

# Parks Middle School Continues to Beat the Odds



Principal Christopher Waller continues to spend as much time as he can in the classroom.

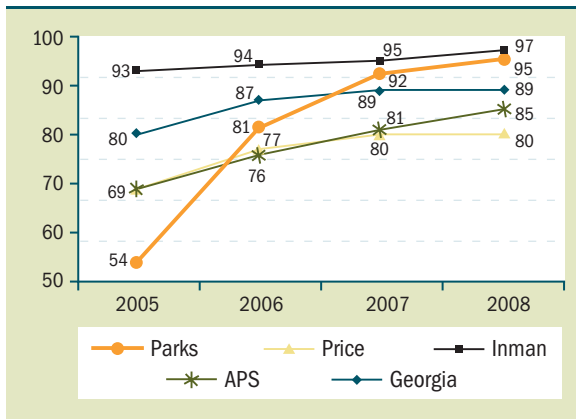
*Beating the Odds at Atlanta's Parks Middle School* was written in 2007, after Parks had achieved Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as defined under No Child Left Behind for the second year in a row and was taken off the Needs Improvement list. During the following school year, Parks continued its academic progress, achieving AYP for a third straight year. In recent years, the school's gains have outpaced those of the district as a whole as well as of the entire state.

During the 2007-08 school year, Parks had 480 students, a slight decrease from the previous year. Nearly all of Parks' students are still African American (98%) and low income (92%). Because of its high concentration of low-income students, Parks is defined as a Title I school.

During this past school year, the percentages of Parks' 8th graders meeting or exceeding the state standards went up in reading (from 94% to 96%) and stayed

Remarkably, despite its concentration of low-income students, more Parks' 8th graders met or exceeded the standards in reading, English/Language Arts and math in 2007–08 than did 8th graders from throughout the state.

**Percentage of 8th Grade Students Meeting or Exceeding Performance Standards in English/Language Arts**



steady in English/Language Arts (94%). The percentage went down in science and math. However, the percentages of 8th graders meeting or exceeding the standards in science and math were down sharply throughout the Atlanta Public Schools system and across the state. This dip resulted from new curricula and new test norms, changes that were begun in science and math in 2007.

While the percentage of Parks' 8th graders meeting or exceeding standards in science fell from 72% to 50% between 2006 and 2008, the percentage for all 8th graders in Atlanta dropped much more, from 80% to 38%. The percentage for Georgia as a whole also dropped significantly, from 87% in 2006 to 60% in 2008.

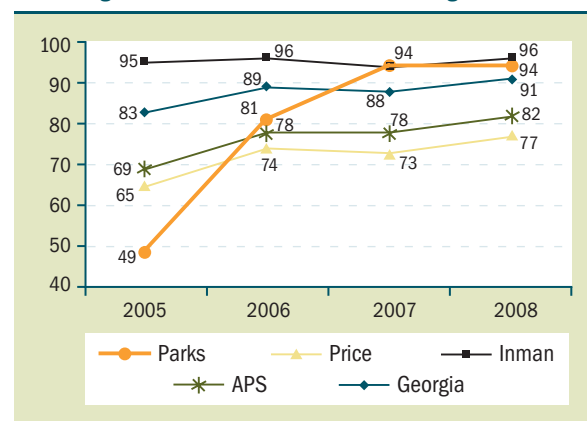
In math, while Parks' percentage fell (from 90% in 2007 to 82% in 2008), it

actually widened its lead over 8th graders for the state as a whole (who dropped from 81% to 62%).

Remarkably, despite its concentration of low-income students, more Parks 8th graders met or exceeded the standards in reading, English/Language Arts and math in 2007–08 than did 8th graders from throughout the state. Parks is behind only in science.

In part, these dramatic improvements at Parks reflect improvements throughout Atlanta Public Schools. Since 1999, when Dr. Beverly L. Hall became Atlanta's superintendent, the percentage of 8th graders meeting or exceeding standards has increased 22 points in reading, 14 points in math and 38 points in English/Language Arts.

