

Issue 1 – EdQuest Georgia: Charting Education Reform

Issue Overview

In 2017 Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education focused its research on the policies that high performing states, countries, and school systems share, and based on the results of this best practice review, created a framework to ensure that those same policies that enable and accelerate strong public education are in place in Georgia.

This framework, called EdQuest Georgia, includes seven core policy areas that – when fully implemented and working together – produce optimum outcomes for students.



1. *Foundations for learning*, which include supports from birth for families, schools, and communities as well as access to high-quality early learning
2. *Quality teaching* for all students ensured by providing supports for teachers across recruitment, retention, and professional development and learning
3. *Quality leadership* within schools — such as teacher-leaders, counselors, and principals — and those outside the school building, such as district and state leaders
4. *Supportive learning environments* that promote positive conditions for learning within schools through fostering positive school climate and social and emotional learning for students, and outside of school in the home and throughout the community
5. *Advanced instructional systems* that support high standards, personalized learning, innovation, a strong accountability system, and aligned curricula
6. *Clear pathways to post-secondary success* that support the transition from high school into post-secondary education, and ensure post-secondary education access and success
7. *Adequate and equitable funding* to support the achievement of all students

Working as a holistic approach, and not as individual silos, these integrated policy gears can drive education improvement. These policy supports identified in each of the seven identified areas create the foundation needed for individual schools and districts to focus on teaching and learning.

Significance for Georgia

Each of the areas addressed by EdQuest impacts education policy makers and stakeholders in different ways. To those with young children, foundations for learning are likely of immediate importance, but not only parents are impacted by the outcomes of the state’s early learning system. Each of these areas has an impact that reaches far beyond the students currently in Georgia’s schools. The state’s workforce, crime rate, and healthcare system are just a few examples of sectors outside of education that are deeply connected and affected by the condition of the public education system in Georgia. By examining each area, one can see how they are part of a broader policy framework that impacts the entire state.

Action Steps for Georgia

Opportunities to protect great work already being done and to change or implement policies that need improvement to put the state on the path to having a top performing education system are identified for all seven of the core policy areas of EdQuest. These opportunities are the action steps that should be taken to improve or sustain success in each core area of education policy in Georgia. It is the goal of the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education that EdQuest Georgia serves as a tool for the education advocacy community and all public education stakeholders to show where opportunities for progress exist. We hope that you will join us on this quest to make Georgia a top-performing state in public education.

Issue 2 – Equity and Fairness: The Opportunity to Succeed

Issue Overview

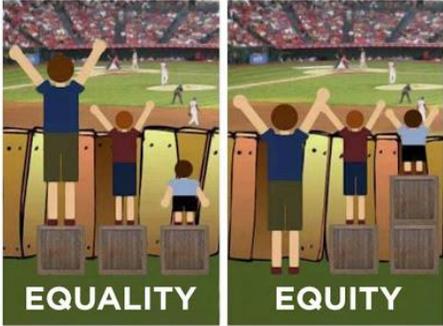
What is educational equity? What does it look like? What would it take to achieve it? These are questions that have been present in education policy discussions for a long time. However, with the growing focus on accountability coupled with changing demographics and the shifting roles of federal and state responsibilities, issues of educational equity have recently taken center stage. Educational equity means:

Every student has access to the resources and educational rigor they need at the right moment in their education, despite race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, family background or family income.

Significance for Georgia

Equity does not mean creating equal conditions for all students, but rather targeting resources based on individual students’ needs and circumstances so that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed. While some Georgia students come from well-resourced homes where their families provide for all their needs, other students live in more challenging conditions often related to a low household income or one that qualifies as being below the federal poverty level.

Equality V. Equity



Examining outputs such as achievement rates are but one measure of equity. However, importantly, inputs such as the *distribution of funding, access to educational supports such as high-quality teachers, rigorous coursework, support services, supportive school climates, and extracurricular opportunities* all contribute to educational equity and the opportunity gap. Students facing adverse conditions at home can benefit from supports that take into account the difficulties they likely face in succeeding in school.

