

Investing in South DeKalb

A Community Proposal for Stronger Schools

This proposal is written by parents and community members who want the same thing the district wants: strong schools that families choose. We are not here to assign blame. We are here to offer practical ideas that can work alongside the district's planning process, not against it.

South DeKalb schools face real challenges. Enrollment has declined. Families are transferring to theme schools and magnets elsewhere in the county. Academic performance at some schools has fallen behind. These are facts, and this document does not dispute them.

What this document asks is a simple question: before the district commits to closing schools, has it considered what would happen if it invested in making those schools the kind of schools families would choose?

What We Found

1. The enrollment problem is concentrated in South DeKalb, not countywide.

South DeKalb accounts for 82% of projected excess high school capacity. North DeKalb high schools are overcrowded: Lakeside (129%), Dunwoody (124%), Chamblee (110%). A countywide consolidation plan does not match this geography.

2. The district was overbuilt from the beginning.

DeKalb County has approximately 110,000 school seats, but peak enrollment was 102,310 in 2005-06. The district has never had more than about 102,000 students. Roughly 8,000 of today's empty seats were never filled by students in the first place. Much of this overbuilding occurred in South DeKalb during the SPLOST construction era of the late 1990s and 2000s. The community should not be penalized for decisions made decades ago about how many seats to build.

3. Students are not leaving public education. They are leaving their zoned schools.

South DeKalb elementary schools lose about 35% of their zone-assigned students to theme schools, charter schools, and magnet programs within the district. North DeKalb schools lose about 12%. This 3-to-1 ratio has held for six consecutive years. The students are staying in DeKalb County public schools. They are choosing schools with stronger programs.

4. Promise Scholarships will accelerate the problem, not solve it.

Georgia's new Promise Scholarship Program (SB 233) offers \$6,500 vouchers to students at schools in the bottom 25% of state performance. Over 30 DeKalb schools qualify. Funding begins July 2026. If the district closes schools without improving the ones that remain, it gives families at low-performing schools a state-funded reason to leave the district entirely. Closing buildings does not address the quality gap that makes students eligible for vouchers. Improving schools does.

5. Consolidation has a poor track record in comparable cities.

Chicago closed 49 schools in 2013. Math scores stayed depressed for four years. In Philadelphia, each additional mile a student traveled to a new school was associated with a 5% increase in suspensions. Georgia State University research found that school closures save less than \$1 million per school per year in operating costs. Transition costs frequently consume the projected savings.

Empty Seats Are Not a Community Failure

When the district points to thousands of empty seats in South DeKalb, it helps to understand where those seats came from.

During the SPLOST-funded construction boom of the late 1990s and 2000s, DeKalb County built school capacity for approximately 110,000 students. But the district's enrollment never reached that number. Peak enrollment was 102,310 in the 2005-06 school year.¹ Even at its highest point, the district had roughly 8,000 more seats than students.

Much of that overbuild happened in South DeKalb. Large high schools were constructed with capacities of 1,700 to 2,000 seats in communities where the population to fill them never fully materialized. The result: South DeKalb schools have carried a structural capacity surplus for decades. This is not a problem the community created. It is a planning decision the district made.

DeKalb County Enrollment vs. Capacity

School Year	Enrollment	Approx. Capacity	Empty Seats
1999-2000	95,283	~110,000	~14,700
2005-2006 (peak)	102,310	~110,000	~7,700

School Year	Enrollment	Approx. Capacity	Empty Seats
2015-2016	101,389	~110,000	~8,600
2019-2020	98,800	~110,000	~11,200
2024-2025	91,445	~110,000	~18,500

Sources: Ballotpedia/NCES historical enrollment data; DCSD State of the School Facilities Report, November 2025; 11Alive reporting, February 2026.

The point is straightforward: a significant portion of the "empty seat" problem in South DeKalb was baked in at construction. Closing schools does not undo that decision. It simply removes buildings from communities that were promised them.

The Promise Scholarship Threat

In 2024, Georgia passed the Promise Scholarship Act (SB 233). Starting in the 2026-27 school year, students at schools in the bottom 25% of state performance can receive \$6,500 per year in public funds to attend private school.² Over 30 DeKalb County schools are on the eligible list, concentrated almost entirely in South DeKalb.³

This creates an urgent problem. If the district closes South DeKalb schools and consolidates students into the remaining buildings without improving academic quality, those receiving schools will likely remain on the Promise-eligible list. Families will then have a state-funded alternative to leave the public system altogether.

The Georgia Budget and Policy Institute estimated that the voucher program could divert \$150 million or more from public schools statewide upon full implementation.⁴ At \$6,500 per student, every 100 families who leave DeKalb for private school represent \$650,000 in lost state funding per year. The families most likely to leave are in exactly the South DeKalb communities where closures are being proposed.

