

20TH EDITION

# TOP TEN ISSUES TO WATCH IN 2024



Georgia Partnership  
FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

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JANUARY 2024

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

OUR MISSION

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

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Georgia Partnership  
FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

2023 was a year best defined by the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education doing what it does best, convening stakeholders – policy-makers, nonprofit and community leaders, and corporate partners – to identify ways to improve Georgia’s public education system and enhance post-secondary and workforce readiness. Through our stakeholder engagement, it became clear that for Georgia to remain competitive on the global stage, state policymakers, education leaders, the business community, and other stakeholders needed to unite around a North Star, a singular goal that could motivate and inspire collective action while also promoting personal well-being, community resilience, and state economic security. The North Star ensures that 65% of Georgians aged 25 to 64 have earned post-secondary credentials of value by 2033. This work culminated in the release of *EdQuest Georgia 2023*, a ten-year, multifaceted strategy designed to strengthen the state’s education and workforce systems by increasing the percentage of adults with post-secondary credentials – degrees, certificates, certifications, and occupational licenses – that provide a livable wage. As we continue advancing our mission to inform and engage leaders to positively impact education in Georgia, we believe *EdQuest* is a compass for our collective journey to ensure Georgia leads the nation in educational opportunity and economic mobility.

Although our state appears to have moved beyond the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Partnership, in 2023, continued to leverage the multi-year, multi-strand **CARES Impact Study** to assess the ways in which education stakeholders across Georgia used federal relief funds to address the pandemic’s negative effects on student learning and well-being. The most recent findings were released in November in the Year-Two report. They reflect districts’ investment in a mix of strategies to help students who were behind academically or struggling with mental health or other issues. Having launched the study in 2021, we published the study’s Baseline Report in January 2022 and published the Year-One Report in November 2022. The Year-Two report captures the expenditures of federal funds to date and highlights the ways in which the use of relief funds has shifted as pandemic conditions changed.

The Partnership also achieved a new level of success in our **Community Engagement** work, concluding our role in The Workforce Plan, a comprehensive needs assessment project in partnership with Thomasville/Thomas County. The project, which we initiated in 2022, convened multisector leaders and stakeholders from across Thomas County to determine strengths, challenges, assets, and gaps in the workforce pipeline. The plan provides a snapshot of Thomas County’s economic, educational, and community needs, and brings together stakeholders from across the community to identify aligned strategies to address those needs, build on strengths, and support the community.

In 2023 we also graduated the 15th cohort of the Partnership’s flagship professional development experience, the **Education Policy Fellowship Program (EPFP)**, adding 17 fellows to our Georgia EPFP alumni network and bringing the total number of Georgia EPFP alumni to 300. The current, 16th cohort, is the largest in Georgia EPFP history and is comprised of 24 fellows from our state’s business, education, government, and nonprofit sectors. This program continues to serve as one of the Partnership’s key strategies to inform and influence leaders and emerging leaders so that they are then able to meaningfully contribute to the development of educational policy decisions in our state.

What awaits the Partnership in 2024? Simply put, tremendous opportunity. Before us lies the opportunity to inform and influence some of Georgia’s most important decision makers (business, education, and government leaders) to help improve academic and economic outcomes for our state’s public-school students. This is an opportunity we must steward well and fully maximize. It is our hope that the 20th edition of the *Top Ten Issues to Watch* report will serve as the guide for Georgia’s leaders looking to understand our state’s biggest education challenges and equip them to devise solutions that improve education and economic outcomes for all Georgians. We are grateful for your ongoing support and welcome your participation in our work. Georgia’s children need you.



## INTRODUCTION

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**Welcome to 2024 and the 20th Edition of the Georgia Partnership's *Top Ten Issues to Watch* report.** In the two decades since we released the inaugural edition of this publication, the *Top Ten* has become one of the Partnership's signature brands. Over the past 20 years, we have provided insight and analysis on how to improve early learning, K-12, and post-secondary and workforce systems. While the *Top Ten* has covered individual topics like assessment and accountability, school funding, and teacher workforce strategies since its inception, overtime the publication has also become a place for policymakers to learn about how mental health challenges, rural poverty, and school and community safety affect student achievement and well-being.

**While on the surface each topic may seem like a discrete issue, they are all connected in a system of learning and support.** And, over the past several years, Georgia's public education and workforce systems have been under siege. Education systems across Georgia are still pushing through unprecedented headwinds as they continue to support long-term recovery from the pandemic and successfully address the needs of students and their families, including the persistent achievement disparities across income levels and between white students and students of color. Public education systems are also facing increased social and political polarization that distracts from real issues of teaching and learning and discourages nuanced and substantive dialogue about what strategies will propel the state forward.

**What is needed now is unity: a common vision for excellence that rises above the divisive rhetoric.** We need a vision that allows Georgia to leverage all its unique strengths to reconfigure state systems and investments to ensure that Georgia leads the nation in educational opportunity and economic growth by 2033.

**Over the last two years, the Georgia Partnership has offered a common vision for excellence – the North Star.** We recommended that state policymakers, education leaders, and the business sector unite around a "North Star" goal – ensuring 65% of Georgians aged 25 to 64 have earned a post-secondary credential by 2033. The goal is attainable through long-range planning. To achieve this, in August 2023, the Partnership released *EdQuest Georgia 2023* – a 10-year policy framework and 2-year state implementation plan to promote the achievement of better outcomes for all Georgians, from early learners to adults, by strengthening Georgia's education and workforce systems.

**The issues presented in the *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2024* are organized around this framework and emphasize the importance of all education and community partners moving in the same direction in common purpose.** The Issues focus on how to address immediate needs while also making gradual improvements to strategies over the next 10 years. Each issue spotlights the benefits of removing the barriers that threaten the long-term well-being of individuals and communities.

**It is the goal of the Georgia Partnership that the *EdQuest Georgia Framework* and the annual *Top Ten Issues to Watch* will serve as a tool for all public education stakeholders to unite under a common vision of excellence that will transform education, economic development, and workforce readiness in Georgia.** We hope that you will join us on this journey to ensure Georgia leads the nation in educational opportunity and economic growth by 2033!



Dr. Dana Rickman

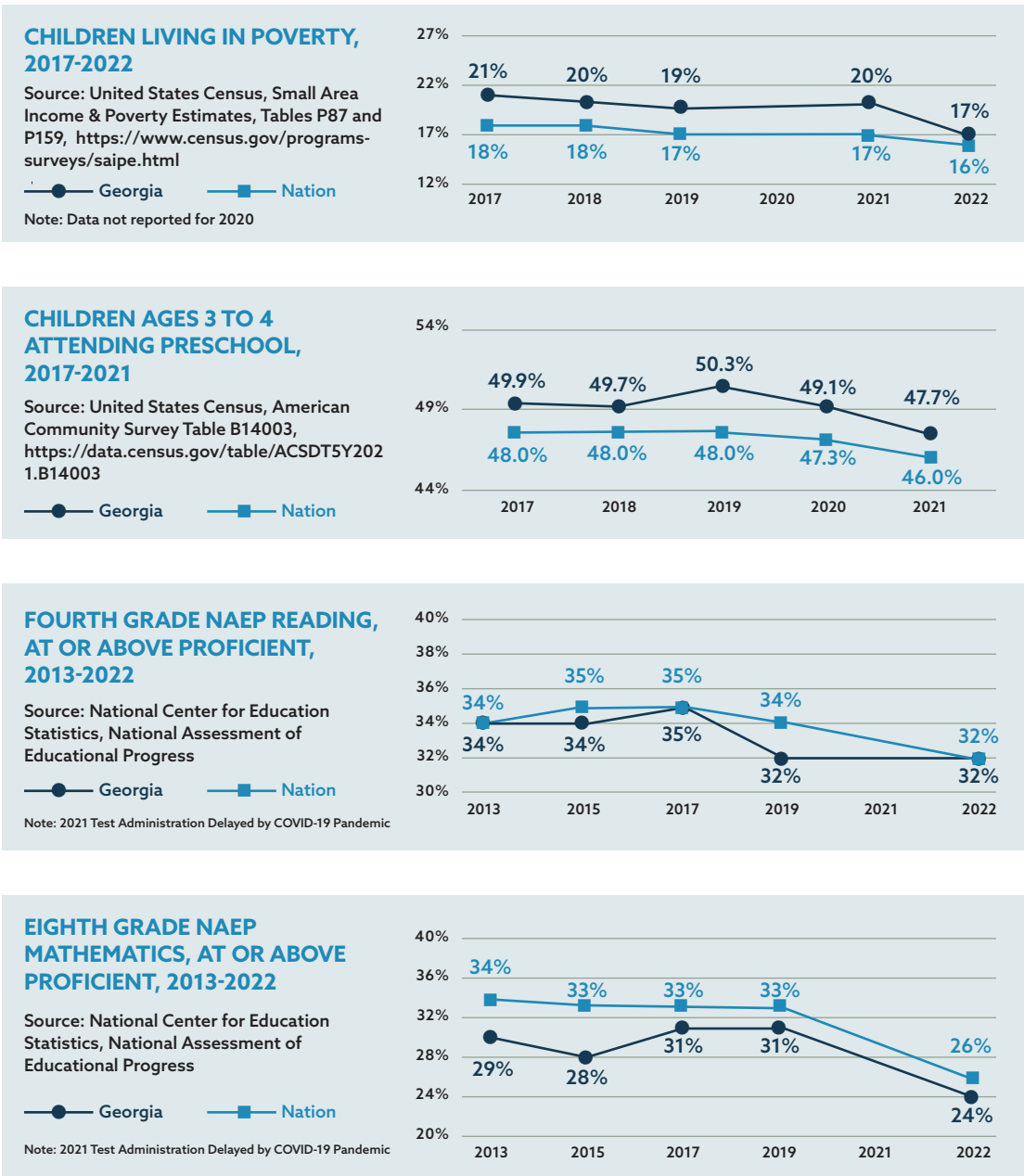
President, Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education

# INDICATORS FOR SUCCESS: WHERE IS GEORGIA TODAY?

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

What additional progress is necessary for Georgia to lead the nation in educational opportunity and economic growth by 2033?

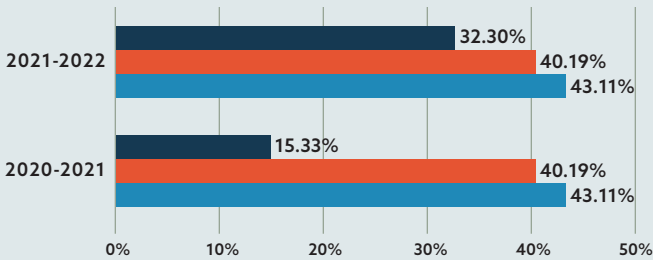
These Indicators for Success reveal where Georgia stands on critical indicators of child well-being, educational attainment, and workforce readiness. Shown in each graph is a comparison of trends in Georgia relative to national averages. Informed by the **EdQuest Georgia initiative**, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education has added three new indicators to this year's edition: career pathways completion, post-secondary readiness of recent high school graduates, and post-secondary degree attainment for adults aged 25 to 64. The Georgia Partnership is committed to tracking these indicators over time and advocating for policies and practices that will enable our state to reach the North Star Goal of 65% adult post-secondary attainment by 2033.



CAREER PATHWAYS  
PERFORMANCE FOR HIGH  
SCHOOL STUDENTS

Perkins Collaborative Resource  
Network, Georgia State  
Performance Data

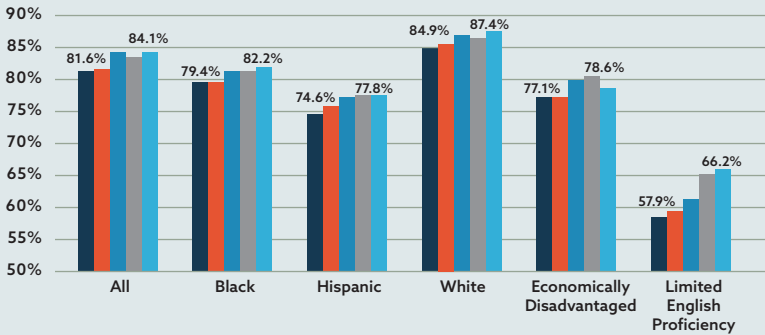
- Earned Credential of Value
- Participated in Work-Based Experience
- Completed Pathway Program



HIGH SCHOOL  
GRADUATION RATES,  
2018-2022

Source: Governor's Office of  
Student Achievement K-12  
Report Card

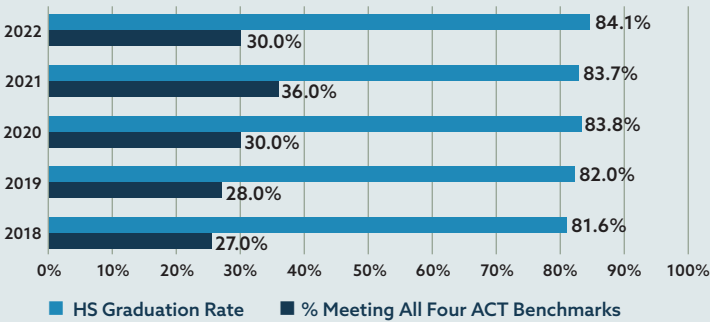
- 2017-18
- 2018-19
- 2019-20
- 2020-21
- 2021-22



GEORGIA HIGH SCHOOL  
GRADUATION RATES VS.  
PERFORMANCE ON ACT  
SUBJECT TESTS, 2018-2022

Source: Governor's Office of Student  
Achievement K-12 Report Card and  
ACT, Inc.

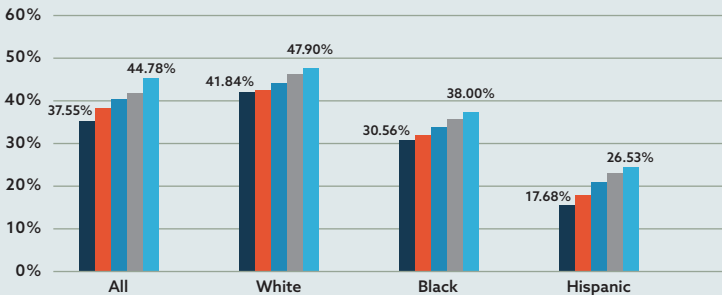
Note: ACT sets college readiness benchmarks  
based on the minimum score required for  
students to succeed in entry-level post-  
secondary courses in English, Social Science,  
College Algebra, and Biology.



