

Thomas County School System

Strategic Plan for Diversity and Equity



Thomas County Schools Strategic Plan for Diversity and Equity

Message from the superintendent:

The Thomas County School System is committed to providing quality instruction and opportunities for all students to reach their potential. From our traditional to our non-traditional students, we have a place where every student can thrive.

Over the last several years, we have made significant strides in increasing the high school graduation rate while closing the gap between the four-year graduation rates of black and white students. Through the MERIT program, we have increased five-fold the enrollment of black students in gifted and accelerated classes at our middle school. We have also increased the diversity of our staff by 16% since 2011.

Even though we are proud of these achievements, we know that we have much more work left to do. We are committed to securing the best teacher available for every classroom, and in our comprehensive recruitment efforts, we make deliberate efforts to increase the diversity of our teaching and administrative staffs.

Our commitment to diversity is not new. The Thomas County Board of Education has long had policies ensuring Equal Employment Opportunities and Equal Educational Opportunities. (A copy of policies GAAA and JAA are provided in the appendix of this document.) Our system's strategic plan also includes a recruitment goal dedicated to faculty diversity.

This plan is intended to pull together in one place for easy reference our system's vision, mission, and goals to promote diversity. As stated in this plan, it is a living document that is subject to constant revision as needed to meet the changing needs of our system.

Parents and other community stakeholders are encouraged to take advantage of the many opportunities available to serve on school councils, to attend parental involvement activities, and to join our various parent organizations and booster clubs.

If you have any suggestions about how we can make our school system better, please feel free to contact me or any member of my staff.

Best regards,

Lisa Williams, Ed.D.
Superintendent

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Introduction

The Thomas County School System embraces its role in establishing a long-term mission and vision for diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is our mission to appreciate differences and actively promote inclusion and equity. We envision a district where every student is encouraged to achieve his or her highest potential, and we will leverage our differences to achieve excellence.

We will fully embrace our rich, diverse community as expressed through race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, religion, national origin, immigration status, language background, language proficiency, and family structure.

We recognize that it will be an ongoing process to achieve and maintain this vision. We are prepared to do the work as we implement this Strategic Plan for Diversity and Equity. The plan provides guidance and a clear path for the work of the District, Superintendent, Board and community to achieve this noble vision.

This plan is a living document. As such, periodic adjustments will be necessary to capture progress and improvements as well as the need for redirection to ensure a deliberate course toward our goals for diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Diversity and Equity Mission Statement

The mission of the Thomas County School System for diversity, equity and inclusion is to actively include and value all students and to meet their unique learning needs while developing their understanding and respect of difference, thus preparing them to live in an inclusive, global community and ever-changing world.

Diversity and Equity Core Beliefs

- We believe our schools should be a safe and welcoming environment that supports learning for all students.
- We believe all students will learn and be successful, and we recognize that students have different learning styles and that we must provide equitable supports.
- We believe in meeting the needs of a growing and diverse student population and understand that by valuing and supporting our multicultural and multilingual students and their families, all students will be more successful.
- We believe in inclusive curriculum, instruction and assessment that is learner-centered and based on high standards and expectations.
- We believe in promoting positive self-esteem, self-discipline, and mutual respect.
- We believe that in order to achieve academic excellence, students, teachers, parents and

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community members must be active partners.

- We believe the recruitment and retention of a diverse and culturally competent faculty and staff is essential for meeting the needs of all our students.
- We believe that the system's policies and procedures must support our ability to achieve our diversity and equity goals.
- We believe that we each have a responsibility to combat racism, sexism and other forms of prejudice, discrimination and harassment for the betterment of our schools and society.

Diversity and Equity Vision Statement

The Thomas County School System will:

- Provide a welcoming, safe and equitable school community that is affirming and inclusive, including schools and classrooms that are a reflection of our community.
- Commit to a culture that reflects, respects, and embraces the voices, perspectives and differences arising from our diverse community.
- See each student as unique and seek to empower all students to achieve their highest potential.
- Eliminate educational inequalities by providing access to services, school resources, and other learning opportunities to all students.
- Develop a diverse and inclusive curriculum that reflects the wide range of voices, perspectives, and experiences of the students and families in our community and the world.
- Build trusting relationships with all students and their families.
- Recruit and retain culturally competent and diverse administrators, faculty, and staff.
- Provide regular professional development to assist educators and staff as they increase their understanding of inclusiveness and cultural proficiency.
- Ensure policies and procedures are consistent with our goals of diversity, equity and inclusion and that they do not act as barriers to our success.

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- Maximize outcomes for all students by encouraging parents and the community to be active partners in the learning process.