The only way to compete with vouchers is to give families a reason to stay. That means making South DeKalb schools stronger, not fewer.

Where Students Are Going

The district's own non-resident attendance data tells a clear story. South DeKalb families are not abandoning public education. They are choosing schools within DeKalb County that offer programs their zoned schools do not.

School	Students Lost Per Year	Consistency
Flat Rock ES	300-476	Every year for 6 years
Chapel Hill ES	280-437	Every year for 6 years
Princeton ES	186-435	Every year for 6 years
Panola Way ES	215-407	Every year for 6 years
Stoneview ES	140-334	Every year for 6 years

Source: DCSD Non-Resident Attendance Matrices, 2019-2025.

These students are transferring to district-run theme schools like Narvie Harris (STEM), Wynbrooke (Montessori), and Robert Shaw (performing arts), which each attract 500 to 740 non-resident students per year. The demand is real. The programs exist within DeKalb. They are just not located in South DeKalb.

Closing schools does not fix a quality gap. It removes buildings. Bringing strong programs to South DeKalb addresses the actual reason families leave.

What the Research Says Works

Decades of research have identified specific, replicable practices that improve academic outcomes at under-performing schools. These are not theoretical. They have been tested in randomized controlled trials and implemented in districts comparable to DeKalb. Elementary schools are the foundation of every community, and improving them is the starting point for reversing enrollment decline.

Adopting What High-Performing Schools Do

Harvard economist Roland Fryer identified five practices that predict whether a school raises student achievement, regardless of whether it is a charter or a traditional public school: frequent teacher feedback, data-driven instruction, high-dosage tutoring, increased instructional time, and a culture of high expectations.⁵ When Fryer implemented all five in twenty of the lowest-performing schools in Houston, elementary students gained 0.18 standard deviations in math per year -- enough to close the racial achievement gap in under three years.⁶ A parallel experiment in Denver, run through the Blueprint Schools Network, produced similar gains. Three of six participating schools ranked in the top 7% statewide for reading growth after one year.⁷

These are not charter-only strategies. They are evidence-based instructional practices that any school can adopt. The Houston experiment proved that traditional public schools using these methods matched the results of the highest-performing charter schools in the country.

High-Dosage Tutoring

A 2024 meta-analysis of 89 tutoring studies found that high-dosage tutoring -- defined as at least three sessions per week during the school day -- produces gains equivalent to three to four months of additional learning.⁸ In a randomized study across Chicago Public Schools and Fulton County Schools in Georgia, fifth graders receiving high-dosage math tutoring gained two-thirds of a school year of additional learning.⁹ The key elements: tutoring during school hours, not after school; trained tutors aligned with classroom curriculum; and consistent, dedicated time slots. At an estimated cost of \$3,200 to \$4,800 per student, this intervention delivers among the largest effect sizes of any education reform.

K-8 School Conversion

Several districts facing enrollment decline have converted elementary schools to K-8 models rather than closing them. Indian River County, Florida expanded four elementary schools to K-8 in 2025. About two-thirds of graduating fifth graders chose to remain at their expanded schools, retaining students who would have transferred elsewhere.¹⁰ Portland Public Schools adopted the same model. K-8 conversion keeps families in their neighborhood school longer, reduces transition trauma, and uses existing building capacity more efficiently. For South DeKalb elementary schools losing students at the fifth-grade transition, this model directly addresses the point where attrition begins.

Redesign, Not Closure

The Learning Policy Institute, in an August 2025 report, argued that declining enrollment should be treated as an opportunity for school transformation, not a reason for closure.¹¹ Smaller learning communities of 300 to 500 students are associated with higher engagement, attendance, graduation rates, and postsecondary success -- particularly for historically underserved students. When Anaheim Union High School District in California faced an 18% enrollment decline, it consolidated two campuses but entirely redesigned the merged school around small learning communities, teaching teams, advisory systems, and project-based learning. The approach drew families back rather than pushing them away.

South DeKalb's under-enrolled elementary schools already operate at sizes where personalized, community-centered learning is possible. Rather than closing these schools and creating larger, more impersonal buildings, the district could redesign them into the kind of smaller,

relationship-driven schools that research consistently shows produce better outcomes.

What We Propose

Every component below is drawn from programs already operating in comparable districts or, in some cases, already operating within DeKalb County. None of them require new buildings. The total cost is \$2.5 to \$4.0 million per year -- about 0.1% to 0.2% of the district's \$2.03 billion annual budget.

1. Community Schools at Five Elementary Schools

Convert Flat Rock, Chapel Hill, Princeton, Panola Way, and Stoneview into full-service community schools. Each school receives a full-time community school coordinator, a school-based health clinic (through the existing Emory University/DCSD partnership), after-school STEM and enrichment programming, a family resource center, and tutoring partnerships with local universities.

