



# policies that **ROCK** Cobb County *and how CCAE helped get them*

## It's 1:00 o'clock on a Thursday.

The Cobb County Board of Education is gathering for a meeting to discuss the extension of the county's SPLOST, or Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax. As the members of Cobb's Board of Education prepare for their meeting, a few observers trickle into the room. There are around 30 to 40 chairs pre-set in the audience. As the meeting gets under way, there are just a handful of people populating the audience. One of them is Gaye Shin, president of the Cobb County Association of Educators.

CCAIE is always front and center for board meetings. "It's essential that CCAIE have a presence at board meetings," says President Shin. "We want to have a say in what happens in our county and in our profession." CCAIE members routinely attend Board of Education meetings and voice their opinions and their hopes for public education in Cobb County. And when there's an issue that CCAIE is passionate about—either for or against—members are here in full force. Recently, a vote taken at a meeting much like this one that gave CCAIE a reason—20 reasons, in fact—to celebrate.

## A land called Cobb.

Located in north metro Atlanta, Cobb County is home to the second-largest school system in the state of Georgia and 29th largest in the country. Nearly 110,000 students populate the county's 113 schools. With nearly 9,000 teachers and administrators responsible for educating these students, the school district is the county's largest employee.

Their track record is a good one. In 2007, 80 percent of seniors took the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT). They achieved a combined average score of 1534—outscored the national average of 1511 and the state average of just 1472. In 2008, the district spent an average of \$8,545 per student.

Cobb County is also home to the Cobb County Association of Educators. Daily CCAIE President Gaye Shin works with GAE UniServ Director Tana Page to advance and ultimately fulfill the CCAIE mission.

Like CCAIE, the Cobb County Board of Education is also on a mission: to guarantee a quality educational program for all students in a challenging, secure environment. Recently, the Board of Education looked to personnel policy changes as one way to fulfill its mission.

## The 20 Policies.

It was in October 2007 that the Cobb County Board of Education unanimously voted in favor of 20 major personnel policy changes. For CCAIE, that vote was a cause for major celebration.

"The changes," points out CCAIE President Gaye Shin, "make for a better, more respectful working environment for teachers throughout the county."

"When you strive to create a positive working environment for teachers," points out GAE UniServ Director Tana Page, "you simultaneously create a positive learning environment for students. At the end of the school day, it's the students who matter most. That's why we're all here."

Some items in the existing personnel policy needed only minor tweaking and clarification. Others needed a complete revamping. For instance, the board made a number of changes to the maternity and adoption leave policy. Still more new policies needed to be added to update and consolidate the policies. Now, with the board's approval, teachers have the right to use their cell phones at school during non-instructional times. Previously, teachers were strictly prohibited from using cell phones at all. Now, they are guaranteed the right. Another new policy added prohibits special education paraprofessionals from being used as substitutes in other classrooms. The board also took steps to protect teachers who find themselves caught in a potentially unhealthy and harassing working environment. The board ensures that administrative transfers can be granted when harassment or retaliation towards

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employees can be substantiated by a Human Resources investigation.

"Now a teacher—even one who is on a professional development plan—can apply for a transfer," says GAE UniServ

Director Tana Page. Cobb County teachers may now be eligible for transfer with the superintendent's authority and substantiating conditions. "Before this, teachers facing these situations didn't have any options," adds Page. "They just had to stay put and hope for the best."

President Gaye Shin is also pleased with the new directed leave policy. Each year, it allows educators up to two days to attend workshops, conferences, or other professional association activities. "We have so much to be happy about," says Shin. The list goes on.

### How this came about.

"We decided that there were a number of personnel policies that needed to be updated and some that needed to be added," says Dr. Teresa Plenge, member of the Cobb County Board of Education. An eleven-year board veteran, Dr. Plenge has been instrumental in bringing about these policy changes. As a former CCAE member and Cobb County school employee, Plenge knows firsthand the issues facing teachers in her county. That knowledge has made the revamping of the policies a true labor of love for Plenge. "I am thrilled about the policies," says Dr. Teresa Plenge.

It was Chairman of the Board and retired elementary school principal Betty Gray who brought Plenge onto the subcommittee tasked with revising, clarifying, and adding where needed personnel policies. Dr. John Crooks, a minister at Roswell Street Baptist Church and Vice Chairman of the

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Visit CCAE: [www.ccae4kids.com](http://www.ccae4kids.com)

Board, joined Plenge and Gray. His wife is a teacher in Cobb. His two children have both been attended public schools in Cobb County.

They began identifying the areas in the existing policy where clarification and revision was needed. As they worked, they also kept a list of new policies to be added. Under their careful direction, 57 pages of policy rewrites were eventually distilled into the 20 personnel policies adopted by the board. It was a lot of work. But they made it happen.

The result: a higher quality school climate and a set of standard expectations for teachers across the county.

In addition to that end result, the new policies have given the Cobb County Board of Education and the Cobb County Association of Educators a chance to



work together for the betterment of the entire school system and its students.

"It's important to be a county where your employees are valued, protected, and honored," explains Plenge. "All parties wanted to see these changes come about. We've all been on the same page about this. It's a win-win situation."

