

21ST EDITION

# TOP TEN ISSUES TO WATCH IN 2025



Georgia Partnership  
FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

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### JANUARY 2025

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

Two years ago, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education cast a bold, long-term vision for Georgia's future prosperity and global competitiveness: ensuring that 65% of Georgians aged 25 to 64 have earned post-secondary credentials of value by 2033. To realize this vision, the Partnership launched *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.

In support of this vision, the Partnership has since been leading a coalition of state policymakers, advocates, and education and business leaders to spotlight policies and practices that promote educational opportunity and economic mobility. Last year, 2024, the Partnership deepened the *EdQuest Georgia* work by forming five working groups within the coalition. They were charged with identifying leading data indicators to guide state and community leaders in assessing the quality, effectiveness, and impact of their investments aligned with the *EdQuest* priorities. These working groups address segments of the education and workforce continuum: early learning, K-12 education, and post-secondary education and workforce training, as well as teacher and leader issues and community, health, and environmental factors that shape student learning and wellness. The Partnership is proud to release the five data profiles in 2025 and provide recommendations for how state and community leaders can evaluate their strategies and investments. *EdQuest* will continue to be at the forefront of the Partnership's work as we pursue greater educational opportunity and economic mobility for all Georgians for generations to come.

In 2024, the Partnership also entered year three of the multi-year public/private **CARES Impact Study**. Funded in part by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), the study captures how local school districts are using the \$5.9 billion received through the federal, Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund. In addition to publishing the Year-Three report, the Partnership published the first of three GaDOE-commissioned case studies focused on identifying and capturing promising practices in local school districts being supported by ESSER funds. The case study, *Rewriting How Literacy is Taught: How Three School Districts are Changing How Students Learn to Read*, focuses on the experiences of Fulton County Schools, Marietta City Schools, and Grady County Schools as they took different but successful approaches to implementing literacy reform in their districts.

The Partnership continues to prioritize rural leadership development and capacity-building through the **Regional Initiative** and the **Rural Learning Network (RLN)** – which has grown to include more than 169 leaders from over 51 counties. The RLN connects leaders across sectors creating solutions through collective expertise that drives meaningful change and strengthens communities across Georgia. By bringing experts together, the RLN enables members to identify shared challenges and build capacity to address them through multi-sector collaboration.

The Partnership proudly concluded 2024 by hosting the "Blueprint for the Future: The Case Ensuring Affordable Postsecondary Education" **Critical Issues Forum**. This event focused on the current structure of funding for Georgia's colleges and universities, explored the challenges students face in paying for higher education, and spotlighted potential solutions for reducing financial barriers for Georgia's students.

The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education believes that a better future for Georgia begins with education. We also recognize that improved academic achievement and access to high quality career opportunities for all of Georgia's residents will not happen by accident. They require the intentional investment of resources, alignment of vision, and commitment of strong leaders to achieve these outcomes.



## INTRODUCTION

### **Welcome to 2025 and the 21st Edition of the Georgia Partnership's *Top Ten Issues to Watch* report.**

We are living in exciting yet uncertain times. State and community leaders are motivated to invest in education and workforce strategies that ensure more Georgians benefit from the state's prosperity. However, debates about the proper role of government at all levels — federal, state, and local — affect how our leaders invest public resources. While people can disagree on how to solve perennial challenges, Georgia needs an overarching vision for how to close opportunity and resource gaps, reduce teacher turnover, and support students and educators as they continue to show the impacts of trauma stemming from the global pandemic.

Three years ago, the Georgia Partnership offered a common vision for excellence. We recommended that policymakers, education leaders, and the business sector across the state unite around achieving this North Star goal — ensuring 65% of Georgians aged 25 to 64 have earned a post-secondary credential by 2033.

Agreeing on a common outcome is easy. However, agreeing on how to get there, especially in our complex political environment, can sometime feel untenable. Therefore, the Georgia Partnership urges local communities to take the lead in visioning and promoting education opportunity and economic mobility by identifying common interests, developing shared goals, and coordinating investments. The Georgia Partnership remains committed to a community-centered model in which local leaders drive innovation and state leaders create systems that support the spread and scale of local strategies.

The issues presented in this edition focus on how to address immediate needs while also making gradual improvements to strategies over the next decade to reach our North Star goal. Each issue highlights the benefits of removing the barriers that keep all Georgians from experiencing a good quality of life, and is laid out in three sections:

**1. A Recipe for Deeper Learning** – For the first time, the Georgia Partnership has devoted an entire section to a single topic: how to accelerate student success and well-being through a focus on deeper learning. Issues 2 through 4 identify three factors — attendance, student motivation, and teacher quality — that have an outsized impact on whether students engage in deeper learning.

**2. Building Momentum to Reach the North Star** – Issues 5 through 7 recommend changes to state systems and investments that equip community leaders with the resources to support children, youth, and working adults. The three issues cover each segment of the Birth-to-Work pipeline: delivering early education and health interventions to young children, aligning K-12 staffing to student needs, and expanding access to post-secondary education via nontraditional routes.

**3. Investing in the Solutions of the Future** – The final three issues look to 2033 and beyond. Issue 8 focuses on employability, ensuring more Georgians can obtain livable-wage jobs. Issue 9 presents the benefits of artificial intelligence while also describing how guardrails can prevent some of AI's excesses. Building on the theme of rediscovering a positive vision for public education, the final issue calls on state and community leaders to adopt a new mindset around funding and evaluating strategies that prioritizes the spread of innovative practices.

We believe that the data and commentary presented in this 21st edition of the *Top Ten Issues to Watch* report will guide conversations with policymakers, educators, and community and business leaders about these challenges and opportunities before us. It is a cross-sector, clarion call for every leader in Georgia to embrace their role in improving our state's education and workforce outcomes. We hope that it will serve as a go-to guide for understanding our state's biggest education challenges and equip leaders with the tools to devise solutions that improve education and economic outcomes for all Georgians. We are grateful for your continued engagement and welcome your support in this work. Georgia's future needs you.



Dr. Dana Rickman

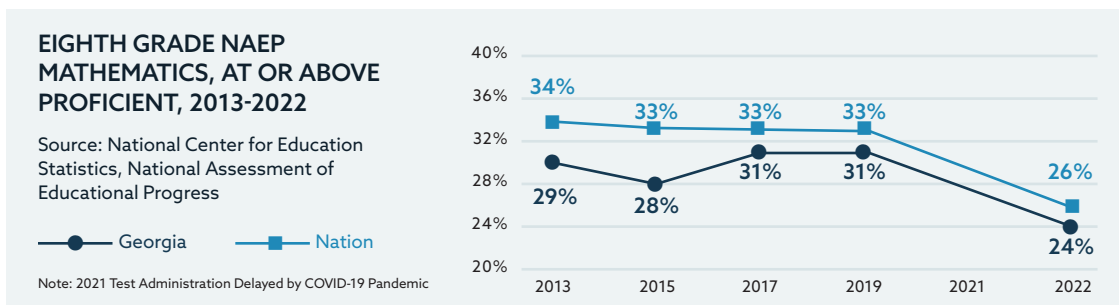
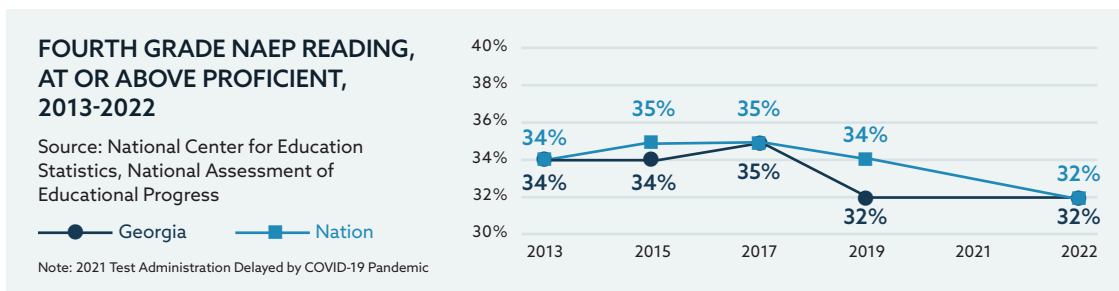
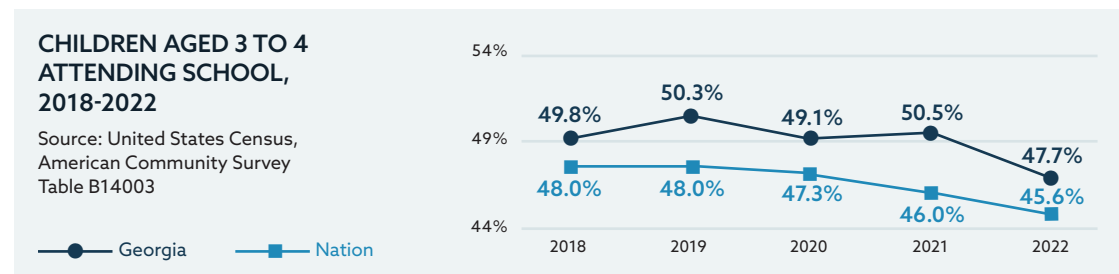
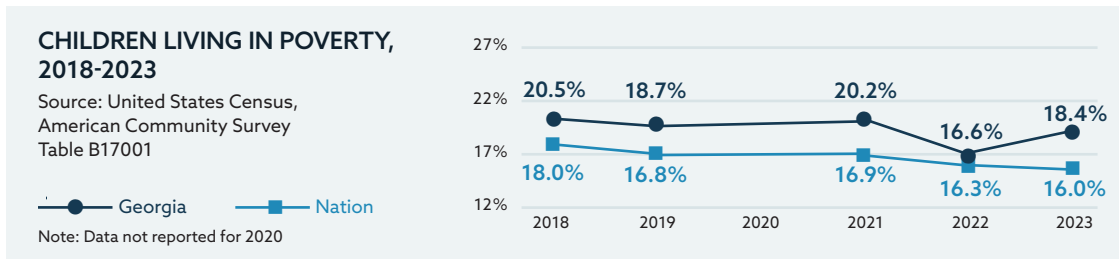
President, Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education

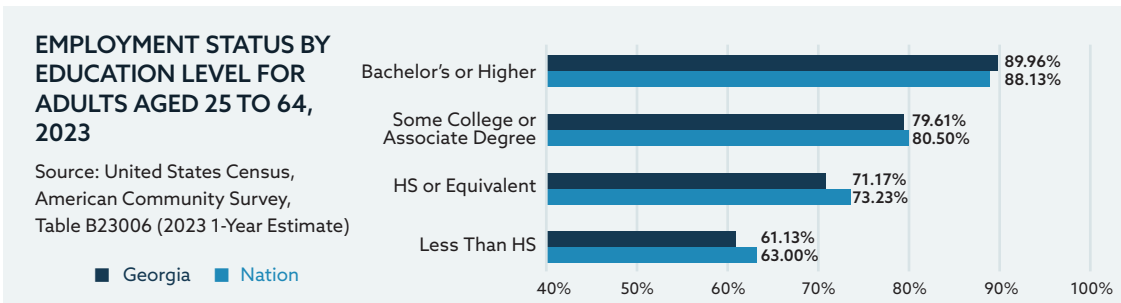
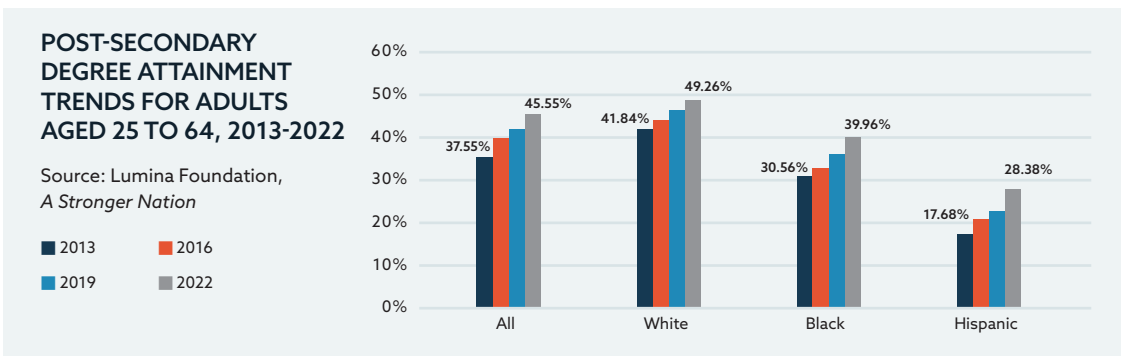
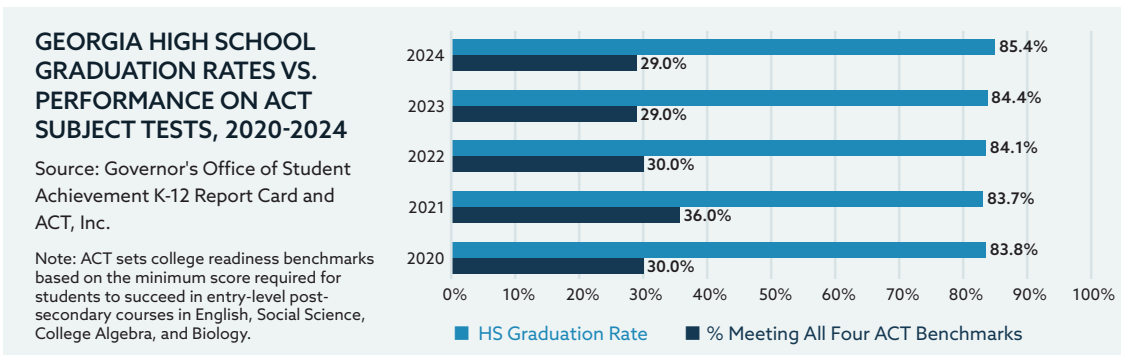
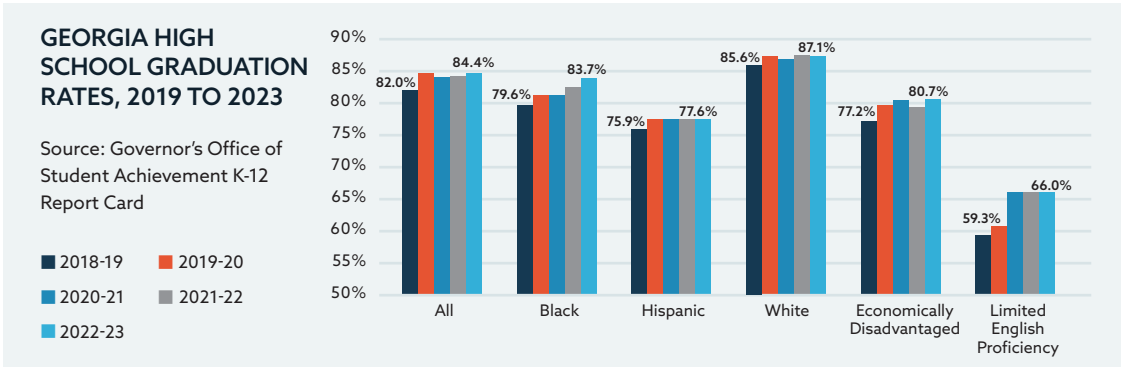
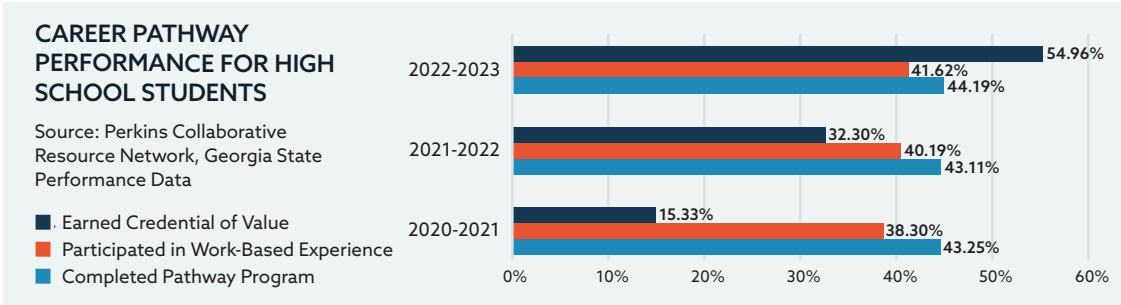
# INDICATORS FOR SUCCESS: WHERE IS GEORGIA TODAY?

