

◀ 18TH EDITION ▶

# TOP TEN ISSUES TO WATCH IN 2022



GEORGIA PARTNERSHIP  
FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION



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### JANUARY 2022

The Top Ten Issues to Watch is an annual publication of the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. Past editions are available on our website, [www.gpee.org](http://www.gpee.org).

### OUR MISSION

Inform and influence Georgia leaders through research and non-partisan advocacy to impact education policies and practices for the improvement of student achievement.

## ALSTON & BIRD

Special thanks to Alston & Bird for their support of this publication.



If 2020 were a year defined by tumult and uncertainty, 2021 was a year marked by optimism and transition. Education stakeholders settled into the realities of living and leading through a pandemic while making the most of the silver linings that emerged in the work of improving public education throughout 2021. The Georgia Partnership also settled into a time of optimism and transition. As we continued our work advocating for innovative, future-oriented ways of ensuring the education and workforce pipelines could better and more equitably serve Georgia's students, we were working just as diligently internally to ensure a smooth transition from our third president, Dr. Steve Dolinger, to our fourth, Dr. Dana Rickman. The transition was foundational to everything we accomplished in 2021, through a combination of strong, visionary leadership and an unrelenting resolve to make Georgia a top performing state where all children have the same equitable access to a high-quality education.

In a continuation of our statewide level response to COVID-19, the Ga Partnership launched the **CARES Impact Study**, a multi-year, multi-strand research project designed to capture the ways Georgia school districts were planning to use the \$6.6 billion they received in federal relief funding. Considering the unprecedented infusion of dollars into our state's public schools, the Ga Partnership recognized an opportunity to not only study how the dollars were being spent, but also share how education stakeholders used the resources to reimagine areas of K-12 education and better serve students beyond the immediate challenges created by the pandemic.

In 2021, the Ga Partnership also continued to broaden the reach of our **Regional Initiative** work, which included growing the multi-sector **Rural Learning Networks (RLNs)** almost 90 members, up from 50 in 2020, in over 30 communities across Georgia. These RLNs have been instrumental in establishing partnerships and connections between entities who would otherwise not be in communication. Relatedly, we reincorporated **Regional Summits** into our annual programming, partnering with regional, higher education institutions like the University of North Georgia, Valdosta State University, and Dalton State College to explore students' needs and challenges related to post-secondary access and completion.

In 2021 we also graduated the 13th cohort of the Partnership's professional development experience, the **Education Policy Fellowship Program (EPFP)**, adding 19 fellows to our 200+ person Georgia EPFP alumni network. The current, 14th cohort, like previous classes is exploring the necessary policies and procedures that must be implemented to help ensure equitable student success. This program is one of the key components of the Ga Partnership's strategy to inform and influence leaders and emerging leaders so that they are then able to meaningfully contribute to the development of educational policy decisions in our state.

Our success in hosting virtual engagements was also apparent in the evolution of the type and style of online convenings we hosted throughout 2021. In January we hosted our first ever virtual **Media Symposium**, which is our annual, closed-door convening held exclusively for education reporters from across Georgia and Tennessee to hear from education experts in Georgia on key issues in public education. By November, we were hosting our first hybrid **Critical Issues Forum** in Partnership history, offering attendees both an in-person and livestreaming option.

As the Ga Partnership enters 2022, we do so with our feet firmly planted on the success we've achieved over the last two years advocating for high quality education for all of Georgia's students. We believe that the 18th edition of the *Top Ten Issues to Watch* report will serve as a critical guide for Georgia's leaders looking to understand our state's biggest education challenges and equip them to devise solutions that improve life outcomes for public school students across the state. We are grateful for your ongoing support and welcome your participation in our work. Georgia's children need you.



## INTRODUCTION

**Welcome to 2022 and the 18th Edition of the Georgia Partnership's *Top Ten Issues to Watch* report.** Over the past year schools welcomed back children and youth to in-person learning. Most employers called workers to return to the office or adopted hybrid schedules. Restaurants and businesses reopened. These moves toward normalcy paid dividends for Georgia's economy. In July 2021, the Georgia Department of Revenue reported a \$3.2 billion increase in tax revenues above last year's collections despite the social, education, and economic upheaval created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

While such reports and news headlines touting positive economic trends reinforce the idea that a post-COVID-19 recovery is in full swing, the reality, however, is that many people have yet to regain their footing after the initial economic devastation caused by the pandemic. In fact, **the pandemic worsened the underlying educational and economic challenges confronting the most vulnerable Georgians:** students of color, low-income youth, rural residents, workers lacking post-secondary training, and adults caring for children and elders. **And the resulting disparities in education and workforce opportunities continue to threaten personal well-being, community resilience, and Georgia's long-term economic security.**

**We have also seen increased social and political polarization.** Debates around issues such as masking and critical race theory continue to divide us. Polarization has discouraged nuanced and substantive dialogue about what strategies could propel the state forward. Across the backdrop of widening inequality and growing polarization, the Georgia Partnership has chosen to focus on **equity** — which we define as the allocation of appropriate resources and tools for all Georgians to succeed and believe is the primary driver of individual prosperity and state economic growth.

This edition of the *Top Ten Issues to Watch* describes why educational and workforce equity is an economic imperative. The publication identifies access and opportunity gaps and encourages state and local leaders to pursue a solution-focused approach to improving education and workforce development strategies.

Readers will see references to an **equity mindset** — a commitment to ensuring that education and workforce systems provide the appropriate resources and tools for all Georgians to succeed. An equity mindset underlines the Ga Partnership's work — from early learning and K-12 education to post-secondary studies and workforce training programs.

This is why we believe leaders and education advocates should unite around an ambitious 10-year goal — ensuring 65% of Georgia's residents aged 25 to 64 will hold a postsecondary credential by the end of 2032. To advance this goal, Georgia needs a long-range plan, anchored in a common set of incremental education and workforce targets, that address how the state will lead the nation in post-secondary completion by 2032.

The *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2022* report is a starting point for developing that plan. It focuses on barriers to access at various points in the education-to-work continuum and offers targeted recommendations in each issue on how to address immediate needs and develop a roadmap for a more prosperous Georgia. But the plan must emerge from the hearts and minds of our state leaders, regional and local stakeholders.

Without a shared commitment across all education agencies (early learning through post-secondary) and workforce development entities to coordinate this work, decades of poverty, undereducation, and dependence on low-skilled jobs will hinder Georgia's ability to meet the challenges of economic globalization and advancing technology. I invite all stakeholders to join us in our common goal of addressing the educational challenges of today and meet our economic goals of tomorrow.



Dr. Dana Rickman

President, Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education

## INDICATORS FOR SUCCESS: WHERE IS GEORGIA TODAY?

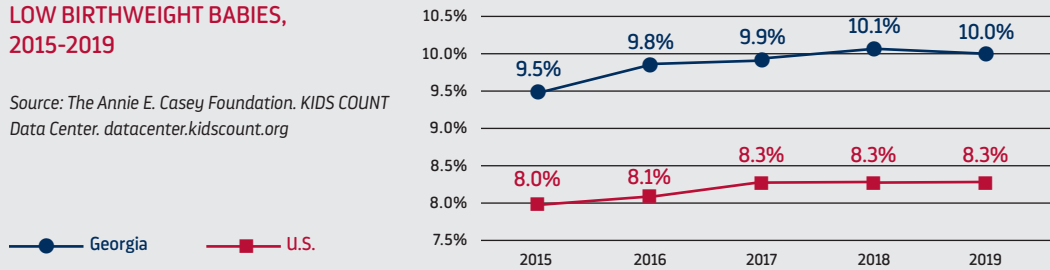
**How does Georgia fare in producing excellent results for our citizens throughout the birth-to-work pipeline?**

**What additional progress is necessary to move our state above the national average and into the top tier of states to make Georgia a national leader?**

These Indicators for Success reveal where Georgia stands on critical indicators of child well-being, educational attainment, and workforce readiness. Shown in each graph is a comparison of trends in Georgia relative to national averages. These data represent outcomes related to student achievement and success. Changes in these outcomes will require focused, collaborative work on each of the issues discussed in this publication. The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education is committed to tracking these indicators over time and advocating for policies and practices that will enable our state to emerge as a national education leader.

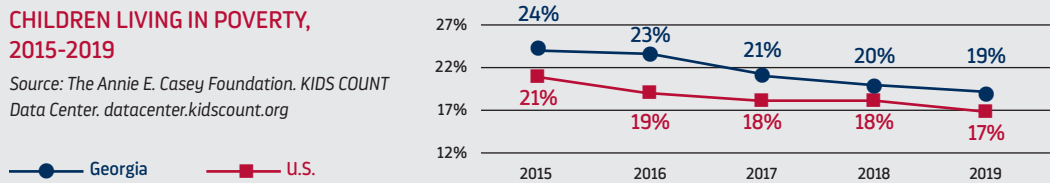
### LOW BIRTHWEIGHT BABIES, 2015-2019

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation. KIDS COUNT Data Center. [datacenter.kidscount.org](http://datacenter.kidscount.org)



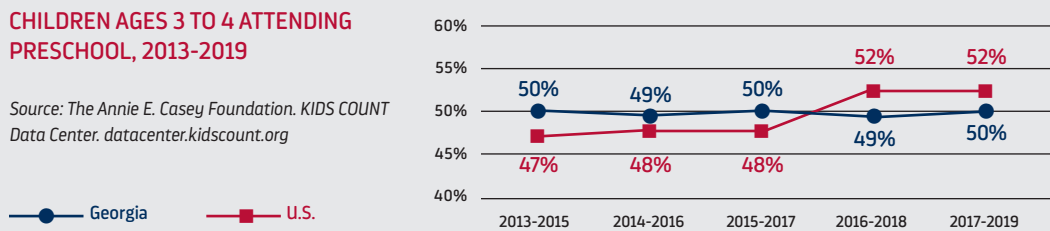
### CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY, 2015-2019

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation. KIDS COUNT Data Center. [datacenter.kidscount.org](http://datacenter.kidscount.org)



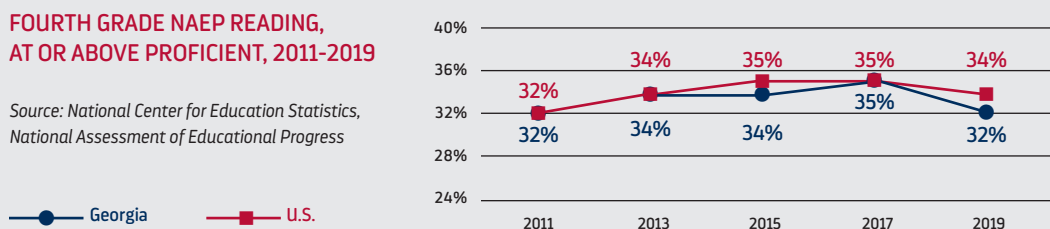
### CHILDREN AGES 3 TO 4 ATTENDING PRESCHOOL, 2013-2019

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation. KIDS COUNT Data Center. [datacenter.kidscount.org](http://datacenter.kidscount.org)



### FOURTH GRADE NAEP READING, AT OR ABOVE PROFICIENT, 2011-2019

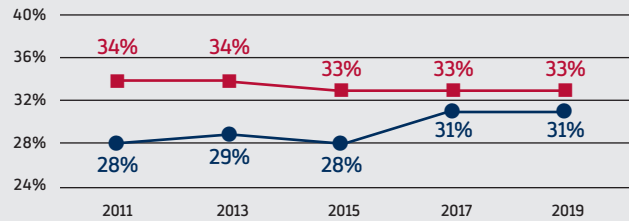
Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress



### EIGHTH GRADE NAEP MATHEMATICS, AT OR ABOVE PROFICIENT, 2011-2019

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress

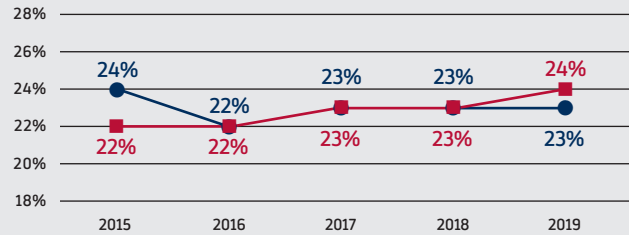
—●— Georgia —■— U.S.



### PERCENTAGE OF GRADUATING CLASS EARNING 3 OR HIGHER ON AN AP EXAM, 2015-2019

Source: AP Program Results: Class of 2019

—●— Georgia —■— U.S.

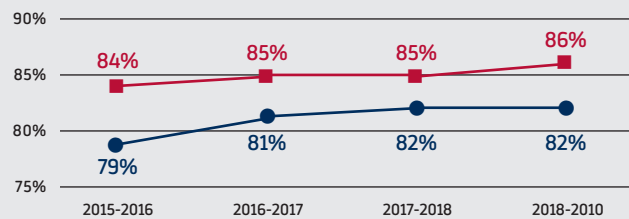


### HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES 2016-2019\*

\*Public high school 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Public Four-Year On-Time Graduation Rates: School Years 2015-2016, 2016-2017, 2017-2018, 2018-2019

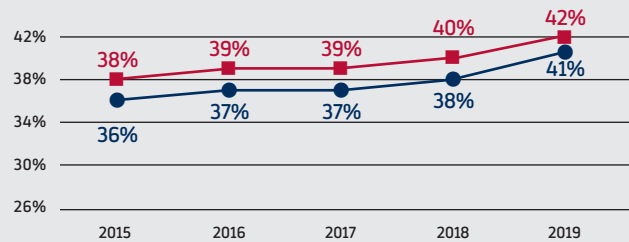
—●— Georgia —■— U.S.



### ADULTS OVER AGE 25 WITH AN ASSOCIATE'S DEGREE OR HIGHER, 2015-2018

Source: US Census Bureau, American Fact Finder American Community Survey 2018 5-Year Estimates (Georgia/United States)

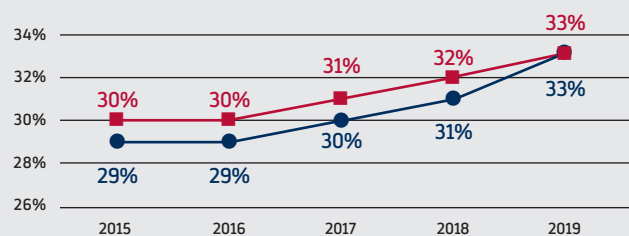
—●— Georgia —■— U.S.



### ADULTS OVER AGE 25 WITH A BACHELOR'S DEGREE OR HIGHER, 2015-2018

Source: US Census Bureau, American Fact Finder American Community Survey 2018 5-Year Estimates (Georgia/United States)

—●— Georgia —■— U.S.



# ISSUE 1

## EQUITY – SHIFTING MINDSET AND STRATEGY

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

The pandemic was a seismic event that disrupted society, education, and work. Between February and April 2020, over 23 million Americans lost their jobs;<sup>1</sup> the economy contracted at the highest rate since World War II;<sup>2</sup> and nearly 50 million school-age children endured school closures and the shift to online-only instruction.<sup>3</sup>

During the same period, 531,000 Georgians lost their jobs.<sup>4</sup> While the state's unemployment rate declined from 12.7% to 3.2% in the subsequent 18 months,<sup>5</sup> Georgia's most vulnerable residents — those living in poverty, employed in low-wage industries, and lacking post-secondary training — struggled to cover their basic needs and find livable-wage employment.<sup>6</sup>

Although some students thrived in digital learning environments, the experiment illustrated the importance of face-to-face instruction. Students who did not have regular access to high-quality virtual learning options — primarily students of color, low-income youth, and those living in rural Georgia — were disproportionately impacted by the interrupted learning time and fell further behind their peers academically. They also were denied critical non-academic services during school closures.

The pandemic spotlighted the social, economic, and educational inequities that affect all Georgians. This issue brief describes how an equity mindset and expanded access to high-quality education and workforce opportunities promote **personal well-being, community resilience, and state economic security.**

### EQUITY AT THE FOREFRONT

- **Equity** means all people have the opportunity to succeed in life and work provided they receive the appropriate resources and tools to meet their needs and overcome obstacles.
- An **equity mindset** helps state leaders and practitioners identify barriers and expand access to education and workforce opportunities for all Georgians.
- Individuals' needs are the primary focus of **equity-centered strategies**. State and local leaders should identify solutions and build on community strengths. They should adapt current policy and practice to address immediate needs and create long-term growth goals to create a more equitable future for Georgia.

1 Handwerker, E.W., P.B. Meyer, J. Piacentini, M. Schultz, and L. Sveikauskas. 2020, December. *Employment Recovery in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic*. US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2020/article/employment-recovery.htm>.

2 Handwerker et al., 2020. *Employment Recovery*.

3 Hanson, M. 2021, September 19. K-12 School Enrollment & Student Population Statistics. Education Data Initiative. Retrieved from <https://educationdata.org/k12-enrollment-statistics>.

4 Khalfani, R. 2020, December 18. *State of Working Georgia: 2020 COVID Crisis Year End Review*. Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://gbpi.org/state-of-working-georgia-2020-covid-crisis-year-end-review/>.

5 Khalfani, 2020, *State of Working Georgia*.

6 Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. 2021, November 10. *Tracking the COVID-19 Economy's Effects on Food, Housing, and Employment Hardships*. Retrieved from <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-economys-effects-on-food-housing-and>.

## SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA

Three challenges stand in the way of ensuring an inclusive educational and economic recovery for all Georgians:

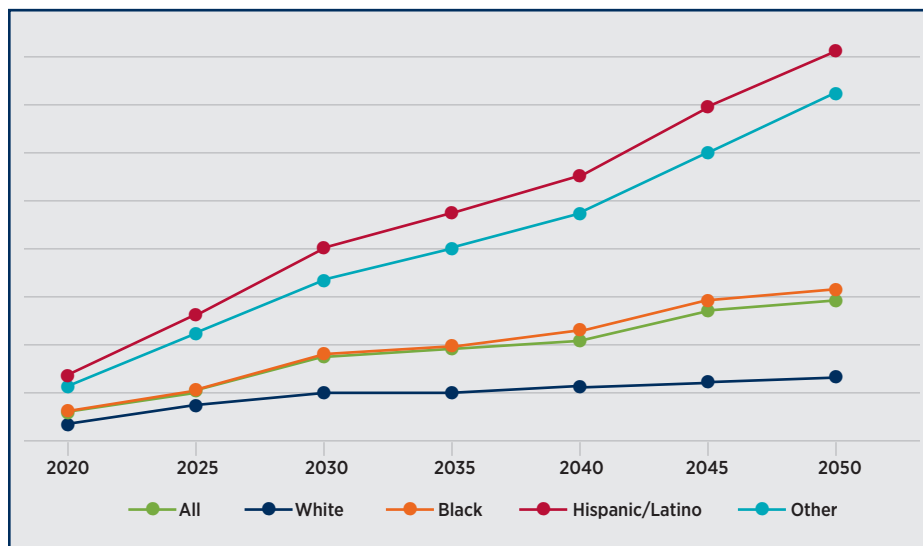
1. Shifting demographics,
2. System inequities and structural barriers, and
3. Lack of bold, systemic, and coordinated policy action.

### Demographics

The number of residents who have earned post-secondary credentials — degrees, certificates, or technical diplomas — has grown by 6.4% since 2010.<sup>7</sup> Despite the progress made in the last 12 years, the state's current post-secondary attainment rate of 52.8% still lags the number of post-secondary credentials needed to satisfy labor market demand by 2025: 60%.<sup>8</sup>

According to the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, Georgia will be a majority non-White state by 2029. While the Black population is projected to grow at the state average through 2050, the number of Latino Georgians could increase by as much as 82% (see Figure 1.1). Currently, Latinos have the lowest post-secondary completion rate of any racial/ethnic group in Georgia (see Figure 1.2).

**FIGURE 1.1 PROJECTED POPULATION GROWTH IN GEORGIA, 2020-2025<sup>9</sup>**



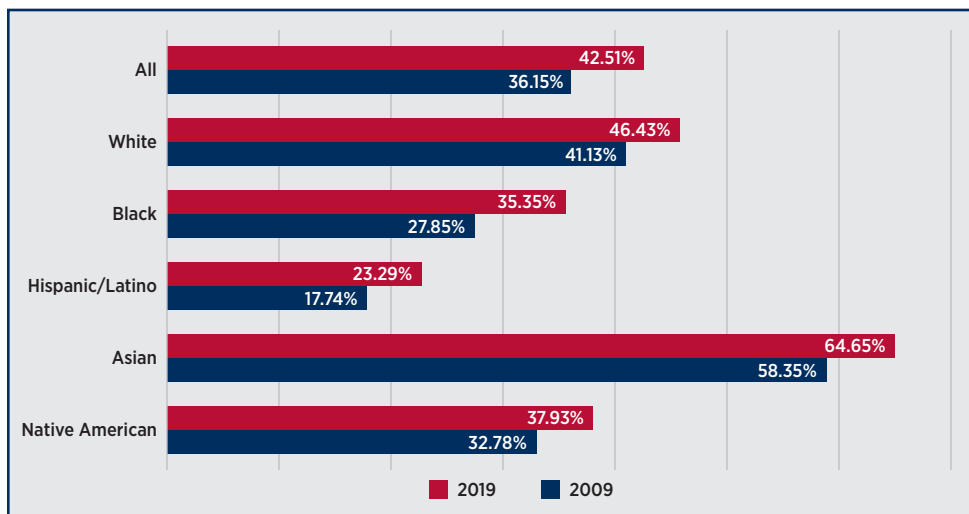
<sup>7</sup> Lumina Foundation. n.d. *A Stronger Nation: Georgia's 2021 Progress Report*. Retrieved from <https://luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/2021/#/progress/state/GA>.

<sup>8</sup> Lumina Foundation, n.d., *A Stronger Nation*.