### A force for good.

For CCAE, the new board policies are the fruition of two years of dedicated lobbying. Over that period, Gaye Shin and Tana Page have consistently voiced CCAE's ideas for change.

"We let them know what our members were telling us," says Shin. "We'd get a call about a personnel issue. We'd make sure the board knew where the problems were."

CCAЕ's current relationship with the Cobb County Board of Education is a good one. That wasn't always the case. Years ago, CCAE had even filed a lawsuit against the district. Tana Page admits that it was the most contentious relationship between a local association and a school district that she had ever witnessed. "We weren't allowed to speak at meetings," remembers Page. "Our opinions weren't welcome one bit."

"The board didn't really want to work with us," adds Shin. "They didn't trust us."

Shin says that they wanted the Board of Education to see CCAE as a positive education partner. Instead, CCAE was seen as being counter-productive and an obstacle. "That's not what CCAE is or how we operate," says Shin. "We're after the best schools for our students." CCAE needed the board and the community at large to know that it was a force for good.

CCAЕ had to embark on an aggressive re-imagining campaign for CCAE. "Every choice we made we did with the intention of establishing our reputation and

### "I FELT COMPELLED TO RUN FOR ELECTION."

#### Meet Dr. Teresa Plenge. *Cobb County School Board Member, Mother, & GAE member*

Dr. Teresa Plenge has served as a Cobb County school board member since January 1997. As a speech-language pathology and special educator, she gained front line experience on what it's like to work in a school and with students in Cobb County. That experience has influenced and enlightened her work as a member of the Board of Education. As an educator, she can paint a very real picture of life inside a classroom for her fellow board members. In the beginning, she ran for the position not just because of her educational experience, but as a mother concerned for her son's educational future and opportunities. It's taken 11 years, but she's accomplished a very big to-do list that first inspired her to run. We can't wait to see what she does next.

nurturing our community relationships,” says Page.

Gaye Shine joined the Cobb Chamber of Commerce and got on the education committee. If had to do with education, she pounced on it. Page also sought ways to connect CCAE with the broader Cobb Community. Her choice: Kiwanis. Page now serves as the organization’s education liaison.

Today the Cobb County Association of Educators is seen as a good community partner to have. Just ask Brumby Elementary, Belmont Hills Elementary, or Clay Elementary. All three schools have become Partners in Education with CCAE. CCAE helped Brumby Elementary earn a grant for ESOL summer activities.

And as they reputation for positive change grew, so did their local power.

### The power of politics.

CCAIE has a long-standing history of being active in the political arena. Over the years, it has cultivated friendly relationships with a number of state legislators. Most recently, CCAIE played a major role in securing the Grade Integrity Act, a law which ensures that teachers cannot be directed to change a grade.

On a local level, CCAIE wanted to actively encourage and engage community members to run for the Board of Education. “We wanted candidates we could really get behind and support,” says Tana Page. “We wanted candidates who would bring excitement, commitment, and integrity to the board.”

The key to this political activity on a state and local level is CCAIE’s Political Action Committee (PAC). Through PAC, CCAIE interviews candidates for public office to determine their views on education. Based on these interviews, CCAIE recommends and works to elect friends of education.

In 2006, CCAIE took it one step further by running a boot camp for potential BOE candidates. CCAIE sought to arm these potential candidates with all of the infor-

**The Cobb County School District, located in north metro Atlanta, is the second-largest school system in Georgia serving a diverse population of 107,307 students in 113 schools.**

mation they needed to run a campaign and win. Dr. John Crooks, now Vice Chairman of the Board, participated.

“When we elect friends of public education,” says Shin, “we just want one thing: an open dialogue.”

“We don’t always have to agree,” adds Page. “We just need to know that there’s room for conversation.” Now conversation is happening in Cobb County. And educators—not just CCAIE members—are benefiting from it.

**“We’re a professional organization deeply rooted in the community. We’re not confrontational or disruptive. We’re working for what’s best for our community,”**  
**says Shin.**

### The future in Cobb.

It looks bright indeed in Cobb County. Just like in other places across the country, Cobb County needs more and more highly qualified educators to teach in its schools. For Cobb County, recruitment and retention of these educators is a high priority. Dr. Plenge is convinced that the 20 personnel policies adopted in October will make a big difference.

“If we want to retain our best teachers, we need to offer them a good school climate,” says Plenge. “If we want to recruit the best, the same is true.” This year, the county plans on highlighted the new personnel policies heavily in its recruitment materials.



Indeed the personnel changes showcase the BOE’s commitment to its school system’s teachers. “I feel really good about the direction we’re heading,” says Gaye Shine. “Ultimately, the BOE and CCAIE share the same goal: to do what’s in the best interest of our students.”

“I wouldn’t teach anywhere else,” says Shin. And she points out...any local can have this kind of impact.



### BOE MEMBERS

Dr. Teresa Plenge  
Dr. John Crooks  
Betty Gray

## The 20 Policies.

The Cobb County Board of Education voted 7-0 in favor of these major personnel changes.