



EDQUEST GEORGIA – AN INVITATION TO PURSUE CROSS-SECTOR SOLUTIONS

ISSUE OVERVIEW

For four years, the Georgia Partnership has recommended that state policymakers, education leaders, and the business sector unite around a **“North Star” goal**: ensuring 65% of Georgians aged 25 to 64 have earned a post-secondary credential of value by 2033.

In 2025, the Georgia Partnership convened a coalition of state policymakers, advocates, and education leaders to develop the *2026 EdQuest Georgia State Plan (2026 Plan)*. The plan identifies priorities that Georgia’s leaders can adopt to reach the North Star and describes how leaders at all levels can engage in cross-sector partnerships that deliver quality educational and economic opportunities at scale. The plan also reflects EdQuest Coalition members’ relentless focus in achieving three critical outcomes: individual well-being, community resilience, and state economic security.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Through this coalition work, the Georgia Partnership has identified three ways to accelerate momentum toward the North Star:

1. **Investing in Talent** – Promote educational and economic opportunity by ensuring more Georgians have access to quality child care and high-value career pathways.
2. **Optimizing Local Strategies** – Spotlight programs and practices that address perennial challenges. Use data and research to increase the quality, effectiveness, and impact of local strategies.
3. **Aligning Priorities and Investments** – Reconfigure state systems and strategies to ensure investments align with new priorities and yield the outcomes defined by policymakers.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

While the 2026 Plan identifies high-impact strategies that state and local leaders should implement over the next two years, the plan does not prescribe an entirely new path for Georgia. Instead, the 2026 plan encourages leaders to leverage current assets and reform existing strategies to align with new goals and priorities. The plan also emphasizes the importance of working across silos to ensure communities develop talent strategies that promote long-term economic stability.



EARLY LEARNING – NEW INVESTMENTS WARRANTED

ISSUE OVERVIEW

In 2023, the Georgia Partnership called on state leaders to create a statewide child development strategy that would ensure more vulnerable children receive the education, health, and family supports that prepare them for kindergarten.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How can new investments in early care expand access and promote system stability?
2. What can state leaders do to increase parent awareness of available resources?
3. How can local leaders partner with employers to build out the early care infrastructure in their communities?

Creating a unified plan requires intentional design and a revamped funding model. To set the stage for a cross-sector child development strategy, several states have launched programs that leverage investments from government, corporate, and philanthropic sources. Inspired by cost-sharing models pursued in other states, the EdQuest Coalition selected the following priority for the 2026 EdQuest State Policy Plan: expand access to quality early care and learning options that leverage new state and corporate investments.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

This Issue recommends three systemic changes to the early care ecosystem that can support parents, providers, and communities and can lead to increased access and needed investments.

1. Build parent and community awareness about available resources.
2. Create a new early care economic model focused on attracting state and corporate investment.
3. Provide incentives for education, civic, and corporate leaders to develop regional early care strategies. community leaders can invest in Georgia's future.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

New state and corporate investments in the early care ecosystem are needed to support sustainable, community-driven strategies. Expanding access to quality options will provide immediate benefits for parents interested in participating in the workforce. At the same time, preparing Georgia's youngest children for school and for life is a long-term investment that will sustain community vitality and state economic growth for future generations.



CAREER PATHWAYS – THREE SYSTEMS, ONE GOAL

ISSUE OVERVIEW

The leaders of Georgia’s three career readiness systems — K-12 education, post-secondary education, and workforce training — have worked together to streamline career pathways and connect Georgians to career opportunities. This work is crucial to the state’s future.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How can supports for information, marketing, and career navigation encourage residents to enroll in career pathways?
2. How can system leaders retool pathway strategies to ensure they align with state and regional talent needs?
3. What incentives can state policymakers create to encourage community and industry involvement in developing regional talent strategies?