<sup>9</sup> Governor's Office of Planning and Budget. 2020, October. State Projections by Race, 2020 to 2065. Retrieved from <https://opb.georgia.gov/document/document/state-projections-race-2020-2065/download>.



**FIGURE 1.2 GROWTH IN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN GEORGIA BY RACE AND ETHNICITY: 2009 VERSUS 2019<sup>10</sup>**



The demographic charts illustrate three important trends that will affect Georgia's long-term education and workforce efforts.

1. The retirement of skilled workers could destabilize the economy if a group of talented and well-skilled Georgians does not replace them. Georgia will need to replace about the 18% of working residents currently aged 45 to 59 who are eligible to retire between 2025 and 2035.<sup>11</sup>
2. Over the next 10 years, demographers estimate that most of the population growth will come from people of color. By 2029, Georgia will be a majority non-White state.<sup>12</sup> Since people of color earn post-secondary credentials at lower rates than their White peers, state policies and local practices will need to address social, economic, and educational barriers to success.
3. While fall enrollments at Georgia's public colleges have increased by nearly 93,000 students since 2011, male student enrollment has declined compared to female enrollment.<sup>13</sup> If this trend continues, fewer males will receive post-secondary credentials. Because some women with post-secondary credentials choose underemployment or workforce exit to provide child and eldercare, gender-based differences in post-secondary completion will have a negative impact on family well-being and state economic growth.

Addressing age, race, and gender inequities is essential to mitigate the demographic challenges that could stymie Georgia's efforts to successfully rebound from the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Equity – Individual Needs and Collective Impact**

The Ga Partnership defines “equity” as equipping Georgians with the tools and resources necessary to be full participants in society and the workforce.<sup>14</sup> Equity-focused policies and practices strategically provide needed resources to youth and adults who require them. Such resources are available to all students based on individual need, as well as those from historically underserved groups.

<sup>10</sup> Lumina Foundation, n.d., *A Stronger Nation*.

<sup>11</sup> Atlanta Federal Reserve Bank. 2021, November 19. Labor Force Participation Dynamics. Retrieved from <https://www.atlantafed.org/chcs/labor-force-participation-dynamics>.

<sup>12</sup> Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, 2020, State Projections by Race, 2020 to 2065.

<sup>13</sup> The Ga Partnership used the IPEDS Statistical Tables Tool to search Georgia's public college enrollments by gender and race/ethnicity in fall 2011 and fall 2020. The website is <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/InstitutionList.aspx>.

<sup>14</sup> Travers, J. 2018, October 1. *What Is Resource Equity?* Education Resource Strategies. Retrieved from <https://www.erstrategies.org/cms/files/4039-what-is-resource-equity-oct-2018.pdf>.



When discussing equity, the Ga Partnership defines several attributes that affect access and opportunity, such as the following:

- |                           |                 |                      |
|---------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| ■ Age                     | ■ Family wealth | ■ Personal income    |
| ■ Disability              | ■ Gender        | ■ Race and ethnicity |
| ■ English language status | ■ Geography     |                      |

One of the most well-documented examples of inequities driving outcomes is in early learning.

Compared to their more privileged peers, low-income and non-White toddlers are more likely to have learning deficits surface before entering school.<sup>15</sup> Research suggests multiple interrelated factors contribute to gaps in school readiness: family income, access to health care, and enrollment in high-quality early learning programs.<sup>16</sup>

Low-income and minority students are more likely to enter kindergarten already behind their more affluent White peers. Most public-school children in Georgia are low-income (about 62%) and non-White.

With readiness gaps already present before students enter kindergarten, it follows that only 32% of Georgia's fourth-grade students are proficient readers.<sup>17</sup> Students who are reading on grade level in fourth grade are more likely to graduate high school and experience positive post-secondary outcomes than their peers who are not ready to read at age eight, regardless of race or income.<sup>18, 19</sup>

Equity-focused strategies would address the root causes for why students are not ready for school and intervene to ensure that more youth are ready to read and succeed. Since more than two-thirds of fourth-grade students are reading below grade level, equity-focused strategies are imperative to accelerate opportunity for all students.

### Responding to Current Challenges

Historical differences in achievement and opportunity have left Georgia vulnerable to recessions and pandemics. While the pandemic interrupted learning for all, unequal access to high-quality educational opportunities does not just affect youth that encounter systemic barriers to learning. In fact, the pandemic-induced interruptions give policymakers and practitioners the space and opportunity to dig into the systemic changes that an equity-focused mindset requires and ultimately champions.

To receive funds from the federal American Rescue Plan Act, the federal government required the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) to produce a state plan for addressing interrupted learning caused by the pandemic. The plan describes the department's priorities and funded activities through September 2024, which include:<sup>20</sup>

15 Meloy, B., M. Gardner, and L. Darling-Hammond. 2019, January 31. *Untangling the Evidence of Preschool Effectiveness: Insights for Policymakers*. Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Untangling\\_Evidence\\_Preschool\\_Effectiveness\\_BRIEF.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Untangling_Evidence_Preschool_Effectiveness_BRIEF.pdf).

16 Garcia, E., and E. Weiss. 2017, September 27. *Education Inequalities at the Starting Gate*. Economic Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.epi.org/publication/education-inequalities-at-the-school-starting-gate/>.

17 National Center for Education Statistics. 2019 *Reading State Snapshot*. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2019/pdf/2020014GA4.pdf>.

18 Piontek, O. 2021, February 4. *Predicting Students' Academic Trajectory from Third-Grade Reading Scores*. Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Retrieved from <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/predicting-students-academic-trajectory-third-grade-test-scores>.

19 Beaudette, P., K. Chalasani, and S. Rauschenberg. 2017, March 22. *How Do Students' 3rd Grade Reading Levels Relate to Their ACT/SAT Performance and Chance of Graduating from High School?* Governor's Office of Student Achievement. Retrieved from [https://gosa.georgia.gov/sites/gosa.georgia.gov/files/related\\_files/press\\_release/3rd%20Grade%20Reading-Graduation-ACT-SAT%20Analysis%20Final%2003222017.pdf](https://gosa.georgia.gov/sites/gosa.georgia.gov/files/related_files/press_release/3rd%20Grade%20Reading-Graduation-ACT-SAT%20Analysis%20Final%2003222017.pdf).

20 For a full discussion of GaDOE's state plan, see the following: GaDOE. 2021, July 21. *Accelerating Learning, Personalizing Supports, and Promoting Opportunity*. Retrieved from <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/07/Georgia-ARP-ESSER-State-Plan.pdf>. For general information about the American Rescue Plan Act in Georgia, see the following: Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. 2010. FAQ: Federal COVID Relief Funding for K-12 Education in Georgia. Retrieved from: <https://1hlp161d4zqn27aufu3ikxut-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CARES-FAQ-Final.pdf>.

1. Accelerated learning: Addressing unfinished learning and barriers to student success,
2. Personalized supports: Deepening and differentiating support for students and educators, and
3. Promoting opportunity: Expanding access to accelerated and extended learning opportunities.

Federal legislation also required district leaders and charter school executives to articulate their plans for how they would spend COVID relief funds. An initial review of school districts' American Rescue Plan applications suggests a wide variety of funded initiatives. Generally, the strategies fall into three categories:

- Ensuring continuity of instructional and student support services,
- Expanding access to accelerated learning opportunities, and
- Covering costs related to instructional software, digital learning platforms, school transportation, and facilities.

### **ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA**

Georgia is well-positioned for education and workforce revitalization. The number of Georgians with post-secondary credentials has increased steadily over the last 10 years. The Technical College System of Georgia has partnered with industries to develop high-demand credential and noncredit workforce programs.<sup>21</sup> GaDOE and numerous school districts have committed to career pathways that lead to industry-recognized credentials and align with community and technical college programs.<sup>22</sup>

State policymakers and education leaders should build on these strengths and advance efforts to increase equity and opportunity for all learners, but especially the most vulnerable Georgians. The infusion of federal COVID relief funds could help launch coordinated efforts across the birth-to-work continuum.

State leaders and education advocates need to commit to an ambitious 10-year goal — 65% of Georgians ages 25 to 64 will hold a post-secondary credential by the end of 2032. Achieving this Big Goal will require a dual focus — retooling investments to address immediate needs and coordinating efforts over time to ensure that all Georgians can participate in the state's economic prosperity.

The long-range plan could draw on the research originally outlined in the EdQuest Georgia<sup>23</sup> report produced by the Ga Partnership in collaboration with 30+ state agencies and advocacy organizations. A comprehensive plan could anchor efforts toward a common set of education and workforce goals.

Recommendations below could start a conversation on how to create a more resilient and prosperous Georgia.

21 Technical College System of Georgia. n.d. Sector Partnerships. Retrieved from <https://www.tcsg.edu/worksource/sector-partnerships/>.

22 GaDOE. n.d. Career Clusters and Pathway Courses. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/CTAE/Pages/cluster-pathway-courses.aspx>.

23 For more information, please visit <https://www.edquestga.org/>.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

### ACT NOW - ADDRESSING IMMEDIATE CHALLENGES

1. Review state policies to assess if they support or impede the educational opportunities of underserved groups. During the landscape scan, prioritize the following groups:
  - Black and Latino youth
  - Low-income students
  - English language learners
  - Residents of rural communities
  - Working adults who have not completed post-secondary training
2. Identify the instructional practices and student support services that accelerate learning. The process of identifying and implementing promising practices could provoke a deeper discussion about how to reshape funding and state-level guidance.
3. Communicate the benefits of coordinated strategies (to consumers). Disconnected services and supports could discourage some Georgians from making the next step in their educational journey. For instance, high school students could benefit from enrolling in apprenticeships. However, not all families know about efforts to award post-secondary credit for completing apprenticeships. The gap in knowledge could result in fewer students enrolling in high-demand, career-aligned programs.

### INTERMEDIATE - CONFRONTING STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

1. Assess the capacity of staff to implement equity-focused strategies and to remove barriers that threaten student growth. Some of the gaps are related to instructional delivery.
2. Revise the Quality Basic Education formula to assign state funding based on student characteristics. The approach, as recommended by the Deal Education Reform Commission in 2015, would provide base funding for each public-school student with additional funds provided for five groups: K-3 students, high schoolers, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged youth, and English language learners.

### LONG-TERM - DEVELOPING A LONG-RANGE PLAN

GaDOE has articulated a vision for education transformation that includes a focus on providing a well-rounded education that ensures each student receives what they need to succeed.<sup>24</sup>

Although state policymakers and education advocates could learn from grassroots efforts, transformative change is more likely to occur if state and local leaders are committed to a long-range vision for how the education strategies promote community resilience.

1. The education and workforce agenda would provide a roadmap for how to achieve state goals and allows leaders to compare current success against future improvement goals.
2. Local leaders would interpret state priorities and adapt the goals/objectives to their local context.
3. The plan should be a living document, adaptive to changes in social and economic circumstances, especially at the local and regional levels.

<sup>24</sup> For a full description of the GaDOE's vision, *A Roadmap to Reimagining K-12 Education*, see [https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Documents/A\\_Roadmap\\_to\\_Reimagining\\_K-12\\_Education.pdf](https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Documents/A_Roadmap_to_Reimagining_K-12_Education.pdf).



To achieve these goals, leaders across Georgia must rise above the current divisive discourse and focus on the needs of a strong educational system. For example, debates around issues such as critical race theory and masking threaten community cohesion and economic resilience in two ways:

1. By deemphasizing creative thinking, consensus building, and long-range planning, and
2. By discouraging nuanced discussions about the benefits of equity-focused education and workforce strategies.

Leaders across Georgia — state and local, business and education, community and faith — must rise above divisive rhetoric and focus on Georgia's common need for a strong education and economic development system for the prosperity of all Georgians.

Successful, long-range planning can both address immediate needs and allow policymakers and other leaders to make gradual improvements to strategies over a defined period, usually a decade. The remaining issues in the *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2022* focus on barriers to access at various points in the education-work continuum. These issues offer targeted recommendations on how to address immediate needs and develop a long-range plan for Georgia's future.

## ISSUE 2

## UNFINISHED INSTRUCTION – EQUITY THROUGH ACCELERATION

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic.<sup>25</sup> Two weeks later, nearly all school districts had shifted to online-only instruction. By May 6, education leaders in 48 states chose to end the school year early, ending the seven-week virtual learning experiment.<sup>26</sup>

#### EQUITY AT THE FOREFRONT

- Remediation, focusing on foundational skills before engaging current-grade content, contributes to unfinished instruction. Multiple years of remediation can result in students being underprepared for high school and post-secondary opportunities.
- Acceleration is a more equitable instructional model because students receive grade-level instruction with supplemental academic support.
- With nearly \$6 billion in direct K-12 federal funding available, school districts and charter schools should reimagine learning — where, when, and how it takes place.

When students returned to school in fall 2020, teachers started to assess how the pandemic had interrupted student learning. Research studies conducted in fall 2020 and spring 2021 found that the pandemic contributed to learning losses of about four months in reading and five months in mathematics.<sup>27</sup>

Before the pandemic, researchers commonly used the term **learning loss** to describe the reversal of academic progress during summer breaks, especially among non-White and low-income youth related to an absence of enriching out-of-school experiences.<sup>28</sup> During the pandemic, barriers to high-quality learning options contributed to greater learning losses for youth attending high-poverty schools, which disproportionately serve students of color.<sup>29</sup>

The Ga Partnership uses the term **unfinished instruction** instead of learning loss. Unfinished instruction is the “combination of teaching and learning within an academic year that fails to provide students with an opportunity to demonstrate

25 Ducharme, J. 2020, March 11. World Health Organization Declares COVID-19 a “Pandemic.” Here’s What That Means. *Time*. Retrieved from <https://time.com/5791661/who-coronavirus-pandemic-declaration/>.

26 Education Week. 2021, March 4. A Year of COVID-19: What It Looked Like for Schools. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/a-year-of-covid-19-what-it-looked-like-for-schools/2021/03/>.

27 Dorn, E., B. Hancock, J. Sarakatsannis, and E. Viruleg. 2021, July 27. *COVID-19 and Education: The Lingering Effects of Unfinished Learning*. McKinsey. Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-education-the-lingering-effects-of-unfinished-learning>.

28 Lorie, W. 2020, June 9. *Contextualizing COVID-19 “Learning Loss” and “Learning Recovery.”* Center for Assessment. Retrieved from <https://www.nciea.org/blog/school-disruption/contextualizing-covid-19-learning-loss-and-learning-recovery>.

29 Lewis, K., M. Kuhfeld, E. Ruzek, and A. McEachin. 2021, July. *Learning during COVID-19: Reading and Math Achievement in the 2020–2021 School Year*. NWEA. Retrieved from <https://www.nwea.org/research/publication/learning-during-covid-19-reading-and-math-achievement-in-the-2020-2021-school-year/>.

[grade-level] proficiency.”<sup>30</sup> Unfinished instruction recognizes the structural barriers and inequitable practices that stunt student learning, while also acknowledging that **accelerated learning models** and an **equity focus** could address learning gaps.

Unfinished instruction also recognizes the responsibility of state policymakers and district leaders to equip teachers with the resources to drive more equitable opportunities for students.<sup>31</sup> This issue brief examines how schools can **accelerate** student learning, meeting students where they are and ensuring that they perform up to their level of capability.

## SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA

When students are not performing on grade level, schools often focus on foundational skills and content presented in previous grades. This approach is called **remediation**.

An emerging approach looks forward, not backward. Teachers deliver grade-level content while interventionists or tutors provide supplemental academic support. This approach is called **accelerated learning**.

Accelerated learning usually evokes images of high-performing students taking advantage of early college and career opportunities. Accelerated learning can also involve personalizing instruction based on students’ needs, regardless of background or current performance. Since the starting line differs for each student, accelerated learning models could address unfinished learning, meeting students where they are and ensuring that they perform to their own level of capability. This section describes how technology and mixed-ability grouping can accelerate learning for all students while maintaining an equity focus.

### Education Technology

Artificial intelligence and machine learning have contributed to a significant increase in “smart” educational software.<sup>32</sup> The wider adoption of interactive, standards-aligned applications has provided teachers and school leaders with valuable instructional tools to assess skill mastery and monitor student progress.

A recent study analyzed learning growth for the 2 million students using Zearn, an online math program that supplements classroom instruction.<sup>33</sup> When students are not progressing through lessons or when they provide multiple incorrect answers related to a single instructional standard, the application sends a “struggle alert” to teachers. The prompt allows classroom educators and academic interventionists to provide immediate academic support. The software application enriches students’ instructional experiences while acting as a **formative assessment**, a tool that helps educators identify learning gaps and personalize instruction based on student needs.<sup>34</sup>

Schools cannot accelerate learning for all students without diagnosing learning needs. School and district leaders have used universal screeners and formative assessments, especially in elementary classrooms, to identify students’ knowledge and skills gaps.<sup>35</sup> Increasingly, formative assessments are technology-based,

30 Hancock, A. 2021, May 21. *Why Unfinished Instruction Is More Accurate and Equitable Than Learning Loss*. Retrieved from <http://www.unbounded.org/blog/why-unfinished-instruction-is-more-accurate-and-equitable-than-learning-loss>.

31 Hancock, 2021, *Why Unfinished Instruction Is More Accurate and Equitable Than Learning Loss*.

32 Karandish, D. 2021, June 23. 7 Benefits of AI in Education. *THE Journal*. Retrieved from <https://thejournal.com/articles/2021/06/23/7-benefits-of-ai-in-education.aspx>.

33 TNTP. 2021, May 23. *Accelerate, Don't Remediate: New Evidence from Elementary Math Classrooms*. Retrieved from [https://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP\\_Accelerate\\_Dont\\_Remediate\\_FINAL.pdf](https://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP_Accelerate_Dont_Remediate_FINAL.pdf).

34 Beard, E. 2021, July 20. *What Is Formative Assessment?* NWEA. Retrieved from <https://www.nwea.org/blog/2021/what-is-formative-assessment/>.

35 Klint, A. 2020, September 10. *Understanding Different Types of Assessments*. Illuminate Education. Retrieved from <https://www.illuminateed.com/blog/2020/09/types-of-assessments/>.



providing authoritative recommendations that support personalized learning for each student.<sup>36</sup> Digital assessments could “free up” time for educators to focus on personalized instruction, for both for high-performing and struggling students.

Educators also can integrate technology into their lessons to deepen student learning. (See the sidebar titled Effective Use of Technology for a description of one instructional technology model.)

### Student-Centered Instruction

When starting small-group activities, teachers often group students according to perceived ability. However, emerging research suggests that ability grouping can perpetuate achievement gaps because struggling students do not learn alongside their higher-achieving peers.<sup>38</sup> The division of groups by performance level can also negatively affect classroom culture by stigmatizing academic struggles and reducing students’ self-esteem and motivation.<sup>39</sup>

If implemented effectively, **mixed-ability groups** can accelerate learning by establishing the same rigorous instructional expectations for all students. Students work together through what educators call “productive struggle,” solving problems that do not have clear, convenient answers. High expectations and the open-ended nature of this instructional format can result in accelerated learning for all students.

A second engagement model involves soliciting student feedback. **Student surveys and self-assessments** can signal that teachers and leaders value student perspectives. Also, the results can empower teachers to tailor instruction to student interests. A focus on self-reflection results in students taking ownership of their learning, setting goals, and developing post-secondary plans.<sup>40</sup>

### EFFECTIVE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Ruben Puentedura created the SAMR Model to show how teachers can integrate technology and multimedia resources into their lessons.<sup>37</sup>

The first two stages of the model – substitution and augmentation – supplement learning by requiring students to use technology and multimedia resources.

During the other two stages – modification and redefinition – teachers empower students to redesign lessons and redefine learning outcomes.

Imagine the following scenario: A history teacher asks students to present on the Civil Rights Movement. Students use PowerPoint as a presentation aid (substitution). The teacher augments the assignment by requiring students to show a video clip or share music that illustrates one of the movement’s key themes. Students could modify instruction when they ask audience members to provide immediate feedback using the school’s online learning platform. Through redefinition, students complete a year-end multimedia project that incorporates the feedback from peers.

36 Bullmaster-Day, M L. 2021, August 23. *Strategies for Dynamic Formative Assessment with Digital Tools*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Retrieved from [https://s3.amazonaws.com/prod-hmhco-vmg-craftcms-public/White\\_Paper\\_Digital\\_Formative\\_Assessment.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/prod-hmhco-vmg-craftcms-public/White_Paper_Digital_Formative_Assessment.pdf).

37 Terada, Y. 2020, May 4. *A Powerful Model for Understanding Good Tech Integration*. Edutopia. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/article/powerful-model-understanding-good-tech-integration>.

38 Francis, B., B. Taylor, and A. Tereshchenko. 2019, August 9. *Reassessing “Ability” Grouping: Improving Practice for Equity and Attainment*. London: Taylor & Francis Group.

39 Advancement Courses. 2019, December 19. *Ability Grouping: A Primer*. Retrieved from <https://blog.advancementcourses.com/articles/ability-grouping/>.

40 Mercer-Golden, Z. n.d. *A Guide to Student Surveys about Teaching*. Panorama Education. Retrieved from <https://www.panoramaed.com/blog/guide-to-student-surveys-about-teaching>.

## ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

Students of color and youth attending high-poverty schools are more likely to endure cycles of remediation and inequity. Disrupting these cycles will require school and district leaders to redesign instruction, address outdated school structures, and provide personalized support for students and teachers. Federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds could provide the resources necessary for schools to pursue accelerated learning models.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

#### IMMEDIATE ACTIONS – THE MINDSET SHIFT

##### 1. Supplemental Learning Resources

- School district leaders should explore the use of “smart” software. These applications serve three purposes: (1) gamifying learning for students, thereby increasing engagement and interest; (2) generating robust performance data without formally assessing students; and (3) providing actionable recommendations for how to improve students’ mastery of skills and grade-level content.<sup>41</sup>
- While smart software can support accelerated learning, district leaders should do their homework. A recent report demonstrated that some educational technology companies base their claims for improving student achievement on “shoddy research.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, district leaders should perform rigorous, ongoing program evaluations before renewing contracts with software providers.

