists, mental/physical health service providers, psychologists, family engagement liaisons, career/college attainment coaches, etc.	1

11. Average student-classroom teacher ratio, that is, the number of students in the school divided by the FTE of classroom teachers, e.g., 22:1 22:1

12. Show daily student attendance rates. Only high schools need to supply yearly graduation rates.

Required Information	2019-2020	2018-2019	2017-2018	2016-2017	2015-2016
Daily student attendance	96%	97%	96%	97%	97%
High school graduation rate	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

13. **For high schools only, that is, schools ending in grade 12 or higher.**

Show percentages to indicate the post-secondary status of students who graduated in Spring 2020.

Post-Secondary Status	
Graduating class size	0
Enrolled in a 4-year college or university	0%
Enrolled in a community college	0%
Enrolled in career/technical training program	0%
Found employment	0%
Joined the military or other public service	0%
Other	0%

14. Indicate whether your school has previously received a National Blue Ribbon Schools award.
 Yes No

If yes, select the year in which your school received the award.

15. In a couple of sentences, provide the school’s mission or vision statement.

The mission of Atlanta Elementary is to provide an exceptional education for all students in a safe and nurturing learning environment that encourages them to become productive citizens no matter their destination after graduation. The vision is to create and nurture a 21st century classroom environment that enables all learners to be successful in a global society.

16. Briefly describe how your school has been operating during the current 2020-2021 school year (e.g., open as usual, online only, a hybrid model, etc.)? If different grade levels in your building operate in different ways, include this. If the school began with one model and switched to another partially through the year, include this as well.

Atlanta Elementary has been open for face-to-face learning since August 17, 2020. Approximately 20 percent of students chose to be online learners at the beginning of this year. The number of students choosing online learning has decreased significantly as the year has progressed. However, a large number of students have moved in and out of online learning due to being quarantined for possible exposure to COVID-19 and/or illness. Strong health protocols have been in place including masking, social distancing, and additional cleaning practices of all high-touch surfaces. This has resulted the school staying open every day of this school year.

17. **For public schools only**, if the school is a magnet, charter, or choice school, explain how students are chosen to attend.

PART III - SUMMARY

Named in 1871 by settlers from Georgia, the small, rural town of Atlanta is located in the heart of the “pineywoods” of Northeast Texas where the main industries are forestry and paper. Atlanta has a shrinking population of upper and middle class with a growing population of lower income. Generational poverty is pervasive, leaving many AES children struggling to overcome barriers. The population is very diverse with several races, cultures, and ethnicities represented.

Atlanta Independent School District originated in 1875. The school mascot is the Rabbit, named after former teacher and coach Ed Rabb. The Atlanta Rabbits have a long history of excellence in the community, from academics to athletics and fine arts. Rabbit Pride is deeply instilled in the community where high achievement is the expectation.

Atlanta Elementary School (AES) serves grades 3 - 5 and is proud to be an A-rated school by the state of Texas. AES has received the “Closing the Gaps” designation from the state six times in the past seven years, as well as many distinctions in reading, math, academic growth and postsecondary readiness. There are currently no other elementary schools with comparable demographics in this region that have received an A rating and every distinction possible. Although demographics show great diversity, the school has built a highly unified body of learners that is socially and emotionally connected. AES helps to lift children out of generational poverty by creating a positive peer culture that includes influences emphasizing the value of success in education. They teach students to believe in their dreams, convert them into action, and to never give up. The school motto is “Work Hard - Dream Big.”

