

## **Atlanta Urban Development Institute**

By Brett Hardin, Social Studies Teacher

It was 3:30 on a Friday afternoon, the end of the first week of the Atlanta Urban Development Institute, a new, two-week summer program hosted at Paideia. We all felt spent after such an intense, emotional itinerary of meetings, a service project, bus trips, tours and debriefings. Considering the pace the students had kept up that week, Laura Magnanini, Social Studies teacher, and I were surprised by the energized discussion still unfolding in our classroom. We also recognized that if we ever wanted to get home for the weekend, we would, with regret, have to table this spirited debate about public housing, Section 8 and Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA), and the pursuit to end chronic homelessness.

Within that first week of the program, we had visited Gateway 24/7, a homeless shelter downtown, Glenwood Properties, a green consulting and development company, and participated in a guided tour of mixed-income housing by the Atlanta Housing Authority. All 10 of the program's students, a mix from Paideia, Woodward, Pope High School, Eagle's Landing and Mount Pisgah, had passionate opinions and insights about what they had seen, inspiring them to spill over during our daily reflection session. The issues of homelessness and public housing had touched them all.

You would have thought that those two issues were the sole focus of the program – quite the contrary! During that same week, we also met with Mayor Shirley Franklin, Dr. Lindsey Stillman of the Georgia Department of Community Affairs, Paideia parent Charles Brewer, Co- Founder of Green Street Properties, and took a walking tour of the Edgewood Business District with Atlanta City Councilman, Kwanza Hall. It was a powerful week, and the students were still fully engaged in debating the costs and benefits of mixed-income housing, gentrification, and how a city balances the needs of so many people.

A team of teachers began discussing this new summer program over a year ago. It was modeled after a three-week leadership institute designed and run by Paideia alumni, Peter Shulman, in Portland, Oregon. The idea was to give students a first-hand experience in how Atlanta works to maintain a sustainable lifestyle for our changing population. After countless planning meetings with Laura Magnanini and Lenore Carroll, Associate Director of College Counseling, we whittled down our list of topics to public housing, transportation, homelessness and public health.

Much of what students learn in U.S. government and history focuses on the national level; students often skim over local government until a specific issue arises that personally affects them or their families. For example, how many Atlantans really understand how Grady works? Once we delved into local issues, they became even more complex. How do county commissions work and how do they differ from a city council? What are the goals of the Beltway project? How do governments lay out 10 and 20 year plans? What is a tax allocation district? One goal of the Atlanta Urban Development Institute was to provide students with the opportunity to learn about local policy initiatives while also getting a sense of how policy is actually made and implemented.

Ours was a two-week program, which made it necessary to narrow the focus of what we studied. We wanted to explore pressing issues for which we could find access to

leaders in the community – leaders who could provide an insider’s perspective on what was happening. Our final list read like a “Who’s Who” of Atlanta politics. The positive response was amazing, as city leaders from non-profits and local politicians graciously shared their expertise with our program. Even the Mayor gave us an hour of open question and answer time. She had a frank discussion with our students about crime, MARTA, homelessness and how she worked to rebuild trust in the city government. She left students with the idea that we all have to build trust everyday.

What our students experienced during those two weeks went far beyond what we had envisioned last fall. In a meeting with Paideia alumni, John Ahmann ‘83, the students gained a real sense of the tension in Decatur’s struggle to close two elementary schools and why the issue of school closings is such a hot topic for local communities. In that same meeting, they heard the life story of someone committed to making a difference in his community by running a firm that, “orchestrates public, private and civic investment and involvement.” Councilman Kwanza Hall took the time to give our students a walking tour of the Edgewood Business District while discussing how they are trying to rebuild the street. Earlier that day, the students met with Charles Brewer in Glenwood to learn more about Green Street Properties and how they are building new communities in areas that were abandoned years ago. Alumni parent, Tina Arbes, former Vice President of Beltway, Inc., also spoke with the students to teach them about the massive, 25-year project with the potential to dramatically change the way Atlanta looks and functions as a city. Throughout the course, students met with trailblazers who are redesigning the interactions and relationships between businesses and communities in Atlanta.

On the last day of the program, students met with Dekalb County CEO and Paideia parent, Burrell Ellis. CEO Ellis discussed the importance of communication between county government and the diverse municipalities in Dekalb. He noted that the changing demographics of metro areas mean that many people are moving outside the cities, and he emphasized that governments must rethink how they allocate funding and services. We were thrilled when the CEO’s Chief of Staff, Philippa Brown, generously offered the students a chance to actually shadow the CEO for an entire day. Two of our students are already following up on this opportunity. In all of our meetings, the students dialogued with significant leaders in the community and saw up close how leadership styles shape the development of a healthy community.

Our primary goal was to provide the students with access and exposure to key issues that metro Atlanta faces, but the program gave its participants so much more than that. Students were able to flesh out essential details of local issues to gain a networked perspective into the complexity of public policy and how it affects all Atlantans. In particular, the students were deeply impacted by the on-site meetings with those who are actively engaged in providing valuable services to the poor. They continuously discussed the complications of providing immediate relief while also seeking long term solutions for people to live more secure and independent lives. As Paideia rising senior, Peter Cornick, wrote, “ I knew nothing about local politics before this class. I did not think they were important either, but now I truly understand the issues in this city, the factors involved and I feel like an educated voter now. It has opened my eyes to a new part of my city and I am very happy I know more.”