**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?**

These Indicators for Success reveal where Georgia stands on critical indicators of child well-being, educational attainment, and workforce readiness. For the second consecutive year, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education includes three additional indicators identified by the EdQuest Georgia Coalition: career pathways completion, post-secondary readiness of recent high school graduates, and post-secondary attainment for Georgians 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.







# 1 ISSUE

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

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

Although schools are experiencing the crushing weight of pessimism and unrealistic expectations, public education is not broken. Far from it. Despite unprecedented pressures

#### ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- Support for public education is eroding. In the absence of a compelling, future-oriented vision for public education, confidence may continue to decline.
- District and civic leaders should invite a group of neighborhood stakeholders to the table to formulate a community-driven vision for public education.
- Through the EdQuest Georgia initiative, the Georgia Partnership has identified evidence-based solutions and a set of leading indicators that support community visioning.

placed on schools by the pandemic, student achievement in Georgia increased on 16 of 20 statewide assessments administered in spring 2024. Eight-point increases in proficiency on the eighth-grade math assessment and the Algebra end-of-course test suggest that the state efforts to improve core instruction are working.<sup>1</sup>

However, only 16% of adults responding to a recent national survey expressed the belief that public education is going in the right direction. Reasons given for pessimism included schools not prioritizing core academic content, teachers injecting their personal views into classroom instruction, and schools not having sufficient resources to promote student learning.<sup>2</sup>

Schools and their leaders must overcome the challenges of public perception. While the reasons behind public pessimism matter, the perception that the education system is broken matters more. With confidence in public education waning, state and community

1 Frick, M. 2024, September 30. "Students Show Strong Improvement on Math Georgia Milestones: An Early Indicator of Success for New Math Standards" [Press release]. Georgia Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://gadoe.org/press-releases/students-show-strong-improvement-on-math-georgia-milestones-an-early-indicator-of-success-for-new-math-standards/>

2 Minkin, R. 2024, April 4. "About Half of Americans Say Public K-12 Education Is Going in the Wrong Direction." Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/04/about-half-of-americans-say-public-k-12-education-is-going-in-the-wrong-direction/>

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.

The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (Georgia Partnership) understands that forming new community visions for public education is a complex, multistep process. Our recommendation is hollow without communities across Georgia committing to frank and open dialogue about how to retool public education and workforce investments to respond more forcefully to community needs.

When community stakeholders invest in new visions and express their satisfaction with new strategies, they give state and civic leaders the political will to move plans forward. Political will formalizes the collective energy and efforts of people working together in common purpose. Political will activates new learning, jumpstarts strategies, and allows leaders to reset how they invest in and evaluate the state's education and workforce systems.

The Georgia Partnership's EdQuest Georgia initiative has identified strategies that support personal well-being and community resilience. Communities across Georgia can use EdQuest as inspiration when setting priorities, selecting high-impact strategies, and developing cross-sector partnerships.<sup>3</sup>

In fall 2024, the EdQuest Georgia Coalition, a group of state agency, nonprofit, and civic leaders, 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 this edition of the *Top Ten Issues*, the Georgia Partnership describes how these metrics could help leaders secure Georgia's future by ensuring that strategies yield better outcomes.

#### CALL TO ACTION

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

#### ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

The Georgia Partnership urges communities to take the lead in visioning, promoting education opportunity and economic mobility by identifying common interests, developing shared goals, and coordinating investments. The Georgia Partnership remains committed to a community-centered model in which local leaders drive innovation and state leaders create systems that support the spread and scale of local strategies. This Issue describes three principles of a community-led vision for public education.

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<sup>3</sup> Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. 2024, May. "EdQuest Georgia." Retrieved from <https://gpee.org/edquest-georgia/>

**PRINCIPLE 1: Improve Outcomes by Focusing on the Factors That Impact Success and Well-Being.**

Companies invest in research and development to improve the quality of their products and services. They evaluate the needs and wants of their customer base and identify the market forces that affect consumer preferences. When innovators disrupt the status quo, industry leaders must adapt their strategies to remain relevant.

Schools and post-secondary institutions are no different. Even though education leaders are not producing goods, they are providing a service: ensuring students are ready for life and work. As we enter a new era, we cannot return to pre-pandemic frames and mindsets. Now that we have exited crisis and are moving toward renewal, we must not discard the lessons we have learned.

School systems have revamped instructional strategies and student supports since the onset of the pandemic. District leaders have partnered with nonprofit and community health providers to identify nonacademic factors that affect student success. A vision of public education that considers how family, community, and neighborhood factors affect student outcomes should result in strategies that are more responsive to student, community, and workforce needs.

*Issues 2 through 4 introduce factors that support student success and well-being, including student attendance, engagement and motivation, and teacher quality. These three factors drive deeper learning, defined as the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that individuals need to succeed in life and work.<sup>4</sup>*

**PRINCIPLE 2: Increase Resilience by Placing People at the Center of Reform Efforts.**

District and community leaders can adapt their strategies to align with factors that promote student success and well-being. When developing a new strategic vision, state and local leaders should consider what practices increase resilience — the ability of individuals to learn from challenging experiences. Systems can support collective resilience.

However, these systems often fall short of their promise because strategies are not sufficiently coordinated and aligned. For example, only 55% of Georgia’s four-year-olds are enrolled in the Georgia Pre-K program.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that some families would struggle to know how and when to register their kids for kindergarten, since a substantial minority of parents are not interacting with education systems before their kids’ fifth birthday. The percentage of students attending the first day of school is a powerful leading indicator because it represents the disconnect between families, schools, and the varied supports that at-risk individuals need but do not always receive.

<sup>4</sup> Learning Policy Institute. n.d. “Deeper Learning.” Retrieved from <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/topic/deeper-learning>

<sup>5</sup> KIDS Count Data Center. n.d. Children Enrolled in the Georgia Pre-K Program in Georgia. Annie E. Casey Foundation. Retrieved from <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/630-children-enrolled-in-the-georgia-pre-kindergarten-pre-k-program>



*Issues 5 through 7 reveal three ways that state and community leaders can support resilience. Issue 5 focuses on the birth-to-five space, with specific attention on how to improve school readiness. Issue 6 proposes that district leaders reimagine how they staff schools to be more responsive to student, community, and workforce needs. Issue 7 describes how a fragmented post-secondary and workforce training environment stymies efforts to serve at-risk youth and working adults.*

### **PRINCIPLE 3: Reimagine Strategies Now to Prepare Georgians for the Future.**

For the last three years, the Georgia Partnership has offered a common vision for excellence: the North Star. The Partnership recommends that state policymakers, education leaders, and the business sector continue to unite around a singular goal: ensuring that 65% of Georgians ages 25 to 64 have earned a post-secondary credential of value by 2033.<sup>6</sup>

The 65% figure is a proxy for what it will take for Georgia to maintain its advantaged position in the global economy and to ensure most Georgians are able to participate in the workforce. Everything that policymakers do, including expanding access to quality childcare, motivating learners to prepare for what comes next, and removing barriers to post-secondary opportunities, is in service of the North Star goal.

Working backwards from the North Star, state and community leaders can redesign strategies and reconfigure investments to ensure more Georgians can participate in the state's economic prosperity.

*The final three issues of the 2025 edition focus on the future, specifically how to improve workforce outcomes for adults (Issue 8), use artificial intelligence to enhance current strategies (Issue 9), and shift how state and local leaders evaluate their education and workforce investments (Issue 10).*

### **CONNECTING THE DOTS: How State and Community Leaders Can Support New Visions for Public Education**

- **Measure What Matters:** What factors promote or threaten education opportunity and economic mobility?
- **Execute Community-Driven Solutions:** How can school and community leaders retool their strategies to support student success and personal well-being?
- **Make Sense of Chaos:** How can state and local leaders learn from disruptive innovations to adapt how they evaluate strategies and investments?

<sup>6</sup> Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. 2024, May. *The North Star: Securing Georgia's Future by 2033*. Retrieved from <https://gpee.org/edquest-georgia/northstar/>

## MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

Throughout this Issue, the Georgia Partnership has described the importance of confronting the lack of confidence in public education by offering a future-oriented vision centered on student, community, and workforce needs. Communities can rediscover the purpose and promise of public education by investing their time and energy in reforming how we 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.

Although communities are best equipped to execute public education and workforce strategies, state leaders set the stage for innovation in two ways. First, policymakers invest in state systems that create more favorable conditions for communities to act. Second, state leaders identify priorities, set long-term goals, and invest in strategies that promote innovation.

Focused attention on and state investments in early literacy and mental health has inspired local leaders to reimagine how they support their communities. As local districts and community leaders push for their vision of public investments in education, that public will can translate into political will. Leveraging local public will and state-level political will together could make the vision of a stronger education system a reality. The action steps below offer specific ways that state and local leaders can support community action to reform public education.

ACTION STEPS	
<b>POLICY</b>	The Georgia General Assembly and state agencies fund program evaluation efforts to assess the quality, effectiveness, and impact of public education and workforce investments.
<b>PRACTICE</b>	<p>Education and workforce leaders audit their current programs and strategies, looking for ways to address the nonacademic factors that limit education access and opportunity, such as poor health, poverty, or lack of access to affordable housing and transportation.</p> <p>Leading state nonprofit organizations and experts develop measurement tools that help evaluate whether individuals are ready for kindergarten, post-secondary education, or in-demand careers.</p>
<b>PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING</b>	<p>K-12 and post-secondary education leaders survey local stakeholders, e.g., students, parents, community members, and industry leaders, to gather feedback on how to develop a shared vision.</p> <p>Chambers of commerce and business interests participate in community discussions about how to identify and address critical workforce needs.</p>

Last year, we urged leaders across Georgia — state and local, business and education, community and faith — to rise above divisive rhetoric and focus on Georgia's future.

This year, we are calling on the same leaders to activate this promise.

The Issues focus on how to address immediate needs while also making gradual improvements to strategies over the next 10 years. Each issue in this edition of the Top Ten highlights the benefits of removing the barriers that keep Georgians from experiencing a good quality of life.



## STUDENT ATTENDANCE – A LEADING INDICATOR OF SUCCESS

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

Chronic absenteeism is defined as students missing more than 10% of instructional days during the school year. Attendance is a leading indicator of academic success, a measure that predicts future education and economic outcomes.<sup>7</sup> For example, a 2024 report from the Get Georgia Reading Campaign cited the following:<sup>8</sup>

#### ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- Nearly 20% of Georgia's K-12 students missed at least 15 school days during the 2022-23 school year, a condition called chronic absenteeism.
- Chronic absenteeism threatens students' future success and well-being and undermines community resilience and state economic security.
- School and community leaders need early warning and intervention systems to ensure students at risk of chronic absenteeism are served.

- Students who are chronically absent in preschool through first grade are far less likely to read at grade level by third grade.
  - Early chronic absenteeism negatively impacts foundational skills critical for reading development, leading to long-term academic challenges. Those who are not proficient in reading by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school.
  - Missing more than five days of school significantly harms learning.
  - By sixth grade, chronic absenteeism increases the risk of dropping out of school exponentially.
- Irregular attendance is a stronger indicator of whether students will drop out of high school than their test scores.

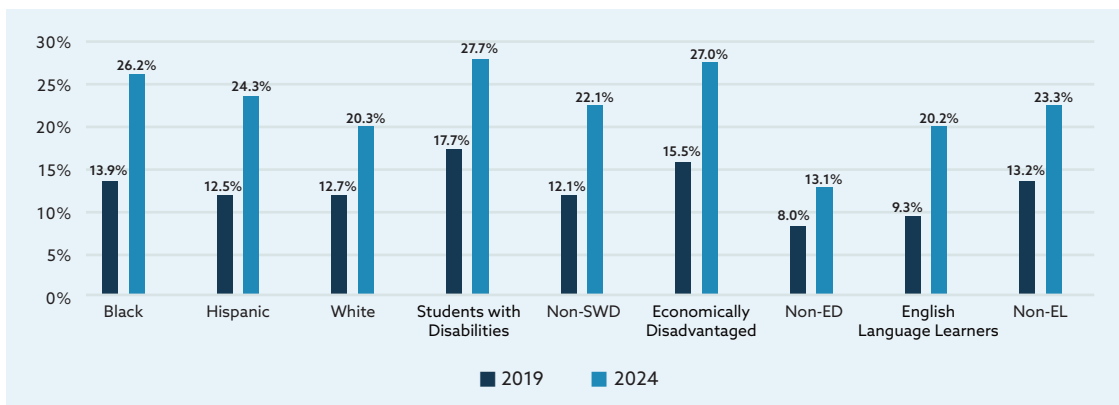
<sup>7</sup> Attendance Works. n.d. "Chronic Absence: The Problem." Retrieved from <https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/the-problem/>.

<sup>8</sup> Get Georgia Reading – Campaign for Grade Level Reading, Cabinet. 2024, September. (Unpublished Report). *Student Attendance Subcommittee – Report and Recommendations*.

