

# Making the Decision

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Education in the United States has been through many changes during the last decade. Education in Georgia is no exception. During the last few years, Georgia educators have experienced “No Child Left Behind,” “Adequate Yearly Progress,” “Race to the Top,” new teacher certification rules, College and Career Readiness Performance Index scores that rate schools, changes in the educator evaluation process, and a huge change in the state assessment of student learning, just to name a few mandated methods for school improvement. Our teachers and administrators have embraced these changes and tried to implement them with fidelity.

Yet another major change is on the horizon. The number of rules and regulations that apply to schools is already massive. Under existing guidelines, systems often must petition the State Board of Education for exemptions or waivers from specific rules in order to do what system leaders feel is best for their students or to survive financially. For example, the state sets the maximum number of students who can be in a class. Since the economic downturn and subsequent cuts in school funding, Whitfield County is among many other systems in Georgia that have annually asked the State Board of Education for a waiver from this rule to allow up to four additional students in a classroom. This reduction in the number of classrooms increases class size, but has been necessary to keep teacher salaries within the district’s budget.

In 2008, our state legislators passed school legislation that goes into effect this summer. The law is designed to offer some flexibility for school systems and freedom from regulations in exchange for increasing levels of accountability for student achievement. The legislation is based on the type of governance under which local school systems operate. The new law requires every system in Georgia to choose one of three types of school system governance and submit a letter of intent to the State Board of Education by June 30. After sending the letter, the next step will be to develop a contract between Whitfield County Schools and the state school board. That contract will commit the system to specific academic goals and other targets. This academic contract will be valid for five years. The three options based on different types and levels of school governance are Status Quo/Traditional System, Charter System, or Investing in Educational Excellence (IE2)/Strategic Waivers System.

A Status Quo system chooses to continue operating under existing education law. Waivers would be extremely limited and only approved in cases of hardship. Schools will maintain school councils and school administrators will continue to make the decisions for the school. The lack of waivers is a disadvantage for this option, though it may be a good choice for districts that do not need waivers to achieve their goals within budget and that feel classroom innovations can be attained without waivers.

Shared governance is the defining characteristic of a Charter System. Each charter school would have a governing board that would share in decisions concerning personnel, budget, curriculum and instruction, resource allocation, and monitoring the achievement of school improvement goals. Whitfield County has 23 schools plus the Career Academy, which would require 24 charter boards. A charter school board could be appointed or elected and would be made up primarily of parents and community members. Their charters would depend on student achievement. Charter systems can benefit from having most education laws and rules waived with their charter.

The IE2 option (now being called the Strategic Waivers option) would allow local boards of education to enter into a five-year contract with the State Board of Education. Those contracts will be based on strategic plans aimed at increasing student achievement. Accountability is focused at the school level and is measured by each school’s College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) score. Under this contract, each school must annually increase its CCRPI score by a certain amount set each year. Performance goals would be set and requested waivers granted by the State Board. If a school fails to meet performance targets three out of five years, it would be possible for the local school board to lose governance of the school. This is the basis for the recently passed SB 133 to establish a statewide Opportunity School District that would be managed from Atlanta by a superintendent appointed by the governor.

This decision is important for our district. The Whitfield County Board of Education has been studying the options available and welcomes feedback from the public. More detailed information is available on the Whitfield County Schools website at [www.whitfield.k12.ga.us](http://www.whitfield.k12.ga.us). Parent and community input is always welcomed and appreciated.