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– INTRODUCTION –

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Drawing on current research, national trends, and state policy developments, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education has identified 10 issues that will likely impact public education in the coming year.

The discussion of each issue is organized in three distinct sections, beginning with an issue overview that provides a simple introduction to the political urgency of the topic.

Next is the policy context, a research-based analysis of the issue, and lastly, we highlight what is next for Georgia, drawing attention to the imminent decisions and changes facing our state.

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Each year the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education hosts an Annual Bus Trip Across Georgia. We convene nearly one hundred leaders from the education, business, government, and non-profit sectors, and for three days, we travel the highways and scenic paths of Georgia to visit public schools that have achieved remarkable student outcomes. Despite the years I have spent in classrooms and school buildings as a teacher, principal, and superintendent, the Bus Trip experience – the chance to walk the halls and visit with the students, leaders, and instructors of high-achieving schools – always provides me with a new perspective on the work of the Georgia Partnership.

We advocate for educational improvements throughout our state, and we share resources and lend our organizational expertise to policymakers and other stakeholders for many reasons. Yes, we are concerned about the economic competitiveness of Georgia and of our nation. And yes, we want to ensure the best return on our investment of taxpayer dollars into our public schools. But above all, the Georgia Partnership's mission to inform and influence leaders throughout the state is inspired by the faces of the children and youth we have seen over the course of 17 years of annual bus trips. The experiences and futures of our students are shaped by every political decision we make and each education policy we enact. Debates over school funding and school choice ultimately impact the opportunities and outcomes of our youth.

The year 2010 will be a dynamic time for Georgia's public schools. With state revenues still declining, local school systems will be forced to operate on further reduced budgets. The frenzy of the federal stimulus and the potential for Race to the Top funds are speeding up state and local efforts to create comprehensive reform plans. If Georgia wins the grant competition, implementation of new educational strategies would begin almost immediately. And in the midst of it all, Georgia's voters will elect a new governor and other state leaders in November of this year. At this point, the impact of the election on our public education system is a great unknown.

The information and analysis provided in this year's Top Ten Issues to Watch are intended to facilitate dialogue and collective work toward excellence throughout the coming months. As we enter the new year, the public education landscape is shifting, but the goal has not changed. Like the thousands of students we have seen on our bus trips, all young adults in Georgia deserve access to high-quality public schools that provide the opportunity for obtaining a meaningful diploma, one that signifies readiness for college or the workforce.

As you read the 10 issues on the following pages, please do not hesitate to contact us for additional information or to share your thoughts and concerns. We value your insight and know that the greatest improvements to Georgia's education system will happen collectively.

Dr. Stephen D. Dolinger
President, Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education

Budget, Budget, Budget: The Grim Reality

Issue Overview

Following a year of economic pain, a year fraught with record levels of unemployment, unprecedented home foreclosures, and dwindling public revenues, a collective sigh of relief could be heard across the country when Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke announced in September 2009 that it was “very likely” the recession had ended.¹ After witnessing the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, Americans were finally greeted with good news in the last months of the year: “The U.S. economy grew at an annual rate of 3.5 percent in the third quarter, snapping four straight quarters of economic contraction.”² It seemed that our national economy was on the mend.

Despite the cautious optimism that began to wash over Wall Street and company board rooms, analysts cautioned that full economic recovery would be slow,

and for some individuals, financial security would seem elusive for many more months. As Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner acknowledged, “For every person out of work, for every family facing foreclosure, for every small business facing a credit crunch, the recession remains alive and acute.”³ As we enter the year 2010, the fiscal outlook also remains grim for every state wrestling with reduced education funds, every teacher facing increased class sizes and furlough days, and every school system facing deficit funding. Economic forecasters predict that there can be a lag time of 18 months between improvements in the national economy and upturns in state education spending. In Georgia as well as many states across the country, the painful reality for public education is that throughout the coming year, signs of economic relief will be extremely difficult to find.

Policy Context

The issues of our country’s economic crisis and sharply declining state budgets have now become old news. The period of recession that began in December 2007 was felt sharply throughout the next two years as financial realities drastically altered the habits and ways of living of thousands of Americans. As the months progressed, economic figures made clear that the 50 states were facing one of the worst fiscal periods in decades. According to a 2009 report by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the National Association of State Budget Officers (NASBO), fiscal conditions deteriorated for nearly every state during 2009, and 42 states were forced to make midyear cuts to their enacted budgets. Overall, state revenues declined 7.5 percent in fiscal 2009, which for most

states ended June 30, 2009. The weak economic conditions are expected to continue in 2010 and possibly into fiscal years 2011 and 2012.⁴ The NGA and NASBO predict that revenues will likely continue on this downward trend for another one or two quarters before slowly marking positive growth. As of November 2009, 33 states were already estimating midyear cuts for fiscal 2010.

The economic blow dealt to states by the recession has forced governors and policymakers in nearly all states to make difficult decisions on state spending. In at least 42 states and D.C., cuts have been enacted in all major areas of state services, including health care, services to the elderly and disabled, and education.⁵ The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reports that as of

1 Labaton, S. (September 16, 2009). Fed chief says recession is ‘very likely over.’ *The New York Times*. Retrieved December 2, 2009 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/16/business/economy/16bernanke.html>.

2 Lee, D. (October 30, 2009). U.S. economy returns to growth, but recovery has a long way to go. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved December 2, 2009 from <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-gdp-recession30-2009oct30,0,4048377.story?track=rss>.

3 Elving, R. (October 30, 2009). Whose recession is over? Not Obama’s. *Watching Washington*. National Public Radio. Retrieved December 2, 2009 from http://www.npr.org/watchingwashington/2009/10/whose_recession_is_over_not_ob.html.

4 National Governors Association & National Association of State Budget Officers. (2009). *The Fiscal Survey of States*.

5 Johnson, N., Oliff, P., & Williams, E. (2009). *An Update on State Budget Cuts*. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

November 2009, at least 26 states and D.C. had made cuts in state spending on K-12 education. Within local communities, these reductions in state allocations have forced local school systems to enact cost-saving measures such as teacher furloughs, shortened school weeks, and the elimination of non-essential staff and extracurricular programs.

As unwelcome and painful as state budget reductions have been, the passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) in 2009 and the subsequent infusion of federal stimulus dollars into state coffers helped to lessen the impact of the recession on state and local programs such as education. The stimulus bill, which provided an education investment of more than \$100 billion, signaled a historic level of federal support for states and their K-12 public education systems. Over the two-year disbursement of the stimulus funds, Georgia will receive a total of about \$2 billion for education, the majority of which will be directed at the K-12 level. Table 1.1 shows the major funding areas in which this federal money will be applied.

In Georgia, as in other states, the stimulus funds allocated for education helped plug gaping budget holes and created or saved thousands of jobs. But despite this federal aid, many school systems are still facing financial deficits. The reality of 2010 budgets combined with the drying-up of the one-time ARRA funds means that for many states and local school systems, the current fiscal outlook is grimmer than ever before, and looming just ahead could be a very steep funding cliff. Revenue estimates from the final months of 2009 suggest that as we enter the new year, Georgia is again facing a sizeable budget shortfall of approximately \$1.26 billion. An analysis from the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute finds that the governor may have to implement a contingency plan that would cut public services in fiscal 2010 by another \$320 million. As shown in table 1.2, for education programs in the state, another round of cuts could devastate our public schools and students.

Any additional cuts to Georgia's state education spending that occur in the coming year will further compound the long-standing financial adversity faced by local school systems as a result of years of state austerity cuts. These state-level funding cuts, which originated during a previous economic downturn, have significantly limited the amount of revenue local districts receive from the state, despite the levels of education funding guaranteed by Georgia law. Since the first austerity cuts were imposed in 2003, the cumulative effect has been a reduction in state education funding of more than \$2.7 billion (see table 1.3).

TABLE 1.1. ARRA Funding for K-12 Education in Georgia

Program Area	Amount of ARRA Funding (estimate)
Title I (for the education of economically disadvantaged students)	\$351.4 million
IDEA Part B (for the education of students with disabilities, K-12)	\$313.8 million
IDEA Part B grants (for preschool students with disabilities)	\$10.5 million
Educational Technology State Grants	\$22.1 million
Fiscal Stabilization Funding	\$900 million

TABLE 1.2. FY 2010 Implemented and Contingency Plan Budget Cuts (thousands of dollars): Georgia Education Agencies

State Agency	FY 2010 Budget Cuts (enacted May 2009)	FY 2010 Additional Budget Cuts (July 2009)	FY 2010 Contingency Plan Additional 3% Budget Cuts	Supplements to Budget ^a	Total Net Budget Cuts	Percent Net Budget Cuts from FY 2009
Early Care and Learning	-\$630	-\$197	-\$118	--	-\$945	-20.7%
Education ^b	-\$636,591	-\$332,419	-\$168,000	\$581,145	-\$555,863	-6.8%
Board of Regents	-\$215,585	-\$103,155	-\$61,893	\$92,618	-\$288,015	-12.6%
Technical College System	-\$39,145	-\$16,591	-\$9,955	\$15,406	-\$50,285	-13.6%

Source: Essig, A. (2009). "The FY 2010 Hole Gets Even Deeper." Georgia Budget and Policy Institute.

(a) Supplements to budget include funds from ARRA, tobacco reserves, and education reserves.

(b) Additional budget cuts for the Department of Education (DOE) include a \$99 million cut resulting from the three furlough days. The total DOE budget cuts take into account \$166 million from State Health Benefit Plan surpluses used to fund the DOE health insurance contribution for non-certified employees and retirees.

TABLE 1.3. Austerity Reductions in Georgia's State Funding for K-12 Education

Fiscal Year	Austerity Reduction in State Education Funding
2003	\$134,933,642
2004	\$283,478,659
2005	\$332,838,099
2006	\$332,838,092
2007	\$169,745,895
2008	\$142,959,810
2009	\$495,723,830
2010	\$936,342,040
Total	\$2,828,860,067

Source: Georgia School Superintendents Association & Georgia PTA

What's Next for Georgia?

News of the national recession's ending provides some optimism as 2010 begins, but for states and school systems economic recovery remains just a light at the end of a very long tunnel. Georgia's lawmakers and agency heads will again face tough decisions as they wrestle with balancing the fiscal 2011 budget. At the local level, school systems throughout the state have already implemented or planned for cost-saving measures. In the last few months of 2009 at least 76 school districts received approval from the state Board of Education to increase class sizes in some grades and subjects. For many systems class size waivers were sought as a precautionary measure that might provide some cushion should future budgets force staff reductions or necessitate larger classes. Several school systems mandated unpaid furlough days for teachers over the 2009-2010 school year, a strategy that was recommended by Governor Sonny Perdue in July 2009 upon the announcement of a 3 percent funding cut for public schools. Additionally several school districts have made cost-saving adjustments to their school calendars, extending school hours in order to shave days off the traditional week or year. Yet even with the implementation of multiple spending cuts, there is a danger that dozens of school systems will find themselves in deficit financing at the end of fiscal 2010.

What can Georgia lawmakers and educational leaders do to minimize the recessionary pain felt by schools and ensure the future restoration of their economic resources? Because more than 80 percent of a school system's budget is designated for

employees' salaries and benefits, spending cuts to programs, transportation, or facility maintenance have a limited impact on overall financial stability. The identification of additional budget changes that can save money yet not diminish educational quality will present an enormous challenge for state and local leaders. A national commission offers these few suggestions:

- **Promote school district purchasing cooperatives.** A recent study found that if school districts pooled their purchasing power, they could reduce their costs from 8-14 percent. In Georgia, districts may utilize their Regional Education Service Agency (RESA) for such cooperative strategies.
- **Encourage districts to work together to educate high-needs special education students.** Such collaborative work can improve the quality of education for these students while also reducing costs for school systems.⁶

As the impact of the recession on state revenues begins to diminish over the next two years, school systems will begin to feel some fiscal relief. But to ensure long-term economic security for Georgia's public schools, our policymakers must engage subject-matter experts, education stakeholders, and practitioners in the work of revisiting the state formula for education funding in order to make certain that our public schools are adequately equipped to serve all students. All investments made by the state must support programs that have a proven, positive impact on student achievement.