In the *2026 EdQuest Georgia State Plan*, the Georgia Partnership and EdQuest Coalition identified the Top State for Talent initiative as a key driver of expanding access to high-value pathways. Inviting employers and community leaders to engage in the career pathway development process will help Georgia retain its status as a top state for business while also emerging as a national leader in promoting post-secondary opportunity.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

This Issue recommends three systemic changes to the early care ecosystem that can support parents, providers, and communities and can lead to increased access and needed investments.

This issue details three recommendations to modernize and simplify Georgia’s career pathways:

1. Build the case for why Georgians should enter career pathways.
2. Retool pathway strategies to meet stakeholders’ needs.
3. Integrate career pathways into regional talent development strategies.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

Focusing on high-demand careers is critical, and the state’s technical education assets are already positioned to support this priority. State leaders should restructure pathways around three student guarantees:

1. Mastering skills that employers demand
2. Earning credentials of value that support career advancement
3. Completing work-based experiences that promote smoother transitions between training and employment.



TEACHER QUALITY – HOW A NEW STATE PLAN CAN SUPPORT RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

ISSUE OVERVIEW

During the 2025 legislative session, the Georgia State Senate requested that the Professional Standards Commission (PSC) develop a statewide strategic plan to support teacher recruitment and retention. The PSC, in collaboration with state education agencies and leading educational associations, released the strategic plan in December 2025.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How can a state recruitment and retention plan address barriers to entry into the teaching profession?
2. How can Georgia's leaders sustain these efforts by investing in teacher leaders?
3. How can indicators of teacher satisfaction and well-being shape the development of new educator workforce strategies?

In Issue 4 of the *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2025*, the Georgia Partnership introduced three pillars of teacher excellence: readiness, resilience, and retention. This current Issue describes how this three-part framework can help state partners implement a comprehensive strategy that reimagines how school districts recruit and prepare candidates, support early-career educators, and deploy teacher leaders.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

This Issue details three opportunities to support teacher growth in alignment with the pillars of teacher excellence and the new comprehensive statewide strategic plan:

1. Deliver preparation experiences that equip educators for excellence.
2. Leverage current educator growth strategies, including new-teacher induction and professional learning communities, to increase teacher resilience.
3. Create formal teacher leadership roles to support instructional excellence and provide career advancement opportunities for highly effective educators.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

The Georgia Partnership recommends that the General Assembly codify the priorities outlined in the comprehensive statewide strategic plan. Importantly, state leaders must allow time for the field to provide feedback on how to activate these priorities. The EdQuest Coalition, in partnership with state agencies and educational associations, can develop a framework for educators to provide feedback on the strategic plan through a statewide working conditions survey. Also, the EdQuest Coalition will spotlight district and community practices that are deserving of replication in other communities.



STUDENT ATTENDANCE – CALLING FOR A UNIFIED COMMUNITY RESPONSE

ISSUE OVERVIEW

Regular school attendance promotes academic success and wellness. The effect is cumulative: students who miss fewer than five days of school each year have more time to learn, interact with peers, and develop trusting relationships with adults. The opposite is also true. Chronic absence — missing more than 10% of the school year — stifles learning and the development of executive functioning skills.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What data do district and school leaders need to develop an early warning system for students at risk of missing school?
2. How can community health providers and local employers contribute to a prevention-focused attendance strategy?
3. How can a parent engagement strategy increase awareness of school and community resources that promote student attendance?

With broad consensus that chronic absenteeism is an issue deserving policy attention and significant investment, it is now time for district leaders to engage with parents and community members to craft a unified strategy that addresses nonacademic barriers, fosters positive school climate, and delivers personalized student supports.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

This Issue details three recommendations for communities to create unified strategies:

1. Know your data and discover your assets.
2. Tailor strategies based on grade level and student subgroups.
3. Ask students and parents for their input.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

Attendance is the first stage in promoting student success and well-being. To ensure more students enjoy higher

quality of life, the Georgia Partnership proposes that each community create a cross-sector coalition committed to prioritizing school attendance. School and district leaders, public health and workforce leaders, and students and parents are all essential partners in creating strategies to support student attendance.