Teachers face a formidable challenge. They must raise the bar on student performance, while competing against social, environmental, and outside pressures as never before. The staff strives to create high-achieving centers of learning by providing rigorous academics, strengthening students’ connectedness to others, and adhering to standards of acceptable behavior. Teachers create welcoming and equitable learning environments for diverse students and their families on a daily basis. To do this, they engage with all stakeholders - school leaders, students, teachers, families, local organizations, businesses, and city leaders to help create an environment of trust. Through awareness training for staff, AES has built cultural competence - the ability to form authentic and effective relationships across differences. This has transformed the way teachers carry out instruction to become more responsive to diversity. For teachers, this means examining pedagogy and curriculum, as well as expectations and interaction patterns with students. It means looking honestly at outcome data and creating new strategies to positively impact student success. As the school has worked together to learn the value of diversity in education, achievement gaps in test scores along ethnic and economic lines have significantly narrowed. Professional development for creating inclusive teaching and learning in AES is a long-term process which challenges them to grow.

AES utilizes evidence-based processes proven to improve school performance. Every initiative implemented improves academic performance and success; strengthens emotional and social development; and/or reduces disciplinary incidents and referrals. With this in mind, the school has implemented a number of innovative programs such as blended learning, the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) of gifted pedagogy for all, leadership and character development programs, a high quality after-school program, culturally responsive teaching, and targeted interventions for struggling students. These programs have also improved student attendance and socio-emotional learning (SEL) by making AES a place where students want to be.

Practically overnight, COVID-19 caused a sudden shift in the delivery of instruction. Fortunately, the schools’ commitment to technology integration meant that for the first time ever, the school had a way to provide uninterrupted instruction and learning while the building was vacant. The transition was not easy, nor was it perfect. A recent shift to blended learning using online technology combined with in-person instruction eased this transition. As the new reality unfolded last spring, AES became very familiar with the challenges and the innovations happening across the education landscape. Staff had to make decisions rapidly so that students could receive instruction as soon as possible. Teachers had to become students themselves and quickly learn how to navigate online teaching. They rose to the challenge and seamlessly provided instruction. Last fall, AES fully opened for in-person learning with 20 percent of students choosing

remote instruction. In addition, a number of students have been in quarantine due to possible exposure making the remote learning process very fluid. To facilitate this, the school added a remote learning coordinator who works closely with teachers to monitor online attendance and progress. Data has shown remote learning has caused significant learning loss. The school has implemented research-based interventions to mitigate these losses, and great care is taken to ensure that no matter the delivery method, mastery of missed concepts will increase.

PART IV – CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

1. Core Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment.

Using the combined efforts of teachers and the campus leadership team, the AES curriculum is based on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and is aligned vertically and horizontally across all grade levels. These efforts not only result in a strong base of foundational skills for students, but also a plan for mastery at high levels.

English Language Arts/Reading teachers, guided by curriculum specialists, develop curriculum maps that outline the scope and sequence of the core curriculum. These maps include a detailed sequential guide for each six weeks which includes academic vocabulary and spiraled tested concepts to ensure readiness standards are rigorously delivered. Each six weeks the curriculum maps are reviewed for mastery of concepts to determine if spiraling instruction is needed. Teachers ensure each student reads connected text daily to support reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. Foundational skills, including the use of inferential and narrative language and vocabulary knowledge are important for academic success. Students are taught how to decode words, analyze word parts, use summarization and inferencing strategies to understand text as well as create well-organized and cohesive written responses and essays.

For students to become fluent in mathematics they must have a robust sense of number. An evidence-based mathematics curriculum ensures the most rigorous instruction. This curriculum maintains effective instructional methods through in-depth lessons, frequent assessments, and spiraled repetition of readiness concepts in addition to real life, hands-on lessons using manipulatives to conceptualize skills. Teachers receive fundamental core training each six weeks to reinforce with consistency and fidelity the daily classroom practices for implementing the program. Foundational skill-building activities include justifying and solving mathematical concepts such as basic computation, order of operations, fractions, measurement, personal financial literacy, and other problem-solving process skills.