Goals and Strategies

Goal 1: Ensure a welcoming, safe, inclusive, and equitable school community.

Strategies:

- Regular review of the school climate survey results
- Regular review of discipline and suspension data
- Assess and improve facilities, hallways and classrooms to ensure they are welcoming and inclusive

Goal 2: Respect and value diversity.

Strategies:

- Plan building-based cultural sharing and celebrations
- Plan for and promote inclusion and cultural awareness through equity activities and opportunities
- Provide professional development that empowers staff members to embrace the differences of others through collaborative processes
- Provide training for students on cultural awareness, responsiveness, and understanding
- Develop opportunities for cross-cultural conversations for students
- Build relationships through research-based instructional practices to create an environment of trust between students and staff as well as between students and their peers

Goal 3: Empower all students to achieve excellence.

Strategies:

- Continue to search for and remove barriers for student groups, particularly students of diverse backgrounds, to ensure they have the most rigorous courses available
- Encourage students with diverse backgrounds to enroll in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and other advanced level courses while providing any support needed for success
- Evaluate the process used for screening students for advanced level classes
- Provide opportunities for more students to access advanced level courses beginning at the elementary level, and continuing through high school

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- Provide leadership opportunities to students
- Foster student interest in curricular and extracurricular activities
- Provide a variety of opportunities to develop culturally aware student leaders

Goal 4: Strengthen connections with English Language Learners (ELL) and new American families.

Strategies:

- Provide information to families in their native language about their children's educational progress
- Provide policies and other district information in multiple languages and formats
- Work collaboratively with other organizations that provide resources to families to broaden our collective impact

Goal 5: Close the academic achievement gap.

Strategies:

- Identify and implement instructional strategies and supports needed to improve academic outcomes for all students
- Utilize student assessment information to gain a clear picture of students' strengths and areas of need
- Identify how to best provide instructional interventions for underperforming students
- Provide additional learning opportunities for students who are not on grade level during the school day, after school, and through summer programs
- Discuss achievement gaps through equity conversations
- Utilize instructional technology as a way to better engage students and close the achievement gap

Goal 6: Develop a diverse and inclusive curriculum.

Strategies:

- Review existing curriculum materials for bias to ensure multicultural perspectives
- Research and purchase needed multicultural inclusive curriculum materials
- Utilize instructional materials aligned to Georgia's Standards of Excellence in order to provide all students, particularly those with diverse backgrounds, the academic foundation needed for a strong future, while understanding the cultural differences that may exist in the classroom

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Goal 7: Recruit and retain diverse and culturally competent administrators, faculty and staff.

Strategies:

- Develop and maintain hiring practices to meet the district wide goal of diverse administrators, teachers and staff
- Develop a hiring plan for all hiring departments, including non-certified positions
- Pursue resources which will allow for regular support and monitoring of all hiring processes across the district
- Review of recruitment and hiring practices for unintentional bias or exclusionary practices
- Encourage diversity in the membership of all district-level committees and all building-level and district-level hiring committees
- Develop a long-term recruitment plan and promotional tools to attract diverse candidates
- Review exit surveys and make recommendations which could improve the quality of information we receive from staff members leaving our district
- Attend job fairs focused on candidates of color
- Maintain partnerships with historically black colleges and universities
- Develop recruitment teams to assist and support recruitment efforts
- Develop mentoring programs to support new teachers
- Develop partnerships with local community organizations, teacher organizations and faith institutions
- Provide diversity and equity resources specifically for the supervisors
- Reach out to minority parents and community members who may be qualified for employment postings

Goal 8: Organizational Development.

Strategies:

- Review policies and procedures for equity
- Support building-level administrators with employee evaluation and performance matters
- Provide information and timely response to employee questions on policies and procedures
- Offer supports to staff as indicated in performance evaluations
- Provide administrators with professional development to develop the skill set and emotional sensitivity to address, mediate, and work through challenging situations

Goal 9: Training and Professional Development.

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Strategies:

- Develop cultural competency focused open forums for employees
- Maintain a professional development plan for the District that is aligned with the Strategic Plan for Diversity and Equity
- Include professional learning for diversity and equity in the district’s professional learning plan
- Provide professional development that empowers staff members to embrace the differences of others through collaborative processes

Goal 10: Strengthen Parent and Community Partnerships.

