

**Christie Finley
Superintendent**



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**July 11, 2019
Superintendent’s Response to the Desegregation Advisory Committee’s
2018-19 Annual Report
Introduction¹**

I thank the members of the Desegregation Advisory Committee (“DAC”) for their hard work. I believe it is important to acknowledge that volunteer parents and volunteer students are the ones who do all the work of the DAC. Over the last year, these volunteers have organized meetings; marketed their meetings; collected comments; reviewed data and comments; met with me, my staff, and the Huntsville City Board of Education (“Board”); and prepared the DAC’s annual reports. I appreciate all that they do. The DAC is a critical component of the District’s implementation of the Consent Order, and I look forward to continuing my work with the DAC.

At the outset, I must emphasize that the District was already aware of many of the issues and concerns the DAC raised in its 2018-19 Annual Report. Through the implementation of the Strategic Plan, the District is already working to resolve many of the concerns and issues raised in the DAC’s annual report. The Strategic Plan provides a five-pillar foundation that sets goals, priorities, and strategies for building sustainable improvements in all aspects of the District. Each Pillar of the Strategic Plan addresses a separate part of the school system. Pillar I focuses on improving learning outcomes and student achievement. Pillar II addresses the whole student and attacks social and emotional barriers that hinder student performance. Pillar III provides a plan or

¹ On June 6, 2019, the Desegregation Advisory Committee submitted its 2018-19 Report to the Huntsville City Board of Education. As the Superintendent, the Consent Order requires me, “[n]o later than the Board’s first meeting in July, [to] present the DAC’s report and [my] commentary as to that report to the Board during a meeting of the Board.” (Doc. 450, p. 89). I did that during the Board’s July 9, 2019 Board meeting.

equipping teachers with modern strategies and skills necessary for success in the classroom. Pillar IV addresses student safety and equity in the District's interior and exterior learning environments. Finally, Pillar V is the roadmap to a comprehensive communication system for reaching all community stakeholders. I believe that, by implementing the Strategic Plan with intentionality and integrity, the District will achieve the goals of the Consent Order.

I. Superintendent's Response to Chair's Comments

I thank the Chair of the DAC, Kristi Santiago, for her hard work and dedication. Leading the DAC can be a time consuming, difficult, and sometimes thankless job. Ms. Santiago handled her duties with the utmost respect and integrity. She stayed in constant communication with the District and alerted us to issues and complaints in a timely manner. She helped the DAC complete its obligations under the Consent Order and provided the District valuable feedback and insight. I commend Ms. Santiago for her hard work.

In her comments, the Chair pointed out that parents and the community at-large want to hear more about the Consent Order and Consent Order related positive outcomes. Specifically, Ms. Santiago noted that parents had communicated a desire to receive data-backed information related to the Consent Order. She recommended that the District appoint an individual with marketing experience to be a liaison with the DAC to share positive information to the community.

I agree with Ms. Santiago. I believe the District must do a better job of communicating with the community about the Consent Order, its successes, and related data. At the beginning of the implementation process, the District was focused on improving the morale of teachers and District employees. The District could not accomplish the many tasks set out in the Consent Order without first earning the support of teachers and school personnel. Now, it is time for the

District to turn its attention to the community at-large and focus on building the buy-in of community members, families, and students.

Pillar V of the Strategic Plan is based on my belief that strengthening community partnerships and improving stakeholder relations enhances and supports student achievement and growth. Pillar V is focused on enhancing the positive image of the District and improving the ways the District shares its good news. These newsworthy items occur in our classrooms and on our campuses daily and need to be shared with parents, students, teachers, and the citizens of Huntsville. We must understand and use current trends in communication to our benefit and continue to survey our families on how they prefer to receive information. Pillar V establishes six core communications related objectives with accompanying action items designed to accomplish each objective.

In sum, I agree that the District must improve its efforts to share easily digestible information regarding the Consent Order. In response to your recommendation, I have tasked the Pillar V leadership team with investigating options for improving the District's Consent Order marketing strategies, including the possibility of hiring an individual with marketing experience.

