

1 ISSUE

SECURING GEORGIA'S FUTURE – REDISCOVERING THE PURPOSE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

CALL TO ACTION

State and community leaders champion a vision for education and workforce development that is outcomes-focused, people-centered, and future-oriented.

ISSUE OVERVIEW

With confidence in public education waning, state and community leaders must take proactive steps to rebuild trust and credibility. Local leaders can reshape public perceptions by inviting community stakeholders to form a new vision for public education.

In fall 2024, the EdQuest Georgia Coalition identified leading indicators – measures that predict education and economic outcomes – that would allow policymakers to assess the impact of state and community investments in K-12 education, public health, and workforce development.

Throughout the Top Ten Issues, the Partnership describes how leading indicators could help communities reconfigure current strategies to meet future needs.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

The Georgia Partnership has identified three principles that support community-led rediscovery of the value and purpose of public education.

1. Improve outcomes by focusing on the factors that impact success and well-being
2. Increase resilience by placing people at the center of reform efforts.
3. Reimagine strategies now to prepare Georgians for the future.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

In 2024, the Georgia Partnership urged leaders across Georgia to rise above divisive rhetoric and focus on Georgia's future. This year, we are calling on the same leaders to activate this promise.

Communities can rediscover the purpose and promise of public education by investing their time and energy in reforming how they support students. Community engagement – and the pursuit of consensus – should guide new visions for how public investments in education and workforce systems benefit all residents.



STUDENT ATTENDANCE – A LEADING INDICATOR OF SUCCESS

CALL TO ACTION

District and community leaders develop a student- and family-centered strategy that supports early identification of and intervention for students at risk of chronic absenteeism. Leaders use available data to identify gaps and provide students with the resources they need to thrive.

ISSUE OVERVIEW

Nearly 20% of Georgia’s K-12 students missed at least 15 school days during the 2022-23 school year, a phenomenon officially termed chronic absenteeism. While the pandemic did not create this problem, the trend worsened and provided a moment of reckoning – that school and community leaders must develop and execute comprehensive plans that match the depth and severity of the challenges arising from chronic absenteeism.

In 2024, the Get Georgia Reading Campaign’s Student Attendance Subcommittee explored the issue of chronic absenteeism and produced a report, whose findings and recommendations are described in this issue.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Student absences result from a variety of factors, many of which are interconnected. While research often focuses on the physical and mental health issues that contribute to student absence, other factors are important to highlight, such as housing and food insecurity, transportation barriers, school climate and culture, family obligations, and parent perceptions of the importance of school attendance.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

It is critically important for schools, families, communities, and policymakers to work together to address the multifaceted causes of student absence. This problem cannot be solved by schools and districts alone. With the spotlight on chronic absenteeism, Georgia’s community leaders across all sectors must take advantage of this opportunity to develop community-wide responses to the factors that contribute to poor attendance and interrupted learning.



STUDENT AGENCY – THE KEY TO LONG-TERM SUCCESS AND WELL-BEING

CALL TO ACTION

District and school leaders reimagine learning in secondary school environments, modeling how students can become agents of their own success.

ISSUE OVERVIEW

Between 2023 and 2024, the Walton Family Foundation partnered with Gallup to survey Generation Z and found that students reported lower engagement in learning as they progressed through high school, and less than half (47%) felt prepared for the future.

However, there was some good news. Highly engaged students were four times more likely to feel optimistic and 10 times more likely to feel prepared than their peers who felt disengaged. The survey results reinforce findings from research – student engagement is an important element in preparing students for lifelong success. To improve engagement, the Georgia Partnership recommends that district and school leaders reimagine learning in grades six to 12 classrooms, encouraging students to take ownership of their learning through goal setting, career exploration, and self-reflection, a concept called agency.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

As Georgia continues recovering from the pandemic, educators have observed that students have become more disengaged and isolated than ever. The factors that support positive attitude and behavior – the presence of caring adults and meaningful relationships – also support learning. By emphasizing agency, educators are not only focusing on academic success; they are also showing students that interest and engagement drive their future success and well-being.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

Schools must place student and community needs at the center of all strategies, instead of expecting students to exist within systems that do not support their needs. Fundamental shifts in teaching and learning will need to take place to support the dramatic increases in student engagement. However, school and community leaders can support this ambitious goal modeling the social, emotional, and academic mindsets that contribute to students' post-secondary optimism and readiness.



4 ISSUE

QUALITY TEACHING – PREPARING FOR THE DEEPER LEARNING TRANSITION

CALL TO ACTION

District and school leaders foster teacher quality and resilience by inviting educators to address problems of practice at a schoolwide level. Districts deploy teacher leaders who coach, mentor, and support teachers as they master deeper learning techniques.