Strategies:

- Continue to improve system communications within the community and develop community support for ongoing school initiatives
- Improve communications with parents and the community regarding diversity and equity
- Encourage greater parent and community participation
- Continue to promote and encourage the use of our various and electronic communication tools. The website, app, and rapid calling system have a translation feature. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter social media feeds, as well as submissions to local news media, will continue to feature news and photos about all students to show the diversity within our schools.
- Share information about school and community resources to assist new families
- Survey families about their interests to find out how best they can become involved in our schools

Conclusion

We realize this is a work in progress. We will continue to make adjustments to fit the social and educational needs of all learners in the Thomas County School System. The Strategic Plan for Diversity and Equity offers knowledge, skills and resources for students, parents, faculty and staff, and community stakeholders. We value the diversity of our schools and community and hold high expectations for acceptance, support, and inclusion.

If you have any suggestions about how we can improve our system’s Diversity and Equity Plan or ways that we can make our system better overall, please contact any of the staff members listed in the following section.

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System Contact Information

Dr. Lisa Williams
Superintendent
229-225-4380 ext. 105
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Dr. Scott James
Associate Superintendent for Student Services
229-225-4380 ext. 111
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Mrs. Brecca Pope
Director of Administrative Services
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The School District does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, age, disability, or sex in its employment practices. It is the policy of the Board of Education to comply fully with the requirements of Title VI, Title VII, Title IX, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) and all accompanying regulations.

Any employee, applicant for employment, or other person who believes he or she has been discriminated against or harassed in violation of this policy must make a complaint in accordance with the procedures outlined below.

COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

Complaints made to the School District regarding alleged discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color or national origin in violation of Title VI; religion or sex in violation of Title VII; sex in violation of Title IX; disability in violation of Section 504 or the ADA, or on the basis of age in violation of the ADEA, will be processed in accordance with the following procedure:

1. Any employee, applicant for employment, or other person with a complaint alleging a violation as described above shall promptly notify, in writing or orally, either the principal for his/her school or the appropriate coordinator designated from time to time by the Board of Education. If the complaint is oral, either the coordinator or school principal to whom the complaint is made shall promptly prepare a memorandum or written statement of the complaint as made to him or her by the complainant and shall have the complainant read and sign the memorandum or statement if it accurately reflects the complaint made. If the complaint is made to a school principal, he or she shall be responsible for notifying the appropriate coordinator of the complaint.
2. If the alleged offending individual is the coordinator designated by the Board of Education, the complaint shall either be made by the complainant to the Superintendent or, if the complaint is initially made to the school principal, reported by the principal to the Superintendent. If the alleged offending individual is the Superintendent, the complaint shall be made to the designated coordinator, who shall, without further investigation, report the complaint to the Board chairperson.
3. The coordinator or his or her designee shall have fifteen work days to gather all information relevant to the complaint made, review the information, determine the facts relating to the complaint, review the action requested by the complainant, and attempt to resolve the complaint with the complainant and any other persons involved. The coordinator or designee shall prepare a written response to the complaint detailing any action to be taken in response to the complaint and the time frame in which such action will be taken and copies of this response shall be furnished to the complainant, the appropriate coordinator and the Superintendent or his or her designee.
4. If the complaint is not resolved at the conclusion of this fifteen-day period or if the complainant is not satisfied with the resolution of the complaint, the complainant shall have the right, within five work days of receiving a copy of the written response, to have the complaint referred to the Superintendent of Schools. If the alleged offending individual is the Superintendent, the complainant may have the complaint referred to the Board of Education, rather than the Superintendent.

5. The Superintendent shall have fifteen work days to review the complaint and the response of the coordinator or designee and attempt to resolve the complaint. The Superintendent shall furnish to the complainant a written response setting forth either his or her approval of the action recommended by the coordinator or designee or the action to be taken by the School District in response to the complaint in lieu of that recommended by the coordinator or designee and the time frame in which such action shall be taken.
6. If the complainant is dissatisfied with the response of the Superintendent, then the complainant shall have the right, within fifteen work days of the receipt of the written response of the Superintendent, to have the complaint referred to the Board of Education. In order to have the Board review the Superintendent's decision, the complainant must file with the Superintendent a written statement setting forth the reasons he or she disagrees with the response of the Superintendent and the action the complainant is requesting the School District to take. The complainant shall also include in the written response a request that his or her complaint be referred to the Board of Education.
7. Within thirty work days of receipt of the written request of the complainant, the Superintendent shall present the matter to the Board of Education at its regular meeting or at a special meeting called for that purpose. The Board shall review the original complaint, the response of the coordinator or designee, the response of the Superintendent, and the response of the complainant. In addition, the Board may, but is not required to, hear directly from any individuals with knowledge of any relevant facts relating to the complaint.
8. The Board of Education will either uphold the recommendation of the Superintendent or require the School District to take some other action in response to the complaint. A copy of the action of the Board will be furnished to the complainant, either as a part of the minutes of the Board of Education or as a separate written statement. The Board shall be the final reviewing authority within the School District.
9. This policy is not intended to deprive any employee of any right he or she may have to file a grievance pursuant to any other policy of the local Board of Education, specifically the policy designed to implement Official Code of Georgia Annotated 20-2-989.5, where appropriate. This policy is not intended to provide an alternative process for resolving evaluation and employment disputes where there already exists a due process procedure mandated by state law or State Department of Education regulations, specifically including, but not limited to, hearings to be conducted pursuant to the Fair Dismissal Act of Georgia. The complainant retains at all times the right to contact the Office of Civil Rights, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or any other appropriate state or federal agency with regard to any allegations that the system has violated the statutes described above.
10. The School District shall be responsible for distributing and disseminating information relevant to this policy and procedure to employees through appropriate procedures.
11. No reprisal shall occur as a result of reporting unlawful discrimination or harassment under this policy, and any attempt to retaliate against a complainant shall be disciplined as is appropriate.
12. The confidentiality of any individual making a complaint or report in accordance with this policy, to the extent it is reasonably possible and in compliance with law, shall be protected, although the discovery of the truth and the elimination of unlawful harassment shall be the overriding consideration.