LITERACY – SUPPORTING TEACHERS, IMPROVING INSTRUCTION

ISSUE OVERVIEW

In 2023, the Georgia General Assembly passed the Georgia Early Literacy Act, creating a state framework to improve K–3 reading proficiency. Since then, districts have adopted reading screeners, selected high-quality instructional materials, and provided literacy training to K–3 educators.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How can reading coaches support teachers to deliver quality interventions that help struggling readers?
2. What data do district and school leaders need to evaluate the quality of small group and individualized reading interventions?
3. How can communities support schools to foster a stronger foundation for reading success?

To ensure effective implementation of local literacy initiatives, research has shown state leaders must invest in the deployment of school-based reading coaches. Moreover, the Georgia General Assembly should consider policies that encourage district adoption of high-dosage tutoring, an instructional support strategy that accelerates students' mastery of literacy and numeracy skills.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Instructional coaches fulfill three job roles: structuring interventions for struggling readers, providing professional learning opportunities for teachers, and evaluating progress made by students who receive supplemental academic support. They also serve as the point person in schools and districts to ensure the effective implementation of literacy initiatives.

During the pandemic, education researchers identified high-dosage tutoring (HDT) as an effective model to accelerate student learning outcomes. The HDT approach requires regular and frequent interactions with students: at least three times per week for 30 minutes per session with the same tutor. Learning outcomes for this intervention are promising. One study found students gained three to 15 months in learning growth.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

In 2023, state policymakers set the stage for early literacy reform by requiring state agencies, school districts, and teacher preparation providers to come together to forge a statewide strategy. Literacy fuels student engagement, career exploration, and skills development. Investing in school-based coaches and tutors is a proven strategy that helps students maximize their potential.



COMMUNITY HUBS – EXPANDING HEALTHCARE ACCESS

ISSUE OVERVIEW

The 2026 EdQuest Georgia State Plan identified community health hubs as a strategy that could expand healthcare access. Community health hubs are a one-stop shop for health and social services. Residents

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How can community leaders and employers support integrated health services?
2. How can they build awareness of available health services?
3. How does ongoing engagement with community members strengthen service delivery within a hub model?

receive preventative healthcare services and learn more about education and training resources that could improve economic mobility.

Over the last five years, schools have increased healthcare access by providing services on campus or via referral to community health providers. The Georgia Partnership recommends that communities build upon this strong foundation by creating community health strategies that support well-being for all residents.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

This Issue provides three recommendations for how a cross-sector group of community stakeholders could implement the hub model:

1. Tailor services to community needs.
2. Expand healthcare access through a cost-share model.
3. Jumpstart efforts by providing core services to children and adolescents.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

K-12 schools and school systems are not designed or resourced to be the sole host and deliverer of health and social services. Local leaders can, however, develop a community health model in which schools are primary hubs that are properly resourced to connect residents to a larger network of providers across a community or region.

Communities can achieve the vision of an integrated public health strategy by understanding what the minimum requirements are to serve a community with their population and demographics. Needs assessments help cross-sector partners develop an infrastructure build-out plan and a strategy to pay for initial implementation. State leaders can support replication of proven strategies by investing in programs that bring the principal players to the table and alleviate the initial costs of establishing hubs.



RETURN ON INVESTMENT – MAXIMIZING THE BENEFITS OF POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

ISSUE OVERVIEW

Several factors make individuals question the value of post-secondary education. Tuition costs have outpaced inflation. Rising student debt loads delay milestones like starting a family or buying a home. Also, employers have addressed talent gaps by investing in automation and artificial intelligence, which has decreased the number of entry-level jobs for new graduates.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How can policymakers adjust financial aid policies to align with new state priorities?
2. How can state investments address the needs of adults and other underserved populations?
3. How can a revamped pathways system support career progression and lifelong learning?