Two recent efforts to amend the state's education funding formula have failed to produce any legislative recommendations. The Governor's Education Finance Task Force (commonly referred to as Investing in Educational Excellence: IE2) was appointed in 2004 and tasked with devising a new framework for financing Georgia's schools. Despite meeting for three years, the Task Force never produced a final set of recommendations for school funding. In 2008 a Senate Resolution passed during the General Assembly established the Senate Education Funding Mechanisms Review Study Committee for the purpose of examining the Quality Basic Education funding formula and suggesting new legislation. Yet much like IE2, this now-defunct committee failed to produce a set of recommendations.

As the economy rebounds, Georgia's leaders must pledge their support for a funding formula that considers and accurately reflects all the costs associated with providing the constitutionally-required adequate public education. Furthermore, once a funding formula is established, the state must commit the necessary resources to pay its fair share of the basic costs of educating our public school students. Finally, beyond suggestions for altering current education funding strategies, new sources of public revenue will have to be considered for Georgia to avoid long-term fiscal challenges.

⁶ Griffith, M. (2009). "A Light at the End of the Tunnel." Education Commission of the States.

Georgia's Race to the Top

Issue Overview

Soon after taking office, President Barack Obama signed into law the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), legislation that provided an infusion of funds into the economy to stimulate recovery from the recession, support job creation, and invest in critical sectors such as education. In addition to providing federal aid to shore up state education budgets and increase resources for existing federal programs such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Title I services for low-income students, the ARRA established a new \$4.35 billion Race to the Top fund that is the largest amount of discretionary funding for K-12 education reform in the history of the United States.⁷

With so many states still reeling from the economic downturn, the Race to the Top fund offers a tremendous opportunity to receive additional federal supports for educational programs. Yet the fund also represents a specific federal agenda, as attached to the fund is a very prescriptive list of strategies believed by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to be critical in improving public schools. As detailed in the Department of Education's summary and guidelines, the Race to the Top fund is a competitive grant program designed to encourage and reward states that are creating

the conditions for education innovation and reform and implementing ambitious plans in four core education reform areas:

- Adopting internationally-benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace;
- Recruiting, developing, retaining, and rewarding effective teachers and principals;
- Building data systems that measure student success and inform teachers and principals how they can improve their practices; and
- Turning around our lowest-achieving schools.⁸

On the day the draft guidelines for applying for the Race to the Top fund were released by the U.S. Department of Education, Secretary Duncan proclaimed in a speech that "for states, school districts, nonprofits, unions and businesses, Race to the Top is the equivalent of education reform's moon shot." As a new year begins, Georgia (along with 49 other states) is gearing up for what might be its most challenging race in recent history. Will Georgia win or will we lose? And whatever is the outcome of the race, what does it really mean for our schools and for our students?

Policy Context

In January 2009, as President Barack Obama was inaugurated as the 44th leader of the United States, education stakeholders were uncertain about the new administration's plan for public education. Though Obama had built his campaign around the promise of change in all sectors and for all Americans, the challenges facing the economy and our national security demanded immediate attention from the federal government.

Fast forward to the present day, and it is clear that the president, along with Secretary Duncan, is delivering on what was a key message of his pre-election education platform: "We need a new vision for a 21st century education – one where we aren't just supporting existing schools, but spurring innovation; where we're not just investing more money, but demanding more reform." In 2010 the federal administration will be looking to realize that new vision by enticing states with a share of the \$4.35 billion education jackpot to adopt key reform strategies.

7 Duncan, A. (July 24, 2009). "Education Reform's Moon Shot." *The Washington Post*.

8 U.S. Department of Education. (2009). *Race to the Top: Executive Summary*.

The federal government has not always played such a powerful role in the public education system. In fact, the Department of Education is a relatively young agency that has not held much influence over education policy until recent decades. When President Jimmy Carter signed a bill in 1979 to establish the agency, he signaled the end of a 150 year struggle to create a Cabinet-level Department of Education. Today the federal education agency oversees a limited scope of programs and performance accountability, the most notable of which include the No Child Left Behind Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and the Title I assistance to economically disadvantaged students. In spite of these significant acts, the federal government's jurisdiction over K-12 education is much smaller than that of states or local districts, both in terms of funding and policy-setting. In Georgia, only about 7 percent of the total funds for public education come from federal sources. Thus, the Race to the Top program marks not only a historic level of discretionary federal funding for education, but also an increased level of federal influence over the direction of states' education reform efforts.

Within the education policy sector, Race to the Top has been closely tracked and analyzed by multiple researchers and advocacy organizations since the grant program was first announced. The initial grant application is daunting – a 100-page document requiring the signatures of the governor, state school superintendent, and state school board chair; certification by the state's attorney general; and memoranda of understanding signifying the participation of local school systems. In addition to the application, the U.S. Department of Education has provided hundreds of pages of supporting materials that provide critical information regarding the grant program. Summarized below are the most important details in four categories of the grant process: application timeline, eligibility requirements, process for application completion, and selection criteria.

Application Timeline

The U.S. Department of Education will award Race to the Top grants in two phases, as detailed in figure 2.1. States that are ready to apply may do so in Phase 1, and states that need more time for planning may apply in Phase 2. Georgia will submit its application in Phase 1.

Eligibility Requirements

The U.S. Department of Education requires that states meet two eligibility requirements in order to apply for grant consideration. Georgia will meet the first criterion and already meets the second.

- The state's application for funding under the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund program must be approved by the Department prior to a Race to the Top award being made.

FIGURE 2.1. Race to the Top Competition Timeline

RACE TO THE TOP – PHASE 1

November 18, 2009	Final notice published in the Federal Register; Applications available to states
January 19, 2010	Application deadline for Phase 1
April 2010	Winners announced for Phase 1; Feedback provided to applicants who do not win

RACE TO THE TOP – PHASE 2

June 1, 2010	Application deadline for Phase 2
September 2010	Winners announced for Phase 2

Source: U.S. Department of Education

- The state must not have any legal, statutory, or regulatory barriers to linking data on student achievement or student growth to teachers and principals for the purpose of teacher and principal evaluation.

Process for Application Completion

The process of planning for and completing the Race to the Top application is extensive, and federal guidelines estimate that the time required to complete the application will average 681 hours. In the fall of 2009, Georgia learned that it was one of 15 states preselected by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to receive \$250,000 worth of technical assistance from a consulting firm. Throughout the detailed application process, our state will be supported by the consultancy services of The Parthenon Group.

Georgia's Race to the Top application process is being directed by a steering committee comprised of the governor's policy director, the executive director of the Office of Student Achievement, and the chief of staff of the Department of Education. Providing input and expertise to the steering committee are workgroups devoted to each of the four reform areas and a critical feedback group. Additionally, the steering committee has pledged to make the Race to the Top planning process "an ongoing dialogue with all those invested in education" and will solicit input through discussions, surveys, and vetting sessions.⁹

Selection Criteria

The U.S. Department of Education will judge all eligible applications using a two-tier review process. As shown in table 2.1, states will be awarded a specific number of points for each of 19 high-level selection criteria identified by the Race to the Top scoring rubric. The categories that carry the greatest weight in the competition are states' success factors and states' plans for building a cadre of great teachers and leaders.

⁹ "Georgia's Race to the Top (RT3) Plans." (2009). Governor's Office of Student Achievement. www.gaosa.org.

TABLE 2.1. Race to the Top Scoring Rubric

SELECTION CRITERIA	POINTS	PERCENT
A. State Success Factors	125	25%
1. Articulating state's education reform agenda and LEA's participation in it	65	
2. Building a strong statewide capacity to implement, scale up, and sustain proposed plans	30	
3. Demonstrating significant progress in raising achievement and closing gaps	30	
B. Standards and Assessments	70	14%
1. Developing and adopting common standards	40	
2. Developing and implementing common, high-quality assessments	10	
3. Supporting the transition to enhanced standards and high-quality assessments	20	
C. Data Systems to Support Instruction	47	9%
1. Fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system	24	
2. Accessing and using state data	5	
3. Using data to improve instruction	18	
D. Great Teachers and Leaders	138	28%
1. Providing high-quality pathways for aspiring teachers and principals	21	
2. Improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance	58	
3. Ensuring equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals	25	
4. Improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs	14	
5. Providing effective support to teachers and principals	20	
E. Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools	50	10%
1. Intervening in the lowest-achieving schools and LEAs	10	
2. Turning around the lowest-achieving schools	40	
F. General	55	11%
1. Making education funding a priority	10	
2. Ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools	40	
3. Demonstrating other significant reform conditions	5	
Competitive Preference Priority: Emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics)	15	3%
TOTAL	500	100%

In August 2009, The New Teacher Project (TNTP) used existing data to analyze states' eligibility and competitiveness for the federal funding program. Georgia was one of 15 states deemed "competitive," a ranking just below the "highly competitive" position that was assigned to only two states, Florida and Louisiana.¹⁰ If the TNTP analysis holds true, and Georgia's Race to the Top application is reviewed favorably by the federal education agency, then our state stands to receive an award in the range of \$200-\$400 million.¹¹ Such an award could allow Georgia to pursue bold strategies that will help increase the access of all students to high-quality education and boost student outcomes.

Some critics have argued that the Race to the Top guidelines are too prescriptive and leave states little room for creativity or true innovation. The grant requirements compel state leaders to place a heavy emphasis on those education reforms deemed critical by federal policymakers, and many practitioners and advocates object to this seemingly one-size-fits-all approach to educational improvement. Yet for Georgia, where severe challenges still prevent many students from reaching excellent educational outcomes,¹² the focus areas of Race to the Top seem both appropriate and necessary. Furthermore, whether or not Georgia wins this race, the application process can establish a statewide, long-term focus on the critical issues of rigorous standards, effective teachers, reliable and useful data, and low-performing schools. In a year that will bring certain change with the election of a new governor and other state leaders, the Race to the Top may be one of the few policy matters that can unite Georgia's education community and provide continuity of school improvement efforts over the coming years.

NOTE: Given the importance of the Race to the Top grant program to the national and state education policy sectors, the next four issues in this Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2010 publication focus on the four critical reform areas identified in the Race to the Top guidelines.

10 The New Teacher Project. (2009). *Interpreting "Race to the Top:" TNTP Summary & Analysis of USDE Draft Guidelines.*

11 The U.S. Department of Education released a non-binding estimation of the range of funds each state could expect to receive based on the state's population of children ages 5-17.

12 See the following report: Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. (2009). *Achieving Excellence in Secondary Education: Georgia's Unfinished Business.*

Standards & Assessments: The Foundation for Student Success

Issue Overview

While the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* is largely cited as the catalyst for the modern day standards-based reform movement, a renewed focus on the preparedness of America's public school students for life after high school and their ability to compete in a global economy has underscored the importance of having rigorous academic standards for all students. Standards are central to realizing the aims of America's public schools as a core element of the country's economic future by delineating what students are expected to know and be able to do. As such, they are the foundational component of education reform.

In the 1990s, almost all states established statewide content standard documents that set out the statewide goals for what students should know and be able to do in core academic subjects in K-12 education. Today two large-scale policy developments are compelling education leaders across the country to revisit their academic standards.

1. In spring 2009, governors and state commissioners of education from across the country committed to joining

a state-led process to develop a common core of state standards in English-language arts and mathematics for grades K-12. The Common Core State Standards Initiative is being jointly led by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) in partnership with Achieve, ACT, and the College Board.¹³

2. The U.S. Department of Education Race to the Top grant application was released in November 2009. One of the four areas states must address in their application is the adoption of standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy.¹⁴

In the year 2010, Georgia's education leaders face a unique challenge and opportunity of continuing the policy work that has been done recently to improve our academic standards and assessments while seeking new, bold strategies that will further enhance the teaching and learning in our public schools.

Policy Context

Over the past several years Georgia has enacted new policies and engaged in collaborative work with national experts in order to strengthen academic standards and increase the number of high school graduates who are prepared for college or a career. In 2004, the state Board of Education adopted the Georgia Performance Standards, a comprehensive, internationally-benchmarked curriculum that is more rigorous than the previous state curriculum. In 2006, Georgia

joined the American Diploma Project (ADP), a network of states guided by the national organization Achieve to develop policies that bring value to the high school diploma by increasing the rigor of standards and assessments. More recently, in 2008, Georgia became one of eight states to participate in the College and Career Ready Policy Institute, an effort led by five national organizations that is designed to help states put K-12 assessment and accountability systems in place that will ensure all students graduate from high school college- and career-ready.