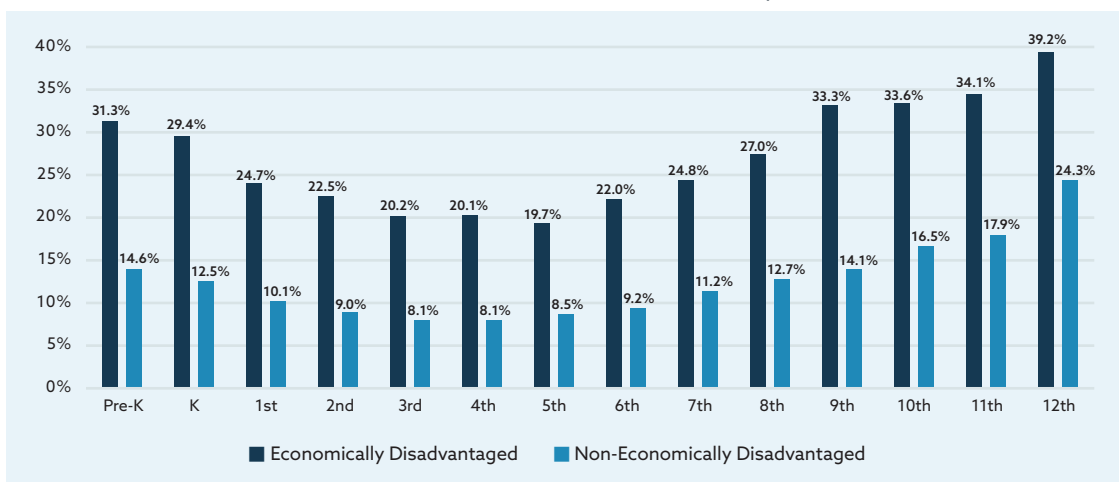
The report also cites the negative “ripple effects” of chronic absenteeism: making it harder for teachers to teach, establish classroom norms, and build relationships with students.<sup>9</sup> Classrooms with a high percentage of chronically absent students may be forced to move at a slower pace, affecting student success and engagement levels for their peers. This cumulative effect can negatively impact the academic performance of the entire class.<sup>10</sup>

During the height of the pandemic, nearly a quarter of Georgia’s K-12 students (24.4%) missed more than 15 instructional days.<sup>11</sup> Black and Hispanic students and youth living in poverty were significantly more likely to be chronically absent, missing more than 10% of the school year.<sup>12</sup> Figures 2.1 and 2.2 from the Get Georgia Reading report show differences in chronic absenteeism by race and economic disadvantage, a measure defined as the percentage of children eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

**FIGURE 2.1 STUDENTS IN GEORGIA ABSENT MORE THAN 15 DAYS, PRE-POST PANDEMIC<sup>13</sup>**



**FIGURE 2.2 STUDENTS IN GEORGIA ABSENT MORE THAN 15 DAYS, BY ECONOMIC STATUS<sup>14</sup>**



9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Governor’s Office of Student Achievement. n.d. “Attendance: 2021-22.” Retrieved from <https://gosa.georgia.gov/dashboards-data-report-card/downloadable-data>

12 Malkus, N. 2024, January. *Long COVID for Public Schools: Chronic Absenteeism Before and After the Pandemic*. American Enterprise Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Long-COVID-for-Public-Schools.pdf>

13 Get Georgia Reading – Campaign for Grade Level Reading, Cabinet. 2024, September. (Unpublished Report). Student Attendance Subcommittee: Report and Recommendations.

14 Ibid.

In July 2024, the American Enterprise Institute and the Education Trust, two organizations situated on opposite sides of the political spectrum, partnered with Attendance Works to issue a bipartisan call to action: to reduce chronic absenteeism by 50% by 2030.<sup>15</sup>

With schools struggling to address learning loss from the disruptions caused by the pandemic, consistent attendance is more critical than ever. While the pandemic did not create the attendance crisis, it provided a moment of reckoning, underscoring that school and community leaders must develop and execute comprehensive plans that match the depth and severity of the challenges arising from chronic absenteeism. This Issue identifies some of the community, health, and environmental factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism and describes three strategies that district and school leaders can adopt to address the crisis.

### 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.

### ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Student absences result from a variety of factors, many of which are interconnected. While physical health and mental health issues are significant causes of student absences, other causes such as homelessness or housing instability; transportation barriers; the social conditions of the school; family obligations, such as caregiving or the need to work, particularly among high school students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds; high rates of teacher absenteeism; and even parent perceptions of the importance of school attendance all contribute to absenteeism.<sup>16</sup> This section describes three elements — healthcare access, family and community factors, and school culture and climate — that affect attendance and, subsequently, student learning and well-being.

#### Healthcare Access

State law requires parents to file a completed Form 3300 for children enrolling in public schools for the first time.<sup>17</sup> The form identifies vision, hearing, dental, or nutritional challenges that, if not addressed, could contribute to learning challenges. Since physical health conditions can emerge after children enter kindergarten, not

#### POWER STRATEGY: School-Based Health Centers (SBHCs)

SBHCs vary in the services they provide, but most conduct physicals and developmental screenings, manage chronic illnesses, and dispense medication. Centers also might offer vision, dental, and behavioral healthcare, either through direct service or referral to community partners. SBHCs increase healthcare access by providing services, regardless of student and families' ability to pay.

15 Phenice, C. 2024, July 24. "A Unified Call to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism." The Education Trust. Retrieved from <https://edtrust.org/blog/a-unified-call-to-reduce-chronic-absenteeism/>

16 Get Georgia Reading – Campaign for Grade Level Reading, Cabinet. 2024, September. (Unpublished Report). *Student Attendance Subcommittee – Report and Recommendations*.

17 Georgia Department of Public Health Rule 511-5-6-.02 governs the filing of the Form 3300 certificate.

requiring ongoing screening could result in youth missing school because they do not have glasses or hearing aids or are experiencing dental pain or food insecurity.

Research shows that both physical health and mental health issues are major causes of student absences. During the pandemic, Governor Kemp prioritized healthcare access for students and their families by dedicating pandemic-relief funds for districts to create school-based health centers (SBHCs). Over the last 10 years, the number of SBHCs in Georgia has grown from 3 to 119.<sup>18</sup> While most schools do not have dedicated mental health staff to provide therapeutic interventions, nurses often refer students to community behavioral health providers.

### Family and Community Factors

In 2023, over 18% of Georgia's school-age children lived in households with incomes at or below the federal poverty level,<sup>19</sup> and 64.7% of youth qualified for free or reduced-price lunch.<sup>20</sup> Family and community risk factors like poverty, abuse, neglect, and neighborhood violence aggravate underlying health and well-being challenges.

Prolonged exposure to toxic stress, which is related to many of these factors, has long-term, negative consequences, with research showing a persistent and alarming connection between childhood trauma and poor adult health and employment outcomes.<sup>21</sup> During the pandemic, some districts used one-time federal funds to connect children and families to community resources that met their basic needs.

### POWER STRATEGY: Tiered Systems of Support

The Georgia Department of Education's Office of Whole Child Supports provides training and technical assistance to district and school leaders interested in developing integrated services and supports for students. The office encourages schools to implement multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), evidence-based approaches that address myriad student needs. Using multiple measures of student growth that encompass attendance, behavior, health, and achievement data, school staff identify students who could benefit from Tier 2 (prevention) and Tier 3 (intensive intervention) supports.<sup>22</sup>

### School Culture and Climate

A healthy school climate can empower accelerated learning, the delivery of nonacademic support services, and increased family and community engagement.<sup>23</sup> When school leaders invite teachers, students, parents, and community members to shape school culture, all stakeholders contribute to safe and supportive learning environments. Approaches that welcome parents and community leaders into the school building also are factors that ensure more students attend school regularly.

18 Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "School-Based Health Centers Map." Retrieved from <https://apps.gadoe.org/SBHC>

19 Annie E. Casey Foundation. 2024, September. "Children in Poverty in Georgia." Retrieved from <https://datacenter.aecf.org/rawdata.axd?ind=43&loc=12>

20 Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "Free and Reduced-Price Meal Eligibility." Retrieved from [https://app3.doe.k12.ga.us/ows-bin/owa/fte\\_pack\\_frl001\\_public.entry\\_form](https://app3.doe.k12.ga.us/ows-bin/owa/fte_pack_frl001_public.entry_form)

21 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/>

22 Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "Office of Whole Child Supports." Retrieved from <https://gadoe.org/whole-child-supports/>

23 Aspen Institute, Education & Society Program. 2021, March. "School Climate Literature Summary." Retrieved from <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Aspen-Institute-School-Climate-LiteratureReview.pdf>

As state and district leaders grapple with how to ensure schools are safe instructional environments, it is important to remember that safety is not just about physical well-being. In Issue 6 of the *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2023*, the Georgia Partnership defined three dimensions of student safety:

1. Attending to the physical and emotional well-being of students and educators
2. Creating safer and more supportive learning environments for students, educators, and other stakeholders
3. Fostering strong interpersonal relationships<sup>24</sup>

Schools are physical and social spaces. While physical safety is an important part of learning, students are more likely to come to a school where they feel emotionally and psychologically safe.

### PROMISING PRACTICE: Gauging Student Feedback

The Georgia Department of Education administers the annual Georgia Student Health Survey. The results are intended to help school leaders identify issues that affect student success and well-being.<sup>25</sup> In addition, schools can adopt several techniques to gather formative feedback, three of which we highlight here.

1. Exit tickets allow students to provide immediate feedback on learning and the instructional environment whenever they feel inclined to do so.<sup>26</sup>
2. More formal surveys administered at predictable intervals throughout the year can provide useful feedback on students' level of engagement and perception of the school climate.<sup>27</sup>
3. Periodic check-ins allow teachers to recognize student growth and give students space to share feedback on instruction and the learning environment.

### CONNECTING THE DOTS: Treating Causes, Not Symptoms

- **EARLY WARNING:** MTSS teams identify students at risk of falling behind academically. Using attendance as an early warning indicator can ensure more students receive necessary support before the problems worsen.
- **PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION:** Community partnerships are critical because they allow school personnel to refer students and families to social, economic, and health services.
- **OPEN DIALOGUE:** Schools with robust data systems and community partnerships will continue to fall short if they do not maintain two-way communication with students and families. The most efficient way to improve attendance is to increase the number of touchpoints that school personnel have with students, parents, and community members.

24 Smith, M. 2023, January 6. *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2023*. Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. Retrieved from [https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/GPEE-Top-Ten-Issues-2023\\_Jan-6-final.pdf](https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/GPEE-Top-Ten-Issues-2023_Jan-6-final.pdf)

25 Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "School Climate." Retrieved from <https://gadoe.org/whole-child-supports/school-climate/>

26 The Teacher Toolkit. n.d. "Exit Ticket." Retrieved from <https://www.theteachertoolkit.com/index.php/tool/exit-ticket>

27 Hanover Research. 2024, February 23. "Strategies for Successful K-12 Survey Design and Analysis." Retrieved from <https://www.hanover-research.com/insights-blog/k-12-education/strategies-for-successful-k-12-survey-design-and-analysis/>



## MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

The Get Georgia Reading Campaign convened a Student Attendance Study Committee in summer 2024. Georgia Partnership staff contributed to the report, mentioned earlier in this Issue, which identifies the causes of chronic absenteeism and spotlights school and community strategies that support improved attendance. The report notes that schools and districts have already been struggling to respond to this crisis, as described below:

[A]ccording to a survey by RAND, one-fourth of district leaders say none of their strategies to reduce absenteeism are working.<sup>28</sup> Nearly all districts (93%) have tried at least one method to combat absenteeism, such as notifying parents of missed days, conducting home visits, using early warning systems, and running mentoring programs. The most common approach is implementing early warning systems to identify at-risk students, but many school districts report that the issues are so complex that using one strategy will not address the problems.<sup>29</sup>

Research published in 2024 by Brookings found that many parents are not aware of the negative impacts of school absence. Even caregivers who report their children as being chronically absent did not perceive this as a significant problem or concern.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, it is critically important for schools, families, communities, and policymakers to work together to address the multifaceted causes of absenteeism. 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.

The action steps listed below, many of which were outlined in the Get Georgia Reading report, describe specific ways that state and community leaders can confront the challenges associated with chronic absenteeism.

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28 Diliberti, M.K., L.R. Rainey, L. Chu, and H.L. Schwartz. 2024, August 27. *Districts Try with Limited Success to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism: Selected Findings from the Spring 2024 American School District Panel Survey and Interviews*. RAND Corporation Research. Retrieved from [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR956-26.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR956-26.html)

29 Get Georgia Reading – Campaign for Grade Level Reading, Cabinet. 2024, September. (Unpublished Report). *Student Attendance Subcommittee – Report and Recommendations*.

30 Saaverda, A., M. Polikoff, and D. Silver. 2024, March 26. *Parents Are Not Fully Aware of, or Concerned About, Their Children's School Attendance*. Brookings. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/parents-are-not-fully-aware-of-or-concerned-about-their-childrens-school-attendance/>

ACTION STEPS	
<b>POLICY</b>	<p>District leaders integrate measures of attendance and engagement into their school improvement and student support plans.</p> <p>The Georgia General Assembly boosts state funding for school counselors, psychologists, and social workers by lowering the staff-to-student ratios for these positions.</p>
<b>PRACTICE</b>	<p>Districts incorporate attendance data into their multi-tiered support system (MTSS) strategies.</p> <p>School leaders develop tailored attendance plans for students with chronic illness, disabilities, or special needs.</p> <p>Districts help manage chronic health conditions that keep students from attending school by setting up school-based health clinics and partnering with community providers to expand healthcare access.</p>
<b>PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING</b>	<p>State and community leaders develop a campaign geared at parents that highlights the importance of their children attending school regularly. The Communities in Schools "Being Present Matters" public campaign is a strong model of this type of engagement.<sup>31</sup></p> <p>School leaders conduct personalized outreach with families of at-risk students to discuss barriers to attendance.</p>

31 Saldana, R., and H.N. Chang. 2024, September 30. "Being Present Matters: The Fight to End Chronic Absenteeism." Communities in Schools. Retrieved from <https://www.communitiesinschools.org/articles/article/being-present-matters-the-fight-to-end-chronic-absenteeism/>



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

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

In 2023, the Walton Family Foundation partnered with Gallup to survey Generation Z, the age cohort born between 1997 and 2012.<sup>32</sup> The second annual survey released in August 2024 presented three worrying trends.

#### ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- Teachers can increase engagement by empowering students to take ownership over their learning, a concept called agency.
- Learners who exhibit high agency are more likely to believe they can learn.
- By modeling self-belief and ensuring students are mastering core instructional content, K-12 educators can prepare youth for post-secondary opportunities.

1. Students reported lower engagement in learning as they progressed through high school.
2. Only 14% of students strongly agreed that their schoolwork was challenging.
3. While 79% of students expressed optimism about the future, less than half (47%) felt prepared for the future.<sup>33</sup>

However, there was some good news. The same survey found highly engaged students were *four times more likely to feel optimistic and 10 times more likely to feel prepared for the future than their peers who felt disengaged*.<sup>34</sup> The survey results reinforce findings from research: student engagement is an important element in preparing students for lifelong success.<sup>35</sup>

32 Walton Family Foundation. 2023, September 24. "Walton Family Foundation and Gallup Gen Z Panel." Retrieved from <https://nextgensights.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/resources/wff-and-gallup-gen-z-panel/>

33 Hrynowski, Z. 2024, August 21. *K-12 Schools Struggle to Engage Gen Z Students*. Gallup. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/648896/schools-struggle-engage-gen-students.aspx>

34 Ibid.

35 Fisher, D., N. Frey, and A. Gonzalez. 2023, September 1. "4 C's for Better Student Engagement." ASCD. Retrieved from <https://ascd.org/el/articles/4-cs-for-better-student-engagement>

When trying to improve student outcomes, most schools focus on executing instructional strategies, revising curricula, adopting new instructional materials, or experimenting with new student assessments. None of these tactics is guaranteed to increase student engagement. In fact, trying to improve curricula, instruction, and assessment without student input can result in changes and reform strategies that do not meaningfully accelerate learning.

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**. Student-directed learning is the instructional approach that allows students to become agents of their own learning.<sup>36</sup> By cultivating agency in their students, educators and school staff can foster self-efficacy — a student’s belief that they can succeed.

While Georgia has the assets in place to shift instruction to a student-led approach, this transformation will require understanding how students learn.

#### CALL TO ACTION

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

#### ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

As Georgia continues to recover from the pandemic, educators have observed that students have become more disengaged and isolated than ever. The factors that support positive attitudes 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 will drive their future success and well-being.

This section highlights how redefining the role of learners in instruction and seeking their input can increase student agency.