POST-SECONDARY  
DEGREE ATTAINMENT  
TRENDS FOR ADULTS  
AGED 25 TO 64, 2013-2022

Source: Lumina Foundation,  
*A Stronger Nation*

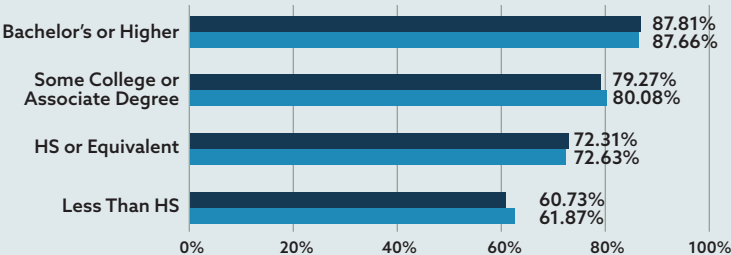
- 2013
- 2015
- 2017
- 2019
- 2021



EMPLOYMENT STATUS BY  
EDUCATION LEVEL FOR  
ADULTS AGED 25 TO 64,  
2022

Source: United States Census,  
American Community Survey,  
Table B23006 (2022 1-Year Estimate)

- Georgia
- Nation



## ISSUE 1

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

#### ISSUE OVERVIEW

Public surveys conducted between 2021 and 2023 reveal a growing partisan divide between Democrats and Republicans on the purpose of public education, what content is appropriate for students to learn, and the level of influence parents should have over curriculum and instruction.<sup>1</sup>

#### ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- Social and political polarization diverts attention away from what matters: increasing the number of Georgians who are prepared for work and life.
- Georgia's leaders must push for a hard reset, a new paradigm in which communities pursue comprehensive solutions to education and workforce challenges through civil discourse and collective action.
- District and school leaders can model the mindset shift by empowering students, parents, and educators to develop a shared vision for public education in their communities.

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 solutions through civil discourse.

Polarization also diverts attention away from what matters: how to address illiteracy, declining student achievement, unmet student mental health needs, and educator burnout. The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (Georgia Partnership) calls on Georgians to reject polarization and incivility through a "hard reset." 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.

Even if local 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.

#### ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

##### Three Principles for District Leaders Initiating a System Reset

##### *Principle 1: Let evidence drive improvement in school and community strategies.*

Companies invest in research and development (R&D) to improve the quality of their products and services. While education and civic leaders are not producing goods, they are rendering a service: ensuring that students are ready for work and life. Just as companies leverage R&D to learn more about customer needs, district and school leaders can redesign instructional strategies to better serve students, parents, and their communities.

<sup>1</sup> Hatfield, J. 2023, June 5. "Partisan Divides over K-12 Education in 8 Charts." Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/06/05/partisan-divides-over-k-12-education-in-8-charts/>.

School and community leaders can use evidence to drive the development and execution of strategies in three ways:

- Assess the current school and community environments to determine gaps between emerging needs and current resources
- Integrate evidence-based interventions into school improvement plans
- Improve processes and adjust current practices by evaluating program quality, reach, and impact.<sup>2</sup>

By implementing practices that serve the needs of learners and educators and evaluating current practices to ensure alignment with those needs, school and community leaders can inspire collaborative and innovative strategies.

***Principle 2: Invite students, parents, and educators to cosign a shared vision.***

Family and community engagement is an essential element of district and school improvement initiatives. Successful engagement requires strong principal leadership, professional learning for teachers, and environments that build trust and relationships.<sup>3</sup>

When students, parents, and educators are unable to or not asked to provide feedback, they might feel disconnected from the school and broader community. Feelings like these often result in beliefs, attitudes, and actions that are counterproductive to school and community improvement.

#### DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT: SEEKING COMMUNITY INPUT IN PIKE COUNTY

Graduate profiles are a tool for school and community leaders to agree on the skills and habits that students should master before enrolling in a post-secondary program, starting a job, or enlisting in the Armed Forces. Pike County Schools developed the Portrait of a Graduate after incorporating extensive input from students, parents, educators, and community members.<sup>4</sup> The district uses the profile to guide curriculum development and deliver student supports. With its student-centered focus, the Portrait of a Graduate also outlines expectations around individual and community outcomes and communicates the value of helping students master skills demanded by employers. As community partnerships mature, graduate profiles can also evolve to ensure that school improvement efforts align with local and regional workforce needs.

District and school leaders can empower students, parents, and educators by reshaping expectations and more rigorously defining the roles that each group plays in the school's health and vitality. Leaders should clarify roles and expectations for various school actors. Then, school leaders should provide concrete examples of how students, parents, and educators can act as decision-makers.

Relational trust is built through thousands of daily social exchanges by individuals in a school environment. Disrespect and misapprehension can create low relational trust. However, working together to achieve a common purpose is possible when classroom teachers and school leaders partner with students and parents to pursue a common vision for student success.<sup>5</sup>

2 US Department of Education. 2023, September 28. *Non-Regulatory Guidance: Using Evidence to Strengthen Education Investments*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/fund/grant/about/discretionary/2023-non-regulatory-guidance-evidence.pdf>.  
 3 Ross, E.M. 2023, March 21. "The Case for Strong Family and Community Engagement in Schools." Harvard Graduate School of Education. Retrieved from <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/usable-knowledge/23/03/case-strong-family-and-community-engagement-schools>.  
 4 Pike County Schools. n.d. "Pike County's Innovative Student Curriculum." Retrieved from <https://pike.k12.ga.us/portrait-of-a-graduate/>.  
 5 EL Education. n.d. "Relational Trust in Schools." Retrieved from <https://eleducation.org/resources/relational-trust-in-schools>.



*Principle 3: Develop joint school and community initiatives focused on improving individual well-being and long-term economic stability.*

Over the last two years, the Georgia Partnership, in consultation with the EdQuest Coalition, established a common vision for excellence that rises above divisive rhetoric. The EdQuest Georgia Framework sets forth a 10-year plan to ensure that the Peach State leads the nation in educational opportunity and economic growth by 2033. The EdQuest Georgia State Policy Plan identifies eight priorities that leverage the state's unique strengths and promote system reform to ensure more individuals are work ready.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, school and community leaders can set priorities, design strategies, monitor progress, and adjust their plans accordingly. However, many school districts lack the capacity to rigorously evaluate their instructional and student support strategies. In a vacuum where schools implement strategies without an understanding of their effectiveness, leaders lack the ability to adjust investments to achieve community and workforce goals.

School boards and district central offices are critical to developing strategic plans that identify community priorities, metrics to measure and monitor progress, and practices that allow for agility in reconfiguring investments and strategies. Providing opportunities for parents and community members to give input should also strengthen these efforts.

### CONNECTING THE DOTS

The three strategies outlined in this section are distinguished by the following themes:

- **Building trust and credibility** by placing student and community outcomes at the center of planning, execution, and evaluation
- **Emphasizing community collaboration** and the responsibility of all individuals participating in the public-education enterprise
- **Focusing on goals and solutions**, not problems and quick remedies.

### MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

Resetting the public discourse is a difficult but crucial step in expanding access to educational opportunity and ensuring economic mobility. Rhetoric and division prevent communities from adopting meaningful solutions to perennial education and workforce challenges. Although community members should drive innovation and solutions-focused improvements, state leaders also play a critical role.

The action steps described below offer specific ways that state leaders can support communities in fostering shared consensus and, ultimately, creating joint education and economic development strategies that improve individual well-being and community resilience.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, M. 2022, August 22. *The EdQuest Georgia State Plan: Improving Individual and Community Well-Being*. Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. Retrieved from <https://gpee.org/edquest-georgia/edquest-state-plan/>.



ACTION STEPS	
POLICY	<p>The Georgia General Assembly and state agencies fund program evaluation efforts to assess the efficacy of state policies and strategies.</p> <p>State leaders expand incentives, such as the PEACH Education Tax Credit, for school and district leaders to perform innovation work and bust conventional mindsets.</p>
PRACTICE	<p>Leading nonprofit organizations and other experts develop measurement tools that help evaluate whether individuals are ready for kindergarten, post-secondary education, or high-demand careers.</p>
PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING	<p>State agencies partner with nonprofits and member organizations to deliver district training and technical assistance. The principal coaching initiative founded by the Georgia Department of Education and the Georgia Association of Educational Leaders is a powerful example of this partnership model.<sup>7</sup></p> <p>State and local leaders connect with business and industry partners to identify and address critical education and workforce needs.</p>

Georgia’s leaders must rise above the political rhetoric and noise to champion a common goal: ensuring that the state’s education and workforce strategies support educational opportunity and economic prosperity for all Georgians.

The remaining issues in the *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2024* emphasize the importance of all education and community partners moving in the same direction in common purpose. The issues focus on how to address immediate needs while also making gradual improvements to strategies over the next 10 years. Each issue brief spotlights the benefits of removing the barriers that threaten the long-term well-being of individuals and communities.

7 State Board of Education. “State Board Meeting Minutes – May 2023.” Retrieved from <https://simbli.eboardsolutions.com/Meetings/Attachment.aspx?S=1262&AID=1532535&MID=110522>.

## ISSUE 2

### LITERACY: BUILDING A STRONG FOUNDATION

#### ISSUE OVERVIEW

The research is clear: 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.<sup>8</sup> Reading proficiency is a significant predictor of future educational achievement, economic status, and lifelong health and well-being.<sup>9</sup> The *EdQuest Georgia State Policy Plan*, released in August 2023, identifies third-grade reading proficiency as a key metric in predicting future educational achievement for children and youth.<sup>10</sup>

#### ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- The Georgia Early Literacy Act (House Bill 538) creates a comprehensive framework to increase the percentage of third graders reading on grade level.
- The act requires school systems to assess K-3 students' reading proficiency and provide customized interventions for struggling readers.
- State leaders can support more effective local execution of K-3 literacy strategies by providing funding for reading coaches and guidance on how to support struggling readers.

In the spring of 2023, 39% of children exiting third grade were proficient readers, as measured by the Georgia Milestones English Language Arts assessment.<sup>11</sup> Responding to low reading proficiency, the Georgia General Assembly passed the 2023 Georgia Early Literacy Act,<sup>12</sup> creating a comprehensive framework to improve reading proficiency. The act also describes the responsibilities of the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), local school systems, and educator preparation providers in executing the law's requirements.

This issue brief describes the requirements outlined in the Georgia Early Literacy Act and identifies current gaps in policy and practice that could threaten local implementation.

#### ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

##### What Are the Four Requirements Outlined in House Bill 538?

##### *Universal screening*

A universal reading screener is an assessment tool administered several times during the school year that allows educators to monitor student progress and recommend customized supports for struggling readers.<sup>13</sup>

8 Hernandez, D.J. 2011, April. *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*. Annie E. Casey Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.aecf.org/resources/double-jeopardy>.

9 Hanover Research. 2016, November. *Early Skills and Predictors of Academic Success*. Retrieved from [https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/ESSA-Evidence-Guides/Early\\_Skills\\_and\\_Predictors\\_of\\_Academic\\_Success](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/ESSA-Evidence-Guides/Early_Skills_and_Predictors_of_Academic_Success).

10 Smith, M. 2023, August. *EdQuest Georgia State Policy Plan*. Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. Retrieved from [https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/EdQuest-Georgia-State-Plan-Final\\_8-21.pdf](https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/EdQuest-Georgia-State-Plan-Final_8-21.pdf).

11 Georgia Department of Education. 2023, July 28. "Overview of the 2022–2023 Georgia Milestones Public Release" [PowerPoint]. Retrieved from [https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Assessment/Documents/Milestones/Statewide%20Scores/22-23/Georgia\\_Milestones\\_Spring\\_2023\\_State\\_Results.pdf](https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Assessment/Documents/Milestones/Statewide%20Scores/22-23/Georgia_Milestones_Spring_2023_State_Results.pdf).

12 Georgia General Assembly. 2023, April. Georgia Early Literacy Act. Retrieved from <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/64710>.

13 International Dyslexia Association. n.d. "Universal Screening: K-12 Reading." Retrieved from <https://dyslexiaida.org/universal-screening-k-2-reading/>.

## WHAT IS STRUCTURED LITERACY?

The Georgia Early Literacy Act requires school systems to revamp K-3 reading instruction using structured literacy (SL) approaches. According to the International Dyslexia Association, structured literacy creates an instructional framework in which children learn letter sounds (phonemic awareness) and understand how letter sounds interact to form words (phonics).

As young readers master these two building blocks, educators can build on the strong foundation and deliver more difficult concepts, ensuring students develop word fluency, increase their vocabulary, and comprehend the meaning behind the written words.<sup>14</sup>

Research suggests that 95% of K-3 students can learn to read using SL approaches.<sup>15</sup>

The GaDOE invited vendors to submit universal reading screeners for inclusion on the state-approved list. The State Board of Education (SBOE) approved a list of universal reading screeners that school systems could use on July 19, 2023, nearly a year before the July 1, 2024 deadline.<sup>16</sup>

While the approved list gives school systems substantial flexibility to select their universal reading screener, the law requires GaDOE to make at least one screener available for use by local school systems free of charge beginning with the 2024-25 school year.

Starting in August 2024, local school systems must administer a GaDOE-approved universal reading screener at least three times a year to K-3 students. House Bill 538 permits school systems to substitute an approved formative reading assessment for one of the three required administrations.

### *Curriculum and instruction*

By request of the GaDOE, the Georgia Language Arts Supervisors (GLAS) conducted a review of instructional materials submitted by vendors. GLAS recommended the state board approve eight sets of instructional materials aligned with the structured literacy approach. The SBOE approved the recommended list on November 2, two months before the statutory deadline of January 1, 2024.<sup>17</sup>

School systems have until December 1, 2024, to adopt and approve high-quality instructional materials aligned with state board guidelines. Local boards must submit an annual certification to GaDOE by December 15, 2024 — and August 1 in subsequent years — that demonstrates the instructional materials comply with legal and regulatory requirements.

### *Educator preparation and professional learning*

House Bill 538 requires GaDOE by August 2024 to develop or adopt a professional learning program that enables K-3 educators to implement instructional techniques aligned with structured literacy approaches. The program also must provide training on how to use universal reading screeners and analyze assessment results.

14 International Dyslexia Association. n.d. "Structured Literacy Instruction: The Basics." Reading Rockets. Retrieved from <https://www.readingrockets.org/topics/about-reading/articles/structured-literacy-instruction-basics>.

15 Lexia. 2023, September 25. "Nationwide Shift to Science of Reading Helps Students with Dyslexia" [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.lexialearning.com/blog/nationwide-shift-to-science-of-reading-helps-students-with-dyslexia>.

16 Georgia State Board of Education. 2023, August 24. "State Board Meeting Minutes – July 2023." Retrieved from <https://simbli.eboardsolutions.com/Meetings/Attachment.aspx?S=1262&AID=1552951&MID=111577>.

17 Georgia State Board of Education. 2023, November 2. "Board Item – High Quality Instructional Materials." Retrieved from <https://simbli.eboardsolutions.com/Meetings/Attachment.aspx?S=1262&AID=1574085&MID=113767>.

By July 1, 2025, districts must ensure K-3 teachers have completed the state’s professional learning program. In addition, school systems must provide onsite, ongoing K-3 teacher training related to delivering instruction aligned with the science of reading standards.

