



NEW LEADERSHIP – CHANGES AT THE CAPITOL

Issue Overview

No Georgia resident could steer clear of the 2018 midterm elections. On the national stage, political pundits kept their eyes on Georgia and its hotly contested governor's race. In the end, Republican Brian Kemp won the closest governor's race in Georgia since 1966, as well as the most expensive race in the state's history. In an election that set records for voter turnout, he defeated Democrat Stacey Abrams by roughly 55,000 votes.

As this publication goes to press, the newly elected governor is assembling transition teams, identifying advisors, and preparing to take the helm of Georgia in 2019. What will these new leaders mean for our state? What have our new leaders promised to do in office, and what will it mean for our public education system?

Significance for Georgia

In Georgia, the governor plays a powerful and critical role in the governance of public education. Georgia's governance structure affords a substantial amount of authority to the governor, who holds appointment powers over multiple education agencies, . As the new head of state, Kemp has the power to make key appointments across multiple education agencies from early learning through post-secondary education. How the new governor uses his powers and the extent to which he makes education a priority for his office are yet to be seen. Near the end of the campaign, Brian Kemp provided more details about his policy platform for early learning and K-12 education, which include:

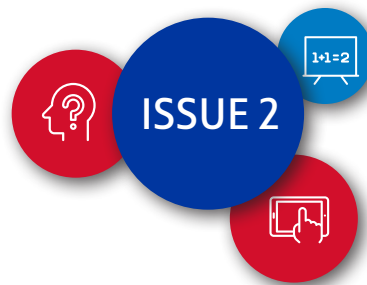
1. Improved literacy through early learning,
2. Increased school safety, and
3. Increased pay for teachers.

A hallmark of Kemp's campaign and gubernatorial platform was a focus on rural Georgia. He has developed a comprehensive plan for "A New Day in Rural Georgia" that empowers the private sector to offer high-speed Internet, supports the agriculture industry, and improves access to quality health care and high-paying jobs through economic development and investments. These types of strategies can only help strengthen local school systems, which, in turn, will support the economic activities of the region through increased high school graduation rates and the successful completion of post-secondary education for rural residents.

Action Steps

Moving forward into 2019, Georgia not only has a new governor but also has new chairs of both education committees in the House and Senate. The leaders of both legislative chambers can have tremendous influence. They decide which legislators will sit on which committees (including education and higher education) and whether bills approved by that committee will be voted on by the entire chamber. As Republicans still control both the House and Senate, it is likely we will see more legislation around vouchers, student scholarship organizations, and education savings accounts.

Georgians deserve a clear vision for public education that empowers state and local leaders as well as parents and students to make decisions that best support the educational needs of all of the state's citizens. That's why the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education created a framework to ensure that the same policies that enable and accelerate strong public education nationally and globally are in place in Georgia. This framework, called EdQuest Georgia, is built on seven core policy areas that ensure local districts are sustained by strong families, employ quality teachers and leaders, provide supportive learning environments to their students, are engaged with advanced instructional systems that provide clear pathways to post-secondary success, and have equitable access to resources to be able to innovate, customize, and meet the needs of their students.



EARLY LEARNING: QUALITY EARLY CARE AND ITS ECONOMIC IMPACT

Issue Overview

Beyond the short- and long-term social and education outcomes directly related to young children participating in early learning programs, high-quality early learning and child care contributes directly to the economic health of Georgia. The early care and education industry in Georgia generates \$4.7 billion in economic activity and provides more than 67,000 jobs statewide annually. Further, working parents who are supported by child care across Georgia generate another \$24 billion in annual earnings. In other words, when parents have quality early care and learning options, they will work, earn, and spend, all of which generates another \$374 million in federal tax revenue and \$162 million in state and local revenue.

But what happens to these earnings if parents do not have access to stable child care options? A recently released report, *Opportunities Lost: How Child Care Challenges Affect Georgia's Workforce & Economy*, asked that question. The Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS) and the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce surveyed 400 parents with children under the age of five and found that difficulty in accessing child care creates an annual loss to the state economy estimated at \$1.75 billion, with subsequent lost tax revenue of \$105 million.

