

## Priority: Safe and Supportive Learning Environments

Support school and community efforts that address students' physical, academic, social, and emotional needs.

### Policy Context

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

School and district leaders often partner with regional agencies and community organizations to deliver wraparound supports, or student-centered resources that address one or more non-academic learning barriers.

School systems have used Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to expand non-academic student support services. These investments reflect a "whole-child, whole-school, whole-community" approach, an engagement model in which schools are a hub for expanding access to community resources.

Fundamental to the concept of school as community hub is the idea that students, educators, and parents feel safe when they enter the building. While school safety discussions often focus on physical well-being, the Georgia Partnership supports a three-dimensional view of safety that attends to the physical and emotional well-being of students and educators, fosters safer and more supportive learning environments, and enables stronger interpersonal relationships between all individuals participating in the life of the school.

### Key Outcome

Increase student achievement and engagement by reducing chronic student absenteeism to 15% (from 24%) and suspension and expulsion rates to 10% (from 14%).

### EdQuest Framework

#### Supportive Learning Environments

Advanced Instructional Systems

Clear Pathways to Post-Secondary Success

Foundations for Learning

## Power Strategies

### Supportive Learning Environments

Ensuring expanded access to wraparound supports delivered within schools and by referral to community partners.

Developing and implementing strategies that enable students and educators greater input and agency over the learning process.

### Getting Started: Focusing on Quick Wins

- The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) and other state-level organizations should provide training and technical assistance to district leaders on how to integrate positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), school climate initiatives, and expanded mental health services efforts into a comprehensive school safety and student support strategy.
- State policymakers and advocacy groups should develop a statewide communications campaign to inform school and district leaders about how the Georgia Mental Health Parity Act supports a unified school and community response to delivering physical and mental health services to students.
- GaDOE should provide guidance to districts on how to expand access to non-academic student support services by leveraging recurring federal funds.

## Sustaining Momentum Through 2033

### *Progress Metrics*

Each of the priorities presented in the EdQuest State Policy Plan includes at least one outcome measure and a set of metrics that help state and community leaders know whether they are making progress. This profile includes a non-exhaustive list of measures that contribute to fostering safe and supportive learning environments.

- Percent of students living in poverty
- Percent of uninsured children
- Percent of school-aged children without access to mental health services
- Number of substantiated child abuse or neglect cases per 1,000 residents
- Percent of residents experiencing food insecurity
- Percent of students who miss more than 10 days per academic year
- Percent of teenagers (age 16-19) who are not in school and are not working
- Number of discipline incidents or referrals
- Student, parent, and educator perceptions of school safety and climate, as measured through statewide surveys.

### *State Leadership*

State leaders along with other state and local stakeholders can address barriers to learning in several ways including:

- Ensuring all students, regardless of insurance status, receive regular vision, dental, and behavioral health screenings through a combination of school-based services and referral to community partners.
- Refining current Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) strategies to include a community assets approach to student support services. MTSS is a framework that identifies students' academic, social, and behavioral needs and provides proactive support to address them.

## Building a Strong Foundation

### *State strengths and assets*

GaDOE investments in district technical assistance and educator training around PBIS and student engagement

Use of federal ESSER funds to expand the number of school systems with school-based health services

School and district leadership coaching from organizations such as Regional Education Services Agencies (RESAs), Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI), Georgia Association of Educational Leaders (GAEL), and the Georgia School Superintendents Association (GSSA)

Commitment to expanding access to child and adolescent mental health services and supports both at school and in the community

### *Improving on current policy and practice*

The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) developed the Whole Child Toolkit for school, district, and community leaders to learn more about the chronic health and environmental conditions that threaten student success and well-being. The toolkit provides resources organized around five whole-child attributes: healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged.

GaDOE has also created an Office of Whole Child Supports charged with providing leadership around student health, school climate and safety, and PBIS. Over the next 10 years, school and community leaders can leverage state policy efforts to tackle the health, environment, and neighborhood risk factors that serve as barriers to student learning and well-being.

### *Alignment with the North Star goal of 65% post-secondary attainment*

Environmental factors like family and community poverty, chronic stress, and lack of access to health care widen achievement gaps. The pandemic compounded the problem, in part because lost instructional time affected all students, not just the most vulnerable youth. State and federal surveys of school leaders suggest that student behavioral issues increased significantly after schools reopened. Also, pandemic-era programs for children and families have ended, which means that families are struggling to meet basic needs.

Addressing non-academic learning barriers is one of the most critical steps in reaching the North Star goal. While state leaders have invested resources in expanding student services and supports, achieving 65% post-secondary attainment will require locally driven efforts in which school and community partners identify and sustain the most impactful strategies after federal funds lapse.