The Act also required the Georgia Professional Standards Commission to integrate structured literacy-aligned content and pedagogy into teacher education standards. These changes are intended to ensure teacher candidates are ready to serve struggling readers before they enter the classroom as licensed educators. By July 1, 2025, state licensure tests must include content that assesses the readiness of teachers to implement evidence-based literacy instruction.

*Tiered interventions for struggling readers*

The Georgia Early Literacy Act requires school systems to use the results of the screeners to provide tiered reading intervention plans for struggling readers. By August 1, 2024, school systems will need to determine how they will deliver customized interventions. The law requires parental notification within 15 days and the development of a reading intervention plan 30 days after students are diagnosed with significant reading deficiencies, as measured by the chosen universal reading screener.

DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT: LITERACY INITIATIVES	
FULTON COUNTY SCHOOLS	MARIETTA CITY SCHOOLS
<p>Fulton County Schools is using nearly two-thirds of its Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds — about \$90 million — to implement the Every Child Reads program.<sup>18</sup></p> <p>To execute the standardized reading curriculum, the school system has hired 65 reading coaches and has provided \$2,300 stipends for over 2,500 teachers and 850 school leaders to complete a rigorous two-year, 80-hour training course.</p> <p>The challenging work is starting to pay off. GaDOE recognized 155 “literacy leading” elementary schools that grew third-grade reading proficiency by 15% year-over-year or reached 90% proficiency. Twenty-two of Fulton’s elementary schools received recognition.<sup>19</sup></p>	<p>Marietta City Schools also has made a multi-million-dollar investment in literacy. The school system’s board approved the hiring of 40 new full-time K-5 reading specialists for the 2023-24 school year. The specialists will deliver intensive reading instruction to elementary students struggling to read.</p> <p>The board also announced a \$5,000 one-time bonus for all teachers and specialists that provide direct reading instruction.</p> <p>The district will continue to provide access to Science of Reading training and reimbursement for educators pursuing Orton-Gillingham certification and reading/dyslexia endorsements.<sup>20</sup></p>

18 Dalton, M. 2023, July 18. “Fulton Rolls Out ‘Transformational’ \$90 Million Literacy Program.” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Retrieved from <https://www.ajc.com/education/fulton-rolls-out-transformational-90-million-literacy-program/>.

19 Dalton, M., and J. Reyes. 2023, October 2. “Fulton Tops State List of Schools Excelling in Literacy Performance.” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Retrieved from <https://www.wsbradio.com/news/local/fulton-county-leads-statewide-list-literacy-leaders/>.

20 WSBTV. 2023, January 29. “Marietta City Schools to Invest \$7 Million in Literacy and Learning Loss.” Retrieved from <https://www.wsbtv.com/news/local/cobb-county/marietta-city-schools-invest-7-million-literacy-learning-loss/>.

CONNECTING THE DOTS:  
HOW STATE POLICYMAKERS CAN ADDRESS IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

The Georgia Early Literacy Act creates a comprehensive framework to improve third-grade reading proficiency. The Act sets a timeline for school districts to adopt instructional strategies and deliver student interventions. The Georgia General Assembly and state agencies referenced in House Bill 538 need to address several unknowns related to implementation of the Act’s requirements.

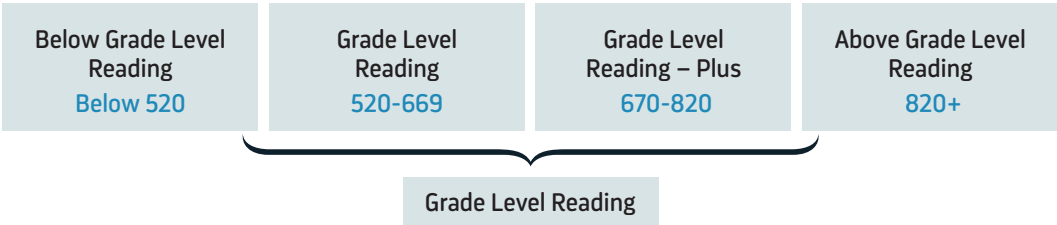
- **FUNDING:** State leaders need to provide additional funds to support district implementation of new requirements related to curriculum, professional development, and the hiring and training of reading coaches and interventionists.
- **STUDENT INTERVENTIONS:** The state department must provide more clarity and specific criteria for how to provide tiered reading interventions for struggling students.
- **PROGRESS MONITORING:** Working with subject-matter experts and state nonprofits, agency leaders must support district and school leaders’ efforts to evaluate program effectiveness and use data to initiate changes in instructional delivery.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

Senate Bill 211, also enacted in 2023, creates the Georgia Council on Literacy. Between July 2023 and December 2026, the council will work with the SBOE and GaDOE to implement the provisions outlined in the Georgia Early Literacy Act.<sup>21</sup>

One requirement of Georgia Early Literacy Act is for the SBOE to implement uniform grade-appropriate metrics for measuring literacy. In November 2023, the board voted that third-grade students who score between 520 and 820 on the Lexile Framework for Reading<sup>22</sup> are ready for fourth grade. The state will report students’ scores across four categories of reading readiness, as shown in Figure 2.1.

FIGURE 2.1: GEORGIA’S STATE LITERACY METRIC FOR THIRD GRADE STUDENTS



ACHIEVEMENT CATEGORIES

**Below Grade Level Reading:** The student is reading below grade level and will need intervention and remediation, which may include EIP.

**Grade Level Reading:** The student is reading on grade level but will need additional supports, which should be guided by screening results, formative assessment results and classwork.

**Grade Level Reading – Plus:** The student is reading at or above the midpoint of the stretch band and is ready for more challenging academic content.

**Above Grade Level Reading:** The student is reading above grade level and should receive academic enrichment opportunities.

21 Georgia General Assembly. 2023, April. Senate Bill 211. Retrieved from <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/64512>.

22 GaDOE has worked with MetaMetrics®, the developers of the Lexile® Framework for Reading, to link the Georgia Milestones English Language Arts (ELA) assessments with the Lexile scale. In Georgia, students will receive a Lexile measure when they receive a scale score on a Georgia Milestones end-of-grade or end-of-course ELA assessment. This Lexile measure is based on the reading portion of the ELA test. For more information about the Lexile Framework for Reading, see <https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Assessment/Pages/Lexile-Framework.aspx>.

Importantly, students who fall within the grade-level reading category (520–669) are recommended to receive additional supports as they move into fourth grade. To ensure these students receive these supports, it is vital that educators get the proper training and resources to identify and administer those supports through differentiated instruction and/or other needed multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS).<sup>23</sup>

ACTION STEPS	
POLICY	<p>The Georgia General Assembly provides funding for districts to hire reading coaches and academic interventionists and to offer professional learning for them to strengthen instructional delivery and program evaluation.</p> <p>Through the Georgia Council on Literacy, state agencies develop a statewide literacy plan, identifying assets and opportunities for community partnerships that emphasize lifelong literacy.</p>
PRACTICE	<p>State policymakers assemble an educator task force to set standard criteria for screening and intervention strategies.</p> <p>Practitioners and subject-matter experts develop a crosswalk between the Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards and K-12 ELA Standards.</p>
PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING	<p>State agencies and nonprofit organizations design a communications campaign that informs parents about the science of reading and specific practices they can use at home to complement school-based instruction.</p>

As the district spotlight highlighting Fulton County and Marietta City schools literacy reform efforts suggests, systemic approaches to improving K-3 literacy require significant investments. To date, Fulton County Schools has spent \$90 million and Marietta City Schools \$7 million on ensuring more students are proficient readers by the end of third grade. Their strategies include the adoption of high-quality instructional materials, the deployment of dedicated staff to support implementation, and incentives for current educators to receive professional learning. Both school systems relied on federal pandemic-relief funds to initiate these efforts. Increasing state funding for K-3 literacy programming could enable other districts to pursue strategies at similar scales.

<sup>23</sup> Multi-tiered system of support provide a tiered infrastructure that uses data to help match academic and social-emotional behavior assessments and instructional resources to each student's needs.

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. Schools serving suburban areas and low-poverty neighborhoods

ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- School systems have responded to increased student need by providing proactive mental and behavioral health services.
- The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) has provided leadership in this area by championing strategies that support student mental health and safe and supportive learning environments.
- With federal pandemic-relief funds set to expire in September 2024, school systems must strengthen their partnerships with community health providers to ensure unmet mental health needs are addressed and that family and community risk factors do not inhibit student learning.

reported higher demand for mental health services than the national sample. 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.” Community poverty, student demographics, and school location were not significant drivers of school leaders’ perceptions.<sup>24</sup>

The pandemic was a stressful and traumatic time for students, educators, and parents. Prolonged exposure to trauma, regardless of age, race, or background, negatively affects learning, mental health, and physical well-being. Children and adolescents are especially vulnerable because they often lack the skills and resources to process trauma in their lives. When students’ mental health needs are unmet, educators observe the symptoms: chronic school absence, poor academic performance, and behavioral dysregulation.<sup>25</sup> District and school leaders cannot address these effects alone. They need to partner with healthcare providers and community organi-

zations to conduct interventions that go beyond simply acknowledging and identifying the symptoms. They must address the root causes of unmet student needs.

During the height of the pandemic, school systems responded to increased student need by providing proactive mental and behavioral health services. Schools used Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to administer mental health screeners, contract with mental health practitioners to conduct interventions, and hire more school social workers and psychologists to deliver just-in-time supports.<sup>26</sup> With the last phase of ESSER

24 National Center for Education Statistics. 2023, August. “Recovery from the Coronavirus Pandemic in K-12 Education.” *Condition of Education*. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/toa/k12-covid-recovery>.  
25 Houri, A. 2021, April 15. *The Connection Between Mental Health and Academic Success*. Groves Learning Organization. Retrieved from <https://www.groveslearning.org/connection-between-mental-health-academic-success/>.  
26 Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. 2023, November 30. *CARES Impact Study: Year Two Report*. Retrieved from [https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CARES-Impact-Study-Year-Two-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CARES-Impact-Study-Year-Two-Report_Final.pdf).



funding expiring on September 30, 2024, school and community leaders need to determine how to maintain their essential student mental health services and strategies. This issue brief summarizes current state strategies and identifies barriers to effective implementation of local student mental health initiatives.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

What Statewide Strategies Could Support School and Community Initiatives?

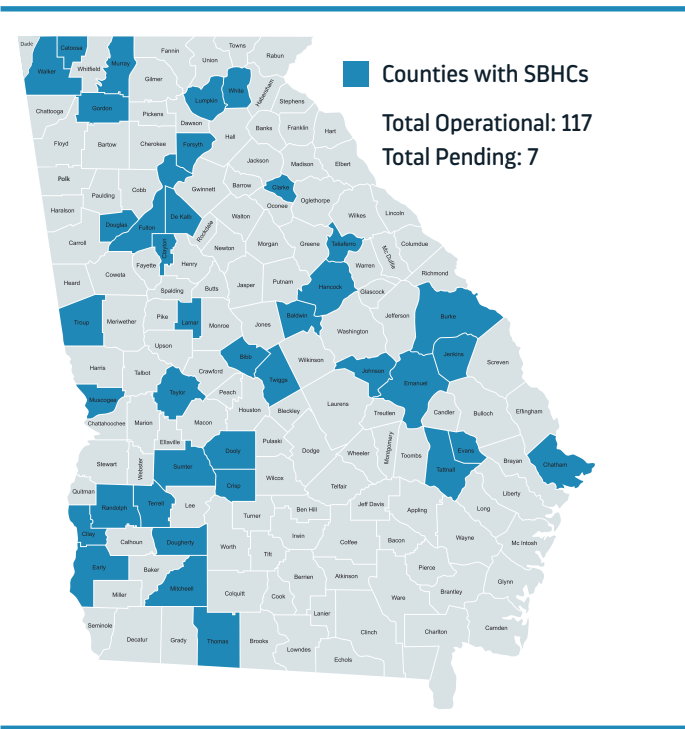
Georgia Department of Education’s (GaDOE’s) Office of Whole Child Supports assists districts, schools, and communities in identifying and addressing student non-academic barriers to success while expanding learning opportunities. The office coordinates mental health and well-being, integrated wellness, school safety, and wraparound support services. Below are some examples of the initiatives the office leads.<sup>27</sup>

School-based health interventions

Using federal pandemic-relief funds, GaDOE has provided two rounds of planning grants to encourage school systems to create school-based health centers (SBHCs). While SBHCs vary in the services they provide, most offer a combination of vision, dental, primary care, and behavioral healthcare. All students who have access to an SBHC receive needed care regardless of their ability to pay. SBHCs are helpful in two ways: (1) delivering preventative healthcare and managing chronic illnesses like asthma, and (2) giving mental and behavioral health referrals to community providers.<sup>28</sup> The SBHC footprint has grown significantly over the last five years, with 117 centers in operation across more than 40 districts.<sup>29</sup>

A second type of school-based health intervention is the Georgia Apex program, which supports partnerships between schools and community mental health practitioners. Funded by the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, the program aims to reduce the number of students with unmet mental health needs. The program delivers screening services in participating schools and needed interventions at schools or in the community through a school referral. The program provides three tiers of intervention.

FIGURE 3.1 SCHOOL-BASED HEALTH CLINICS (SBHCs) IN GEORGIA, DECEMBER 1, 2023<sup>30</sup>



27 Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "Office of Whole Child Supports." Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/wholechild/Pages/home.aspx>.  
28 Georgia Department of Education. 2023, June 23. "Benefits of School-Based Health Centers." Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/wholechild/Documents/SBHC%20Benefits%20Final%206.23.23.pdf>.  
29 Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "School-Based Health Centers Map." Retrieved from [https://www.gadoe.org/wholechild/SiteAssets/WholeChild\\_SBHC\\_MAP/Index.html](https://www.gadoe.org/wholechild/SiteAssets/WholeChild_SBHC_MAP/Index.html).  
30 Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "School-Based Health Centers Map." Retrieved from [https://www.gadoe.org/wholechild/SiteAssets/WholeChild\\_SBHC\\_MAP/Index.html](https://www.gadoe.org/wholechild/SiteAssets/WholeChild_SBHC_MAP/Index.html).

- **Tier 1 Universal prevention:** Schools provide mental health awareness events for students and parents.
- **Tier 2 Early intervention:** Counselors, social workers, and other interventionists provide screening and individual and group therapy services.
- **Tier 3 Intensive intervention:** For students with more acute needs, mental health providers conduct diagnostic screenings and behavioral assessments to determine a treatment plan.<sup>33</sup>

#### **Integrated academic and behavioral supports**

The Office of Whole Child Supports has also prioritized efforts to address academic and behavioral needs in a single, coordinated strategy called multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). MTSS encompasses all student-centered assessments and interventions conducted at school by educators and healthcare practitioners.