#### Student-Directed Learning

In classrooms across Georgia, instruction usually follows a predictable pattern. Teachers plan out their units, deliver lectures aligned to instructional standards, and evaluate student mastery using a variety of assessments. Teachers then review student work and provide supplemental academic support to students who are struggling to meet standards. Even in cases where teachers ask students to conduct an experiment or complete projects, learning is often still a “closed loop” in which students arrive at the same result if they follow the step-by-step procedures outlined in the instructions.

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<sup>36</sup> Collier, K. 2023, March 28. “Empowering Students by Cultivating Agency.” Edutopia. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/article/framework-cultivating-student-agency-elementary-school/>

Student-directed learning is a contrasting approach in which students have more control over how they learn. Students set learning objectives and choose how to achieve them. Students demonstrate skill mastery by conducting independent research and presenting their findings. They refine their work after receiving constructive feedback from teachers and their peers.<sup>37</sup> In this format, learning is open-ended, with educators expecting students to demonstrate lateral thinking — problem solving that involves using research to generate solutions and insights that are not immediately obvious.<sup>38</sup>

Although student-directed learning increases engagement and motivation, the instructional format is significantly different from teacher-driven instruction in four primary ways.

- 1. Power-Sharing:** Students and educators are not accustomed to sharing the responsibility for learning. Although students benefit from identifying learning objectives and participating in setting instructional expectations, that autonomy must still be balanced by adult guidance.
- 2. Feedback:** In teacher-centered learning formats, students receive feedback on performance through scores on quizzes, tests, and essays. However, project-based learning requires specific, immediate, and continuous feedback. Teachers should receive professional learning on how to deliver feedback and help students correct course when they struggle.
- 3. Student Reflection:** Effective teacher feedback encourages students to reflect on their learning goals, critique their work products, and interact with their peers to strengthen the presentation of their ideas.
- 4. Self-Efficacy:** The primary goal of student learning is for students to demonstrate skill mastery. However, for students to capitalize on what they have learned and feel motivated, they must believe that they can master new content in the future using techniques that they have learned in the past.

Student-directed learning is a promising instructional format because educators teach content and promote the belief in students that they can succeed. Cultivating high self-efficacy is the engine that sustains interest and motivation.

### Social and Emotional Learning Matters

Effective instructional strategies recognize how social, emotional, and academic mindsets weave together to build a love of learning. When schools focus solely on developing academic skills, a valuable part of the learning process is underemphasized: the role of adults in reinforcing student belief and self-efficacy, two elements associated with student optimism and readiness for the future.<sup>39</sup>

37 Sammon, J., and T. Koehler. 2024, September 26. "Taking an Incremental Approach to PBL." Edutopia. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/article/project-based-learning-engages-all-students/>

38 Miles, M. 2023, May 25. "What Is Lateral Thinking? 7 Techniques to Encourage Creative Ideas" [Web log post]. BetterUp. Retrieved from <https://www.betterup.com/blog/what-is-lateral-thinking>

39 Moran, P. n.d. "What Strategy Is Most Useful in Promoting Self-Efficacy in Educators and in Learners?" Digital Promise. Retrieved from [https://digitalpromise.org/ask\\_a\\_researcher/strategy-useful-promoting-self-efficacy-educators-learners/](https://digitalpromise.org/ask_a_researcher/strategy-useful-promoting-self-efficacy-educators-learners/)

## Student Engagement

When students feel connected to caring adults and feel engaged in meaningful learning, these positive experiences shape their success and well-being.

Social-emotional learning is a critical piece of student agency, school climate, and workforce readiness. Just as schools have academic standards and curricula, educators can accelerate learning by equipping students with tools to regulate their emotions, build enduring relationships, and make smart, responsible decisions.<sup>40</sup>

Fundamental to the concept of school as community hub is the idea that students, educators, and parents feel safe when they enter the building. While school safety discussions often focus on physical well-being, the Georgia Partnership's EdQuest Georgia initiative champions a three-dimensional view of safety that attends to the physical and emotional well-being of students and educators, fosters safer and more supportive learning environments, and enables stronger interpersonal relationships between all individuals participating in the life of the school.<sup>41</sup>

Family and community factors like poverty, chronic stress, and lack of access to health-care affect academic success and student engagement levels. With pandemic-era funding for programs aimed at addressing these factors having ended, many families are struggling to meet their basic needs. Educators and school leaders can address some of the negative impacts of these factors by creating an environment where open dialogue is possible and feedback is recognized and, most important, integrated into the student support strategies prioritized by schools and districts.

### The Importance of Student Voice<sup>42</sup>

Teachers can invite learners to volunteer their opinions and share feedback through focus groups or surveys. While soliciting feedback is an important first step, teachers and school leaders can increase engagement by demonstrating how student input affects the redesign of instructional and student support strategies. School personnel can provide opportunities for learners to collaborate and share the responsibility for learning outcomes.

40 CASEL. n.d. "Fundamentals of SEL." Retrieved from <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/>

41 Smith, M. 2023, August. "Safe and Supportive Learning Environments." Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. Retrieved from <https://gpee.org/edquest-georgia/edquest-state-plan/safe-and-supportive-learning-environments/>

42 Benner, M., C. Brown, and A. Jeffrey. 2019, August 14. *Elevating Student Voice in Education*. Center for American Progress. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/elevating-student-voice-education/>

### **CONNECTING THE DOTS: Agency Is Learned. Educators Can Model It!**

Students who take ownership of their academic success and well-being are taking an important step in supporting positive school climate. The Georgia Partnership has identified three ways that school personnel can model positive social, emotional, and academic mindsets for students, and, in the process, be agents of positive school culture.

- 1. Reset the Learning Environment:** Students set learning goals and co-develop instructional expectations with their teachers. By reframing learning, teachers model self-efficacy and resilience.
- 2. Amplify Student Voice:** Teachers and school leaders solicit student feedback, incorporate their input, and find formal ways to recognize their contributions, with the eventual goal of making students more active participants in school decision-making.
- 3. Shape What Comes Next:** Students explore their interests and aptitudes. Just as teachers guide student learning, counselors, career coaches, and mentors can help students become experts in how to proceed along their career and educational journeys.

### **MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD**

Addressing low student engagement, especially in middle and high school environments, is a critical step in preparing students for post-secondary opportunities. Highly engaged learners are more optimistic about their prospects and better prepared to confront what comes after high school.

Educators 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 are needed to support such a dramatic increase in student engagement. However, school and community leaders can support this ambitious goal by modeling the social, emotional, and academic mindsets that contribute to students' post-secondary optimism and readiness.

The action steps on the following page describe concrete strategies that state and community leaders can execute to support stronger student agency.

ACTION STEPS	
<b>POLICY</b>	State and local leaders invest in professional learning that allows school staff to promote safe, healthy, and engaging learning environments for students.
<b>PRACTICE</b>	<p>Districts adopt individual career and academic plans (iCAPS) that document student milestones related to exploring careers, applying for college or financial aid, and taking the ACT or SAT.</p> <p>Districts provide proactive career counseling to improve students' institutional <i>match</i> (e.g., academic profile and career interests) and <i>fit</i> (e.g., college cost, location, and campus attributes), two indicators associated with post-secondary persistence and completion.</p>
<b>PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING</b>	<p>District and school leaders offer routine opportunities for students to provide input on instruction and the learning environment.</p> <p>School leaders facilitate feedback sessions with students, parents, and community stakeholders to evaluate whether current strategies contribute to increased student success.</p>





## QUALITY TEACHING – PREPARING FOR THE DEEPER LEARNING TRANSITION

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

Educators are instructional experts. They plan challenging lessons, monitor student progress, and use data to personalize learning. They attend to students' social, emotional, and academic development, which together foster deeper learning. By creating safe and supportive learning environments, teachers promote self-efficacy: students' belief that

they can learn and succeed, even in the face of adversity.

### ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- Shifting to student-led learning will require teachers to master new instructional and pedagogical techniques.
- District and school leaders can use existing professional growth strategies to achieve this goal.
- State and district leaders can adjust current teacher workforce policies to ensure the shift to deeper learning is sustainable and enduring.

District and school leaders can cultivate that 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.

Through the EdQuest Georgia<sup>43</sup> and CARES Impact Study<sup>44</sup> initiatives, the Georgia Partnership has identified three areas where state and district leaders should focus.

- 1. Readiness:** What professional practices do educators need to master to prepare engaging lessons, provide meaningful instructional feedback to students, and model deeper learning mindsets?
- 2. Resilience:** How can school leaders use new-teacher induction, professional development, and professional learning communities to promote teacher resilience, defined as the collective capacity of educators to execute and sustain quality practices?

<sup>43</sup> Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. 2023, August. "EdQuest Georgia." Retrieved from <https://gpee.org/edquest-georgia/>

<sup>44</sup> Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. n.d. *CARES Impact Study*. Retrieved from <https://gpee.org/programs/cares-impact-study/>

**3. Retention:** How can districts create formal teacher leadership roles to support instructional excellence and stem the tide of quality educators leaving the profession because they are dissatisfied with career advancement opportunities?

While instructional shifts on this scale are achievable, district and school leaders can improve the odds of success by involving teachers in the design, execution, and evaluation of strategies. Inviting educators to participate in all phases of instructional transformation will not require a hard reset. In fact, school leaders can use current professional growth strategies to transition to deeper learning approaches. This Issue describes how leveraging these educator growth strategies in more intentional and strategic ways can improve teacher quality and reduce the lead time to introduce deeper learning approaches.

#### **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.

#### **ADDRESSING THE ISSUE**

##### **Leveraging Existing Strategies to Promote Teacher Quality and Resilience**

District and school leaders can help promote teacher resilience in three ways: mentoring and supporting early-career teachers, differentiating professional development for individual teachers, and strengthening teacher effectiveness through professional learning communities.

##### **Mentoring and Supporting Early-Career Teachers**

When districts hire novice teachers, they often pair them with peer mentors to smooth transitions into the profession. Some schools may place all first-year teachers in a cohort with a single mentor to help shape their professional growth. In some — but not all — school systems, district staff provide professional learning to school-based mentors to ensure they are effective. Without strong practices in place, mentoring can become a compliance activity that does not address new teachers' needs. While the efficacy of induction and mentoring approaches vary from district to district, the strategy is critical to shape new teachers' expectations about how they can participate in student success initiatives.

### PROMISING PRACTICE: State Guidance and Support

During a November 2024 webinar, the Georgia Department of Education presented the seven components of quality induction strategies and a rubric for school system leaders interested in adopting the state framework.<sup>45</sup>

#### Recommendations

State policymakers can support induction and mentoring strategies in three ways:

1. By funding teacher leader and mentor stipends
2. By establishing criteria for mentor selection and professional growth
3. By providing examples of how mentors and mentees can use their dedicated time to address what matters

### Differentiating Professional Development

School leaders should use professional learning strategies to supercharge teacher growth. The research is clear: professional learning is more impactful when aligned with teacher interests, needs, and specific job roles.<sup>46</sup> Emphasizing teacher choice and agency is crucial in developing talent. After providing these opportunities, school leaders can then identify teachers ready to serve as teacher leaders, mentors, and adult learning facilitators.

### PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT: GaLEADS

The Georgia Department of Education has partnered with districts to pilot a new educator evaluation system: GaLEADS. The new system will allow educators to pursue professional learning aligned with their career interests and needs. By taking advantage of customized professional learning options, teachers can enter career pathways that prepare them to serve in advanced instructional roles.<sup>47</sup>

#### Recommendations

Districts can use the upcoming transition to GaLEADS to make concurrent shifts in how they deliver professional development throughout the school year. Allowing teachers to pursue their own learning journeys could increase self-efficacy and improve student outcomes. School leaders could tailor professional development to educators' needs in three ways:

1. By allowing teachers more choice and flexibility when selecting professional learning offerings during staff development days
2. By expanding access to competency-based and asynchronous learning opportunities that allow teachers to learn "on the go"
3. By dedicating time for teachers to observe quality practices from teacher leaders

45 Georgia Department of Education. 2024, November 5. GaDOE Certified Teacher Induction Program, Part 1 [Webinar]. Retrieved from <https://login.community.gadoe.org/events/gadoe-certified-teacher-induction-program-part-1>

46 Darling-Hammond, L., M.E. Hyler, and M. Gardner. 2017, June. *Effective Teacher Professional Development*. Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Effective\\_Teacher\\_Professional\\_Development\\_REPORT.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Effective_Teacher_Professional_Development_REPORT.pdf)

47 Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "Educator Performance." Retrieved from <https://gadoe.org/learning/educator-performance/>

## Using Professional Learning Communities to Support School Improvement

Teachers engage in professional learning communities (PLCs) by grade level or content area. PLCs often focus on achievement, growth, and student behavior. While many PLCs have formal structures and norms in place, teacher leaders and school administrators must ensure that teacher collaboration yields results in terms of differentiating student learning and allowing educators to experiment with new instructional approaches. Educators can drive school improvement by focusing on specific problems of practice and designing interventions that address them.

### DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT: Bartow County School System

In 2021, Solution Tree recognized the Bartow County School System as a Model PLC District. The district revised its PLC Playbook in June 2024. The playbook includes three qualities of effective PLCs: placing student learning at the center of all activities, pursuing common goals and shared solutions, and holding each other responsible for results.

The Bartow model is innovative because it provides a workflow for what teachers do daily: teach students, assess their progress, differentiate learning for those who struggle, and provide enrichment for students who have already demonstrated mastery.<sup>48</sup>

#### Recommendations

The Bartow model is worth replicating because their approach allows educators to identify specific instructional challenges and use their collective expertise to discover solutions. School staff in other districts should use PLCs to achieve three objectives:

1. Address students' social, emotional, and academic development
2. Monitor student growth data against grade-level benchmarks
3. Evaluate teacher instructional practices

### 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. Teacher leaders also monitor teacher progress toward mastering deeper learning approaches.
- **Resilience:** Teacher leaders provide formative feedback to their peers. They also model practices and mindsets that allow educators to develop self-efficacy. Educators with high self-efficacy are more likely to report being capable of delivering challenging and rigorous instruction.<sup>49</sup>
- **Retention:** By priming their peers for success and providing them with habits and dispositions that make them more resilient, teacher leaders also create more favorable work environments, which contribute to higher job satisfaction and lower staff turnover.

48 Bartow County School System. 2024, June. "Professional Learning Community & Strategic Plan." Retrieved from <https://www.bartow.k12.ga.us/page/professional-learning-community>

49 Mielke, C. 2021, November 1. "The Critical Element of Self-Efficacy." ASCD. Retrieved from <https://ascd.org/el/articles/the-critical-element-of-self-efficacy>

## MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

The instructional shift toward student-led learning will not occur overnight. However, Georgia's recent focus on early literacy<sup>50</sup> illustrates how a comprehensive strategy can prepare educators to implement new instructional approaches. The Georgia Partnership is confident that a similar agenda for deeper learning in grades 6 to 12 could take shape using existing professional growth strategies to support mastery of new techniques.

Two developments will accelerate the spread of deeper learning approaches across Georgia: the wider adoption of formal teacher roles in schools across the state and more active involvement of classroom teachers in the day-to-day execution and evaluation of school improvement strategies.

The action steps listed below provide more detail on how state and local leaders can move the deeper learning agenda forward.