Significance for Georgia

In 2017, 66% of children under age six had all available parents (either both parents or their only parent) engaged in the labor force. This means a majority of parents across Georgia need reliable child care to maintain employment and earn a living. Without it, parents may miss work, turn down promotions, or leave their jobs altogether due to child care challenges. These challenges also affect parents enrolled in school or job training programs. Employee absences and turnover impacts the bottom line for business and reduces participation in higher education and work training programs, which dilutes the workforce pipeline for future employers.

The statewide survey conducted by GEEARS and the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce found that among Georgia parents with children under age five:

- More than 1 in 5 indicated they have quit a job, school, or work training program due to child care issues.
- Approximately 1 in 20 reported having been fired because of missing work due to challenges related to child care.
- More than 1 in 6 reported having turned down a promotion at work because of issues with child care.

Action Steps

New state leaders in Georgia need to set forth a strong policy agenda that expands access to early learning for all families, especially those living in poverty who are trying to navigate a pathway to prosperity. This requires advocating for sufficient funding for the child care subsidy program, onsite child care at businesses and post-secondary campuses, and other programs that meet the needs of young children and their families.

Investment in early learning is an economic development strategy. As previously stated, 66% of young children in Georgia have parents engaged in the workforce. For Georgia's economy to continue to grow, families with young children must be considered a priority.



TEACHING: ELEVATING THE PROFESSION...NOW!

Issue Overview

In 2015, the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) surveyed more than 53,000 educators across the state to understand teacher job satisfaction and reasons for wanting to leave the profession. Georgia, like states across the country, suffers from teacher shortages across the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields, special education, and bilingual/English language learner education. This shortage is driven by a combination of a decrease in enrollments in teacher education programs and teacher attrition, teachers leaving the classroom. In fact, the bulk of the demand for teachers is caused by attrition. Most teachers who leave the profession before retirement list “dissatisfaction with teaching conditions” as their primary reason. Educating children requires specialized knowledge and skills and deserves the same status and standing as other traditional professions. For a state to attract and maintain a highly qualified, effective teaching pool, educators need to feel they are valued for their expertise. How does Georgia professionalize teaching to inspire a shared spirit of high standards and public service—a sense of professionalism—among both those inside and outside of education?

Significance for Georgia

2018 became known as “the year of the teacher strike.” Beginning in West Virginia and spreading to other states like Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky, and North Carolina, teachers walked out of the classroom demanding better pay and, in some cases, general increases in school funding. Georgia has not seen its teachers rising up in this way, primarily due to increased attention and debates on school funding issues over the past several years. In 2018, under the leadership of Governor Nathan Deal, the Georgia legislature increased overall school funding and finally did away with years-long austerity cuts to the K-12 funding formula.

However, that does not mean Georgia does not have issues that need to be addressed to ensure high-quality teachers are recruited and retained in classrooms across the state. A feeling remains that educators are not valued at the same level as other highly regarded professions, impacting both retention and recruitment. The debate over teachers’ professional standing usually revolves around three key issues: wages, benefits, and professional pathways.

Action Steps

An urgent opportunity for Georgia found in the EdQuest research is to recognize teachers as professionals. Professionalization includes how the profession is viewed, compensated, and mentored and supported for ongoing professional learning. Attracting and retaining talented professionals in the field means compensating and supporting that talent like professionals. In most cases, this will require additional revenue. To be clear, new revenue should not subsidize outdated pay systems that fail to create avenues for personal and professional growth or continue to overpay poor teachers. However, Georgia needs to develop a quality teaching and leadership plan, coupled with a schedule of investments in teaching professionals, that include (1) a total compensation structure, (2) tiered certification/career ladders, and (3) meaningful professional development. The result will help Georgia achieve the goal of a highly qualified, professional educator in every classroom.



SCHOOL SAFETY: MUCH MORE THAN METAL DETECTORS

Issue Overview

The debates about how to respond to school shootings specifically can overshadow a broader discussion of school safety more generally. School shootings, like those in Parkland, Florida, are still statistically rare, especially when compared to the safety issues schools deal with daily, such as bullying, fights, and theft.

As schools and districts in Georgia address the issue of school safety, it is important to understand the full spectrum of safety issues. A comprehensive framework for school safety includes the physical safety of the building and addresses issues of school climate, discipline, and the behavioral health of students and faculty.

