



TOP STORY

# Atlanta

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## CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS

# Schools look ahead, make room for growth

By Vanessa McCray  
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Atlanta Public Schools is in the midst of a building surge. The school board recently approved a bevy of renovation and construction projects to be paid for with money from a one-penny sales tax.

The district will spend about \$39 million to renovate Beecher Hills Elementary School, Hollis Innovation Academy, Harper-Archer Elementary School and Gideons Elementary School. Work is underway to transform the site of the former Walden Middle School into an athletic complex for use by Grady High School teams. The board on June 4 approved a \$27.6 million construction contract to build a new school to be called Tuskegee Airman Global Academy.

And – in a project that has gathered buzz that matches its roughly \$50 million price tag – APS will renovate and reopen Martin Luther King Jr.'s childhood school in the Old Fourth Ward. The shuttered David T. Howard Building will be turned into a middle school with a design that

incorporates modern needs and historic preservation. But even as the district hammers away at those projects it's planning what comes next. That conversation will delve into thorny issues such as gentrification, equity concerns and redistricting that resonate deeply in neighborhoods across the city.

APS enrollment cratered after topping 100,000 students in the 1960s, but it has begun to slowly climb in recent years. Last fall, APS counted 52,147 students.

The district is paying attention to a growth spurt in the Grady cluster, where officials say schools are already bursting at the seams.

To address the problem, students who currently attend Inman Middle School will move into the updated Howard building, which the district estimates will accommodate several hundred more students. The school board in April approved a two-year lease to rent an annex site for kindergarten classes at Morningside Elementary School; the district will shell out \$14,705 a month in rent

the first year, 3 percent more the second year, and spend an estimated \$565,000 to renovate the space.

Officials believe millennials and their young families will continue to flock to inner-city living and the Beltline's walkable allure.

The district is awaiting the results of the 2020 census to provide more data, but population estimates say Atlanta is poised to grow. The debate is over how much. The city's current population is under a half-million people. Estimates of how many residents could live in the city by 2040 vary widely – from 560,000 people to 1.2 million.

"What it means for us as a district is that more than likely we'll have far more kids, and we are going to need a lot more schools," Larry Hoskins, who supervises the district's operations, told board members at a recent planning retreat.

During the school year that just ended, APS had 144 properties (that's a whopping 1,638 acres), including 74 active school sites, 17 vacant buildings and 19 sites categorized as "unimproved land."

TOP STORY

# Gwinnett

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## EDUCATION

# Online campus lets students study 24/7

By H.M. Cauley  
For the AJC

From kindergarten through third grade, Jessica Walton's son, Javon, attended traditional Gwinnett County schools with the usual class settings and schedules. But when fourth grade rolled around, Javon was a champion boxer and gymnast who had a hard time fitting a normal school routine into his hectic schedule.

"He spends a lot of time on the road, and he can't meet the demands of attendance policies in the brick-and-mortar schools," said Walton. "So we found an alternate plan."

That alternate was the Gwinnett Online Campus that gives him access to the district's standard curriculum, with visual content created by Gwinnett's certified teachers. The 11-year-old from Buford just completed fifth grade and is excelling, said Walton.

"As a parent, I wanted to make sure Javon would not get behind, and I wanted something I knew was measurable so if he went back to a brick-and-mortar, he wouldn't be behind," she said.

The online campus is designed with Walton's student in mind, said Assistant Principal Christine Austin, who was part of the development team for the school when it opened in 2011.

"Self-motivated students certainly do well here," she said. "They have to be able to identify when they're struggling and know when to reach out. There's also so much in-depth reading that students' reading skills improve substantially in all subjects. They learn to comprehend and analyze texts while still working on 21st century skills, such as collaboration. They also build close relationships with their teachers, more so than in a traditional building."

While 600 students call the online campus their home school, it also offers a supple-



Gwinnett Online Campus science teacher Erin Springthorpe works with fourth-grade students. Though the school offers primarily online courses, some classes, such as labs, require attendance. CONTRIBUTED

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## The school has a physical campus in Lawrenceville where students must show up when required.

mental program that allows students to take courses not offered at their home school. Approximately 200 students across the district sign up for AP courses alone each year. Their performances have been strong enough that the online campus was recently named one of 56 AP Honor schools in Georgia.

But despite its name, the school has a physical campus in Lawrenceville where students must show up when required.

"Science labs are mandatory, and they have to come for testing," said Dale Wade, the school's communications coordinator. "One day a week, there's an interactive lab they're encouraged to attend, but each session

is recorded so students can see what they missed. We also have digital production studios and interactive classrooms. A student can be in a hot spot in a car and still participate in a class. Our parents say it's like going to school at Google: Kids are getting exposed to programs, software and tech skills that exceed the normal learning environment and better prepare them to enter the workforce. It's very exciting to see the way classes take place on this campus."

But the biggest draw is the flexibility the online campus offers, said Wade. "Yesterday, I had a parent call whose student just landed a role in an HBO series and needs to travel. He'd be marked absent if he was in a regular building, but with the internet, he can keep up 24/7. Other than that, our population looks like any other school, with classes from gifted to spec ed. We are just not bound by a schedule."

Information about the Gwinnett Online Campus is at gwinnettonlinecampus.com.

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## MEDLOCK PARK

# Neighbors raise money for family of World War II vet killed in fire

By Joshua Sharpe  
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Harold Ferrell Smith, 92, was an Atlanta native, a World War II veteran, a retired Veterans Administration worker, a great-grandfather and even a great-great-grandfather.

In the wake of his death in a DeKalb County house fire, neighbors and well-wishers are raising money for the family. By Wednesday morning, more than \$9,000 had come in.

The fire happened Sunday on Firehopper Road in the Medlock Park neighborhood.

Four people had minor injuries and Smith was trapped. He was freed by firefighters but pronounced dead at the hospital.



Following Harold Ferrell Smith's death in a house fire in his Medlock Park neighborhood, neighbors and friends began raising money for his family. By Wednesday, more than \$9,000 had been raised. CHRIS HUNT / SPECIAL

A dog also died. No cause for the fire has been revealed. Smith's obituary said he retired from the VA's Prosthetic Division and was a member of American Legion Post #66. A funeral service was held Friday.