With attendance, behavior, health, and achievement data all warehoused in one location, school personnel can identify students who need Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. After screening children, student support teams select interventions and develop progress-monitoring metrics to define whether the interventions are successful in addressing student needs.<sup>34</sup>

#### **School safety**

State law requires school systems to develop school safety plans to address school violence and provide safe and supportive learning environments for students and instructional personnel.<sup>35</sup> The Georgia Center for School Safety, a joint initiative of GaDOE and the Georgia Emergency Management and Homeland Security Agency, provides strategic planning and training resources for districts and schools.<sup>36</sup>

The Georgia Partnership recommends that local school systems use the school safety plans as an opportunity to describe how existing student-centered academic, behavioral, and mental health interventions support school safety and positive school climate. While these plans will not immediately reduce school violence and behavioral disruptions, identifying and addressing school and community risk factors can promote lasting change and focus attention on the root causes of antisocial behaviors.

### **THE NEGATIVE AND CUMULATIVE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA**

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that affect learning, mental health, and physical well-being.<sup>31</sup> The pandemic spotlighted the family and community risk factors — poverty, abuse, neglect, neighborhood violence — that aggravate underlying mental and behavioral health challenges.

The effects of ACEs are cumulative. There is a strong correlation between the number of ACEs and the presence of toxic stress, which disrupts brain development and increases the risk of poor academic performance, chronic school absenteeism, and emotional dysregulation.<sup>32</sup> Toxic stress has long-term negative impacts, with research showing the connection between childhood trauma and poor health and employment outcomes in adulthood.

31 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2023, June 29. "Fast Facts: Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences." Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/fastfact.html>.

32 Center on the Developing Child. n.d. "ACEs and Toxic Stress: Frequently Asked Questions." Retrieved from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/aces-and-toxic-stress-frequently-asked-questions/>.

33 Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities. 2020, January. "Georgia Apex Program." Retrieved from <https://dbhdd.georgia.gov/document/document/georgia-apex-program-overview-brief/download>.

34 Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "Georgia's Tiered System of Supports for Students." Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/wholechild/Pages/TieredSystemofSupports.aspx>.

35 Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "School Safety Planning." Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/wholechild/Pages/School-Safety-Planning.aspx>.

36 Georgia Department of Education and Georgia Emergency Management and Homeland Security Agency. n.d. "Resources." Retrieved from <https://www.gacss.org/resources/>.

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 resources.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

During the pandemic, districts have 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. In cases where outside providers are more capable, then school leaders can prioritize partnerships that allow for students to receive interventions through community referrals.

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

School and district personnel should involve — not just engage — parents and community leaders in the process of developing a whole-child strategy, a primary component of which is mental health and well-being.

ACTION STEPS	
POLICY	The Georgia General Assembly revises K-12 financing strategies to boost state funding for school counselors, psychologists, and social workers.
PRACTICE	District and school leaders use strategic planning and school improvement processes to describe how specific student non-academic interventions support positive outcomes.
PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING	State leaders, partnering with nonprofit advocates, develop local communications campaigns to inform parents and civic leaders about how the Georgia Mental Health Parity Act (House Bill 1013) <sup>37</sup> supports a unified school and community response to delivering physical and mental health services to students.

37 Georgia General Assembly. 2022, April. House Bill 1013. Retrieved from <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/61365>.

ISSUE 4

ACCESS TO QUALITY CHILDCARE:  
REMOVING WORKFORCE BARRIERS

ISSUE OVERVIEW

For the 10th year in a row, economic developers have named Georgia the number one state in the nation for doing business. The Peach State scored well on several indicators, including cost of living, workforce talent, and the quality of public workforce development programs.<sup>38</sup>

ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) distributed \$1.6 billion in federal pandemic-relief funds to stabilize childcare programs and provide tuition assistance to parents.
- The temporary boost in federal assistance expired on September 30, 2023, leaving early care providers with few good options to continue services at the level pandemic-relief funds allowed: reduce the number of children served, cut staff salaries, or raise parent tuition.
- To ensure continued economic growth and to encourage credentialed, highly skilled workers to re-enter the workforce, state leaders and employers must address childcare access and affordability challenges.

Georgia is also a national leader in early care and learning. Since becoming the first state in the country to establish a universal pre-kindergarten program in 1995, Georgia has provided high-quality early learning to over 2 million four-year-old students.<sup>39</sup>

While state leaders tout Georgia’s favorable position in the global economy, the average annual cost of childcare (\$7,644)<sup>40</sup> outpaces current-year in-state tuition rates at all but four of the state’s 48 public post-secondary institutions.<sup>41</sup> The high cost of childcare has a negative impact on Georgia’s overall economy and contributes to absenteeism and workforce exit. Economists estimate that the direct impact to parents and caregivers leaving the workforce is \$1.75 billion in economic activity and additional \$105 million lost in terms of state income tax revenue.<sup>42</sup>

38 State of Georgia. 2023, October 3. “Georgia No. 1 State for Business for 10th Consecutive Year” [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.georgia.org/press-release/georgia-no-1-state-business-10th-consecutive-year>.

39 Griffin, R. 2023, July 26. Georgia’s “Pre-K Program Prepares for 2023-2024 School Year.” Retrieved from <https://www.dec.ga.gov/documents/attachments/Georgias%20Pre-K%20Program%20Prepares%20for%202023-2024%20School%20Year.pdf>.

40 Economic Policy Institute. “The Cost of Child Care in Georgia.” Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students. Retrieved from <https://geears.org/news/cost-child-care-georgia/>.

41 University System of Georgia. n.d. “University System of Georgia Undergraduate Tuition Rates Per Semester – Fiscal Year 2024.” Retrieve from [https://www.usg.edu/fiscal\\_affairs/assets/fiscal\\_affairs/documents/tuition\\_and\\_fees/Appendix\\_IIA\\_FY\\_2024\\_Tuition.pdf](https://www.usg.edu/fiscal_affairs/assets/fiscal_affairs/documents/tuition_and_fees/Appendix_IIA_FY_2024_Tuition.pdf).

42 Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students. 2018, November 26. *Opportunities Lost: How Child Care Challenges Affect Georgia’s Workforce and Economy*. Retrieved from <https://geears.org/wp-content/uploads/Opportunities-Lost-Report-FINAL.pdf>.

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

1. **LACK OF AVAILABLE OPTIONS:** Childcare options are not available in all communities and neighborhoods. In rural areas in particular, providers might not exist, and those that do operate in these communities do not always have sufficient space to accommodate all children.
2. **HIGH COST OF CARE:** Working parents, especially those managing families as single parents, struggle to pay for childcare. Parents, primarily mothers, may exit the workforce after comparing the benefits of working with the cost of childcare.
3. **LACK OF ACCOMMODATION:** Current options do not always align with parents' needs, particularly for evening and overnight shift work.
4. **EXPIRING FEDERAL PANDEMIC-RELIEF FUNDS:** Between May 2021 and October 2023, parents eligible for the federal Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) program did not pay their share of tuition. The end of the moratorium on CAPS copayments will reduce the affordability of childcare for low-income families.<sup>43</sup> In addition, a grant program for licensed childcare providers, the Short-Term Assistance Benefit for Licensed Entities (STABLE), ended on September 30, 2023. The resulting loss of these funds could affect the bottom line of centers, ultimately leading to reductions in service or closures.<sup>44</sup>
5. **WORKFORCE SHORTAGES:** Low pay and poor working conditions for early care educators, especially those not working in Georgia's Pre-K classrooms, discourage talented and well-qualified individuals from pursuing early childhood education as a career.

### ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

#### How Can State Leaders and Employers Help Expand Access to Childcare?

##### *State agencies and the General Assembly*

Much like other industries, the early learning industry is experiencing a talent shortage with child care centers struggling to recruit and retain staff.<sup>45</sup> Low wages, especially for those not working in the Georgia's Pre-K Program, discourage talented and well-qualified individuals from pursuing early childhood education as a career. The most direct and impactful way to expand access and ensure program quality is to address low pay and stressful working conditions for early childhood educators.

Simply raising staff salaries is not a feasible option. Parent fees and tuition are the primary source of revenue (over 60% of total revenue) for non-Georgia's Pre-K early learning establishments.<sup>46</sup> Many families, especially low-income families, already struggle to find and pay for quality childcare. Georgia currently subsidizes staffing and resources for Georgia's Pre-K classrooms through state lottery funds. Given the state's large lottery reserve, the Georgia

43 Governor's Office. 2021, October 18. "Gov. Kemp: Georgia to Serve 10,000 Additional Children Through CAPS Child Care Program" [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://gov.georgia.gov/press-releases/2021-10-18/gov-kemp-georgia-serve-10000-additional-children-through-caps-child-care>.

44 Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning. n.d. "STABLE 4WARD: Georgia's Child Care Stabilization Program." Retrieved from <https://www.dec.state.ga.us/bfts/Stable.aspx>.

45 Coffey, M., and R. Khattar. 2022, September 2. "The Child Care Sector Will Continue to Struggle Hiring Staff Unless It Creates Good Jobs." Center for American Progress. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-child-care-sector-will-continue-to-struggle-hiring-staff-unless-it-creates-good-jobs/>.

46 Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, Georgia State University, and Carl Vinson Institute of Government, University of Georgia. 2016. *Economic Impact of the Early Care and Education Industry in Georgia*. Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning. Retrieved from <https://www.dec.state.ga.us/BftS/ResearchEconomicImpact.aspx>.

General Assembly could release some of the unrestricted funds to stabilize childcare providers and lower the parental cost of childcare. In effect, using a portion of the unrestricted lottery reserve to increase investments in non-Georgia's Pre-K early learning environments could result in more parents finding and affording Quality Rated childcare.<sup>47</sup>

### Employers

The Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS) developed a business toolkit that describes how employers can use their resources to remove barriers to workforce participation.<sup>48</sup>

The toolkit highlights four ways that employers can support their workers with young children. The first two strategies involve delivering onsite childcare or contracting with offsite providers. In both cases, employers can defray the cost of providing childcare with federal and state tax credits.

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. Such programs are mutually beneficial: parents reduce their taxable income, and employers reduce payroll expenses because the set-asides are not subject to Social Security or payroll taxation.

Human resources managers can also provide workers with information about the CAPS program and the Dependent Care Tax Credit, a program that provides additional tax credits to care for children under age 13 with diagnosed physical or mental disabilities.

### COMMUNITY AND FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

Quality Care for Children has partnered with Promise All Atlanta Children Thrive (PAACT) to award Boost Parent Child Success scholarships. Eligible children are between ages zero and three. Family income should not exceed 85% of the state median income, which is \$80,953 for a family of four. Parents pay a maximum of 10% of their gross weekly income, with the scholarship covering the remaining cost of childcare.<sup>49</sup> Programs like this make childcare more affordable while also recognizing the vital link between childcare access and workforce opportunity.

### MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

To encourage more parents and caregivers to stay in or re-enter the workforce, state and business leaders need to increase investments in early care and learning and reframe who benefits from early learning programs. Viewed narrowly, early learning programming might appear to benefit children and their families only. However, underinvestment in early learning also has indirect impacts on local communities and the state economy.

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. For example, in September 2021, GEEARS released a report on the cost-benefit calculations Georgia parents make, especially in light of the impacts of COVID-19.<sup>50</sup> One in three parents (34%) reported that "they

47 Quality Rated is a voluntary state program that assesses whether participating early learning providers meet or exceed state program quality standards.

48 Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students. n.d. "Business Toolkit." Retrieved from [https://geears.org/wp-content/uploads/Business\\_Toolkit.pdf](https://geears.org/wp-content/uploads/Business_Toolkit.pdf).

49 Quality Care for Children. n.d. "BOOST and PAACT Partner to Help Families." Retrieved from <https://www.qualitycareforchildren.org/pcs>.

50 Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students. 2021, September. *Checking In: How Georgia's Families Are Navigating Child Care and Employment Impacts in the Era of COVID-19.* Retrieved from <https://geears.org/wp-content/uploads/Survey-Findings-2021.pdf>.

or someone in their family had to quit a job, not take a job, or greatly change a job in the past 12 months because of problems with childcare.”

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.

ACTION STEPS	
POLICY	The Georgia General Assembly taps the \$1.4 billion unrestricted lottery reserve fund to invest in evidence-based, early education and health strategies, such as home visitation, Early Head Start, parent tuition subsidies, and early screening and intervention for children with developmental and intellectual disabilities.
PRACTICE	State agencies and local community leaders implement multigenerational strategies that support school readiness for young children and workforce readiness for their parents and caregivers.  DECAL, in collaboration with state and community partners, continues to expand access to childcare offered outside of the traditional 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. schedule.
PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING	DECAL and state nonprofits establish a communications campaign that promotes expanded childcare access as a driver of economic growth and workforce activity.



## ISSUE 5

### CAREER PATHWAYS: A DEMAND-DRIVEN APPROACH

#### ISSUE OVERVIEW

The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) manages the Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (CTAE) program. The program includes career-themed courses spread across 17 clusters.<sup>51</sup> High school students can satisfy graduation requirements by completing one of over 150 three-course pathway sequences.<sup>52</sup> The CTAE program is designed to provide opportunities to students to engage in Georgia’s economy and help meet ever-growing and changing workforce needs.

*Each CTAE graduate will complete a career pathway that provides opportunities to earn an industry credential, work-based learning experience, and/or post-secondary credit.<sup>53</sup>*

#### ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- Over 130,000 Georgia high school students completed a three-course sequence in one of 17 career clusters during the 2021-22 school year.
- Georgia lacks specific data on whether current district and school CTAE offerings align with local, regional, and state workforce needs.
- Districts must collaborate with local industry to adopt a demand-driven approach that prioritizes two goals: expanded access to work-based learning opportunities and increases in the number of students who earn credentials of value while enrolled in high school.

However, when comparing the credentials earned with employer demand for individuals with those credentials, Georgia receives a low alignment rating.<sup>54</sup> Four of the 17 clusters — business, management, and administration; information technology; health science; and finance — accounted for nearly 44% of total CTAE enrollments in the 2021-22 school year. Conversely, other high-demand career fields in Georgia like transportation, manufacturing, and energy represented less than 2% of total enrollments.<sup>55</sup> Of all the credentials earned in 2019, only 16% were considered in-demand by Georgia employers.

Further, even among the 130,055 Georgia high school students who completed a three-course pathway sequence during the 2021-22 school year, only 40.2% participated in a work-based learning opportunity and just 32.3% earned credentials of value.<sup>56</sup>

51 Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "Career Clusters and Pathway Courses." Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/CTAE/Pages/cluster-pathway-courses.aspx>.

52 Georgia State Board of Education. 2020, March 11. Rule 160-4-2-.48. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/State-Board-of-Education/SBOE%20Rules/160-4-2-.48.pdf>.

53 Georgia Department of Education. 2021, August 3. "Profile of a Georgia CTAE Graduate." Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/CTAE/Documents/8-3-21%20Profile%20of%20a%20Georgia%20CTAE%20Graduate%20Flipbook.htm>.

54 ExcelinEd and Burning Glass Technologies. n.d. "State Summary: Georgia." Credentials Matter. Retrieved from <https://credentials-matter.org/state-summary/ga/>.