ACTION STEPS	
<b>POLICY</b>	<p>School systems recognize teacher leaders and mentors as learning specialists and provide pay, responsibilities, and release time commensurate with their new roles.</p> <p>The Georgia General Assembly includes teacher leaders as a funded instructional position in the Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula. School leaders empower teachers to execute school improvement plans and evaluate progress in reaching critical goals.</p>
<b>PRACTICE</b>	<p>District and school administrators empower mentors to deliver personalized support based on novice teachers' needs.</p> <p>School leaders support educators in the ability to use professional learning communities during the school day to diagnose current challenges, pilot new interventions, and observe quality lessons.</p>
<b>PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING</b>	<p>State and local leaders survey teachers to ask them how educator workforce strategies can be reimaged to support educators' social, emotional, and professional growth.</p>

<sup>50</sup> House Bill 538 (2023) requires school systems to revamp K-3 reading instruction using structured literacy approaches. Senate Bill 211 (2023) creates the Georgia Council on Literacy to support local implementation of the provisions outlined in House Bill 538.



## STRONG FOUNDATIONS – ENSURING GEORGIANS YOUNGEST ARE PRIMED FOR LIFELONG SUCCESS

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

Ninety percent of brain development occurs before children enter kindergarten. Several factors support healthy brain development including nurturing relationships with adults, exposure to quality early learning experiences, and access to health and wellness services.

#### ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- School readiness is a milestone associated with positive adult education, health, and economic outcomes.
- Researchers have identified specific early learning and health interventions that increase school readiness.
- The EdQuest Georgia initiative recommends state leaders develop a comprehensive strategy that delivers services and supports to students at risk of not being ready for school.

Conversely, family and community factors like poverty, toxic stress, and neglect compromise brain development and contribute to poor health and learning outcomes.<sup>51</sup>

In the *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2023*, the Georgia Partnership called on state and community leaders to develop a single child development strategy that ensures more vulnerable children receive the education, health, and family supports that prepare them for kindergarten.<sup>52</sup>

Learning and literacy gaps first identified in elementary school begin long before a child enters kindergarten and widen in adulthood.

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 visitation, developmental screenings, and early interventions for at-risk children — are not reaching most infants, toddlers, and young children, especially those from disadvantaged families.<sup>53</sup>

51 Zero to Three. 2023, August 16. "Understanding Brain Development in Babies and Toddlers." Retrieved from <https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/distillation/understanding-brain-development-in-babies-and-toddlers/>

52 Smith, M. 2023, January 6. *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2023*. Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. Retrieved from [https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/GPEE-Top-Ten-Issues-2023\\_Jan-6-final.pdf](https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/GPEE-Top-Ten-Issues-2023_Jan-6-final.pdf)

53 Heckman, J. n.d. "Invest in Early Childhood Development: Reduce Deficits, Strengthen the Economy." The Heckman Equation. Retrieved from <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/invest-in-early-childhood-development-reduce-deficits-strengthen-the-economy/>

This Issue describes the factors that support school readiness and identifies ways that a unified statewide child development plan could make a case for investments that prime our youngest for lifelong success.

### CALL TO ACTION

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

### 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 section identifies practices that support school readiness.

#### Early Learning

##### *Language Nutrition: The Role of Parents and Caregivers*

Early exposure to language creates a strong foundation for cognitive functioning and emotional regulation, two factors that promote school readiness and future quality of life. Language-rich interactions with caregivers nourish brain development, just as healthy foods support strong physical health.<sup>54</sup>

However, research demonstrates income-based disparities in the language nutrition — the quantity and quality of language-rich interactions — that young children receive. While state and community leaders can assemble resources to support gap closure in this area, a first step is to increase awareness among parents and community members about the importance of language to future learning and well-being.

### EdQuest Georgia Partner: Get Georgia Reading Campaign<sup>55</sup>

The Get Georgia Reading Campaign's primary goal is ensuring every child in Georgia is a proficient reader by the end of third grade. Language nutrition is one of the four pillars that support this goal. The other three — access to supports and services, positive learning climate, and teacher preparation and effectiveness — build upon early language exposure to ensure more young children are ready to read. The Campaign Cabinet includes 35 influential organizations in the child development space, including the Georgia Partnership.

54 Get Georgia Reading. n.d. "Language Nutrition." Retrieved from <https://getgeorgiareading.org/language-nutrition/>

55 For more information about the Get Georgia Reading Campaign, see <https://getgeorgiareading.org/>.

56 Derrick-Miles, T., E. Miles, and A. Farr. 2024, March 14. *Key Insights and Recommendations for DECAL's Comprehensive Review of Quality Rated*. Urban Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/key-insights-and-recommendations-decals-comprehensive-review-quality-rated>

### **Quality Childcare**

In 2023, the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) commissioned the Urban Institute to conduct a comprehensive study of Quality Rated (QR).<sup>56</sup> Quality Rated is Georgia's Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System that supports programs' efforts to increase and maintain quality while also publicly communicating how child care learning centers and family child care learning homes perform across a variety of quality standards.<sup>57</sup> Quality Rated assigns a 1, 2, or 3-star rating to participating programs. In August 2024, the Urban Institute released their findings, which included feedback from focus groups with families and early childhood educators and a survey of program providers.

DECAL is currently in the process of developing possible revisions to Quality Rated. Based on the feedback from the Urban Institute report, DECAL is looking at ways for the system to strengthen supports and resources that Quality Rated offers to providers. As part of the overhaul, the system will focus more on supporting continuous quality improvement.<sup>58</sup>

#### **EdQuest Georgia Partner: Quality Care for Children<sup>59</sup>**

To help increase the overall quality of childcare programs, Quality Care for Children supports childcare providers and parents through nine programs. Services include the following:

- Coaching providers interested in obtaining Quality Rated status or increasing their star rating
- Offering professional development to early childhood educators
- Distributing mini-grants for equipment and administrative and financial services
- Providing a free statewide childcare referral service for parents
- Awarding means-tested childcare tuition scholarships for families that qualify

### **Health**

#### ***Focusing on Maternal Health and Early Milestones***

Preterm birth and low birthweight are two health outcomes that can impact a child's readiness for kindergarten. Several maternal factors contribute to preterm birth and low birthweight, including chronic health conditions like smoking, obesity, and diabetes.

57 The five standards are director and teacher qualifications; child health, nutrition, and physical activity; family engagement; intentional teaching practices; and teacher-student ratio requirements.

58 Department of Early Care and Learning. 2024, May. Quality Rated Revisions [Webinar Power Point]. Retrieved from [https://www.decals.ga.gov/documents/attachments/QualityRatedRevisionsWebinar\\_May2024.pdf](https://www.decals.ga.gov/documents/attachments/QualityRatedRevisionsWebinar_May2024.pdf)

59 For more information about Quality Care for Children, see <https://www.qualitycareforchildren.org/>.



The lack of access to perinatal care — health interventions for mother and child during the first year after birth — and the insurance status of the mother are also highly correlated with learning and health outcomes.<sup>60</sup> Comprehensive developmental screenings during the first three years of life are critical so that young children receive interventions that address their needs.<sup>61</sup>

#### **Birth-to-Five Resource: CDC Milestone Tracker**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American Academy of Pediatrics developed a checklist that identifies key social-emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development milestones. Children who meet milestones on time are more likely to experience high cognition function, emotional regulation, and physical well-being, three predictors of school readiness.<sup>62</sup>

#### **Insulating Young Children from Stress**

Chronic stress and childhood adversity affect brain development and physical health. Trauma, like poverty, is intergenerational. Children of parents who have experienced abuse, neglect, or adversity are more likely to experience toxic stress than those that do not. Investments in behavioral health services, especially for children and adolescents, are critical to breaking this multigenerational cycle.<sup>63</sup>

#### **EdQuest Georgia Partner: Resilient Georgia<sup>64</sup>**

Resilient Georgia's goal is to create an integrated behavioral health system for children, adolescents, and young adults. Resilient Georgia supports regional coalitions, provides professional learning resources for community providers, and communicates the importance of incorporating evidence-based practices into current state approaches.

#### **Parent and Family Supports**

The Georgia Partnership and the EdQuest Georgia Coalition cite multigenerational strategies as one of four power strategies in the birth-to-five space.<sup>65</sup> Multigenerational strategies provide parental education and family resources while ensuring Georgia's youngest children are prepared for school. DECAL and coalition partners like Get Georgia Reading and Quality Care for Children support multigenerational efforts. Better coordination between these efforts and greater state investments could spread and scale effective strategies.

60 Girardi, G., M. Longo, and A.A. Bremer. 2023, September 6. "Social Determinants of Health in Pregnant Individuals from Underrepresented, Understudied, and Underreported Populations in the United States." *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 22(186). Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-023-01963-x>

61 Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center. 2024, September. *Prenatal-to-3 Policy Clearinghouse Evidence Review: Comprehensive Screening and Connection Programs*. Vanderbilt University. Retrieved from <https://pn3policy.org/policy-clearinghouse/comprehensive-screening-and-connection-programs>

62 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. n.d. "Milestone Moments Checklist." Retrieved from [https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/pdf/LTSAE-Checklist\\_COMPLIANT\\_30MCorrection\\_508.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/pdf/LTSAE-Checklist_COMPLIANT_30MCorrection_508.pdf)

63 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2024, October 8. "Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences." Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/aces/prevention/index.html>

64 For more information about Resilient Georgia, see <https://www.resilientga.org/>.

65 Smith, M. 2023, August. "Foundations for Learning." Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. Retrieved at <https://gpee.org/edquest-georgia/edquest-framework/foundationsforlearning/>

### State Program: Georgia Gateway

Georgia Gateway is a portal that allows families to apply for six social service programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program. Research suggests that easing the burden of accessing safety net programs can in turn reduce the odds of families remaining in poverty.<sup>66</sup>

The EdQuest Georgia initiative also champions policies that support economic mobility and mitigate family poverty. Researchers have identified several policies that support parents and caregivers, including Medicaid expansion, paid family leave, state earned income tax credit programs, and expanded access to childcare subsidies.<sup>67</sup>

### CONNECTING THE DOTS: Three Benefits of a Single Statewide Child Development Plan

1. **Visibility and Awareness:** Policymakers see how various education and health interventions interact to promote learner readiness and well-being.
2. **Data and Transparency:** State and community leaders understand where gaps exist and can use data to address them.
3. **Deeper Impact:** A unified state plan could support greater coordination of services and increase parent and community awareness of available resources.

### 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, the most important academic milestone for children and youth. Children who are proficient readers at this juncture are four times more likely to graduate from high school than their peers who are not proficient readers.<sup>68</sup>

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. Other community assets are in place to support agencies tasked with child development, including the Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS) Infant Toddler Coalition, the Georgia Children's Cabinet, and the early literacy work championed by Georgia Reads.

<sup>66</sup> Schweitzer, J. 2022, May 5. How to Address the Administrative Burden of Accessing the Safety Net. Center for American Progress. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/how-to-address-the-administrative-burdens-of-accessing-the-safety-net/>

<sup>67</sup> Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center. n.d. *2024 Prenatal-to-3 State Policy Roadmap*. Vanderbilt University. <https://pn3policy.org/pn-3-state-policy-roadmap-2024>

<sup>68</sup> 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>

The action steps described below offer specific ways that state and community leaders can make good on the promise of a single statewide child development strategy.

<b>ACTION STEPS</b>	
<b>POLICY</b>	State leaders increase their investments in evidence-based, early education and health strategies, such as home visitation, comprehensive health screenings, and early interventions for children with developmental and intellectual disabilities.
<b>PRACTICE</b>	<p>State leaders convene a working group to identify how to measure school readiness using education, health, and environment data. The working group should leverage existing assets like the G-KIDS Readiness Check<sup>69</sup> and the Framework for School Readiness in Georgia led by GEEARS<sup>70</sup> to develop a checklist of high-impact interventions.</p> <p>Early learning centers and K-12 schools adopt trauma-informed approaches that help support the learning and well-being of students exposed to toxic stress or childhood adversities.</p>
<b>PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING</b>	<p>Direct-service nonprofits and community health providers deepen efforts to inform pediatric health professionals about learning and health supports for children and caregivers that close school readiness gaps.</p> <p>State agencies coordinate efforts to ensure parents and caregivers know about available education and health resources in their communities.</p>

<sup>69</sup> For more about the G-KIDS Readiness Check, see <https://gadoe.org/assessment-accountability/gkids/>

<sup>70</sup> For more about the Framework for School Readiness in Georgia, see <https://geears.org/framework-for-school-readiness/>



## TAILORING SCHOOL STAFFING TO STUDENT, TEACHER, AND COMMUNITY NEEDS

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

The Georgia Partnership uses the term “unfinished learning” to describe the knowledge, skills, and abilities students have yet to master to reach their next education or career milestone.<sup>71</sup> Unfinished learning is a strategic mindset that allows schools and communities

#### ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- Districts should reform school staffing models to promote student learning and well-being.
- Teachers would benefit through the deployment of teacher leaders as coaches, mentors, and professional learning facilitators.
- The Georgia Partnership has identified three state policy assets that district leaders can use to execute new staffing initiatives.

to focus on student growth, while also acknowledging that some current school structures and practices, such as traditional staffing models, might be counterproductive to student success.

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.

In the last three editions of the *Top Ten Issues*, the Georgia Partnership called on district leaders to deploy teacher leaders to accomplish two goals: accelerate student learning and improve teacher quality through a coordinated educator growth strategy.

While leading districts already use teacher leaders in their schools, the Georgia Partnership urges all district leaders to take a more dramatic step: leverage 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 how teachers grow their professional tools.

<sup>71</sup> Clash, C. 2020, January 14. “Unfinished Learning, or Unfinished Teaching? A Mindset Shift.” ANet. Retrieved from <https://www.achievementnetwork.org/resource-center/unfinished-learning-or-unfinished-teaching>.

**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.

**ADDRESSING THE ISSUE**

Many of the strategic school staffing practices described in this section were first implemented on a statewide scale during the pandemic. With modest tweaks to teacher workforce strategies, state and district leaders can make these changes permanent to better meet state, educator, and community needs.

**Student Learning and Well-Being**

Superintendents who responded to the Georgia Partnership's CARES Impact Study surveys between 2022 and 2024, reported three investments from their federal pandemic-relief dollars that had an outsized impact on student success during the pandemic:

1. Supporting struggling students through extended learning opportunities, e.g., afterschool, summer, and tutor programs
2. Executing comprehensive strategies to improve math and reading instruction
3. Expanding access to behavioral health services and supports<sup>72</sup>

Before the onset of the pandemic, district and school leaders explored how to use academic interventionists to support struggling students. Academic interventionists provide individual and small-group instruction. They also monitor student progress and deliver feedback on how classroom teachers can develop personalized learning plans for students who are not mastering core content.<sup>73</sup> Districts should deploy teacher leaders and interventionists to adopt collaborative teaching models proven to accelerate student learning.

Districts are also rethinking how they support students' physical and behavioral health. Using pandemic-relief funds, the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) provided planning grants to encourage more school systems to create and implement school-based health centers (SBHCs). Most centers provide vision and hearing screenings, treat chronic health conditions, and refer children to dental and behavioral health providers. Despite the state SBHC footprint having grown from 3 to 119 over the last decade,<sup>74</sup> persistently low healthcare access for economically disadvantaged children and rural students means some individuals will not receive the preventative healthcare they need.

