



Georgia Partnership
FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

TOP 10 ISSUES TO WATCH IN 2026

- 22ND EDITION -

1

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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.

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.

Special thanks to our Corporate Partners for their generous support. <https://gpee.org/corporate-partners/>



Georgia Partnership
FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education believes that if we assemble, empower, and deploy a high-performing team of professionals and strategically leverage our research and policy expertise, we will increase stakeholder engagement to educate and empower leaders, build and lead strong cross-sector advocacy initiatives, uplift and challenge communities to think differently about the purpose and power of public education, and influence state-level systems. The result of which will be empowered leaders

and improved educational and workforce opportunities for all Georgians.

We spent 2025, a year dominated by change and uncertainty, in pursuit of that belief, doing what we do best: convening stakeholders – policymakers, nonprofit and community leaders, and corporate partners – to identify ways to improve Georgia's public education system and enhance post-secondary and workforce readiness.

Four years ago, the Georgia Partnership set a new post-secondary attainment target for Georgia: ensuring at least 65% of the state's adults have earned post-secondary credentials of value by 2033. This North Star goal calls for Georgia's leaders to invest more heavily in education and workforce strategies so that we can sustain our economic growth and expand the number of residents who participate in the state's ongoing prosperity. To realize this vision, the Georgia Partnership has led the EdQuest Coalition, a group of state policymakers, nonprofit advocates, and education and business leaders. Throughout 2025, the Partnership guided the coalition in developing the *2026 EdQuest Georgia State Policy Plan*, released in Winter 2026. The state plan is one of three resources that comprises the *EdQuest Toolkit*, which also includes a research-based Framework and Leading Indicators, data metrics that help leaders monitor progress and evaluate investments opportunities for generations to come.

The Partnership completed the final year of the *CARES Impact Study*, funded in part by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE). The study captured how school districts used \$5.9 billion in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to navigate COVID-related learning loss and recovery. In 2025 we released two new in-depth case studies. The first, *Creating Student Support Systems to Improve Learning*, highlighted how three districts used ESSER funds to improve student mental health and wellness. The second, *Creating Community, Building Skills, and Boosting the Teacher Pipeline*, showcased how three districts invested in strategies to support early-career educators.

The Georgia 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 provides a space for community leaders to identify shared challenges and build capacity to address them through multi-sector collaboration.

In 2025 we also graduated the 17th cohort of the Partnership's flagship professional development experience, the **Georgia Education Policy Fellowship**, formerly known as the Education Policy Fellowship Program, adding 24 fellows to our alumni network and bringing the total number of GEPF/EPFP alumni to more than 300. The current, 18th cohort is comprised of 24 more fellows from our state's business, education, government, and nonprofit sectors. This program continues to serve as one of the Partnership's key strategies to inform and influence leaders and emerging leaders so that they are then able to meaningfully contribute to the development of educational policy decisions in our state.

The Georgia Partnership concluded 2025 by hosting a **Critical Issues Forum** on how state and community leaders can maximize educational opportunity in an era of federal uncertainty. Invited panelists provided specific examples of how they plan to innovate in three areas: early learning, K-12 education, and post-secondary education and workforce development.



The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education believes that a better future for Georgia begins with education. We also recognize that achieving ever-higher outcomes for Georgians does not happen by accident. Accelerating progress and ensuring continued prosperity requires an intentional approach in which state and community leaders partner to align their visions, priorities, and investments. In 2026, the Georgia Partnership stands ready to lead and support cross-sector efforts that expand educational and economic opportunities for more Georgians.

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to 2026 and the 22nd Edition of the Georgia Partnership's *Top Ten Issues to Watch* report. Over the last 12 months, the education policy landscape has shifted. With the federal government delegating more authority and decision-making to state agencies and school districts, Georgia finds itself in an environment of uncertainty. At the same time, our state leaders have an opportunity to advance an affirmative, future-focused vision for education and workforce development that expands educational opportunity and leverages Georgia's considerable assets.

In 2023, the Georgia Partnership unveiled EdQuest Georgia 2023 – a 10-year research framework and the first of several, two-year state plans to promote better educational outcomes and well-being for more Georgians. Within the initial two-year plan, we laid the foundation for a statewide vision that called on policymakers, education leaders, and the business sector to unite around a North Star goal – ensuring 65% of Georgians aged 25 to 64 have earned a post-secondary credential of value by 2033.