¹³ Common Core State Standards Initiative. <http://www.corestandards.org>.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Education. (2009). *Race to the Top Application for Initial Funding*.

While Georgia has often lagged behind other states on national assessment scores and high school graduation rates, the strategic policy work of the past few years is beginning to yield positive results. As Georgia continues its work in these initiatives and completes the roll-out of the Georgia Performance Standards, two new developments that will shape our state's standards and assessments in the year 2010 are the Common Core Standards Initiative and the opportunity presented by Race to the Top to strengthen our state assessment system for student learning.

Common Core Standards

The Common Core Standards Initiative is described as a historic opportunity for states to collectively develop and adopt a core set of academic standards in mathematics and English language arts. As of December 2009, 48 states (including Georgia) and three territories had joined the initiative. The goal of this collaborative effort is to create a set of rigorous, research-based standards that are internationally benchmarked to top-performing countries, thus ensuring that students across the country are taught to the same level of expectation.¹⁵

Currently, every state has its own set of academic standards and a corresponding system of state assessments for public school students. While this variation in standards reflects the constitutional responsibility and power of each state to manage its own education system, the reality is that students in Georgia may be taught a vastly different set of knowledge and skills in ninth-grade Algebra, or any other grade level and subject area, than students in North Carolina or Maine. Proponents of common core standards contend that their implementation would provide a common denominator for student learning across the United States and ensure a more equal opportunity for student success.

The absence of common standards and common assessments makes it difficult to compare student learning across state boundaries, a challenge that seems even more problematic given the increasing focus of business and education leaders on the need for students in the United States to be internationally competitive. Analysis of the average scores of states on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) – currently the only assessment that allows state-to-state comparisons of achievement – underscores the vast discrepancies among what students are learning in different areas of the country. Commonly known as the “Nation’s Report Card,” the NAEP is administered every two years to statistically representative samples of fourth-grade, eighth-grade, and twelfth-grade students from each state in reading and mathematics.

A recent report from the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) presented the findings from the development of a

method for mapping each state’s standard for proficient performance onto a common scale – the NAEP achievement scale. When states’ standards are placed onto the NAEP reading or mathematics scales, the level of achievement required for proficient performance in one state can then be compared with the level of achievement required in another state. The study’s findings confirm the fact that often, a student’s score of “above basic” on one state’s standards equates to a NAEP score that is vastly different from that of a student in another state who also scores “above basic” on his state’s standards. In other words, students who show similar academic skills according to NAEP performance, but reside in different states, are being educated to different standards and held to different expectations for success in reading and mathematics.¹⁶

Such geographical variation in expectations for student learning provides a strong argument in support of common core standards. According to Gene Wilhoit, the executive director of CCSSO, “Having common standards is a critical issue for many students who may have different expectations depending on where they live and which school they attend. These standards will allow students to more easily transition from one state to another without losing valuable learning time adjusting to different standards.”¹⁷

Organizers of the common standards initiative stress not only the potential benefits of the project, but also a few critical components that will shape the process and results. First, the standards work is a collective state-led education reform, meant to reflect the common belief by most state leaders that all students deserve a high-quality set of learning outcomes. Second, the common standards work adheres to four foundational principles and a transparent development process. The standards will be fewer, clearer, and higher than existing state standards; aligned with college and work expectations; internationally-benchmarked; and evidence and/or research based. Lastly, state adoption of the common standards is voluntary and, according to the initiative’s definition of “adoption,” states may choose to adopt the common core in its entirety or may add up to an additional 15 percent of their own state standards.

At this point the common standards development process is proceeding along a very ambitious timeframe. The K-12 common core state standards in English/language arts and mathematics are to be completed and publicly released in early February 2010. This fast-track to reform may be driven in part by the timeline and ambitions of the federal Race to the Top grant application (see Issue 1 of this publication). States earn 40 of the total 500 points on the Race to the Top scoring rubric for their participation in the common standards consortium and their plan for adoption of the standards in 2010.

15 The Council of Chief State School Officers & National Governors Association. (2009). “Common Core State Standards Initiative: Executive Summary.” www.corestandards.org.

16 Bandeira de Mello, V., Blankenship, C., and McLaughlin, D.H. (2009). *Mapping State Proficiency Standards Onto NAEP Scales: 2005-2007*. National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC.

17 Wilhoit, G. (December 4, 2009). “Improving Our Competitiveness: Common Core Education Standards.” Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor. Retrieved from www.ccsso.org/content/pdfs/Wilhoit_Testimony_120809.pdf.

Like nearly all education reform efforts, the common core standards initiative is not without controversy. Critics argue that despite the intentions of the collective effort, setting a national framework for what students should be learning undermines the constitutional authority of states and local systems to control their own systems of public education. Other opponents and skeptics cite the logistical barriers that could hinder the standards process. While the work on English and math standards is underway, how easy will it be in the future to reach consensus among all states and educational experts on the necessary knowledge students should have in social studies, arts, or foreign language courses? Additionally, for a common set of standards to be most effective, states would need to collaborate on a corresponding set of common assessments. Within the federal Race to the Top grant is a sum of \$350 million for the purpose of supporting states in the development of assessments. However, there is no guarantee that the money and the political will can last long enough to support the extremely difficult and contentious work of creating a new-and-improved generation of student assessments.

The Next Generation of Georgia's Assessment System

A crucial part of any accountability system, student assessments serve as the measure of whether or not students are mastering the standards set forth in the curriculum. While various types of assessments have long been used by classroom teachers to provide evidence of student learning, they have become an increasingly critical component of state and national educational systems. Policymakers are relying more than ever on large-scale tests to make high-stakes decisions about students and schools. Assessments are increasingly tied to high-stakes decisions about students' grade promotion and graduation. Throughout the country, parents, reporters, and educational stakeholders are scrutinizing test scores as indicators of the quality of our educational system.¹⁸

Now, as the federal education administration uses its Race to the Top grant competition to compel states to undergo comprehensive reforms, student assessments may be getting a makeover. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has reserved \$350 million to support consortia of states that are working to create new assessments tied to a common set of standards. The assessment grants will come from the \$4.35 billion Race to the Top Fund and will be awarded in 2010 under a separate competitive program. In response to this federal announcement, educational leaders and experts across the country are beginning to grapple with the questions of what constitutes high-quality assessments of learning and what states must do to improve their current assessment programs.

In Georgia's public schools, students are already administered a battery of statewide, standardized assessments. Our current testing system allows state and school leaders to collect informa-

tion on student performance a myriad of times throughout the K-12 education progression, as depicted in table 3.1. With the recent curriculum transition in Georgia, the state has spent extensive time and resources redesigning many of the state assessments to align them with the new Georgia Performance Standards. Any future developments or changes in the state's assessment system must not only ensure a high return on investment but must represent a shift toward a new generation of assessments.

One example of a new approach to testing can be found in the examples of New Hampshire and Rhode Island, two states that recently instituted "performance-based or competency-based assessments that link content to skills and use multiple measures (not just a statewide standardized test) to evaluate students' proficiency."¹⁹ The strategy of performance-based assessment requires students to carry out tasks – performances, portfolios, or projects – that demonstrate mastery of content and skills. While this approach to testing may be met with resistance from those who argue that performance assessments do not meet high standards of reliability and objectivity, they have long been used in research-based educational settings. Students enrolled in International Baccalaureate Diploma programs are assessed using a variety of methods that can include performance tasks, portfolios, and fieldwork projects. Teachers seeking National Board Certification are assessed in part based on their submission of an elaborate portfolio that provides evidence of excellent teaching practices.

The standards-based accountability system that has become a driving force in educational policy and practice depends on high-stakes tests to measure the progress of teaching and learning. In the current landscape, these stringent accountability structures will likely ensure that students in public schools are always assessed by standardized tests like Georgia's current CRCTs and GHSGTs. Yet, it is possible for a new generation of assessments to incorporate fewer traditional tests in order to provide students with the opportunity to exhibit their growth in learning through performance-based measures that are rigorous and relevant to the 21st century world.

What's Next for Georgia?

In January 2010, Georgia will submit its Race to the Top grant application which must detail the state's "high-quality plan demonstrating its commitment to and progress toward adopting a common set of K-12 standards by August 2, 2010, or at a minimum, by a later date in 2010 specified by the State, and to implementing the standards thereafter in a well-planned way." In addition, the application must demonstrate Georgia's commitment to participation in a consortium of states

18 Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. (2008). "Standards, Assessments, and Accountability." *Education Policy Primer: 2008-09 Edition*.

19 DiMartino, J. (April 25, 2007). "Accountability, or Mastery?: The assessment trade-off that could change the landscape of reform." *Education Week* (26)34.

that “is working toward jointly developing and implementing common, high-quality assessments.”²⁰ Until the grant applications are released for public viewing in April 2010, general education stakeholders in Georgia will have limited knowledge of the specific ideas proposed by our state’s leaders regarding the adoption of a new set of standards and corresponding assessments.

In the meantime, Georgia remains an active participant in the work of the American Diploma Project Network and the College and Career-Ready Policy Institute. One goal of the latter initiative is the design of a comprehensive assessment system that is aligned with college and career-ready standards and is used for

postsecondary course placement. Eventually this focus on improved assessments may lead Georgia to establish new policies and procedures that combine the use of the current Georgia High School Graduation Test and End of Course Tests to determine high school graduation and college placement. Ultimately, any changes made to Georgia’s set of standards and assessments must be assessed for the impacts they will have on teaching and learning in our public schools and on our state budget. Academic standards for knowledge and skill acquisition must equip our students for life and work in the 21st century, and high-quality assessments must provide meaningful opportunities for our students to show what they know and can do. Our education policymakers and practitioners have a responsibility to act in ways that fulfill this vision of learning.

TABLE 3.1. Georgia’s Current Assessment System

Assessment	Grade Level	Subject Area
PRIMARY STATE-LEVEL ASSESSMENTS		
CRCT (Criterion Referenced Competency Tests)	1-2 3-8	Reading; English/Language Arts; Mathematics Reading; English/Language Arts; Mathematics; Science; Social Studies
EOCT (End of Course Tests)	9-12	Mathematics (Algebra I & Geometry); Social Studies (U.S. History & Economics); Science (Biology & Physical Science); English/Language Arts (9th grade Lit/Comp & American Lit/Comp)
GHSGT (Georgia High School Graduation Test)	11-12	English/Language Arts; Mathematics; Science; Social Studies
GAA (Georgia Alternative Assessment)	K-2 3-8, 11	English/Language Arts; Mathematics; English/Language Arts; Mathematics; Science; Social Studies
Writing Assessments	3, 5, 8, 11	Various writing genres
ADDITIONAL GEORGIA ASSESSMENTS		
Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (GKIDS)	K	English Language Arts; Math; Science; Social Studies; Personal/Social Development; and Approaches to Learning
National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)	4, 8, 12	Reading; Mathematics
Iowa Test of Basic Skills	3, 5, 8	Reading; Mathematics; Science; Social Studies
ACCESS for English Language Learners	K-12	English

Source: Georgia Department of Education

20 U.S. Department of Education. (2009). *Race to the Top Application for Initial Funding*. Washington, D.C.

A Data System to Support Instruction

Issue Overview

The importance of using data to drive teaching and learning in our public schools is not a new concept. For years Georgia's statewide accountability system has made data reporting and analysis fundamental in helping promote continuous improvement in raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act established new mandates for accountability systems and student achievement that required many states to expand their data collection and reporting systems. In 2005, recognizing the increased attention on data-driven decision making within states' education systems, a group of national organizations launched the Data Quality Campaign (DQC). Since DQC's inception Georgia has worked with the campaign and has benefited from its effort to improve the collection, availability, and use of high-quality education data.