II. Superintendent's Response to Student Comments

I thank the student DAC members for serving on the DAC and for their hard work. Student members play a critical role on the DAC and provide valuable, on-the-ground insight into the District's implementation of the Consent Order. I agree with Ms. Scott that we must continue to take a proactive approach to bullying and educate students and employees about the signs of bullying in our schools. I also agree with Ms. Poe that we must find a leadership team for Jemison that will create stability. As I will explain in more detail later in this response, I believe that Dr. Demetris Leverett and her team will provide the stability and expertise that

Jemison High School needs to succeed. Again, I want to thank our student DAC members for their hard work and valuable feedback.

III. Superintendent's Response to "Activities of the DAC"

The Consent Order contains a number of internal operating requirements for the DAC, from enhancing communications to holding public meetings. In this section of its report, the DAC described its efforts to comply with those requirements. The DAC appears to have conducted all of its required meetings, and I applaud the members for their hard work.

The DAC pointed out that it implemented monthly video conferences, with the help of the District, for the student DAC members during Power Hour. The goal of the video conferences was to increase the involvement of the student DAC members. The video conferences were a big success, and I like the DAC's focus on increasing student involvement. The District will continue to help the DAC increase student involvement, and I look forward to working with the DAC its shared goal of increased student participation.

IV. Superintendent's Response to "Findings of the DAC"

The Consent Order requires that the DAC "advise the Superintendent and to inform the Court through this process about its assessment of the implementation of the terms of the Consent Order." (Doc. 450, p. 86). The DAC assesses the District's implementation by conducting public meetings, soliciting community feedback, and, when necessary, seeking information from the District. The DAC requested information to help it assess the District's implementation of the Consent Order. As the DAC notes, the District responded to all of the DAC's questions and requests for information fully and promptly.

In this section of the report, the DAC shared its findings, concerns, and suggestions regarding the Green Factors. I will provide detailed responses to the DAC's concerns and

suggestions below. I have considered all of the DAC's comments and concerns, and I do appreciate the DAC's feedback.

A. Superintendent's Response to "Student Assignment" Findings

This section of the Report focused mostly on the District's magnet programs. The DAC pointed out that it received complaints regarding tensions between magnet and non-magnet students at Williams Middle School. In addition, the DAC noted that some parents complained that the magnet programs were forcing non-magnet programs to "tone it down" or "not compete" with the magnet schools. Taken together, this feedback reflects a lack of complete harmony between our magnet and non-magnet programs and schools.

First, I am aware that there has been a lack of cohesion at Williams Middle School between the magnet and non-magnet programs. The District has been working to resolve these issues. For example, the District has implemented blended core classes at Williams Middle School in hopes of creating cohesion and solidarity between the programs. The blended classes will require magnet and non-magnet students to take classes together for core subjects. Hopefully, these blended classes will create cross-program friendships and partnerships that will increase cohesion. We will continue to create a mentality that all students at Williams Middle School, whether magnet or non-magnet, are one body.

Overall, lack of cohesion between magnet and non-magnet programs, to some, has been a reoccurring issue. The Consent Order requires the District to work with schools to build cohesion between magnet and non-magnet schools and programs. We, as a District, have struggled to balance creating innovation and opportunity for all students with maintaining the unique components of each magnet school. After receiving the DAC's feedback, I tasked my leadership team with developing strategies and plans for improving cohesion between programs. In

addition, Pillar II of the Strategic Plan provides strategies for fostering a positive school climate at all District Schools. Together, I think these strategies will foster new and bright relationships between our magnet and non-magnet programs and schools.