55 Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "Cluster Summary Enrollment Data." Retrieved from <https://ctaedelivers.org/summary-data>.

56 Perkins Collaborative Resource Network. n.d. "Georgia State Performance Data." Retrieved from <https://cte.ed.gov/pcrn/profile/state/performance/2022/GA/summary/all/secondary/all>.

Ensuring high school students are equipped to complete career pathway programs is an essential component of Georgia meeting workforce readiness goals by 2033. In the *EdQuest Georgia State Policy Plan*, the Georgia Partnership identified increasing career pathway completion rates as a key outcome for state policymakers to track over the next 10 years.<sup>57</sup>

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.

This issue brief describes three steps that district leaders can take to forge a more demand-driven approach to career pathways development.

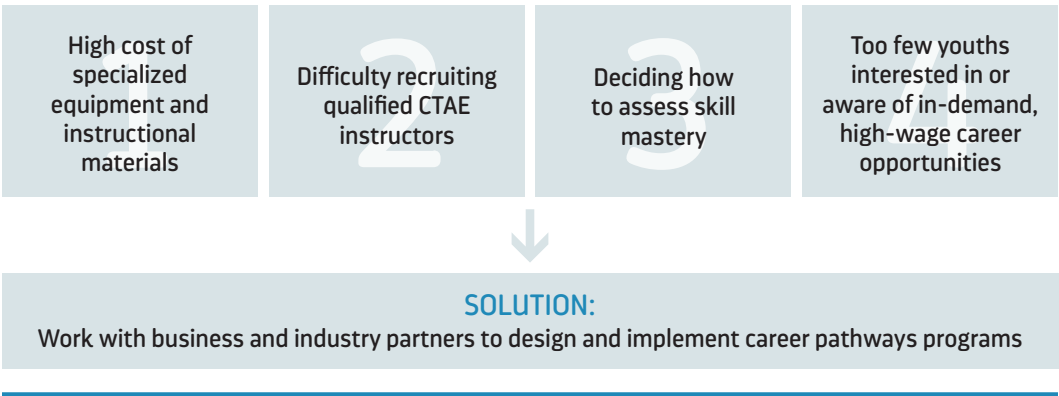
ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

How District Leaders Can Create a Demand-Driven Approach

Step 1: Let evidence drive what career pathways to offer.

The federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) requires regional workforce development boards to produce annual reports that provide data on high-demand occupations.<sup>58</sup> While the primary purpose of these reports is to determine what workforce programs are eligible to receive WIOA funds, district leaders can use the data to compare their current CTAE offerings to regional workforce shortages. In cases where education and training options misalign with employer demand, district leaders should collaborate with business and industry partners to explore ways to adapt CTAE offerings to address skill and talent gaps.

FIGURE 5.1. FOUR CHALLENGES OF STANDING UP NEW PATHWAYS PROGRAMS<sup>59</sup>



Step 2: Seek out partnerships with local employers and post-secondary institutions.

The challenges outlined in Figure 5.1 discourage district and school leaders from offering new career pathway programs. However, business and post-secondary leaders can help address many of these barriers.

District leaders can partner with local employers to create durable school-to-work pipelines. Employers can provide work-based learning opportunities that both help CTAE pathway completers earn industry-recognized credentials and provide the industry with much-needed workforce talent.

57 Smith, M. 2023, August 22. *EdQuest Georgia State Policy Plan*. Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. Retrieved from [https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/EdQuest-Georgia-State-Plan-Final\\_8-21.pdf](https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/EdQuest-Georgia-State-Plan-Final_8-21.pdf).  
58 WorkSource Georgia. n.d. "Demand Occupations List." Retrieved from <https://cdn.atlworks.org/wp-content/uploads/demand-occupations-list-2023.pdf>.  
59 All4Ed. n.d. "Leveraging Career Pathways to Maximize Student Opportunities." Retrieved from <https://all4ed.org/future-ready-schools/emerging-practices-guides/leveraging-career-pathways-to-maximize-student-opportunities/>.

By partnering with post-secondary institutions, districts can expand access to career-themed content for their high school students. As pathway programs mature, students can participate in CTAE courses offered in high school while enrolling in apprenticeship and technical diploma programs delivered at Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) institutions.

By examining data on employer needs and working with partners from industry and higher education, local districts can be a crucial element in ensuring all students graduate from high school ready for their next steps, while simultaneously supporting the workforce needs of their region.

#### PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT: GEORGIA COLLEGE AND CAREER ACADEMIES MODEL

In this model, school districts partner with education, corporate, and civic leaders to deliver skill-based instruction and provide work-based learning opportunities aligned with regional workforce needs.

Districts start the process of forming an academy by assembling a steering committee and applying for a charter waiver from GaDOE. Then, in conjunction with the steering committee members, economic development partners, and the local chamber of commerce, district leaders conduct a needs assessment to identify the career pathways and clusters that the college and career academy should offer.<sup>60</sup>

Currently, 57 career academies serve more than 45,000 Georgia students and partner with over 3,000 industry representatives.<sup>61</sup>

#### *Step 3: Develop a community-wide career education strategy based on current and emerging workforce needs.*

After partnering with business and post-secondary leaders, district leaders should have greater insight into how all strategies fit together to advance workforce readiness. Community partnerships also reveal critical gaps and obstacles that stand in the way of more residents earning credentials in areas of workforce shortage or high schools offering career pathways that respond to workforce needs.

For example, corporate leaders can invest their time and expertise by helping to adapt career pathway curricula in high schools and at post-secondary institutions to better align with current employer needs.

Regional and community-based models are promising because they concentrate efforts on community-wide needs, moving away from one-off remedies that benefit one business or one career pathway. By developing joint education and economic development strategies, new community partners can forge innovative solutions that replicate the promising practices of mature partnerships already underway in the community.

<sup>60</sup> Technical College System of Georgia. 2022, February. "GA College & Career Academies 101: How to Get Started." Retrieved from <https://www.tcsg.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/GCCA-101-How-to-Get-Started.pdf>.

<sup>61</sup> Isenhour, A. 2022, December 1. "Gov. Kemp and TCSG Announce New College and Career Academies" [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://gov.georgia.gov/press-releases/2022-12-01/gov-kemp-and-tcsg-announce-new-college-and-career-academies>.

## MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

### Two Ways State Leaders Can Support Local Pathway Programming

#### *Strategy No. 1: Differentiate state funding.*

School districts receive CTAE funding through the Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula.

The formula provides a 1.1811 weight for students enrolled in CTAE courses, which reflects the cost of program delivery.<sup>62</sup> Current 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.

#### *Strategy No. 2: Strengthen articulation between CTAE and career-themed programming offered at post-secondary institutions.*

Through the Articulated Credit Agreement initiative, the TCSG awards college credit to high school students who complete one of 18 career pathways, shortening the time it takes to earn post-secondary credentials.<sup>63</sup> GaDOE, TCSG, and the University System of Georgia can leverage these 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.

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62 Georgia Department of Education. 2022, July 1. "FY2023 FTE Data Collection Categories and Weights." Retrieved from <https://georgiainsights.gadoe.org/Data-Collections/Documents/FTE%20Resources/FY2023/FY2023%20FTE%20Categories%20and%20Weights.pdf>.

63 Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "Articulation." Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/CTAE/Pages/Articulation-.aspx>.

ACTION STEPS	
POLICY	The Georgia General Assembly and the state’s two post-secondary systems pilot a differentiated funding strategy that provides extra funding for career pathways programs that address local and regional workforce needs. Policymakers could pilot differentiated funding outside of the K-12 and post-secondary funding formulas to determine whether the initiative spurs local innovation and encourages an outcomes- and demand-driven focus.
PRACTICE	<p>Local community leaders leverage funds from three federal sources – the Every Student Succeeds Act, Perkins, and WIOA<sup>64</sup> – to support career pathways development and expansion. A 2020 Southern Regional Education Board report describe ways that state leaders can blend these funds, but the recommendations outlined in the brief are relevant to local leaders.<sup>65</sup></p> <p>District and school leaders develop partnerships with the business community to expand access to work-based learning experiences.</p>
PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING	<p>State leaders and pathways experts develop a state clearinghouse where students, parents, and the public can learn more about the wage potential of various industry-recognized credentials.</p> <p>A group of state leaders, advocates, and corporate representatives develop a communications campaign to demonstrate the value of enrolling in career and work-based learning programs while in high school.</p>

As previously stated, only about 16% of credentials currently earned through the CTAE program are aligned with high-demand workforce skills. Georgia has many tools and opportunities for students to shorten time to degree to both increase post-secondary completion rates and meet Georgia’s workforce needs. To truly leverage all of these tools, state and local leaders must ensure that pathway offerings are aligned with workforce demand. To that end, it is possible — and essential — for state and local education leaders, post-secondary systems, and business and industry to come together and redesign and reconfigure career pathways to ensure they address workforce needs and employer demands. Anything short of that will leave youth and adults underprepared for the career opportunities Georgia’s growing economy offers.

64 The federal government provides Title funding as authorized through the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. The Perkins V program funds career and technical education programming in middle and high schools. WIOA programs provide post-secondary and workforce training for disconnected youth and working adults.

65 Anderson, K. 2020, May. *Designing a Ready Workforce: Opportunities for State Leaders to Align ESSA, Perkins V and WIOA Funds*. Southern Regional Education Board. [https://www.sreb.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/epw\\_aligned\\_efficient\\_designing\\_a\\_ready\\_workforce\\_final.pdf?1589212669](https://www.sreb.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/epw_aligned_efficient_designing_a_ready_workforce_final.pdf?1589212669).

ISSUE 6

EDUCATOR RECRUITMENT:  
A NEW PARADIGM FOR DISTRICTS

ISSUE OVERVIEW

Classroom educators are leaving their positions at a greater rate than before the pandemic. In the school year prior to the onset of the pandemic (2018-19), 6% of teachers and school leaders across the nation left their positions. By the end of the 2021-22 school year, 10% of teachers and 16% of school leaders had retired or resigned, a significant increase over a three-year period.<sup>66</sup>

ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- Clinical practice requirements vary based on whether teacher candidates are pursuing certification through a traditional or alternative licensure route.
- Districts should use clinical experiences like internships, residencies, and apprenticeships as a pre-employment pathway to recruit well-qualified teacher candidates.
- The Georgia Partnership calls on districts and educator preparation providers (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.

Hiring has not kept up with teacher exits, according to national<sup>67</sup> and state<sup>68</sup> 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.

Teacher turnover also has a financial cost, with districts having to recruit, train, and support new hires for educators who leave the school system or the profession entirely. With estimates for training and induction ranging from \$10,000 to \$20,000 per new educator, a 10% increase in staff retention could result in sizable long-term savings for school districts.<sup>69</sup>

*The EdQuest Georgia State Policy Plan* recommends that district leaders adjust how they deliver clinical experiences to teacher candidates placed in their schools. Currently, most candidates in the traditional university and GaTAPP<sup>70</sup> programs complete internships.

66 Diliberti, M.K., and H.L. Schwartz. 2023. *Educator Turnover Has Markedly Increased, but Districts Have Taken Actions to Boost Teacher Ranks: Selected Findings from the Sixth American School District Panel Survey*. RAND Corporation. Retrieved from [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR900/RR956-14/RAND\\_RRA956-14.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR900/RR956-14/RAND_RRA956-14.pdf).

67 McKinsey & Company. 2022, November 2. *Halftime for the K-12 Stimulus: How Are Districts Faring?* Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/halftime-for-the-k-12-stimulus-how-are-districts-faring>.

68 Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. 2023, November 30. *CARES Impact Study: Year Two Report*. Retrieved from [https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CARES-Impact-Study-Year-Two-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CARES-Impact-Study-Year-Two-Report_Final.pdf).

69 Learning Policy Institute. 2017, September 13. "What's the Cost of Teacher Turnover?" Retrieved from <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/the-cost-of-teacher-turnover>.

70 The Georgia Teacher Academy for Preparation and Pedagogy (GaTAPP) is an alternative preparation program that leads to a renewable certification approved by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission.

Two emerging models, residencies and educator apprenticeships, allow school districts and educator preparation providers to design preparation programs and clinical experiences in which candidates receive job-embedded coaching, training, and mentorship.

Regardless of the models that districts pursue, the Georgia Partnership urges districts to blend their recruitment and preparation strategies, finding ways to leverage clinical experiences to recruit well-qualified candidates.

## ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

### The Clinical Internship Model

The Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GaPSC) requires all teacher candidates to complete a clinical internship or residency lasting at least one semester.<sup>71</sup> In Georgia, most candidates enrolled in university preparation programs complete a semester or yearlong internship after finishing all academic coursework. Once placed in a school for their internship, a veteran educator (called a “cooperating teacher”) coaches the intern, and over a semester or yearlong experience, the intern gradually takes on more teaching responsibilities. The level of intentionality in intern placement varies by district.

Internships have evolved over time. Historically, the student teaching experience centered on the role of the cooperating teacher as mentor and master. More recently, EPPs have provided opportunities for peer learning and job-embedded pedagogical training from professors-of-practice, teacher leaders with recent classroom experience.<sup>72</sup> These emerging practices provide interns with deeper instruction on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that they will need to succeed as licensed educators.

Candidates enrolled in Master of Arts in Teaching programs also complete field experiences and clinical internships in a similar order to their undergraduate counterparts.

Individuals enrolled in the Georgia Teacher Academy for Preparation and Pedagogy, or GaTAPP, the state’s alternative preparation track, also complete internships. They receive job-embedded coaching and professional learning while working full time as a classroom educator. They receive ongoing support from a field supervisor, a teacher mentor, and a school administrator. GaPSC has approved 21 GaTAPP providers: 14 regional education service agencies, six school systems, and one technical college.<sup>73</sup>

71 Georgia Professional Standards Commission. 2023, August 15. “505-3-.01. Requirements and Standards for Approving Educator Preparation Providers and Educator Preparation Programs.” Retrieved from <https://www.gapsc.com/Rules/Current/EducatorPreparation/505-3-.01.pdf>.

72 Francies, C., S. Glover, and C. Jamieson. 2021, August. *Enhancing Teacher Preparation Through Clinical Experience*. Education Commission of the States. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED615164.pdf>.

73 Georgia Professional Standards Commission. n.d. “Approved Providers.” Retrieved from <https://www.gapsc.com/EducatorPreparation/GaTAPP/Providers.aspx>.