##### 2. Curriculum Review

- Teachers and building leaders should evaluate their capacity to deliver accelerated instruction. Increasing rigor without providing supplemental academic supports could reinforce the learning barriers currently encountered by students of color and low-income youth.
- School and district leaders should assess whether the current educational technologies and instructional models promote access to high-quality opportunities for all students. Digital assessments could provide educators with the formative assessment data necessary to differentiate instruction for students. As building staff begin using these tools, a second round of review and evaluation could result in more effective accelerated learning models.

##### 3. Policy Audit

- State policymakers and agency leaders should ask themselves whether state laws and regulations support or impede accelerated learning models. Policies could hamper accelerated learning in subtle ways. For instance, local leaders might not adopt performance assessments as a nontraditional way to reward credit because state rules do not clarify how to structure these alternatives.

*Continued on page 12*

41 PowerSchool. 2021, January 22. 9 Benefits of Using Formative Assessments to Increase Student Growth. Retrieved from <https://www.powerschool.com/resources/blog/9-benefits-of-using-formative-assessment-to-increase-student-growth/>.

42 Mathewson, T.G., and S. Butrymowicz. 2020, May 20. *Ed Tech Companies Promise Results, But Their Claims Are Often Based on Shoddy Research*. Hechinger Report. Retrieved from <https://hechingerreport.org/ed-tech-companies-promise-results-but-their-claims-are-often-based-on-shoddy-research/>.

*Continued*

## **INTERMEDIATE ACTIONS – EQUITY AND LEARNER-CENTERED STRATEGIES**

### **1. Performance Assessments**

- Performance assessments measure students' ability to apply what they have learned in a unit or course. Teachers might create short-answer or essay prompts as performance assessments. Also, students could complete portfolios that include several distinct and standards-aligned learning goals. Portfolios are authentic learning tools because they require students to synthesize what they have learned over a semester or year. School and district leaders could use performance assessments to accelerate students' accumulation of credits, leading to early enrollment in college and career experiences.<sup>43</sup>

### **2. State Resource Clearinghouse**

- The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) plans to use federal COVID relief funds to expand access to virtual professional learning opportunities for teachers. GaDOE could create a resource clearinghouse, a platform that links to curated resources educators can use to create equity-focused instructional environments. Similarly, GaDOE could provide a forum for school and district leaders to communicate about their experiences implementing digital assessments and learning software applications. In both cases, practitioners could engage with one another to identify the most effective and equity-focused resources.

## **LONG-TERM – SHARED COMMITMENT TO SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION**

### **1. Learning Time Reform**

The pandemic demonstrated that learning happens everywhere and at any time. Extending learning beyond the school day could help students who need supplemental academic support. In addition, redesigning school schedules could ensure that teachers receive high-quality, job-embedded professional learning. While these changes would disrupt current learning models, reforming instructional time could result in students and teachers receiving the resources and supports they need to accelerate learning.

The pandemic allowed practitioners to push the “reset” button on teaching and learning. Digital assessments and learning software allow educators to monitor student performance and identify specific educational standards that students have not yet mastered. By clarifying where students struggle, educators and school leaders can provide grade-level content while targeting specific instructional needs. With the infusion of federal COVID relief funds, school systems can adopt progress-monitoring strategies and instructional models that embed high academic expectations for all students, regardless of students' current achievement level.

<sup>43</sup> Maler, A., J. Adams, D. Burns, M. Kaul, M. Saunders, and C. Thompson. 2020, October 13. *Using Performance Assessments to Support Student Learning*. Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/cpac-performance-assessments-support-student-learning-brief>.



# ISSUE 3

## NON-ACADEMIC BARRIERS – THE SCHOOL’S ROLE

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

In 2019, nearly 20% of Georgia’s school-age children lived in households with incomes at or below the federal poverty level,<sup>44</sup> and 59% percent of youth qualified for free or reduced-price lunch.<sup>45</sup> Many of these students encounter **non-academic barriers to learning**, health and environmental conditions that impede their ability to learn, engage with teachers and peers, and succeed in school. Figure 3.1 summarizes chronic health conditions that affect students’ learning and quality of life.

To address non-academic barriers to learning, school leaders must consider how the following five social determinants of health affect student well-being.

**FIGURE 3.1 COMMON STUDENT HEALTH CONDITIONS**

PHYSICAL HEALTH	BEHAVIORAL HEALTH
Food insecurity Hearing loss Malnutrition Poor dental health Uncontrolled asthma Vision problems	Anxiety Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder Depression

1. Neighborhood — Physical environment where youth learn and live
2. Community — Social context, relationships, and support networks
3. Economic Stability — Socioeconomic status, housing, and food security
4. Education — Access to and quality of education and workforce opportunities
5. Health Care — Access to high-quality physical and behavioral health services<sup>46</sup>

One or a combination of social determinants can create or aggravate non-academic barriers. School building staff can identify health conditions through behavior or observation. Environmental factors — family and community poverty, violence, abuse, neglect, and trauma — are more difficult to observe because they are not always the obvious root cause of behavioral issues.

The pandemic has spotlighted the importance of addressing non-academic barriers as a necessary first step to prepare students for accelerated learning. Federal COVID relief funding distributed to local districts, county governments, and public health agencies could help foster a community-wide response to poverty, low health care access, and other areas of instability.

44 Annie E. Casey Foundation. 2021, June 21. 2021 *KIDS COUNT Data Book: State Trends in Child Well-Being*. Retrieved from <https://www.aecf.org/resources/2021-kids-count-data-book>.

45 Georgia Department of Education. 2019, October. Free Reduced Lunch (FRL) Fiscal Year 2020 Data Report. Retrieved from [https://oraapp.doe.k12.ga.us/ows-bin/owa/fte\\_pack\\_frl001\\_public.entry\\_form](https://oraapp.doe.k12.ga.us/ows-bin/owa/fte_pack_frl001_public.entry_form).

46 Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. n.d. Healthy People 2030: Social Determinants of Health. Retrieved from <https://health.gov/healthypeople/objectives-and-data/social-determinants-health>.

At the local level, school staff identify learning barriers by observing student behavior. By reviewing the background factors affecting behaviors, school specialists provide an initial diagnosis and recommend specific interventions. Some of these interventions are called **wraparound supports**, student-centered resources that address one or more learning barriers. School and district leaders often partner with regional agencies and community organizations to deliver wraparound supports.

So, what's missing? An **equity-centered discussion** is needed about the school's role in identifying family and community barriers, diagnosing student needs, and delivering wraparound supports. This issue brief describes how schools can address learning barriers through a whole-community approach, an engagement model in which the school is a resource hub for expanding access to community resources.

### SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA

Individuals, families, and communities respond differently to system factors, such as income inequality or lack of access to social, educational, and public health services. Thus, barriers to learning can vary from student to student.

Regardless of student needs, schools are the primary resource for students and families experiencing hardship.

### Identifying Barriers

Schools can identify and address these barriers to learning in a variety of ways. In terms of basic health, the state requires parents to file a completed Form 3300 for children enrolling in Georgia public schools for the first time.<sup>48</sup> The form identifies vision, hearing, dental, or nutritional challenges that, if not addressed, could create learning barriers.

Georgia and North Carolina are the only two states in the region that do not require ongoing vision, hearing, and dental screenings.<sup>49</sup> Since physical health conditions can emerge after youth enter kindergarten, not requiring ongoing screening could result in more Georgia children being underprepared to learn.

To help treat medical conditions, school districts can directly bill Medicaid for services provided by licensed school nurses. School nurses can also refer students to community primary care providers that take managed Medicaid plans.<sup>50</sup>

### EQUITY AT THE FOREFRONT

- Students of color and low-income youth, especially those living in communities with concentrated poverty (30% or more of families living below the poverty line) are more likely to experience non-academic barriers than their White or more advantaged peers.<sup>47</sup>
- Equity-focused interventions target resources toward the greatest student and community needs. They address the root causes of student challenges, including underlying physical and behavioral health conditions, family instability, and community poverty.
- Equity-focused practices can also increase student resilience by integrating academic and social-emotional learning into the classroom curriculum.

47 McDaniels, A. 2018, August 22. *Building Community Schools Systems: Removing Barriers to Success in US Public Schools*. Center for American Progress. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/building-community-schools-systems/>.

48 Georgia Department of Public Health Rule 511-5-6-.02 governs the filing of the Form 3300 certificate.

49 Gracy, D., A. Fabian, C.H. Basch, M. Scigliano, S.A. MacLean, R.K. MacKenzie, and I.E. Redlener. 2018. Missed Opportunities: Do States Require Screening of Children for Health Conditions That Interfere with Learning? *PloS One*, 13(1).

50 Georgia Department of Community Health. 2021, October 1. *Policies and Procedures for Children's Intervention School Services*. Retrieved from <https://dch.georgia.gov/document/document/21ciss-fact-sheet-final/download>.

### Addressing Barriers

Beyond basic medical screenings, the education community has come to recognize the role of schools in supporting student health, safety, and well-being by developing integrated student support initiatives. These offer specific services and supports to students and their families to build a foundation for academic success. These initiatives, referred to as community schools and wraparound supports as well as integrated student supports models, help schools connect struggling children with secure housing, medical care, food assistance, tutoring, and other critical supports. In some cases, assistance may go beyond student needs to provide critical services to parents and families.<sup>51</sup>

At the local level, many districts and schools offer wraparound services both within the school building during the school day and by coordinating services within the community. School partners refer students and families to these resources. For example, school-level staff can refer families to community resources that address hunger and homelessness.

In terms of mental health, many districts have used federal Title IV, Part A funds and more recently federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to identify students who are struggling with anxiety, depression, or suicidal ideation. While most schools do not have dedicated mental health staff to provide therapeutic interventions, funded strategies often involve referrals to out-of-school mental health providers.

The Georgia Department of Education's (GaDOE) Office of Whole Child Supports assists districts, schools, and communities in identifying and addressing student non-academic barriers to success while expanding learning opportunities. The office coordinates mental health and well-being, integrated wellness, school safety, and wraparound support services. GaDOE developed the Whole Child Toolkit as a "one-stop" location for information for schools, districts, and communities about how to support these coordinated efforts.<sup>52</sup>

**FIGURE 3.2 DISTRICT EXAMPLES**

COOK COUNTY – WELL READ/WELL FED INITIATIVE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Addresses nutrition and early literacy for the county's age five-and-under residents.</li> <li>■ Expands community access to food pantries and community gardens.</li> <li>■ Delivers content to parents on how to support early language development.</li> <li>■ Aligns with another early intervention program, the Baby Hornets.</li> </ul>
GLYNN COUNTY – PARTNERSHIPS WITH COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS (CIS) AND GLYNN COUNTY HOUSING AUTHORITY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ The original focus of the CIS partnership was improving graduation rates. After reviewing academic and behavioral data, the school system and CIS expanded efforts to address students' behavioral and mental health needs, as well as covering basic needs.</li> <li>■ The CIS case management approach looks at student performance and how the environment affects opportunities for students to succeed.</li> <li>■ A separate partnership with the Glynn County Housing Authority provides early-intervention services at two elementary schools.</li> <li>■ The school system also uses a portion of Title IV, Part A funds from the federal government to support site coordinators.</li> </ul>

51 For a detailed evaluation of the impacts of integrated student support initiatives and wraparound services, see [https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/ISS\\_ChildTrends\\_February2018.pdf](https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/ISS_ChildTrends_February2018.pdf).

52 GaDOE. n.d. *Whole Child Toolkit*. Retrieved from <https://www.georgiainsights.com/wholechild.html>.



## ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

The pandemic has illuminated new opportunities for expanding the use of wraparound supports to address non-academic learning barriers. Wraparound supports are a smart investment, with every dollar invested yielding at least \$3 of savings in government spending on social, educational, public health, and corrections programs.<sup>53</sup>

With the infusion of federal COVID relief dollars, districts and schools are uniquely positioned to pilot new non-academic supports and evaluate what strategies they should continue after the stimulus funds expire.

Often, districts prioritize professional learning for educators related to managing classroom behaviors. These trainings focus on minimizing negative student behaviors. An equity mindset instead looks to identify the most appropriate intervention for each student, not correction or reversal of behaviors. Focusing on outward behavior instead of the root causes behind the behaviors may identify the challenges, but the barriers still exist.

School systems have a short window to partner, pilot, and evaluate the effectiveness of their wraparound supports. After ESSER funds expire, local districts will need to find alternative funding sources or lean on community partners more to deliver the supports once provided in the school building.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

#### IMMEDIATE – IMAGINATION

School and district leaders should consider the following steps to identify needs and implement programs.

##### 1. Needs Assessment

- Solicit feedback via student, parent, and community surveys.

##### 2. Rank Needs

- Select interventions by identifying the two or three greatest challenges faced by students and families based on available data.
- Explore whether problems are new or perennial. The answer will affect the size, scope, and duration of interventions.

##### 3. Capacity Testing

- Do building staff have the interest, time, knowledge, and expertise to implement programs? The answer will affect the quality and impact of interventions. Schools should partner with community groups with the capacity and track record to pull off large-scale interventions.
- Evaluate school and district readiness to introduce new student services or expand existing supports.

*Continued on page 17*

<sup>53</sup> Bowden, A.B. and J.W. Gish. 2021, April 26. *Small Investments for Big Gains: Transforming Wraparound Services into an Engine of Opportunity*. Brookings Institution. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2021/04/26/small-investments-for-big-gains-transforming-wraparound-services-into-an-engine-of-opportunity/>.

*Continued from page 16*

### **INTERMEDIATE – IMPLEMENTATION**

#### **1. Program Pilots**

- Pilot wraparound supports using federal COVID relief funding.
- Identify goals and metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of student interventions.

#### **2. Evidence-Based Interventions**

- Refine current Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) strategies to include a community assets approach to student services. MTSS is a framework that identifies students' academic, social, and behavioral needs and provides proactive support to address them.
- Adapted MTSS protocols should allow clinicians or trained building staff to identify student risk factors, accounting for specific health and environmental challenges (to avoid misdiagnosis) until they can provide an evidence-based diagnosis. All students would receive Tier I interventions, such as routine vision, dental, and physical exams. Some students would receive Tier II or Tier III school interventions and/or referrals to community-based resources.
- Develop quality control protocols and safeguards against misdiagnosis. Schools need to avoid imposing new learning obstacles while attempting to address previously identified barriers.

### **LONG-TERM – INSTITUTIONALIZATION**

#### **1. Financial Sustainability**

- District leaders should leverage federal formula funds to continue the delivery of wraparound services.
- State policymakers should create separate funding sources to prioritize non-academic and wraparound supports.

The pandemic has placed additional stress on school systems to accelerate student learning and to mitigate the effect of non-academic barriers to learning. School systems vary in their ability to deliver wraparound resources to students. As a community hub, schools can fulfill one of three roles: deliverer, partner, or referrer. To the extent possible, school personnel should determine where the community resources are and collaborate with partners that have the expertise and capacity to address the out-of-school factors that stifle student learning. While federal COVID relief funds will temporarily expand access to wraparound services in many districts, system leaders should be proactive and seek out partners to sustain the most impactful strategies after the federal funds lapse.

## ISSUE 4

## IMPROVING SCHOOL CULTURE – THE IMPERATIVE OF SCHOOL LEADERS

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

The importance of school principals in improving student performance has long been underestimated.<sup>54</sup> While teacher quality is the most important school-related factor influencing student achievement,<sup>55</sup> the role of the principal in creating the right conditions for learning cannot be overstated. School leaders are responsible for all aspects of student learning both inside and outside the classroom. In fact, research shows that principals play a significant role in recruiting and retaining effective teachers and ensuring their success in the classroom through maintaining a positive school climate, motivating school staff, and enhancing teacher practices.<sup>56</sup>

Amidst the pandemic, school leaders have more responsibilities than ever. As districts, schools, educators, and students look to emerge from the pandemic, a healthy school climate can empower accelerated learning, the delivery of non-academic support services, and increased family and community engagement.<sup>57</sup> By inviting stakeholders — teachers, students, parents, and community members — to become involved in improving the school's health, vitality, and success, school leaders can co-create the conditions for safe and supportive learning environments. This facilitative approach to cultural change helps stakeholders identify school needs and develop a shared commitment to achieving common goals.<sup>58</sup>

**Culture** refers to the norms and beliefs held by educators, students, parents, and the community that affect whether students succeed.<sup>60</sup>

A focus on **climate** — the ways that culture is animated in the school building — allows stakeholders to evaluate the success of their efforts.

*“A lot of times people think school climate is something you work on and take care of so you can get to the real work of teaching and learning, but what we find is learning is inherently social and emotional. If students don’t feel safe and engaged, they aren’t learning.”*

– Elaine Allensworth,  
director of UChicago’s Consortium for School Research<sup>59</sup>

54 Grissom, J.A., A. Egalite, and C. Lindsay. 2021, February. *How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research*. Wallace Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/how-principals-affect-students-and-schools-a-systematic-synthesis-of-two-decades-of-research.aspx>.

55 Rice, J.K. 2003. *Teacher Quality: Understanding the Effectiveness of Teacher Attributes*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

56 Levin, S., and K. Bradley. 2019, March 19. *Understanding and Addressing Principal Turnover: A Review of the Research*. Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals.

57 Council for Children’s Rights. 2019, July 18. *The Effects of a Positive School Environment*. Retrieved from <https://www.cfcrights.org/the-effects-of-a-positive-school-environment/>.

58 NAESP Staff. 2020, March 5. Shifting from Parental Involvement to Parental Engagement. National Association of Elementary School Principals. Retrieved from <https://www.naesp.org/blog/shifting-from-parental-involvement-to-parental-engagement/>.

59 Wiener, R. 2018, August 1. *Why School Climate Should Be Every Principal’s Top Priority*. Aspen Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/why-school-climate-should-be-every-principals-top-priority/>.

60 Shafer, L. 2018, July 23. *What Makes a Good School Culture?* Harvard Graduate School of Education. Retrieved from <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/18/07/what-makes-good-school-culture>.

This issue brief summarizes how school leaders can hone their skills as cultural change agents and encourage school and community stakeholders to participate in making the building culture more vibrant.

### SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA

Across the country and in Georgia, schools are focusing on improving school climate and culture to reduce student discipline problems and increase school safety. A positive learning culture is a significant contributor to improved student outcomes, including test scores, attendance, grade promotion, and graduation rates. The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments offers this definition of a positive school climate:

The product of a school's attention to fostering safety; promoting a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community no matter the setting — from pre-K/elementary school to higher education.<sup>62</sup>

### EQUITY AT THE FOREFRONT

- Equity-focused school leaders create an inclusive culture where students feel a sense of belonging in the school building and in the curriculum, and teachers feel that they have the appropriate resources to meet students' needs.<sup>61</sup>
- By identifying student, school, and community needs, school leaders can deploy resources more effectively and equitably.
- Equity-focused strategies include more job-embedded professional learning and more time set aside for school leaders to collaborate with peers. This approach could have a more immediate impact than initial preparation programs offered by districts and post-secondary institutions.

Empowering school-level leaders to establish and maintain a culture of learning is one of the most important steps districts and schools can take to support student learning and transform the student experience.

### Cultural Norms and Learning

Educators ground their instructional practice in state standards. By interpreting these standards, school leaders and classroom teachers create an academic curriculum. Several high-impact strategies can increase the relevance of the curriculum and drive student learning gains, such as the use of formative assessments, progress monitoring, and teacher collaboration on effective practices.

Culture can reinforce these strategies by focusing on what some practitioners call the “hidden curriculum,” the relationships that individuals have with other people in the school ecosystem.<sup>63</sup> Highly effective school leaders integrate two types of cultural norms:

1. High instructional expectations for all students, and
2. Safe and supportive learning environments for students and teachers.

61 Rimmer, J. 2016, February 23. *Developing Principals as Equity-Centered Instructional Leaders*. Center for Educational Leadership. Retrieved from <https://k-12leadership.org/developing-principals-as-equity-centered-instructional-leaders/>.

62 National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. 2018. *School Climate*. Retrieved from NCSSLE – Topics and Research: <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/safe-and-healthy-students/school-climate>.

63 Jerald, C. 2006, December. *School Culture: The Hidden Curriculum*. Reading Rockets. Retrieved from <https://www.readingrockets.org/article/school-culture-hidden-curriculum>.



Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a critical piece of the school culture puzzle. Just as schools have academic standards and curricula, educators can accelerate learning by equipping students with tools to regulate their emotions, build enduring relationships, and make smart, responsible decisions.<sup>64</sup> While not in opposition to classroom management techniques and student discipline strategies, SEL creates a framework for student engagement and learning that focuses on building emotional intelligence rather than on behavioral modification or negative reinforcement.<sup>65</sup>

Instructionally, equity-focused principals champion academic and social-emotional competencies. Together, these two halves of culture reinforce one another. This focus means curriculum redesign to give all students, but especially traditionally disengaged or underserved students, the opportunity to feel a sense of belonging and representation within the curriculum. Also, building relational trust requires a more inclusive mindset around safety. Most educators, when defining safe and healthy school environments, focus on classroom management and student discipline. While these two focus areas deserve attention, a more positive school culture is distinguished by how it proactively engages students and parents, not simply by the absence of negative outcomes like violence and discipline problems.

Culture also affects professionals in the school building. The adult side of the school culture equation should focus on what teachers need — **the working conditions that enable them to succeed**. Similar to students, teachers thrive when expectations are clear and schoolwide strategies are coherent. Leaders should strive to build a culture that creates an expectation that all teachers can succeed provided they receive appropriate resources and training. Creating deliberate opportunities to build community among educators can set the stage for instructional experimentation and shared commitment.<sup>66</sup>

### School Leadership Preparation

To improve recruitment and preparation, Georgia is actively implementing or developing several of the six state policy levers identified by the Wallace Foundation as best practices to ensure leaders are well-trained and supported.<sup>67</sup> Many of these strategies are supported and coordinated by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GaPSC), especially in the areas of leadership training programs, standards, and licensing.