<sup>72</sup> Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. n.d. CARES Impact Study. Retrieved from <https://gpee.org/programs/cares-impact-study/>

<sup>73</sup> Choice Schools. n.d. "Helping Everyone Thrive in Schools: School Interventionists." Retrieved from <https://choiceschools.com/choice-schools-news/helping-everyone-thrive-in-their-schools/>

<sup>74</sup> Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "School-Based Health Centers Map." Retrieved from <https://apps.gadoe.org/SBHC>

The need to support students' physical and behavioral health has become part of a school counselor's job and further reduces the time dedicated to proactive post-secondary advisement. The Georgia Partnership recommends state leaders consider a new strategy: providing funding for two types of counseling positions in each secondary school — one for social-behavioral issues, the other for academic and career counseling. Further, state leaders should consider changes to the Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula to increase state funding for other student support staff, including social workers, school psychologists, and behaviorists.

### **State Policy Levers: Making Staffing Changes through Waiver Flexibility**

Georgia law empowers districts to rethink the flexibility they currently have through the Strategic Waiver School System program. Approved school systems may waive state requirements related to class size, instructional expenditure levels, teacher certification, and salary schedules. Districts could use their waivers to shift how they pay educators, especially teacher leaders responsible for student learning and the supervision of pre-professional and early-career educators.<sup>75</sup>

## **EDUCATOR PROFESSIONAL GROWTH**

In 2022, the Georgia Partnership identified two changes that would deepen teacher quality:

1. Enacting meaningful teacher leadership roles
2. Providing more time during the school year for frequent, job-relevant professional learning opportunities<sup>76</sup>

Teacher leaders provide coaching and professional growth opportunities centered on the content that educators identify as necessary to enrich their professional practice. While systems and structures can reinforce effective practice, developing formal teacher leader roles is the most critical piece of state and local educator workforce plans. Creating positions for highly effective educators to coach and mentor peers signals to aspiring professionals that career advancement is possible while spending most of their time in the classroom.

### **National Report on Strategic Staffing**

The National Council on Teacher Quality released *Reimagining the Teacher Role* in September 2024. The report examines the role of state policy in supporting strategic staffing and identifies disruptive innovators like Public Impact and Education Resource Strategies.<sup>77</sup>

Most schools operate under a "one teacher per classroom" model. Student success under this approach is reliant on the quality of instruction delivered by individual teachers, rather than the collective efficacy of the building's teachers. Public Impact, a nonprofit focused on

75 Governor's Office of Student Achievement. n.d. "Strategic Waivers School Systems FAQs." Retrieved from <https://gosa.georgia.gov/strategic-waivers-school-systems-frequently-asked-questions-faq>

76 Smith, M. 2022, January. *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2022*. Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. Retrieved from [https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/GPEE-Top-Ten-2022-Full-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/GPEE-Top-Ten-2022-Full-Report_Final.pdf)

77 National Council on Teacher Quality. 2024, September. *Reimagining the Teaching Role: How Strategic Staffing Can Attract and Retain Effective Teachers*. Retrieved from <https://reimagineteaching.nctq.org/>

improving education systems, disrupted the one teacher model when it developed the multi-classroom leader (MCL) approach. School leaders hire MCLs to coach a small team of four to six teachers. They provide coaching to new teachers, lead professional learning communities, and model effective instructional practices. Depending on the district, MCLs operate on either a full or partial release schedule. In a partial release environment, MCLs retain their classroom responsibilities while providing co-teaching during part of the school day. Typically, MCLs earn a salary about 20% higher than their peers, placing their compensation between that of teachers and assistant principals.<sup>78</sup>

### State Policy Levers: Leveraging Tiered Licensure

Teacher leader initiatives provide educators with career pathways that keep them in the classroom, allowing them to receive recognition and greater compensation without having to take on administrative roles. School systems should leverage Georgia's tiered teacher certification system to create formal teacher leader roles. Teachers can pursue two types of advanced certification — one to support instructional excellence (Advanced Professional), the other to mentor and coach their peers (Lead Professional).<sup>79</sup>

### Family and Community-Facing Roles

In a safe and supportive learning environment, all stakeholders feel like they have a voice in how schools operate. However, educators are not always equipped with the training and resources to engage parents and the community in how they can support student learning. In the post-pandemic era, district and school leaders must consider the value of hiring personnel to support authentic family and community engagement.

School leaders have more responsibilities than ever, so it is imperative that staff dedicate time to creating and maintaining a healthy school culture. Involving parents and community members in the climate of the school helps achieve this goal. School leaders interested in promoting positive school climate can use federal Title I funds to hire family and community engagement coordinators, especially if they demonstrate a link between the coordinators' work and improved student learning.<sup>80</sup>

### State Policy Levers: Consolidation of Funds

GaDOE allows Title I schools to combine federal, state, and local funds into a single budget through a waiver from the US Department of Education. Schools then have the flexibility to allocate funds according to their comprehensive needs assessments. Schools can fund several positions — school nurses, counselors, and academic and behavioral interventionists — in a consolidated strategy that would have been more difficult when having to abide by the accounting requirements of each grant.<sup>81</sup>

78 Public Impact. n.d. "Opportunity Culture Educator Roles." Retrieved from <https://www.opportunityculture.org/opportunity-culture-educator-roles/>

79 Georgia Professional Standards Commission. 2024, April 15. "505-2-.02 Classification." Retrieved from <https://www.gapsc.com/rules/current/certification/505-2-.02.pdf>

80 Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "What Is Parent and Family Engagement?" Retrieved from <https://gadoe.org/federal-programs/title-i-part-a-family-school-partnership/>

81 Georgia Department of Education. 2024, September 25. Consolidation of Funds: Unlocking Opportunities for Flexibility and Innovation (PowerPoint). ESEA Network. Retrieved from <https://www.e seanetwork.org/c/titlei/files/Webinars/2024/NAESPA%20Consolidation%20Webinar%209.25.2024.pdf>

## MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

When considering how to staff schools, district leaders should keep three questions in mind.

1. How do we increase the number of students ready for post-secondary opportunities?
2. How do we provide support for teachers that accelerates student learning?
3. How do we create and maintain a positive school climate?

The Georgia Partnership recommends that early adopters create a replicable framework in which districts identify needs, define options, execute strategies, measure progress, and refine models to meet student, teacher, and community needs.

The action steps described below offer specific ways that state and community leaders can adopt strategic staffing principles.

ACTION STEPS	
<b>POLICY</b>	<p>The Georgia General Assembly or GaDOE funds district pilots focused on advanced teacher roles and innovative staffing models. The North Carolina General Assembly has funded a successful district pilot program for six years.</p> <p>Districts deploy teacher leaders to induct, mentor, and coach their early-career peers.</p>
<b>PRACTICE</b>	<p>School systems develop aspiring leader programs to identify educators with the interest and aptitude to become teacher leaders.</p> <p>GaDOE creates a guidance document that educates current school leaders about how to effectively deploy and utilize teacher leaders.</p> <p>School leaders provide release time for teachers to learn from their peers. Teacher leaders can lead short-cycle projects where educators diagnose current challenges, pilot new interventions, and observe quality instruction.</p>
<b>PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING</b>	<p>State agencies or existing nonprofits support a coalition of early-adopter districts committed to developing strategic staffing approaches.</p> <p>State nonprofit leaders create a draft state teacher working conditions survey that builds on the instruments already used by educator and school and district administrator organizations.</p>





## POST-SECONDARY TRANSITIONS – NONTRADITIONAL ROUTES TO WORK READINESS

### 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.

Just over half (52.8%) of Georgians have earned a post-secondary credential: a degree,

certificate, certification, or occupational license.

An additional 36% of Georgians have earned a high school diploma or equivalency, making them eligible to enroll in post-secondary education and workforce training programs.<sup>82</sup>

### ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- Georgia will not reach the North Star goal – 65% of the adult population with a post-secondary credential – without increasing the percentage of working adults with post-secondary credentials.
- Noncredit and nondegree programs in high-demand career fields are affordable alternatives to four-year degree pathways.
- Georgians are more likely to enroll in these programs when they know that short-term credentials provide immediate value and allow them to pursue degrees in the future.

The Partnership’s EdQuest Georgia initiative identifies three strategies that state leaders could adopt to encourage the one-third of residents who have earned a high school credential or equivalency but no credential to enter post-secondary education and workforce training programs.

1. Build awareness of nondegree and noncredit pathways as viable alternatives to two- and four-year degrees.
2. Create more continuity between short-term credentials and degree programs so students can earn short-term credentials and then enroll in degree programs with minimal disruption.

<sup>82</sup> Lumina Foundation. n.d. *A Stronger Nation: Georgia Attainment 2009–2022*. Retrieved from <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/#/progress/state/GA>

3. Make nondegree pathways more accessible and affordable for residents who have little or no prior exposure to post-secondary education.<sup>83</sup>

In the *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2022*, the Georgia Partnership called on state leaders and education advocates to unite around an ambitious goal: ensuring that 65% of Georgians aged 25 to 64 hold a post-secondary credential by the end of 2033. **We call this the North Star goal.**<sup>84</sup> This Issue identifies three ways that state leaders can help meet that goal by supporting nondegree pathway growth: through better messaging, by linking nondegree programs to broader state strategies, and by investing in students who choose to complete credentials in high-need areas.

#### CALL TO ACTION

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

#### ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

When most people think of post-secondary transitions, they imagine young adults graduating from high school, enrolling in colleges and universities, and completing an

##### EdQuest Post-Secondary and Workforce Readiness: 2033 Goal

Prepare Georgians for workforce opportunities by ensuring their skills and credentials meet employers' needs.

associate or baccalaureate degree before they turn 25. While this pathway remains vital to reaching Georgia's educational attainment goals, state leaders will need to invest in strengthening systems that both motivate traditional college-going students and entice disconnected youth and working adults to enter or re-enter post-secondary programs. This section reveals three steps that higher education leaders can take to reach the North Star goal.

#### Define the Value of Post-Secondary Training

One of the strongest social and cultural messages ever conveyed to the American public is that four-year degrees are the passport to the middle class. Economic data support this argument, to a point. Georgians who have college degrees, for instance, are more likely to weather economic shocks than their peers who have not earned a credential. However, individuals who have earned certificates in engineering, blue-collar fields, information technology, and legal studies often earn salaries comparable to peers who have earned a college degree.<sup>85</sup>

83 Smith, M. 2023, August. "Clear Pathways to Post-Secondary Success." Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. Retrieved from <https://gpee.org/edquest-georgia/edquest-framework/clear-pathways-to-post-secondary-success/>

84 Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. 2023, August. *The North Star: Securing Georgia's Future by 2033*. Retrieved from <https://gpee.org/edquest-georgia/northstar/>

85 Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce. 2020, January 28. *The Overlooked Value of Certificates and Associate's Degrees*. Retrieved from <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/subba/>

Rising tuitions and corresponding student debt loads have some Georgians questioning the value of the four-year degree, but few Georgians are entering the short-term credential space, despite some types of credentials offering a decent wage premium at a more affordable price. Perhaps, with little understanding of which credentials produce the greatest return, most Georgians are not confident that the nondegree route is a viable alternative.<sup>86</sup>

Currently, state leaders lack the data to make the case for nondegree pathways, especially in comparison to two- and four-year degrees. While the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) collects data on the number of earned nondegree credentials, state leaders lack data on the number of Georgians who have earned such credentials outside of public higher education systems. In addition, workforce data are available to make valid claims about wage and employment outcomes, but that information may not be easily found by residents needing information. Georgia's leaders can build trust in nondegree credentials by ensuring the data are available and accessible for adults to use to make informed decisions about what nondegree credentials to pursue.

**EdQuest Georgia Recommendation:** Increase state capacity to collect data on nondegree credentials and generate wage premium data for specific credentials. The National Student Clearinghouse<sup>87</sup> is a resource for developing data-based insights in the short-term while policy-makers define how they will increase local capacity.

### **Integrate Skill-Based Credentials into Broader State Strategies**

The University System of Georgia and TCSG have developed strong articulation agreements for general education courses. In the career, technical, and agricultural education (CTAE) arena, the Georgia Department of Education and TCSG have partnered to allow students who complete one of four high school career pathways – welding, patient care, cloud computing, or automotive service technology – to receive technical college credit.<sup>88</sup> These strides are moving Georgia in the right direction.

However, to meet the needs of tomorrow's post-secondary graduates, the two post-secondary systems should create skill and credential maps that show how knowledge, skills, and abilities progress from short-term credentials to doctoral degrees. Skill and credential mapping should allow system leaders to create formal pathways that demonstrate how students can move from skill-based credentials to advanced degrees in their chosen field.

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.

<sup>86</sup> New America. n.d. "Labor-Market Outcomes." Retrieved from <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/the-short-term-credentials-landscape/labor-market-outcomes/>

<sup>87</sup> For more information, see <https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/>

<sup>88</sup> D'Alessio, M. 2021, August 25. "TCSG, GaDOE agreement will allow students to receive college credit for identified high school Career Pathways" [Press release]. Technical College System of Georgia. Retrieved from <https://www.tcsge.edu/tcsge-gadoe-agreement-will-allow-students-to-receive-college-credit-for-identified-high-school-career-pathways/>

**EdQuest Georgia Recommendation:** Ensure nondegree, noncredit programs are aligned to related degree programs so that students can pursue two- and four-year degrees.

### Reward Georgians Who Pursue Training Aligned with Workforce Needs

Students who enroll in certificate and technical diploma programs can access financial aid through the HOPE and Zell Miller Grants. Both grants provide tuition assistance. Students enrolled in nondegree programs aligned with in-demand career fields can also receive the HOPE Career Grant, a supplemental program that covers approved educational costs in addition to tuition.<sup>89</sup> In total, the Georgia General Assembly appropriated about \$76.5 million across these three financial aid programs in FY 2025.<sup>90</sup>

Expanding employer tax credit programs to encourage incumbent worker training and “earn and learn” strategies also could increase the percentage of working adults with post-secondary credentials of value by enticing businesses to upskill their workforces.

**EdQuest Georgia Recommendation:** Expand and deepen incentives for working adults to earn short-term post-secondary credentials in areas with workforce shortages.

## MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

At the Georgia Partnership, we are hopeful because Georgia has significant policy assets and structural advantages that can be leveraged to jumpstart 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.

### CONNECTING THE DOTS: Clarity, Credit, and Guarantees

Georgians are more likely to enroll in nondegree programs of study if they understand the value of the credentials they would earn when completing these programs. State leaders can change mindsets and encourage behaviors in three ways:

1. By building awareness of what factors motivate individuals to pursue career-relevant, skills-based credential programs
2. By leading with data and evidence that demonstrates the value of skill-based credentials. Initially, the state can rely on national partners to pull together the dataset
3. By publicizing system guarantees (i.e., transfer/portability of experiences) and financial aid incentives to entice more individuals to enter programs that are aligned with workforce needs

<sup>89</sup> Georgia Student Finance Commission. n.d. “HOPE Programs.” Retrieved from <https://gsfc.georgia.gov/programs-and-regulations/hope-programs>

<sup>90</sup> Governor's Office of Planning and Budget. n.d. *Budget in Briefs FY 2025–AFY 2024*. Retrieved from <https://opb.georgia.gov/document/budget-briefs/fy-2025-afy-2024-bib/download>

Creating a statewide campaign emphasizing the value of skill-based credentials is an immediate step that state and community leaders can take. Over time, these leaders can increase understanding of the value of these credentials 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 nondegree programs more accessible and affordable.