Today Georgia continues its focus on strengthening a statewide data system, and two significant policy developments could bolster our state's ability to gather reliable data and use them to inform education conversations and actions. First, in April 2009, Georgia was awarded an \$8.9 million grant by the federal government to improve its statewide educational data system. Our state was one of 27 that received a 2009 Statewide Longitudinal Data System Grant from the Institute of Educational Sciences, a division of the U.S. Department of Education. The Georgia Department of Education plans to use the funds to establish a new infrastructure that manages the exchange, integration, analysis, and reporting of educational data.²¹ Second, in January 2010, Georgia will submit its Race to the Top grant application, which requires the state to delineate a plan for fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system and using data to improve instruction.

Policy Context

Georgia currently has no dearth of education data. Financial reports, school report cards, Annual Yearly Progress data collections, state and district scoreboards, to name just a few, are publicly available from the Department of Education and the Office of Student Achievement. Policymakers, practitioners, and parents can easily see how students at a particular school or of a certain demographic group performed on end-of-the-year assessments and how many of the schools in any given system are labeled as "needs improvement." But as we look to drive improvement and design policies and strategies that will elevate our students' outcomes, these existing data are limited in their usefulness. The key information Georgia's leaders need to facilitate educational improvement are data that "shed light inside the 'black box' of the school and district – illuminating why [certain] results look like they do."²² Without adequate

investments in information technology infrastructure and absent the human and organizational capacity to employ data in transformative ways, Georgia's education system will continue to be data rich yet knowledge poor.

Our state's leaders have long talked about the importance of a robust statewide data system, and for years the work has supposedly been underway to build a better data infrastructure. In December 2003, the Georgia Department of Education began the development of a Statewide Student Information System that was going to produce a "comprehensive student-centered statewide data collection and reporting system for K-12 public education." That work and investment seemed to stall before its objective was met. Fortunately, political will within the state and country is again bringing attention to the need for a better data system.

21 Georgia's grant application and project abstract are available from the National Center for Education Statistics' website: <http://nces.ed.gov/Programs/SLDS/state.asp?stateabbr=GA>.

22 Hess, F. M., & Fullerton, J. (2009). *Balanced Scorecards and Management Data*. Center for Education Policy Research. Harvard University.

Each year, the Data Quality Campaign (DQC) surveys all 50 states and D.C. to assess states' progress toward implementing what DQC has identified as the 10 essential elements of a high-quality longitudinal data system. When DQC initiated the survey in 2005, no states reported having all 10 elements. According to the latest report released in November of 2009, Georgia is now one of 11 states with all 10 elements in place.²³ Our state should now have the capacity to conduct sophisticated data analyses and provide reliable answers to a myriad of policy questions such as:

- Which schools produce the strongest academic growth for students?
- What high school performance indicators are the best predictors of students' success in college or the workplace?
- Does the state have the necessary elements to calculate a longitudinal cohort graduation rate?
- Which teacher preparation programs produce graduates whose students have the strongest academic growth?²⁴

While the DQC report is promising for Georgia, public education stakeholders in the state have yet to see evidence that the data system is being leveraged to its potential. Answers to the questions above remain elusive. To ensure that data can be accessed, analyzed, and used by multiple stakeholder groups, Georgia has critical work to tackle in the near future.

What's Next for Georgia?

The coming year may be a turning point in Georgia's ongoing work to build a better data system. With the federal Longitudinal Data System Grant awarded to the state in 2009, Georgia plans to correct existing deficiencies in the system in order to produce a valid and reliable cohort-based graduation rate for the class of 2010. Additionally, if Georgia does win a Race to the Top grant, our state will have even greater financial support to complete the necessary infrastructure and begin using the statewide data system to improve teaching and learning throughout the public education system.

²³ Data Quality Campaign. (2009). *Annual Progress Report on State Data Systems*. www.DataQualityCampaign.org.

²⁴ Ibid.

Great Teachers & Leaders: What Our Students Need Most

Issue Overview

The importance of teacher quality in our public schools has become a fundamental tenet of education policy at the federal, state, and local levels. Practitioners, policymakers, and advocates alike recite the research-based mantra that a well-qualified, highly-effective teacher workforce is the single most influential school-based factor for improving student achievement. Despite the broad consensus that teacher quality profoundly influences student outcomes, many states and school systems still struggle to create an actionable plan for recruiting, training, and retaining effective teachers in all classrooms.

According to a 2009 report by The New Teacher Project (TNTP), some of the current policies and practices implemented in our public education system actually pose barriers to improving our teacher workforce.²⁵ Researchers from TNTP examined current systems of teacher evaluation in

several districts and found that “a teacher’s effectiveness – the most important factor for schools in improving student achievement – is not measured, recorded, or used to inform decision-making in any meaningful way.” By ignoring the qualities and practices that characterize effective instruction, our education policies create an environment that is indifferent to performance.

In recognition of the current policy landscape’s inadequacy in addressing teacher quality, the federal Race to the Top competition places this issue at the forefront. States must submit a detailed plan for recruiting, developing, rewarding, retaining, and evaluating effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most. The scoring rubric for states’ grant applications designates the largest percentage of points to this category, which is a signal that federal leaders are committed to helping states create fundamental change in the teaching profession.

Policy Context

In late 2009 the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Center for American Progress, and Frederick M. Hess of the American Enterprise Institute released the second edition of *Leaders and Laggards*, a report that grades states on several school performance indicators.²⁶ Two of the eight areas investigated were practices that impact teacher quality: hiring and evaluation (including alternative certification for teachers); and removing ineffective teachers. The results are both promising and sobering. Almost every state currently has some sort of alternative teacher certification program, and 25 states received a grade of A or B for hiring and evaluation practices. For their policies that enable principals to remove ineffective

teachers, 20 states received an A or B. A summary of Georgia’s grades are presented in table 5.1. Despite these encouraging findings, the report also revealed some disturbing trends among states:

- The teacher pipeline fails to provide a diverse pool of high-quality educators.
- Teacher evaluations are not based on performance.
- Major barriers exist to the removal of poor-performing teachers.²⁷

Recent policy developments in Georgia suggest that policymakers are paying closer attention to how our state ranks on measures of teacher quality and how well the teacher work-

25 Weisberg, D., Sexton, S., Mulhern, J., & Keeling, D. (2009). *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness*. Brooklyn, NY.

26 Center for American Progress, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, & Hess, F. (2009). *Leaders and Laggards: A State-by-state Report Card on Educational Innovation*.

27 Ibid.

force is meeting current educational needs. Two new laws passed by the General Assembly in 2009 will have an impact on salary compensation for teachers and leaders, and a federal grant from the U.S. Department of Education will facilitate Georgia's efforts to recruit nontraditional teacher candidates.

TABLE 5.1. Georgia's Grades on Selected Criteria of Leaders and Laggards

Staffing: Hiring & Evaluation

OVERALL GRADE	B
State requires teachers to pass basic skills tests	Yes
State requires teachers to pass subject-knowledge tests	Yes
Strength of teacher evaluations	C
Strength of alternative certification	B
National programs to recruit nontraditional teachers	A

Staffing: Removing Ineffective Teachers

OVERALL GRADE	A
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Source: Center for American Progress, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, & Hess, F. (2009). *Leaders and Laggards: A State-by-state Report Card on Educational Innovation*.

The first new law, House Bill 280, addresses the ongoing shortage of teachers in the fields of math and science by creating salary incentives to help recruit and retain these teachers.²⁸ New, fully certified teachers in math and science in grades 6-12 will receive initial placement on step four of the state salary schedule (equivalent to six years experience). All veteran fully certified math and science teachers below salary step four will also rise to that level. Additionally, the legislation establishes new endorsements for elementary grades teachers in math and science. Teachers who earn the new K-5 endorsements will earn a \$1,000 annual salary increase for each endorsement completed. The impact of House Bill 280 on reducing teacher shortages is uncertain, particularly in the near future as the state continues to confront a fiscal crisis. Funding for the new math and science salary supplements is contingent on appropriation by Georgia's lawmakers and is currently scheduled to be provided in school year 2010-2011.

A second legislative measure related to Georgia's teacher workforce is House Bill 455 which addresses the salary increases paid for advanced degrees in leadership for individuals not assigned to leadership positions. Obtaining a leadership credential has become a common strategy for teachers to acquire a raise in pay. However, according to the Professional Standards Commission, nearly \$68 million in public funds was spent in 2008 on salary increases for individuals with leadership certificates who were not serving in leadership positions.²⁹ This new law addresses "unused" degrees by requiring that individuals hold a leadership position in order to receive compensation for that advanced degree.

Finally, Georgia's leaders will begin to address the recruitment of teachers for high-need schools with the support of a federal grant award. The state was recently awarded a five-year, \$3.5 million Transition to Teaching Grant that will be used to place math, science, and special education teachers in eligible schools.³⁰ Georgia's application specifies that the state will partner with 60 of the state's local school systems in order to ensure that high-need schools are fully staffed with high-quality teachers every year.

As Georgia continues the necessary work to implement the recent legislative and programmatic strategies designed to increase teacher quality, our state leaders are also focused on the criteria set forth in the Race to the Top application for this critical reform area. The federal application offers a prescriptive set of goals to strengthen school teachers and leaders, leaving only a little wiggle room for states to create their own bold and innovative plans. Among the reform plan criteria on which federal officials are asking states to focus are the following:

- Design and implement rigorous, transparent, and fair evaluation systems for teachers and principals that differentiate effectiveness using multiple rating categories that take into account data on student growth.
- Use these evaluations, at a minimum, to inform decisions regarding:
 - Compensating, promoting, and retaining teachers and principals;
 - Whether to grant tenure and/or full certification to teachers and principals;
 - Removing ineffective tenured and untenured teachers and principals.
- Ensure the equitable distribution of teachers and principals by developing a plan to ensure that students in high-poverty and/or high-minority schools have equitable access to highly effective teachers and principals.

²⁸ Georgia Professional Standards Commission. (Fall 2009). *The PSC Pulse*. www.gapsc.com.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

- Link student achievement and student growth data to the students' teachers and principals, to link this information to the in-state programs where those teachers and principals were prepared for credentialing.
- Provide effective, data-informed professional development, coaching, induction, and common planning and collaboration time to teachers and principals that are ongoing and job-imbedded.

The Race to the Top criteria for improving teacher quality represent a comprehensive reform framework. The federal pressure is high for states to tackle this issue and institute bold measures that will guarantee all students have access to qualified, effective teachers. In the words of Education Secretary Arne Duncan, "Teaching has never been more difficult, it has never been more important, and the desperate need for more student success has never been so urgent."³¹

While the stakes are high, and the political will for reform at a peak, the work of instituting reforms to Georgia's system of teacher recruitment, retention, compensation, and training is certainly challenging. Reaching consensus on the best practices and most feasible actions for Georgia has historically been difficult. And though the Race to the Top guidance offers a starting point for policy shifts, it still leaves unanswered one question that lies at the heart of education reform: what is an effective teacher? Efforts to optimize new teacher supply, retain and leverage the best teachers, and equitably distribute good teachers cannot be undertaken without first attempting to define the vague yet ubiquitous notion of "effective teaching." Many experts and organizations have voiced their opinions on this matter, as evidenced in figure 5.1, but it is unclear what definition will drive Georgia's reform work in the coming years.

FIGURE 5.1. What is an Effective Teacher? Definitions of Teacher Quality from Various Sources

Federal Definitions	Race to the Top Federal Grant Application	Effective teacher means a teacher whose students achieve acceptable rates (e.g., at least one grade level in an academic year) of student growth.
	No Child Left Behind Federal Law	To be deemed highly qualified, teachers must have: 1) a bachelor's degree, 2) full state certification or licensure, and 3) prove that they know each subject they teach.
State Definition	Georgia's Master Teacher Program	Georgia's Master Teachers have at least three years of experience in the classroom on a Georgia Clear Renewable Certificate, and evidence that links classroom instruction to students' achievement and progress.
Non-profit Organizational Definitions	Teach For America	The most effective teachers exhibit six characteristics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set an ambitious vision of students' academic success. • Invest students and their families in working hard toward the vision. • Plan purposefully to meet ambitious academic goals. • Execute those plans thoroughly and effectively. • Work relentlessly to meet high academic goals for students. • Continuously reflect and improve on leadership and effectiveness.
	National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality	The five-point definition of teacher effectiveness includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective teachers have high expectations for all students and help students learn, as measured by value-added or other test-based growth measures. • Effective teachers use diverse resources to plan and structure engaging learning opportunities; monitor student progress formatively, adapting instruction as needed; and evaluate learning using multiple sources of evidence.