An example is a change in the preparation and licensure/certifications for education leaders. Beginning in January 2016, the Georgia Educational Leadership Certificate offered by GaPSC was made available in two tiers:

- Tier 1 programs are for future leaders who are still in the classroom but looking to make the transition to school-level leadership, with a focus on instructional leadership.
- Tier 2 programs are for current school and district leaders.<sup>68</sup>

64 Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). n.d. *What Does the Research Say?* Retrieved from <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-does-the-research-say/>.

65 CASEL, n.d., *What Does the Research Say?*

66 Saphier, J. 2021, January 18. Chapter 5. How Leaders Strength Adult Professional Culture (APC) and Achieve Collective Efficacy [unpublished book chapter]. Retrieved from [https://www.rbteach.com/sites/default/files/chapter\\_5\\_adult\\_professional\\_culture.\\_edited\\_1.18.21\\_2.pdf](https://www.rbteach.com/sites/default/files/chapter_5_adult_professional_culture._edited_1.18.21_2.pdf).

67 The six policy levers are principal leadership standards, recruiting professionals, approving and overseeing principal preparation programs, licensing, leader professional development, and leader evaluation. See: Manna, P. 2015. *Developing Excellent School Principals to Advance Teaching and Learning*. New York: The Wallace Foundation.

68 Georgia Professional Standards Commission. 2016, January. Educational Leadership Tiered Transition Guidance. Retrieved from [http://www.gapsc.com/Commission/policies\\_guidelines/Downloads/LeadershipTieredTransitionGuidance\\_20160825.pdf](http://www.gapsc.com/Commission/policies_guidelines/Downloads/LeadershipTieredTransitionGuidance_20160825.pdf).

Albany State University, a historically Black college and university (HBCU), received a University Principal Preparation Initiative grant from the Wallace Foundation in 2016.<sup>69</sup> The university used the funds to redesign the Educational Leadership Tier II program. Albany State partnered with three local school districts and proven leaders in principal leadership development — the Gwinnett County School District Quality-Plus Leadership Academy and the New York Leadership Academy — to cultivate leadership talent in southwestern Georgia. The clinical curriculum and field experiences emphasize equitable practices such as modifying master schedules and staff assignments to support teacher effectiveness and accelerated learning for teachers.

The Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) is an independent nonprofit organization with a mission to uplift school leaders, transform mindsets and action, create vibrant cultures of innovation, and build excellent and equitable schools. Leadership training at GLISI is aimed at transforming toxic cultures among adults that keep teachers in isolation, discourage experimentation, and undercut decision-making authority.

GLISI's flagship training program, the Base Camp and Leadership Summit, is a powerful catalyst for shifting leader mindsets and improving team culture. GLISI uses a cohort model in which school and district teams receive coaching on how to implement more equitable and effective instructional strategies. A culture of learning among adults is one of the most critical precursors of school success, yet culture change is notoriously difficult to achieve at scale. GLISI's pre-post assessments of participants' capacity to positively influence culture, including measures of team efficacy and psychological safety, consistently show statistically significant gains.<sup>70</sup>

The Georgia Association of Educational Leaders offers the Aspiring Principals Program, a yearlong program open to assistant principals who would like to become principals. This program helps participants prepare for the complex responsibilities of school leadership, which include tasks as varied as building manager, human resources administrator, change agent, student disciplinarian, and instructional leader.<sup>71</sup>

### ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

Positive school culture is more likely to endure when school leaders are given the skills to develop and maintain a positive culture through collaboration with all stakeholders, especially students and teachers, but families and community members as well.

**FIGURE 4.1 THE PRINCIPAL AS CHANGE LEADER**

ROLE	OBJECTIVE	STRATEGY
Recognize	Principals meets with teachers to identify norms and beliefs that support improved student learning outcomes	School improvement planning
Reinforce	Teachers integrate social and emotional skill-building into academic lessons to increase the depth and relevance of student learning.	Social-emotional learning
Repeat	Principals sets the stage for student success, and stakeholders adapt their work to achieve shared goals.	Climate-building activities
Reckon	Principals facilitate feedback sessions with building staff and community stakeholders to evaluate whether current strategies contribute to increased student success.	School improvement planning

69 Albany State University. 2016, October 13. ASU Selected to Participate in \$47-Million Initiative to Improve Training for Principals. Retrieved from <https://www.asurams.edu/news/2016/asu-initiative-improve-training-principals.php>.

70 For more information on the Base Camp and Leadership Summit, see <https://glisi.org/base-camp-and-leadership-summit-2/>.

71 For more information on the Aspiring Principal Program, see <https://www.gael.org/resources/aspiring-principals-program/>.

In the framework articulated in Figure 4.1, recognition and reckoning are activities that principals actively lead. During the reinforcement and repetition stages, principals empower school stakeholders to implement social-emotional learning strategies and school climate initiatives. Principals respond to stakeholder needs and ensure that resources are deployed and that services are delivered in ways consistent with school improvement plans and an equity mindset.

In a safe and supportive learning environment, administrators provide opportunities for teachers to learn from one another and identify challenges in a nonjudgmental environment. Parents and community members feel like they have a voice in school operations.

Highly effective change leaders bring all stakeholders to the table. They do not rely on the classic, hierarchical arrangement where building leaders direct instructional delivery, teachers direct student learning, and students, parents, and community members lack the agency to offer feedback on how to change their role in the ecosystem.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD**

### **ACT NOW – HOW SCHOOL SYSTEMS CAN SUPPORT POSITIVE SCHOOL CULTURE**

1. School systems can develop formal professional learning programs for aspiring school leaders. These programs could equip future principals with the tools to support a more community-centered approach to building positive school culture.
2. District leaders can provide training and technical assistance for classroom teachers on how to adapt classroom practices to ensure students feel engaged and respected.
3. School systems can explore ways that school leaders can collaborate with their peers during the school day to evaluate how culture and climate initiatives support improved school and student performance.

### **INTERMEDIATE – HOW SCHOOL LEADERS CAN AMPLIFY STUDENT AND TEACHER VOICE**

1. School leaders can work with their classroom teachers to identify approaches that increase student voice and engagement in the curriculum and school life. Surveys are an appropriate tool to assess student perceptions. As students enter middle and high school, school staff could use survey results to redesign projects and assignments to reflect greater student choice.
2. School leaders can restructure learning time so that educators can review problems of practice and pilot small-scale interventions that address student learning challenges. Increasing the frequency of these learning opportunities during the school day could result in improved teacher collaboration and collegiality.

### **LONG TERM – MEASURING EFFECTIVENESS OF SCHOOL-BASED INITIATIVES**

1. The Georgia Department of Education should develop or adopt a self-assessment instrument that allows school and district leaders to evaluate the effectiveness of culture and climate initiatives.

Equity-focused school leaders do not create a positive culture; they set a vision for school transformation. They help school stakeholders — teachers, students, parents, and community leaders — understand how their norms, beliefs, and efforts contribute to a vibrant school culture. In this ecosystem, school leaders facilitate change but let stakeholders negotiate how they fit within culture. Any friction that results from misalignment between the principal's vision and the efforts of other stakeholders provides an opportunity for considering how to reallocate resources and rethink strategies. This reassessment, in turn, promotes more inclusive, equitable, and effective decision-making.



## ISSUE 5

## FUNDING – SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION ON A DEADLINE

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

Longtime educators remember the last time Georgia received a large federal investment in K-12 schools. In the wake of the Great Recession, the state received \$400 million through the Race to the Top initiative.<sup>72</sup> The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) designated half of the funds to increase state and local capacity in four areas: standards and assessments, teacher effectiveness, data systems, and school turnaround.<sup>73</sup> Specifically, GaDOE created new teacher and leader evaluation systems, enhanced the student longitudinal data system, and established the State Office of School Turnaround. GaDOE allocated the remaining \$200 million to a cohort of 26 districts to adopt local policies and strategies related to the four state priorities.

A 2014 evaluation of the Race to the Top program conducted by the Ga Partnership concluded that “Georgia must now work hard to recommit to the vision implemented over the past four years [2010–2014] and articulate a strategic plan on how the recent systemic changes will be fully implemented and sustained.”<sup>74</sup> In the intervening years, the State Board of Education pursued a local student assessment pilot, disbanded the Office of School Turnaround, and delegated more authority to school systems related to educator evaluation and support.

A decade later, the state and its 233 local school systems<sup>76</sup> have received 1,550% more in federal funding — \$6.6 billion — to transform K-12 education. While GaDOE’s approved American Rescue Plan describes how it will invest its 10% allocation,<sup>77</sup> district leaders should heed the Ga Partnership’s underlying message throughout this edition of the *Top Ten Issues to Watch*: find ways to sustain funded strategies past the September 30, 2024 deadline for use of federal COVID relief funds.

*“We have often heard, and maybe even exclaimed ourselves, that education is the great equalizer. Well, now is our chance to prove it... Are we going to lead through this and come out stronger? Or is the temptation of complacency going to dissipate our call to action?”*

– Miguel Cardona, Secretary of Education<sup>75</sup>

72 Georgia Department of Education. n.d. Georgia’s Race to the Top (RT3) Plan. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/Race-to-the-Top/Pages/default.aspx>.

73 GaDOE. 2010, June 1. Georgia’s Race to the Top Application. Retrieved from <https://gosa.georgia.gov/documents/georgia%E2%80%99s-rtt-application>.

74 Rickman, D., and E. Olivarez. 2014. *Race to the Top: Georgia’s Vision for Educational Excellence*. GaDOE. Retrieved from <https://gosa.georgia.gov/document/document/click-here-download-full-report/download>.

75 Cardona, M. 2021, June 22. Secretary Cardona’s Remarks at the Department of Education’s Equity Summit [Press release]. US Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/secretary-cardonas-remarks-department-educations-equity-summit>.

76 Note that the calculation includes charter schools approved to operate by the State Charter School Commission.

77 Frick, M. 2021, July 22. Georgia’s State Plan for Final Portion of K-12 Education Stimulus Funds Approved [Press release]. GaDOE. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Pages/PressReleaseDetails.aspx?PressView=default&pid=878>.

The US Congress approved the distribution of the first two rounds of COVID relief funding in March and December 2020. The third and final round was approved in March 2021 through the American Rescue Plan Act. Collectively, the three programs are referred to as the **Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief fund**, or ESSER.

Initially, the funds were used to cover the unanticipated costs associated with the immediate shift to digital learning, providing devices to smooth the transition and making immediate renovations to facilities to make them safe for students to return.

School system leaders have about 30 months to spend all ESSER funds. State and local leaders should learn from the Race to the Top experience by piloting programs and strategies that will exist beyond the next two or three years. By using ESSER funds to sustain effective initiatives, leaders could seed the strategies that drive improved school and student performance well into the post-pandemic era.

### EQUITY AT THE FOREFRONT

- Resource equity is the deployment of people, time, and money to create enriching and rigorous learning opportunities for all students.<sup>78</sup>
- School systems should leverage ESSER funding to expand access to extended learning opportunities and wraparound supports.
- Over the next 30 months, state policy-makers and district leaders should identify high-impact practices that schools could continue to implement using recurring federal funds.

## SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA

The 2021 edition of the Top Ten Issues to Watch described how the pandemic and earlier state budget cuts created a situation where districts encountered increased costs and declining revenue.<sup>79</sup> Many local school boards used reserves to cover budget shortfalls.

With the infusion of more than \$4 billion in additional federal funds since March 2021, a new question has emerged: how to use the nonrecurring ESSER funds to promote equitable opportunities and effective programming now and in the future. This issue brief focuses on how to leverage ESSER funds to ensure the continuation of practices that accelerate student learning and alleviate non-academic learning barriers.

### Current Challenges

Research supports the notion that increasing school funding improves student outcomes.<sup>80</sup> However, the way that districts spend money matters.<sup>81</sup>

For instance, some Georgia districts have used ESSER funds for non-instructional purposes, such as renovating school facilities and covering school transportation costs. Other districts have hired school interventionists to support student learning gains. Both types of expenditures affect student performance, just in different ways.

78 Travers, J. 2018, October. *What Is Resource Equity?* Education Resource Services. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED593369.pdf>.

79 Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. 2021, January 8. *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2021*. Retrieved from [https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/GPEE-Top-Ten-2021\\_Final.pdf](https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/GPEE-Top-Ten-2021_Final.pdf).

80 Jackson, C.K. 2018. Does School Spending Matter? The New Literature on an Old Question. In L. Tach, R. Dundon, and D.L. Miller (Eds.). *Confronting Inequality: How Policies and Practices Shape Children's Opportunities* (pp. 165–186). American Psychological Association. Retrieved from <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2020-30963-008>.

81 Bellwether Education. 2021, October 28. What Is School Finance Equity and Why Does It Matter? *Splitting the Bill: Understanding Education Finance Equity* series. Retrieved from [https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/Bellwether\\_SplittingBill\\_04-BiggestProblems\\_Final.pdf](https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/Bellwether_SplittingBill_04-BiggestProblems_Final.pdf).

Recognizing that the funds will soon lapse, some districts have chosen to use ESSER funds to purchase educational software to supplement classroom instruction and to offer more digital learning opportunities to students, rather than invest in hiring more educators and paraprofessionals. The short grant period might discourage school systems from hiring staff if district leaders do not think they can retain personnel after the end of the 2023-24 school year.

Also, with only 30 months to pilot new programs or expand existing strategies, district and charter school leaders may find that they do not have the capacity to evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives before the end of the 2023-24 school year, which could result in a situation where school systems lack the funding to implement the programs that they started or expanded during the ESSER grant period.

### Existing Assets

While the short timeline to use ESSER funds and the lack of capacity to evaluate the effectiveness of funded initiatives are crucial challenges that school systems face, the infrastructure is already in place to support more equitable and effective use of federal funds by districts.

GaDOE requires school systems, referred to as local educational agencies or LEAs, to complete the Consolidation LEA Improvement Plan (CLIP) when applying for federal funds.<sup>82</sup> When completing these plans, federal programs staff in district offices describe how they have conducted outreach with parents and community members, the data that they have reviewed to assess student needs, strategies to serve specific student subgroups (such as students of color, economically disadvantaged students, and English learners), and the action steps that will help their school system achieve their district-wide improvement goals.<sup>83</sup>

GaDOE program specialists review the CLIPs to ensure that plans align with federal requirements. At least once every four years, the department conducts cross-functional monitoring to ensure that school systems are monitoring program outcomes and evaluating how funded activities support improved student performance.<sup>84</sup> GaDOE staff evaluate district compliance with federal requirements, not the quality of the plan or the effectiveness of funded activities. At the end of the day, school systems are responsible for confirming that practices are in place to ensure that all students receive the resources and high-quality programming necessary to accelerate learning.

GaDOE reserves 10% of federal awards to administer grants, support training and technical assistance, provide curriculum and professional learning resources, and implement priorities identified by the state superintendent. Emerging priorities inform how GaDOE uses the state reserve. To the extent that school systems are retooling their improvement plans to ensure more effective and equitable student interventions, GaDOE could use federal funds to address statewide barriers that impede the expansion of accelerated learning, the delivery of wraparound supports, and the development of safer and more supportive learning environments.

82 GaDOE. 2021, April 21. *FY22 Consolidated LEA Improvement Plan (CLIP) Guidance*. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/School-Improvement/Federal-Programs/Documents/LEA%20Consolidated%20App/FY22%20CLIP%20Guidance%20%204.21.2021.pdf>.

83 GaDOE, 2021, April 21, *FY22 Consolidated LEA Improvement Plan (CLIP) Guidance*.

84 GaDOE. 2021, November 2. *GaDOE Cross-Functional Monitoring Indicators: 2021-2022*. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/School-Improvement/Federal-Programs/Documents/Cross%20Functional%20Monitoring/FY22%20CFM%20Document%2011.2.2021.pdf>.

## ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education is conducting a four-year ESSER impact study, The CARES Impact Study,<sup>85</sup> which began in the summer of 2021. The Ga Partnership is using surveys, focus groups, and interviews to ultimately identify how school systems used the ESSER funds, how needs shifted over time, and how school and district leaders have monitored program implementation and effectiveness.

After analyzing the initial baseline survey responses provided in the fall 2021, the Ga Partnership found that school systems are planning to use ESSER funds on a variety of activities, including devices, learning technologies, software, equipment, and consulting services. Subsequent surveys will focus on how local districts will identify effective strategies and sustain them through other funding sources.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

#### ACT NOW

1. School systems can identify the most essential and effective programs funded through the ESSER program and include those activities in the Consolidated LEA Improvement Plan (CLIP) – the state’s application for federal funds. District leaders could use the CLIP to describe how the system will blend federal funds to maximize the scale and impact of activities.
2. Leaders at GaDOE can reflect on how the department could use ESSER or recurring federal funds to create economies of scale to help school systems buy software and equipment or receive third-party technical assistance at lower rates because of the state’s coordinated buying power.
3. State policymakers should not perceive the infusion of ESSER funding into school systems as a rationale for K-12 education divestment.

#### BEFORE THE COVID RELIEF PERIOD EXPIRES

1. State leaders should convene a group of state agency leaders and education advocates to create a training and technical assistance plan that supports local implementation of evidence-based strategies.
2. Most of the federal COVID relief funds were deployed based on family poverty within the school boundaries. Consequently, the time is ripe to convene an education finance commission to update recommendations related to integrating a poverty indicator into the state funding formula.

#### LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

1. School system leaders can explore how to develop cooperative funding strategies. For example, districts could partner with regional health agencies, community foundations, and nonprofits to fund school-based health services after ESSER funds expire.

<sup>85</sup> For more information about The CARES Impact Study, see <https://gpee.org/programs/cares-impact-study/>.



Education Resource Strategies has released the “Do Now, Build Toward” guide, a roadmap for how school systems can invest ESSER funds in the most effective and sustainable ways possible.<sup>86</sup> The seven principles for investing funds, shown in Figure 5.1, encourage districts to start by addressing current critical student needs and employing a sustainable long-term vision for the future when designing changes.

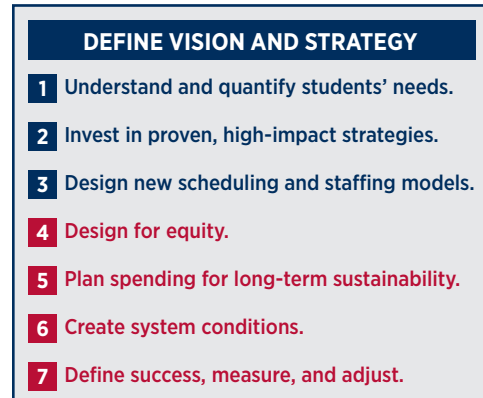
The first two principles relate to assessing student needs and identifying high-impact strategies. The third and fourth principles — “design new scheduling and staffing models” and “design for equity” — challenge districts to think about how funded strategies could prompt changes to school structures and teachers’ instructional approaches. The last three principles focus on sustainability of strategies in three areas: securing future funding, delineating district and school-level leadership roles in executing strategies, and evaluating funded activities to guide future implementation.

Three district-level tasks guide the investments:

1. Establish a vision for improvement,
2. Implement strategies that embody that vision, and
3. Support school-level processes that will need to change to achieve success.

Districts should balance two objectives: (1) meeting current needs while also (2) planning for the future. School and district leaders should ask themselves the same question that education advocates posed in 2010 during the Race to the Top era: In five years, what will be fundamentally different about teaching and learning in my schools due to the use of these one-time federal funds?

**FIGURE 5.1 SEVEN PRINCIPLES FOR INVESTING ESSER FUNDS<sup>87</sup>**



<sup>86</sup> Education Resource Strategies (ERS). 2021, June. *Do Now, Build Toward: 7 Principles for Investing Federal ESSER Funds in Recovery & Redesign*  
<sup>87</sup> ERS. 2021, *Do Now, Build Toward*.

## ISSUE 6

## ACCOUNTABILITY – WHAT'S THE FUTURE?

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

Twenty years ago, the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) ushered in a new era of standards and accountability. NCLB required annual performance reporting on standardized tests by race and ethnicity. Disaggregated performance data revealed persistent achievement gaps by race and income.<sup>88</sup>

NCLB's successor, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), still mandates the annual administration of standardized assessments and the publication of school and district report cards. However, the law also provides significant flexibility to states and school systems to redesign assessment strategies and accountability systems based on local priorities.<sup>89</sup>

In the three years between ESSA's passage and the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, state leaders and a committee of local stakeholders revised Georgia's K-12 accountability tool, including outcomes data related to how well schools and districts provide access to accelerated learning opportunities.<sup>90</sup> During the pandemic, however, state leaders paused the publication of accountability results so that school systems could focus on reopening schools and accelerating learning for all students. By fall 2020, the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) recommended that the state adopt a new accountability system that reflects the unique priorities of local school systems.

### EQUITY AT THE FOREFRONT

- A new accountability tool should accomplish two objectives: informing parents and community leaders about their school's performance, and equipping state and local leaders with the data needed to monitor progress and correct course when needed.<sup>91</sup>
- An equity-focused accountability system provides context for interpreting results and de-emphasizes letter grades or rating scales.
- An equity-focused accountability system prioritizes training and technical assistance so school-level teams can pursue evidence-based interventions.

88 Klein, A. 2015, April 10. No Child Left Behind: An Overview. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/no-child-left-behind-an-overview/2015/04>.

89 Center on Standards and Assessment Implementation. 2019, December. *Planning for the Every Student Succeeds Act: Assessment*. Retrieved from [https://csaa.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/CSAI-ESSA\\_Assessment\\_Finalv2.pdf](https://csaa.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/CSAI-ESSA_Assessment_Finalv2.pdf).