**Percentage of 8th Graders Meeting or Exceeding Performance Standards in Reading**



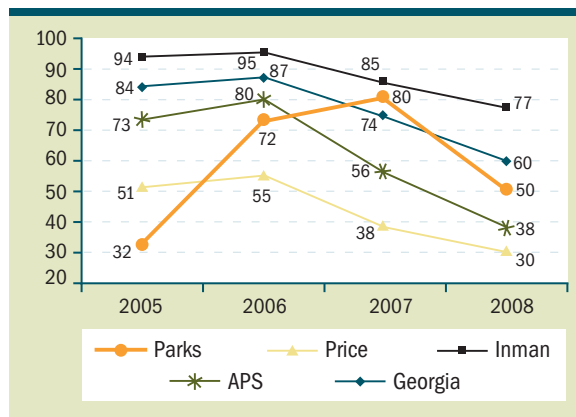
During the past four years, the percentage of 8th graders meeting or exceeding standards at Parks has increased 45 percentage points in reading, 41 points in English/Language Arts, 58 points in math and 18 points in science.

During the past four years, the gap between Atlanta and the rest of the state in English/Language Arts shrank from 11 percentage points to just four. In reading, it shrank from 14 to nine. In math, from 19 to 12.

But while Atlanta as a whole has been improving its scores and reducing the achievement gaps, Parks Middle School stands out remarkably. During the past four years, the percentage of 8th graders meeting or exceeding standards at Parks has increased 45 percentage points in reading, 41 points in English/Language Arts, 58 points in math and 18 points in science.

Whereas Parks' averages were far below both the district and state in 2005, Parks 8th graders outperformed the district and the state in reading, English/

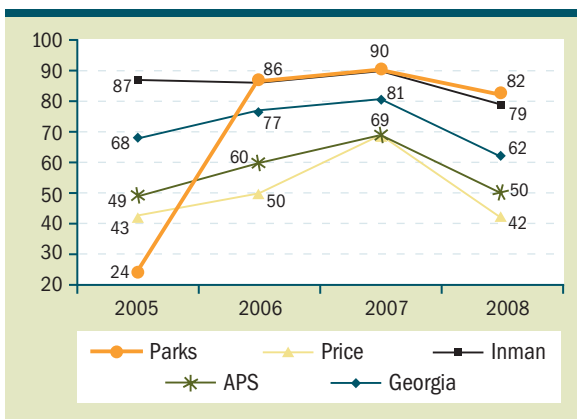
**Percentage of 8th Graders Meeting or Exceeding Performance Standards in Science**



Language Arts and math in 2008 and outperformed the district in science.

These significant increases have brought Parks on par with the highest performing middle school in APS, Inman Middle School. Located in an upscale neighborhood, Inman serves a higher income population: only 39 percent of its students are low income. Nevertheless, the percentage of eighth graders meeting or exceeding standards at Parks in 2008 was only two percentage points below Inman in reading and Language Arts and was three percentage points above Inman in math. Only in science did Parks differ greatly from Inman.

**Percentage of 8th Graders Meeting or Exceeding Performance Standards in Math**



The increases at Parks are especially noteworthy when compared with similar schools in the district that have been historically low-performing. The large majority of students at Price Middle

These significant increases have brought Parks on par with the highest performing middle school in the Atlanta Public Schools system, one located in an upscale neighborhood.

School (95 percent) are low income. In 2005, Price greatly outperformed Parks in all four major subjects, with gaps of between 15 and 19 points. Since then, however, Parks has had dramatic improvements while Price's improvements have mirrored the steady district-wide advances. In 2008, Parks outperformed Price in all four major subjects by a margin of 15 to 50 points.

**P**arks is continuing to secure the partnerships, identify the resources and implement the curricula changes necessary to bolster increased student success. A deepening partnership with Georgia Tech is helping Parks to enrich students' understanding of science and science-related careers. Georgia Tech is providing Parks' science teachers with professional development and coaching opportunities and graduate students will be assisting in the classroom. It is also helping teachers design a variety of hands-on experiments and projects that relate to students' lives, such as building kites to learn about aerodynamics.

Funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation is enabling Parks to purchase

lab tables and supplies for the science classes in each grade.

With funding from federal, state and private sources, Parks offers summer and after-school programs that provide both academic and enrichment activities. In 2008–2009, the after-school program has been reorganized to align with the four academies at The New Schools at Carver, the high school that most Parks students will attend. Students will be able to participate in activities and mini-courses related to the arts; health sciences and research; technology; and college preparatory.

The Parks Pals Mentoring Program, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, is connecting Parks students with students at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges. This program helps students succeed in school today and aspire to go to college.

Through these programs and partnerships, Parks is building on the foundation of its recent successes towards its goal of becoming the highest performing middle school in Atlanta and beyond.

This update was written by Sarah Torian, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Atlanta Civic Site's diarist.

It was edited and published by The Diarist Project [www.DiaristProject.org](http://www.DiaristProject.org).

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