### GROW YOUR OWN PROGRAMS

In general, teacher turnover rates are higher in rural school systems. Grow Your Own programs address challenges associated with recruiting and retaining educators by encouraging residents within the community to enter educator preparation programs. One group that state and district leaders have prioritized is paraprofessionals, assistant teachers that provide supplemental academic supports for students and administrative and classroom management supports for licensed teachers. In October 2023, the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) released \$2.4 million in grant funds to support the expansion of pathways for paraprofessionals to become licensed teachers in 75 rural school systems.<sup>74</sup> This funding comes on the heels of \$5 million being appropriated by the Georgia General Assembly to expand career advancement opportunities for paraprofessionals.<sup>75</sup>

Grow Your Own programs also focus on encouraging high school students to become teachers. Baldwin County Schools received \$9,000 through GaDOE's Cultivating Teachers Grant to expand the number of students enrolled in the Teaching as a Career pathway.<sup>76</sup>

Corporate funders are acting as investors, too. The Georgia Power Foundation awarded a \$100,000 grant to the University of Georgia to sustain Grow Your Own partnerships with the Hall County and Gainesville County school districts that support native Spanish-speaking graduates in their quest to become teachers.<sup>77</sup>

### Emerging Models: Residencies and Apprenticeships

Residencies and apprenticeships are preparation strategies that are gaining traction across the country. Like interns, graduate students participating in a residency receive mentorship from a cadre of veteran teachers and troubleshoot with peers. After at least one year of education and training, residents earn a Master of Arts in Teaching. In most cases, 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.<sup>78</sup>

School systems can leverage residencies to recruit well-qualified candidates interested in working in hard-to-staff schools and subjects.

The US Department of Labor (USDOL) also approved the first state educator apprenticeship program in January 2022. Since then, the USDOL has provided grants to 35 states to scale up educator apprenticeships.<sup>79</sup> As of December 2023, Georgia has not submitted any proposals to form registered apprenticeship programs in the state.

74 Frick, M. 2023, October 27. "GaDOE Provides Grants to Cover Rural Para-to-Teacher Certification" [Press release]. Georgia Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Pages/PressReleaseDetails.aspx?PressView=default&pid=1086>.

75 Williams, D. 2023, March 14. "Kemp Signs Mid-Year State Budget." Georgia Public Broadcasting. Retrieved from <https://www.gpb.org/news/2023/03/14/kemp-signs-mid-year-state-budget>.

76 Willis, A. 2023, September 23. "Baldwin County School District Fostering Next Generation of Teachers with 'Grow Your Own' Teacher Program." WGMT. Retrieved from <https://www.41nbc.com/baldwin-county-school-district-fostering-next-generation-of-teachers-with-grow-your-own-teacher-program/>.

77 Leonard, C. 2023, July 17. "Georgia Power Foundation Grant Boosts Teacher Prep." University of North Georgia. Retrieved from <https://ung.edu/news/articles/2023/07/georgia-power-grant-boosts-teacher-prep.php>.

78 National Center for Teacher Residencies. n.d. "Our Residency Model." Retrieved from <https://nctr residencies.org/our-residency-model/>.

79 US Department of Education. 2023, July 27. "Education, Labor Departments Announce New Efforts to Advance Teacher Preparation Programs and Expand Registered Apprenticeships for Educators" [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/education-labor-departments-announce-new-efforts-to-advance-teacher-preparation-programs-and-expand-registered-apprenticeships-educators>.

The first registered apprenticeship, the Tennessee Teacher Occupation Apprenticeship, requires candidates to complete 6,000 hours of paid, job-embedded training and 1,800 hours of classroom instruction. Unlike most apprenticeships, program completion results in candidates receiving a baccalaureate degree.<sup>80</sup> The apprenticeship strategy stemmed from an earlier effort by the Tennessee Department of Education to use federal pandemic-relief funds to support district adoption of Grow Your Own models.<sup>81</sup>

Like residencies, apprenticeships are an intriguing approach because candidates are paid to learn. Since candidates are employed by school systems, they are also eligible for healthcare and retirement benefits. Also, candidates do not pay for training, removing another barrier to professional entry.

As state agencies, school systems, and educator preparation providers design apprenticeships, they must submit their plans to USDOL for approval as registered programs. When the department approves educator apprenticeships, states and districts can leverage federal Workforce Investment Opportunity Act (WIOA) funds.<sup>82</sup>

#### CONNECTING THE DOTS: THE BENEFITS OF PROACTIVE RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

- **BUILT-IN RECRUITMENT ADVANTAGE:** Districts invite candidates to apply for clinical placements. School leaders can use internships, residencies, and apprenticeships to extend contingent employment offers.
- **INCREASE PROGRAM AFFORDABILITY:** Individuals participating in residency and apprenticeship programs receive a salary or stipend. Some programs also provide tuition relief and loan forgiveness.
- **ADDRESS THE HIGH COST OF TEACHER ATTRITION:** Local school systems spend between \$10,000 and \$20,000 to recruit, train, and induct early-career educators. When educators leave their positions, districts must invest more funds to replace them.

#### MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

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. The time and resources that school districts invest in teacher candidates as pre-employees could create more favorable recruitment conditions than relying on passive recruitment strategies like career fairs.

School systems will be most successful when they partner with EPPs and community leaders to develop a comprehensive strategy to recruit new teachers. While most teacher residencies and apprenticeships require a large upfront investment from school systems, the economic model could make more sense when one considers how much districts spend on replacing teachers and the cost of inducting, coaching, and mentoring teachers who leave the profession.

80 Tennessee Department of Education. n.d. *Tennessee Teacher Apprenticeship Models: A Component of Tennessee's Grow Your Own Initiative*. Retrieved from [https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/grow-your-own/TDOE\\_GYO\\_Models\\_Overview.pdf](https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/grow-your-own/TDOE_GYO_Models_Overview.pdf).

81 Excel in Ed. 2023, May 10. *Tennessee's Grow Your Own Program: A Progress Report*. Retrieved from <https://excelined.org/2023/05/10/tennessees-grow-your-own-program-a-progress-report/>.

82 Workforce GPS. 2023, November 30. "K-12 Educator Registered Apprenticeship Resources." Retrieved from <https://apprenticeship.workforcegps.org/resources/2023/01/12/19/01/K-12-Teacher-Registered-Apprenticeship-Resources>.

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.

ACTION STEPS	
POLICY	The Georgia General Assembly creates and funds a statewide pilot program for districts to develop innovative school-based programming for teacher candidates.
PRACTICE	<p>State leaders convene a working group to identify high-impact practices associated with recruiting a more diverse, well-qualified cohort of teacher candidates. Instead of lowering entrance standards, the group should explore how to recruit individuals to the profession by offering paid, job-embedded training while they earn their teaching licenses.</p> <p>State leaders work with school and community partners to develop toolkits that help school systems adapt and strengthen their candidate preparation strategies.</p>
PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING	State agencies develop a communications campaign that focuses on multiple pathways to professional entry, including paraprofessional pathways and Grow Your Own recruitment efforts.

ISSUE 7

THE SUPERINTENDENT STRUGGLE:  
SUPPORTING DISTRICT LEADERS THROUGH  
UNPRECEDENTED TIMES

ISSUE OVERVIEW

In 2022, nearly two out of three superintendents (63%) responding to a national survey reported worrying about their mental health and well-being. Forty percent of those surveyed also reported feeling threatened in their positions as district leaders. Researchers administering the survey contend that political polarization and divisiveness of the public-education discourse have contributed to environments where superintendents have less time to focus on instructional leadership.<sup>84</sup>

ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- Local school district superintendent turnover rates have grown steadily since the beginning of the pandemic.
- While the research literature is fairly robust on the causes and consequences of teacher and principal turnover, recent research suggests that the local district superintendent role has become more important because of increasing social and political pressures.<sup>83</sup>
- State policymakers must develop formal induction and professional growth strategies to broaden the pipeline of district leaders and address the working conditions that contribute to high turnover.

The average tenure of a local Georgia district K-12 superintendent is 2.8 years, about five months shorter than the national average. Between January 2022 and August 2023, at least 51 superintendents left their positions, a statewide turnover rate of nearly 30%. Two-thirds of those superintendents retired. The remaining third left their positions for a variety of reasons, including contract nonrenewals or buyouts, taking a job in another school district, or exiting public education for positions in the private and nonprofit sectors.<sup>85</sup>

Generally, 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 superin-

tendent pipeline is to first repair the teacher and principal leadership pipelines. By providing better preparation and support to education leaders within schools, state and district policymakers can create more favorable conditions for those practitioners that could soon assume top district leadership positions.

This issue brief describes the environmental and demographic realities that local Georgia K-12 school districts are facing when recruiting superintendent candidates. It then presents three opportunities for state and district leaders to mend broken leadership pipelines.

83 Domina, T., A. Hashim, C. Kearney, L. Pham, and C. Smith. 2022, April. *COVID-19 and the System Resilience of Public Education: A View from North Carolina*. Urban Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/COVID-19%20and%20the%20System%20Resilience%20of%20Public%20Education%20A%20View%20from%20North%20Carolina.pdf>.

84 White, R.S., M.P. Evans, and J.R. Malin. 2023, January 30. "Political Battles in Suburbia." Phi Delta Kappan. Retrieved from <https://kappanonline.org/political-battles-in-suburbia-white-evans-malin/>.

85 Joyner, T. 2023, August 17. "Georgia Sees Surge in School Superintendent Exodus through Retirement and Other Departures." State Affairs. Retrieved from <https://stateaffairs.com/georgia/education/school-superintendents-leaving-retirement-departure/>.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Environment and Demographics: Two Factors that Aggravate Leadership Development Efforts

The pandemic engendered anger, anxiety, and conflict in schools and communities. Since the pandemic began in 2020, district leaders have been forced to navigate an increasing number of issues that could disrupt learning such as resentment and confusion over issues like mask mandates, debates over critical race theory and divisive concepts, and rancorous school board meetings. Regardless of leadership experience or tenure, superintendents might not have the political capital to pursue innovative strategies in the face of this divisive rhetoric and polarization.

Like the teaching profession, the district leader workforce is graying and greening at the same time. While the average superintendent tenure continues to decline, a significant percentage of superintendents are reaching retirement age. Generally, the professionals replacing retirees have less experience or are new to the superintendent role. As retirement-age professionals leave, local school boards draw from a narrower pool of available talent.

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT:  
STUDYING THE SUPERINTENDENCY

In spring 2023, the Broad Center, Scale Initiative, and Annenberg Institute brought together 16 scholars who study district leaders. The scholars identified three areas where current research is limited.

- 1. ROLES: What knowledge, skills, and dispositions do superintendents need to succeed in their roles?
- 2. PEOPLE: How can states and districts recruit, hire, and support superintendents, especially females and people of color?
- 3. OUTCOMES: What do we know about superintendent effectiveness? How can states and districts assess effectiveness?

The scholars produced a Call for Research that demonstrates why collecting evidence on superintendents is crucial to understanding how district leaders build and sustain system improvement.<sup>86</sup> Collecting data and sponsoring research on the needs and capacities of district leaders should contribute to preparation and ongoing professional learning strategies that increase superintendents' effectiveness.

Also, current superintendents do not reflect the demographics of the public-school students and educators. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 71.5% of school superintendents are men. Nearly two-thirds of top district leaders (65.3%) are white.<sup>87</sup> Comparatively, in 2022, 63% of the K-12 public-school population were students of color.<sup>88</sup> The lack of diversity among current superintendents requires systemic action, specifically increasing the number of women and people of color in the district leadership pipeline.

86 Annenberg Institute, the Broad Center, and the Scale Initiative. 2023, August. *Studying the Superintendency: A Call for Research*. Retrieved from <https://watson.brown.edu/files/watson/imce/news/ResearchBriefs/2023/Studying%20the%20Superintendency%20-%20Call%20for%20Research.pdf>.

87 Zippia. 2023, July 21. "School Superintendent Demographics and Statistics in the US." Retrieved from <https://www.zippia.com/school-superintendent-jobs/demographics/>.

88 Governor's Office of Student Achievement. n.d. "K-12 Public Schools Report Card." Retrieved from <https://gaawards.gosa.ga.gov/analytics/saw.dll?dashboard>.

## Two Ways State Policymakers and Local Boards Can Mend Broken Leadership Pipelines

### Recruitment and preparation

Most superintendents started their pathway to district 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.

#### POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- Develop standards of excellence for superintendents. Use the draft standards to redesign district and university preparation strategies.
- Establish programs for aspiring district leaders. State agencies, regional education services agencies, districts, and state nonprofits are strong candidates for leading aspiring leadership programs. The Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) and Georgia School Superintendents Association (GSSA) already offer robust programming for district leaders.

### Coaching and professional growth

Superintendents 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. Current professional learning programs for district leaders do not adequately prepare school leaders to serve as instructional leaders, culture builders, community engagers, and fiscal managers. State leaders should support professional learning that emphasizes ongoing, practical experiences and that expands access to the collective expertise of veteran leaders.

#### POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- Create a superintendents-in-residence program, a fellowship opportunity where veteran district leaders coach and mentor early-career superintendents.
- Provide coaching for early-career superintendents that emphasizes shared governance with school boards and techniques to support effective family and community engagement.

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT:  
GEORGIA SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS ASSOCIATION

GSSA supports the preparation and professional growth of district leaders through several initiatives.

The Superintendent Professional Development Program (SPDP) is a two-year program focused on promoting “competency in strategic leadership, school governance, community relations, and organizational leadership.” Open to current school and district leaders, SPDP currently serves 25 aspiring superintendents.<sup>89</sup>

GSSA invites early-career superintendents to participate in the Superintendent Induction Program. Inductees receive 18 months of coaching from active and retired superintendents through the Executive Leadership Coaching Program. Participants also take the Highlands Ability Battery, an assessment that generates useful insights about their strengths and areas for growth. Inductees network with their peers and receive professional learning at workshops offered during regularly scheduled conferences (GSSA Bootstrap and the Georgia Association of Educational Leaders Winter Conference).<sup>90</sup>

GSSA also offers professional learning for veteran superintendents. The Senior Executive Leadership Program allows experienced leaders to deepen their skills related to public-education advocacy. Participants complete three professional learning models and attend the American Association of School Administrators Advocacy Conference, where they learn more about how to influence the legislative process.

In addition to programming for aspiring, early-career, and veteran superintendents, GSSA also operates three institutes that provide specific instruction on skills that district leaders must master to be effective: preparing and administering system budgets, managing district human resources, and understanding how to build and renovate facilities.<sup>91</sup>

CONNECTING THE DOTS:  
STRENGTHENING THE DISTRICT LEADER PIPELINE

Current preparation, induction, and professional learning supports for district leaders are inadequate. State policymakers can address this challenge by creating a coherent district leadership development strategy. The Georgia Department of Education and the Georgia Professional Standards Commission could draw on the collective expertise of professional development providers like GLISI and GSSA to expand access to coaching and induction supports for new district leaders.

89 Georgia School Superintendents Association. 2023, April 25. “Superintendent Professional Development Program.” Retrieved from <https://www.gssaweb.org/superintendent-pof-dev/>.

90 Georgia School Superintendents Association. 2023, April 25. “New Superintendent Induction Program.” Retrieved from <https://www.gssaweb.org/new-superintendent-induction-program/>.

91 Georgia School Superintendents Association. n.d. “Professional Development Programs.” Retrieved from <https://www.gssaweb.org/eduportal-3/>.