The evidence is strong. Cincinnati converted all 65 schools to community learning centers and saw graduation rates rise from 51% to 85.7%. New York City opened 421 community schools and reduced chronic absenteeism by 10.1 points for Black students. The Learning Policy Institute estimates a return of \$3 to \$15 for every dollar invested.¹²

Cost: \$1.0 to \$1.75 million per year for five schools. Health clinics funded separately through the existing Emory partnership (\$1.35M/year already allocated) and Medicaid billing.

2. Theme Magnets in South DeKalb

Convert two or three high-attrition elementary schools to whole-school themed magnets based on a survey of what South DeKalb families want. Likely candidates include a STEM/STEAM academy, a Montessori or project-based learning school (replicating the Wynbrooke model that already draws 500+ non-resident students), and an early college pathway at McNair or Columbia HS through Georgia Piedmont Technical College.

A federal evaluation of 21 elementary schools that converted to whole-school magnets found increased diversity and, for traditional magnets, higher achievement in English language arts.¹³ In Chicago, three under-enrolled schools that received STEAM upgrades saw chronic absenteeism drop from nearly 50% to 17%.¹⁴

3. High-Dosage Tutoring at Pilot Schools

Implement high-dosage math and reading tutoring at the five highest-attrition elementary schools. Tutoring should occur during the school day in dedicated time slots, using trained tutors aligned with classroom curriculum. The Fulton County Schools model -- already operating in the adjacent county -- provides a proven template. Cost: \$500,000 to \$750,000 per year for five schools, based on \$3,500 per student for approximately 150 students per school.

4. Two Regional STEM Hubs

Create two STEM hubs, each serving three to four schools. One STEM specialist rotates among partner schools on a fixed schedule. A mobile STEM lab visits each school weekly. Partnerships with Georgia Tech (dual enrollment via live video), Georgia Virtual Learning, and local employers provide additional pathways. Cost: \$250,000 to \$375,000 per year for two hubs.

5. High School Transformation

McNair (31% projected utilization), Columbia (37%), and Miller Grove (42%) need transformation, not closure. Embed Georgia Piedmont Technical College career pathways so students earn industry credentials on campus. Extend the Emory health clinic partnership to these three schools. Establish a South DeKalb teaching residency with Georgia State University and Morehouse School of Medicine. Teacher residency programs retain 75% of graduates at five years, versus roughly 50% for traditional preparation.¹⁵

How to Pay for It

Total annual cost: \$2.5 to \$4.0 million. The district holds approximately \$900 million in reserves, carries no long-term general obligation debt, and has seen property tax revenue grow from \$307 million to \$538 million in five years. Multiple existing funding sources can cover this cost without raising taxes.

Source	Available	Notes
Title I (federal)	\$500K - \$1M/yr	Coordinators and family engagement
21st Century Learning Centers	\$750K - \$1.5M/yr	After-school STEM and enrichment
Full-Service Community Schools grants	\$500K - \$1M/yr	Competitive DOE grants, 5-year terms
E-SPLOST (local)	\$500K - \$1M/yr	Already being collected
Medicaid school-based billing	\$200K - \$500K/yr	Health clinics bill Medicaid directly

Source	Available	Notes
Emory/DCSD health center agreement	\$1.35M/yr	Already funded from county tax revenues

Total identified funding: \$4.5 to \$7.1 million per year. The available funding exceeds the program cost.

Compare this to the \$1.5 billion capital improvement program the district has engaged HPM Consulting to manage. A targeted investment approach costs a fraction of that amount and addresses the root cause directly -- the quality gap driving families away.

What We Are Asking For

1. Pause the consolidation timeline for South DeKalb and commission a targeted study of enrollment attrition before closing any schools.
2. Launch a community school pilot at five high-attrition South DeKalb elementary schools in the 2027-2028 school year.
3. Implement high-dosage tutoring at pilot schools, modeled on the Fulton County program, to raise academic performance and reduce the number of schools eligible for Promise Scholarships.
4. Convert two or three under-enrolled elementary schools to whole-school themed magnets based on a family survey of preferred themes.
5. Expand the Emory/DCSD school-based health center partnership to South DeKalb elementary and high schools.
6. Embed Georgia Piedmont Technical College career pathways at McNair, Columbia, and Miller Grove high schools.
7. Set measurable goals: track enrollment retention, academic growth, chronic absenteeism, and family satisfaction at pilot schools. Report results annually.
8. Require an equity impact analysis before any school closure vote, conducted by an independent entity and made public.

South DeKalb does not need fewer schools. It needs schools worth choosing.

Families are transferring because they see better options elsewhere within the same district. Promise Scholarships now give them a funded path out of the district entirely. The only answer is to bring the programs, the support, and the investment to where it is needed most.

The district has the resources, the partnerships, and the evidence. This proposal asks it to use them.

Sources

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