This year, the Georgia Partnership released the second *EdQuest Georgia State Policy Plan*. Developed in collaboration with the EdQuest Coalition, the plan outlines five priorities that will help state and community leaders identify common interests, develop shared goals, and coordinate strategies through 2028. The Georgia Partnership remains committed to activating the priorities through a community-centered model in which local leaders drive innovation and state leaders create systems that support the spread and scale of local strategies.

Each Issue in this 22nd edition addresses how state and community leaders can meet residents' immediate needs while also making gradual improvements to strategies over the next decade. Together, the Issues spotlight the benefits of comprehensive solutions that address the barriers that keep Georgians from experiencing a good quality of life. The edition is laid out in three sections:

1. **Investing in Talent** – The first section identifies three factors that close talent and skills gaps: expanding access to quality early care and learning options, developing high-value career pathways, and supporting teacher growth and excellence.
2. **Optimizing Local Strategies** – The second section tracks state and community progress on three areas prioritized by state policymakers: improving student attendance, strengthening early literacy instruction, and expanding healthcare access.
3. **Aligning Priorities and Investments** – The third and final section focuses on three topics: maximizing returns on post-secondary investments; transforming rural communities by focusing on talent development, quality of life, and leader capacity; and equipping the state's 2026 candidates with resources to inform their policy platforms.

We believe that the research and commentary presented in the 22nd edition of the *Top Ten Issues to Watch* will guide conversations with policymakers, educators, and community and business leaders about how to reach the North Star. As an introduction to the new EdQuest State Plan, the Top Ten Issues sets out the priorities that will help Georgia's leaders improve educational 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/CEO, Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education

INDICATORS OF 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. 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.

CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY, 2019-2024

Source: United States Census, American Community Survey Table B17001

— Georgia — Nation

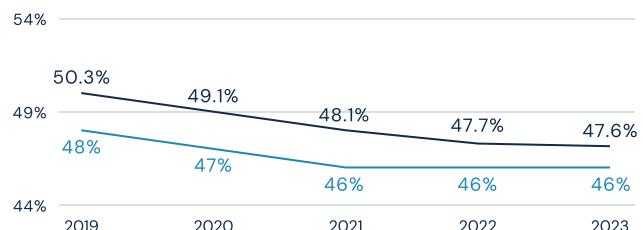
Note: Data not reported for 2020



CHILDREN AGED 3 TO 4 ATTENDING SCHOOL, 2019-2023

Source: United States Census, American Community Survey Table B14003

— Georgia — Nation



FOURTH GRADE NAEP READING: AT OR ABOVE PROFICIENT LEVEL

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress

— Georgia — Nation

Note: 2021 Test Administration Delayed by COVID-19 Pandemic



EIGHTH GRADE NAEP MATH: AT OR ABOVE PROFICIENT LEVEL

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress

— Georgia — Nation

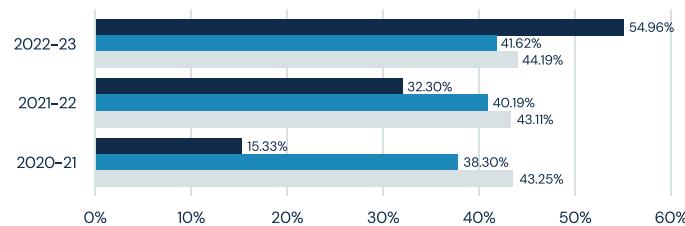
Note: 2021 Test Administration Delayed by COVID-19 Pandemic



CAREER PATHWAY PERFORMANCE FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Source: Perkins Collaborative Resource Network, Georgia State Performance Data

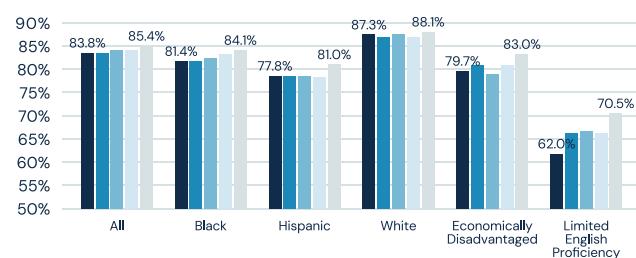
■ Earned Credential of Value
■ Completed Pathway Program
■ Participated in Work-Based Experience