Significance for Georgia

In addressing school safety, schools and districts must properly understand the root causes and consequences of school violence and its impact on overall school safety. A wide variety of issues such as firearms, adult and student sexual misconduct, substance abuse, gangs, bullying, approaches to discipline, and the social-emotional health of both students and faculty all play a role in school safety.

Critical to school safety is ensuring a positive school climate, one which fosters safety; promotes a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and encourages and maintains respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community. Reciprocally, both physical safety and emotional safety are key components to a positive school climate. Emotionally safe learning environments can be achieved by making social and emotional learning (SEL) an essential part of education. Strong SEL competencies support the mental health of the student body. Social and emotional well-being leads to mental wellness and the development of soft social skills that are part of being a productive member of a community.

Action Steps

In 2018, Georgia passed two laws aimed at increasing school safety by addressing student discipline policies related to behavioral and mental health and attendance protocols that support a positive school climate. One of them, HB 763, also made specific recommendations about school safety plans. A Senate School Safety Study Committee, which met throughout 2018, issued recommendations in the late fall of 2018. HB 763 centered on three key areas aimed at strengthening school safety: 1) crisis prevention; 2) the physical security of school buildings, facilities, and buses; and 3) emergency response.

School safety is a complex challenge, and one strategy alone will not address all elements of school safety. State and local leaders across Georgia are recognizing the complexity of this issue and what is necessary to meet the needs of each individual student. At the state level, that includes continued, and in some cases expanded, support for programs that impact school climate and support student learning, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), mental health supports, language and literacy, and SEL competencies embedded into state standards. At the district level, this includes developing integrated strategies that incorporate such diverse elements as climate; prevention and intervention programs related to mental health; school facilities and personnel; student behavior and discipline policies; security hardware and security systems; safe school planning; coordination of communications between schools and local law enforcement, fire, and emergency experts; and teachers, parents, students, administrators, and community members working together.



FUNDING: IS FULLY FUNDED QBE ENOUGH?

Issue Overview

Nationally, discussions and policies around funding formulas for K-12 systems are shifting focus from equal funding across districts to considerations of equity. Unlike equal funding models, which provide all students regardless of need the same allotment of resources, the equity-based model takes into consideration that it simply costs more to educate some students than others. For example, low-income students tend to start school academically behind their higher income peers and require additional academic supports, extra learning time, and potentially outside services related to social services, physical and mental health, or housing.

Now that Georgia has “fully funded education,” many believe the state can move on to other topics of education policy. However, many questions remain. To date, lawmakers determine what the state is willing to spend in support of that promise, but that amount is different from what it would actually cost to fulfill. What exactly is an adequate public education? How much does it cost to provide all students with one? Is the amount Georgia is spending equal to what adequate education costs?

Significance for Georgia

In Georgia, the majority of state funds for public schools are provided according to the Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula, which was established by state legislation in 1985. The total amount of state revenue received by local districts is based on three factors: QBE earnings, categorical grants, and equalization grants.

Georgia has moved away from a state-mandated centralized approach to decision-making toward a decentralized approach that values local control in its educational system. District leaders have been empowered with the flexibility and authority to lead their districts through student performance contracts with the State Board of Education, operating as either a Charter System or a Strategic Waiver School System.

Embedded in these new performance contracts is greater flexibility with respect to the QBE model. Most districts have embraced that by waiving the state salary schedule, which is a significant portion of the QBE calculation, and direct classroom expenditure controls that are normally dictated by the formula. This flexibility allows districts to target more of their resources to student needs and district priorities. Allowing flexibility to local districts has shifted focus from funding inputs to funding based on student needs and outputs. However, by offering flexibility without seriously considering the actual cost of educating students, the policy may be limiting a local district's ability to meet the needs of its students while being increasingly held accountable for student outcomes through its flexibility contracts.