Science and social studies curriculum is designed according to the TEKS. Teachers utilize a cross-curricular approach to present topics from these content areas to all other areas of the curriculum. Science concepts are explored in a makerspace called “ThinkLab” through the use of technology, investigation, and virtual reality. Experiments that reinforce learning through hands-on activities are conducted in science labs. Social studies learning is extended by teaching civic responsibility and the importance of patriotism through various projects and events such as mock presidential elections, anti-bullying campaigns, school-wide assemblies, and partnerships with community organizations. To extend learning outside of classrooms, AES offers in-person and virtual field trips to historical sites and scientific museums. Community and business leaders share engaging experiences with students during school assemblies to broaden their perspectives.

The pandemic has forced the school to make learning more student-centric, collaborative, personalized, and available to all students whether in-class, remote or hybrid. Teachers use an online learning platform with both remote and in-person students. AES is not simply transferring traditional instruction online, they are transforming online learning with real-time monitoring, summative assessments, personalized learning, and effective feedback. In a remote learning environment, students may not have access to the full support they would receive in a typical classroom; therefore, the school accommodates learners who may need extra support by providing all of the accommodations online that would be received in a regular classroom setting such as oral administration of material, content/language supports, and digital manipulatives. In addition, a homework helpline is available to students and parents beyond normal school hours. AES also provides hotspots at no cost to students who do not have internet access at home.

Closing the achievement gap and adhering to high expectations is a responsibility shared by every staff member. By identifying the students’ academic, social, and emotional weaknesses early, intentional targeted instruction and mentoring begins the first day of school. Extending learning time - before school, after-school, and in summer programs - has played a major role in student success. These deliberate practices combined with the passion, energy and relentless efforts of the staff have produced favorable results in student engagement, ownership of learning, and closing achievement gaps.

Data-driven decisions are the driving force behind the school's curriculum plans. Common formative and summative assessments are given across grade levels and content areas. Other assessment data comes from state-adopted materials, online platforms, daily assignments, teacher observations, and teacher-created tests. Teachers disaggregate weekly assessment data to create blueprints for instructional units. When the overall data is reviewed, vital student data is tracked so teachers can target individual student needs. While these assessments provide valuable data, they may not perfectly reflect students' abilities. Teachers know their students best, and if assessments do not match daily progress, they decide which interventions are most appropriate. Ongoing observation of students, combined with systematic assessment enables teachers to create groups of students who fit a particular instructional profile. Tiered supports are provided to match assessment data. In addition to using blended learning during regular classroom instructional time, students who are identified for intervention are provided small group instruction to address individual deficiencies.

1a. For secondary schools (middle and/or high school grades):

1b. For schools that offer preschool for three- and/or four-year old students:

2. Other Curriculum Areas:

AES has a very strong, inclusive arts and enrichment program which helps close learning gaps. All students in grades 3 -5 receive 45 minutes per week of music instruction aligned with the TEKS. All students are also active participants where they sing, play instruments, and perform.

To provide learning opportunities that far exceed the mandated core-content instruction and curriculum and provide teacher and student choice of meaningful hands-on experiences, AES uses the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM). For eighteen weeks per year, hour-long learning clusters similar to college electives are chosen by each student. These offerings provide enriched learning experiences and higher learning standards for every student on campus. Regular offerings include dramatic interpretation, art, dance, landscaping, college and career exploration, and coding.

All students attend "ThinkLab," a collaborative makerspace for creating, learning, exploring and sharing that uses high-tech to no-tech tools for 45 minutes each week. Readily available materials ranging from 3D printers and robotics to cardboard and scissors are provided to act as a provocation for inquiry. STEM enrichment is provided through core classes, after-school activities, and summer STEM camp.

Students are encouraged to create and maintain healthy lifestyles. The school counselor provides student workshops throughout the year focusing on how to proactively recognize stressors and respond appropriately. All students participate in physical education activities for 135 minutes per week which are created to not only cover the required knowledge and skills, but also to make students aware of the importance of health. In addition, the after-school program teaches participants about healthy lifestyles with cooking, gardening, and exercise classes.