With the increasing need for post-secondary credentials to grow Georgia's economy, the concerns over the return on investment (ROI) of post-secondary participation are worrisome and must be addressed.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

This Issue identifies three ways that state leaders can increase post-secondary ROI for individuals and communities:

1. Create an opportunity scholarship that provides financial aid for students with unmet need
2. Explore corporate tax credits that encourage employers to invest in work-based learning opportunities
3. Expand incentives for adults to earn short-term credentials in high-demand careers.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

The *2026 EdQuest Georgia State Plan* champions a three-part affordability strategy:

1. Opportunity aid for financially needy students
2. State post-secondary funding formula reform
3. Work-based learning opportunities funded through state and corporate investments

The plan also prioritizes tighter alignment between post-secondary programs and employer needs by creating cross-sector, regional talent strategies. Ensuring Georgians have more entry points to post-secondary opportunities is critical to improve return on investment at all levels.



RURAL COMMUNITIES – INVESTING IN TRANSFORMATION

ISSUE OVERVIEW

Popular culture often defines rural communities by their challenges. This deficit-based mentality ignores the many assets rural communities possess and stifles the search for cross-sector solutions to problems common in rural communities.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How can rural leaders create a comprehensive talent strategy?
2. How can leaders sustain economic development by focusing on improving quality of life in their communities?
3. How can state policymakers invest in rural leaders to ensure they have resilience and resolve to execute cross-sector strategies?

This Issue explores how to shift mindsets on rural development by crafting a comprehensive strategy founded on three pillars: talent development, quality of life, and leader capacity.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

State leaders can foster rural transformation in three ways:

1. **Inspire cross-sector partnerships:** State leaders develop a resource toolkit for local and regional civic, corporate, and education leaders interested in creating initiatives that address skill and talent shortages in their regions.
2. **Promote downtown redevelopment:** State agency leaders and economic developers provide grants for communities to revitalize their downtowns and main streets.
3. **Invest in community capacity:** State organizations create rural leadership academies that focus on cross-sector partnerships, grant writing, and leadership training.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

As state leaders explore ways to support continued rural transformation, they should identify how cross-sector strategies have already achieved local priorities. From these lessons, state agency leaders can reconfigure priorities and investments to align with strategies first executed in local communities.

Community assets are present across rural Georgia, but they are not always coordinated in ways that allow rural leaders to easily expand access to education and workforce opportunities. The Georgia Partnership and the EdQuest Coalition urge rural leaders to focus on immediate challenges while simultaneously creating long-term plans to transform personal well-being and community resilience.



A MESSAGE FOR 2026 CANDIDATES

ISSUE OVERVIEW

In January 2027, Georgia will have a new governor, lieutenant governor, and state attorney general. Within the Georgia General Assembly, most of the Senate leadership is running for higher office in 2026, which will lead to a significant loss of institutional knowledge. Consequently, Georgia needs new leaders to step up and promote strategies and investments to improve public education and workforce opportunities.

In addition to those state level changes, the current uncertainty around federal government funding and oversight are complicating state leadership strategies. However, the potential transfer of policy authority to the states represents a unique opportunity for leaders to recast priorities, evaluate investments, and adopt high-impact strategies.

This Issue is a letter to candidates running for office in 2026 and highlights the 2026 EdQuest Georgia State Policy Plan (2026 Plan) as an affirmative vision for public education and workforce development that primes state leaders for the future.

FIVE POLICY PRIORITIES WITH BIPARTISAN APPEAL

1. Expanding access to affordable, high-quality early learning options
2. Integrating work-based learning K-12 learning frameworks
3. Investing in career training that allows individuals to earn money while they learn
4. Reducing barriers to candidates interested in entering the teaching profession
5. Lowering the cost of healthcare by addressing the causes of health risks

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

The change initiative proposed by the EdQuest Coalition creates a framework for how leaders can encourage productive cross-sector dialogue. Developing consensus on high-level priorities related to education and workforce development allows for a more robust debate on how to execute strategies based on shared goals.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

The Georgia Partnership and the EdQuest Coalition outlined five priorities in the 2026 Plan form the basis for innovative policy reform. While the priorities are specific to Georgia, they are tightly aligned to the bipartisan policy priorities listed above. The timeline we set for building a strong foundation for advocacy and action guides our work and, hopefully, inspires those of policymakers.