

Issue 5 – The Missing 20 percent: Increasing Georgia's High School Graduation Rate

Issue Overview

In 2017, Georgia students passed a major milestone: the high school graduation rate was above 80 percent for the first time since using the adjusted cohort calculation now required by federal law. This number represents a growth of more than 10 percentage points since 2012. Even better, 50 Georgia school districts recorded 2017 graduation rates at or above 90 percent.

While this growth is significant and should be celebrated, to continue to improve, Georgia must understand and address the remaining 20 percent of students who are not completing high school. Who are these students who have not responded to current interventions? What are their needs? To build effective interventions that will support these students in completing high school, we must answer these questions, and address the factors contributing to their non-completion.

Significance for Georgia

The economic viability of Georgia’s future depends on reaching the missing 20 percent.

Research has identified the primary early warning indicators of not graduating high school as the ABCs – attendance, behavior, and course performance. The impact of the ABCs varies by grade span, but students can be thrown off the path towards graduation at any point along the elementary through high school continuum.

Of important note is the interaction of poverty with the ABCs. Poor children are four times more likely to be chronically absent in elementary school than their higher income peers. The negative impact of absences on literacy is 75 percent larger for low-income children. As the chart below demonstrates, the impact of student absences in 8th grade can be very predictive of whether these students will go on to graduate from high school.

Georgia 8th Grade Student Absences and 4-Year Graduation Rate

Days Absent	4-Year Graduation Rate
0	82%
1 to 5 Days	80%
6 to 10 Days	72%
11 to 14 Days	61%
15 or More Days	38%

Action Steps for Georgia

The needs of very vulnerable students, including foster youth, those with chronic health conditions, and those involved with the justice system need to be directly addressed, however. Early interventions, especially for very young children in foster care, must be built. This includes shoring up mental health support for children and youth, and addressing how disabilities are diagnosed and treated, especially among low income and minority populations. These subgroups and their overlap must be understood, and appropriate interventions put in place to keep students in the birth-to-workforce pipeline.

Importantly, the root causes of the primary early warning indicators of not graduating high school can vary among communities. It is incumbent upon each school and community to examine the root causes affecting these vulnerable students and work collectively to address them.