B. Superintendent’s Response to “Equitable Access to Course Offerings and Programs” Findings

1. AP Enrollment and Student Proficiency

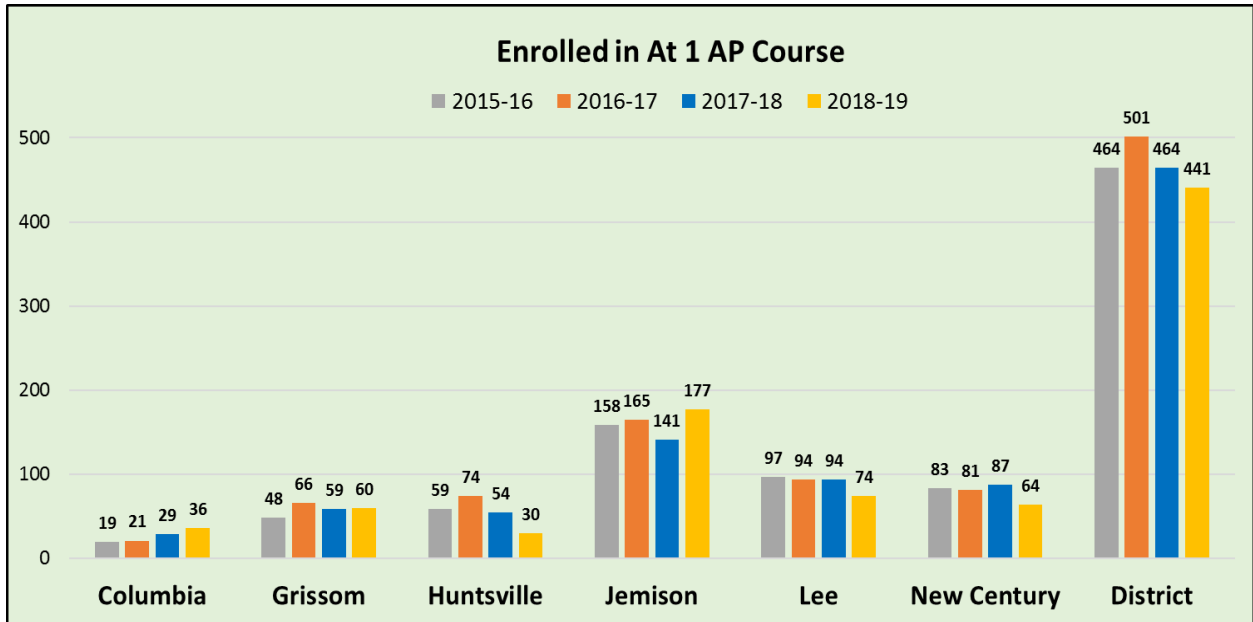
The DAC found that the District is seeing a downward trend in the number of Black students taking AP classes.² It is concerned that the District’s AP recruiting efforts have not directly impacted AP enrollment numbers for Black students. Also, the DAC found that both Black and White student proficiency data is decreasing.

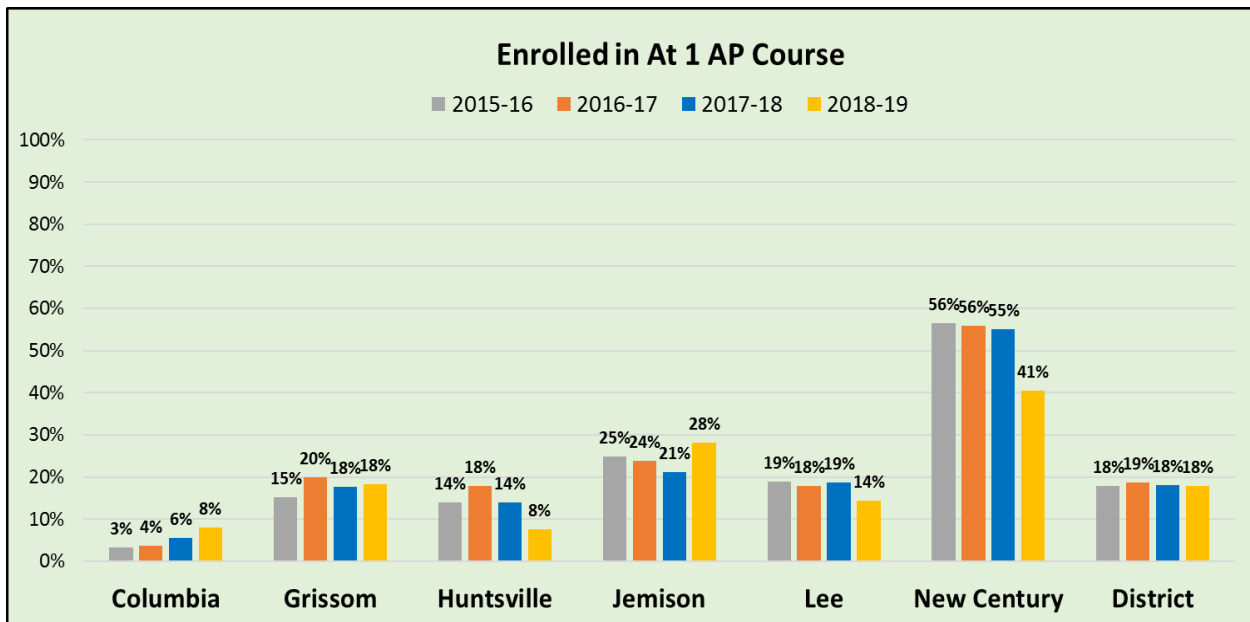
The DAC is correct that the District’s AP Black enrollment numbers have not increased since the implementation of the Consent Order. In addition, some schools in the District have experienced a decline in proficiency. I am aware of the data the DAC presented in its Annual Report. Pillar I of the Strategic Plan is our plan for increasing student enrollment in AP courses and improving student proficiency numbers.