Action Steps for Georgia

Education equity in the United States is becoming more urgent as the diversity of the nation grows. In the ESSA state plan developed by GaDOE and submitted to USED, Georgia addressed how the state would ensure low-income and minority children have equitable access to effective, in-field, experienced teachers. Districts must use the information provided by the state to address inequities through their annually submitted district improvement plans, which must include an equity component and school improvement goals. Districts must use the information provided by the state to address these inequities through their annually submitted district improvement plans, which must include an equity component and school improvement goals.

Access to a *high-quality teacher* is but one aspect of equity of opportunity to succeed. Teachers and school leaders need resources and support to help overcome the harmful impacts of poverty and adverse neighborhood factors. It is rare that a school can outperform its community.

Georgia must use collaboration, data, clear accountability, and community support, with limited resources to move the dial on equity in education, because the American promise of educational opportunity – no matter background or family – depends on it.

Issue 3 – The Early Learning Workforce: A Challenge for Georgia

Issue Overview

Georgia Pre-K is a huge part of the state’s efforts to ensure a quality education for students that begins with early learning. Currently the program serves over 350,000 children ages 0-4. Almost one third of those students attend Quality Rated childcare facilities, which have been approved by the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning for offering high quality early learning opportunities. Like most sectors, the workers in this field are affected by a variety of factors that contribute to the wellbeing and effectiveness of a professional workforce – compensation and benefits, staffing structures and advancement, retention, education level, and certification requirements are but a few examples.

In terms of compensation and benefits, the early learning industry is a relatively low-paying field. According to the Economic Impact study, in 2015 Georgia Pre-K lead teachers made, on average, \$16 per hour. This compares to \$9 per hour for classroom lead teachers in other early learning centers.

Hourly Median Wages for Teaching Staff at Child Care Learning Centers by Position

Teaching Position	State Hourly Average
Lead Teachers, non-Georgia Pre-K or Head Start	\$10.14
Lead Teachers, Georgia Pre-K or Head Start	\$16.45
Assistant Teachers, non-Georgia Pre-K or Head Start	\$8.85
Assistant Teachers, Georgia Pre-K or Head Start	\$9.68

Significance for Georgia

Young children thrive when they have secure positive relationships with adults who are knowledgeable on how to support their health, development, and learning. Many of these relationships take place in high-quality early learning environments from infant age through kindergarten entry. Conversely, a lack of high-quality early learning opportunities and responsive interactions puts children at risk for poor mental and physical health, behavior problems, and school failure. Ensuring that the workforce for the early learning industry is strong and supported must be a priority to ensure high-quality early learning opportunities for Georgia students.

Action Steps for Georgia

Recent changes to Georgia’s Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) Program already ensures that payments to Quality Rated providers are higher. Higher quality simply costs more. There are recommendations resulting from the 2015 Governor’s Education Reform Commission to require a center to be Quality Rated to participate in the CAPS program. This is an attempt to expand the number of available spots for low-income children in Quality Rated centers. If this change is made, Georgia needs to fully fund the demand for the CAPS program at the level required by centers to operate to higher standards of quality. The Commission also recommended a combination of tax incentives for parents, teachers and centers to increase their own quality and help families pay for higher quality. These recommendations should be funded and adopted by the state.

The importance of early learning has become increasingly visible in recent years, only reemphasizing what educators have known for quite some time: high quality early learning is the building block for student success. Through time and resources spent on quality improvements and access across the Pre-K program, Georgia is once again leading the nation in providing this foundation to the state’s four-year-old population. Now is the time to establish a similar long-term commitment to the rest of the early learning industry.

Issue 4 – Teachers: Leadership from the Classroom

Issue Overview

In school systems, the leadership role is paramount. Research has found that leadership disparities explain almost a quarter of the difference in student performance accounted for by schools. While traditional definitions of education leadership focus on school and district administrative positions, the role of the ‘teacher leader’ is gaining considerably more attention, focus, and significance.