90 Woods, R. 2018, April 24. *Redesigned CCRPI 101*. Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE). Retrieved from [https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Accountability/Documents/Webinars%20and%20Presentations\\_FY18/Redesigned%20CCRPI%20101%20RESA%20Summit%204.24.18.pdf](https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Accountability/Documents/Webinars%20and%20Presentations_FY18/Redesigned%20CCRPI%20101%20RESA%20Summit%204.24.18.pdf).

91 Woods, J., and A. Rafa. 2018, July. *Guiding Questions for State School Improvement Efforts*. Education Commission of the States. Retrieved from <https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Guiding-Questions-for-State-School-Improvement-Efforts.pdf>.

As COVID-19 continues to interrupt how schools deliver learning, Georgia leaders need to review lessons learned during the pandemic to create a school accountability system that recognizes and rewards school systems that expand access to high-quality educational opportunities for all students as well as making sure all students are learning to their highest potential.

This issue brief summarizes how ESSA and the pandemic have affected state-level accountability strategies. It also offers practical options that state and local leaders should consider when developing a student- and equity-centered accountability system.

## SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA

### Role of Accountability

The primary role of an accountability system is to inform school stakeholders — parents, teachers, and community members — about efforts to ensure all students succeed. While accountability tools promote transparency and communicate areas in which schools are meeting or not meeting expectations<sup>92</sup> the information generated by these tools often requires additional analysis.

The accountability tool serves as way to monitor progress toward school, district, and state goals. However, practitioners often do not receive technical support on how to use the results to improve their programs and strategies.

The system frames successes and challenges, but the people inhabiting the system are the true accountability agents. A properly formulated and utilized accountability system allows educators to use the results to change attitudes, modify behaviors, and install a more positive school culture.

**FIGURE 6.1 SHORTCOMINGS OF STATE K-12 ACCOUNTABILITY TOOLS**

- The selected indicators generate a numerical score or letter grade. The final score serves as a cognitive shortcut for most consumers, discouraging deeper analysis and interpretation.
- Low or declining student achievement is a symptom of larger, systemic challenges.
- Educators cannot use results to make immediate changes to school policies and practices. Practitioners must interpret the results and identify root causes.

### Accountability in Georgia

After the US Department of Education approved Georgia's ESSA plan, policymakers and agency leaders revised state-level strategies to take advantage of federal flexibility. GaDOE redesigned the state's accountability tool, the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI), during the 2017-18 school year. While a significant portion of the total accountability score is focused on achievement scores and content mastery (measured by end-of-grade or end-of-course state tests), GaDOE also publishes results on non-academic indicators like school climate.<sup>93</sup>

As in all states, Georgia's accountability system, the CCRPI, is inextricably linked to the state assessment system, the Georgia Milestones (Milestones). Related to the Milestones, GaDOE received federal approval to participate in the Innovative Assessment Pilot Program in 2019, joining Louisiana, New Hampshire, and North Carolina in allowing school systems or district consortia to administer alternative assessments in place of state-required tests.<sup>94</sup> Two district cohorts in Georgia have developed decentralized assessment models.<sup>95</sup>

92 Education Trust. n.d. *New School Accountability Systems in the States: Both Opportunities and Peril*. Retrieved from <https://edtrust.org/new-school-accountability-systems-in-the-statesboth-opportunities-and-peril/>.

93 GaDOE. 2018, January 19. *Redesigned College and Career Ready Performance Index*. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Accountability/Documents/Resdesigned%20CCRPI%20Support%20Documents/Redesigned%20CCRPI%20Overview%20011918.pdf>.

94 Brogan, F. 2019, July 12. *2019 Approval Letter*. US Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/iada/gaiadaapproval2019.pdf>.

95 The two assessment models are The Georgia MAP Assessment Partnership (GMAP) and the Putnam County Consortium. The GMAP is piloting a version of the nationally available MAP test that has been aligned with Georgia academic standards. Current partnership members include Clayton, Floyd, Jackson, Jasper, and Polk County Schools along with Marietta City Schools starting this school year. Gilmer, Haralson,

More recently, the Georgia General Assembly reduced the number of required statewide assessments using the Georgia Milestones through the passage of Senate Bill 367 in spring 2020.<sup>96</sup> These efforts set the groundwork for state and local leaders to create an accountability system that provides a more holistic view of how schools support accelerated student learning and more equitable access to educational opportunities.

When the pandemic prompted school closures and an immediate shift to digital learning, State School Superintendent Richard Woods requested a series of assessment and accountability waivers from the US Department of Education. Georgia received approval to discontinue spring 2020 assessments and the release of school report cards because of the pandemic.<sup>97</sup> However, the federal government rejected a second assessment waiver for the 2020-21 school year.<sup>98</sup>

To mitigate the effect of this action, the superintendent requested that the Georgia State Board of Education reduce the weighting of end-of-course assessments for high school students from 20% of a student's final grade to 0.01% in December 2020. Three months later, GaDOE suspended accountability requirements and announced that agency would not release the CCRPI results for the 2020-21 school year.<sup>99</sup> While the state did release standardized assessment results for the 2020-21 school year, GaDOE has not released accountability results for two school years.

### Alternative Accountability Model

True Accountability is a national framework that proposes a district- and community-centered alternative to current statewide accountability strategies.<sup>100</sup> The Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE) manages a network of 16 school systems currently developing and piloting the True Accountability model as an alternative to the CCRPI.<sup>101</sup> School staff learn how to collaborate with students, parents, and community members to develop shared expectations for school performance. In this model, communities receive periodic updates on school performance throughout the year.

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and Dalton County Schools, and Trion City Schools will join next year. GMAP tests were initially being developed in math, ELA, and science for grades three through eight to be administered no later than 2020-2021. Each participating district was to administer a combination of the GMAP and Milestones during the first three years of the program. That timeline was paused by one year due to the pandemic. The Putnam County Consortium had hoped to administer the Navvy test, developed by a partnership between Putnam County Schools and Navvy Education, LLC, during the 2018-2019 school year in math and ELA in grades three through eight, and high school math and ELA classes. Putnam County, the only participating member, proposed to use Navvy for accountability purposes for grades three through eight and high school beginning in the 2018-2019 school year in lieu of administering Milestones. Affiliate members – Calhoun City Schools, Dougherty, Evans, Fayette, Floyd, Liberty, McIntosh, Oglethorpe, and Pike County Schools – will use Navvy during this first pilot year, but still administer the Milestones for accountability purposes. Due to delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, neither group will finish field testing before spring 2022. Therefore, both groups are hopeful to administer an operational assessment for comparability purposes beginning in 2022-2023 school year. For more information see: [https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Assessment/Documents/Flexibility/Georgia\\_Year2APR\\_August2021.pdf](https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Assessment/Documents/Flexibility/Georgia_Year2APR_August2021.pdf)

96 Frick, M. 2020, September 10. Georgia Identifies Tests to Be Eliminated in Response to SB 367, Aligning State Testing Requirements to the Federal Minimum [Press release]. GaDOE. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Pages/PressReleaseDetails.aspx?PressView=default&pid=802>.

97 Frick, M. 2020, April 7. Georgia Department of Education Receives Federal Assessment Waiver; Other COVID-19 Updates [Press release]. GaDOE. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Pages/PressReleaseDetails.aspx?PressView=default&pid=759>.

98 Woods, R. 2020, September 15. Superintendent Woods on US Department of Education's Lack of Support for Common-Sense Testing Waivers [Press release]. GaDOE. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Pages/PressReleaseDetails.aspx?PressView=default&pid=800>.

99 GaDOE. 2021, March 29. GaDOE FAQ on Spring 2021 Federal Accountability, School Identification, and Report Card Waiver in Response to COVID-19 Pandemic. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Accountability/Documents/ESSA/2021%20Accountability%20Waiver%20FAQ%203.29.21.pdf>.

100 bravEd. n.d. A Path to True Accountability for K-12 Schools. Retrieved from <https://brave-ed.com/true-accountability/>.

101 Professional Association of Georgia Educators. n.d. True Accountability. Retrieved from <https://www.pageinc.org/true-accountability/>.



## ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

In September 2020, GaDOE released a new vision for state education policy. *The Roadmap for Reimagining K-12 Education* recommends that the state “develop an accountability system that aligns to the unique priorities of local communities and lifts up our schools.”<sup>102</sup>

The recommendation includes three practical accountability considerations: (1) creating a set of state indicators that apply to all schools and districts, (2) empowering districts to select accountability metrics from a preset menu that reflect school needs and community priorities, and (3) producing a report that allows districts to showcase their efforts to expand educational opportunities for all students.<sup>103</sup>

The GaDOE Roadmap framework has two goals: ensuring that schools are held accountable to a common set of state metrics while providing space for school leaders to identify metrics that best align with their array of student-centered strategies.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

#### IMMEDIATE ACTIONS – SCHOOL SYSTEMS

Local school boards approve district policies. Accountability exists outside of the statewide model. For example, local school boards hold superintendents accountable for releasing district improvement plans. District leaders can engage community stakeholders to revise or establish new improvement plans in the wake of the pandemic. Practical steps include the following:

1. Identify challenges and opportunities in consultation with teachers, students, parents, and community members.
2. Rank student and community needs to allocate limited funds.
3. Evaluate instructional models and student support services.
4. Draft a district improvement plan, share results with local stakeholders, and tweak the plan based on stakeholder feedback.

#### IMMEDIATE ACTIONS – STATE POLICYMAKERS

1. Convene a group of policymakers and affected stakeholders to rethink accountability.
2. Potentially develop an accountability tool similar to the GaDOE framework that includes state metrics and district-determined measures. Further, consider how to integrate these indicators into a comprehensive accountability tool.

#### MEDIUM AND LONG-TERM ACTIONS – TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

1. Identify state and regional organizations that can provide technical support in analyzing accountability results and restarting the school improvement planning process.

102 GaDOE. 2020, September. *A Roadmap to Reimagining K-12 Education*. Retrieved from [https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Documents/A\\_Roadmap\\_to\\_Reimagining\\_K-12\\_Education.pdf](https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Documents/A_Roadmap_to_Reimagining_K-12_Education.pdf).

103 GaDOE, 2020, *A Roadmap to Reimagining K-12 Education*.

A future education accountability tool should reflect the needs of all stakeholders. For consumers — parents, community leaders, and the public — the tool should provide data in a transparent format that situates current student and school performance in two contexts. First, the tool should provide a historical perspective for consumers to understand if current efforts are contributing to improved or declining performance. Second, the tool should allow consumers to see how current performance compares to all other schools in the state.

Second, practitioners will need to answer more substantive questions about the results, such as the following:

- What do the accountability results communicate about our performance?
- What data are absent from the accountability results that could help us refine our school improvement plan?
- How do the accountability results shape our priorities? Do we need to refine some of our strategies to prioritize resources for certain student subgroups?
- What partners could help us interpret the results and revise the school improvement plan?

When school-level staff reflect on these questions, they can use an equity mindset to review results, evaluate policy and practice, and tweak strategies to increase quality, scale, and impact. When the accountability system contributes to school and system improvement efforts, then the accountability tool can support equity — elevating the practices that allow students and teachers to succeed to their own level of capability.

## ISSUE 7

## EARLY LEARNING – PROTECTING INVESTMENTS IN EARLY LEARNERS

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

State policymakers have developed a strong early learning infrastructure in Georgia over the last 30 years, anchored by Georgia's Pre-K Program, established via a voter-approved referendum in 1992. Since the program's inception and through the 2020-21 academic year, the Georgia General Assembly has allocated nearly \$8 billion in lottery funds for the Pre-K Program. During that time, the program has provided pre-kindergarten for over 1.87 million of the state's four-year-olds.<sup>104</sup>

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), established in 2004, administers Georgia's nationally recognized Pre-K Program, licenses child care centers and home-based child care, and oversees Georgia's Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) program, federal nutrition programs, and the Head Start State Collaboration Office.<sup>105</sup> Additionally, DECAL manages Quality Rated, Georgia's system to determine, improve, and communicate the quality of programs that provide child care by assigning one, two, or three stars to early education and school-age care programs that meet or exceed the minimum state requirements.<sup>106</sup>

Early child care and learning centers were hard hit by the pandemic as families sheltered in place. Declining enrollments resulted in the temporary or permanent closure of many centers. During the same period, DECAL received federal COVID relief funds to address declining access to child care and school-readiness programs<sup>107</sup> and revised the state's Child Care and Development Fund plan (CCDF), a requirement to receive US Health and Human Services block grants.<sup>108</sup>

### EQUITY AT THE FOREFRONT

- Early learning providers have struggled to recruit and retain highly effective teachers. Lack of parity with K-12 educator pay and poor working conditions magnify these challenges.
- While Georgia's Pre-K Program is available to all four-year-olds in the state, only 80,328 slots were funded in 2020, which represents 58.9% of the eligible student population.<sup>109</sup> If current state investments do not allow for full enrollment, then policymakers should consider ways to prioritize enrollment for low-income students.
- Access to high-quality early education is crucial to students' readiness for kindergarten and the economic well-being of families.

104 Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL). n.d. Georgia's Pre-K Program. Retrieved from <http://www.decal.ga.gov/documents/attachments/GaPreKFundingHistory.pdf>.

105 DECAL. 2021, November. About Bright from the Start. Retrieved from <https://www.decal.ga.gov/bfts/About.aspx>.

106 DECAL. 2021, November. About Bright from the Start

107 DECAL. 2021, November. STABLE 4WARD: Georgia's Child Care Stabilization Program. Retrieved from <https://www.decal.ga.gov/Bfts/Stable.aspx>.

108 DECAL. 2021, November. Child Care and Development Fund Plan (CCDF) Plan for Georgia, FFY 2022–2024. Retrieved from <http://www.decal.ga.gov/Bfts/CCDFPlan.aspx>.

109 Annie E. Casey Foundation. n.d. Children Enrolled in the Georgia Pre-K Program in Georgia. Retrieved from <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/630-children-enrolled-in-the-georgia-pre-k-program#detailed/2/any/false/574,1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867/any/1469,11216>.

Despite Georgia's progress in the early care and learning space and the infusion of federal funds to stabilize the early childhood education (ECE) system, the continued lack of access to affordable child care and wage inequity for ECE workers threatens state investments in early childhood education. This issue brief describes how current ECE workforce trends could result in fewer students of color and low-income youth receiving high-quality early care and learning in the long term.

### SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA

Like many other industries, the early learning industry is experiencing a talent shortage, and industry turnover is high: Turnover rates of 40–60% in independent learning centers are common. Teacher turnover is a perennial challenge that has been aggravated by the pandemic. Research shows the effectiveness of policies that expand access to high-quality programs and employ a dedicated focus on building a high-quality early childhood workforce.<sup>110</sup> The quality of Georgia's early learning workforce has a direct impact on building a strong foundation for future success. To that end, DECAL is working to expand access to high-quality early learning experiences for the state's youngest citizens. However, to support both historical and current investments as well as continuing to expand access, a strong early learning workforce is critical.

#### State Efforts

From establishing the first universal pre-K program entirely funded by the state lottery, to creating the first state-level department responsible for early learning, Georgia has made intentional investments in its approach to provide high-quality early childhood education. Federal grants have supported most of state programming and alignment efforts. For example, Georgia received \$51.7 million through the Early Learning Challenge Grant competition in 2013. Under DECAL's leadership, the state invested in five critical areas:

1. Building successful state systems, including the establishment of Early Education Empowerment Zones;
2. Increasing high-quality accountability programs through the Quality Rated program;
3. Promoting early learning outcomes through Georgia's Early Learning and Development Standards (GELDS) and statewide family engagement grants, and expanding home visitation and family, friend and neighbor care;
4. Developing a talented early childhood education workforce focused on professional learning grounded in GELDS; and
5. Measuring outcomes and progress, which has resulted in the development of a comprehensive assessment system, a kindergarten entry assessment, and a unified data system.<sup>111</sup>

More recently, DECAL used federal COVID relief funds to provide retention bonuses to eligible ECE staff through the Providing Our Workforce Essential Recognition program.<sup>112</sup>

DECAL has offered two rounds of funding through the Short-Term Assistance Benefit for Licensed Entities (STABLE) program. During the second application window ending in November 2021, eligible providers could spend grant funds in four areas: workforce support, tuition relief for families, facilities, and operational supplies. Grantees had to spend at least 70% of the funds on employee wages and benefits or tuition relief for families.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>110</sup> Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. 2017, November. *EdQuest Georgia: Charting Educational Reform, 2017 Baseline Report*. Retrieved from EdQuest Georgia: [www.EdQuestGa.org](http://www.EdQuestGa.org).

<sup>111</sup> DECAL. n.d. Projects to Accomplish Georgia's Early Learning Challenge Agenda. Retrieved from <https://decal.ga.gov/documents/attachments/ProjectstoAccomplishGeorgiaELCAgenda.pdf>.

<sup>112</sup> DECAL. 2021, November. The Power Is On! Retrieved from <http://www.decal.ga.gov/InstructionalSupports/POWER.aspx>.

<sup>113</sup> DECAL, 2021, STABLE 4WARD: Georgia's Child Care Stabilization Program.

### Instability of the Early Learning Workforce

While the STABLE program should provide temporary relief to early care and learning programs, the early learning industry is still experiencing a talent shortage, made worse by the pandemic. A variety of factors contribute to the quality and effectiveness of the ECE workforce. Compensation and benefits, staffing structures and advancement, retention, education level, and certification requirements are but a few examples.<sup>114</sup>

By any measure, Georgia's early childhood workers are underpaid. The average hourly wage for Pre-K and Head Start lead teachers is \$16.45 per hour.<sup>115</sup> Alarming, educators in nonsubsidized programs earn \$10.14 on average — a 38% difference.<sup>116</sup> For ECE workers, jobs in retail, food services, or hospitality could pay more than the \$10.14 average hourly wage. Noncompetitive wages and challenging working conditions contribute to high industry turnover.

Overall, early educators earn 20.4% less than their licensed colleagues in K-8 classrooms.<sup>117</sup> Georgia ranks 38th in the US for child care worker salaries, with teachers earning an annual average of \$21,810 — \$3,000 below the national average.<sup>118</sup> One in seven teachers lives below the federally defined poverty line, which is \$26,500 for a family of four.<sup>119</sup> Nearly half — 46% — of child care workers receive government benefits.<sup>120</sup>

In addition to salary, professional development is also a crucial factor in maintaining a stable, high-quality workforce. However, many early learning directors and owners are reluctant to bear the burden of professional development costs of their staff due to the high rate of staff turnover within the industry. Staff turnover is an often-mentioned concern, primarily due to its impact on children. Research shows that a key to providing quality child care programs is the retention of staff members, particularly teachers. Turnover can also be costly to ECE programs due to the expense involved in training new staff in areas such as curriculum, best practices, health, and safety.<sup>121</sup> An Economic Impact Study commissioned by DECAL and conducted by the University of Georgia and Georgia State University pre-pandemic, found the following:<sup>122</sup>

- 80% of centers had one or more permanent employees leave during the prior year.
- 37% of centers used seasonal or temporary staff to meet their needs.
- Teachers were the most likely of all types of staff members to leave the center.

Pay and benefits differ significantly between Georgia's Pre-K classroom lead and assistant teachers, and other teachers in the early learning workforce that work in the infant-to-preschool-aged classrooms or non-Georgia's Pre-K Program four-year-old classrooms. This difference is not a surprise. Since its inception, DECAL has worked to advance the quality of the workforce within Georgia's Pre-K classrooms by raising the minimum education levels and certification requirements for classroom lead and assistant teachers over time, including now requiring all Pre-K lead teachers to have a bachelor's degree.

114 Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. 2015. *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8*. Retrieved from <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/19401/transforming-the-workforce-for-children-birth-through-age-8-a>.

115 Quality Care for Children. 2021, November. *The Child Care Worker Wage Problem & Dilemma*. Retrieved from <https://www.qualitycareforchildren.org/ece-wages>.

116 Quality Care for Children, 2021, *The Child Care Worker Wage Problem & Dilemma*.

117 Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. 2021, November. *State Profiles: Georgia*. Retrieved from <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/states/georgia/>.

118 Early Childhood Teacher. 2020, November. Early Childhood Education Jobs in Georgia. Retrieved from <https://www.earlychildhoodteacher.org/jobs/georgia/>.

119 Early Childhood Teacher, 2020, Early Childhood Education Jobs in Georgia.

120 See <https://www.qualitycareforchildren.org/ece-wages>.

121 Learning Policy Institute. 2021, March 4. *Building a National Early Childhood Education System That Works*. Retrieved from [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/LPI\\_Early\\_Childhood\\_Education\\_2021\\_BRIEF.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/LPI_Early_Childhood_Education_2021_BRIEF.pdf).

122 Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, Georgia State University, and Carl Vinson Institute of Government, University of Georgia. 2016, June. *Economic Impact of the Early Care and Education Industry in Georgia*. Retrieved from DECAL: <https://www.dec.ga.gov/documents/attachments/EconImpactReport>.



Note that these changes took place within an established state structure that administered the Georgia's Pre-K Program. While Georgia's Pre-K classrooms are operated by local school districts and private child care providers, they all have the same standards, oversight, and most importantly, a consistent funding stream that comes from the Georgia Lottery and is distributed by DECAL.

The remainder of the early learning industry is dependent on parent fees and tuition. Across the industry, parent fees represent more than 60% of gross receipts, estimated to be \$1.58 billion annually.<sup>123</sup> Comparatively, federal and state funding combined (including the Georgia's Pre-K lottery funding) comprises about 35% of gross receipts for the industry.

Simply raising staff salaries to compensate for higher education and certification levels in the private sector is not a feasible option. Many families, especially low-income families, already have a hard time finding and paying for quality child care. On average, the annual cost of center-based child care in Georgia ranges from \$3,500 for a school-aged child to over \$7,000 for an infant, which is comparable to the average annual cost of in-state college tuition.<sup>124</sup>

Georgia's Pre-K is the only program for which staffing and resources for classrooms are directly funded by the state through DECAL. Staff and resources for other programs, including birth-to-age-three child care learning centers and family care homes, are the responsibility of the centers, which tend to be small businesses with costs disproportionately covered by parent tuition and to a much lesser extent federal support programs.