The chart provided by the DAC on page 12 shows the total number of AP classes taken by Black students. In other words, the chart does not depict the number of Black students taking AP courses, it depicts the number of AP classes which Black students are enrolled. Thus, one Black student could be enrolled in multiple AP classes and skew the data set.

² The DAC also noted that “Columbia had 7 AP/IB courses offered as opposed to the minimum 12 outlined in the Consent Order.” See Page 11 of the DAC’s Annual Report. The District’s Fourth Court Report in report III.M.1.a shows that Columbia offered 6 AP courses and 29 IB courses easily satisfying the Consent Order’s minimum requirement of 12 AP or IB courses taught.

I have provided two charts that the District believes better represent the District's Black student AP enrollment numbers. The charts show both the raw total number and percentages of Black students who are enrolled in at least one AP class. This data set provides a more accurate representation of the number of Black students taking AP classes at each school and District-wide, but the problems identified by the DAC are still present.





District-wide, Black AP student enrollment, since its peak in the 2016-17 academic year, has declined by one percentage point, or roughly sixty (60) students. Huntsville High School and New Century Technology High School have seen the largest drop in AP enrollment for Black students. Black student AP enrollment for Columbia High School, Grissom High School, and Jemison High School has either remained constant or slightly increased since 2016-17.

Needless to say, the District is working diligently to move enrollment in a positive direction. First, it is important to understand that the process of preparing a student for AP courses begins at the earliest stages of education. I believe that simply removing barriers to participation and increasing recruiting efforts and outreach are insufficient by themselves to close the AP enrollment gap. To close the enrollment gap, I believe the District must focus on both consistent and continuous academic growth of students and the social and emotional needs of the student.

I believe that students must achieve grade-level proficiency starting at the earliest levels of education in order for the student to be prepared for AP courses when he or she reaches the

high school level. Thus, Pillar I of the District's Strategic Plan focuses on ensuring that ALL students are learning and meeting rigorous academic standards at every step of their elementary, middle, and high school careers. Pillar I sets out a road map for increasing student proficiency across all grade levels and sets three-year target goals for the District. As part of Pillar I, we will monitor student performance and growth beginning at the elementary stages and continuing through high school using Alabama State Department of Education ("ALSDE") approved measures.

