

[Turning the page on public education](#)

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Meria Carstarphen, right, superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools and a Tulane alumna, discusses the future of urban education with Paul Hill, founder of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, at the [Tulane Education Research Alliance conference](#) in New Orleans on June 19. Her passion for education was borne from her own time in public schools as a child growing up in Selma, Alabama, in the 1980s. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

How does an educator harness a natural passion for learning? Meria Carstarphen, who is a 1992 [Newcomb College graduate](#), has a vision for schools that embrace possibility and positive outcomes.

"I've seen so many children come into our school system, our youngest children, and they love school. There are so many great stories and so many great people. As a country, we hear far more stories about what is wrong than about what is strong," says Carstarphen, superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools.

Carstarphen took over her new position in 2014, guided by a commitment to change the culture for both students and teachers. She leads and provides oversight to the district's 50,000 students, 7,000 employees, and 123 learning sites with an \$850 million budget.

Her philosophy is simple. "It should be that when those kids enter that schoolhouse gate, they get a quality education. At the heart of that is why it's the cornerstone of our democracy. When our education systems are weak, so is our country."

As an expert on urban public school administration, she feels that sometime the core purpose of education can be pushed to the margins.

"The challenge that I see is that in these systems, that core purpose, why we come every day, gets lost when communities aren't laser-like in their focus that it should be a child-centered agenda for the purpose of educating children that prepares them for college or career. The challenge around purpose and focus sends the entire system into a spiral that doesn't get great outcomes for kids."

Cartstarphen argues that children should be at the center of every effort in public education. Otherwise, she notes, "For ever great strategy we've had, the culture will eat it for breakfast every day if we don't move closer to that child-centered experience faster. It is the hardest work I've ever done."

Read more in the fall issue of [Newcomb magazine](#). Aidan Smith is external affairs officer for the Newcomb College Institute.