Action Steps

The Georgia Constitution guarantees an adequate public education for all citizens. Yet determining whether the state actually provides adequate resources to schools remains a dominant issue in school finance for Georgia. Best practice research finds that these funding levels should be tied to actual costs and periodically reviewed to reflect community needs and aspirations. Georgia must conduct a study to determine the actual costs associated with supporting student achievement and then use this data to guide state and district policy. Doing so requires a comprehensive assessment of the costs of ensuring all students reach the achievement goals set for them and an understanding of the resources required to meet those goals.



ASSESSMENTS: TESTING THE WATERS

Issue Overview

Passionate debates have been raging in Georgia and across the country for years about the role tests and assessments play in the education system. What should we test and how often? How should we use the results? Should we focus on summative or formative assessments? Norm-referenced or standardized? What do those words even mean? In short, why do we test?

One reason why states administer assessments is because the federal government requires them to do so to gauge student learning in exchange for federal funding. Beyond that, however, most educators recognize that good assessments can provide critical data that show students' academic strengths and weaknesses and provide information necessary to address the instructional needs of the students.

With the new flexibility offered under ESSA, all states, including Georgia, are rethinking the role of assessments within their education system. They are trying to find the proper balance between using assessments as a means of holding educators accountable and as a tool to inform instruction and support personalized learning.

Significance for Georgia

When Georgia decided to improve its standards in 2009, it assumed responsibility for creating a corresponding assessment system to measure student learning, now called the Georgia Milestones Assessment System (Milestones). The Milestones were first administered during the 2014–2015 school year, used not only to monitor student-learning progress but also to evaluate teacher performance in the classroom and school leader performance. They are also a significant component of Georgia's accountability system, the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI).

The federal law ESSA, passed in 2015, made specific changes to the previous No Child Left Behind federal legislation, including changes to the federal requirements regarding state assessments. Under ESSA, states must continue to assess all students enrolled in public schools in grades three through eight and high school, but they're allowed to work with local school districts to review testing requirements and needs.

By using the flexibility provided by the federal law under ESSA, Georgia is taking steps to change the focus of assessments away from just being used for high-stakes purposes that drive instruction to formative assessments that help inform instruction and allow for greater personalization. The aim of the flexibility being sought is to allow districts to use assessments to meet the particular needs of their students and educators while trying to limit the amount of time students spend taking tests.

Action Steps

Georgia is continuing to strive to find the proper balance between an effective assessment system that supports its educational goals for students and holds the educational system accountable for serving those students. For public education to function optimally, it requires an instructional system that makes the acquisition of knowledge and skills efficient, effective, and appealing. The EdQuest Georgia best-practice research tells us that top-performing states and education systems have well-developed, coherent instructional systems that incorporate standards, curricula, and assessments that allow for the personalization of instruction and appropriate methods of teaching. Combined, this coherent instructional system helps all students reach their goals.



ESAS/VOUCHERS: TAKING A HARD LOOK AT WHAT'S NEXT

Issue Overview

Georgia has witnessed a growing interest in choice programs that expand students' educational options as well. Among the policies that have gained traction among parents and policymakers alike are vouchers, tax credit scholarships, and education savings accounts (ESAs). While each is intended to give families greater flexibility in how they use taxpayer dollars to educate their children, they rely on different means to achieve that end.

In recent years, charter schools have become a normal part of the education landscape in Georgia, as has the general conversation around education choice. Newly elected governor Brian Kemp even campaigned on choice-related promises, like doubling the tax credit scholarship cap and piloting an ESA program for military families. These programs have become more than just novel ideas and are gaining in popularity, but where Georgia is headed in terms of choice legislation remains to be seen. In the meantime, it would be prudent to examine the effectiveness of current options in Georgia and study the implications of those being considered for expansion and implementation.

Significance for Georgia

Currently, Georgia is home to both vouchers and tax credit scholarships. The state offers three options: the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship, the Georgia Private School Tax Credit program, and the Qualified Education Donation Tax Credit. The Special Needs Scholarship is a voucher program and was established in 2007 to allow public-school students with special needs to transfer to "another public school, public-school system, state school, or approved participating private school." The Georgia Private School Tax Credit allows individuals and businesses to donate money to Student Scholarship Organizations (SSOs), which then award private-school scholarships to eligible students and families. The Qualified Education Donation Tax Credit, which became law in 2018, is the most recent of the three options available in Georgia and is a tax credit program designed to provide financial support to public schools, particularly those performing among the lowest 5% in the state. Only five states currently have active ESA programs: Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, Tennessee, and North Carolina.