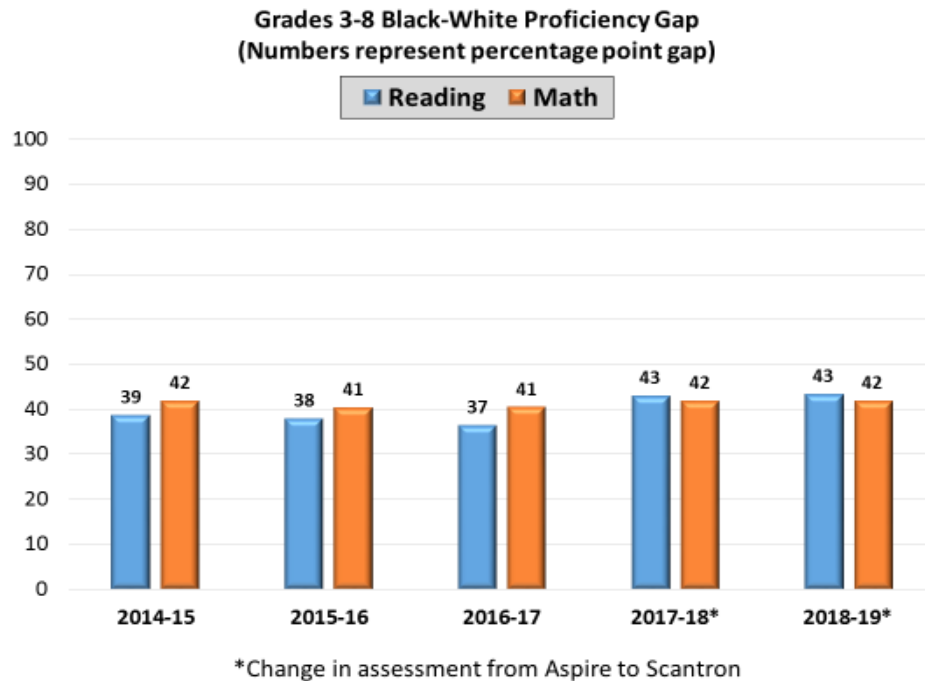
Increasing AP enrollment requires more than a focus on academic performance. Instead, we must also focus on providing holistic services that meet, not only the academic, but also the social and emotional needs of our students. Pillar II of the Strategic Plan is designed to address the whole student and is based on my belief that each student is unique, capable of learning, and deserving of dignity and respect.

Pillar II recognizes that students may have social or emotional barriers that hinder their ability to succeed academically. Like Pillar I, Pillar II sets District-wide goals and establishes three-year targets for schools in areas such as attendance, reducing negative behaviors, and eliminating bullying. By focusing on the whole student and addressing those barriers, the District is able to provide a learning environment where all students can succeed.

Therefore, by improving academic performance, increasing grade level proficiency, and addressing a student's social and emotional needs, the student will have the confidence, courage, and tools necessary to not only enroll in AP courses, but pass those courses.

2. Achievement Gap

A review of the District's data shows that the achievement gap³ between Black and White students has remained relatively stagnant.⁴



Closing the achievement gap is a long-term goal with successes measured, not in large leaps, but in small steps. I am focused on closing this gap. We have invested heavily in early childhood education, provided numerous specialized magnet programs, increased the number of honors and AP courses, provided Majority-to-Minority transfer opportunities, offered numerous professional development courses for teachers, and provided counseling and educational supports to students. The District will continue to invest heavily in the educational supports and

³ The achievement gap is defined as a persistent disparity in measures of educational performance among subgroups of students.

⁴ The DAC also noted that it had received feedback that the District had eliminated diversity training. See page 16. The District has not discontinued its culturally responsive and equity training. We continue to provide this training for new faculty and refresher training for all faculty and staff.

programs necessary to ensure that every student in the District has access to rigorous and engaging instruction.

In addition, I will ensure that the District implements every aspect of the Strategic Plan with integrity and intentionality. As explained above, the Pillars of the Strategic Plan are designed to meet all needs of the school system. By faithfully implementing all five Pillars of the Strategic Plan, I believe we can attack the achievement gap from all angles and close it.

That said, the burden of closing the achievement gap does not rest solely on the shoulders of the Strategic Plan and the District. Research has shown that a combination of home, community, and in-school factors affect academic performance. In fact, research shows that home and community environments may have a stronger impact on school achievement than in-school factors, in part, because students spend more time outside of school than in school. Thus, the achievement gap is a challenge not only to the District, but also to parents and the community. By working together - parents, through consistent involvement; the community, by providing necessary resources and supports; and the District, by faithfully implementing the Strategic Plan - we will close the achievement gap.