The School District does not discriminate on the basis of race, color or national origin, sex or disability in any student program. It is the policy of the Board of Education to comply fully with the requirements of Title VI, Title IX, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans With Disabilities Act and all accompanying regulations.

Any student, parent or other person who believes he or she or any student has been discriminated against or harassed in violation of this policy must make a complaint in accordance with the procedures outlined below.

COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

Complaints made to the School District regarding alleged discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color or national origin in violation of Title VI, on the basis of sex in violation of Title IX or on the basis of disability in violation of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 or the Americans With Disabilities Act will be processed in accordance with the following procedure:

1. Any student, employee, parent or other person with a complaint or report alleging a violation as described above shall promptly notify, in writing or orally, either the principal for his/her school or the appropriate coordinator designated from time to time by the Board of Education [or by the principal]. If the complaint is oral, either the coordinator or school principal to whom the complaint is made shall promptly prepare a memorandum or written statement of the complaint as made to him or her by the complainant and shall have the complainant read and sign the memorandum or statement if it accurately reflects the complaint made. If the complaint is made to a school principal, he or she shall be responsible for notifying the appropriate coordinator of the complaint.
2. If the alleged offending individual is the coordinator or the principal, the complaint shall either be made by the complainant to the Superintendent or, if the complaint is initially made to the school principal, reported by the principal to the Superintendent. If the alleged offending individual is the Superintendent, the complaint shall be made to the designated coordinator, who shall, without further investigation, report the complaint to the Board chairperson.
3. The coordinator or his or her designee shall have fifteen work days to gather all information relevant to the complaint made, review the information, determine the facts relating to the complaint, review the action requested by the complainant, and attempt to resolve the complaint with the complainant and any other persons involved. The coordinator or designee shall prepare a written response to the complaint detailing any action to be taken in response to the complaint and the time frame in which such action will be taken and copies of this response shall be furnished to the complainant, the appropriate coordinator and the principal or his or her designee.
4. If the complaint is not resolved at the conclusion of this fifteen-day period or if the complainant is not satisfied with the resolution of the complaint, the complainant shall have the right, within five work days of receiving a copy of the written response, to have the complaint referred to the Superintendent of Schools. If the alleged offending individual is the Superintendent, the complainant may have the complaint referred to the Board of Education, rather than the Superintendent.
5. The Superintendent shall have fifteen work days to review the complaint and the response of the coordinator or designee and attempt to resolve the complaint. The

Superintendent shall furnish to the complainant a written response setting forth either his or her approval of the action recommended by the coordinator or designee or the action to be taken by the School District in response to the complaint in lieu of that recommended by the coordinator or designee and the time frame in which such action shall be taken.

6. This policy is not intended to deprive any student or parent of any right they may have to file a complaint under any other applicable policy of the local board or to contact the Office of Civil Rights or other appropriate state or federal agency with regard to any allegations that the School District has violated the statutes described above.
7. The School District shall be responsible for distributing and disseminating information relevant to this policy and procedure to students, parents and employees through appropriate procedures.
8. No reprisal shall occur as a result of reporting unlawful discrimination or harassment under this policy, and any attempt to retaliate against a complainant shall be disciplined as is appropriate.
9. The confidentiality of any individual making a complaint or report in accordance with this policy, to the extent it is reasonably possible and complies with the law, shall be protected, although the discovery of the truth and the elimination of unlawful harassment shall be the overriding consideration.