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. No resource toolkits were available to help district leaders navigate the pandemic. The complexity of the education leadership role and its responsibility has magnified gaps in preparation and professional learning for district superintendents. Georgia must have strong leaders and support the development of a leadership pipeline that is equally distributed across this diverse state. A more robust induction and mentoring system for early-career superintendents could enhance district leaders’ capacity to formulate strategies and support practices that enable schools and communities to thrive.

ACTION STEPS	
POLICY	<p>State policymakers fund induction and professional development efforts modeled on leadership content delivered by the Georgia Association of Educational Leaders, GSSA, Georgia School Boards Association, and GLISI.</p> <p>State agencies collect district and school leadership data related to job satisfaction, perceptions of working conditions, and professional learning and coaching opportunities.</p>
PRACTICE	<p>Regional education service agencies facilitate leadership academies for aspiring superintendents.</p>
PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING	<p>Professional organizations coordinate outreach around the role of school and district leaders, as well as how local school boards support school improvement and community involvement.</p>

ISSUE 8

THE FUNDING CLIFF:  
MOVING FORWARD AFTER THE MONEY  
RUNS OUT

ISSUE OVERVIEW

Between 2020 and 2021, Georgia school districts received \$5.94 billion in federal funds to mitigate the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>92</sup> Initially, school systems used these Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to cover the unanticipated

costs associated with the immediate shift to digital learning in spring 2020 and to ensure student health and safety when they returned to school the subsequent fall.

As conditions stabilized, district leaders moved from crisis to recovery, using ESSER funds to help address learning loss and the non-academic risk factors aggravated by the pandemic.<sup>93</sup>

The ESSER program consisted of three funding rounds, the first two of which ended in September 2022 and September 2023, respectively. Most of the federal funds (65%) were allocated through the final grant — called ESSER III or the American Rescue Plan Act.

ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- The final federal pandemic-relief program expires in September 2024.
- Districts must determine how to maintain promising practices when they might lack the funds to continue them at pandemic-era scale.
- Since most districts lack the time and resources to assess the effectiveness of ESSER-funded initiatives, state leaders must develop comprehensive solutions to address district capacity constraints.

TABLE 8.1 GEORGIA’S ESSER FUNDING ALLOCATIONS

LEGISLATION	PASSAGE	TOTAL FUNDING	DISTRICT FUNDING	FUNDS EXPIRE
Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES 1)	3/27/2020	\$457,169,852	\$411,452, 867	9/30/2022
Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CARES 2)	12/27/2020	\$1,892,092,618	\$1,702,883,356	9/30/2023
American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA)	3/11/2021	\$4,249,371,244	\$3,824,434,120	9/30/2024

92 Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "ESSER Funding." Georgia Insights. Retrieved from <https://www.georgiainsights.com/cares-act.html>.  
93 Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. 2023, November 30. CARES Impact Study: Year Two Report. Retrieved from [https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CARES-Impact-Study-Year-Two-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CARES-Impact-Study-Year-Two-Report_Final.pdf).

In the 2022 edition of the *Top Ten Issues to Watch*, the Georgia Partnership asked, “How can districts use the nonrecurring ESSER funds to ensure the continuation of practices that accelerate student learning and alleviate non-academic learning barriers?”

After two years, the Georgia Partnership asks a different but related question: **How will districts maintain promising practices when the funding used to stand up these programs and strategies is no longer available?**

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 ESSER-funded strategies before the program expires.

## ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

### What Are the Primary Challenges Confronting District and School Leaders?

#### *Continuity of service*

**KEY QUESTION:** How do we maintain the delivery of instructional and non-academic student support strategies created or expanded during the ESSER funding period?

District superintendents and school boards often need to make dramatic shifts in strategy when revenue streams dry up. The stakes are higher for school systems serving larger percentages of students living in poverty because these districts received larger per-student ESSER allocations.<sup>94</sup> These school systems will likely see more dramatic impacts to their budgets when ESSER funds expire than low-poverty school systems.<sup>95</sup>

Utilizing a clear, multiyear strategic plan, district leaders and local boards might prevent short-term budget decisions that have far-reaching negative consequences for students, educators, and the community at-large. Superintendents and board members usually undergo a five-year strategic planning process in which they identify school and community missions, objectives, and expected outcomes.<sup>96</sup> However, the Georgia Partnership urges a more thorough community-based approach where large-scale initiatives fit within the strategic plan. District-level budgets then reflect the values and priorities of stakeholders and the community. This process can also help districts faced with more limited funds prioritize investments that contribute to the success of school and community initiatives.

#### *Capacity constraints*

**KEY QUESTIONS:** 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?

Most school systems lack the time and capacity to evaluate the relative effectiveness of different programs and strategies. The impending ESSER deadline complicates district operations because leaders must choose what strategies to continue, adapt, or discard, with limited analysis of what works for students and educators.

94 Jordan, P.W., and B. DiMarco. 2022, June 7. *How District Poverty Levels Influence COVID-Relief Spending*. FutureEd. Retrieved from <https://www.future-ed.org/how-district-poverty-levels-influence-covid-relief-spending/>.

95 Roza, M., and K. Silberstein. 2023, September 12. “The ESSER Fiscal Cliff Will Have Serious Implications for Student Equity.” Brookings. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-esser-fiscal-cliff-will-have-serious-implications-for-student-equity/>.

96 Georgia School Boards Association. n.d. “Strategic Planning Services.” Retrieved from <https://gsba.com/member-services/strategic-improvement-planning/>.

When comparing the benefits and costs of various initiatives, district and school leaders should carefully identify the required level of investment. For instance, one system implementing a new reading strategy across all elementary schools might consider the cost of purchasing the curriculum and related instructional materials, as well as the consultant fee for the delivery of professional learning. Another district implementing a similar strategy might also include dedicated reading coaches and academic interventionists in its calculation. The second district's budgeting more accurately reflects the full cost of implementing an initiative because the instructional support staff are critical to ensuring the reading strategy is successful.

*District funding challenges*

**KEY QUESTION:** How do districts maintain effective investments when confronted with increased operational costs while facing a significant decrease in overall funding levels?

In January 2023, the Georgia Department of Community Health announced that insurance premiums for educators enrolled in the State Health Benefit Plan would increase by 67%. The monthly employer contribution will increase by \$635 per month, which will place a considerable strain on district budgets.<sup>97</sup>

While the Georgia General Assembly provided some relief to districts by phasing in the same employer premiums for noncertified employees, the future cost of premium increases will affect the number of paraprofessionals that districts can retain. Based on a median \$30,000 paraprofessional salary, the annual premium increases represent an 18% rise in personnel costs.<sup>98</sup>

In addition, the cost of transporting students to and from school has increased over the last 30 years, but the state share has declined. In 2022, the state covered about 20.3% of school transportation costs, with districts covering the remaining 79.7% — about \$877 million.<sup>99</sup> Rising fuel and labor costs contribute to the diversion of local funds to school operations that could have been dedicated to student instruction and support.

As ESSER funds expire, to meet these increasing operational costs, districts may have to cut back on tutoring, afterschool and summer learning strategies, and activities associated with maintaining student and educator mental health and wellness.

**RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT: CARES IMPACT STUDY**

The Georgia Partnership launched the CARES Impact Study in 2021 to understand how LEAs (local education agencies) were using federal ESSER funds to accelerate student learning and improve their well-being. Funded by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), the study elevates district leader perspectives through annual district leader surveys and interviews. The Year Two Report, released in November 2023, identifies challenges LEA leaders have encountered, describes promising practices from the work, and provides recommendations for how state and community leaders can help districts mitigate the negative effects of ESSER funds expiring.

97 Amy, J. 2023, February 1. "Georgia House Aims to Ease Health Insurance Costs on Skills." Associated Press. Retrieved from <https://apnews.com/article/georgia-state-government-subsidies-education-taxes-92100dce9f0e61fc94f901f0d6410c93>.  
98 Before the rate increase, the salary and benefits cost for a paraprofessional making \$30,000 per year was \$41,340. A 67% increase in the employer contribution will result in an increased personnel cost of \$7,620 per year, per employee.  
99 Seider, J.J. 2023, May 8. "Georgia's Struggling School Bus System: Finding Funds and Drivers." State Affairs. <https://stateaffairs.com/georgia/education/georgia-school-bus-driver-shortages-aging-buses-pt2/>.

### MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

#### From Recovery to Renewal

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 ESSER investments ending in September 2024, the Georgia Partnership recommends that school systems and communities begin the third phase: renewal. After having undergone a traumatic group experience like the pandemic and finding ways to confront the negative consequences, stakeholders need to make sense of how to move forward. 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 provide just-in-time technical support for districts.

ACTION STEPS	
POLICY	<p>The Georgia General Assembly revises the Quality Basic Education formula to address the effects of poverty on educational outcomes and emerging district needs, such as transportation, counseling, school safety, and physical and mental health supports.</p> <p>State leaders support efforts to help districts evaluate the reach, impact, and effectiveness of their various initiatives/strategies — and how those factors affect budgeting.</p>
PRACTICE	<p>District leaders review current school staffing models to address students’ unmet instructional and non-academic needs.</p>
PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING	<p>District leaders partner with students, parents, educators, and community members to update strategic plans, incorporating the lessons learned during the pandemic era.</p>

ISSUE 9

CORPORATE CONNECTIONS:  
REIMAGINING DELIVERY  
OF POST-SECONDARY TRAINING

ISSUE OVERVIEW

Georgia's economy grew by 2.4% (as measured by real gross domestic product) in the first quarter of 2023, outpacing the national average of 2%.<sup>100</sup> From July 1, 2022, to June 30, 2023, the state attracted \$24 billion in corporate investments that, in turn, will create 38,400 jobs.<sup>101</sup>

ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- 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 rethinking their relationships with post-secondary systems to address workforce misalignment by serving as advisors and external experts, post-secondary program partners and investors, and champions for state-level strategies.
- State and local leaders should invite the corporate community to function as hands-on partners in restructuring the post-secondary student experience.

The state unemployment rate — as high as 12.3% in April 2020 — is now below pre-pandemic levels.<sup>102</sup>

While these data points suggest Georgia has weathered the turbulence brought by the pandemic, three underlying trends indicate trouble ahead.

1. Businesses responded to pandemic pressures by accelerating investments in automation and artificial intelligence. These investments endanger the job prospects and earning potential of the 2 million workers in Georgia who do not have a post-secondary credential.<sup>103</sup>
2. Nearly 30% of adults aged 25 to 64 in Georgia are not working.<sup>104</sup> The lack of affordable housing, transportation, and childcare contribute to depressed workforce participation.
3. Employers currently are struggling to find workers to fill their open positions, especially for STEM and technical roles.<sup>105</sup>

100 USA Facts. 2023, August 30. "Economy of Georgia." <https://usafacts.org/topics/economy/state/georgia/>.

101 Georgia Department of Economic Development. 2023, August 8. "Georgia Breaks Economic Development Records for Third Year in a Row" [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.georgia.org/press-release/georgia-breaks-economic-development-records-third-year-row>.

102 St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank. n.d. "Unemployment Rate in Georgia." Retrieved from <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/GAUR>.

103 Southern Regional Education Board. 2020, November. "Georgia 2020 State Workforce Outlook." Retrieved from <https://www.sreb.org/publication/georgia-1>.

104 St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank. n.d. "Labor Force Participation Rate for Georgia." Retrieved from <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/LBSSA13>.

105 Technology Association of Georgia. 2021, June 18. "STEM Careers Plentiful in Georgia, But Talent Pipeline Running Dry." Retrieved from <https://www.tagonline.org/tagwire/stem-careers-plentiful-in-georgia-but-talent-pipeline-running-dry/>.

To address these underlying trends, the Georgia Partnership convened stakeholders — policy-makers, nonprofit and community leaders, and corporate partners — to identify ways to improve post-secondary and workforce readiness. This work culminated in the launch of the *EdQuest Georgia 2023*, an initiative focused on increasing the percentage of adults aged 25 to 64 with post-secondary credentials — degrees, certificates, certifications, and occupational licenses — that lead to jobs that provide a livable wage. To focus efforts, the Georgia Partnership has set a 10-year post-secondary attainment goal of 65%. **We call this goal our North Star.**<sup>106</sup>

The Georgia Partnership created the EdQuest Georgia State Policy Plan to provide concrete recommendations on how to start the journey toward the North Star. One of the eight priorities outlined in the plan is corporate and civic involvement.<sup>107</sup> Elevating corporate investments in education and economic development efforts was intentional, as the Georgia Partnership has identified numerous efforts of industry representatives broadening employee pipelines through strategic partnerships with school district, post-secondary, and workforce partners.

This issue brief presents three ways that the corporate community can contribute to education and economic development efforts in Georgia by partnering with the state's post-secondary institutions to reimagine how to deliver education and training.

## ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

### What Roles Could the Corporate Community Play in Program Delivery?

#### *Advisors and external experts*

Initial employer engagement often results from one-off requests, such as instructors inviting industry leaders to present to their students or employers hosting a workplace visit for trainees. As both sides develop familiarity and rapport, post-secondary leaders could ask for input on curriculum design, instructional delivery, and student assessment. Industry representatives provide their expertise, and students benefit from instruction and work-based experiences that are more closely aligned to employers' skill demands.

#### *Program partners and investors*

While state efforts to increase the number of Georgians with post-secondary credentials is critical to sustaining the state's economic competitiveness, employers can meet immediate workforce needs by investing in career-connected programming offered by post-secondary institutions.

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. Employers can also partner with education leaders at the local and state levels to create education-to-career pipelines for their specific workforce sector that prepare Georgians for high-demand careers.

106 Smith, M. 2023, August 22. "The North Star: Securing Georgia's Future by 2033." Retrieved from <https://gpee.org/edquest-georgia/northstar/>.

107 Smith, M. 2023, August 22. Priority: Civic and Corporate Involvement. Retrieved from <https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/EdQuest-Civic-and-Corporate-Involvement.pdf>.



PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT:  
THE SOUTHWIRE 12 FOR LIFE MODEL

In 2007, fewer than two in three students (64%) graduated from high schools in Carroll County, Georgia. Recognizing the need to boost graduation rates, Southwire, a local manufacturer, partnered with the Carroll County School District to create the 12 for Life model.<sup>108</sup>

High school students enroll in the state's CTAE (Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education) manufacturing pathway. Like the other career clusters, the pathway includes three courses. Once students complete the course sequence, they take an end-of-pathway assessment. Program completers then participate in work-based learning opportunities at Southwire facilities.

While students continue their education, they may participate in the Youth Apprenticeship Program. The apprenticeship experience requires students to complete 720 hours of job-embedded training and earn industry-recognized credentials. The model is popular and effective because of the multiple, progressive milestones. For instance, students can complete the high school portion of the career pathway or continue to work with Southwire to earn post-secondary credentials of value.

