The following comments were shared by CEO/Superintendent J. Alvin Wilbanks at the December 11, 2008, public hearing on Gwinnett County Public Schools’ proposed “IE2 Partnership Contract for Improving Student Achievement” with the Georgia Board of Education. The IE2 (Investing in Educational Excellence) contract would allow the school system to receive flexibility for its schools from specified state statutes and/or rule in exchange for greater accountability for student achievement.

Chairman Boyce and Board members,

Tonight’s public hearing is a necessary step in a process that we have been involved in for several months in developing our proposed IE2 Partnership Contract with the Georgia Board of Education. The contract offers us an unprecedented opportunity to empower the principals and teachers in our schools to do what they believe will best help their students improve their academic achievement. I look forward to bringing the proposed contract to you for approval later.

Before doing so, I recognize the importance of first holding this hearing to collect input from the public and our employees. I also welcome this opportunity to address the misleading information circulated in recent days that has caused some of our teachers undue concern over something that ultimately will be a tremendous advantage to them and their schools.
The partnership contract that we have been working to develop with the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement and the Georgia Department of Education would be the first under a new state law passed in the last Georgia General Assembly. House Bill 1209 was the only significant piece of education legislation to pass in 2008, but it is one of the most promising bills we’ve seen in several years. It addresses a long-standing concern of this Board about the incessant mandates, most of them unfunded or under-funded, that have been passed by the legislature and that do little if anything to help student achievement. From the day the flexibility bill was signed by Governor Perdue we have been talking with you and our school leaders about our plans to submit one of the first contracts authorized in the new law. What the contract does is simply grant us permission to be relieved from some of the state rules and mandates that keep us from being as effective as we can and must be.

Because this is a new endeavor, state and school district staff had to invest a lot of time and effort in developing a successful first contract. We have worked together right up to today to iron out a plan that will satisfy the law’s requirements for increased accountability, while providing us the flexibility to use our human, financial, and physical resources in ways we think are best for educating our students. It was essential that we develop not only a workable plan for Gwinnett County Public Schools, but also a model that other systems could adapt in seeking the flexibility they need and desire. Most importantly, our goal was to create a contract that would give the professionals in the local school the freedom and the resources to do what they believe would best serve their particular student population.

It was not an easy task. Some here tonight would suggest that we should have made the contract public much sooner. We would like to have done so, but the development process with the state was longer and slower than anticipated. Some would argue that input from teachers and parents should play a part in the contract. I agree… and I assure them that will be the case… when we reach that point in the process. The partnership contract, which was developed with input from system and local school leaders, identifies the
areas of accountability and flexibility that the school system and the state must come to agreement on. It also outlines the possible consequences if a school does not meet its performance targets. The contract does not include the details as to how schools will go about implementing flexibility. That will be determined later at each school site with input from teachers, parents, the school council, PTA, and others in the school community.

As we worked with the state to develop our contract, many ideas and suggestions were proposed for consideration. While we were discussing with the state the many possibilities, the Atlanta newspaper filed an open records request for all of our working documents. As a result, a lot of premature and ultimately irrelevant information was distributed. The reporter’s article suggested that we are seeking flexibility from state statutes and rules that would be detrimental for our teachers, causing them needless concern.

Let me be very clear… when we talk about flexibility in class sizes, we only want to get out from under an artificial barrier that ties principals’ hands in staffing their schools and costs us millions of dollars we could use better elsewhere. Adding just one student to each classroom district wide would save us over $30 million, money we need in these tight budget times for things like teacher salary increases.

We also are not looking to eliminate 30 minutes of duty-free lunch for elementary teachers. We just want local schools to be able to work this out with their faculties in the manner that best suits the local school. What surprises me most, perhaps, is the allegation that we intend to replace teachers with TVs and paraprofs. You have heard me say countless times that the most important factor in raising student achievement is having a qualified teacher in the classroom. Yes, we may want to expose more students to instruction delivered by some of our master teachers through televised classes, but we would do so on a limited basis and only where it is most warranted.
As I said, how flexibility will be implemented will be determined to a large degree at each individual school. From the list of flexibility options, some schools may opt to pursue a number of them, while others may be interested in only a few. To help schools in the selection process, we put together a cross-functional action team composed of principals, assistant principals, and central office support staff. The team is studying different ways schools could implement flexibility to benefit instruction and operations. Schools will use this research, along with district guidelines, to determine how to implement the desired flexibility. As such, it will vary from school to school.

We are still in the early stages of this process. Once the partnership contract is approved by this Board, it will be submitted to the Georgia Board of Education for action. We hope to receive its approval in January in order to take the newly acquired flexibility into consideration as we begin to budget for next school year. Once the district’s partnership contract is approved, the real work begins as our local school communities provide input on how this long-sought-after flexibility might be implemented at their schools.

Gwinnett County Public Schools has a long history of implementing school improvement efforts that are instructionally sound and, more importantly, are in the best interest of our students. As a result, academic achievement in our schools remains high. Our record also contains extensive evidence of how much the organization values teachers, and nothing in the district’s proposed partnership contract disputes that fact. We know that overcrowded classrooms, unqualified teachers, low staff morale, and unpleasant working conditions are not best for students, nor are they consistent with the value we place on our teachers. To allege that we are asking for flexibility at the expense of students’ or teachers’ well-being is, frankly, unfounded and untrue.
I am on record as saying that I believe the IE² Partnership Contract has the potential to greatly benefit public education in Gwinnett County and throughout the state, especially during times of economic stress such as we are experiencing now. I am confident many others will share my optimism as we move forward with the partnership contract, implementing accountability and flexibility with one goal in mind—increasing student achievement. Mrs. Boyce…