The effectiveness, transparency, use, and constitutionality of these choice programs are currently under debate, and the research on tax credit scholarships, vouchers, and ESAs can best be described as limited and often contradictory. There are data-driven arguments both for and against these private choice options, making it even more difficult for families to successfully weigh their options and for state legislatures to make informed policy decisions about private choice.

Action Steps

As the school choice landscape in Georgia continues to shift toward a broader spectrum of education options for families and students, state policymakers must be cautious in moving forward and take seriously the need to develop robust accountability systems for new choice mechanisms. Like public schools, private schools directly receiving taxpayer dollars or SSO funds should be transparent about how they are spending those tax-payer dollars and how effectively they are educating their students. These institutions' fiscal activities and academic results should instill confidence in the public that tax dollars are being used ethically and wisely and are yielding positive outcomes for participating students.



SUMMER START DATE: MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Issue Overview

The debate over summer and school calendar start dates has been a hot topic in Georgia over the past year. But there is much more to the issue than simply whether the 180 days of school begin before or after Labor Day. The school start date debate encompasses larger educational issues, including summer learning loss, access to out-of-school learning opportunities, and local control. Historically, it has been up to local school districts to take into account “the summer slide” and incorporate community preferences into their local school calendar. Proponents of a later start date, however, argue that Georgia’s economy can greatly benefit from a start date after Labor Day, as students fill seasonal and part-time jobs and families can take summer vacations that also boost the state economy. So, why does Georgia start school so early? And what other options are there for Georgia?

Significance for Georgia

Historically, school start dates in Georgia have ranged from July 10 to September 8, with a majority of schools beginning within the first two weeks of August. While the 2018–2019 school year start dates lacked uniformity, most fell around early August. Only two districts started the school year after Labor Day. A mandated September start date would significantly shift the calendar for the majority of schools in the state. Currently, local school board members select and approve the calendar that is the best fit for the needs and interests of their local community.

While a change in start date is not about the total number of school days in a calendar year, which is specified in Georgia Code at 180 days, many other impacts and issues should be considered before making such a change. Issues such as summer learning loss, availability of summer learning activities, economic development, and student safety are among those.

In March 2018, Senator Steve Gooch (R - Dahlonega) called together a Senate study committee to explore the school calendar in Georgia and a possible state-mandated start date after Labor Day for all schools. It is clear that many stakeholders have opinions about the school calendar and start date in Georgia. How does Georgia prevent summer slide and ensure student safety, while also maximizing economic growth for our state? It is important to look at this issue from a broader perspective and consider all of these factors when discussing school calendars.

Action Steps

Georgia will likely see legislation in 2019 around summer learning. The Senate study committee has recommended changes to the state law that would place “guardrails” on each district’s ability to set school year start and end dates. The committee is recommending a required start date no earlier than seven to 10 days before Labor Day and an end date around June 1.

The calendar debate is drawing important attention to how students spend their summers in Georgia. This could be a good time for legislators, stakeholders, and interest groups to draw on this momentum and push conversations around summer learning opportunities for all students across the state. Summer does not look the same for all students, and many do not have access to summer learning opportunities, especially low-income students and students in rural communities. For example, summer learning program participation was only 28% in rural communities, compared to 41% in urban communities. With the increased attention being paid to school calendars, it is an opportune time for Georgia to dig deeper into summer learning and explore what can be done to support students across the state during this critical time.



DUAL ENROLLMENT: GROWTH AND SUSTAINABILITY

Issue Overview

Dual enrollment allows high school students to take college-level courses and earn high school and college credit concurrently. Through dual enrollment coursework, students graduate high school already on a higher education path.

Today's dual enrollment program was established in 2015 through Senate Bill (SB) 132's Move On When Ready Act and surged in popularity in the last few years. The program's explosive growth raises several questions. First, why is the program growing so much? What are the trends? How is Georgia financing Dual Enrollment, and what is our return on investment? Finally, as the program grows, what implications should be considered?