Currently, 70 students participate in the 12 for Life initiative. In November 2023, Southwire opened a new industrial maintenance lab that serves 15 students. Students completing the program will receive an in-demand certification that will increase their earning potential when they enter the workforce.

As the program matures, other school systems and workforce partners are watching. One example is in the Augusta area, where Textron Specialized Vehicles partnered with the Richmond County School District to create the Reaching Potential through Manufacturing program.

*System champions and state-level advocates*

The corporate community should also engage with legislative and state agency leaders to ensure greater alignment between state priorities and employer needs.

To this end, the Georgia Partnership has identified three ways industry representatives can advocate for aligned education and workforce development strategies:

1. Champion strategies that address regional and statewide workforce needs such as expanded state funding for registered apprenticeships.
2. Provide advice and technical recommendations to state legislators on how to expand access to and execute specific programs and strategies related to in-demand workforce needs.
3. Serve as surrogates for key education and workforce messages.

108 12 for Life. n.d. "Program Overview." Retrieved from <https://12forlifecarrollga.schoolinsites.com/programoverview>.

Over time, the *EdQuest Georgia Framework* provides a roadmap for developing a work-ready post-secondary system. The EdQuest initiative highlights the following strategies:

- Increasing the transferability of nontraditional credentials, such as noncredit workforce programs, short-term certificate and certifications, occupational licenses, and apprenticeships
- Learning from rapid workforce training initiatives like the TCSG's Quick Start program as a model for investing in and improving other technical college programs of study
- Building on recent credit transfer and program articulation efforts to create a system of stackable credentials.

### CONNECTING THE DOTS: CORPORATE CONNECTIONS DRIVE SYSTEM CHANGE

Corporate leaders can connect with post-secondary efforts at a variety of different entry points. Some businesses identify an immediate need and partner with post-secondary institutions to address it. Other corporations might work through industry and trade groups to support stronger alignment between credit and noncredit workforce programs.

Regardless of how corporate leaders engage with post-secondary partners, the resulting connections enable both communities to pursue joint strategies that increase economic and workforce development activity across Georgia.

## MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

Career-connected learning occurs in several venues: high schools, technical colleges, workforce training centers, and private workplaces. While short-term credential programs are often more affordable, flexible, and convenient than degree programs, the long-term benefits of certificates, certifications, and occupational licenses may be unclear to students. In prioritizing short-term post-secondary programs, state leaders should commit to a long-term goal of creating one career readiness system with multiple pathways and a system of stackable credentials.

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.

At the Georgia Partnership, we remain hopeful and committed to success because of the growing evidence of innovative community and corporate strategies cropping up across the Peach State. By collaborating with leaders at all levels, the corporate community can be a hands-on partner in moving Georgia forward toward the North Star.

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 through financial aid or learn and earn opportunities, (2) participating in pathways construction and credential stacking, and (3) providing career counseling, advisement, and mentoring.

ACTION STEPS	
POLICY	State policymakers and post-secondary system leaders expand incentives for community and workforce partners to co-develop career-connected content and curricula, while also expanding access to real-world/applied-learning opportunities, such as internships, externships, apprenticeships, and other cooperative opportunities.
PRACTICE	State agencies build local leaders' capacity to create seamless career pathways centered on regional workforce needs through training, technical assistance, and resource toolkits.
PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING	State and community leaders collaborate with post-secondary institutions and industry representatives to create, revise, or expand high-demand career pathways aligned to regional needs.

ISSUE 10

1.25 MILLION MORE CREDENTIALS:  
HOW WE REACH THE NORTH STAR

ISSUE OVERVIEW

Over the last two years, the Georgia Partnership convened a group of policymakers, nonprofit and community leaders, and corporate partners to identify ways to strengthen Georgia’s education and workforce strategies. These efforts culminated in the release of the *EdQuest*

*Georgia State Policy Plan* in August 2023. The document outlines eight priorities that state and community leaders should consider over the next two years to move closer to a post-secondary attainment target of 65%. For the Post-Secondary and Workforce Readiness priority, the Partnership outlined three ways to reach the North Star:

ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- 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: Georgians without a high school diploma, residents with some post-secondary credit but no credential, and current workers at risk of being unemployed or underemployed because of macroeconomic changes.

1. Increase the percentage of Georgians with degrees and nondegree post-secondary credentials (e.g., certificates, certifications, technical diplomas, occupational licenses, registered apprenticeships).
2. Accelerate attainment rates among Black and Hispanic/Latino adults by 30% over 2021 levels by 2033.
3. Expand access to post-secondary programs for nontraditional students, adult learners, disengaged youth, and low-income residents.<sup>109</sup>

To reach the North Star target, Georgia will need to add at least 125,000 more credentials per year for a decade. State and community leaders can support increased post-secondary attainment through homegrown productivity and by attracting credentialed workers from other states via economic development initiatives.



109 Smith, M. 2023, August 22. *EdQuest Georgia 2023 State Policy Plan*. GPPE. Retrieved from [https://gppe.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/EdQuest-Georgia-State-Plan-Final\\_8-21.pdf](https://gppe.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/EdQuest-Georgia-State-Plan-Final_8-21.pdf).

The Georgia Partnership urges state and community leaders to secure Georgia’s economic future and improve individual and community well-being through strategies that support educational achievement at all levels. This issue brief focuses on targeted strategies for three groups: residents who lack high school diplomas, Georgians who have enrolled in post-secondary education and training programs but did not earn credentials, and workers at risk of unemployment or underemployment because of shifts in workforce needs and employer demand.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

What Is a Post-Secondary Credential? What Determines Whether a Credential Has Value?

Individuals earn credentials when they complete post-secondary programs. The credential signifies that the recipient has mastered the content and skills associated with their programs of study. Roughly half of Georgians (51%) aged 25 to 64 have earned a post-secondary degree or nondegree credential. Most post-secondary credentials are degrees, such as an associate or bachelor’s degree (44.7%).<sup>110</sup> The state is unlikely to reach the North Star of 65% attainment without a significant increase in the percentage of residents who have earned short-term credentials like skills-based certificates and certifications or occupational licenses and the completion of apprenticeships.

Although a focus on increasing overall attainment rates is crucial to individual well-being, community vitality, and long-term economic security, earned credentials also must have workforce value. While a standardized definition does not currently exist, state leaders can define “credentials of value” relative to the wage and employment outcomes that recipients have earned. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has developed a specific definition called the minimum value threshold, which compares the median wages of residents with post-secondary credentials to those with only high school diplomas.<sup>111</sup>

What Strategies Should State and Institutional Leaders Use to Increase Post-Secondary Attainment for the Three Subgroups?

In 2021, over 3.11 million Georgians aged 25 to 64 had not yet earned any post-secondary credential.<sup>112</sup> Between 2024 and the end of 2033, state leaders must prioritize strategies to move each subgroup represented in Table 10.1 to the next education or work milestone.

TABLE 10.1 GEORGIAN’S AGED 25–64 WITHOUT A POST-SECONDARY CREDENTIAL

SUBGROUP	ESTIMATED POPULATION (2021)	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL POPULATION
Georgians without a high school diploma or equivalency	578,957	10.2%
Georgians with only a high school diploma	1,454,361	25.7%
Georgians with post-secondary experience but no credential	1,085,593	13.0%

110 Lumina Foundation. n.d. *A Stronger Nation: Georgia's 2021 Progress Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/#/progress/state/GA>.  
111 Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. 2023, May 1. "Ensuring Students Attain Credentials of Value." Retrieved from <https://data.highered.texas.gov/credentials-of-value/>.  
112 Lumina Foundation. n.d. "Download Data." Retrieved from <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/static/downloads-data/GA-time.zip>.

### *Adult learners with no high school credential*

The Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) offers several programs that prepare adults for post-secondary and workforce training programs, including adult basic education (ABE), high school equivalency (HSE), and English as a Second Language classes.<sup>113</sup> According to a recent report commissioned by the TCSG, the Office of Adult Education funds a network of 228 ABE/HSE provider sites across 145 of Georgia's 159 counties.<sup>114</sup> Between July 2022 and June 2023, 3,463 residents enrolled in ABE/HSE programs earned a high school diploma or equivalency.<sup>115</sup> Although the number of high school credentials earned by adult learners increased by 23% between 2022 and 2023, current efforts will not significantly decrease the percentage of working adults who lack high school credentials.

**EDQUEST STRATEGY:** 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*

Thirteen percent of Georgians have enrolled in a post-secondary program but did not earn a credential. As an April 2023 report indicates, adults older than age 35 are less likely than adults aged 16 to 34 to re-enroll in post-secondary programs, regardless of the number of credits earned.<sup>116</sup> However, state and institutional leaders can increase post-secondary achievement by focusing on three subgroups: near completers, potential completers, and recent stop-outs.

Near completers have earned 75% or more of the credits required to receive a degree or nondegree credential. For near completers, institutions should use proactive/intrusive communication techniques to entice them to re-enroll to complete their degree or certificate program.

Potential completers are those students who have earned more than two years of post-secondary credits. For potential completers, the two post-secondary systems should review transcripts to see if these Georgians have satisfied most or all the requirements for an associate degree or short-term credential. Working with institutional leaders, the system office can identify candidates for reverse transfer: those who have met the requirements for a sub-baccalaureate credential. By awarding an intermediate credential, leaders can help potential completers establish momentum toward earning more-advanced degrees. Institutional leaders can also reach out to potential completers to see if they would like to use current credits as electives toward a different program of study, reducing the time required to earn their credentials.

Recent stop-outs are students who withdrew from post-secondary programs within the last 12 months. Students who do not re-enroll within a year of stopping out are less likely to earn credentials in their lifetime.

**EDQUEST STRATEGIES:** 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.

113 Technical College System of Georgia. n.d. "Adult Education." Retrieved from <https://www.tcsg.edu/adult-education/>.

114 Adult Literacy Research Center. 2022, December 15. Supply and Demand of Adult Basic Education and High School Equivalency Services in Georgia. Retrieved from [https://www.tcsg.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Final-Report\\_03.07.2023\\_TCSG-SupplyDemand\\_FY2022\\_IJZF.pdf](https://www.tcsg.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Final-Report_03.07.2023_TCSG-SupplyDemand_FY2022_IJZF.pdf).

115 Technical College System of Georgia. n.d. "Adult Education: High School Equivalency Graduates." Retrieved from [https://www.tcsg.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Scorecard\\_-HSE\\_Graduates-MES0205.pdf](https://www.tcsg.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Scorecard_-HSE_Graduates-MES0205.pdf).

116 National Student Clearinghouse. 2023, April. Some College No Credential Student Outcomes: Annual Progress Report — Academic Year 2021/22. Retrieved from <https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SCNCRReport2023.pdf>.

### NATIONAL MODEL: DEGREES WHEN DUE

Between 2018 and 2021, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) managed a national initiative in which more than 200 institutions across 23 states explored ways to encourage adult learners to re-enroll and complete post-secondary credentials.

In an April 2022 report evaluating the initiative, researchers found that 10% of the “some college no degree” (SCND) population had completed two or more years of coursework.<sup>117</sup> Some of these students transferred from a community or technical college to a four-year institution, not knowing that they had met the criteria to earn an associate degree.

IHEP provided technical assistance to help institutions identify policies and practices that contribute to students leaving before they earn credentials. Institutions reviewed transcripts to see how specific courses align with available degrees, a process called degree auditing. Institutional leaders then tailored communications to near completers about the benefits of re-enrollment. Two specific strategies — the retroactive awarding of degrees and learner re-engagement practices — are ways that institutions can support credential completion for SCND students.

#### At-risk adults

Nearly half of Georgia’s adults aged 25 to 64 have not earned a post-secondary credential. According to a November 2020 report released by the Southern Regional Education Board, this group of workers are at risk of unemployment and underemployment by 2025 due to the pandemic and the corporate sector’s accelerated investments in automation and artificial intelligence.<sup>118</sup>

By transforming some positions and eliminating others altogether, rapid advances in automation and changes in global economic trends have increasingly displaced adults with no degree or credential beyond a high school diploma.

TCSG institutions and community workforce training providers use federal Workforce Investment Opportunity Act funds to provide rapid workforce training to adults displaced by job loss or who lack the technical skills to be competitive candidates for high-demand, high-wage jobs.<sup>119</sup>

Employers also can use the TCSG’s Quick Start program to deliver skills-based instruction to current employees.

In both cases, state leaders could provide financial support to employees, trainees, or students to pursue post-secondary study, especially if programs align with in-demand career fields. Further, the same strategy could encourage employers to do the same: partner with the public post-secondary systems to help insulate at-risk workers from the risk of unemployment and underemployment.

**EDQUEST STRATEGY:** Reward academic credit for the completion of nondegree, noncredit workforce credentials to allow working adults who completed short-term programs to continue their education.

117 Davis, L., J. Poci, J.L. Taylor, S.A. Kauppila, and P. Rubin. 2022, April. *Lighting the Path to Remove Systemic Barriers in Higher Education and Award Earned Postsecondary Credentials through IHEP’s Degrees When Due Initiative*. Institute for Higher Education Policy. Retrieved from [https://www.ihep.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/IHEP\\_DWD\\_fullreport\\_Web.pdf](https://www.ihep.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/IHEP_DWD_fullreport_Web.pdf).

118 Southern Regional Education Board. 2020, November. “Georgia 2020 State Workforce Outlook.” Retrieved from <https://www.sreb.org/publication/georgia-1>.

119 US Department of Labor. n.d. “WIOA Adult and Dislocated Worker Program.” Retrieved from <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/workforce-investment/adult>.



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.

ACTION STEPS	
POLICY	<p>State policymakers explore how to use financial aid as a lever to increase affordability, award merit, and encourage people to enter high-demand, high-wage occupations.</p> <p>The Georgia General Assembly expands incentives for private-sector companies to offer “learn-and-earn” opportunities for Georgians enrolled in post-secondary programs, thereby creating tighter alignment between education and workforce development policy.</p>
PRACTICE	<p>Post-secondary institutions provide targeted career counseling to encourage thoughtful selection of credential programs.</p>
PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING	<p>State, system, and corporate leaders develop a more inclusive and data-driven post-secondary narrative to demonstrate that four-year credentials are not the only pathway to family-sustaining employment.</p>

Considering Georgia’s changing demographics, shifting workforce demands, and current educational achievement levels, the question remains for state leaders: “Will there be enough skilled workers to meet Georgia’s workforce needs by 2033?” Without a coordinated plan and a thorough appraisal of the effectiveness of current investments, the answer is likely “no.” However, at the Georgia Partnership, we are hopeful because the state already has significant policy assets and structural advantages that, if better leveraged, could jump-start education and workforce efforts. We are also enthusiastic about opportunities for education, corporate, and civic leaders to pursue community-driven strategies that address local and regional needs. Together, state and community leaders can create more favorable conditions for educational and economic opportunities through collective action.

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270 Peachtree Street, Suite 2200  
Atlanta, Georgia 30303  
404.223.2280 ■ [www.gpee.org](http://www.gpee.org)