This funding distribution further exacerbates inequities in the availability of quality care, while also suppressing industry wages. Historically, the early learning industry has been a relatively low-paying field, and workers of color are overrepresented in the lowest-paid positions. DECAL's economic impact study supports this trend, noting that the highest paid positions, including center directors and Georgia Pre-K lead teachers, are filled by just over 50% White and 41% Black workers; in contrast, lower paid positions such as infant/toddler teachers are 52% Black and 40% White. In family child care homes, the majority of owners and paid assistants are Black (53% and 59%, respectively).<sup>125</sup>

## ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

DECAL is a national leader in supporting access to high-quality ECE programs. DECAL has developed a statewide strategic plan to prioritize equitable access to high-quality ECE experiences for all children aged zero to five, including underserved populations.<sup>126</sup> The agency defines several vulnerable groups, including children living in poverty, children with developmental disabilities, and children in foster care or who are experiencing homelessness.

Through this strategic plan, DECAL is continuing to prioritize the needs of young children and their families by building on the past investments in the state's early learning and development system. Some examples include the recently established (February 2021) Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Task Force. This task force serves as a cross-agency collaborative focused on early childhood mental health policy, finance, workforce development, and promotion and prevention efforts to support infant and early childhood mental health in Georgia.<sup>127</sup>

123 Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, Georgia State University, and Carl Vinson Institute of Government, University of Georgia, 2016, *Economic Impact*.

124 Johnson, M. 2015, March. *Child Care Assistance: Georgia's Opportunity to Bolster Working Families, Economy*. Atlanta: Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://gbpi.org/child-care-assistance-georgias-opportunity-to-bolster-working-families-economy/>.

125 Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, Georgia State University, and Carl Vinson Institute of Government, University of Georgia, 2016, *Economic Impact*.

126 DECAL. 2021, June 23. *Strengthening Georgia's Early Childhood Care and Education System: Strategic Plan*. Retrieved from [http://www.dec.al.ga.gov/documents/attachments/PDG\\_B-5StrategicPlanTrifold.pdf](http://www.dec.al.ga.gov/documents/attachments/PDG_B-5StrategicPlanTrifold.pdf).

127 For more information, see <https://www.dec.al.ga.gov/Prek/InfantandEarlyChildhoodMentalHealth.aspx>.

In January 2020, Governor Brian Kemp announced that Georgia had been awarded a three-year, \$11.2 million Preschool Development Renewal Grant from the US Department of Health and Human Services. This grant is aimed at addressing the needs of families of children ages birth through five. In addition to establishing the Quality Rated Language and Literacy Endorsement,<sup>128</sup> this work includes five strategic goals:<sup>129</sup>

1. **System Building** – Ensure alignment, integration, and coordination in Georgia's birth-through-five mixed-delivery system to better meet the needs of each and every child, especially in underserved and vulnerable populations.
2. **Data and Research** – Establish a data and research agenda that enhances informed decision-making to support the effective and efficient delivery of early childhood programs and services in Georgia, especially to children in underserved and vulnerable populations.
3. **Workforce** – Recruit, retain, and diversify a professional early learning workforce that supports high-quality early childhood care and education services in Georgia.
4. **Access and Quality** – Provide access to high-quality programs to meet the unique developmental and familial needs of every child in Georgia, especially in underserved and vulnerable populations.
5. **Family Engagement** – Foster authentic family engagement to strengthen family voice and engage families in their children's care and education.

These are but two examples of the ambitious work being conducted to support Georgia's ECE foundation. A strong workforce is needed to accomplish these goals. Research shows that the economic security of early care workers is linked to their ability to create enriching learning environments for their students.<sup>130</sup> Thus, improving pay and working conditions are critical strategies for maintaining equitable access to high-quality early care and learning for all students.

DECAL also received over \$1.6 billion in federal American Rescue Plan funds.<sup>131</sup> The STABLE grants described above provide supplemental funding for centers to increase pay, recruit and retain staff, conduct professional learning, and offer discounts on family tuition.

Beginning November 1, 2021, Georgia expanded the Childhood and Parent Services (CAPS) program by 10,000, increasing the total number of low-income children served to 60,000.<sup>132</sup> Through the Awarding Child Care Education Scholarship Supplements (ACCESS) program, families participating in CAPS will not pay tuition until October 3, 2022.

The three programs highlighted above provide temporary relief to the ECE industry and working families. Before nonrecurring funds lapse, state policymakers should consider how to sustain access to high-quality and affordable early learning programs.

128 DECAL. 2020, January 22. Georgia Awarded \$11.2 Million to Support High Quality Early Education Statewide [Press release]. Retrieved from [http://www.dec.state.ga.us/documents/attachments/release\\_2020%20PDG%20Grant.pdf](http://www.dec.state.ga.us/documents/attachments/release_2020%20PDG%20Grant.pdf).

129 DECAL, 2021, *Strengthening Georgia's Early Childhood Care and Education System*.

130 Schlieber, M., and C. McLean. 2020, January 21. *Early Educator Preparation Is Important, but Work Environments Matter, Too*. Words on Workforce. Retrieved from <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/educator-work-environments-are-childrens-learning-environments-how-and-why-they-should-be-improved/>.

131 Governor's Office of Planning and Budget. n.d. ARP Program Summary. Retrieved from <https://opb.georgia.gov/arp-program-summary>.

132 DECAL. 2021, October 18. Georgia Increasing Children Served through CAPS Program by 10,000 and Expands Eligibility [Press release]. Retrieved from [http://www.dec.state.ga.us/documents/attachments/release\\_CAPS%20expansion%2010-15-2021.pdf](http://www.dec.state.ga.us/documents/attachments/release_CAPS%20expansion%2010-15-2021.pdf).

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

### IMMEDIATE

DECAL's bold strategic plan underscores the need for a sustainable and predictable finance structure for early learning and care. State policymakers and birth-to-five advocates should partner to develop a draft framework.

### INTERMEDIATE

Children of color and low-income youth are most at risk of not being ready for kindergarten. If future funding is insufficient to provide access for all infants and children, then state leaders should consider changes to CAPS and Georgia's Pre-K Program eligibility that ensure the most vulnerable and underserved children receive services.

### LONG TERM

While DECAL has developed a mixed-delivery plan for children aged zero to five, a comprehensive state strategy would ensure that students are reading on grade level by the end of third grade. Such a birth-to-eight plan could expand on the research and advocacy work promoted by the Get Georgia Reading (GGR) Campaign.<sup>133</sup> GGR's strategy focuses on language development, access to academic services and wraparound supports, positive learning climate, and teacher preparation and effectiveness.

Industry workforce is a critical pillar of Georgia's overall plan to build on previous investments and expand its early learning system. Continued support for a quality workforce is needed. DECAL has implemented qualification-based wage incentives to boost educator continuing education and professional development. However, despite current state and federal investments, Georgia must do more to improve ECE worker pay and increase retention rates. The average hourly wage for educators in child care centers is unacceptable given the importance they play in the economic recovery.

The drivers of early childhood policy must shift from relying on low-wage workers to serve the majority population to placing value on a diverse, skilled workforce. Georgia needs to consider health insurance, debt forgiveness, refundable tax credits, and professional development support to bolster the early learning and child care workforce — all of which will, in turn, improve outcomes for the children, families, and communities they serve.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>133</sup> Get Georgia Reading. n.d. Framework Overview. Retrieved from <https://getgeorgiareading.org/framework-overview/>.

<sup>134</sup> Bassok, D., A. Markowitz, and M. Michie. 2020, October 23. *COVID-19 Highlights Inequities in How We Treat Early Educators in Child Care vs. Schools*. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2020/10/23/covid-19-highlights-inequities-in-how-we-treat-early-educators-in-child-care-vs-schools/>.

# ISSUE 8

## REVAMPING THE TEACHING PROFESSION – A NEW MOONSHOT

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy proclaimed that an American would land on the moon by the end of the 1960s.<sup>135</sup> Kennedy's moonshot required significant investment and an overriding commitment to that singular goal. After 20 separate cycles of experimentation and refinement, NASA engineers pulled off the unthinkable: creating a lunar module that enabled two astronauts to land on the moon.

*“Ten thousand problems had to be solved to get us to the Moon. Every one of those challenges was tackled and mastered between May 1961 and July 1969. The astronauts, the nation, flew to the Moon because hundreds of thousands of scientists, engineers, managers, and factory workers unraveled a series of puzzles, often without knowing whether the puzzle had a good solution.”<sup>136</sup>*

Georgia would benefit from a similar call to action — this time to transform the teaching profession by 2030.

To revamp the profession, school and district leaders should focus on three policy areas critical to developing coherent educator workforce strategies:

1. Recruitment and hiring,
2. Teacher leadership programs, and
3. Expanded professional learning opportunities.

These policy areas address teacher needs and create favorable conditions for educators to accelerate learning for all students.<sup>137</sup>

This issue brief describes how educator workforce strategies could set the stage for the moonshot that Georgia could achieve by the end of this decade.

<sup>135</sup> Wall, M. 2019, July 17. Apollo 11: Why JFK Believed His Bold Moonshot Could Actually Happen. *Space*. Retrieved from <https://www.space.com/jfk-apollo-moonshot-nasa-readiness.html>.

<sup>136</sup> Fishman, C. 2019, June. What You Didn't Know About the Apollo 11 Mission. *Smithsonian Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-you-didnt-know-about-apollo-11-mission-fifty-years-ago-180972165/>.

<sup>137</sup> Konoske-Graf, A., and L. Partelow. 2016, December 22. *To Attract Great Teachers, School Districts Must Improve Their Human Capital Systems*. Center for American Progress. Retrieved from <https://americanprogress.org/article/to-attract-great-teachers-school-districts-must-improve-their-human-capital-systems/>.

### EQUITY AT THE FOREFRONT

- **Educator diversity matters.** Research suggests that non-White students with same-race teachers perform better on standardized assessments, graduate from high school at higher rates, and are absent from school less often than similarly situated peers who do not have same-race teachers.<sup>138</sup>
- Students attending high-poverty schools are less likely to receive instruction from effective or highly effective teachers.<sup>139</sup> **Equitable access to effective teaching** is a crucial part of ensuring schools are agents of accelerated learning for all students.
- In the latest edition of the RAND American Educator Panels, “78% of US K-12 teachers reported frequent job-related stress compared to 40% of all US adults.”<sup>140</sup> While financial compensation is a key concern for teachers, **prioritizing teacher collaboration and shared decision-making could improve working conditions.**<sup>141</sup>

### SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA

Before state and district leaders can create educator support strategies, they will need to address the underlying system challenges that serve as barriers to a more skilled workforce. This section focuses on how to broaden pathways into the teaching profession, deepen the effectiveness of the teacher workforce through teacher leadership programs, and extend the effectiveness of teacher teams by providing more time for frequent, job-relevant professional development opportunities.

#### Recruitment and Preparation

The data are dismal. Recent high school graduates’ interest in teaching careers is at an all-time low: only 4%.<sup>142</sup> Researchers project that the pandemic will accelerate retirements.<sup>143</sup> As working conditions worsen, more teachers could leave the profession.<sup>144</sup>

Prospective educators can enter the profession through one of two pathways: traditional university preparation programs and the Georgia Teacher Academy for Preparation and Pedagogy (GaTAPP), an alternative training model for individuals with bachelor’s degrees who have not completed a preparation program.<sup>145</sup>

Since 2009, all alternative teacher candidates enroll in the GaTAPP program. Candidates must have a degree in the teaching field or present a passing score on the state’s content-area assessment. The programs last between one and three years. Providers assign

candidates a support team consisting of a school administrator, school-based mentor, and program supervisor.<sup>146</sup> The Georgia Professional Standards Commission has approved 23 GaTAPP providers, including 14 regional education service agencies and seven school systems.<sup>147</sup>

138 Zerbin, N. 2021, April 19. *Teacher Diversity and Student Success: Why Racial Representation Matters in the Classroom*. Brookings Institution. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/events/teacher-diversity-and-student-success-why-racial-representation-matters-in-the-classroom/>.

139 Ross, E. 2019, April 29. Ensuring Equitable Access to Greater Teachers: State Policy Priorities. *Phi Delta Kappan*. Retrieved from <https://kappanonline.org/ensuring-equitable-access-great-teachers-state-policy-priorities-ross/>.

140 RAND Corporation. n.d. Rand American Educator Panels. Retrieved from <https://www.rand.org/education-and-labor/projects/aep.html>.

141 Podolsky, A., T. Kini, J. Bishop, and L. Darling-Hammond. 2016, September 15. *Solving the Teacher Shortage: How to Attract and Retain Excellent Educators*. Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/solving-teacher-shortage-brief>.

142 ACT, Inc. n.d. *The Condition of College and Career Readiness 2019: Georgia Key Findings*. Retrieved from <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/cccr-2019/Georgia-CCCR-2019.pdf>.

143 Zamarro, G., A. Camp, D. Fuchsman, and J. McGee. 2021, September 16. Pandemic Prompts More Teachers to Consider Early Retirement or New Career. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/pandemic-prompts-more-teachers-to-consider-early-retirement-or-new-career-166871>.

144 Education Resource Strategies. 2021, April 23. *Teacher Turnover Before, During, & After COVID*. Retrieved from [https://www.erstrategies.org/tap/teacher\\_attrition\\_covid](https://www.erstrategies.org/tap/teacher_attrition_covid).

145 Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GaPSC). n.d. Georgia Teacher Academy for Preparation and Pedagogy. Retrieved from <https://www.gapsc.com/EducatorPreparation/GaTAPP/GaTAPP.aspx>.

146 GaPSC. n.d. FAQs. Retrieved from <https://www.gapsc.com/EducatorPreparation/GaTAPP/FAQs.aspx>.

147 GaPSC. n.d. Approved Providers. Retrieved from <https://www.gapsc.com/EducatorPreparation/GaTAPP/Providers.aspx>.



Concerns around declining enrollment in teacher preparation programs have contributed to expanding the scope of teacher recruitment beyond university candidates and career changers to include high school students and paraprofessionals.

“Teacher as a Profession” is one of the pathways in Georgia’s Education and Training career cluster. Interested high school students enroll in a three-course sequence, which culminates in a practicum field experience and performance portfolio demonstrating the knowledge and skills acquired through enrollment in the career pathway. After completing the three courses, students take a state-developed End of Pathway assessment. If students pass the assessment and receive the pathway credential, they will receive three hours of college credit and be exempt from taking EDUC 2100.<sup>148</sup> Currently, 105 high schools offer the pathway, serving 773 students.<sup>149</sup>

Some university preparation providers have created pathways for paraprofessionals — teacher aides that supervise children and assist in the delivery of instruction. For example, Middle Georgia State University offers online and weekend degree programs. Teacher candidates can complete field experiences and student teaching at the schools where they work.<sup>150</sup> Similarly, the University of West Georgia’s Newnan campus offers a dual certification program in elementary general education and elementary special education.<sup>151</sup> By allowing candidates to use their current placement to become a fully licensed teacher, paraprofessionals can earn higher pay and advance their careers.

#### **POLICY GOAL NO. 1: INCREASING FACULTY DIVERSITY**

Georgia’s school-age population is more diverse than the educator workforce. During the 2019-20 school year, only 31.7% of teachers were educators of color,<sup>152</sup> whereas the most recent data from GaDOE indicate that 62.6% of Georgia’s students are non-White.<sup>153</sup>

While broadening nontraditional teaching pathways could increase the number of educators entering the profession, current state recruitment strategies are not targeted enough to increase faculty diversity.

In a 2018 report, the Learning Policy Institute documented six ways that state leaders can develop more supportive pathways for candidates of color. Examples include the following:

- Creating intensive preparation programs that provide financial support, mentorship, and high-quality clinical placements,
- Funding teacher residencies, partnerships between educator preparation providers and school systems that train candidates of color to teach in high-need schools or subject areas, and
- Rewarding educator preparation programs that recruit candidates of color and provide the supplementary supports that allow them to succeed.<sup>154</sup>

148 Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE). n.d. Program of Study: Teaching as a Profession. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/CTAE/Documents/Education-and-Training-Teaching-as-a-Profession-POS.pdf>.

149 GaDOE. n.d. Family & Consumer Sciences Cluster. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/CTAE/Documents/FCS-Clusters-in-Georgia.pdf>.

150 Middle Georgia State University. 2020, April 28. MGA Launches Teacher Certification Pathways for Paraprofessionals [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.mga.edu/news/2020/04/online-weekend-teacher-ed-track-MGA.php>.

151 Lindenberger, E. 2018, November 13. Growing Our Own: Dual Certification Program Addresses Teacher Shortage. University of West Georgia. Retrieved from <https://www.westga.edu/news/academics-newnan/dual-certification.php>.

152 Pelfrey, R., and M. Flamini. 2020, December. 2020 Georgia K-12 Teacher and Leader Workforce Report. Governor’s Office of Student Achievement. Retrieved from <https://gosa.georgia.gov/georgia-k-12-teacher-and-leader-workforce-report>.

153 GaDOE. 2021, September 27. Quick Facts about Georgia Public Education 2021–2022. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Documents/Quick%20Facts%202021-2022.pdf>.

154 Carver-Thomas, D. 2018, April 19. Diversifying the Teaching Profession: How to Recruit and Retain Teachers of Color. Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/diversifying-teaching-profession-report>.

### Teacher Leadership Programs

While increasing the number of adults in the preparation pipeline is essential to maintaining the size of the teaching workforce, district leaders can expand teacher leadership programs to address student needs and personnel shortages. Teacher leader initiatives provide educators with career pathways that keep them in the classroom, allowing them to receive recognition and greater compensation without having to take an administrative role.

The Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GaPSC) adopted the current tiered teacher certification system in 2014 to support district teacher leadership efforts.<sup>155</sup> The highest certification tier is for classroom teachers who have demonstrated instructional effectiveness (Advanced Professional) or aptitude for mentoring and coaching peers (Lead Professional). District leaders interested in creating new teacher leadership positions could use advanced licensure as a way to recruit highly effective professionals to mentor early-career educators and revamp instruction in a school.

Also, state law empowers districts to apply for flexibility through the Strategic Waiver program. Approved school systems may waive state requirements related to class size, instructional expenditure levels, teacher certification, and salary schedules.<sup>156</sup> School districts facing severe teacher shortages find ways to increase class sizes and deploy paraprofessionals and teacher interns to supplement the teaching delivered by effective teachers. Teacher leaders are responsible for student learning while they supervise pre-professional and early-career educators.

Georgia's school systems have the opportunity and authority to pursue innovative staffing models and creative teacher leadership strategies.

### POLICY GOAL NO. 2: EQUITABLE ACCESS TO EFFECTIVE TEACHING

School systems can cultivate teacher leadership as a strategy to increase the effectiveness of classroom teachers. By identifying talented educators and providing them with professional learning, school systems can create a cadre of teacher leaders who can be deployed to different schools. These teacher leaders could provide the mentorship and professional learning that improves the instructional effectiveness of early-career educators and struggling teachers.

However, increasing equitable access across Georgia requires a system response. A focus on high-quality induction models for new teachers and rewarding educators that take on advanced roles like mentoring their peers could set the stage for more equitable distribution of effective teachers.

### Professional Learning and Development

Many school districts have partnered with university preparation providers, regional education service agencies (RESAs), state professional organizations, and nonprofits to develop ongoing professional learning that is timely, meaningful, and job embedded. The state's P-20 collaboratives are one example of how universities, RESAs, and school systems identify problems of practice and deploy collective resources to address shared challenges.

Another example is the partnership between the University of Georgia (UGA) and the Clarke County School District designed to improve teacher induction programming. UGA's College of Education used teacher feedback from surveys and focus groups to create an induction strategy responsive to early-career teachers' needs.<sup>157</sup>

155 Georgia PSC. n.d. Tiered Certification. Retrieved from <https://www.gapsc.com/Certification/TieredCertification/tieredCertification.aspx>.

156 For more information, see the rule related to strategic waivers at <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/State-Board-of-Education/SBOE%20Rules/160-5-1-.33.pdf>. Federal law prohibits school systems from waiving special education certification requirements.

157 Kao, K. 2021, August 2. UGA: School Partnership Makes an Impact. *UGA Today*. Retrieved from <https://news.uga.edu/uga-school-partnership-supports-new-teachers/>.

As the federal COVID relief funds expand professional learning efforts, school systems could expand partnerships to pursue the following strategies:

- Redesign the school day to provide more time for accelerated learning and teacher collaboration,
- Schedule time during the school day for teachers to diagnose current practices, pilot new interventions, and observe high-quality lessons, and
- Redistribute teaching loads and responsibilities.

### ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

To launch the moonshot in Georgia, state policymakers and local leaders should reframe the value proposition around teaching.<sup>158</sup> A value proposition defines what a profession offers an individual. To recruit more talented individuals to the profession, leaders should focus on career advancement opportunities and how teacher leadership roles allow highly effective practitioners to stay in the classroom. Communicating the benefits of choosing teaching as a career is only the first step. State agencies and RESAs should identify a cohort of early-adopter districts that are piloting promising practices and contribute to the state's knowledge base related to recruitment, teacher leadership, and job-embedded professional learning.

For districts looking to lead the effort, cultivating teacher leaders is a mission critical step. Districts can deploy teacher leaders to provide induction and mentoring for early-career teachers and lead professional learning opportunities that contribute to more effective instruction.

District leaders who develop formal teacher leader roles signal to aspiring professionals that their school systems award highly effective teachers. Put simply, investments in teacher leadership today could seed the teaching profession that Georgia needs by 2030.