Significance for Georgia

Research has shown that engaging teachers as leaders can promote a culture of collective responsibility and shared accountability for school improvement in our most struggling schools. Teacher leadership can also provide a career ladder for teachers who want to stay in the classroom. Historically, career pathways for teachers involved leaving the classroom and taking on administrative roles within education. However, a national survey of teachers found that most teachers (69%) are not interested in becoming a principal - the traditional education career ladder. The same survey found one in four teachers were ‘extremely’ or ‘very interested’ in serving in a hybrid role where he or she can both teach students and lead educational reforms.

Action Steps for Georgia

There are a few different opportunities for Georgia to enhance support for teacher leaders that were identified in the EdQuest Georgia baseline report. An urgent opportunity found in the best practice research was to recognize teachers as professionals. Professionalization includes how the profession is viewed, compensated, and mentored and supported for ongoing professional learning. Focusing on teacher leadership gives Georgia the opportunity to further professionalize the field, leading to the retention of higher quality teachers, which ultimately impacts outcomes for all students. Other urgent opportunities include examining teacher compensation and addressing teacher equity – both actions that will also further support teacher leaders and keeping great individuals in the teaching profession in Georgia.

Why now for teacher leadership? Increased rigor and accountability, new state and federal reforms, and more students living in poverty have significantly added to the responsibilities of school principals. At the same time, teachers are seeking opportunities to expand their roles while staying in the classroom and asking for more professionalization within their field. Supporting and expanding teacher leadership can help distribute the pressure on principals, provide teachers with meaningful opportunities, and positively impact overall student achievement.

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 keeps 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.

Issue 6 – Georgia’s Talent Gap: Time to Close It

Issue Overview

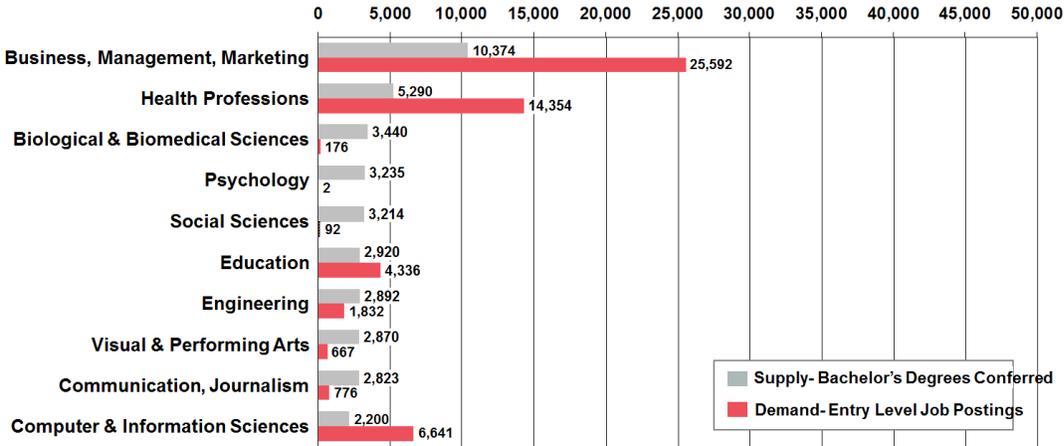
Economic opportunities are on the rise in Georgia as the economy is expanding. Employer job postings have grown over 150% since 2010, outpacing the national growth rate. Meanwhile, Georgia ranks 34th among states for unemployment. Though the number of jobs available is increasing, many potential workers are unemployed or underemployed. These factors indicate that Georgia is experiencing a talent gap, meaning there is a mismatch between the degrees and skills needed by employers and the degrees and skills of the population.

Significance for Georgia

It’s a statistic that many of us know well. By 2020, 60% of jobs in Georgia will require some form of post-secondary education, ranging from a certificate to university degree. Georgia has set a goal to increase the number of post-secondary graduates by 250,000 by the year 2025.

Post-secondary completion is important in Georgia for closing the talent gap. However, enrollment and even completion alone will not do that. Completion is also necessary in a field and of a level (certificate, Associate’s degree, Bachelor’s degree, etc.) that matches job openings and economic trends for the state to address the talent gap. As Georgia moves to increase the number of students successfully transitioning into post-secondary education for a degree, it must be noted that having a credential is not the same as having the *right* credential.