³¹ Duncan, A. (October 22, 2009). "Teacher Preparation: Reforming the Uncertain Profession." Remarks of Secretary Arne Duncan at Teachers College, Columbia University. Retrieved from www.ed.gov/news/speeches/2009/10/10222009.html.

What's
Next for
Georgia?

As states across the country are gearing up to submit proposals for the Race to the Top competition, many leaders within the education sector are expressing cautious optimism about the current opportunities and potential for bold school reform. The political and financial support currently being extended to states from the federal Department of Education, cross-state commissions, and national philanthropic foundations has created the perfect storm to galvanize leaders and stakeholders in Georgia. For years we have heard the message echoed that teacher quality is the single most important factor influencing student outcomes, but until now our state's handful of efforts at improving teacher quality have been piecemeal.

The reality of Georgia's declining public revenue will pose a challenge to the introduction of new policies and legislation that impact teacher preparation, compensation, evaluation, and training. Depending on the outcome of the Race to the Top competition, our state may benefit from federal funds to shore up the work regarding teacher quality. In either scenario, Georgia's leaders cannot allow budget constraints to impede the work that must be done to boost the supply of effective teachers and leaders for our public school classrooms. Building a well-trained, exemplary teacher workforce in Georgia must be a top priority now.

Turning Around Georgia's Lowest-Achieving Schools

Issue Overview

State accountability systems and the federal No Child Left Behind Act have established stringent criteria by which to assess school performance over time. Schools receive rewards and consequences based on their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) determination, an annual measurement of student achievement and progress on a set of performance indicators. While increased attention to accountability within the public education sector has led to greater public recognition for outstanding schools, it has also increased our awareness of the problem of chronically underperforming schools.

According to a 2007 comprehensive national study of low-performing schools, five percent or 5,000 of America's public schools, representing more than 2,500,000 students, are on track to fall into the most extreme federal designation for failure by 2009-10.³² Many more schools will be placed into less extreme categories, and the report concludes that the

percentage in some states will significantly exceed 50 percent. Another study conducted by researchers at Johns Hopkins University identified 2,000 high schools – “dropout factories” – that produce close to half of America's dropouts. An even more egregious finding was that nearly half of the nation's African American and Latino students attend high schools with high poverty and low graduation rates.³³

Such a high volume of underperforming schools is untenable for our nation, our communities, and most importantly, our students. Many state education agencies and local school systems have been trying for years to turn low-performing schools into successful ones, but unlocking the mystery of school turnaround has not been easy. This issue is now gaining greater attention as the federal Race to the Top grant requires states to devise a plan for turning around our country's persistently lowest-achieving public schools.

Policy Context

For years researchers and education think tanks have issued reports outlining the components of high-performing schools. Even with widely differing methodologies, dozens of case studies and policy briefs have identified many of the same core principles associated with excellent schools: capable, data-driven school leaders; a culture that values rigor, relevance, and relationships in teaching and learning; a cadre of well-trained teachers who work collaboratively toward increased student achievement; and partnerships with external community leaders that provide additional resources to support instruction.³⁴

Despite what educators and policymakers know about the recipe for excellent schools, successful efforts at instilling these

practices in low-performing schools and thereby effecting a radical transformation have been few and far between. The shining examples of lasting school turnaround often represent the individual work of a dynamic principal, and systemic, large-scale change remains rare. As the groundbreaking study *The Turnaround Challenge* concluded, “The research on turnaround of failing schools reveals some scattered, individual successes, but very little enduring progress at scale.”³⁵ Impeding large-scale progress has been an approach to change that is too timid, too cursory to meet the dire needs of our lowest-performing schools. In the words of turnaround researchers:

“Most of what's applied to under-performing schools today represents an incremental-change effort or an incomplete attempt at wholesale change. ‘Light-touch’ efforts that redirect curriculum or provide leadership coaching may help

32 Mass Insight Education and Research Institute. (2007). *The Turnaround Challenge*.

33 Balfanz, R. & Legters, N. (July 12, 2006). “The Graduation Rate Crisis We Know and What Can Be Done About It.” *Education Week*.

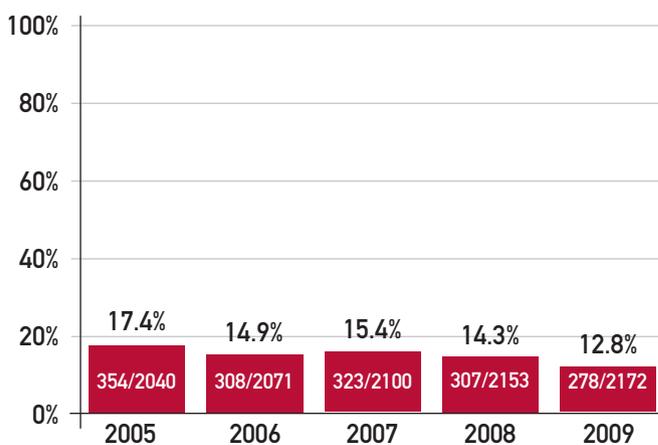
34 See forthcoming report from the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education: *Increasing the Graduation Rate*.

35 Mass Insight Education and Research Institute. (2007). *The Turnaround Challenge*.

some average-performing schools improve, but they are clearly not sufficient to produce successful turnaround of chronically poor-performing schools."³⁶

The School Improvement division within the Georgia Department of Education supports and facilitates efforts in all schools to increase student achievement and provides a statewide system of support for all Georgia schools not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The success of this work can be seen in the decreasing number of schools classified as Needs Improvement over the past five years, as shown in figure 6.1, and in the national recognition Georgia has received. In a December 2009 report by the Center on Education Policy, our state was one of six recognized for its policy on the restructuring of schools in the most severe status of Needs Improvement (levels 5 and above).³⁷

FIGURE 6.1. Georgia Public Schools in Needs Improvement



Source: Georgia Department of Education

While the school improvement tools offered by the state department are well-designed and have assisted many schools increase performance, the capacity of the department is limited. As with many states, Georgia continues to house substantial numbers of low-performing schools. In 2009, 305 of our state's 2172 public schools (14 percent) failed to make AYP. One hundred nineteen (5 percent) of our schools were classified as Needs Improvement-Year 3 or above, meaning they had not made AYP for three or more years in a row. Finally, 45 schools have been in the Needs Improvement category for five or more years and are therefore now state-directed. Of these 45 state-directed schools, 40 are designated as Title I schools due to their enrollment of a high percentage of economically-disadvantaged students. The story behind these numbers is that thousands of students in our state's public schools, a disproportionate number of whom are low-income, are being educated in persistently low-performing schools.

Just as the Race to the Top competition has heightened the political will for addressing other crucial areas of educational reform, it is also pushing Georgia's leaders to rethink our state's strategies for improving low-performing schools. The federal grant application calls for a specific action plan to address those schools that meet the following criteria:

- (1) Any Title I school in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring that
 - a. Is among the lowest-achieving 5 percent of this group of schools (or the lowest-achieving five, whichever number is greater), or
 - b. Is a high school that has had a graduation rate less than 60 percent over a number of years.

- (2) Any secondary school that is eligible for, but does not receive, Title I funds that
 - a. Is among the lowest-achieving 5 percent of this group of schools (or the lowest-achieving five, whichever number is greater), or
 - b. Is a high school that has had a graduation rate less than 60 percent over a number of years.

The federal definition additionally defines "lowest-achieving" as taking into account the academic achievement of all students on state assessments in reading/language arts and mathematics. Despite the challenges states and researchers have faced over the years in identifying the best practices for school turnaround, the Race to the Top guidelines offer four specific models for intervention. States must utilize these models in their reform plans for school improvement. As table 6.1 presents, each of these four models has a corresponding set of feasibility challenges. Georgia's state and district education leaders must carefully consider the root causes that are preventing so many of our schools from succeeding in order to determine what intervention models could benefit the students and communities those schools serve.

What's Next for Georgia?

The four turnaround models proposed in the Race to the Top guidelines are all less than perfect. History and research underscore that even the most promising reform strategies do not always result in successful school transformation. To bolster our efforts at improving low-achieving schools, Georgia's leaders must consider the strategies already at work within our state and incorporate those into any new reform plans. The School Keys and Georgia Assessment of Performance on School Standards (GAPSS) processes designed by the state Department of Education are the foundation for Georgia's comprehensive, data-driven system of school improvement and support. Currently mandated for schools in Needs Improvement – Year 6, the GAPSS review strategy could be extended to additional low-achieving schools. Additionally, the systemic data-driven

36 Mass Insight Education and Research Institute. (2007). *The Turnaround Challenge*.

37 Center on Education Policy. (2009). *Improving Low-performing Schools: Lessons from Five Years of Studying School Restructuring Under No Child Left Behind*.

reform initiatives provided by the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) have a proven track record for assisting school leaders in successful turnaround work. Strengthening state support for GLISI's work and encouraging more schools and districts to participate in their programs would ultimately pay great dividends for Georgia's schools and students.

Whether or not Georgia wins a Race to the Top grant, it is clear that we must focus our attention on the dozens of public

schools that are persistently low-achieving. The impact of consistent failure at the school level affects not only our youth – diminishing their likelihood of success and opportunity – but our communities as well which feel the pain of reduced social and economic capital. *As The Turnaround Challenge* articulated well, "Turning around the bottom five percent of schools is the crucible of education reform. They represent our greatest, clearest need – and therefore a great opportunity to bring about fundamental change."³⁸

TABLE 6.1. School Turnaround Models Established by Race to the Top

INTERVENTION	DESCRIPTION OF KEY COMPONENTS	FEASIBILITY CHALLENGES
Turnaround Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Replace the school principal. - Screen all existing school staff and rehire no more than 50 percent. - Adopt a new governance structure. - Implement an instructional program that is research-based and vertically aligned from one grade to the next. - Establish schedules that provide increased learning time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiring a new principal and effective teachers to replace half a school's teaching staff presents a human resource challenge, particularly in rural districts. How does a district successfully recruit new candidates to join the staff of a persistently low-performing school? • Increasing learning time and instituting a new comprehensive instructional program may incur significant costs.
Restart Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Convert the school or close and reopen the school under a charter school operator, a charter management organization, or an education management organization. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selecting a charter operator requires careful planning and an understanding of the success rate and the contractual agreement of the operator. • Enticing a charter operator to assume responsibility for a persistently low-performing school may be difficult, particularly in districts with no (or few) existing charter schools.
School Closure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Close the school and enroll the students who attended that school in other schools within the district that are higher achieving. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In districts with no more than one school per grade configuration, this option is not feasible. • Enrolling students in another school could lead to capacity issues (Do nearby schools have space for more students?), transportation issues (Is the higher-performing school nearby?), and disruption or controversy within a community.
Transformation Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Replace the school principal. - Implement an instructional program that is research-based and vertically aligned from one grade to the next. - Establish schedules that provide increased learning time. - Provide ongoing mechanisms for family and community engagement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Districts with more than nine persistently lowest-achieving schools may not use this model for more than 50 percent of their schools. • Increasing learning time and instituting a new comprehensive instructional program may incur significant costs.

³⁸ Mass Insight Education and Research Institute. (2007). *The Turnaround Challenge*.

College Access for All

Issue Overview

Global economic trends and generational shifts in expectations have made the issues of college-readiness and college enrollment central to our 21st century education system. Only a few decades ago a college degree was viewed as unnecessary for personal or professional success. Today abundant research proves that times have changed. Not only are college degrees in greater demand by employers, but individuals who earn a postsecondary diploma are likely to enjoy higher earnings, better health, and a host of other personal benefits.

According to a recent study from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of jobs for workers with a bachelor's degree or higher is projected to increase from 38 million in 2006, or about 25 percent of the workforce, to more than 43 million by 2016. That's a growth rate of nearly 15 percent – faster than the average growth for all occupations, and faster than the rate for jobs at other education levels.