The pandemic punctuated how isolating in-person teaching is for underprepared teachers or newer practitioners working in schools that lack a culture of collaboration and openness. Shifting how schools use staff and how they structure instructional experiences will be inadequate if teachers' willingness to mentor and coach peers is not appropriately recognized and compensated.

While teacher leadership and talent identification programs will not solve teacher shortages, robust teacher leadership programs and specialized teaching roles could create a corps of highly effective educators that equip students and early-career teachers with the tools they need to succeed.

As state policymakers and district leaders consider how to revamp the teaching profession, a long-range state plan should consider how educator development and support strategies affect thinking about funding, curriculum and instruction, and school climate and culture. EdQuest Georgia, an initiative led by the Ga Partnership on behalf of 30+ state agencies and advocacy organizations, spotlights Quality Teaching as one of seven core areas to advance the state's education and workforce priorities.<sup>159</sup>

158 Shields, R.A., and C. Lewis. 2012, December. *Rethinking the Value Proposition to Improve Teaching Effectiveness*. Education Resource Strategies. Retrieved from <https://www.erstrategies.org/cms/files/1378-value-proposition.pdf>.

159 <https://www.edquestga.org/>

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

### IMMEDIATE (LAYING THE FOUNDATION)

- School leaders can reschedule teaching and professional learning time as an initial way to improve working conditions.
- Central office staff can explore how to budget for new teacher leadership positions without compromising other important initiatives.
- Legislators and state agency leaders can audit current state laws and regulations to ensure they do not inhibit local system development of creative incentives and nontraditional staffing models.

### INTERMEDIATE (EXPERIMENTATION – WHAT WORKS?)

- School systems can partner with educator preparation providers to create teacher residencies, long-term candidate placements that provide more exposure to content and pedagogy while completing program requirements.
- School systems can develop talent programs to identify teachers with the interest and aptitude to become lead or master educators. One option is to leverage the state tiered licensure system to create two leadership corps, one for accelerating student learning and the other for providing professional learning for teachers.

### LONG-TERM (REDESIGNING TEACHING – ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS)

- Legislators and state agency leaders convene a stakeholder committee to develop a comprehensive state teacher workforce plan. State and system leaders could accomplish the following strategies as a prelude to developing the end-of-decade plan.
  - GaDOE can spotlight effective district models and supports cross-district learning.
  - The Georgia General Assembly can fund pilots across Georgia focused on advanced teacher roles and innovative staffing models.
  - The Professional Standards Commission and University System can provide guidance on how school systems and educator preparation providers could partner to develop innovative programming for early-career teachers

## ISSUE 9

## WORKFORCE READINESS – A STRATEGY THAT PAYS OFF

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

The University and Technical College Systems of Georgia have committed to a 60% post-secondary completion goal through Complete College Georgia, a decade-long initiative to increase the number of young adults with a post-secondary credential.<sup>160</sup> In 2019, 42.4% of Georgians held a post-secondary degree. Including post-secondary certificates and certifications brings the total to 52.8% — still 7.2% short of the state's completion goal.<sup>161</sup>

Post-secondary attainment for Blacks and Hispanic/Latinos lags that of their peers at 35.4% and 23.3%, respectively.<sup>162</sup> A look at Georgia's post-secondary enrollment trends suggests Georgia's workforce equity gaps by race and ethnicity will only continue to worsen.<sup>163</sup> Consider the following outcomes for the Georgia Class of 2015:

- 50.9% of Black students enrolled in post-secondary within 16 months of graduation; however only 31% had completed at least one year of credits (24 credit hours) within the first two years of enrollment.
- 48.2% of Hispanic/Latino students enrolled in a post-secondary program within 16 months of graduation, but only 32.9% had earned at least one year of credits within the first two years of enrollment.
- In comparison, 61.3% of White students enrolled within 16 months, and nearly 45.5% had completed 24 credit hours within two years.<sup>164</sup>

With the share of the White population expected to dip below 50% by 2030<sup>165</sup> and enrollments declining at institutions serving students of color and working adults,<sup>166</sup> the state will fall further behind its goal without a bold strategy to support post-secondary enrollment and completion efforts for students of color.

Given the emerging demographic and workforce challenges confronting the state, Georgia would benefit from a comprehensive long-range post-secondary education and jobs plan that encourages recent high school graduates and working adults to complete **credentials of value** — degree, certificate, and certification programs that prepare Georgians for high-demand, high-wage careers.<sup>167</sup>

<sup>160</sup> University System of Georgia. 2021, November. Complete College Georgia. Retrieved from <https://completega.org/>.

<sup>161</sup> Lumina Foundation. n.d. *A Stronger Nation: Progress for States*. Retrieved from <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/#/progress/state/GA>.

<sup>162</sup> Lumina Foundation, n.d., *A Stronger Nation*.

<sup>163</sup> Carnevale, A.P., T.J. Garcia, N. Ridley, and M.C. Quinn. 2020. *The Overlooked Value of Certificates and Associate's Degrees*. Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce. Retrieved from <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/subba/>.

<sup>164</sup> Governor's Office of Student Achievement. *2018-19 Post-Secondary C12 Report for 2015 Graduating Class*. Retrieved from [https://download.gosa.ga.gov/2019/C12\\_FY2019\\_HS%20Graduates%202015\\_Enrolled%20in%2016%20Mos%20\\_%20Completed%2024%20Credits%20-Redacted.xlsx](https://download.gosa.ga.gov/2019/C12_FY2019_HS%20Graduates%202015_Enrolled%20in%2016%20Mos%20_%20Completed%2024%20Credits%20-Redacted.xlsx).

<sup>165</sup> Governor's Office of Planning and Budget. n.d. State Projections by Race, 2020–2065. Retrieved from <https://opb.georgia.gov/document/document/state-projections-race-2020-2065/download>.

<sup>166</sup> See changes in USG and TCSG institution enrollment ([https://www.usg.edu/assets/usg/docs/news\\_files/Fall\\_2021\\_SER.pdf](https://www.usg.edu/assets/usg/docs/news_files/Fall_2021_SER.pdf)) and (<https://www.tcsge.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Annual-AY-2021-Enrollment.xlsx>).

<sup>167</sup> National Conference of State Legislatures. 2021, February 17. Credentials of Value. Retrieved from <https://www.ncsl.org/research/education/credentials-of-value.aspx>.



### EQUITY AT THE FOREFRONT

- The state assets are in place to serve recent high school graduates and working adults. An **equity-focused mindset** could help state and institutional leaders allocate resources to increase post-secondary completion rates.
- **Equity-focused strategies** recognize the importance of addressing barriers to post-secondary access, affordability, and completion. An equity focus also encourages state leaders to reconfigure incentives so that decisions made by individuals make communities more resilient and the state economy more stable over time.
- **Equity-focused strategies** address students' immediate needs while laying the groundwork for long-term economic growth through system coordination and partnerships with industry leaders. For example, providing short-term incentives for Georgians to enter high-demand programs of study could result in more credentialed workers. A more talented workforce could lead to more industry involvement in transforming Georgia's education and workforce strategies.

Increasingly, short-term certificate and industry-based certification programs are becoming pathways to livable-wage employment. After earning initial, career-oriented certificates and receiving entry-level positions, adults can re-enter post-secondary education to earn credentials that enable them to advance in their chosen career. This concept is called **credential stacking**.

By creating multiple, formal exits and on-ramps to post-secondary education, system and institutional leaders can eventually establish a statewide workforce readiness system that allows workers to maintain their position in a changing economy by completing more advanced credentials. This issue brief describes how expanding access to all types of credential programs could provide a way for all Georgians, especially people of color and low-income residents, to fully participate in the state's economic prosperity.

### SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA

Issue 2: Unfinished Instruction – Equity through Acceleration and Issue 3: Non-Academic Barriers – The School's Role in this edition of the *Top Ten Issues to Watch* describe how K-12 school leaders can accelerate learning for all students by addressing both academic and non-academic barriers that stifle success. Similarly, state policy-makers and system leaders can address barriers to post-secondary entry for both recent high school graduates and working adults by focusing on acceleration.

**Acceleration** involves any resources or supports that increase students' readiness for post-secondary education or encourages them to enroll when they not might otherwise. Providing these supports in collaboration with K-12 and adult education partners could increase enrollment, persistence, and completion rates for students, especially students of color and low-income students.

Policymakers in Georgia should focus on four specific barriers to positive post-secondary outcomes: lack of exposure to post-secondary opportunities in high school, affordability, misperceptions about what credentials have value, and lack of clarity about how prior learning applies to post-secondary programs.

## Exposure to Accelerated Learning Opportunities

### WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

More high school students need to take advantage of opportunities to earn college credit through career, technical, and agricultural education (CTAE) programs, apprenticeships, and work-based learning programs.

Increasing access to **accelerated learning opportunities** while students are still in the high school provides a strong foundation for post-secondary success and can be strong on-ramps to in-demand careers upon graduation.

The University and Technical College Systems of Georgia play a direct role in preparing high school students for the rigors of college coursework and for post-secondary success through Georgia's dual-enrollment program. Dual enrollment allows qualifying high school students to take college courses for free while earning both high school and post-secondary credit. The program can help reduce barriers to post-secondary entry in three ways: (1) by providing early exposure to college-level courses, (2) by allowing students to earn credit and reducing the time to degree, and (3) by lowering the cost of attending college by reducing the number of courses needed to complete a degree.

A November 2019 Georgia Budget and Policy Institute report on dual enrollment confirmed the program's significance:<sup>168</sup>

- Dual enrollment is vital to rural areas in Georgia. One in four students in the seven most rural counties in Georgia took at least one dual-enrollment course in 2019, compared with one in 20 high school students in metro Atlanta systems.
- Core academic courses accounted for 61% of credit hours taken in 2019, with technical colleges serving as the state's largest provider.
- Equity is improving, with dual enrollment 2016–2019 participation rates increasing at a faster pace among Black and Latino students.

The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) offers the CTAE's Career Clusters and Career Pathways program. Students can take courses in more than 130 career pathways within 17 Career Clusters, earn industry-recognized credentials, and participate in work-based learning, apprenticeships, and internships.<sup>169</sup> CTAE career pathways enable students to experience the workplace relevance of what they are learning in the classroom. The key factor in accelerating instruction is allowing students to explore careers and earn credits that prepare them for academic and technical programs upon high school graduation or to enroll in programs while in high school.

School systems can also accelerate post-secondary readiness and workforce opportunities by certifying students' skills and experiences. For instance, GaDOE has established Career Ready Diploma Seals for students who complete career pathways or a series of outlined accomplishments and who engage in activities, courses, industry certifications, and experiences that foster career readiness.

Students who pass Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) exams can also earn college credit. Aligning additional credits around diploma seals and completed career pathways could accelerate students' progress toward post-secondary program completion.

<sup>168</sup> Lee, J. 2019. *Dual Enrollment Requires Sustainable Funding to Promote High School and College Success*. Atlanta: Georgia Budget and Policy Institute.

<sup>169</sup> Georgia Department of Education. n.d. Career Clusters/Pathways. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/CTAE/Pages/CTAE-Georgia-Career-Clusters.aspx>.

Finally, school systems are partnering with higher education institutions and the business community to increase access to apprenticeships and other work-based learning opportunities. The completion of these pre-professional programs offered by school districts could result in college credit and priority enrollment status at technical colleges.

### Affordability

#### WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Current state financial aid strategies contribute to inequitable post-secondary opportunities for recent high school graduates of color, low-income students, and working adults of all races and ethnicities.

Georgia is one of only two states that does not offer statewide need-based financial aid.<sup>170</sup> The only state-sponsored, statewide financial aid programs in Georgia are merit based: the HOPE Scholarships and Grants, and the Zell Miller Scholarship. The HOPE Scholarship requires recent graduates to have a 3.0 minimum high school GPA and complete four units of credit from the Academic Rigor List.<sup>171</sup> High school students who do not enroll in or have access to advanced courses in their schools might be ineligible to receive the HOPE Scholarship.

These programs have increased the accessibility and affordability of college for almost 2 million Georgians since the inception of the HOPE Scholarship in 1993. However, certain patterns that reinforce the inequities of higher education in Georgia have become clear in the more than 25 years that HOPE has been in place. Higher income students are more likely to receive HOPE and Zell Miller Scholarships. White and Asian students are the most likely to get HOPE or Zell Miller Scholarships, while Black students are the least likely. Among full-tuition Zell Miller Scholars, Black students are severely underrepresented compared to their numbers in the student population as a whole.<sup>172</sup>

Adult students can apply for the HOPE Scholarship after earning 30 hours of post-secondary credit if they maintain a 3.0 college GPA.<sup>173</sup> Adults enrolled in baccalaureate programs are not immediately eligible for state financial aid until they have earned college credit.

Georgia also provides the HOPE Grant for students who are enrolled in certificate and technical diploma programs.<sup>174</sup> College students enrolled in high-demand programs might also receive a concurrent award — the HOPE Career Grant — if they are studying at one of five public universities or 22 technical colleges.<sup>175</sup> This is an excellent, low-cost opportunity for students to align their post-secondary work with in-demand jobs across Georgia.

170 National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs. 2020. *50th Annual Survey Report on State-Sponsored Student Financial Aid*. Retrieved from [https://www.nassgapsurvey.com/survey\\_reports/2018-2019-50th.pdf](https://www.nassgapsurvey.com/survey_reports/2018-2019-50th.pdf).

171 Georgia Student Finance Commission. 2020, September. Listing of Courses Possessing Academic Rigor to Meet the HOPE Rigor Requirement. Retrieved from <https://www.gafutures.org/media/j0wlzalp/rigor-list-september-2020-print-ready.pdf>.

172 Lee, J. 2020, September 14. *Moving HOPE Forward into the 21st Century*. Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://gbpi.org/moving-hope-forward-into-the-21st-century/>.

173 Georgia Student Finance Commission. n.d. Initial Academic Eligibility for the HOPE Scholarship. Retrieved from <https://www.gafutures.org/hope-state-aid-programs/hope-zell-miller-scholarships/hope-scholarship/initial-academic-eligibility/>.

## Undervaluing Short-Term Credentials

### WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Students, parents, and the general public lack clarity about the worth of career-oriented post-secondary programs.

Many Georgians have the perception that noncredit or short-term credentials have less workforce value than two- and four-year degrees. Most high schools prepare graduates for academic study at a technical college or university. Students and families misperceive the value of nondegree opportunities, which could result in more students ultimately enrolling at four-year institutions. While one's post-secondary field of study affects earnings potential, some shorter-term degrees may hold more value than four-year degrees. For example, workers with associate degrees in engineering have median earnings between \$50,001 and \$60,000 per year. Workers with certain certificates in engineering technologies or drafting have median earnings between \$75,001 and \$150,000. These types of degrees and certificates also may be more affordable, flexible, and convenient, making these programs attractive.<sup>176</sup> The Technical College System of Georgia's "Succeed Sooner" campaign is targeted to students seeking zero debt, job placement success, and two years or less of college.

Working adults might not recognize the value of short-term credentials or know that in-demand programs of study are available. Many adult students need short-term skills training to secure immediate employment. National numbers bear this out: 57% of associate degrees and 94% of certificates are awarded in career-oriented fields where employment is the goal. This underscores the importance of understanding the labor-market value of the various certificates and associate degrees, particularly because these programs enroll a high proportion of Black and Latino students, as well as low-income students and older adults.<sup>177</sup>

## Certification of Prior Learning

### WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

The time it takes some students to earn credentials may be longer than necessary when institutions do not recognize knowledge and skills acquired outside of post-secondary programs.

In 2019, only 25% of students enrolled in degree-granting programs were over the age of 25. Sixty percent of adults attended part-time.<sup>178</sup> Since family and work obligations might prevent adults from enrolling in post-secondary studies full time, rewarding adults for prior work experience is one way to decrease the time to earning their first post-secondary credential.

174 Georgia Student Finance Commission. n.d. Eligibility for the HOPE Grant. Retrieved from <https://www.gafutures.org/hope-state-aid-programs/hope-zell-miller-grants/hope-grant/eligibility/>.

175 Georgia Student Finance Commission. n.d. HOPE Career Grant. Retrieved from <https://www.gafutures.org/hope-state-aid-programs/hope-zell-miller-grants/hope-career-grant/>.

176 Carnevale et al., 2020, *The Overlooked Value of Certificates and Associate's Degrees*.

177 Carnevale et al., 2020, *The Overlooked Value of Certificates and Associate's Degrees*.

178 National Center for Education Statistics. n.d. Table 303.50: Total Fall Enrollment in Degree-Granting Post-Secondary Institutions, by Level of Enrollment, Control and Level of Institution, Attendance Status, and Age of Student: 2019. Retrieved from [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20\\_303.50.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_303.50.asp).

Institutions can award college credit by assessing work experience, military training, standardized testing, and industry-recognized licenses.<sup>179</sup> According to the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, adult students who received credits for prior learning were 17% more likely to complete a degree than their peers without prior-learning credits, accelerating degree completion by nine to 14 months and saving students between \$1,500 and \$10,200 by not having to pay for additional credit hours.<sup>180</sup>

### ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

Large and consistent gaps exist between White, Black, and Latino subgroups in post-secondary degree pursuit and attainment. Consider the following statistics:

- One-third of White students who perform well on standardized tests enroll at selective post-secondary institutions; only one-fifth of similarly performing Black and Latino students do the same.<sup>181</sup>
- Black students are overrepresented at underfunded, open-access institutions where students complete their degrees at much lower rates, leaving them in debt but without a credential.<sup>182</sup>
- Since the 1990s, almost two-thirds of selective public universities have seen their population of lower-income students shrink. At the same time, they have increased the enrollment of families with incomes in the top 20% of the population.<sup>183</sup>

In other words, selective higher education institutions are increasingly serving richer and whiter student bodies, regardless of test scores, while at the same time the population has been rapidly diversifying.

Georgia has considerable assets to encourage increased post-secondary enrollment: a broad-based, merit aid program, a growing dual-enrollment program, and robust technical system partnerships with active workforce sector involvement.

However, these strategies do not always align with the needs of a diverse student population and state workforce needs. Allocating resources and redesigning strategies to expand equitable opportunities for Georgians disconnected from post-secondary education is crucial to increasing personal and economic resilience in the face of another pandemic or economic shock.

179 Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. n.d. *A Brighter Future Through Credit for Prior Learning*. Retrieved from <https://www.cael.org/lp/pla>.

180 Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, n.d., *A Brighter Future*.

181 Carnevale, A. 2020, September 2. White Flight to the Bachelor's Degree. *Medium*. <https://medium.com/georgetown-cew/white-flight-to-the-ba-e604ee4e3967>.

182 Jones, T.A. 2020, January. *HARD TRUTHS: Why Only Race Conscious Policies Can Fix Racism in Higher Education*. Retrieved from EdTrust.com: <https://edtrustmain.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/14161442/Hard-Truths-Why-Only-Race-Conscious-Policies-Can-Fix-Racism-in-Higher-Education-January-2020.pdf>.

183 Carnevale, 2020, White Flight to the Bachelor's Degree.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

Several opportunities are available for state policymakers, system leaders, and private partners to increase enrollment and degree completion rates for low-income residents, students of color, and working adults. The three recommendations below align with the barriers described earlier in this issue brief.

- The Georgia General Assembly needs to fund a statewide need-based financial aid program.
- The two post-secondary systems can create degree stacks and clear alignment that articulate how knowledge and skills map from noncredit workforce experiences up to doctoral degrees.
- Industry sector partners can explore areas of joint investment to create upskilling programs for working adults at risk of unemployment or underemployment based on changes in workforce sector needs.

Below are additional, more specific ideas for increasing workforce readiness and alignment between post-secondary and workforce strategies.

### IMMEDIATE (INSTITUTIONAL EFFORTS)

- Develop broad-based outreach and marketing campaigns that inform residents about the benefits of short-term credentials like certificates, certifications, and two-year degrees.
- Offer entrance career and financial counseling for new students so that they can assess whether their chosen post-secondary program will yield livable-wage opportunities.

### INTERMEDIATE (SYSTEM STRATEGIES)

- Encourage workforce partners to become directly involved in the development of content, curricula, and internship/externship/cooperative opportunities.
- Pilot state or system-level incentives for institutions to adopt new learning technologies or develop new degree and certificate programs to respond to workforce needs.

### LONG-TERM (CREATING A LONG-RANGE VISION)

- Create multiple onramps to post-secondary opportunities through prior learning assessments, competency-based methods of awarding credit, dual enrollment, and credential stacking.
- Reimagine financial aid by funding a needs-based aid program and creating incentives for adults to pursue post-secondary study, especially if the program is aligned with an in-demand career field.

The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education's EdQuest Post-Secondary Pathways policy recommendations<sup>184</sup> includes more detailed recommendations on how the state can create streamlined educational pathways to increase employability and economic growth.

Closing the state's talent and skills gaps is critical to personal well-being, community resilience, and Georgia's economic security. Many of the necessary state and system policies are in place to create transformative opportunities for youth and working adults. The connections are what are missing. Fragmentation is stifling student decision-making.

Georgia needs to take steps to ensure that residents disconnected from post-secondary education and training are not discouraged from enrolling because of barriers that are solvable by coordinated and coherent state policies. Connecting disparate policies is the way that Georgia policymakers can attack system inequalities and ensure that all students are able to succeed.

# ISSUE 10

## RURAL TRANSFORMATION – FROM THE INSIDE OUT

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

In recent years, state policymakers and agency leaders have addressed challenges confronting rural communities<sup>185</sup> by investing in broadband infrastructure, increasing access to physical and behavioral health services, and tackling rural poverty through education and economic development initiatives.

The pandemic did not diminish these priorities. In fact, local school systems, county commissions, and regional health agencies have received billions in federal COVID funds to scale current development efforts and address barriers to rural transformation.