Bachelor’s Degree Talent Gap



In recent years, Georgia has been aggressively putting in place multiple pathways for post-secondary success. The state has been focusing on increasing the rigor of traditional pathways to high school graduation; readying students for post-secondary education; implementing innovative programs that blend high school, career, and post-secondary education.

Action Steps for Georgia

To ensure that Georgia continues to have a prepared workforce and economic opportunities for all, the state must have policies in place that support career education and college preparation, and innovative programs that promote and ensure post-secondary achievement.

Georgia is moving in a positive direction to ensure an internationally competitive, educated citizenry. The state has increased academic expectations of its students and educators. As a result, more students are graduating from high school and going on to post-secondary education. To be a global leader, however, Georgia must take its education system to the next level, broaden the student base to include non-traditional and adult students, and support career development activities that tie post-secondary education more closely to the employment demands of the state.

Issue 7 – Literacy: A Foundational Necessity

Issue Overview

How important is literacy? For many, literacy is considered a fundamental human right. It is the basis for any individual’s ability to learn. It is more than just being able to read, but rather one’s ability to use written information to function in modern society.

Having a population with high literacy skills also helps a city, region, state, and the country as a whole. Regions with strong literacy skills generally have increased life expectancy, reduced child mortality rates, and overall economic growth.

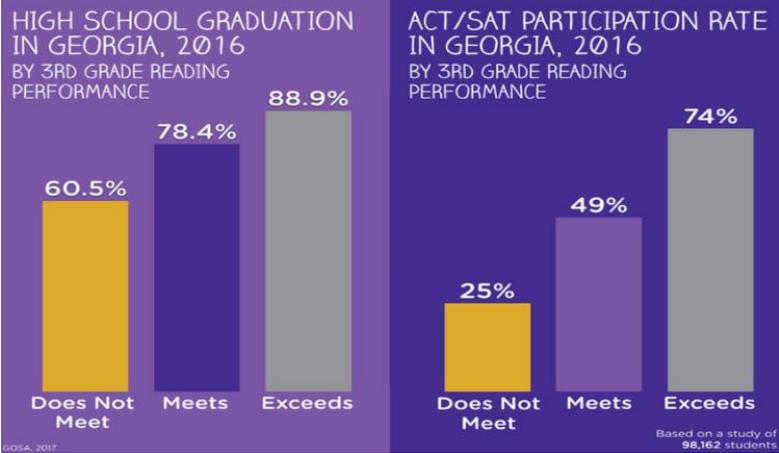
In general, education level is a significant determinant of individual income. However, studies have recently shown that literacy has a positive impact on earnings, beyond the impact of the quantity of schooling. Education is viewed as the great equalizer and mobilizer of upward mobility in American society, and a solid foundation in literacy is the primary driver in overall education success.

Significance for Georgia

To address the needs of its citizenry, Georgia has embarked on a series of education reforms to transform its public education system. The goal is for every student who graduates from high school to be successful in college and/ or their chosen career, and is competitive with their peers throughout the country and the world. The full potential of these reforms can only be realized if students are building on a solid foundation of literacy.

The importance of reading on grade level by the end of third grade and its link to academic success has been widely publicized in the past few years. As summarized by the Get Georgia Reading Campaign: The end of third grade marks the critical time when children shift from learning to read to reading to learn. Children unable to make this shift face serious barriers for future learning, because they can’t grasp half of the printed fourth-grade curriculum and beyond, including math and science. As a result, these children fall even further behind.

Third Grade End of Grade Reading Assessment by Exceeds, Meets, and Does Not Meet.



In addition to student literacy, adult literacy is an important consideration that Georgia must also focus on with greater urgency. There is a proven relationship between adult illiteracy, poverty, and educational outcomes for children. Children whose parents have low literacy levels have a 72% chance of being at the lowest reading levels themselves. In Georgia, 20% of the adult population lacks basic literacy skills.