Completing a college education also enhances an individual's earning potential. In 2009 the median weekly earnings of a high school graduate (with no additional postsecondary training) were 35 percent higher than those of a non-graduate. The median weekly earnings of a college graduate were 145 percent higher than those of a high school non-graduate.³⁹ Over a 40-year working life, the typical bachelor's degree recipient can expect to earn about 61 percent more than the typical high school graduate earns over the same period.⁴⁰

Despite the proven benefits of college education, thousands of young adults across the country are choosing not to attend postsecondary programs. And for those students who do enroll in college, many are unprepared for academic success or unable to secure the necessary financial support, and thus, college completion remains unattainable. Georgia and other states must increase efforts to ensure that our young adults have access to college and the opportunity to succeed in their postsecondary paths.

Policy Context

A national assessment of the higher education policy landscape reveals that the nation and most of the 50 states have made some advances in recent years to better prepare students for college and increase access to higher education.⁴¹ Still our rates of improvement have not been high enough, and the United States continues to fall behind other industrialized countries in improving college opportunities for our young population. Two recent reports from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education have assigned Georgia mixed grades on our state's policies and outcomes for postsecondary participation. As shown in tables 7.1 and 7.2, Georgia has both promising practices and significant areas of challenge.

Increasing postsecondary opportunities for Georgia's students requires attention to the programs and policies that impact two critical areas: college readiness and college success. Our students must have the academic preparation to enroll and succeed without remediation in a postsecondary setting. This preparation must include the attainment of high achievement in rigorous courses, strong analytic and writing proficiency, and academic study skills. According to the 2009 results of the ACT, an assessment commonly required for college entrance, "fewer than one-quarter of high school seniors graduating in 2008 who took the ACT scored at the 'college-ready' level in all four subject areas."⁴²

39 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2009). *Usual Weekly Earnings of Wage and Salary Workers: Second Quarter 2009*. Washington, DC: Author. Earnings listed are for the second quarter of 2009.

40 College Board. (2007). *Education Pays: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society*. Washington, DC: Author.

41 Callan, P.M. (2008). *The 2008 National Report Card: Modest Improvements, Persistent Disparities, Eroding Global Competitiveness*. The National Center For Public Policy and Higher Education.

42 Gewertz, C. (August 25, 2009). "Scores on ACT Show Majority of Students Not College-Ready." *Education Week* (29)1.

Additionally, Georgia's policies must ensure that our students are equipped for successful annual retention and the ultimate completion of their college degree. According to national statistics from the U.S. Department of Education, only 20 percent of young people who begin their higher education at two-year institutions graduate within three years. There is a similar pattern in four-year institutions, where about four in 10 students receive a degree within six years.⁴³ A key component of support for persistence and graduation is the provision of

adequate financial supports for students and families combined with measures to control the skyrocketing costs of postsecondary education. As the *Measuring Up* report concludes, the rising costs of college are significantly impacting the ability of Georgia's families and students to afford postsecondary programs. Table 7.3 presents detailed data on the financial challenges facing Georgia's college students.

TABLE 7.1. Measuring Up: Mixed Outcomes for Georgia's Postsecondary Performance

GEORGIA'S POSTSECONDARY REPORT CARD

From the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

Preparation	C+	Georgia's fairly low performance in educating its young population could limit the state's access to a competitive workforce and weaken its economy.
Participation	D-	College opportunities for young and working-age adults are poor.
Affordability	F	Higher education has become less affordable for students and their families.
Completion	B-	Georgia is a top performer in awarding certificates and degrees relative to the number of students enrolled.
Benefits	B	Only a fair proportion of residents have a bachelor's degree, yet the economic benefits to the state are very high.

Source: *Measuring Up 2008: The State Report Card on Higher Education*

TABLE 7.2. Leading and Lagging: Mixed Outcomes for Georgia's Postsecondary Performance

GEORGIA'S PIPELINE TO POSTSECONDARY

From the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Institute for a Competitive Workforce

	GA	U.S.
Overall Grade	B	—
State requires college- and career-ready diploma	Yes	20 states
State has high school exams that gauge college and career readiness	Yes	10 states
Percentage of students in the high school class of 2008 passing an AP test	16.3%	15.2%
Percentage of high schools reporting dual enrollment programs	66%	65%
Percentage of high schools reporting work-based internships	71%	65%

Source: *Leaders and Laggards: A State-by-State Report Card on Educational Innovation*

⁴³ Public Agenda. (2009). *With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them: Myths and Realities About Why So Many Students Fail to Finish College*.

TABLE 7.3. Affordability Indicators for Higher Education in Georgia

	Georgia 2008	Top States in Previous Years
FAMILY ABILITY TO PAY		
Percent of income (average of all income groups) needed to pay for college expenses minus financial aid:		
At community colleges	20%	13%
At public 4-year colleges/universities	15%	10%
At private 4-year colleges/universities	68%	30%
STRATEGIES FOR AFFORDABILITY		
State investment in need-based financial aid as compared to the federal investment	0%	89%
At lowest-priced colleges, the share of income that the poorest families need to pay for tuition	17%	7%
RELIANCE ON LOANS		
Average loan amount that undergraduate students borrow each year	\$4,653	\$2,619

Source: The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. *Measuring Up 2008: The State Report Card on Higher Education*. Note: Because the national trends have led to decreased college affordability, Georgia's 2008 performance is compared to the performance of top states in previous years (the 1990s). The National Center uses a historical benchmark in order to measure states on a more stable and reliable standard, and thus, grades better reflect actual performance and improvement or decline over time.

Students' academic preparation for college combined with their financial ability to pay ultimately influences postsecondary completion rates. Despite the abundant research citing the benefits of attaining a college degree, overall rates of college completion have remained fairly low over the years. Consider the following facts:

- In the top-performing states only 68 percent of students at four-year institutions complete a bachelor's degree within six years of enrolling.⁴⁴
- Once in college, minority students are much less likely than white students to graduate. Nationally, 59 percent of white students complete a bachelor's degree within six years of enrolling in college. In contrast, 47 percent of Hispanic students, 40 percent of African Americans, and 39 percent of Native American students complete a bachelor's degree within six years.⁴⁵
- In Georgia, only 48 percent of first-time, full-time college students complete a bachelor's degree within six years of enrolling in college.⁴⁶
- Among the 20 four-year degree granting institutions of the University System of Georgia, 59 percent of first-time, full-time freshmen graduate within six years.⁴⁷
- Nationally, 28 percent of first-time full-time associate degree-seeking students earn an associates degree within three years.⁴⁸
- Georgia slightly exceeds the national average with 29 percent of first-time full-time associate degree-seeking students earning an associates degree within three years.⁴⁹

Increasing the percentage of Georgia's population that has at least a bachelor's degree will positively impact individuals, their

44 The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. (2008). *Measuring Up 2008: The State Report Card*.

45 EdTrust. (2009). *Charting a Necessary Path: The Baseline Report of Public Higher Education Systems in the Access to Success Initiative*.

46 The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. (2008). *Measuring Up 2008: The State Report Card*.

47 University System of Georgia. Graduation Rate Report. Retrieved November 19, 2009 from USG by the Numbers (USG123). www.usg.edu.

48 The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems Information Center for Policymaking and Analysis. www.higheredinfo.org.

49 Ibid.

families, and the economic health and competitiveness of our state. Clearly Georgia's policymakers and practitioners must continue seeking solutions to the challenges of college readiness, access, affordability, and completion that plague the state.

What's Next for Georgia?

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provided \$30.8 billion in financial supports for federal college affordability programs. Included in the recovery package was \$17 billion to boost the Pell Grant program and serve an estimated 7 million low and moderate-income individuals.

Additionally the legislation designated \$13.8 billion to increase the federal tuition tax credit from \$1,800 to \$2,500 for families earning up to \$180,000 annually. While these supports will help ease the pain of college affordability over the next two years, they are only a small part of the policy and financial reforms that must be considered to improve college access and success.

Georgia's implementation of the new state curriculum for K-12 schools as well as the new high school diploma requirements will help to increase the levels of college readiness among our youth. In 2009, the University System of Georgia (USG) was awarded a federal College Access Grant of \$2 million per year for up to two years. USG is using the grant to implement strategies focused specifically on low-income families as well as people who started but failed to complete work on their college degrees. And the work of state leaders with the College and Career Ready Policy Institute is seeking policy solutions to strengthen Georgia's P-16 education pipeline.

In 2010 Georgia must continue these efforts currently underway, but our state leaders must also consider what additional programs, strategies, or policy efforts are necessary to increase college access and success for all our citizens. The significant progress Georgia has made in recent years to increase the high school graduation rate will ultimately be diminished if our graduates are unprepared financially and academically for their postsecondary experiences.

The Expanding Charter School Frontier

Issue Overview

It has been nearly two decades since the nation's first charter school law was passed in Minnesota in 1992 allowing the creation of a new form of public school that accepts increased accountability for results in exchange for greater flexibility from state control. The charter school concept spread rapidly, gaining considerable bipartisan support throughout the country, and many states enacted laws to allow the growth of this new education reform. In 1998, Georgia passed its Charter Schools Act which allows existing local schools, private individuals, private organizations, and state and local public entities to organize a charter public school subject to a performance-based contract approved by both the state and local boards of education.⁵⁰

Despite a national trend toward charter schools, the concept is not without controversy. Researchers disagree about the quality of charter school outcomes, and studies of student performance in charters have reached different conclusions. Some evidence suggests that students in charter schools perform at lower levels than their peers in traditional public schools, while other findings prove the opposite. However, the mixed research has not diminished the growth of the charter school sector. Today 40 states and

the District of Columbia have charter laws, and nation-wide more than 4,900 charter schools are in operation enrolling 1.5 million students.

Across the country the profile of charters has been raised substantially in the past several months with announcements of the federal Race to the Top grant competition. Before the detailed guidelines for the grant were even released, Education Secretary Arne Duncan indicated that states with limits on the number of charter schools allowed to operate would not be given funding priority. In reaction, legislatures in many of the 24 states and D.C. with caps on charter school growth began frantically revisiting their legal statutes.

Georgia has no limit on the growth of charter schools, yet the sector has not escaped dispute in the past year. In the final months of 2009, the actions of the Georgia Charter Schools Commission, a state-level, independent authorizing entity established by a 2008 law, have led to a lawsuit filed by a group of local school systems. In the coming year, Georgia must not only address the maintenance of high quality among existing charter schools, but must also monitor charter sector developments at the federal level and wrestle with the legal dispute between the state and local systems.

Policy Context

Though Georgia's charter law was passed more than a decade ago, the sector has seen rapid growth within the past two years. In 2008, 17 new charter schools opened their doors in Georgia, the largest annual increase in operational charter schools since the Charter Schools Act was signed into law in 1993. In addition to these 17 new schools, Georgia also awarded its first system-wide charters to four school districts, which

collectively have 25 schools that are now charter system schools. Including these new charter system schools, the current number of charter schools in Georgia is 122, nearly twice the number of charter schools the state had just two years ago.⁵¹ And the sector continues to grow: in December 2009, the Georgia Charter Schools Commission approved seven petitions for charter schools (several of which had previously been denied by their local board) that will begin operation in fall 2010.

50 Georgia Department of Education. (2009). "Frequently Asked Questions About Charter Schools." www.gadoe.org.

51 Georgia Department of Education. (2008). *2007 – 2008 Annual Report on Georgia's Charter Schools*. www.gadoe.org.

As a share of Georgia's entire public school system, charters serve only a small percentage of the student population. Enrollment in the 2007-2008 school year totaled 33,229 students, only two percent of the state's overall K-12 student population. On average, the outcomes for these charter school students either closely match or slightly outpace the mean state performance. As shown in figures 8.1, 8.2, and 8.3, the percentage of charter school students passing the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) and earning their high school diplomas has been nearly equal or slightly higher than the state average for the past three years.