The Georgia Partnership and the EdQuest Georgia Coalition are committed to creating a seamless post-secondary education and workforce training system by 2033. As we move closer to 2033, a more robust system of education and training will ensure fewer Georgians are locked into low-paying, low-skill jobs.

The action steps described below offer specific ways that state and community leaders can achieve the promise of a seamless system.

<b>ACTION STEPS</b>	
<b>POLICY</b>	<p>The Georgia General Assembly expands incentives for companies to offer "earn and learn" opportunities for Georgians enrolled in post-secondary programs.</p> <p>State and system leaders enhance existing articulation agreements to ensure public institutions award credit for alternative credentials and nontraditional experiences, regardless of where they were earned.</p>
<b>PRACTICE</b>	<p>Post-secondary system leaders create skill and credential maps that show what students should know and be able to do as they progress from noncredit workforce experiences to doctoral degrees.</p> <p>Colleges and universities prioritize recruitment of adult learners by offering flexible scheduling, employer placements, and quality academic and career advising.</p>
<b>PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING</b>	<p>State, system, and corporate leaders develop a more inclusive and data-driven post-secondary narrative that demonstrates four-year degrees are not the only pathway to economic self-sufficiency.</p> <p>State leaders and pathways experts develop a web portal where students, parents, and the public can learn more about the wage potential of various industry-recognized credentials. Better information about tradeoffs, such as time in program, cost of attendance, and wage premiums from credentials, will improve individual decision-making.</p>



## EMPLOYABILITY – LOOKING TO 2033 AND BEYOND

### 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.<sup>91</sup>

#### ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- Only 65% of able adult Georgians work. Male labor force participation has declined significantly since 2000.
- Macroeconomic changes will impact Georgians without high school credentials first.
- Community stakeholders, including civic, corporate, and education leaders, should invest in skills development for adults who lack post-secondary training.

The pandemic exposed many of the systemic, structural barriers that have prevented many Georgians from benefiting from the state's economic prosperity. Displacement and job loss due to changing economic trends disproportionately affects low-skill workers who have not earned post-secondary credentials.<sup>92</sup>

To remain responsive to ever-changing workforce needs, state and community leaders must prioritize **employability**, the degree to which individuals obtain gainful employment and succeed in their chosen careers.<sup>93</sup> While

employability is a proxy for quality of life, it is also correlated with a region's workforce stability and economic security.

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

92 Brand, J. E. 2015, August. "The Far-Reaching Impact of Job Loss and Unemployment." *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41:359–375. Retrieved from <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4553243/>

93 Perkins Collaborative Resource Network. n.d. "Employability Skills." Retrieved from <https://cte.ed.gov/initiatives/employability-skills-framework>

Now more than ever, Georgians need career skills that qualify them for good jobs and equitable 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.

To stave off a growing gap between the skills workers have and the skills employers need, within each community, there is a role for all stakeholders. For example, education and civic organizations provide education and jobs programs for unemployed adults and residents who receive government assistance. Business and industry partners meet their immediate workforce needs by recruiting adults into their new-employee training programs. Together, education, civic, and corporate partners can create a more coordinated system of career preparation that allows more Georgians to experience education and economic opportunity.

### **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 unemployability: low-literate Georgians and those lacking a high school diploma or equivalency.

### **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.<sup>94</sup>

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.

This section describes how communities can support individual resilience by promoting basic skills training, expanding access to quality jobs, and addressing risk factors that constrain job prospects.

#### **Basic Skills: Focusing on Earning High School Equivalencies**

One out of every nine adult Georgians does not have a high school diploma or an equivalent credential.<sup>95</sup> Some of the members of this subgroup are immigrant residents that never enrolled in K-12 education. Others dropped out before completing a high school diploma. Regardless of their circumstances, Georgians without a high school diploma are more likely to be unemployed or experience economic hardship than their peers with a diploma.

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94 Perkins Collaborative Resource Network. n.d. "Employability Skills." Retrieved from <https://cte.ed.gov/initiatives/employability-skills-framework>

95 US Census Bureau. n.d. "QuickFacts: Georgia" [as of July 1, 2023]. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/GA/PST045223>

The Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) addresses this crisis by offering free classes for adult Georgians preparing to take a high school equivalency (HSE) test. While nearly 3,600 residents earned their HSE between July 1, 2023 and June 30, 2024 through the TCSG,<sup>96</sup> over 1.2 million adult Georgians still lack a high school credential.

Residents who lack high school credentials are most likely to be among the first wave of Georgians affected by automation and broader macroeconomic changes. Earning an HSE is the first step for many Georgians to enter technical education programs offered at TCSG campuses and jobs programs sponsored by employers.

After these adults receive their HSEs, state and community leaders can find ways to direct them into jobs programs that prepare them for initial employment.

### **State Priority: Combatting Adult Illiteracy**

The TCSG operates the Certified Literate Community Program, an initiative started by Governor Zell Miller in 1990 to combat low literacy among adults. The program operates in over 25 communities across the state, bringing together diverse networks of education, civic, business, and faith-based leaders.

Participating communities identify common goals and coordinate strategies through written plans that they submit to the TCSG. The plans allow community stakeholders to document what works and show why investments in adult literacy are essential to promote economic and workforce development.<sup>97</sup> Investments in adult language and literacy programs can allow adult Georgians to take the next step: earning a high school diploma or equivalency.

### **Technical Skills: Expanding Access to Quality Jobs**

While state efforts to increase the number of Georgians with post-secondary credentials is critical to sustaining the state's economic competitiveness, community and corporate leaders 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. One career pathway recently prioritized by state leaders is the registered apprenticeship. The Georgia General Assembly has provided incentives for employers to recruit, train, and hire apprentices for fields experiencing workforce shortages.<sup>98</sup>

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96 Technical College System of Georgia. 2024, October. "Scorecard: Adult Education." Retrieved from [https://www.tcsg.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Scorecard\\_-High-School-Equivalency-Graduates-MES0205.pdf](https://www.tcsg.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Scorecard_-High-School-Equivalency-Graduates-MES0205.pdf)

97 Technical College System of Georgia. n.d. "Certified Literate Community Program." Retrieved from <https://www.tcsg.edu/adult-education/adult-education-certified-literate-community-program/>

98 Technical College System of Georgia. n.d. "What Is a Registered Apprenticeship?" Retrieved from <https://www.tcsg.edu/worksource/resources-for-practitioners/apprentice/>



By exposing more individuals to skill-based programs, leaders can ensure that the half of Georgia residents who have not earned post-secondary credentials have a credible and affordable alternative to degree programs.

### **Building Responsive Workforce Strategies**

Corporate leaders often partner with post-secondary institutions and civic leaders after identifying an immediate need. The TCSG created the Quick Start program to provide customized employee training for businesses that are expanding in or relocating to Georgia.<sup>99</sup>

The Georgia Partnership urges business leaders to work with chambers of commerce and industry and trade groups to support stronger alignment between credit and noncredit workforce programs. Adult learners interested in reskilling can pursue noncredit programs in specific workforce sectors and continue to acquire more specialized technical skills through related degrees and certifications.

Short-term credentials can serve as steppingstones to further study while providing immediate value to individuals through higher wages and more stable employment.

### **Resilience: The Importance of Meeting Basic Needs**

Individuals possess resilience when they continue to thrive in the face of adversity. Everyday stresses, deep trauma, and shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic test our resilience.

Community leaders are well-positioned to develop broad-based strategies that support the health, wellness, and economic security of residents. As these strategies combine, they can support the resiliency of an entire community. For example, as state and community leaders explore ways to navigate future social and economic disruptions, considering how to support access to quality childcare and healthcare can help insulate an entire community from adverse impacts and help it, and its members, continue to thrive.

The lack of access to affordable childcare means that some individuals choose not to work due to the cost of childcare or simply cannot work due to lack of care. After years of not participating in the workforce, parents and caregivers might find that their skills are not as viable as they once were. Increasingly, communities are recognizing the importance of multigenerational strategies in which local providers meet the basic needs of families so that children can thrive and parents can maintain well-being and economic self-sufficiency.<sup>100</sup>

While economic stability is crucial, expanding community access to mental health services is essential to maintaining high employability across Georgia. While community service boards support residents who are experiencing mental health crises, research suggests that access to affordable behavioral healthcare in community clinics and outpatient settings promotes improved well-being, financial security, and physical health.<sup>101</sup>

99 Technical College System of Georgia. n.d. "Georgia Quick Start." Retrieved from <https://www.georgiaquickstart.org/>

100 Aspen Institute. n.d. "The 2Gen Approach." Retrieved from <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/2gen-approach/>

101 Rapfogel, N. 2022, May 26. *The Behavioral Health Care Affordability Program*. Center for American Progress. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-behavioral-health-care-affordability-problem/>

### Community Spotlight: Valdosta-Lowndes County

The Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce, alongside a coalition of civic and corporate leaders, launched One Valdosta-Lowndes in August 2024. The initiative aims to connect residents to workforce opportunities that improve their quality of life.

Local leaders in Valdosta have identified several ways to increase alignment between education and workforce strategies, including creating a regional college and career academy, partnering with the local technical college to increase enrollment in programs aligned with six in-demand careers, and increasing participation in programs that help veterans transition into civilian jobs. The initiative's strategic plan, also known as Synergy 2030, emphasizes the importance of investing in health, housing, public safety, and entertainment and recreation to make Valdosta a regional workforce hub.<sup>102</sup>

### CONNECTING THE DOTS: Success Builds Resilience

Adult learners build momentum as they acquire new skills and find livable-wage employment. The networks they build and the relationships they foster create resilience. The Georgia Partnership has identified three factors that build resilience.

- 1. Skill Building:** Formal strategies allow residents to acquire basic skills and specialized training in their chosen field.
- 2. Career Ladders:** Residents are more likely to enroll in education and training programs if they see a future path.
- 3. Protective Factors:** Community partnerships foster more conducive environments for obtaining new skills by expanding access to quality childcare and healthcare.

### 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.

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102 One Valdosta-Lowndes. 2024, September. "Synergy 2030." Retrieved from <https://onevaldostalowndes.com/synergy-2030/>

The action steps described below offer specific ways that state and community leaders can support adult learners as they seek education and workforce opportunities that lead to economic self-sufficiency.

<b>ACTION STEPS</b>	
<b>POLICY</b>	<p>State policymakers and post-secondary system leaders expand incentives for community and workforce partners to co-design career-connected content and curricula.</p> <p>Community leaders create formal pathways for adult learners to earn short-term, nondegree credentials aligned with in-demand workforce sectors.</p>
<b>PRACTICE</b>	<p>State agencies build local leaders' capacity to create seamless career pathways centered on regional workforce needs through training, technical assistance, and resource toolkits.</p>
<b>PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING</b>	<p>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.</p>



## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE – USING TECHNOLOGY TO SUPPORT LEARNING

### 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 should enhance learning experiences by providing opportunities for students to deepen their understanding of academic concepts.<sup>103</sup>

### ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- Most learning applications use AI to transform student learning.
- Districts must define how they will embed AI into their teaching and learning, student assessment, and school improvement strategies.
- State and district leaders should address four aspects of AI use: access, equity, ethics, and responsibility.

Generative AI is one of many types of AI tools in the marketplace. It produces new content based on human prompts. Applications like ChatGPT can produce essays comparing the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung in 10 seconds by reviewing over 45 terabytes of text data. For reference, that is one million feet of bookshelf space or one-quarter of all the books in the Library of Congress.<sup>104</sup>

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.

103 All4Ed. n.d. "Demystifying Artificial Intelligence for K-12." Retrieved from <https://all4ed.org/future-ready-schools/emerging-practices-guides/demystifying-artificial-intelligence-ai-for-k-12/>

104 McKinsey & Company. 2024, April 2. "What Is Generative AI?" Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/mckinsey-explainers/what-is-generative-ai>

**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.

**ADDRESSING THE ISSUE****Instruction and Assessment**

Artificial intelligence and machine learning have contributed to a significant increase in “smart” educational software.<sup>105</sup> District adoption of these interactive, standards-aligned applications has provided teachers and school leaders with valuable instructional tools to assess skill mastery and monitor student progress.

Most software programs now send prompts to teachers when students answer multiple questions related to a single instructional standard incorrectly. These prompts provide data that educators can use to identify learning gaps and personalize instruction based on student needs.<sup>106</sup>

**District Spotlight: Savannah–Chatham County Public School System**

Beginning in January 2020, district leaders in Savannah–Chatham County embarked on a three-school pilot to improve early literacy skills. The pilot schools worked with Amira Learning, an educational technology company that uses voice-based AI to help K-3 students improve their reading skills.

When students mispronounce or skip words, the AI digital avatar, Amira, provides immediate feedback. During the early months of the pandemic, students in the three schools read 77,000 minutes on the Amira digital platform. When schools reopened in fall 2020, district leaders expanded the initiative to all K-3 readers.<sup>107</sup> The district reported that 7% more early readers have exited the bottom performance tier on assessments of reading fluency, in part due to voice-enabled AI.

Digital instructional resources like Amira Learning are gaining wider district adoption because they allow for asynchronous learning, provide immediate corrective feedback to students, and send teachers robust analytics from which they can deliver supplemental academic support.

AI-adaptive games and smart tutoring applications also provide a wealth of data that allows teachers to design appropriate interventions based on a student’s learning stage and skill readiness. The rich analytics provided by digital instructional resources also allow teacher teams to identify common standards that students struggle with, which can help educators design lessons or assignments that address instructional deficits.

105 Karandish, D. 2021, June 23. “7 Benefits of AI in Education.” *Technological Horizons in Education Journal*. Retrieved from <https://thejournal.com/articles/2021/06/23/7-benefitsof-ai-in-education.aspx>

106 US Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology. 2023, May. *Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Teaching and Learning*. Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/documents/ai-report/ai-report.pdf>

107 Banerji, O. 2023, March 7. “Schools Are Using Voice Technology to Teach Reading. Is It Helping?” EdSurge. Retrieved from <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2023-03-07-schools-are-using-voice-technology-to-teach-reading-is-it-helping>

### What Learning Challenges Does AI Address?

1. Identifying gaps in content/skill mastery
2. Customizing assignments based on current skill level
3. Increasing student motivation and engagement through gamified learning

### College and Career Planning

AI can support post-secondary readiness in three ways:

1. By providing a more accurate picture of students' readiness level
2. By encouraging students to enroll in career pathways that align with their interests and aptitudes
3. By plotting realistic post-secondary paths and plans

High school counselors advise students and provide them with realistic data on their current post-secondary path. Counselors also demystify the college and careers transition by focusing on the costs and benefits of several post-secondary options and the tasks required to access these options. However, counselor caseloads do not support robust career planning for all students. AI can fill the gap by helping students understand how various post-secondary opportunities align with their knowledge, skills, and abilities.<sup>108</sup>

YouScience, for example, is a college and career planning tool used in Georgia schools. The Georgia Department of Education funds district, school, and student licenses to the platform. Students explore career opportunities, some of which they never considered before, through brain games and a suite of career-interest resources. YouScience promotes exploration of student aptitudes and provides recommendations on how students can learn more about careers aligned with their strengths.<sup>109</sup>

### How Could AI Improve Post-Secondary Planning and Exploration?

- By reducing cognitive complexity
- By increasing knowledge about prospective options
- By improving confidence in making decisions that will align with interests and abilities

108 Jones-Valsceanu, J. 2023, July 5. "AI's Transformation of Career Preparation." AACSB. Retrieved from <https://www.aacsb.edu/insights/articles/2023/07/ais-transformation-of-career-preparation>

109 YouScience. n.d. "About Us." Retrieved from <https://www.youscience.com/about-us/>

### Data-Driven Decision-Making

Artificial intelligence has ushered in a new era by allowing district and school teams to create insight out of noisy data. Before the latest AI tools became available in 2020, teachers had to use clunky databases to access student assessment data. Now, teachers can “talk to their data,” asking questions like, “How many of my pre-algebra students are not ready for Algebra I based on their scores on the last two last nine-week formative assessments?”<sup>110</sup>

The Georgia Partnership urges district leaders to set the stage for next-generation data analysis by automating data entry and report generation. School teams can then identify instructional patterns and trends, which will promote experimentation in and evaluation of what works in the classroom.

