



GUILFORD EDUCATION ALLIANCE

Galvanizing the community around fully and deeply investing in our schools has been a long-term focus of Guilford Education Alliance's work for many years. As part of this work, GEA encouraged and guided a wide array of local leaders to become vocal advocates for GCS students, teachers, and schools.

During GEA's 2019 Education Summit, local business leader and Guilford County Schools alum Adam Duggins shared his observations about a recent visit to Greenville, SC and the impact of their deep investment in school improvements. Duggins also looked at other communities and their investment in education and shared observations after visiting the schools that he attended as a child.

Read his full remarks below.

Thank you Dr. Contreras – for your strong leadership and your commitment to our kids.

My name is Adam Duggins, and I am a Guilford County Schools kid. I was born and raised in this community. The public schools I attended were a huge part of that upbringing. I started at Joyner Elementary, a quaint neighborhood school that had all types of kids. Joyner was a place that I practiced baseball, played after school and went to school fairs. It was a learning, athletic and community center all in one.

For middle school, I went to Mendenhall Middle – now, these were not my favorite years because middle school is...middle school – who does like it? But it was a caring, loving place where the teachers and administrators supported all of us in our teen angst. It was also a campus where I spent many weekends in various sports – again, a centerpiece to our neighborhood.

Finally, I went to Page High School – and I absolutely loved it. Page was such a rewarding experience and exposed me to kids all across our community. Those four years were transformative in becoming an adult for me.

In fact, when my wife and I moved back to Greensboro a few years ago from Atlanta – I started a business and wanted to draw from something in my childhood, I used Page in the title– New Page has a double meaning – honoring the past while looking towards the future. It is time we start to think like that regarding our schools and our students here in the community.

A few weeks ago, I was able to walk the halls of my three schools and see what they are like today. Of course -- all the schools seemed smaller! But really they were very much the same as when I was there decades ago. Keep in mind, all three schools were more than 30 years old **when I attended them**. 30 years later, they are still the same.

Same cinder blocks – same size classrooms, same mobile units, same bathrooms. At Joyner -- the playground equipment looked like the same old equipment I played on as a child. At Mendenhall – I

found my old locker -- good ole #629. And well – a particularly sad thing for a guy like me – I found the most tired, worn out basketball goal I have ever seen.

At Page as I walked down an open breezeway between buildings I commented on the well-worn portable unit sitting to the right. Principal Erik Naglee pointed to a small tin sign screwed to the outside wall of the portable. It looked like a miniature license plate with these numbers:

73-167. I asked him what it meant. He said the 73 means the unit was put there in 1973. 1973 folks. That's over 45 years ago.

Now a little sense of nostalgia at finding my middle school locker and seeing an old playground is one thing – but 1973 portables? No. We have to do better. We can do better.

Now let me say this -- I was **blown away** by each principal I visited at those schools and the passion they have for the kids and their jobs. But I was also blown away from the sheer magnitude of facility issues that were present at each. Old mobile units, where the smell was overwhelming-- leaky roofs and buildings that were built for 20th century learning. In what other industries do we accept facilities that are 60+ years old?

Does anyone say they want to go to a hospital that is 60 years old and hasn't been touched since?

Despite that, these principals and teachers were still performing amazing tasks – makes you wonder what they could do if the facility empowered them to teach...empowered them to innovate!

Recently, I was asked to join a group of business and school leaders to tour Greenville County Schools in South Carolina. If you are like me, you are tired of often hearing the comparison to Greenville. I had always been under the impression that Greenville was all about BMW. However, in touring their schools, I came to realize that there was so much more they were doing to enhance their community. And that BMW plant – it is actually in the next county over.

In the early 2000s, Greenville spent over \$800M on their school system. The school system had 70,000 students, just like ours – and with very similar socio-economic demographics. They did this in a bold fashion, touching every school within 5 years – 5 years! Let me say that one more time – 5 years!

We visited an engineering elementary school, a STEAM middle school and a technology based high school – all three schools were innovative and different. They had Open design – flexible spaces – areas for small groups of students to work together and learn – The signs on the doors up here say it all “ Collaboration Room” “Design Studio” “Innovation Studio”

Here are the facts – we compete with Greenville every day, but right now we aren't competing with their schools. Their facilities blow us out of the water – when companies are comparing our communities, **this matters**.