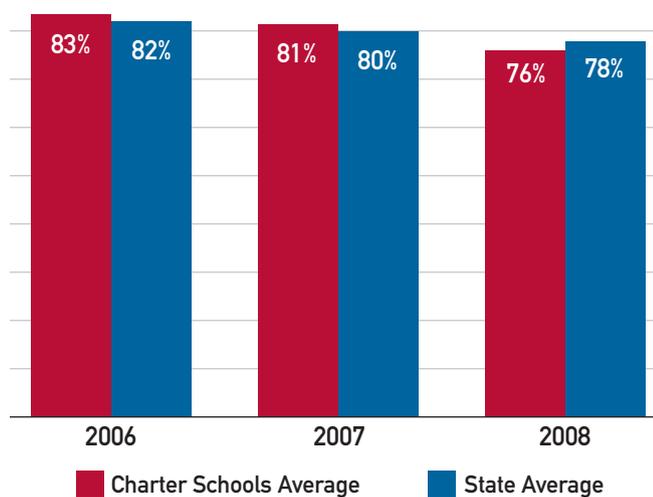
The student achievement data for Georgia's charters schools are promising and suggest that the Department of Education's professed focus on authorizing schools that provide high-quality, innovative educational opportunities has been successful. Nationally, however, the impact of charter schools on student achievement has become a source of great debate among researchers and policy organizations. Two high-profile studies of charter school performance were released in 2009, and their contrasting conclusions have created more questions than answers for policymakers.

In June 2009, researchers at Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) released the results of a national study of student performance at 2,403 charter schools in 15 states and the District of Columbia, a population that represents more than 70 percent of the charter school students in the country.⁵² Using student-level longitudinal data

from the participating states, researchers compared the outcomes of charter school students with those of their "virtual twins," students with identical demographic and educational profiles, enrolled in

FIGURE 8.2. Performance of Georgia's Charter Schools Students on Math CRCT

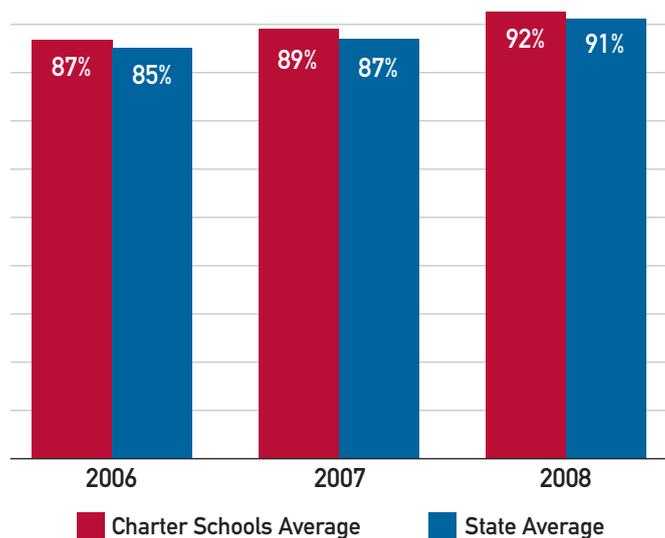
Students Passing Math CRCT



Source: Georgia Department of Education. (2008). *2007 – 2008 Annual Report on Georgia's Charter Schools*. www.gadoe.org.
Note: Data for 2009 was unavailable for this publication.

FIGURE 8.1. Performance of Georgia's Charter Schools Students on Reading CRCT

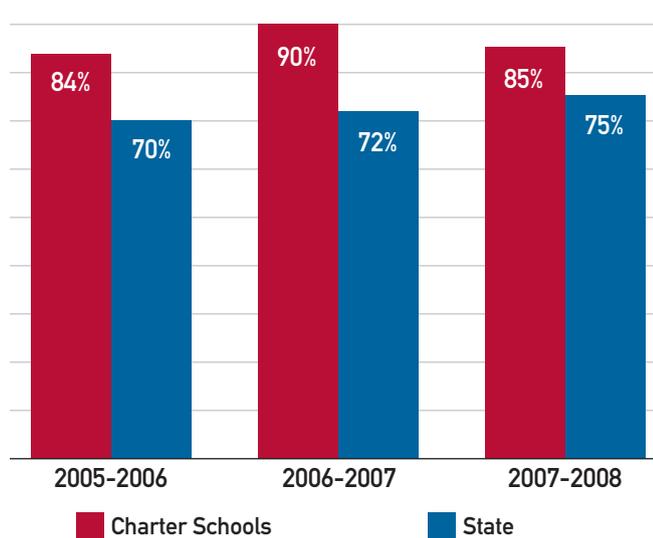
Students Passing Reading CRCT



Source: Georgia Department of Education. (2008). *2007 – 2008 Annual Report on Georgia's Charter Schools*. www.gadoe.org.
Note: Data for 2009 was unavailable for this publication.

FIGURE 8.3. High School Graduation Rates of Georgia's Charter Schools Students

Graduation Rate 2006-2008



Source: Georgia Department of Education. (2008). *2007 – 2008 Annual Report on Georgia's Charter Schools*. www.gadoe.org.
Note: Data for 2009 was unavailable for this publication.

52 Center for Research on Education Outcomes. (June 2009). Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States. Stanford University.

traditional public schools. Overall, the CREDO study found that charter school results are mixed:

- 37 percent of charter schools “deliver learning results that are significantly worse than their students would have realized had they remained in traditional public schools;”
- 46 percent have results that are no different from their traditional public school counterparts; and
- 17 percent achieve results that are superior to other local public schools.

The CREDO study also uncovered positive benefits of charter schools for students in poverty and English language learners. Both of those student subgroups fared better in charter schools than in the traditional system.

Just a few months after the release of the CREDO study, another researcher from Stanford, Caroline Hoxby, published the findings of an investigation into the outcomes of charter schools in New York City. Because the majority of students in New York City’s charter schools enroll through a lottery process, Hoxby was able to draw reliable comparisons between “lotteried-in” charter school students and “lotteried-out” students who remained in traditional schools. Using eight years of student data, the research concluded that the charter schools are making significant strides in closing achievement gaps between disadvantaged inner-city students and their more advantaged suburban peers.⁵³ Specific findings of the study include the following:

- “On average, a student who attended a charter school for all of grades kindergarten through eight would close about 86 percent of the ‘Scarsdale-Harlem achievement gap’ in math and 66 percent of the achievement gap in English.”⁵⁴
- “A student who attends a charter high school is about 7 percent more likely to earn a Regents diploma by age 20 for each year he spends in that school.”⁵⁵

While not all charter schools are high-performing, this research study does offer support to the thousands of educators and families who believe that traditionally underserved students can excel in the right charter school environment. Certainly, Georgia also has outstanding examples of high-achieving charter schools that have improved the outcomes and opportunities for many of our youth. Research and experience, however, have shown that not every charter school produces consistent, positive academic change for students. And as the sector continues to grow, some critics contend that the proliferation of this school model may be interfering with its quality. The charter school movement, “once dedicated to educational quality...is increasingly dominated by powerful advocates of market-based reform and privatization in

public education.”⁵⁶ In Georgia as in other states, charter schools that offer families and students an educational choice yet fail to raise academic quality above that of traditional public schools compromise the intention of the charter school movement.

What’s Next for Georgia?

The coming year will be a dynamic period for charter school policy at the federal and state levels. The Race to the Top funding competition has raised attention to the charter school sector. Not only has Secretary Duncan indicated that priority will be given to states without a limit on the expansion of charter schools, but conversion to a charter school is one of the four recommended methods for turning around low-achieving schools.

In Georgia, while state leaders plan a comprehensive Race to the Top strategy that likely incorporates charter school expansion, a new controversy has arisen regarding the work of the Georgia Charter Schools Commission. The Commission, created by the Georgia General Assembly in 2008, has the power to authorize new charter schools statewide, even after those schools have been denied approval by their local board of education. Schools authorized by the Commission are eligible for state and local funds. In December 2009, the Commission granted approval to seven new charter schools, bringing its total of authorized schools to nine.

Ironically, the work of this new authorizing body has garnered positive recognition at the national level while also sparking a divisive lawsuit within our state. In October 2009, the Commission was named one of three winners of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers Fund for Authorizing Excellence Awards. At the same time, the Commission was being sued by Gwinnett County which alleges that the action of the Commission – withholding state funds from local systems in order to provide funding for Commission-approved schools – is unconstitutional. At least four other school systems, including Atlanta Public Schools, Bulloch County Schools, Candler County Schools, and DeKalb County Schools, have now joined in the lawsuit which will be heard in court sometime in 2010.

One of many school reform strategies, high-quality charter schools can provide positive academic outcomes for many students. Despite two decades of charter school policy in Georgia, the sector faces a challenging year. Our state’s leaders must juggle competing pressures from federal and local policymakers. Regardless the outcomes of the Race to the Top competition and the Commission lawsuit, Georgia’s leaders and practitioners must also begin to consider new strategies or sharing the best practices of the high-achieving charter schools currently operating throughout our state.

53 Viadero, D. (September 22, 2009). “N.Y.C. Charters Found to Close Gaps.” *Education Week* (29)5.

54 Hoxby, C. (2009). *The New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project*.

55 Ibid.

56 Miron, G., & Dingserson, L. (October 7, 2009). “Commentary: The Charter School Express.” *Education Week* 29(6).

Filing Suit: Education Litigation in Georgia

Issue Overview

Public education lies within the jurisdiction of state- and locally-elected policymakers.

Across the country, decisions regarding school funding, teaching, and learning are made by state and local boards of education that are informed by the work of superintendents and central office staff. Traditionally, educational reforms that change the status quo of public schools are proposed, thoroughly vetted, and adopted according to the local and state education governance structure. Yet history has repeatedly shown that when conflict arises regarding the processes and outcomes of public education, the judicial system is often where solutions are sought. Since the 1954 landmark case of the United States Supreme Court – *Brown vs. Board of Education* – famously marked the influence of the courts on public education, the judicial branch has become a powerful player in education reform. Today, an estimated 7,000 education lawsuits are filed in America each year.⁵⁷

Following national trends, Georgia's public education system has grown more litigious over time. Several important court

cases have shaped the education landscape recently and will continue to make headlines in the year 2010. First, in 2004, the Consortium for Adequate School Funding (now known as the Georgia School Funding Association) filed a lawsuit against the state to seek additional funding for Georgia's schools. After a great deal of legal wrangling the Consortium withdrew the lawsuit in 2008, yet maintains the position that "a lawsuit may [still] be necessary to bring about the urgently needed changes" in Georgia's system of public education funding.⁵⁸ Second, in 2009 a group of five local school systems filed suit against the newly-formed Georgia Charter Schools Commission, accusing the state commission of illegally funding charter schools with state money by redirecting local tax dollars meant for other students. Lastly, in 2009, the Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE) filed a lawsuit aimed at preserving the salary supplements of the state's National Board Certified Teachers, which were eliminated for future recipients during the 2009 General Assembly.

Policy Context

Litigation is not the obvious choice for an education reform strategy, yet court decisions have substantially impacted public education across the country in recent decades. The rulings of judges have compelled states and local systems to shift courses in several policy areas including desegregation, student privacy, religion in schools, tuition vouchers, and school funding. In recent years, major litigation in Georgia has centered on education finance and the adequacy of school funding at the state level. While the lawsuit originally filed by the Consortium for Adequate School Funding was withdrawn, the work of the Consortium (now renamed the Georgia School

Funding Association) continues to raise awareness of the challenges of school finance and of the potential need for future litigation.

Formed in 2001 to improve the financing of K-12 education in Georgia, the Association (GSFA) is a non-profit corporation with individuals and organizations as its members. The initial emphasis of GSFA's work was on equity in the financing of Georgia's public schools, but in late 2003 the focus shifted to adequacy. GSFA contends that the state is not fulfilling its constitutional obligation to provide an adequate education for every child in Georgia, and local school systems are being forced to absorb an increasing share of the required cost.

57 Thomas B. Fordham Institute. (September 2009). "Press Release: From Schoolhouse to Courthouse paints a vivid portrait of the role that courts continue to play in America's classrooms." www.edexcellence.net.

58 Georgia School Funding Association. (September 2009). *The Unfulfilled Promise to Georgia's Children*. www.casfg.org.

Although this problem is particularly severe for those systems without a substantial local tax base, it affects all local school systems.