ISSUE OVERVIEW

By creating safe and supportive learning environments, teachers promote self-efficacy – the belief that students can learn and succeed, even in the face of adversity. District and school leaders can cultivate the same belief in educators by creating favorable conditions for teachers to master the instructional techniques and professional practices that will make the transition to student-led learning approaches more seamless.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

District and school leaders can help promote teacher resilience in three ways:

1. Mentoring and supporting early-career teachers
2. Differentiating professional development for individual teachers
3. Strengthening teacher effectiveness through professional learning communities (PLCs).

CONNECTING THE DOTS: The Importance of Teacher Leaders

- **Readiness:** Teacher leaders serve as coaches, mentors, and professional development leaders. They provide guidance as teachers learn new instructional techniques.
- **Resilience:** Teacher leaders provide formative feedback to their peers. They also model practices and mindsets that allow educators to develop self-efficacy.
- **Retention:** By increasing instructional excellence and resilience, teacher leaders also create more favorable work environments, contributing to higher job satisfaction and lower turnover.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

The instructional shift toward student-led learning will not occur overnight. However, recent statewide early literacy initiatives illustrate the promise of comprehensive strategies to prepare educators for a new instructional approach. The Georgia Partnership is confident that a similar agenda for deeper learning in grades six to twelve could take shape using existing professional growth strategies to support mastery of new techniques.



STRONG FOUNDATIONS – ENSURING GEORGIA’S YOUNGEST ARE PRIMED FOR LIFELONG SUCCESS

CALL TO ACTION

State and community leaders deliver integrated education, health, and family supports through a single statewide child development strategy.

ISSUE OVERVIEW

Learning and literacy gaps first identified in elementary school begin long before a child enters kindergarten. Meeting young learners’ needs as early as possible is not just a laudable goal. Birth-to-Five interventions produce the highest return on public investments of any social, economic, or education activity. However, the most effective interventions – home visiting, developmental screenings, and early interventions for at-risk children – are not reaching most infants, toddlers, and young children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Through the EdQuest Georgia initiative, the Georgia Partnership identified three factors – quality early learning, pediatric health and wellness, and parent and family supports – that prepare young children for future education and economic success. This issue identifies practices that support school readiness, including language nutrition, quality childcare, and early interventions.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

A strong foundation built during the early years is critical for students to successfully transition into kindergarten and be proficient readers by the end of third grade. For children and youth, the most important academic milestone is reading at a proficient level by the end of third grade. Children who are proficient readers at this juncture are four times more likely to graduate from high school than their peers who are not.

A single statewide child development plan that addresses quality early learning, pediatric health and wellness, and parent and family supports, would integrate the efforts of various agency and nonprofit stakeholders. Agencies would retain their missions and operate their programs independently while unifying around a common vision of child development that places young children and their caregivers at the center of the delivery of services.



TAILORING SCHOOL STAFFING TO STUDENT, TEACHER, AND COMMUNITY NEEDS

CALL TO ACTION

District leaders adapt school staffing models to meet student, educator, and community needs. Leaders use the strategic waiver system, tiered educator licensure policies, and the Consolidation of Funds program to accomplish this objective.

ISSUE OVERVIEW

All adults in the school-community ecosystem – district and school personnel, parents, and community members – have a responsibility to contribute to a new public education vision that successfully prepares students for what comes next.

While leading districts already use teacher leaders in their schools, the Georgia Partnership urges all district leaders to take a more dramatic step – leveraging existing state assets to reset how they staff schools. Some of the impacts will be minor, such as redefining job responsibilities. Others, like adopting co-teaching and team-teaching models, will be a significant shift in how students learn and teachers develop their professional tools.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Many of the strategic school staffing practices described in this issue (e.g., academic interventionists, and multi-classroom leaders) were implemented on a statewide scale during the pandemic. With modest tweaks to teacher workforce strategies, state and district leaders can make these changes permanent, better meeting state, educator, and community needs. Georgia's Strategic Waiver School System program is an especially powerful tool for districts looking to exercise more flexibility, as it allows them to shift how they pay teachers, especially teacher leaders responsible for student learning and the supervision of pre-professional and early-career educators.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

The Georgia Partnership recommends that districts who have already implemented some of these models create a replicable strategic staffing framework that documents how they identified needs, selected and executed strategies, measured progress, and refined their models.



POST-SECONDARY TRANSITIONS – NONTRADITIONAL ROUTES TO WORK READINESS

CALL TO ACTION

State and post-secondary system leaders jumpstart education and economic opportunity by emphasizing the value of nondegree, skill-based credentials.

ISSUE OVERVIEW

For Georgia to remain competitive on the global stage, state leaders will need to invest in systems reform to ensure all Georgians – not just traditional college-going students – earn post-secondary credentials.

