

## ISSUE 1

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### RESETTING THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE: RISING ABOVE RHETORIC AND DIVISION

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#### ISSUE OVERVIEW

While policy disagreements are normal in a democratic society, political polarization contributes to adversarial climates where winning arguments and apportioning blame eclipse the pursuit of community-driven solutions.

The Georgia Partnership calls on Georgians to reject polarization and incivility. Although state leaders play a pivotal role in resetting the public-education discourse, the Georgia Partnership urges local communities to identify common interests, develop shared goals, and coordinate investments to promote educational opportunity and economic growth.

#### ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

The Georgia Partnership has identified three principles that district leaders should consider when initiating a system reset.

1. Let evidence drive improvement in school and community strategies.
2. Invite students, parents, and educators to cosign a shared vision.
3. Develop joint school and community initiatives focused on improving individual well-being and long-term economic stability.

#### MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

Resetting the public discourse is a difficult but crucial step to expand access to educational opportunity and ensure economic mobility. Rhetoric and division prevent communities from adopting meaningful solutions to perennial education and workforce challenges.

District and school leaders can model a shift in mindset by empowering students, parents, and educators to develop a shared vision for public education in their communities. Even if stakeholders disagree on some of the practical steps to achieve broad-based goals, agreeing to pursue a set of strategies in shared purpose should move communities — and Georgia — forward.

## ISSUE 2

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### LITERACY: BUILDING A STRONG FOUNDATION

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#### ISSUE OVERVIEW

Students who are proficient readers by the end of third grade are four times more likely to graduate from high school than their peers who are not reading on grade level. However, only 39% of children exiting third grade in spring 2023 were proficient readers, as measured by the Georgia Milestones English Language Arts assessment. The 2023 Georgia Early Literacy Act (House Bill 538) creates a comprehensive framework to improve reading proficiency for K-3 students.

#### ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

House Bill 538 outlines the responsibilities of local school systems in executing the law's four activities:

1. Monitoring K-3 student performance using universal reading screeners.
2. Adopting high-quality instructional materials aligned with state board guidelines.
3. Providing ongoing K-3 teacher training aligned with science of reading standards.
4. Delivering tiered interventions for struggling readers.

#### CONNECTING THE DOTS: HOW STATE POLICYMAKERS CAN ADDRESS IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

1. Funding: State leaders provide additional funds to support the hiring of reading coaches and interventionists and professional learning for K-3 educators.
2. Student interventions: The Georgia Department of Education provides non-regulatory guidance on how to deliver reading interventions for struggling readers.
3. Progress monitoring: Working with subject-matter experts and state nonprofits, agency leaders support district and school leaders' efforts to evaluate program effectiveness and use data to initiate changes in instructional delivery.

#### MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

Before the passage of House Bill 538, many high-performing districts had already made literacy a focus by adopting high-quality instructional materials, deploying dedicated staff to support implementation, and providing incentives for current educators to earn reading endorsements. Districts relied on federal pandemic-relief funds to sustain these efforts. Since these funds expire in 2024, increasing state funding for K-3 literacy programming is needed for all districts to implement promising practices pursued by early adopters.

## ISSUE 3

### STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH: ADOPTING A WHOLE-COMMUNITY APPROACH

#### ISSUE OVERVIEW

In a national survey conducted in April 2022, more than two in three school leaders (69%) reported an increase in the number of students requesting mental health services since the start of the pandemic. However, when asked to assess the delivery of services, only 13% of respondents strongly agreed that their schools were able to effectively provide mental health services to all students in need.

This issue brief summarizes current state strategies and identifies barriers to effective implementation of local student mental health initiatives.

#### ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

The Georgia Department of Education's Office of Whole Child Supports assists districts, schools, and communities in identifying and addressing student non-academic barriers to success while expanding learning opportunities. The office coordinates mental health and well-being, integrated wellness, school safety, and wraparound support services.