The attempts of GSFA to bring a judicial remedy to the school finance controversy have been stymied multiple times by state actions. The trial was scheduled to begin on October 21, 2008, but in September of that year, the funding for senior judges was abruptly ended as a result of state budget cuts. The funding case was subsequently transferred to a new judge, and the plaintiffs made the decision to have the lawsuit dismissed. In February of 2009, after the original lawsuit had been voluntarily withdrawn, the Georgia Attorney General issued an opinion on the authority of local school boards to create and use a non-profit corporation for any purpose without express statutory power. The Consortium responded by making several changes to its by-laws. The new entity, named the Georgia School Funding Association, has a membership of individuals across Georgia rather than local school systems, and it will not be a named plaintiff in any future litigation.⁵⁹

Despite the tumultuous history of the Georgia School Funding Association and its unsuccessful attempt to bring the issue of school funding before the court system, there are many practitioners and advocates throughout the state who contend that litigation may still be a necessary procedure for ensuring that all children in Georgia receive an adequate education. Our state is not alone in this regard: across the country, lawsuits challenging state methods of funding public schools have been brought in 45 of the 50 states.⁶⁰ In recent decades more of these cases have addressed the adequacy of funding, a focus which has resulted in more decisions in favor of the plaintiffs:

“Although plaintiffs [of state education finance cases] prevailed in the early litigations, by the early 1980s, defendants were winning most of these cases, primarily because the courts had great difficulty in devising solutions for the problems of funding inequities. Beginning in 1989, however, the pendulum again shifted: plaintiffs have won about two-thirds of the recent cases, mainly because the focus has shifted from equal protection claims to the provisions of state constitutions that guarantee some substantive level of adequate education to all students.”⁶¹

TABLE 9.1. Education Adequacy Decisions Since 1989

Plaintiff Victory (21)	State Defendant Victory (11)	Pending (6)
Alaska ¹	Alabama	Alaska ¹
Arizona ²	Arizona ²	Connecticut
Arkansas	Florida	Florida
Colorado	Illinois	Illinois
Idaho	Indiana	South Dakota
Kansas	Missouri ³	Washington
Kentucky	Nebraska	
Maryland	Oklahoma	
Massachusetts	Oregon	
Missouri ³	Pennsylvania	
Montana	Rhode Island	
New Hampshire		
New Jersey		
New Mexico		
New York		
North Carolina		
Ohio		
South Carolina		
Texas		
Vermont		
Wyoming		

Source: National Access Network (2009).

Notes: (1) Alaska plaintiffs won a capital funding case; an operational funding case is pending appeal. (2) Arizona plaintiffs won a capital funding case in 1994; they lost an at-risk funding case in 2006. (3) Missouri plaintiffs won a new funding system in a 1993 case before the Circuit Court, which went un-appealed; in 2009, the state Supreme Court denied the plaintiffs’ claim that subsequent changes in the funding system had rendered it unconstitutional.

While a lawsuit alone cannot ensure the successful resolution of school finance struggles, it has proven to be a viable strategy toward effecting change in many states. As shown in table 9.1, plaintiffs in 21 states have won victories in court. While the implementation of the courts’ rulings may bring its own set of challenges, in many instances the judicial system serves as a catalyst for educational reform.

While the future of school finance litigation in Georgia remains in question, the state is currently in the midst of another lawsuit regarding the constitutionality of the state Charter Schools Commission. Established by House Bill 881 in 2008, the Commission is a state-level, independent charter school authorizing entity with the power to approve or deny petitions for charter schools and renew, nonrenew, or terminate these schools in accordance with Georgia law.

During its first year of existence the Commission granted its approval to two charter schools, Charter Conservatory of Arts and Technology (CCAT) in Bulloch County and Ivy Preparatory Academy in Gwinnett County. Previously designated as State Chartered Special Schools, the new designation of these schools as Commission-approved charter schools meant they would receive funding from both state and local sources. Despite the fact that these schools were denied charter status by their local school boards, they now receive funds equal to the proportional share of local revenue from students’ home districts. In order to provide this level of funding to the Commission-chartered schools, the appropriate per-pupil funds are deducted from the share of state dollars designated for local systems.

59 Georgia School Funding Association. (September 2009). *The Unfulfilled Promise to Georgia’s Children*. www.casfg.org.

60 National Access Network. “Litigation.” Retrieved December 20, 2009 from www.schoolfunding.info/litigation.

61 Rebell, M. (2001). “Education Adequacy, Democracy, and the Courts.” In Timothy Ready, Christopher Edley, Jr., and Catherine E. Snow, eds., *Achieving High Educational Standards For All*. Washington: National Research Council.

In September 2009, the Gwinnett County School District filed a lawsuit against the Commission, claiming that the Commission does not have standing under the state Constitution to manage and control local schools nor to direct local dollars to the operation of such schools. Since that date at least four additional school systems – Bulloch County, Candler County, DeKalb County, and Atlanta Public Schools – have filed their own lawsuits and the Commission has granted approval to seven additional schools. At the heart of this legal battle are questions regarding the authority of local school boards and the constitutional control over taxpayer dollars that are raised locally and appropriated by locally-elected officials.

**What's
Next for
Georgia?**

The stage is set for several legal actions in Georgia that could substantially impact the governance and financing of our public schools. The economic crisis of recent years has exacerbated the school funding challenges for countless school systems, and it is likely that in the near future the constitutionality of Georgia's school funding may again be challenged. The lawsuit filed by the Professional Association of Georgia Educators on behalf of National Board Certified Teachers will be addressed in 2010. Already some lawmakers are pledging to restore the salary supplement for those teachers when the General Assembly convenes in January, though the grim budget outlook calls that pledge into question. And lastly, the lawsuit against the Charter Schools Commission will progress this year, even as the Commission continues its work to review additional charter applications.

Certainly all of these education lawsuits will be shaped this year by the state's economy and the upcoming statewide elections. The judicial process is costly and will undoubtedly be a drain on state and local resources. And as the state gears up for a major gubernatorial election this fall, the issues being addressed through litigation will likely color the political campaigns. Above all, these lawsuits signal that Georgia has controversy and unrest within the public education community. While the litigation could spur positive reform, it may also detract policymakers and practitioners from the work underway to improve student opportunities and outcomes.

10

Understanding Rural Georgia

Issue Overview

The notion of rural America conjures images of rolling hills and colorful farmlands, of serene communities whose residents exemplify self-sufficiency and hard work. Beyond this romantic view of the rural landscape, Americans in urban and suburban settings give little thought to the challenges facing this geographical sector of the country. In political conversations and in the policymaking process, rural America is often invisible.

Despite public perceptions, communities in rural America are far from simple. The unique demographics, geographies, and economies of rural settings create a distinct set of policy concerns for the areas' citizens. In recent years numerous organizations and compacts have formed to focus specifically on research, policy, and advocacy for rural America, a fact that underscores the need to build greater understanding of these communities and consider policies and programs that focus discretely on their needs.

Of particular concern to rural policymakers and advocates is the quality of education in their communities. Almost one in three public schools in the United States is rural; combined, these schools serve 19 percent of the nation's total public school enrollment.⁶² In Georgia, more than half a million public school students attend rural schools, nearly one-third of all students in the state. For many advocates, attention to rural education is largely an issue of justice and equalization of opportunity for these youth. As the National Rural Assembly articulates:

"It is imperative that national policymakers understand the unique challenges and opportunities these rural schools face and enact policies that support their success. We need education policy that provides rural schools with the tools and conditions necessary to prepare every child to learn and lead. The future of rural communities, and America as a whole, depends on every child's readiness to sustainably develop his or her community and participate fully in building a prosperous nation."⁶³

Policy Context

Despite the sprawling multi-county metropolis that surrounds Atlanta and the handful of other smaller urban cities throughout Georgia, our state has a substantial rural component. Depending on the definition used, between 60 and 122 of Georgia's 159 counties are classified as rural. The Rural School and Community Trust, a national nonprofit organization addressing the crucial relationship between good schools and thriving communities, finds that with 527,507 rural students, Georgia has the nation's third largest rural student population.⁶⁴

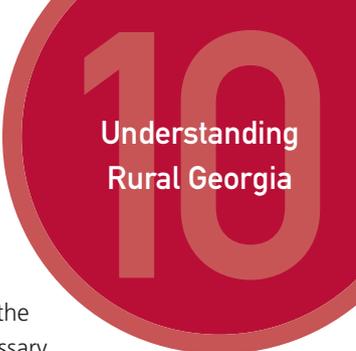
Often these students exhibit lower levels of academic achievement when compared to their non-rural peers. Understanding the unique experiences and outcomes of schooling for such a large percentage of our state's students is imperative. In the words of one researcher, "Information about the contexts and circumstances for rural schools can – and should – inform the work of policymakers and practitioners who are positioned to either make things better or worse for these students and their schools and communities, and...for the nation as a whole."⁶⁵

62 The Rural Assembly. (2008). *Policy Opportunity Snapshots: Context, Challenges, and Opportunities*. Retrieved December 15, 2009 from www.ruralassembly.org/images/policy_opportunity_snapshots.doc; The Rural School and Community Trust. (2009). *Why Rural Matters 2009*.

63 The Rural Assembly. (2008). *Policy Opportunity Snapshots: Context, Challenges, and Opportunities*. Retrieved December 15, 2009 from www.ruralassembly.org/images/policy_opportunity_snapshots.doc.

64 The Rural School and Community Trust. (2009). *Why Rural Matters 2009*. North Carolina has the largest rural student population in the nation; Texas has the second largest.

65 Ibid.



A biennial report from the Rural School and Community Trust offers a comprehensive look at rural education in all 50 states and provides data on the performance of rural education across the country. The report combines numerous indicators to create priority rankings that reflect the overall status of rural education in each state. According to the 2009 report, Georgia ranks 15th which denotes that the rural students and schools here face challenges that are not adequately addressed by public policy. Table 10.1 presents specific findings on the characteristics and achievement of Georgia's rural schools. On many of the indicators Georgia ranks high, meaning the issues surrounding rural education are more critical for our state than for others.

Advocates and policymakers within rural communities have an even more tangible and practical reason to concentrate on the need for a quality educational system. Because of the integral connections between education and workforce development, the opportunities and outcomes of students have a direct impact on the infrastructure and economic sustainability in local communities. For rural policymakers, understanding the links between education and the local economy is critical. However, improvements in rural education systems must be coupled with efforts to address the larger issues of employment opportunities and quality of life. Consider the policy dilemma facing today's rural leaders:

"If rural schools are successful in producing well-educated

students, they run the risk of accelerating the exodus of talented youth to the larger cities that offer higher salaries and other important amenities. Certainly, rural areas can attempt to retain these talented individuals by expanding the availability of better paying, higher quality jobs in the locality. But, in far too many rural places, the necessary infrastructure and fiscal resources needed to create or attract such jobs are simply limited."⁶⁶



The coming year will be dynamic for Georgia. Budget concerns, political campaigns, and federal policies will shape our educational system in ways that are largely unpredictable. Policy and leadership changes that occur at the state level could have a drastic influence on the schools and students in rural Georgia.

No longer can those concerns be ignored by state leaders. To drive educational improvement and enact meaningful legislation that bolsters rural communities, our state's policymakers must understand the unique challenges facing rural schools and enact education policies that provide the necessary support for their success. Lastly, we must give more attention to the proliferation of best practices in educating rural youth – there is a greater urgency now to leverage the successful strategies already in place in rural communities.

TABLE 10.1. Characteristics of Georgia's Rural Schools and Students

INDICATOR	GEORGIA	RANK*	U.S.
Importance			
Number of rural students	527,507	3	Median = 131,129
Percent rural students	32.4%	15	19.4%
Student and Family Diversity			
Percentage of rural minority students	31.2%	13	22.2%
Percentage of rural student poverty	47.4%	11	40.6%
Educational Outcomes			
Rural Grade 4 NAEP scores (math & reading)	228	12	243
Rural Grade 8 NAEP scores (math & reading)	269	12	261
Rural high school graduation rate	56.2%	3	69.2%
Concentrated Poverty⁺			
Number of rural students	26,463	6	Median = 11,689
Percentage of rural student poverty	74.3%	15	63.7%
Rural high school graduation rate	41.0%	3	60.4%

Source: The Rural School and Community Trust. (2009). *Why Rural Matters 2009*.

* A rank of 1 is most crucial or urgent. For example, the lower the rural graduation rate, the higher the state ranks on that indicator.

+ Concentrated poverty refers to the characteristics of the 10 percent of rural districts within each state with the highest poverty levels as measured by Title I eligibility.

⁶⁶ "An Introduction to Education," *The Role of Education: Promoting the Economic and Social Vitality of Rural America*. Southern Rural Development Center. January 2005.



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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.