3. Gifted Identification

In this section, the DAC pointed out the District's gap in gifted identification between White and Black students. The DAC was concerned that an "inadvertent cultural or racial bias . . . could be affecting [gifted] evaluation."

Unfortunately, regulations issued by the ALSDE limit the ability of the District to equitably identify students across racial subgroups. For example, to qualify for gifted under the ALSDE's metrics, among other things, a student must generally have a raw score of at least 118 on the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test ("NNAT"). In our most recent data set, about 25% of

White students achieved that score compared to 4% of Black students. Thus, this single required state metric negatively impacts the District's ability to equitably identify gifted students by eliminating large swaths of minority students from consideration.

As described in previous reports to the Court, the District previously sought a waiver from the State's gifted identification metrics, but was unsuccessful in obtaining the waiver from the State. The District has renewed discussions with the ALSDE to obtain a waiver to avoid having to use the ALSDE's gifted identification metrics. If the District is able to obtain a waiver, the District may be able to implement its own local norms for gifted identification which, we believe will greatly reduce the gifted identification gap. The District is in the early stages of this renewed waiver process but is hopeful that a waiver will be issued.

C. Superintendent's Response to "Extracurricular Activities" Findings

1. Extracurricular Activity Offerings

In this section, the DAC raised concerns, for both elementary and middle schools, that the District was inequitably providing clubs above the minimums required by the Consent Order. Put differently, the DAC was concerned that, while the District is meeting the minimums set by the Consent Order, activities over and above the minimum level required are not being offered at schools in equitable numbers.

Importantly, I agree with the DAC that the District is providing the minimum number of extracurricular activities required by the Consent Order at the elementary, middle, and high school level. For clubs above the minimum number required by the Consent Order, we try to create equitable offerings at all schools. However, we try not to stifle opportunity and creativity. While the District strives for equality between schools, it must also allow schools the freedom and creativity to offer unique and varying clubs that interest particular students. Thus, schools

offer varying numbers and types of clubs. However, every school is required to offer and encourage participation in the clubs required by the Consent Order.

2. Power Hour

In this section, the DAC was concerned that Power Hour was being implemented inconsistently between schools and that there were no standard guidelines for schools. The DAC also received feedback that some schools used Power Hour as a disciplinary tool.

For the 2019-20 academic year, the District plans to implement changes to Power Hour to create consistency among schools. The District plans to implement the following requirements:

- Power Hour will be offered by every high school at the same time each day.
- All high school students will be assigned to a teacher during Power Hour.
- Each high school student will be enrolled in a class in iNOW for Power Hour that will allow teachers and administrators to know the location of every student.
- Each teacher with a Power Hour class will have an assigned lunch time, and students will only be able to attend lunch during their teachers' assigned lunch time.

I believe these changes will resolve the DAC's concerns and alleviate many of the issues experienced by schools during Power Hour.

In addition, the District has no plans to prohibit teachers and administrators from using Power Hour as a disciplinary consequence. I believe that disciplinary consequences that keep students on campus and learning provide valuable alternatives to exclusionary measures. I know schools want to use alternative forms of disciplinary consequences that encourage learning. Thus, the ability to use limited exclusion from Power Hour or an assignment to a study hall during Power Hour as a disciplinary consequence provides schools an alternative consequence that avoids the negative affects of suspension and other exclusionary consequences.

D. Superintendent's Response to "Faculty" Findings

1. Mae Jemison Principal

The DAC recommended that the District “make a concerted effort to find out the root cause of the revolving door of principals at Jemison High School and work to resolving the problem.” Dr. Rachel McDaniel was selected to be the Principal at Jemison because of her experience at underperforming schools and her commitment to building positive relationships with students and families at Jemison. Unfortunately, Dr. McDaniel’s circumstances changed, and she decided to leave the District to pursue another opportunity closer to her family. The District leadership team and I remained committed to Dr. McDaniel until her decision to leave Jemison.

