

April 25, 2022

Members of the DeKalb County Board of Education:

It is essential that our students are able to learn, and our educators are able to teach, in a safe and supportive learning environment.

Recently, students at Druid Hills High School took action to spotlight egregious facility issues at their school. During a site visit conducted by the Georgia Department of Education's facilities team at my request, our team was shown several examples of issues from the students' video footage being addressed. While we were glad to see this response taking place, I question why these issues were only addressed after they were raised by students – rather than being identified and promptly addressed by the adults responsible for them.

Of even greater concern, most of these fixes were solely cosmetic, and it was clear not only that significant issues with the facility remain, but that regular maintenance has been largely neglected. This is unacceptable.

Your governance team recently cited "equity" as a factor in its decision-making regarding facilities, while glossing over very real issues and concerns. Let me be clear: each and every student in DeKalb County Schools has a right to functioning bathrooms; air-conditioned and heated classrooms; spaces free of mildew, mold, and flooding; and safe conditions to learn. Each and every facility in DeKalb County Schools should meet that basic standard – at present, Druid Hills High School does not.

Your governance team has also cited a perceived lack of funding. In reality, there has been a lack of leadership, responsibility, and urgency regarding this core responsibility of DeKalb County Schools: providing safe and fully functioning facilities.

For example: federal COVID relief funds can be used to make facilities improvements, particularly clean and safe buildings for students and teachers. DeKalb County Schools has received more than \$480 million in ESSER relief funds – even after adjusting for state austerity cuts as a result of the pandemic, DeKalb netted more than \$440 million. Much of this remains unspent.

Additionally, through DeKalb's FY23 Capital Outlay Application for the Druid Hills High School facility, another \$1.4 million in state funds will be available to reimburse your district for needed improvements at Druid Hills after September 2022. Work can begin immediately with local funds, to be reimbursed after September.

GaDOE's facilities team will work with DeKalb County Schools to develop immediate, short-term, and long-term plans for corrective action. The board is expected to work as a governance team to enact



policies to address the issues outlined in these plans, and must empower Superintendent Watson-Harris to take swift and immediate action.

I will not recommend DeKalb County Schools' facilities plan for State Board of Education approval while these fundamental issues and concerns remain. DeKalb's facilities plan will not move forward in its current form.

This event is an opportunity for DeKalb County Schools to restore trust with the community; enact bold and sweeping change to the way it maintains and invests in its facilities; and utilize local, state, and federal funding to make historic investments – displaying the same courage and initiative as the students of Druid Hills High.

Our children deserve no less.

Respectfully,



Richard Woods
State School Superintendent

cc: Jason Downey, State Board of Education Chair
Cheryl Watson-Harris, Superintendent/CEO, DeKalb County Schools