One of the school's goals is to produce well-rounded, technology literate students. Technology applications TEKS are integrated into daily lessons in grades three through five. This school is heavily invested in technology with laptops for every student and teacher. Every classroom is outfitted with an interactive panel which provides hands-on learning opportunities and interactive lessons for higher student engagement.

Early college and career awareness is an ongoing initiative promoted by project-based learning and special events. College and Career Week is an important annual event at the school. Students are given virtual tours of universities, teachers present information about their alma maters, and everyone dresses in college attire. Parents and community members participate by hosting a tailgate party complete with grilled hot dogs, guest speakers, hometown heroes, and high school mentors. Another example of this initiative is the school news broadcasting team, the Rabbit News Network. Students write, anchor and deliver a weekly series of school

and community news.

There are a number of leadership opportunities for students, including rewards for meritorious leadership by being dubbed as “knights” in a medieval ceremony and serving as class representatives. Students are also provided with opportunities to volunteer for programs such as “Reading Buddies,” which pairs AES students with younger students at Atlanta Primary School. Student representatives who are chosen weekly by their teachers for demonstrating leadership skills serve as school ambassadors. AES promotes character development with fun, meaningful community service initiatives such as food drives, kindness challenges, and charity fundraisers.

3. Academic Supports:

Fiercely determined to meet the unique needs of all students, AES differentiates instruction and taps into students' personal interests. Scaffolding instruction, enrichment programs, support plans, academic competitions, and interventions are methods used for tailoring instruction.

Instructional scaffolding for those performing below grade level provides support in order to enhance learning by systematically building on students' experiences and knowledge as they learn new skills. Campus Intervention Teams composed of teachers, parents, and campus administrators identify and place students in specific interventions as needed for Response to Intervention (RtI), Section 504, and special education.

Students identified for higher levels of interventions receive reverse pull-out interventions, where small groups of struggling students stay in the classroom for a longer period of time with their regular teacher to address academic shortcomings. Students performing above grade level are placed in an enrichment program which allows them to receive extended instruction. This challenges these learners by allowing those who learn quickly and have well-developed background knowledge to move through instruction in a way that respects their advancement and enables them to move learning to a higher level.

Strong support plans are created for students with special needs using proven strategies for improving achievement. AES provides a variety of specialists and programs, including a certified dyslexia therapist, 504 plans, English Language Learner programs (ELL) and special education. Smaller group size, extended length of sessions, and individualized lessons distinguishes dyslexia intervention from regular instruction. Each grade level has certified ELL personnel providing targeted instruction. The counselor creates and evaluates 504 plans annually to ensure appropriate accommodations are made. Inclusion is practiced in classrooms to the fullest extent possible in resource and life-skills classrooms with certified special education teachers.

AES has an award-winning history of success in the highly competitive Texas University Interscholastic League program. Activities complement the curriculum and are designed to challenge and motivate students to acquire higher levels of knowledge. Coached by certified teachers, students compete in contests such as creative writing, music memory, number sense, oral reading, spelling, and storytelling.

The AES after-school program provides high-quality supplemental enrichment that aligns with the regular academic program and delivers activities in creative and hands-on ways. This program improves student attendance, behavior, and academics, while providing a safe learning space for students who otherwise would not have such opportunities.

Achievement gaps of 10 percent or more exist between the All Student and African-American subpopulations and between the African-American and white subpopulations in the following:

reading and math - grades 3, 4, 5; writing - grade 4; and science - grade 5. To address these gaps, AES will continue interventions in place and provide an organized, impactful, and enriching six-week summer school. Summer camp will be fused with intensive daily tutoring to address learning loss. Transportation and meals will be provided along with attendance incentives. In the 2021-2022 school year, AES will add additional teachers to the staff. Targeting those with the most learning loss, smaller classes and additional interventionists will allow for increased personalized learning and higher academic achievement.