Action Steps for Georgia

The current skill level of Georgia’s workforce does not meet the growing needs of the state’s ambitious plan for its economic development. A focus on the literacy of all the state’s citizens by addressing the factors that impact literacy in young children and increasing access to literacy programs for adults would significantly close the skills gap facing our state.

Issue 8: Student Health: A Pathway to Classroom Success

Issue Overview

For students to be successful in school, they need to be healthy. While this seems like an obvious statement, research has highlighted the direct links between student outcomes and all aspects of health – physical, vision, hearing, oral, nutritional, and mental health. For those in poverty who are at increased risk of not receiving healthcare, this can be an added challenge to achieving academic success. As Georgia works to improve educational outcomes for all students, it must consider the health of the student population.

TABLE 5.1 HEALTH STATISTICS FOR GEORGIA'S CHILDREN

KIDS COUNT HEALTH INDICATORS	GEORGIA	U.S
Low-birthweight babies	9.5%	8.1%
Children without health insurance	7%	5%
Births to women receiving late or no prenatal care	8%	6%
Children with one or more emotional, behavioral or developmental condition	17%	17%
Households that are food insecure	14.9%	13.7%

Significance for Georgia

While Georgia does have some efforts in place to address student health, benchmarks indicating aspects of the health of children in Georgia show that there are opportunities to further support these needs so that students are healthy and ready to learn. Data show that Georgia has a higher percentage than the national average of several problematic health-related indicators: low birthweight babies, children without health insurance, births to women receiving late or no prenatal care, children with developmental, emotional or behavioral disorders, and households that are food insecure. For each of these issues, poverty is a complicating and exacerbating factor.

About one in four children in Georgia are living in homes with incomes at or below the federal poverty level, and more than 60% of public school students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch—over one million children in Georgia are a part of one or both of those groups. For these students, access is the number one challenge in addressing their healthcare needs: access to insurance, access to nutritious food, and access to physical and mental healthcare are all more difficult for economically disadvantaged students.

Action Steps for Georgia

Student health is a significant factor in the ability of students to perform well in school and benefit from the instruction provided there. Expanding health supports for students is paramount for Georgia to see improved educational outcomes for all public-school students. This can be achieved in many ways, including expansion of School Based Health Centers, addressing the state’s mental health worker shortage, and expanding successful student mental health support programs like Project APEX. Student health and ensuring that students have access to quality nutrition and physical and mental health supports must be priorities for the state.

Issue 9 – Rural Georgia: It Matters, A Lot!

Issue Overview

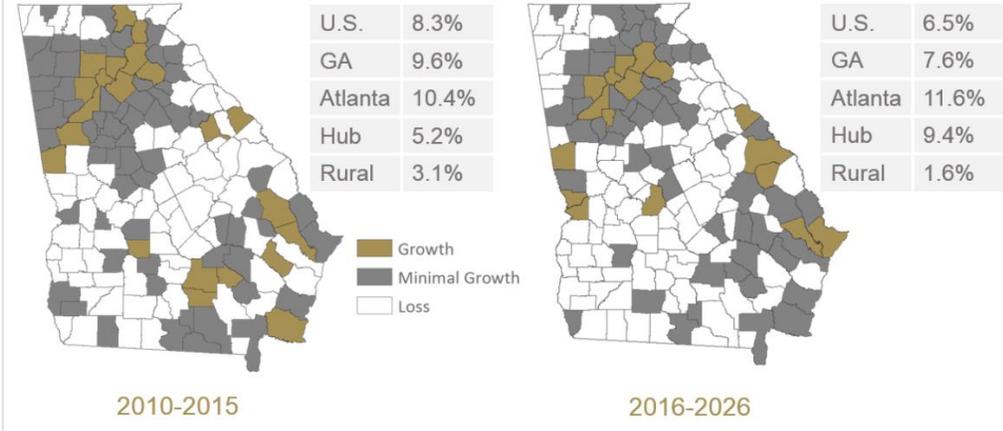
Rural Georgia matters. Supporting rural communities has been a growing concern in Georgia and across the nation in recent years. These areas have fallen behind the growth and prosperity of more urban areas. In 2016, 30.9% of Georgia’s schools were classified as rural.