#### CONNECTING THE DOTS: THREE WAYS SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY LEADERS CAN ADDRESS BARRIERS TO LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION

1. Determine where the community resources are.
2. Collaborate with parents and civic leaders to address the specific community and environmental risk factors that stifle student learning.
3. Develop comprehensive strategies for addressing unmet student health needs, considering resource constraints and available community assets.

#### MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

During the pandemic, districts invested in professional learning for educators related to identifying mental health disturbances and managing classroom behaviors. While screening and identification are essential components of any student-centered intervention, school leaders should consider what the most appropriate interventions are for each student and the relative capacity of school personnel to deliver these supports.

School systems have a short window to partner, pilot, and evaluate the effectiveness of their mental health and non-academic support strategies. After federal funds expire in September 2024, local districts will need to find alternative funding sources or lean on community partners more to deliver the supports once provided in the school building.

## ISSUE 4

### ACCESS TO QUALITY CHILDCARE: REMOVING WORKFORCE BARRIERS

#### ISSUE OVERVIEW

The average annual cost of childcare (\$7,644) outpaces in-state tuition rates at all but four of the state's 48 public post-secondary institutions. The high cost of childcare has a negative impact on Georgia's overall economy and contributes to parents exiting the workforce.

#### ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Georgia currently subsidizes staffing and resources for Georgia's Pre-K classrooms through state lottery funds. The Georgia General Assembly could expand access to high-quality non-Georgia Pre-K options by releasing some of the unrestricted lottery reserve funds to stabilize childcare providers and lower the parental cost of childcare.

Employers can remove barriers to workforce participation by providing onsite childcare or contracting with offsite providers. Employers can also offer Dependent Care Assistance Plans, flexible spending accounts that allow workers to set aside up to \$5,000 of their pre-tax wages for childcare expenses.

#### WHAT ARE THE CURRENT OBSTACLES TO PARENTS ENGAGING IN THE WORKFORCE?

1. Lack of available options
2. High cost of care
3. Current options do not accommodate evening and overnight shift work
4. Expiring federal pandemic-relief funds
5. Shortage of early childhood educators

#### MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

Continued inattention to access and affordability of early learning means that for some individuals, exiting the workforce is a more sensible economic decision because they cannot afford the cost of childcare. Changing the economic calculus for families, however, could result in greater labor productivity and sustained state economic growth.

Georgia must move beyond the notion of funding early learning programs as just a wise public policy to address school readiness. Rather, we must recognize that investing in early learning is also an economic development strategy that encourages well-qualified residents to re-enter the workforce, allows productive employees to stay employed, and incentivizes individuals and businesses to relocate to Georgia.

## ISSUE 5

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### CAREER PATHWAYS: A DEMAND-DRIVEN APPROACH

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#### ISSUE OVERVIEW

Georgia's Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (CTAE) program provides opportunities for high school students to earn industry credentials, participate in work-based learning experiences, and receive post-secondary credit. However, of the 130,055 Georgia high school students who completed a three-course pathway sequence during the 2021-22 school year, only 40% participated in a work-based learning opportunity and just 32% earned industry-recognized credentials.

While increasing the number of high school students entering career pathways and earning post-secondary credentials is a crucial goal, prioritizing completion of programs that prepare students for high-demand, high-wage workforce sectors is also a critical part of sustaining the state's long-term economic position in the global marketplace.

#### ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

The Georgia Partnership has identified three steps that local K-12 district leaders can take to forge a more demand-driven approach to career pathways development.

1. Let evidence drive what career pathways to offer.
2. Seek out partnerships with local employers and post-secondary institutions.
3. Develop a community-wide career education strategy based on current and emerging workforce needs.

#### MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

Current state funding does not differentiate between pathway programs based on whether they align with high-demand careers. A demand-driven, outcomes-focused financing strategy could support local efforts to align career programming delivered in high schools with local and regional workforce needs.

The Georgia Department of Education and the Technical and University Systems can leverage existing credit articulation efforts to find ways to align CTAE pathways with credit and noncredit post-secondary programs. Creating stronger linkages between secondary and post-secondary career pathways could increase student and parent confidence that CTAE offerings prepare high school graduates for high-demand, high-wage careers.

