



COMMITTED TO THE COMMUNITY

Former CCSD Superintendent Dr. Xernona Thomas, who retired on Oct. 8, reflects on her time as an educator and the legacy she hopes to leave behind.

STORY AND
LAYOUT BY MOLLY
HARWELL
Editor-in-Chief

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF MOLLY HARWELL:
**WHY HAVE YOU MADE A POINT
TO STAY AND SERVE THE ATHENS
COMMUNITY?**

Recently retired Clarke County School District Superintendent Dr. Xernona Thomas: I did grow up here and I've always been committed to the community. I see the potential in the community and I also see the need in Athens. As a child, I didn't think I would want to stay here, but then when you become a parent, you realize that different things are important and it's a really good community to raise a family.

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MH: WHAT WAS YOUR PATHWAY TO BECOMING INVOLVED IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION?

XT: I started out as a school social worker, and I thought that I would do that work and then get into private practice counseling and therapy, but fell in love with school social work, and did that in Clarke County from '92 to 2000. I went to Oconee County as a school social worker, but worked a little more as a school counselor and school social worker, doing more direct services with students. While I was there, I moved into being an assistant principal and becoming a principal. In 2009, I got the opportunity to come back to Athens and open (Judia Jackson) Harris Elementary (School), which (is) our most recently opened elementary school and was there until 2018 and became Chief of Staff for Clarke County Schools, and then interim superintendent and superintendent.

MH: WHAT WOULD YOU SAY HAVE BEEN SOME OF YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGES AS SUPERINTENDENT?

XT: I think it's challenging being a female in a role like this, people don't realize it. I've spent a lot of time reflecting on that. You hear a lot about, "Oh, here's the first female superintendent," and yes, but one of the things I've said to myself recently is moving into a space doesn't remove some of the obstacles and challenges that come with being in that space. I think that sometimes the expectations of you as a female can be different. How you're approached, how you're treated, how you're brought to the table or left from the table, are all realities that still exist, that I've had to face and deal with.

MH: WHAT WOULD YOU SAY HAS BEEN THE MOST REWARDING ASPECT OF BEING THE SUPERINTENDENT?

XT: Sometimes your biggest challenges are some of your greatest successes. It is showing people that it can be done when I accepted the position. I didn't even think about being the first female, that was probably months into it when someone brought it up. Then thinking about not just being a female, but a woman of color. That's a success for me. I believe that it shows people what can be done. It shows students of color what can be done, but I also think it's just as important to share that message with students, in general, that you can accomplish, just through hard work and commitment and determination, whatever it is you set out to do.



Top: % * ' - +0 4GEGPVN[TGVKTGF %NCTMG %QWPV[5EJQQN &KUVTKI 595 Prince Ave. on Sept. 15. Throughout her life, Thomas did not search for this position; instead, it found her. "Thi I wanted to be, but I accepted this position because I was committed to the community and I felt that at the time, c something that was needed just to give some stability to where we were in Athens," Thomas said. Photo by Lucas Donnelly
 HERE: Recently retired Clarke County School District Superintendent Dr. Xernona Thomas stands outside of the nial entrance front entrance on Oct. 4. Thomas has maintained a value of commitment and dedication throughout always been committed to the community. I see the potential in the community and I also see the need in Athens. want to stay here, but then when you become a parent, you realize that different things are important and it's a re family," Thomas said. Photo by Lucas Donnelly



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 AboveWORKING WITH PASSION: Recently retired Clarke County School District Superintendent Dr. Xernona Thom
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MH: YOU'VE BEEN IN THE FIELD OF PUBLIC EDUCATION FOR A LONG TIME NOW. HOW WOULD YOU SAY IT HAS CHANGED OVER THE COURSE OF YOUR CAREER?

XT: You hear the more things change, the more they stay the same and you want to say that things are better, but you look back and there's so much that we still haven't improved on. So the impact of poverty, the impact of marginalized populations or the impact for marginalized populations. Even having educational settings that really are responsive to the needs of individual kids. There's so many things along that line that haven't changed. Probably one of the biggest changes that I have seen is just the negative impact of community and negative influences within our society, and seeing the impact of social media and how instantaneous everything is now. Everything is such an entertainment world and everything, now, also shows instant gratification. So how do we support students in helping them understand the importance of hard work and the importance of long-term commitment and that what you pick up on the phone and see about someone on Tik Tok or Instagram or Twitter isn't necessarily the norm?

MH: WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO THE SUPERINTENDENT, DR. ROBBIE HOOKER?


XT: I know he does this anyway, but listening, tapping into our children. He's already asked me about student advisory boards at our high schools where our students have voices, so he recognizes the importance of that. Hearing and listening to young adults, but also to our teachers and our paraprofessionals and our transportation workers and custodians and nutrition workers. He recognized the importance and value of our community, but to really engage and be involved. To make sure that his leadership supports the needs of our community and then to continue to recognize all of the assets that we have here and to capitalize on that, which I know he will do. Just to have high expectations because people rise to the level that you set. How do you make sure that you're focusing on ensuring that our students have strong rigorous learning opportunities while also supporting those other areas of need will be a concern and I'm sure it will be a continued focus.

MH: WHAT GIVES YOU HOPE ABOUT THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION IN ATHENS FOR THE CCSD COMMUNITY?



XT: I have a superintendent's advisory board (and) having conversations with young adults, you realize that there are some brilliant kids from all walks of life in Athens-Clarke County. If we just take the time to stop and listen and allow you to have voices and decisions and allow you to give us input about what you need, it's helpful when I see even what I saw during the pandemic. I think it forced people to identify skills and talents and interests that none of us knew we had and we really didn't know our kids had. As educators, we just have to create schools that help to support and nurture and bring that out of our kids.

MH: AS YOU LOOK BACK OVER YOUR CAREER AS AN EDUCATOR AND SUPERINTENDENT, WHAT DO YOU HOPE YOUR LEGACY ON THE CCSD WILL BE?

XT: That I cared about children and that I believed in children and that somehow left Clarke County in a better place than when I started. If I've just done something to help one family, one student, one teacher, one staff person. This is not what I grew up saying I wanted to be, but I accepted this position because I was committed to the community and I felt that at the time, consistency and familiarity was something that was needed just to give some stability to where we were in Athens. But I hope that people will recognize that, in the three years, I really tried to focus on doing what was best for children and ensuring that the voices of those who aren't always heard and aren't always at the table were considered and every decision was made. 



Above: 4' (. '% 6 + 0) 1 0 # . ') # % ; 4 G E G P V N [T G V K T G F % N C T M G % Q W P V [5 E J 595 Prince Ave. on Sept. 15. Although her time as superintendent is over, she still believes there is work to be done. so many kids and that just gives you hope that there is a lot of potential in our community," Thomas said. "As educational that help to support and nurture and bring that out of our kids." Photo by Lucas Donnelly

Below: GOING WAY BACK: Recently retired Clarke County School District Superintendent Dr. Xernona Thomas embracing a student in the Clarke Central High School west wing on Oct. 4. Thomas believes that the adults in CCHS are a category that students receive. "People rise to the level that you set," Thomas said. "Ensuring that our students have success while also supporting those other areas of need should be - and I'm sure it will be - a continued focus." Photo by Lucas Donnelly

