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## Gwinnett students get a second chance to earn their diplomas

Acceleration Academies had its first graduating class in August

By [Josh Reyes](#)



Credit: Jason.Getz@ajc.com

Jabriel Abdullah and Malachi Bonhomme used to go to South Gwinnett High School, but they didn't always go to class.

"Someone would ask if I wanted to skip, and I'd just do it," Abdullah, 16, said. "It was fun for me."

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Bonhomme, also 16, said he and Abdullah were each warned they needed to be in class or risk being removed from school. But school just didn't feel like it was for them. The two agreed there were numerous disruptions and distractions that made it hard to focus and made them disinterested in learning.

Eventually, Abdullah and Bonhomme each dropped out, but administrators and their respective families made sure they weren't done with school. They both enrolled in Acceleration Academies, a flexible education model that allows students a second chance at earning their diplomas.

Acceleration Academies has 13 campuses across seven states. The Gwinnett operation is the first in Georgia. The academy began operating in a district facility about a year

# The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

ago and moved into its own building in Duluth in September. The first batch of 10 students graduated in August. There are now about 180 students at the academy with 35 expecting to graduate in December.

Gwinnett's [four-year graduation rate](#) is 82% and has been slightly below the state average since 2018. The district wants to raise its rate to 90% by 2027.

“Our goal is to provide the support needed for all students to graduate on time. Acceleration Academies provides another model of support,” Al Taylor, Gwinnett’s chief of schools, said in an email.

Students’ classes are mainly online, but they spend at least 12 hours per week at the academy, where they take tests and can get help with their work from content coaches. Students can be at the academy whenever works best for them from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. Academy students are still enrolled in Gwinnett, so the district is able to pass along the state funds to cover all their costs.

Students can attend the academy until they turn 20, the cutoff age to be in a Georgia public school. The academy encourages students who don’t finish their courses in time to earn the equivalent of a diploma by taking the General Educational Development test.

The academy’s design reflects its difference from a public school. It resembles a co-working space, with a variety of seats and tables — but not many traditional desks — along with a quiet, dimly lit room for sensory breaks. Students complete courses one by one rather than juggling several at a time and must complete each within 60 days to stay enrolled. Usually, it takes about four weeks to finish a class.

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Even if setbacks led students to be at the academy rather than their usual school, there are few signs of that as they work. Students look like any other teenagers, donning Crocs, slides, trendy silver jewelry or beanies, puffer jackets and other winter wear, even on warm days. They can chat and goof off occasionally, but not to the level of bothering their peers. The time they choose to spend in the building is time to work.

“Here we can chill, listen to music, really focus and do work at our own pace,” Abdullah said.

His goal is to graduate early, hopefully by August, then finish trade school to become a diesel mechanic. Bonhomme also plans to graduate ahead of schedule and go to trade school to become a truck driver.

Bonhomme said the academics are easier at the academy both because of the pacing and limited distractions. He misses some of the social aspects of being at school, but not enough to want to go back.

Each month, the district sends Hashima Carothers, director of the Gwinnett academy, a list of students who dropped out, and her staff reaches out with the offer to enroll. She said students have a variety of reasons for being there. Some have children or work to support their families and need the flexibility. Some have anxiety and prefer the relaxed, individualized approach of learning online and at the academy.

Even though much of students’ learning is online, Carothers said her staff works to make connections and create a personal experience.

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Alisa TenHoopen, a science content coach at the academy, said the coach role can be impactful because the interaction is happening individually. TenHoopen's time isn't spent grading tests or lecturing like it was when she was a teacher in a traditional school. She helps with individual problems and questions, figuring out how a student likes to learn and customizing a plan to help them in the course. If a student likes to interact with a teacher, she may plan for more one-on-one time. If they prefer working on their own, she may find supplemental resources for the coursework.

"That aspect of being so personal allows for the motivation to not even be coaching — it's more like an actual relationship or bond that's formed," she said.

Students come with a variety of motivation levels. Carothers said some have just a few credits to go and are laser-focused on getting the degree done. Some come to the academy begrudgingly and have the same struggles that led them to drop out.

Student Brian Lopez, 16, said he started falling behind in school in ninth grade because he was "still acting like a little kid." He's learned to take more ownership over his education.

"You've got to be responsible if you want to graduate and if you want to be successful in life," he said.

Romeo Mazariego, who is 17 and Lopez's brother, said he missed having teachers rather than learning through a screen but enjoyed the flexibility, especially in the morning. "You can wake up better and be happier. You actually want to go to school," he said. Most Gwinnett high schools start their days at 7:20 a.m. The academy's doors don't open until 9 each morning.

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Mazariago said his plan after graduating is to attend college and pursue his goal of working in financial law. Lopez has a couple of years of school left and hasn't quite figured out what he wants to do.

On the wall of the academy are several posters that track progress and keep students motivated. One has the names of students about to graduate with tally marks for the classes they have remaining. There's also a bell that students can ring whenever they finish a class.

At those moments, everyone else stops what they're doing to clap and cheer because one of their peers got one step closer to the goal they all share — earning a diploma.



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