## ISSUE 6

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### EDUCATOR RECRUITMENT: A NEW PARADIGM FOR DISTRICTS

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#### ISSUE OVERVIEW

Educators are leaving the classroom at a greater rate than before the pandemic. Hiring has not kept up with teacher exits, according to national and state surveys. Creating more favorable conditions to recruit well-qualified candidates and retain highly effective educators is essential to the goal of preparing students for post-secondary and workforce opportunities.

This issue brief describes how teacher residencies and educator apprenticeships could allow school districts and educator preparation providers (EPPs) to recruit well-qualified candidates.

#### ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

After at least one year of graduate courses and job-embedded training, individuals enrolled in a teacher residency program earn a Master of Arts in Teaching. In most cases, local school systems subsidize resident and program costs in exchange for graduates committing to work in the district for a pre-determined amount of time, usually at least three years.

Individuals enrolled in an educator apprenticeship also receive coaching and mentorship. Apprentices are paid employees of a local school district and earn a bachelor's degree after meeting program requirements.

#### MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

The Georgia Partnership calls on local K-12 school districts and EPPs to develop blended recruitment and preparation strategies that increase candidate diversity, address barriers to entry, and are attentive to shortages in hard-to-staff subjects.

By blending educator preparation and recruitment strategies, school systems can use internships, residencies, and apprenticeships as pre-employment pathways. Within these pathways, district leaders shape expectations around professional learning and career advancement opportunities, starting conversations about educator retention before candidates complete their preparation programs.

Wider adoption of district-driven and EPP-facilitated clinical experiences could provide a solid foundation for the eventual development of formal teacher leadership programs and innovative professional learning strategies that reinforce the early-career teacher workforce strategies.

## ISSUE 7

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### THE SUPERINTENDENT STRUGGLE: SUPPORTING DISTRICT LEADERS THROUGH UNPRECEDENTED TIMES

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#### ISSUE OVERVIEW

Generally, local K-12 school districts draw new superintendent candidates from two positions: principals and senior central office administrators. As is often the case in interconnected and interdependent systems, the pathway to mending the superintendent pipeline is to first repair the teacher and principal leadership pipelines.

#### ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Most district superintendents started their pathway to leadership as school administrators. As school leaders, these professionals pursued advanced degrees in educational administration. While these programs provide leaders with the knowledge and skills to enter administrative roles, practitioners would benefit from a more robust system of preparation in which they receive job-embedded professional experiences through formal aspiring leaders' programs. Formal district recruitment and preparation programs create pipelines for prospective leaders to enter district and school administration.

Currently, superintendents also lack opportunities to regularly interact with their peers. While principals in a district can address problems of practice, superintendents often do not have formal ways to engage in peer-to-peer learning because their peers are across districts, not within them.

#### MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

Much like CEOs of a corporation, district leaders can create and maintain the culture of their school system. They can create a set of values that shape how people think, feel, and act in schools. That takes time. The vision for Georgia is that every district has a focused, innovative leader able to set a positive culture of learning and student success.

However, over the past three years, within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing polarization, superintendents have encountered challenging moments in their careers with little to no relief or support. A more robust induction and mentoring system for early-career superintendents could enhance district leaders' capacity to formulate strategies and support practices that enable districts, schools and communities to thrive.

## ISSUE 8

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### THE FUNDING CLIFF: MOVING FORWARD AFTER THE MONEY RUNS OUT

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#### ISSUE OVERVIEW

Federal pandemic-relief funds expire in September 2024. The loss of federal pandemic-era financial supports will require district superintendents and local boards of education to make tough decisions about what programs and strategies to fund in 2024 and beyond. It is unclear whether districts have the capacity to evaluate the effectiveness of these federally-funded strategies before the program expires.

#### ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

The Georgia Partnership has identified three challenges confronting district and school leaders as they figure out how to maintain operations with the pending loss of federal relief funds.

