

# Our Commitment to Students' Success Remains Unchanged

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Whitfield County Schools has seen a lot of change since its beginning in 1892. Recently, I found a brochure published by the school system in 1981. It was interesting to compare some of the statistics to today's numbers and note some of the changes in our schools.

In 1981 the enrollment was 9,600 students in 16 schools. This year we have an enrollment of over 13,000 students in 24 schools and are the 29th largest school system in Georgia.

The system employed 966 staff members in 1981 compared to 1,645 staff members this year. In 1981 there was a superintendent and three assistant superintendents. Although we have grown in numbers of students and staff, we still have one superintendent and three assistant superintendents.

In the early '80s, WCS owned a fleet of 65 buses. This year we are running 169 buses and transporting approximately 9,000 students per day. Our buses travel over one million miles a year. Although bus transportation is not required by the state, the majority of our students would find it difficult, if not impossible, to attend school if bus transportation was not available.

Even in 1981 WCS had a joint enrollment plan with what was then Dalton Junior College. Today we have 488 students dual enrolled in Whitfield County Schools and either Dalton State College or Georgia Northwestern Technical College. With dual enrollment, it is possible for a student to receive a high school diploma and an associate degree at the same time.

In the 1981-82 school term, the budget was \$19 million. Currently, our annual budget is over \$110 million. This seems like a lot of money, and it is. However, we continue to struggle financially to provide our students with the education they deserve. One of the most surprising things to me was that the millage rate in 1981 was maxed at 20 mills for maintenance and operations and one mill for bonds. The current millage rate is 18.756.

Like everything else in life, the cost of educating a child has increased through the years. The expenditure per student in 1981 was \$1,650 and the beginning teacher was paid \$12,590. Today's beginning teacher makes a little over \$37,000 and the expenditure per Whitfield County student last year was \$8,547. Most systems in Georgia spend more per pupil than Whitfield County. In fact, this is one of the lowest expenditures per student in the state. We currently rank number 134 out of 180 systems in Georgia in per pupil spending.

Georgia now has one of the highest childhood poverty rates in the nation. It has reached such a proportion that some are calling it an epidemic. In 1992 we had 25.57 percent of our students on free or reduced lunches. Today, 71.52 percent of WCS students are at or below the poverty level.

Our teachers know that children cannot learn when they are hungry, and many children come to school every day hungry. To help with this problem, WCS participates in a federal food program that provides free breakfast to all elementary students.

Poverty poses many challenges, but the hunger of poverty is often the easier problem to fix. More difficult to solve is poverty's effect on the social and emotional aspects of a child's development. Many of our children of poverty begin school already academically trailing their more affluent peers. They need special support and intervention in order to be reading on grade level by third grade. This requires highly qualified educators. Although we have restored furlough days, we must constantly strive to keep our salaries competitive in order to attract and retain the best teachers and support staff.

Much has changed over the years, but one thing that has not changed is the commitment of our teachers and staff in seeing that every student is successful. Our goal continues to be that all students will achieve at their highest individual level.