I am working to make the future better for Jemison students. For instance, On June 6, 2019, I recommended Dr. Demetris Leverette for the position of Principal at Jemison High School. I am excited about the hire and truly believe that Dr. Leverette is the right person for Jemison High School. I know that Dr. Leverette is committed to Jemison, its students, and the surrounding community. I view Dr. Leverette as the long-term solution for Jemison. I selected her because of her commitment to the community, passion for education, and experience as an Assistant Principal at Jemison. I believe in Dr. Leverette and I cannot wait to see the amazing things she has in store for Jemison.

2. Faculty Data

Our data differed substantially from the data presented by the DAC. I will work with DAC to try and understand their math because it does not match what we reported to the Court. For example, using report V.D.12 (doc. 636-8, 637-1), the District shows the following for faculty applicants and hire rates for 2017-18:

	Black	White	Total
Total Candidates	237	976	1415
Hired	85	288	450
Selection Rates	36%	30%	32%

In addition, the District, using report V.D.6 (Doc. 636-2) shows:

- For 2017-18, 14 teachers started as first-year Assistant Principals. Of those 14, 9 were Black and 5 were White.
- For 2018-19, 34 teachers and TOSAs were screened for Assistant Principal positions. Of those, 19 were selected. Of the 19 selected, 12 were Black and 7 were White.

We believe that the District is going in the right direction regarding the racial make-up of faculty and administrators. In addition, by implementing the strategies outlined in Pillar III, the District will continue to move in the right direction for faculty and staff.

E. Superintendent’s Response to “Facility” Findings

The DAC raised specific concerns regarding the facilities at Highlands Elementary. I have tasked the District’s Operations Department with investigating these complaints. The District will make every effort to remedy any facility issues that are discovered.

Additionally, Pillar IV of the Strategic Plan focuses on the continuous improvement of the District’s buildings, facilities, and interior and exterior learning environments. Clean, modernized, and safe buildings are critical to the recruitment and retention of families, students, teachers, and local businesses. Our buildings must be safe, welcoming, and able to accommodate all types of learning styles.

We will provide the latest materials and technology for safety, security, energy efficiency, and digital learning to all students. To implement this goal, Pillar IV of the Strategic Plan sets out various objectives related to security, safety, technology, and facilities management

and establishes three-year target goals for each measure. For example, the Strategic Plan sets a goal of completing all maintenance work orders within 15 days of posting.

By implementing the Strategic Plan, I believe the District will be able to meet its goal of continuously improving all buildings and facilities to foster a 21st Century learning environment.

F. Superintendent's Response to "Student Discipline, Positive School Climate, and Effective Classroom Management" Findings

1. Specific Incidents

In this section, the DAC mentioned specific incidents at Blossomwood Elementary, Columbia High School, and Huntsville High School. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act ("FERPA") prohibits our discussion of any specific student's education records, including records related to disciplinary conduct and outcomes. Thus, the District is unable to respond to the DAC's comments regarding these specific incidents. However, I will note that the District does not expel elementary students.

2. Concerns at ACE/LEAP

Starting with the 2019-20 academic year, ACE will be located at the Calvary Hill Community Center, located at 2900 Fairbanks Street NW, Huntsville, AL 35816. The Calvary Hill location provides a better learning environment for the students at ACE than the previous location. In addition, a portion of the District's Special Education Department is moving its offices to the Calvary Hill location in an effort to provide higher quality interventions to ACE students. The District is focused on creating a true non-traditional learning environment for the students at ACE and LEAP, while also providing as many of the regular school opportunities, such as extra-curricular activities, as possible.

3. Training Concerns

The DAC stated that there were few cultural responsiveness trainings held based on data in the District's most recent Court Report. This is incorrect. In 2017-18, the District provided over 200 hours of professional development and training. This is contained in the Fourth Consent Order Report at III.M.1.e. (See Doc. 628-1, pp. 14-22). Cultural responsiveness professional development included topics such as de-escalation, diversity, educational equity, positive school culture, poverty, and classroom management.

