

Will the gamble to improve one of Atlanta's worst schools pay off?

LOCAL EDUCATION

By [Molly Bloom](#) - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution



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In a gamble to fix a dysfunctional school ahead of a potential state takeover, Atlanta Public Schools Superintendent Meria Carstarphen merged one of the city's best high schools with one of its worst.

Combining Carver School of Technology, where about half of students graduate, with Carver Early College, where nearly every student goes on to a four-year college, tests the theory that threatening schools with extreme sanctions leads to rapid changes for the better — the theory behind Gov. Nathan Deal's Opportunity School District plan. If voters approve that plan this fall, the state could take control of schools like the School of Technology.

If Carstarphen's gamble pays off, hundreds of students will get better educations. Deal will be proven right. Carver staff will be hailed for beating the odds of urban education.

If it fails, it will cripple a school that has sent hundreds of students — nearly all of them African-American, and most of them low-income — to some of the nation's top colleges.

Small schools



Dr. Thomas Gosha teaches his world geometry class at Early College High School At Carver on Wednesday, Jan. 20. Atlanta school ... [Read More](#)

In 2005, Carver High School became the first school subdivided into smaller schools in former superintendent Beverly Hall's high school transformation project. Each small school had a theme, such as technology or the arts, and its own staff and principal.

Carver Early College was one of the success stories.

The school attracted students who had excelled in middle school, the kind who boast about straight-A report cards. Early College students cram most of their required high school courses into their first two years and take classes at Georgia State University or Atlanta Metropolitan State College as juniors and seniors. Marcene Thornton has served as principal since the school's founding.



Carver Early College High School Principal Marcene Thornton stands in the Carver Early College High School hallway. Thornton says there have ... [Read More](#)

At Carver School of Technology, some students enrolled because they wanted to learn about programming or digital design. But for others, it was a place to pass the time before dropping out. It has had five principals in five years. It's earned an "F" rating from the state for the past three years. And it's on the current list of schools up for state takeover if voters approve the Opportunity School District constitutional amendment in November.

'A disservice'

The rapid merger of two very different schools has led to complaints among students and parents. The pace of instruction has slowed, some Early College students say, and disruption in classrooms and hallways has increased.



Carver Early College High School student president Alvan Price sits in world geography class. This year Atlanta school superintendent Meria Carstarphen ... [Read More](#)

But the merger has also created opportunities in both schools. School of Technology students can now take college classes, and Early College students have access to technology-focused classes.

Still, slowing things down and combining the schools over a period of years would have been better for students, said senior Alvan Price, Early College's student president.

"For those people who have to get their education while they try to get it together, I feel like it's really a disservice to them," he said. "It's going to take a while to restore ourselves to back where it was."

The School of Technology students aren't so different, said Early College senior Charles Kinsey. "I know they're smart," he said. "But some of them don't try their best. It's not like I think I'm better than them. I just want them to try harder."

Sandra Bethea enrolled her daughter in Carver Early College two years ago, picking it over her neighborhood high school and its 50 percent graduation rate.

“I felt like we had this unrealized gem within Atlanta schools,” she said.

The merger has changed Early College, she said.

“They say they’re combining schools, but the reality is that they’ve gotten rid of their top performing school by combining it with the lowest performing school. They’ve set the school up for failure.”

There are more fights, she said. Her daughter’s teachers spend more time disciplining students and less time teaching. School staff have less time for extra help. And her daughter spent the first semester of her English class reviewing last year’s material, so School of Technology students could catch up.

At a community meeting last month, Early College students told Carstarphen the merger was slowing their progress.

Carstarphen told them that academic research shows merging a high-performing school with a low-performing one can work. She said their complaints reminded her of what white people said during school desegregation, that they didn’t want “those students” in their schools. “We are a black and brown district,” she said. “We’re not leaving any of our kids behind.”

Challenges

Thornton, the principal of the merged schools, admits there have been challenges. “For 10 years we’ve been separate schools. We’ve built separate cultures, different points of pride,” she said.

Carver Early College doubled in size this year to 600 students. That’s put one of the keys to its success — the relationships teachers form with students — at risk, Thornton said.

“I’ve seen some this year where we are losing that because there are more kids and every teacher at this point just doesn’t know every kid,” she said. “By knowing them I don’t mean just calling them by name, but what are their strengths and what are the things that you need to make sure happen for them so they can be successful.”

She hesitates to talk about some of the other challenges.

“I don’t want it to sound ugly. And I don’t want any of the kids to think I don’t want them,” she said. “I don’t want any of them to think they’re not wanted, because they are.”

But some of the School of Technology students feel inferior to the Early College students. And some parents say Early College sets the bar too high, she said.

There are bright spots, like the School of Technology student who got a Yale scarf on a college tour this year and now wears it proudly.

“You ever see a kid and think, God I wish I got him in the 9th grade?” Thornton said. “I look at some of the Tech kids and think to myself, ‘Boy, if I had gotten them when they were new to high school ...’ They’re pretty good now, but we would have made them really good.”

Among School of Technology students this fall, suspension rates were down and attendance rates up. Significantly fewer fights were reported. But district data show the opposite for Early College: The suspension rate is up and three fights were reported, compared to none reported last fall.

Missed opportunities

David Wofford sent his sons to Carver School of Technology.

He heard about bullying there, a teacher knocked out during a classroom fight, teachers absent for days at a time and dozens of students awarded grades they didn’t earn. Several times, he thought about moving his children to another school.

But his sons were earning good grades. “I really thought that the school was doing pretty well.”

This year, his sons are taking college classes. He said no one at the School of Technology ever told him that was an option.

“For two years or more my kids got educated based on just their ability to do all of the work that was put in front of them, not the teachers pushing them to get a higher education,” he said.

“When I look back, I think the kids could have had a higher learning level if the teachers had

said, 'We have Early College in the next building over. Let's see if some of these kids can achieve higher.' "

These days, Alvan, the student body president, makes it a point to talk to students from both schools. But he focuses on underclassmen who file in every day past a banner that proclaims, "You Attend the #1 High School in Atlanta."

He said it took time for his friends and him to learn to be Early College scholars, "somebody who has the drive and focus to get somewhere with their life, someone who's a leader.

"I'm trying to preserve that tradition," he said. "We're going to make them the next generation of Early College scholars. So when they're seniors, they can tell students, 'This is how we do things.' "

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