PART V – SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE

1. Engaging Students:

AES staff members are keenly aware that the key to reaching students academically is to connect with them emotionally. Research shows to truly inspire and motivate students, teachers must learn their interests, passions, and dreams. Each student requires a myriad of motivational strategies. By focusing on individual students instead of a one-size-fits-all approach, teachers are able to cultivate healthy, interpersonal relationships with students. "Class Meetings" are held regularly where students and teachers are invited to share personal experiences, recognize commonalities, and cultivate mutual respect. These opportunities allow teachers to connect with students individually while providing an avenue for teachers to share details about their lives beyond school hours. When teachers are willing to share personally, this vulnerability and transparency encourages students to do the same.

Students deserve a classroom environment where they feel safe to tackle challenges. Risk-taking is not only considered acceptable, but also encouraged as a part of the learning process. AES students and teachers work together toward common collective goals by setting high expectations and supporting each other. This mutually collaborative climate allows expectations to be met and provides purpose and meaning for hard work.

High expectations are foundational not only for academics, but also for behavior. Instead of assuming students know expectations, students play a pivotal role in the creation of acceptable standards. Students generate behavior contracts at the beginning of each year which outline acceptable behaviors in the school setting. These contracts not only clearly outline behavior expectations, but because of student ownership and accountability in creating them classroom disruptions and office referrals are minimal.

Daily learning goals are posted in all AES classrooms. Establishing goals at the beginning of the lesson gives each student a purpose for his/her learning. Students also formatively assess themselves at the end of each lesson by checking for mastery of goals. Students and classes are recognized daily during announcements for achieving and exceeding their goals.

Since the outset of the pandemic, AES has focused on meeting the needs of students. Daily communication allows students and teachers to stay connected while providing personal support, scaffolding, and reassurance that technology does not provide. To help meet economic hardships the pandemic caused many families, AES provides free breakfast and lunch for all students, both in-person and remote. Meeting the physical and emotional needs of students and families has resulted in a positive environment that is directly correlated to the success of the school.

2. Engaging Families and Community:

AES has experienced success by giving families and the community an active voice in the education of students. To encourage ownership from all stakeholders, the campus site-based committee and the community advisory committee meet regularly to provide input and feedback regarding student, community, and family needs. These committees consist of parents, community members, teachers, and school leaders. The district's education foundation fosters community participation through fundraising efforts that provide competitive grants to encourage teachers to implement innovative teaching and learning. In addition, a campus volunteer organization works alongside teachers to assist with classroom activities and provide support.

Family engagement activities target identified needs to support academic, emotional, and physical needs of students and families. The after-school family engagement specialist coordinates services between the school and community, builds relationships with families, and serves as a resource for community services. School efforts for parental involvement are coordinated with the after-school program to enhance efforts without duplication. Family events on campus include interactive, entertaining, and learning activities. Examples include vegetable garden workshops complete with start-up kits, telescopic star gazing, family

game nights, and STEM fairs.

Community involvement at AES also includes a local organization that helps combat student hunger. This program provides backpacks of healthy food and snacks for needy students to take home every Friday. The community also helps encourage literacy by participating in programs where citizens of all races and cultures are invited to read and discuss books with students. These programs improve literacy and introduce inclusive stories empowering children to see themselves reflected in books. AES seizes every opportunity to partner with the community. Activities have included a ribbon-cutting ceremony sponsored by the local Chamber of Commerce for a new outdoor learning classroom, a cancer survivor tea, and a first responder parade.

AES uses creative solutions for keeping families connected during the pandemic. Frequent social media posts highlight student achievements. Students are photographed individually and in groups and posted on social media for making the honor roll, winning challenges, and participating in various events. Parents are tagged in posts to reinforce the family-school connection. The school utilizes a service for mass and individual text messaging to quickly convey important news. AES also offers a series of “drive-by” events since families are currently not allowed in the building. Families are provided with needs assessment surveys, community resource information, home activities with materials, newsletters, reading materials, nutrition guidance, and mental health information.