And Greenville isn't alone – communities across the country are getting their acts together around this.

In Houston – they have built the first public school with its own private airplane hangar – located in the Hobby International Airport. Talk about hands on learning! Couldn't you see something like this out at PTI?

In Columbia South Carolina, they have developed one site with a high school where students can take courses in a wide range of career pathways, as well as their offices, a public library, a café, and a conference center event space the public can rent that accommodates 700 guests.

Given the state of our GCS offices, we could learn a lot from Richland County. They combined district offices, public spaces and a school for maximum effect and efficiency. I think as we wrestle with the solutions for our schools we cannot neglect our central office spaces. We have to factor in how space impacts the effectiveness of our key school leaders. Anyone who has ever been one of our "central" office locations scattered across the county knows how desperate a need this is for GCS.

Cleveland OH -- a city with more than its share of challenges – has brought some great innovation to providing career option at the their high schools. They have built new schools, renovated old schools, and embedded classrooms in other community assets and on site at businesses. They have a Health focused high school with classrooms on the main campus of their big metro hospital. They have even incorporated a high school with greenhouse into their metro parks system.

When I get thinking about schools this way, I get excited.

We have tremendous assets in this community – businesses, manufacturing facilities, the Science Center, local museums, great parks, the international furniture market, a large and accessible airport facility.

We have school buildings we need to renovate, some we need to close, some we need to tear down and rebuild. But if we do this right – WHEN we come together to do this right –I know it is going to be a game changer for our community. It will be hard – but we CAN do this. We WILL do this.

I think the Superintendent is working as a strong change agent. She and her team are creating dynamic programming and forward thinking focus areas in our schools.

The district is rolling out 6 new signature academies at the high school level this fall.

The Board of Education and County Commissioners are working together to get a handle on the scope of our facilities challenges. Our State legislative delegation is working to secure special funding for Guilford County and the new academies and there are state bond and federal infrastructure bills that would also bring dollars to our community to help us build and renovate schools. We the community need to match all of those efforts with our own work and commitment.

I want to share with you a video about another community --- different than ours for sure – smaller – in the heart of Kentucky between Louisville and Lexington.

A small, economically struggling community. Emmence, KY. Their household median income is just \$36,000 , Guilford County's is just over \$47,000. And on just about every measure, they are lagging our community. But they came together and mustered the political will and ingenuity to do something as

their superintendent said “was larger than anything they thought possible” and it ended up “not just transforming their schools, but transforming their whole community.”

Take a look:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cFyaZtW2iAY>

Ok – I want to reiterate something that superintendent said that really struck me:

“There is something powerful about setting a goal so big that there’s no way you can pull it off. That’s what our town did. “

Look -- I own a business. I am constantly evaluating new opportunities to invest in for my business. And those that work the best are those that are bold – where we can leverage existing assets and invest in talent and opportunity, in untapped potential.

We have heard from our superintendent about the kind of talent we have sitting in our classrooms. That is THE investment opportunity for us. Our investments of money, time, innovative thinking and problem solving our investments of political will, can serve to really unleash the potential in our students and in our community. This isn’t just about building new schools. It is something bigger and bolder than that - it is transforming our school infrastructure for 21st century learning.

We do actually have some examples those kinds of schools here in Guilford County. And I’m not just talking about the early and middle colleges on our college campuses.

After my morning at Joyner, Mendenhall and Page I stopped by Hunter Elementary -- it is our newest school and opened less than 2 years ago.

Let me tell you -- I walked in that building and I was awestruck. It was such a stark contrast to the schools I had just visited. It was like walking out of black and white photograph and into a technicolor world. We have some other newer and renovated schools scattered across the district.

Since I visited Page, let me add that I was pleased to see that the district made some significant investments in Page’s cafeteria last year. But that one much needed renovation required the ENTIRE furniture budget for the whole district. One school cafeteria.

We have to think bigger – we have to rise to this challenge and not just keep robbing Peter to pay Paul. We must scale our investment across the district and accelerate construction and renovation. The clock is ticking. Our kids are moving fast. Marching toward the future. We have to match their pace.

Look -- this is going to be hard. But really – what worth having doesn’t require some good old-fashioned roll-up your sleeves hard work? Isn’t that what we teach kids every single day?

So I am asking you to stay engaged. Stay tuned. Get in this game with us. Let’s make this happen. Let’s realize the possibility that is before us.