Increasing data accessibility will allow teachers to feel more confident when they make decisions to differentiate assignments or personalize learning pathways for students. Also, AI gives teachers a voice within a school’s data-driven culture, translating their instructional expertise into a new skill: using multiple measures to transform teaching and learning.

#### How Can AI Support Data-Driven Decisions?

- By making inferences despite incomplete, imperfect data
- By creating insight out of noise
- By contributing to measuring the quality, effect, and impact of various school initiatives

#### District Spotlight: Gwinnett County

Gwinnett County Public Schools has published guidance on ethical and responsible use of artificial intelligence. The district also created an AI Learning Framework and K-12 Learning Continuum that outline the skills and competencies that ensure learners are AI-ready. To increase student awareness of ethical issues surrounding AI usage, the district distributed an AI handbook that provides guidance to students on how to use AI when producing original work. New for the 2024-25 school year, the district has updated the AI-Ready Framework and created teacher professional learning resources aligned with the framework and its six standards.<sup>111</sup> In collaboration with the Georgia Department of Education, Gwinnett has created a career, technical, and agricultural education pathway focused on AI.<sup>112</sup>

110 Singer, S. 2023, October 26. “How AI Will Build Data-Driven Cultures in K-12 Schools.” PowerSchool. Retrieved from <https://www.powerschool.com/blog/how-ai-will-build-data-driven-cultures-in-k12-schools/>

111 Gwinnett County Public Schools. n.d. “GCPS Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence.” Retrieved from <https://www.gcpsk12.org/programs-and-services/college-and-career-development/academies-and-career-technical-and-agricultural-education/artificial-intelligence-and-computer-science/guidance-for-human-centered-ai-use>

112 Gwinnett County Public Schools. n.d. “Artificial Intelligence and Computer Science.” Retrieved from <https://www.gcpsk12.org/programs-and-services/college-and-career-development/academies-and-career-technical-and-agricultural-education/artificial-intelligence-and-computer-science>

### CONNECTING THE DOTS: Balancing AI Benefits and Risks

State and district leaders must provide safeguards to ensure that AI does not harm students, reinforce biases, or widen opportunity gaps. Safe, ethical, and responsible use of AI is possible when students, teachers, parents, and community members have a common understanding of how AI is used in a school environment.

Specifically, *AI is not a replacement for effective instruction, a substitute for human decision-making, or a mechanism to reduce instructional costs.* Rather, it is an investment in enhancing learning and insight. As district and school personnel consider the value of AI, the Georgia Partnership calls on education leaders to use AI and similar technologies to gauge the quality, effectiveness, and impact of their initiatives.

### MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

The Alliance for Excellent Education (All4Ed) released an emerging practice guide for districts interested in adopting AI strategies. The document identifies four steps: (1) setting a foundation for AI use, (2) designing district platforms, (3) implementing strategies, and (4) evaluating how to sustain effective programming.<sup>113</sup>

Concurrently, the Southern Regional Education Board has convened the Commission on Artificial Intelligence in Education “to chart a course on how artificial intelligence is used in classrooms and how to prepare people for a workforce being transformed by technology.”<sup>114</sup> The Commission is working on building a comprehensive AI framework for K-12 educators and administrators that will address ethical and privacy implications, how to integrate AI through all school disciplines, and provide for collaboration with industry to understand what student skill sets are needed, which will help states and districts shape clear policies and guidance around AI integration in education.

113 Alliance for Excellence in Education. n.d. “Demystifying Artificial Intelligence for K-12.” Retrieved from <https://all4ed.org/future-ready-schools/emerging-practices-guides/demystifying-artificial-intelligence-ai-for-k-12/>

114 Southern Regional Education Board. 2024, June 26. Five Key Takeaways from 2nd SREB Commission on AI in Education Meeting [Press Release]. Retrieved from <https://www.sreb.org/news/five-key-takeaways-2nd-sreb-commission-ai-education-meeting>



The Georgia Partnership has distilled recommendations from these leading efforts in the Action Steps presented below.

<b>ACTION STEPS</b>	
<b>POLICY</b>	<p>The Georgia State Board of Education sets guidelines for appropriate, responsible, and ethical use of AI in instruction, assessment, and program evaluation. The guidelines include recommendations for how district leaders can promote access and the equitable use of AI.</p> <p>Local school boards revise their district improvement goals to illustrate how AI use will affect student learning, teacher professional development, and school efficiency.</p>
<b>PRACTICE</b>	<p>District central offices develop guidance on how teachers can support students' AI and technological literacy through the current curricula.</p> <p>Teachers receive intensive and ongoing professional learning on how to use AI to improve core instruction and refine how they assess student progress.</p>
<b>PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING</b>	<p>State membership organizations and nonprofits partner to define how districts can promote AI access and equity.</p> <p>School personnel share how they intend to use AI in proactive conversations with students, parents, and the community. Surveys assess stakeholder awareness of and satisfaction with AI use.</p>



## INVESTING IN GEORGIA'S FUTURE – MEASURING WHAT MATTERS

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

Since 2022, the Georgia Partnership has recommended that state policymakers, education leaders, and the business community unite around a **North Star goal**: ensuring that 65% of Georgians ages 25 to 64 have earned post-secondary credentials of value by 2033.<sup>115</sup>

#### ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- The North Star is a proxy measure for quality of life, community vitality, and state economic security.
- Georgia can reach the North Star by ensuring current investments align with important state priorities.
- Focusing on leading indicators — data that predict future outcomes — is one way that Georgia's leaders can evaluate current strategies.

In 2022, the Georgia Partnership and a coalition of state policymakers, advocates, and education and business leaders spotlighted policies and practices that, when implemented as part of a comprehensive state plan, promote educational opportunity and economic mobility. The strategies are outlined in the **EdQuest Georgia Framework**.<sup>116</sup>

In 2023, the EdQuest Georgia Coalition released the **EdQuest Georgia State Plan**, which identified eight priorities that state and community

leaders should pursue through January 2026. The plan is used to mobilize stakeholders, enabling them to act in common purpose based on a set of shared goals.<sup>117</sup>

115 Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. 2023, August. *The North Star: Securing Georgia's Future by 2033*. Retrieved from <https://gpee.org/edquest-georgia/northstar/>

116 Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. 2023, August. *The EdQuest Georgia Framework: Charting Educational Reform*. Retrieved from <https://gpee.org/edquest-georgia/edquest-framework/>

117 Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. 2023, August. *The EdQuest Georgia State Plan: Promoting Individual and Community Well-Being*. Retrieved from <https://gpee.org/edquest-georgia/edquest-state-plan/>

Collaborating once again with the EdQuest Georgia Coalition, the Georgia Partnership will release data profiles in spring 2025 focused on the importance of data-driven measurement and evaluation. The profiles identify **leading indicators** — a set of measures that may predict future outcomes — that help state and community leaders assess the quality, effectiveness, and impact of their investments. When we understand what investments and strategies are most integral to reaching the North Star, then Georgia’s leaders can adjust how resources are allocated to accelerate progress.

### Three Ways to Evaluate State and Community Investments

**QUALITY:** Did the program, strategy, or intervention meet the expectations of school and community stakeholders?

**EFFECTIVENESS:** Did the program, strategy, or intervention achieve the intended outcomes?

**IMPACT:** Did the comprehensive plan pursued by school and community leaders contribute to positive learning and wellness outcomes for students?

This Issue describes the necessity of a new investment mindset and provides insight on how to map priorities to outcomes through coordinated and aligned strategies.

### 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.

## ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

In this section, we identify how to reconfigure state funding and accountability strategies to achieve Georgia’s education and economic priorities.

### Finance - Thinking Like Investors, Not Accountants

#### *Budgeting with a Vision for the Future*

After setting the state revenue estimate each year, the Governor’s Office of Planning and Budget (OPB) requests that agency heads submit budgets for the current and upcoming fiscal years. State agencies determine budget needs by estimating program enrollment and the cost of delivering services. After compiling the agency requests and accounting for the governor’s policy priorities, the OPB sends the Governor’s Budget Request to the Georgia General Assembly.<sup>118</sup>

While the OPB ensures that the budget requests align with state goals and priorities, the process generally relies on formulaic arithmetic and cost accounting, rather than aligning to a clear vision for improving the social, economic, and educational outcomes of Georgians. The state can develop a vision for economic prosperity by ensuring all investments contribute to core priorities, regardless of what agency operates a particular program or strategy.

118 Governor’s Office of Planning and Budget. n.d. “The Budget Process.” Retrieved from <https://opb.georgia.gov/budget-information/budget-process>

### ***Supporting Local Education Leaders***

The CARES Impact Study Year-Three Report, released in December 2024, identified the following investments that Georgia school districts made with federal pandemic funds:

1. Executing comprehensive strategies to improve math and reading instruction
2. Supporting struggling students through extended learning opportunities, e.g., afterschool, summer, and tutor programs
3. Expanding access to behavioral health services and supports
4. Addressing the factors that contribute to teacher dissatisfaction<sup>119</sup>

Federal pandemic funding ended in September 2024. Districts are now faced with difficult decisions on which investments they will let go and which they will try to continue with a different funding source. However, most school systems lack the capacity to evaluate the relative effectiveness of their pandemic-era programs or the resources to sustain their efforts at past scale. The need to erase the red ink on the budget ledger also affects what strategies leaders choose to continue, adapt, or discard.

### ***Bringing Together State and Local Perspectives***

At the Georgia Partnership, we believe that communities drive solutions and that state leaders provide favorable environments and systems of supports to allow for effective programming to spread across Georgia. We urge state and community leaders to think of themselves as trustees of Georgia's future. Trustees do not indulge quick remedies or invest all their capital in one sector. Leaders should set priorities and consult with community stakeholders to develop clear, measurable, and achievable goals. They commission studies to evaluate the quality, effectiveness, and impact of their strategies, sometimes referred to as return on investment.

Implicit in this data-driven mindset is that Georgians focus on investments instead of costs, and outcomes instead of inputs and outputs. By identifying leading indicators, measures that predict future success and well-being, we can ensure that funded strategies meet stakeholder needs, achieve intended results, and when aligned with other strategies, afford more Georgians the opportunity to participate in the state's economic prosperity.

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119 Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. 2024, December. 2024 CARES Impact Study: Year-Three Report. Retrieved from <https://gpee.org/programs/cares-impact-study/>

## **Recommendation: Modernize State Education Funding Formulas**

### ***K-12 Funding Formula***

The Georgia General Assembly should revise the state's K-12 funding model, the Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula, by dedicating state funding to high-impact strategies pursued during the pandemic. Such strategies could include the following:

- Hiring school-based mental health and wellness staff
- Deploying two counselors in each public school: one for career readiness and exploration, the other for social and psychological needs
- Recognizing the higher instructional costs associated with teaching students from low-income backgrounds
- Providing categorical funds to extend learning through afterschool, summer, and high-dosage tutoring strategies

### ***Post-Secondary Funding***

The current university system formula funds post-secondary education based on student enrollment and square footage of buildings. While the General Assembly funds the formula, the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia chooses how to allocate funds. The Regents should initiate efforts with the General Assembly to fund a formula that includes student-centered, outcomes-based indicators. For instance, a revised model could reward institutions that achieve enrollment, persistence, and credential completion benchmarks.

## **School and Community Accountability**

The primary role of an accountability system should be to inform school and neighborhood stakeholders — students, teachers, parents, and community leaders — about efforts to ensure all students succeed. Accountability systems promote transparency and communicate school strengths and areas for growth. Such accountability systems can help teachers and leaders in three important ways:

- 1. Interpret Results:** District and school leaders receive technical support on how to interpret the results to improve their programs and strategies.
- 2. Communicate Results:** School personnel receive training on how to effectively share data on school and student performance with parents and community members.
- 3. Readjust Strategies:** District and school leaders have the resources and capacity to evaluate the quality, effectiveness, or impact of their investments, which helps align budgets with student needs and community priorities.

Georgia's current K-12 accountability tool, the College and Career Readiness Performance Index, was not designed with these three objectives in mind. Therefore, the Georgia Partnership is urging district and community leaders, in their ongoing pursuit of effective solutions, to develop a next-generation accountability framework that demonstrates the transformative power of a unifying vision for public education. Lessons learned from community-driven accountability conversations could result in a state accountability framework that produces actionable insights and allows all school stakeholders to use the results to assess progress toward school goals.

### **CONNECTING THE DOTS: Next-Generation Accountability – Created through Vision**

The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) can fulfill this vision of accountability, building upon community-based, school improvement efforts while simultaneously maintaining rigorous state metrics representing college and career readiness that are crucial to meet if Georgia is to remain competitive in the global economy.

Data profiles being released in spring 2025 by the Georgia Partnership identify leading indicators that can help district and school leaders evaluate their strategies. For instance, teachers' satisfaction with their school leaders is a strong predictor of whether educators leave the profession. The *Teachers and Leaders* profile describes specific ways districts can use teacher feedback to redesign staff retention strategies.

Quality can be a consumer-driven metric. **Quality** data reflects whether school and community stakeholders perceive that a strategy has met their initial expectations. Like quality, **effectiveness** is a metric that evaluates if a specific program, strategy, or intervention achieved the desired outcomes. **Impact** is a composite measure that looks at all school improvement initiatives and allows stakeholders to see which strategies had the greatest effect on student learning and well-being.

### **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 investments 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. School and civic leaders can rebuild trust in public education by showing that they are good stewards of public resources and proving that their strategies yield the outcomes that communities expect. A focus on measurement and evaluation is the engine that drives renewed trust and credibility.

<b>ACTION STEPS</b>	
<b>POLICY</b>	<p>GaDOE convenes a group of students, educators, parents, and public- and private-sector representatives to draft a new state K-12 accountability framework. The framework should include state metrics and district-determined measures.</p> <p>State leaders address the financing challenges that surfaced through the Georgia Partnership's CARES Impact Study project related to school staffing ratios and increasing funding for student transportation and school counselors, psychologists, and social workers.</p> <p>State leaders support efforts to help district leaders evaluate the quality, effectiveness, and impact of their strategies — and address how these analyses affect resource allocation.</p>
<b>PRACTICE</b>	<p>Nonprofits like the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement and professional associations such as the Georgia Association of Educational Leaders provide technical support across the state on how to use leading indicators to jumpstart the school improvement and planning processes.</p>
<b>PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING</b>	<p>District leaders explore how to develop cooperative funding strategies. For example, districts could partner with regional health agencies, community foundations, and nonprofits to fund school-based health services after pandemic-related Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds expire.</p> <p>District leaders partner with local stakeholders to update strategic plans, incorporating the lessons learned during the pandemic.</p>

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