GEORGIA HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES, 2020 TO 2024

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

■ 2019-2020 ■ 2022-2023
■ 2020-2021 ■ 2023-2024
■ 2021-2022

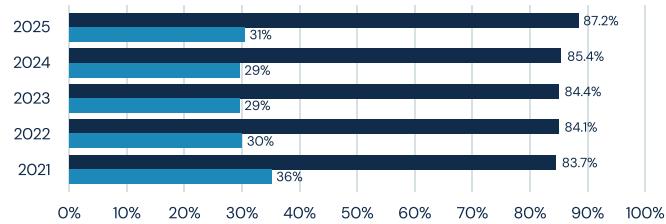


GEORGIA HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES VERSUS PERFORMANCE ON ACT SUBJECT TESTS, 2021-2025

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

■ HS Graduation Rate
■ % Meeting All Four ACT Benchmarks

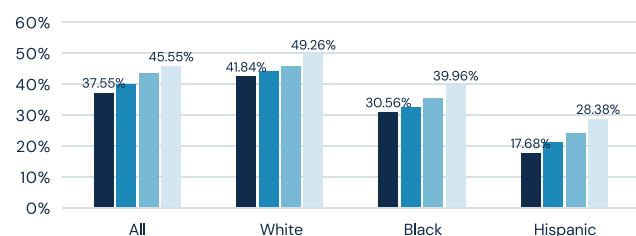
Note: ACT sets college readiness benchmarks based on the minimum score required for students to succeed in entry-level postsecondary courses in English, Social Science, College Algebra, and Biology



POST-SECONDARY DEGREE ATTAINMENT RATES FOR ADULTS AGED 25 TO 64

Source: Lumina, A Stronger Nation

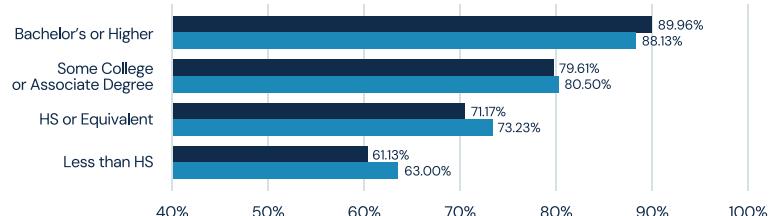
■ 2013 ■ 2016 ■ 2019 ■ 2022



EMPLOYMENT STATUS BY EDUCATION LEVEL FOR ADULTS AGED 25 TO 64, 2023

Source: United States Census, American Community Survey, Table B23006

■ Georgia ■ Nation





EDQUEST GEORGIA – AN INVITATION TO PURSUE CROSS-SECTOR SOLUTIONS

ISSUE OVERVIEW

For four years, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (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 2033.¹

The Georgia Partnership and a coalition of state policymakers, advocates, and education leaders created the EdQuest Georgia Toolkit to accelerate Georgia’s path toward the North Star.² The toolkit includes a research-based framework, a two-year policy plan, and a set of leading data indicators. Together, these resources provide a roadmap for how state and community leaders can invest in Georgia’s future.

Throughout 2025, coalition members reviewed the current landscape and identified five priorities for the next two-year state policy plan. The priorities will inform how EdQuest Coalition members engage in advocacy and partnership through December 2027.

The updated 2026 edition of the state policy plan also describes how leaders at all levels can engage in cross-sector partnerships that deliver quality educational and economic opportunities at scale. The plan reflects EdQuest Coalition members’ relentless focus in achieving three critical outcomes: individual well-being, community resilience, and state economic security.

EDQUEST GEORGIA FRAMEWORK

A set of coordinated strategies that support the educational success and economic well-being of all Georgians

EDQUEST STATE POLICY PLAN

Five priorities that set the foundation for achieving the North Star goal

EDQUEST LEADING INDICATORS

Data metrics that help state and community leaders monitor progress and evaluate investments

¹ Smith, M. 2022, January 7. *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2022*. Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education.