1. Continuity of service: How do districts maintain the delivery of instructional and non-academic student support strategies created or expanded during the federal funding period?
2. Capacity constraints: What strategies are most integral to school functioning and student success? How can districts continue executing effective strategies and discontinue those activities that are not as impactful?
3. District funding challenges: How do districts maintain effective investments when confronted with increased operational costs while facing a significant decrease in overall funding levels?

#### MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

From March to December 2020, district and school leaders were in crisis mode, rolling out virtual learning, connecting students and parents with community resources, and ensuring that students could return to a safe and healthy school environment. Over time, leaders entered recovery, focusing on how to counteract the negative impacts of the pandemic with targeted student interventions and supports.

With the historical federal investments ending in September 2024, the Georgia Partnership recommends that school systems and communities begin the third phase: renewal. Transforming programs and strategies requires changes in how school systems budget and how communities support schools. While communities rethink their values, priorities, and investments, the Georgia Partnership also urges state policymakers to be more proactive in assembling state and nonprofit resources to address district capacity constraints.

## ISSUE 9

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### CORPORATE CONNECTIONS: REIMAGINING DELIVERY OF POST-SECONDARY TRAINING

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#### ISSUE OVERVIEW

Despite rosy economic headlines, post-secondary and workforce programs are not providing an adequate number of graduates to fulfill employer needs. Business and industry leaders are helping to reshape the post-secondary experience by rethinking their relationships with post-secondary systems to address workforce misalignment. Many now are serving as advisors and external experts, post-secondary program partners and investors, and champions for state-level strategies.

#### ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

The Georgia Partnership has identified three roles that the corporate community could play in program delivery.

1. **Advisors and external experts:** Industry leaders provide input on curriculum design, instructional delivery, and student assessment.
2. **Program partners and investors:** Investments in career-connected learning can take several forms, including partnering with post-secondary institutions to identify needs, purchasing specialized equipment, and offering real-world, experiential learning opportunities for interns and apprentices.
3. **System champions and state-level advocates:** The corporate community should engage with legislative and state agency leaders to ensure greater alignment between state priorities and employer needs.

#### MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

Business and industry leaders are an essential component of creating a comprehensive career readiness system in Georgia. Corporate engagement supports two goals: improved workforce alignment and increasing the number of Georgians prepared to fill high-demand, high-wage jobs.

Corporate partners can serve in several roles as the state reimagines delivery and completion of post-secondary credentials of value: (1) accelerating post-secondary affordability, (2) participating in pathways construction and credential stacking, and (3) providing career counseling, advisement, and mentoring.

ISSUE 10

1.25 MILLION MORE CREDENTIALS:  
HOW WE REACH THE NORTH STAR

ISSUE OVERVIEW

In 2021, roughly 51% of Georgians ages 25 to 64 had earned a post-secondary credential. For Georgia to remain competitive on the global stage, state leaders will need to set the sights higher, focusing on an attainment goal of 65%.

To reach the North Star, state and community leaders need to adopt strategies that target three groups: adult Georgians without a high school diploma, residents with some post-secondary credit but no credential, and those currently in the workforce at risk of being unemployed or underemployed because of macroeconomic changes.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

This section summarizes specific strategies outlined in the EdQuest Georgia State Policy Plan that could support accelerated attainment of post-secondary credentials.

POPULATION	EDQUEST STRATEGIES
Adult learners with no high school credential	Create formal pathways for adult learners to earn short-term credentials aligned with in-demand workforce sectors.
Adult learners with some post-secondary coursework but no credential	Reward credit for prior learning to avoid retraining on mastered skills. Provide tuition relief and financial incentives for returning students to earn post-secondary credentials.
Adults at risk of unemployment or underemployment	Reward academic credit for the completion of nondegree, noncredit workforce credentials to allow working adults who completed short-term programs to continue their education.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

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

By creating multiple, formal exits and on-ramps to post-secondary education, system and institutional leaders can eventually establish a statewide workforce readiness system that allows workers to maintain their position in a changing economy by completing more-advanced credentials.