3. Creating Professional Culture:

AES challenges and supports teachers to take risks, innovate, collaborate and embrace lifelong learning by striving to ensure the environment being created fosters, supports, and respects teachers. School leaders - the principal, assistant principal, and counselor - strive to know, recognize, and engage with every staff member individually. School leaders learn who the teachers are, what they need, what motivates and challenges them and ultimately how they need to be supported. School leaders do not sequester themselves in their offices - they live in the classrooms alongside the teachers.

Administrators and teachers live in dialogue, and they know that transparent discussions are a necessity to convey needs and expectations. This open communication environment is created by: 1) fostering autonomy - offering choices on how to accomplish a goal, whom to collaborate with, how to professionally grow, and what technologies to incorporate; 2) soliciting ideas and actively listening; and 3) communicating honestly and openly.

Teacher appreciation is a climate and a culture that is cultivated on the campus. It is more than an annual celebration or designated day. Administrators convey appreciation frequently by hosting luncheons, writing encouraging notes, offering flexibility and support for staff family crises, and providing occasional room service deliveries of snacks and treats. This has created an atmosphere for students and families to express appreciation for teachers.

The school’s approach to professional development includes annual training on curriculum as well as personal development. AES utilizes the “trainer of trainers” model to build a pool of expert instructors who can then teach the material to others. This approach enables teachers to implement new strategies and refine any area of instruction that is critical to student success. The staff receives training in topics such as motivating and engaging students, disaggregating and analyzing data, implementing positive behavior interventions, and incorporating blended learning. This professional development has resulted in increased student achievement on state mandated testing and closing achievement gaps.

Using new technology in the classroom can be very daunting so additional support is provided for assistance with implementation. A highly trained instructional technology team supports hardware, software, and infrastructure with an emphasis on integration in the classroom setting. During the shift to remote learning, this support was especially helpful as changes came rapidly. Last fall, a suite of locally developed online training gave every teacher the opportunity to become a certified technology educator. This allowed teachers to gain expertise and confidence while incorporating technology into student learning.

4. School Leadership:

Leadership is second only to teaching in its impact on student learning, especially in high need schools like AES. The superintendent sets the direction for campuses by charting a clear course and ensuring the entire range of resources in the district fully support teaching and learning. At AES, the principal steers the school in that direction, making the charted course clear and easy to follow, using data to track progress and performance, and setting high expectations. The principal is charged with developing educators – providing staff with the necessary support, motivation, and training to succeed. The AES principal believes relationships between teachers and students are the key to success, and relationships between leadership and staff are just as crucial. To cultivate those relationships and give every staff member a voice in school decisions, the campus leadership team consists of grade level and content area representatives, who bring perspective from the entire faculty, as well as the assistant principal, counselor, and principal.

In implementing the blended learning initiative, the AES principal became a catalyst for change and helped the teachers understand the benefits of this model through study, workshops, and encouragement. Throughout the implementation phases, the principal led the way - offering strong enticement, accompanied by high expectations and grace.

AES teachers are a body of teaching and learning, not independent keepers of knowledge. Meetings do not focus on logistics and paperwork, but instead nurture discussions about best instructional practices. Teachers do not operate in silos but collaborate to analyze grade-level standards and develop common lesson plans. They meet regularly to analyze student progress and performance. These collaborative practices led by campus leadership have and will continue to transform student achievement.

The pandemic shifted every paradigm, especially leadership. The superintendent became the small town leader for wisdom and guidance, and the AES principal led the staff with comfort and courage. Arrangements were quickly organized for staff training and assistance with digital tools. The principal accompanied teachers on home visits, delivered meals to students, supported the staff, and dried tears through the closure. This continued when school started in the fall. The virus and remote learning caused fear and anxiety to grip the staff. Many teachers were ready to give up. Again, the grace and courage of this principal was and still is the key for the staff to persevere. She unfailingly reminds staff that the school motto, “Work Hard - Dream Big,” applies to everyone, not just students.

5. Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning:

Culturally responsive teaching at AES bridges the gap by helping teachers understand cultural nuances that may cause students to fail academically and socially and how to prevent misunderstandings. Culturally responsive family supports provided include English learner programs, translation services, community resource information, and economic assistance.

Living in poverty is often generational and creates its own culture. Over 23 percent of Atlanta’s families meet the federal poverty threshold. Students with dirty clothes and shoes held together by duct tape are common at AES. Some have perfect attendance only because of the free meals provided, and many have never traveled beyond the city limits. Atlanta ISD provides ongoing training in understanding poverty and its relation to education. Teachers receive actionable, evidence-based tools that improve student behaviors and attitudes.

Teaching and engaging with cultural differences in mind helps educators dig deep and recognize those things that are difficult to acknowledge. The experiences people have along life’s journey have formed stereotypes which turn into implicit bias. These unintentional attitudes impact how teachers relate to students and parents, how curriculum is chosen, how learning is assessed, and how lessons are planned. In creating curriculum, AES teachers are mindful of cultural differences while striving to see them as assets by creating caring learning communities where diversity is valued. Literature used in the reading curriculum and provided in the library is very diverse and

representative of the school's cultures, backgrounds, and ethnicities. Holidays include learning about how other cultures celebrate around the world. AES teaches music from all cultures through singing and playing instruments. Teachers are careful to maintain rigor and hold students accountable with challenging curriculum. Belief in students' abilities is reinforced by providing opportunities to soar high above society's expectations.

AES places emphasis on historical and modern day heroes by introducing students to people from all cultures who have made significant contributions to the world. One recent project had students choose a world changer, conduct research, and write a biography. This research became a living and breathing activity as students dressed the part and presented their knowledge to classmates with provided costumes. These examples help students to see themselves as politicians, scientists, authors, musicians, and difference-makers.

All of these efforts have resulted in a school community that is not afraid to honestly share viewpoints concerning current events and social movements. These conversations have resulted in a newfound respect for differences and a renewed commitment to unity.

PART VI - STRATEGY FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

On August 17, 2020, AES proudly opened the doors to welcome students for the first time since the shutdown. As each student entered, staff sensed excitement and anticipation. AES leaders and staff purposed in their hearts and minds to live up to the “Work Hard - Dream Big” mantra by having a steadfast commitment to ensure a successful school year in spite of numerous challenges.

The one practice considered to be the biggest factor in the success at AES is building relationships. Without building relationships between students, teachers, and families, the academic and socio-emotional growth documented by this school would not be possible. Relationships are not built overnight, but over time. Investing time early creates an environment where students are motivated to be successful. Teachers use socio-emotional learning with strategies that build strong relationships including learning names quickly, posting student work in the classrooms and hallways, and finding ways to connect by making themselves approachable and trustworthy. Teachers invest time in each student by giving grace, nurturing self-confidence, and creating an inclusive, welcoming environment. As a result, students want to be at school. Happy students equal happy families.

Due to COVID-19 safety protocols, parents are only allowed in the front office. There have been no in-person programs, lunchroom visits, or class parties with guests. Despite these obstacles, families and the community have continued to support AES by displaying complete faith and trust in the staff. This trust is a direct result of the time spent building relationships with families. Every minute is spent striving to educate, love, reach, teach, and guide children and parents are convinced of this truth. This practice has been in place and COVID did not interrupt or change the community’s perception. AES is a safe place for stakeholders to come with concerns and leave knowing they were heard. Teachers are in constant communication with parents to promote strong relationships and share successes. They communicate in various forms, and always lead with positive and uplifting news about students. Teachers help families learn about the education of their children by explaining what they are doing and why they are doing it.

Long before COVID-19, relationship-building has been the priority at Atlanta Elementary, and it has made a difference. Throughout the pandemic, this practice has continued. This is what sets AES apart from other schools and has allowed this school to be a place that students, parents, and staff members are proud to call home.