Retrieved from https://gpee.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/GPEE-Top-Ten-2022-Full-Report_Final.pdf

² The EdQuest Coalition list can be found at <https://gpee.org/edquest-georgia/about-edquest-georgia/#coalition>.

CALL TO ACTION

The 2026 *EdQuest State Policy Plan* brings coherence to a fragmented ecosystem — one in which goals, priorities, and strategies are often unaligned.

The Georgia Partnership and EdQuest Coalition members will help state and community leaders reset priorities and investments based on what residents need to achieve economic stability and improved quality of life.

The EdQuest Coalition has identified three ways to accelerate momentum toward the North Star. These themes serve as the three sections of the *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2026*.

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.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

The 2026 *EdQuest State Policy Plan*

The 2026 plan identifies five policy priorities, which are outlined in Table 1. The plan also describes power strategies that ensure more Georgians achieve economic stability and improved quality of life.

Table 1. 2026 EdQuest Georgia State Policy Priorities

| | |
|--|--|
| BIRTH-TO-8 STRATEGIES | Expand access to high-quality early care and learning options that leverage new state and corporate investments. |
| K-12 EDUCATION | Champion research-based strategies that improve student achievement and post-graduate outcomes, including often-overlooked factors such as attendance, engagement, and wellness. |
| POST-SECONDARY AND WORKFORCE READINESS | Leverage the “Top State for Talent” initiative to ensure more Georgians can achieve quality of life by earning credentials of value. |
| EDUCATOR RECRUITMENT & RETENTION | Improve student achievement by focusing on the constellation of factors that support teacher growth and engagement, including professional autonomy, personal well-being, and strong school and district leadership. |
| BARRIERS TO LEARNING AND WELL-BEING | Address learning and wellness barriers by investing in shared infrastructure that allows for a multi-agency, cross-sector response to the factors that limit learning and wellness. |

The five priority areas impact Georgians in different ways, yet each delivers benefits to the entire state. Their reach extends beyond those directly affected. For instance, residents who earn post-secondary credentials of value often make more money over their lifetime than their neighbors with high school diplomas. Their earnings also increase community economic activity and quality of life, which produces community and statewide benefits. Examining each priority area shows how they work together as part of a broader strategy that supports individual and community well-being.

EDQUEST PRINCIPLES

The 2026 State Policy Plan embodies four principles strongly correlated with factors that promote individual well-being, community resilience, and state economic security.

Opportunity for All

Personal background should not predict education and economic outcomes. The 2026 plan identifies strategies that interrupt cycles of poverty that make a large proportion of Georgians vulnerable.

Responsiveness

The 2026 plan focuses on how to create strategies that meet Georgians where they are, accelerating opportunity and providing smoother transitions to the next education or work milestone.

Focusing on Outcomes

The 2026 plan also champions strategies that interrupt ineffective policies and practices. The Georgia Partnership and EdQuest Coalition have identified evidence-based strategies and barriers to their execution in communities across the state.

Authentic Partnerships

The final theme expressed throughout the 2026 plan is the importance of cross-sector collaboration. Most of the power strategies outlined in the plan require state leaders to build systems and structures that create continuity between different services and supports.

Aligning statewide efforts will require greater coordination in the delivery of resources, training, and technical assistance. However, state and community leaders can achieve cross-sector coordination without having to consolidate finance, governance, and accountability systems.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

While the 2026 *EdQuest State Policy Plan* identifies high-impact strategies that state and local leaders should implement over the next two years, the document 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.

The EdQuest Coalition identified five priorities (See Table 1) over the next two years that advance the state's education and economic and workforce development objectives. The remaining nine issues in this *Top Ten* edition outline the specific opportunities and results that come from investing in these priorities.

| ACTION STEPS | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| STATE POLICYMAKERS | Reconfigure state systems, structures, policies, and investments so that they promote the achievement of key goals and priorities. |
| EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE LEADERS | Redesign programs and strategies to address the factors that limit access and opportunity, such as access to healthcare, housing, and transportation. |
| COMMUNITY LEADERS | Assess needs and document areas of shared interest and responsibility. Develop shared goals and set performance metrics to evaluate whether initiatives are successful. Identify champions, intermediaries, and supporters to sustain cross-sector strategies. |



EARLY LEARNING – NEW INVESTMENTS WARRANTED

ISSUE OVERVIEW

In 2023, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (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.³

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 will require 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.⁴ 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.