Significance for Georgia

Georgia's Dual Enrollment program is open to all high school students. Through the program, students can complete an unlimited number of courses at post-secondary institutions prior to high school graduation. Students become eligible for the coursework by meeting specific admissions requirements, which vary by institution and course. Most classes are delivered at post-secondary institutions (74%), while a few are delivered at high school campuses (17%) or online (9%).

Dual Enrollment program participation has significantly increased over the last five years. Total attempted credit hours rose 258% between FY 2013 and FY 2017. This includes both increases in the number of students participating in the program (212%) as well as an increase in the number of credit hours attempted per student (15%).

Associated with increased usage is increased costs. Georgia is one of five states where the state is responsible for paying a student's dual enrollment tuition. Dual Enrollment appropriations have increased by 325% in five years, from \$18.5 million in FY 2014 to \$78.8 million in 2018.

Despite its growth, all students are not accessing the program equally. Of potential concern is the distribution of Dual Enrollment participants by race and income. White students are overrepresented in the current Dual Enrollment program compared to their presence in public schools. African American student participation, on the other hand, has been on the decline in comparison with this group's presence in public schools. Hispanic students are also underrepresented in the Dual Enrollment program; participation is increasing but is not keeping pace with the growth of the Hispanic student population. Finally, low-income student participation has been historically low in the program, despite such students being a majority of the K-12 student population.

Action Steps

Georgia's Dual Enrollment program is increasingly opening higher education doors to students statewide while providing vital cost-savings for families. As both participation and costs grow, we need to consider our long-term sustainability. How do we further define the program to contribute to our state's workforce goals? How do we target the right students aligned with the goals of the program to make sure all our children have the same opportunities regardless of their location and background? And how do we grow and monitor the program as smartly as possible to make sure every state dollar counts? These critical questions must be addressed to ensure the program will ultimately meet the needs of the state, our students, and our families.



POST-SECONDARY: COSTS, OTHER BARRIERS IMPEDE SUCCESS

Issue Overview

As the Georgia economy continues to expand, trends in the job market continue to point to a need for an educated workforce to support this growth. It is widely touted that the state needs an additional 250,000 workers with a certificate, two-year, or four-year degree to fill the available positions that our economy will demand by 2025. In a nutshell, post-secondary completion remains one of the most important economic development issues facing the state.

Georgia's post-secondary completion rate, however, continues to slump below the state's need. Only 48% of Georgia residents have completed an associate's degree or beyond; however, economic forecasts predict that 60% of jobs will require at least this much education by 2020. The strongest and fastest growing industries in the state require post-secondary education, yet the pipeline from high school to the workforce is leaking. Less than 70% of college freshmen return to school for their second year. Moreover, five years after high school graduation, only 26% of students have earned a certificate or degree, and 57% have no post-secondary degree and are not currently enrolled in a post-secondary program.

To meet the economic needs of the state and its residents, Georgia must identify the barriers to completion facing post-secondary students.

Significance for Georgia

Georgia has experienced a rapid growth in the percentage of low-income students and families, especially amongst minority students, and these groups underperform in post-secondary retention and completion. One of the most significant barriers to the completion of higher education is cost, which is particularly relevant considering the rapidly growing proportion of low-income residents in Georgia. Costs associated with post-secondary completion include not only tuition, but also basic necessities such as food, housing, health care, and transportation while students attend classes.

With the cost of living expenses being, on average, higher than tuition itself and growing, the impact of these expenses on low-income students and families can be one of the main levers that pushes them out of the post-secondary education pipeline.

Action Steps

EdQuest Georgia best practice research indicates that clear pathways through the educational system are linked to employability and economic growth needs. These best practices also focus on removing barriers to post-secondary education completion, especially concerning needed resources and clear understanding of expectations. Georgia has multiple opportunities to excel in all these areas.

For Georgia to develop the workforce the state needs, and to sustain economic growth, more of our students, especially our growing low-income and minority populations, need to enroll or reenroll in and complete some form of post-secondary education. Understanding the true cost of higher education and developing strategies to help low-income students bear those costs can boost the state's educational attainment, an essential element in future economic development. While Georgia has developed some strategies to address the true costs of post-secondary education, these programs and strategies need to be expanded and resourced to achieve the impact that our economic development depends on.