This issue identifies three ways that state leaders can grow nondegree pathways to help more Georgians earn those credentials: through better messaging, linking nondegree programs to broader state strategies, and investing in students who choose to complete credentials in high-need areas.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

This issue identifies three immediate actions that policymakers can take to create more robust post-secondary pathways:

1. Increase state capacity to collect data on nondegree credentials and generate wage premium data for specific credentials.
2. Ensure individuals who complete nondegree, noncredit programs are aligned to related degree programs and are allowed to subsequently pursue two- and four-year degrees without losing credit for the knowledge and skills they acquired.
3. Expand and deepen incentives for working adults to earn short-term post-secondary credentials in areas of workforce shortage.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

Creating a statewide campaign about the value of skill-based credentials is an immediate step that state and community leaders can take. Over time, the same leaders can address gaps in that understanding by addressing gaps in the state's data-collection infrastructure. In the long-term, state leaders should leverage Georgia's significant policy assets and structural advantages to ensure more residents take advantage of incentives and guarantees that make these nondegree programs more accessible and affordable.



EMPLOYABILITY – LOOKING TO 2033 AND BEYOND

CALL TO ACTION

State and community leaders design adult learner strategies that result in the acquisition of work-ready skills. These leaders prioritize job programming and skills development for Georgians most at risk of unemployment: low-literate Georgians and those lacking a high school diploma or equivalency.

ISSUE OVERVIEW

In 2020, the Southern Regional Education Board sounded the alarm, concluding that the pandemic and resulting economic impacts accelerated investments in automation and machine learning, placing 2 million Georgians at risk of unemployment or being stuck in low-wage jobs by 2030. Post-pandemic, that alarm is even louder.

Now more than ever, Georgians need career skills that qualify them for good jobs and fair wages. Communities are at the center of this work, fostering collaborative partnerships between education, civic, and corporate leaders to ensure individuals have the skills needed.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Employability is a continuous process in which individuals obtain initial employment, develop on-the-job skills, and manage job transitions with minimum disruption and maximum economic benefit.

Employability and quality of life are interconnected. Economic futures — for individuals, communities, and the state — are tied to how well communities cultivate human capital. As more Georgians acquire specialized skills, they become more resilient, able to realize the quality of life afforded by being gainfully employed.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

This issue highlights an important truth: individuals with low literacy and a lack of basic skills will struggle to find gainful employment. Ignoring this reality in our communities will not make the problem go away. However, communities can design comprehensive strategies that allow residents to improve literacy, acquire basic skills for initial employment, and gain specialized technical skills over time. Local leaders should focus on immediate challenges while simultaneously creating long-term plans to bolster personal well-being and community resilience.



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE – USING TECHNOLOGY TO SUPPORT LEARNING

CALL TO ACTION

State and district leaders use artificial intelligence to identify and discontinue ineffective practices while understanding and mitigating the potential negative impacts of implementing AI without guardrails.

ISSUE OVERVIEW

Artificial intelligence (AI) has the potential to revolutionize how students learn, how teachers deliver instruction, and how school leaders analyze student and school performance data. However, AI and similar technologies are not substitutes for effective instructional approaches; rather, they enhance learning experiences by providing opportunities for students to deepen their understanding of academic concepts.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

This issue describes three ways that education leaders can use AI:

1. Create interactive, engaging assessments that allow educators to differentiate student learning.
2. Provide opportunities for students to explore careers and identify their interests and aptitudes.
3. Allow school personnel to evaluate the quality, effectiveness, and impact of various initiatives.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

With all its promise, AI is an imperfect technology that requires human oversight. District and school leaders should be open and transparent about how they use AI in teaching, student assessment, and data analysis. Since well-resourced, high-capacity districts are more likely to harness the value of AI tools, state and district leaders also must ensure that AI does not widen existing student opportunity and resource gaps.

The state has a role. State leaders should set guidelines for the appropriate, responsible and ethical use of AI in instruction, assessment, and program evaluation.



INVESTING IN GEORGIA'S FUTURE – MEASURING WHAT MATTERS

CALL TO ACTION

State and community leaders set priorities, invest in high-impact strategies, and evaluate whether their priorities and strategies yield the outcomes that will move Georgia closer to the North Star goal of 65% post-secondary attainment.

ISSUE OVERVIEW

This issue describes how state and community leaders can map priorities to outcomes using a set of **leading indicators** – measures that may predict future outcomes and provides specific recommendations for how policymakers could reconfigure state funding and accountability strategies to achieve this objective.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

State policymakers should develop a vision for education opportunity and economic prosperity by ensuring all investments contribute to core priorities, regardless of what agency operates a particular program or strategy.

At the community level, school and civic leaders, in their ongoing pursuit of effective solutions, should create a unifying vision for public education and activate the promise of this vision by redefining what local accountability looks like. Lessons learned from community-driven accountability conversations could result in a state framework that produces actionable insights and allows all school stakeholders to use the results to monitor progress.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

The current focus in funding education in Georgia is on tactics, rather than strategy. For example, the public wants to know how much it costs to fund a particular initiative, teach a student, or provide professional development to teachers. Focusing on cost rather than total investment often results in continued deployment of untested or ineffective policies.

Instead, the Georgia Partnership calls on state and community leaders to adopt a future-oriented vision for public education where today's investments yield long-term dividends for individuals and the communities where they live. Community stakeholders should partner to develop a shared local vision for public education that rebuilds confidence in educational institutions.