Many parts of rural Georgia are in a precarious situation as populations shrink and change, and economic sectors of longstanding significance decline or, in some cases, disappear. Rural education, a crucial sector in any thriving community, is also facing increasing challenges. How Georgia responds to this current decline in many of the state’s rural communities will impact not only the lives of the citizens living there, but the economic future of the state as a whole.

Significance for Georgia

To frame the current situation for rural education in Georgia, it is important to understand the broader rural context and its effects on the educational sector. Issues such as health and access to health care, economic distress, and funding strategies all impact educational outcomes for students living in rural areas.

Job Growth in Georgia



While rural districts have been seeing an increase in students requiring greater supports to achieve academically, state funding for education has decreased, increasing the financial responsibilities of local government in recent years.

Action Steps for Georgia

Georgia is home to the third largest absolute rural student enrollment in the United States – almost 380,000 students. The future of Georgia depends on these students becoming successful, productive adults. To address some of the inequities that plague rural Georgia, the state has begun some important initiatives that focus on their unique and significant needs.

For Georgia to thrive, focus on rural development must continue. It represents a good start and is indicative of the attention and commitment that Georgia has to its rural citizens. That commitment must continue and, importantly, it must move beyond the study stage to the action stage. Any intervention supporting rural Georgia must be built on the understanding that in smaller communities, every sector is tied together more tightly than in urban or suburban communities. Thus, cross-sector collaboration and alignment is critical, as each sector immediately affects the others.

Issue 10 – The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) – What’s Next for Georgia?

Issue Overview

The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December 2015 was touted as bringing an end to federally driven education policy. Free of the burdensome federal regulations of its predecessor, the much-maligned No Child Left Behind, ESSA was viewed as an opportunity for states to hit the reset button and provide school and district officials a road map to meet state expectations for the next generation of students.

Under ESSA, states can choose their own measures of progress for student learning aligned to their own educational goals and priorities. Accountability plans must show how states will implement academic standards aligned to help students stay on track for success in college and the workplace; ensure students from all backgrounds have an equal footing; track the progress of schools across a variety of measures not limited to test scores; and identify ways to offer additional support where students are struggling.

In developing the new state plan under ESSA, Georgia addressed issues related to:

- Measuring school performance, setting academic goals, and measuring student progress
- The role of the state assessment system in teaching and learning as well as in the accountability system
- How to intervene in struggling schools and what resources will be made available to support them

Significance for Georgia

In response to the passage of ESSA, the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) has developed a new consolidated state plan to address issues such as how to measure the performance of schools, the assessment systems, how to support struggling schools, and the state’s accountability system. GaDOE submitted the plan on September 18, 2017 to the U.S. Department of Education (USED) and is awaiting final approval.

The state ESSA plan provided Georgia with the opportunity to set out a policy framework related to federal requirements that would ensure accountability for *all* students, outline the role assessments play in teaching and learning, and most importantly, ensure equity of opportunity to the state’s schools and populations that struggle the most. The implementation of this plan in 2018 will begin to answer the question: Did Georgia accomplish its goals?

Action Steps for Georgia

Going into 2018, there are many uncertainties around the implementation of the ESSA plan. As plans are approved by USED, districts will begin implementing ESSA at the local level. Districts will have to address issues related to teacher equity, incorporation of early learning and kindergarten transition, and utilizing flexibility options to meet school improvement goals – among other issues. Depending on district capacity, there may be a wide range of effective implementation of the ESSA plan.

At the time of the printing of this issue, the state accountability system remains an open question. For federal accountability purposes, USED only needs to approve the GaDOE submitted plan. However, the State Board of Education, whose members are appointed by Gov. Deal, must approve any changes to the state accountability system. The Governor has already expressed his dissatisfaction with the revised accountability system and the State Board has echoed those concerns.