In addition, the DAC was concerned that teachers are not being provided adequate training on the Behavioral Learning Guide and BLOOM software. The District's Fourth Court Report, at VII.I.2 (doc. 640-1), shows that the District provided over 150 hours of discipline-related professional development and training. Professional development related to discipline included sessions on the Behavioral Learning documents (BLG and Matrices), BLOOM software, discipline reporting, classroom management, and walkthroughs of different student behavioral scenarios.

The District also offered over 300 hours of positive school climate trainings on topics such as PBIS, positive learning environments, restorative practices, team building, classroom equity, and collaborative learning environments. In total, the below table shows that the District provided **over 1,000 total hours** of professional development for its certified employees related to the Consent Order. Importantly, the below table only includes data on the professional development offered to certified employees reported as part of the District's annual Court Report. The below table does not include professional development provided to non-certified employees, such as campus security officers, nor does it include professional development provided that is unrelated to the Consent Order or not reported as part of the annual Court

Report. Thus, the below chart only includes a portion of the professional development provided by the District to its employees.

Topic	Total Hours of Professional Dev. Offered
Discipline	170.5
Gifted Teachers	68.9
Cultural Responsiveness	210.2
Math	322.5
New Teachers	80.0
Positive School Climate	317.2
Total	1,169.3

4. Discipline Data

I am very aware that the District’s discipline data continues to show a growing disparity in the discipline gap between Black and White students. Pillar II of the Strategic Plan is focused on removing barriers to academic success, such as discipline problems. One of Pillar II’s core objectives is to reduce incidents of negative behavior by 5% over the course of the next three years. Pillar II focuses on reducing instances of fighting, bullying, harassment, and physical attacks. For the 2019-20 academic year, we have implemented new interventions including new school and district level intervention plans. In addition, we are training a teacher at each school to act as a PBIS coach to ensure that PBIS continues to be implemented with intentionality and integrity. By focusing on behavioral supports and interventions, not just documenting instances of misconduct, we believe the discipline gap will begin to shrink and ultimately disappear.

G. Superintendent’s Response to “Transportation” Findings

1. Bus Complaints

In this section, the DAC noted complaints it had received regarding late bus arrivals, Wi-Fi not working, bullying, and inconsistent supervision of students waiting for buses. The DAC is correct that the District used a new bus contractor, Apple Bus Company, for the 2018-19

academic year and we believe that the transportation system improved in 2018-19. Additionally, transportation is a key part of Pillar IV of the District's Strategic Plan. Pillar IV provides plans for improving on-time arrivals, decreasing bus discipline issues, and for maintaining maximum route efficiency.

Regarding late bus arrivals, it is true that buses occasionally arrive at school or at a stop a few minutes late. However, the District's data shows that Apple Bus Company has maintained a 97% on-time rate for morning bus arrivals. Additionally, Apple Bus Company is required to send out a School-Cast message to parents and guardians anytime a bus is running late or a spare bus is being used to cover a route. While there have been occasional glitches with the notification system, I believe any issues were rare and had no disproportionate impact.

Regarding Wi-Fi issues, the District's IT staff routinely checks the functionality of the Wi-Fi units on buses. Any connectivity issues that are reported to the IT staff are immediately addressed and repaired. Regarding bus supervision, my leadership team has instructed school principals to implement a bus duty schedule for the 2019-20 school year. I expect that the bus duty schedule will provide a more organized solution to bus supervision and will alleviate any past supervision issues.

2. Specific Bus Incident

In this section, the DAC noted a bus incident involving a bus driver who deviated from his bus route. The District took immediate action in response to the incident. The District agrees the actions of the bus driver were unacceptable, and, as such, the bus driver involved is no longer drives a bus for the District. This was an isolated incident. I do not think this one incident was representative of the overall performance of Apple Bus Company or a reflection on the quality of its bus drivers and employees.

V. Conclusion

I thank the 2018-19 DAC members for their year of service, and I hope that the DAC finds my response to be helpful. Our District is great, and I am proud to be a part of it. We can improve, and that is why I have developed and implemented the Strategic Plan. I will work in 2019-20 to ensure that we implement the Strategic Plan with intentionality and integrity. I believe that faithful implementation of the Strategic Plan will address many of the DAC's.