As rural Georgia looks to recover from the pandemic and related economic stresses, most best-practice research to date has focused on how to implement education, health, and economic policies in urban and suburban areas.<sup>186</sup> While anecdotal evidence suggests that the pandemic stressed rural health and education assets, the absence of rigorous study of the pandemic's impact on rural areas could result in recovery strategies that are not a good fit for these communities.

The pathway to rural transformation requires a strong birth-to-work strategy, drawing on the expertise and shared commitment of leaders in several sectors: early learning, K-12 education, post-secondary education, health, housing, and business and industry.

### EQUITY AT THE FOREFRONT

- Many rural communities have the assets and leadership necessary to improve access to high-quality workforce opportunities. Rural leaders can promote transformation by identifying common community interests, intentionally bridging social and racial divides, creating long-term shared goals, and developing multisector strategies to achieve goals through a long-range plan.
- To create more equitable and effective strategies, rural communities should identify how economic development objectives shape partnerships with early learning, K-12, and post-secondary leaders. Examples might include homegrown career pathways to prepare residents for in-demand jobs or leveraging industry expertise to reskill adults who lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- State policymakers and agency leaders can provide guidance and expertise, but equity-centered changes will not take hold unless communities pilot the ideas and solutions themselves.

<sup>185</sup> The federal government does not have a single definition for what constitutes a rural area. The US Census defines rural areas based on population size and density, generally a place with 2,500 or fewer residents.

<sup>186</sup> Mueller, J.T., K. McConnell, P.B. Burrow, K. Pofahl, A.A. Merdjanoff, and J. Farrell. 2021, January 5. Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Rural America. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118(1). Retrieved from <https://www.pnas.org/content/118/1/2019378118>.

A significant asset of smaller communities is the closeness between sectors and the relationships between leaders. Rural leaders face a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to leverage multisector relationships and utilize federal COVID funds to create a cooperative strategy. A comprehensive strategy could increase **community resilience**, preparing for the fallout from the next destabilizing social or economic shock.

This issue brief describes the barriers to community resilience and provides a specific process for community leaders to develop community-wide strategies that lift up all rural residents.

## SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA

### Community Resilience

Resilience is a mindset that allows community leaders to prepare for social and economic shocks through collaborative action and proactive planning.<sup>187</sup>

Resilience can be difficult to achieve in rural communities because of underpopulation, low diversity in industry sectors, high poverty, and low post-secondary educational attainment. Often, rural economic development efforts focus on upskilling for displaced workers or technical training in response to local employer needs. While these efforts could improve personal well-being and contribute to greater economic output, rural leaders can make their communities more resilient by aligning education and economic development strategies. See the sidebar titled Rural Development Hubs for an example of this alignment.

### Five Barriers to Community Resilience Challenging Demographics

Nearly 17% of Georgians live in rural areas.<sup>189</sup> The state's rural communities added 25,818 residents over the last 10 years, but the growth rate of 1.45% was anemic compared to 12.62% growth in urban and suburban areas.<sup>190</sup>

According to the 2020 US Census, Georgia's rural areas have higher percentages of retirement-age residents and infants and children (ages 0–19) than the state average. Over time, demographers predict that rural communities will continue to skew older as adults aged 25 to 64 move to nonrural areas.<sup>191</sup>

### RURAL DEVELOPMENT HUBS

Most current economic development approaches focus on job creation and economic growth. Education and workforce partners often respond to these objectives by creating or expanding post-secondary training programs to meet employer demand.

The Aspen Institute spotlighted rural development hubs in 2019 as an alternative approach that combines education and economic development strategies to emphasize personal well-being, workforce readiness, and community prosperity within a defined geographic space. Hubs are regional in scope and help community leaders identify local assets and invest in strategies that scale effective practices.

Regional agencies, community foundations, school systems, and industry partners can serve as or participate in these rural hubs by leveraging funding and expertise to revitalize rural communities.<sup>188</sup>

187 Love, H., and M. Powe. 2020, December 1. *Building Resilient Rural Places: Strategies from Local Leaders to Strengthen Rural Assets, Diversity, and Dynamism*. Brookings. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/building-resilient-rural-places-strategies-from-local-leaders-to-strengthen-rural-assets-diversity-and-dynamism/>.

188 Aspen Institute. 2019, November 12. *Rural Development Hubs: Strengthening America's Rural Innovation Infrastructure*. Retrieved from <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/rural-development-hubs-report/>.

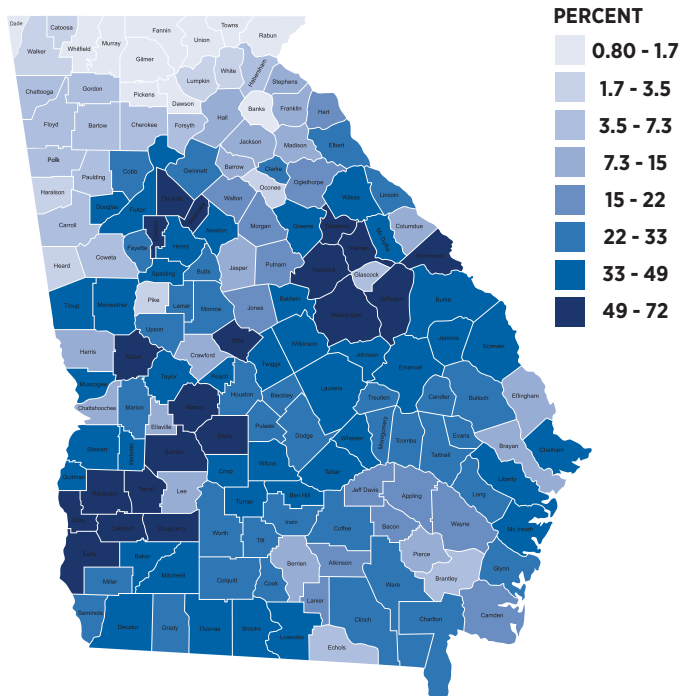
189 Economic Research Service, US Department of Agriculture. n.d. State Fact Sheets: Georgia. Retrieved from <https://data.ers.usda.gov/reports.aspx?StateFIPS=13&StateName=Georgia&ID=17854>.

190 Economic Research Service, n.d., State Fact Sheets: Georgia

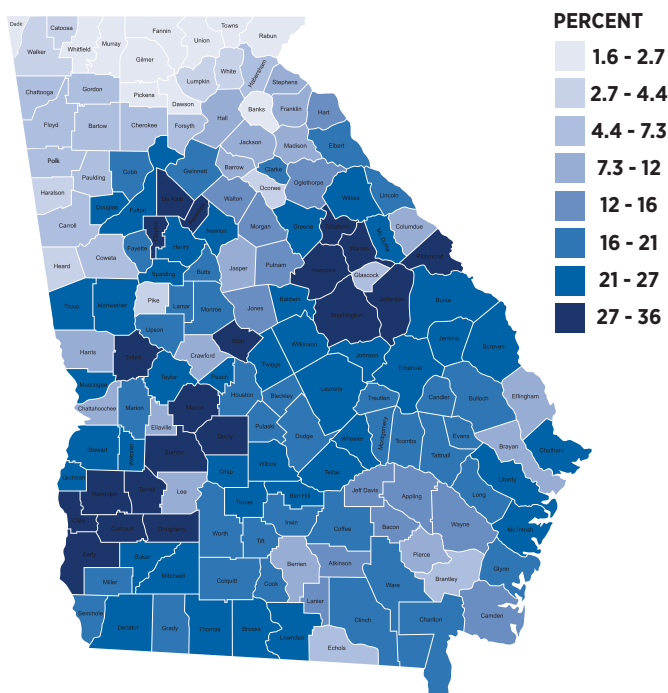
191 Office of Planning and Budget. n.d. County Projections by Age, 2020–2065. Retrieved from <https://opb.georgia.gov/document/document/county-projections-age-2020-2065/download>.

Communities vary in terms of their racial and ethnic composition. For example, Northeast Georgia is trending Whiter and older; Southwest Georgia has larger Black populations (see Figure 10.1); and Central and South Georgia have growing Latino populations (see Figure 10.2).

**FIGURE 10.1 PERCENTAGE OF BLACK RESIDENTS BY COUNTY, 2020<sup>192</sup>**



**FIGURE 10.2 PERCENTAGE OF LATINO RESIDENTS BY COUNTY, 2020<sup>193</sup>**



192 Index Mundi. n.d. Georgia Black Population Percentage by County. Retrieved from <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/united-states/quick-facts/georgia/black-population-percentage#map>.

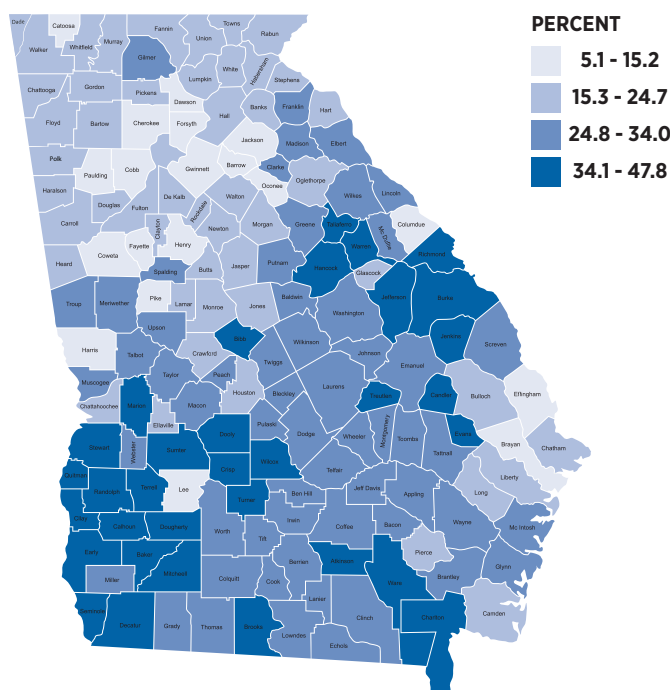
193 Index Mundi. n.d. Georgia Hispanic or Latino Origin Population Percentage by County. Retrieved from <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/united-states/quick-facts/georgia/hispanic-or-latino-population-percentage#map>.



### Family and Neighborhood Poverty

In Georgia, individual poverty as well as family and intergenerational poverty are greater in rural areas than in urban and suburban areas (see Figure 10.3).<sup>194</sup> In many counties across rural Georgia, a quarter to nearly half of all children are living in poverty.

**FIGURE 10.3 PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN IN GEORGIA LIVING IN POVERTY, BY COUNTY, 2019**



Relatedly, rural communities grapple with housing shortages and food insecurity. With lower population density, regional agencies and community partners find it more difficult to deliver wraparound supports and social services. These factors impede the ability of residents to learn and thrive.

### Access to Health Care

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of community hospital closures in rural Georgia concerned state policymakers. Georgia has been among the states with the largest number of hospital closures — nine between 2010 and 2020,<sup>195</sup> and another 31 (46%) of the state's remaining rural hospitals are considered vulnerable to closure.<sup>196</sup> State policymakers and agency leaders have identified several challenges associated with decreased access, including lack of mental and behavioral health services and lack of access to maternal and prenatal care. While these gaps in service impact the overall health of a community, they disproportionately affect low-income and elderly individuals. Moreover, hospital closures reverberate throughout rural counties, impacting their already distressed economies. The loss of a hospital can trigger the closure of banks, restaurants, and grocery stores. Many businesses will not consider moving into an area that lacks viable health care.<sup>197</sup>

194 T. Slack, B.C. Thiede, and L. Jensen. 2020, June 1. *Race, Residence, and Underemployment: 50 Years in Comparative Perspective, 1964–2017*. *Rural Sociology*. 28(2): 275–315. Retrieved from <https://pennstate.pure.elsevier.com/en/publications/race-residence-and-underemployment-fifty-years-in-comparative-per>.

195 Berard, Y. 2020, September 24. “Push Comes to Shove Moment” for Rural Hospitals in Georgia. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Retrieved from <https://www.ajc.com/news/investigations/push-comes-to-shove-moment-for-rural-hospitals-in-georgia/ODVXKRW7JHHDPQ7TKIZJYWUZY/>.

196 The Chartis Center for Rural Health analyzed financial and operational data from closed hospitals as well as 1,844 open rural hospitals. Using a multilevel logistic regression model, researchers calculated the probability of closure for each facility based on a variety of metrics for the two most recent financial reporting years available. The model explored 16 indicators determined to be important predictors of hospital closure, including hospital age, capital efficiency, occupancy, outpatient revenue, and so forth. Hospitals were considered vulnerable or most-vulnerable to closure if their performance levels were similar to those of rural hospitals at the time of their closure. See Charis Group. 2020, February. *The Rural Health Safety Net Under Pressure: Rural Hospital Vulnerability*. Retrieved from [https://www.ivantageindex.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/CCRH\\_Vulnerability-Research\\_FINAL-02.14.20.pdf](https://www.ivantageindex.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/CCRH_Vulnerability-Research_FINAL-02.14.20.pdf).

197 Berard, 2020, “Push Comes to Shove Moment.”

### **Education and Workforce Opportunity Gaps**

Students in rural communities graduate high school at higher rates than their urban and suburban peers.<sup>198</sup> The 2017 high school graduation rate for rural Georgia districts was 85.9%,<sup>199</sup> compared to the state average of 81.6%.<sup>200</sup> However, the percentage of rural residents enrolled in post-secondary programs and the post-secondary completion rates of communities are roughly half those of nonrural areas: 34.4% for urban and 16.7% for rural.<sup>201</sup> The low-skill jobs that undereducated rural Georgians rely on are exactly the ones threatened by automation: retail, food service, tourism, low-skill manufacturing, and agriculture.

### **Racial Distrust**

Historical divisions and systemic inequities have left lasting legacies in housing, employment, educational segregation, and access to capital, which contribute to social separation and distrust between races. While inequitable practices such as red lining, school segregation, White flight to private schools in the wake of desegregation, and lack of access to bank or USDA loans for Black Georgians may no longer be codified in formal policy, they cast a long shadow. The effects linger in social dynamics and racial distrust in many of our rural communities.<sup>202</sup>

Rural Georgia cannot achieve social and economic revitalization without addressing the persistent inequities that negatively affect people of color. Blacks and Latinos are more likely to experience persistent and intergenerational poverty than their White counterparts and, on balance, gaps in financial and educational outcomes are greater in rural areas for people of color.<sup>203</sup>

### **Education and Workforce Interventions**

Community leaders interested in developing cooperative, multisector strategies should consider investments in the following five areas where community-wide coordination could improve equitable access to high-quality opportunities.

### **School Readiness**

Nationally, 60% of mothers with an infant or toddler work, which makes access to child care an important priority in most communities.<sup>204</sup> However, 44% of children live in child care deserts, defined as “census tracts with more than 50 children under age 5 that contain either no child care providers or so few options that there are more than three times as many children as licensed child care slots.”<sup>205</sup> The lack of early learning centers and pre-kindergarten opportunities for the state’s youngest rural residents negatively affects students’ readiness to learn.

198 Economic Research Service, US Department of Agriculture. State Fact Sheets: Georgia. Retrieved from <https://data.ers.usda.gov/reports.aspx?StateFIPS=13&StateName=Georgia&ID=17854>.

199 Showalter, D., S.L. Hartman, J. Johnson, and B. Klein. 2019, November. *Why Rural Matters 2018-2019: The Time Is Now*. Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from <https://www.ruraledu.org/WhyRuralMatters.pdf>.

200 Georgia Department of Education. 2018, September 19. “Georgia’s graduation rate rises to all-time high.” Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Pages/PressReleaseDetails.aspx?PressView=default&pid=644>.

201 Economic Research Service, US Department of Agriculture. State Fact Sheets: Georgia. Retrieved from <https://data.ers.usda.gov/reports.aspx?StateFIPS=13&StateName=Georgia&ID=17854>.

202 Love, H., and M. Powe. 2020, December 1. *Rural Main Streets Can’t Achieve True Economic Revival Without Bridging Social Divides*. Brookings. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/research/rural-main-streets-cant-achieve-economic-revival-without-bridging-social-divides/>.

203 Economic Research Service. 2021, August 23. Data Show US Poverty Rates in 2019 Higher in Rural Areas Than in Urban for Racial/Ethnic Groups. US Department of Agriculture. Retrieved from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail?chartId=101903>.

204 US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2018, April 26. Married Mothers Less Likely to Participate in Labor Force in 2017 Than Other Moms. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2018/married-mothers-less-likely-to-participate-in-labor-force-in-2017-than-other-moms.htm>.

205 Center for American Progress. n.d. 44 Percent of People in Georgia Live in a Child Care Desert.” <https://childcaredeserts.org/2018/index.html?state=GA&split=true&urbanicity=Rural>.

***Supporting Extended Learning Time for K-12 Students***

Rural school systems have used federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to create or expand afterschool and summer programs. Rural districts have submitted plans to the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) that describe how they will address interrupted learning. The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education reviewed these district plans and found that they demonstrate a statewide commitment to accelerating student learning through standards-aligned education software, formative assessment tools, and professional learning for teachers to accommodate new instructional delivery models. Since the initial infrastructure costs and continuing budget impact is large for these investments, rural district leaders should consider how to integrate these strategies into the general budget if they prove effective.

***Community Health and School-Centered Wraparound Supports***

*Issue 3: Non-Academic Barriers – The School's Role* focuses on the school's role in delivering non-academic support services. While schools may lack the capacity to provide health and social services, they could partner with regional health agencies and nonprofits to ensure that the most persistent community challenges are addressed.

***Post-Secondary Education***

*Issue 9: Workforce Readiness – A Strategy That Pays Off* describes how local technical colleges offer short-term certificate and certification programs that could make rural residents more prepared for livable-wage careers. To the extent that these credentials are aligned to regional workforce needs, local communities, post-secondary partners, and industry leaders could partner to support credential stacking, which allows individuals to acquire more advanced skills in their chosen careers.

***Workforce and Economic Development***

Federal COVID relief funds provide an opportunity for rural communities to supercharge their strategies related to increasing workforce readiness and creating a talent base that encourages outside investment from business and industry leaders. While agriculture remains the number one industry in rural Georgia, the primary employers in these communities are county governments, school systems, and the service industry.

In some counties, manufacturing, logistics, or health care sectors may be major employers. All of these sectors increasingly demand a skilled workforce, requiring employees who have completed some level of study or training beyond a high school diploma. However, many of these industries are facing talent shortages. Issue 9 describes ways to support post-secondary completion in Georgia. Beyond those recommendations, to truly support a strong local workforce pipeline, employers and economic developers must coordinate with schools and educators to insulate the entire education pipeline. Local assets and gaps must be considered, assessed, and addressed. Investments in a robust, effective educational ecosystem that serves all students from birth to work are investments in workforce readiness and economic development.

### Statewide Efforts

The GaDOE used federal ESSER funds to establish the Office of Rural Education and Innovation in July 2021. The office will work with low-wealth, low-population school systems to remove barriers to student learning. The whole-child, whole-community approach prioritizes early learning, investments in broadband and device access, and cross-sector collaboration with post-secondary and workforce partners.<sup>206</sup>

The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education has established regional initiatives called Rural Learning Networks to disseminate and amplify best practices in addressing issues concerning educational attainment and economic development, especially in Georgia's hardest to reach communities. These networks engage local education, business, and community leaders to build local capacity to address rural Georgia's unique opportunities and challenges. The shared-learning networks allow community leaders to learn from one another and raise awareness of best-practice work already happening across Georgia.<sup>207</sup>

### ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

First and foremost, rural areas are **communities of space**. People are bound by shared interests and common purpose because they work and live near each other.

The Partnership's Rural Learning Networks have demonstrated that rural leaders can also inhabit **communities of practice** — groups that meet based on a shared interest and discover promising practices by learning and doing.

Community assets are present, but they are not always coordinated in ways that allow rural leaders to expand access to education and workforce opportunities. Rural leaders should focus on immediate challenges while simultaneously creating long-term plans to transform personal well-being and community resilience.

While the Georgia Department of Education's Office of Rural Education and Innovation is poised to provide significant training and technical assistance to high-poverty communities, to be sustainable, the solutions must be developed, implemented, and executed by rural leaders.

<sup>206</sup> Georgia Department of Education. n.d. Rural Education and Innovation. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/rural/Pages/default.aspx>.

<sup>207</sup> Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. n.d. Regional Learning Networks. Retrieved from <https://gpee.org/rural-learning-networks/>.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

### IMMEDIATE

#### 1. Start the Planning Process

- Assess needs.
- Identify partners.
- Document points of shared work and overlapping interests.

#### 2. Locate Regional Assets

- Explore where assets are. They might not be in the immediate vicinity.

#### 3. Insulating the Birth-to-Work Pipeline

- Identify opportunities to improve community education and workforce outcomes by focusing on barriers, such as lack of access to health care, affordable housing, and transportation.

### INTERMEDIATE

#### 1. Ensuring Full-Community Saturation

- Determine whether the right voices are in the room. Ensure that all community interests are represented by those in attendance.

#### 2. Finalizing Strategy

- Develop common goals, a set of investment objectives, and milestones or momentum points that will help determine if initiatives are successful.

### LONG-TERM

#### 1. Executing Strategy

- Implement the cooperative plan. Collect data to assess whether the strategy has resulted in achieving the common goals or reaching the agreed upon milestones. After assessing available outcome data, community leaders should decide if it is prudent to maintain the current course or refine investments.

As has been said throughout this 18th edition of the *Top Ten Issues to Watch*, successful, long-range planning can both address immediate needs and allow policymakers and other leaders to make gradual improvements to strategies over a defined period, usually a decade, to lead us to a more prosperous Georgia. Leaders from rural Georgia can provide locally driven proof points of how community partners, nonprofits, and business leaders collaborated to create local multi-sector strategies. These lessons could inform how state agencies and education, public health, and economic development partners can come together to address the full spectrum of educational and economic disparities. With a shared commitment from these leaders, we can dismantle historic barriers, build community resilience, and create a more prosperous Georgia.





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