State and private-sector investments are crucial to expand child care access and increase affordability. While the lottery funds Georgia Pre-K for 4-year-olds, most birth-to-3 care is funded by federal dollars and parent tuition.

³ 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

⁴ Sullivan, E. T. 2024, January 30. "One State Rolled Out a Promising Child Care Model. Now Others Are Replicating It." EdSurge. Retrieved from <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2024-01-30-one-state-rolled-out-a-promising-child-care-model-now-others-are-replicating-it>

The annual cost of infant care at child care centers — \$11,066 — exceeds the cost of in-state tuition at all public colleges and universities in Georgia.⁵ Although the federal Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) program provides scholarships for children living in poverty, only 5% of eligible families receive aid.⁶ About 44% of Georgians live in child care deserts, defined as areas where no providers exist or the cohort of eligible children exceeds the number of slots by a ratio of 3:1 or greater.⁷

These access and affordability issues directly impact Georgia's economic growth and stability. Nearly one in three Georgia parents with young children report having quit a job due to child care challenges.⁸

New state, community, and corporate investments would accomplish two goals at once:

1. Expanding access to quality early care options that prime our youngest children for lifelong success and
2. Allowing parents to pursue careers that promote family stability.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Our Children and Families

Recommendation: Build parent and community awareness about available resources.

Children and families benefit from access to reliable and affordable early care options in three ways.

1. Child care allows parents to enter the workforce or enroll in education and training programs.
2. High-quality early care and education programs promote language development and executive functioning, two factors that support school readiness and child well-being.
3. Early care programs connect families to community resources, which increases the odds that families achieve economic stability.⁹

Providing community-based early care options is a critical step in supporting child development and family functioning. However, many parents do not take advantage of these programs because they do not know they exist. A unified child development strategy, as outlined above, would address information gaps by helping parents navigate complex early education and pediatric health systems.

⁵ First Five Years Fund. 2025, September. "Child Care & Early Learning in Georgia" [Fact sheet]. Retrieved from <https://www.ffyf.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/2025-Georgia-State-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

⁶ GEEARS. n.d. "Georgia's Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) Program." Retrieved from <https://geears.org/wp-content/uploads/Child-Care-One-Pager.pdf>

⁷ Floyd, I. F. 2024, May 21. *From Barriers to Bridges: Expanding Access to Child Care and Improving Upward Mobility of Georgia's Child Care Workers*. Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://gbpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/BarrierstoBridgesChildCarePaper-3.pdf>

⁸ GEEARS. n.d. "Georgia's Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) Program." Retrieved from <https://geears.org/wp-content/uploads/Child-Care-One-Pager.pdf>

⁹ Center for American Progress. 2025, February 20. "Understanding the Basics of Child Care in the United States." Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/understanding-the-basics-of-child-care-in-the-united-states/>

RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT: GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF EARLY CARE AND LEARNING

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) supports community awareness of early care resources in a variety of ways. For example, through the Family Peer Ambassadors program, DECAL trains prospective ambassadors, who then serve as a resource to parents in their communities.¹⁰

The agency also funds a network of Child Care Resource & Referral agencies that provide referrals to licensed providers and connect parents to community supports.¹¹

Our Providers

Recommendation: Create a new early care economic model focused on attracting state and corporate investment.

Many parents exit the workforce after comparing the benefits of working with the cost of care. Early care workers and center directors grapple with similar tradeoffs.

Early care educators earn poverty-level wages. The median hourly wage for early care workers is \$11.44, despite requirements that educators working in Quality Rated centers hold a post-secondary credential in early childhood education.¹² A single parent with two children earning this wage in 2025 would qualify for government assistance to cover food and healthcare expenses.¹³ Low pay and poor working conditions result in high staff turnover. Turnover affects the ability of providers to deliver quality early care to children and families.

Center directors also operate businesses on slim margins. Dependence on parent tuition and fees means that providers cannot raise rates to pay teachers more. New state and private-sector investments create more sustainable and predictable access to child care for families by supporting child care providers.

Our Communities

Recommendation: Provide incentives for education, civic, and corporate leaders to develop regional early care strategies

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

¹⁰ Kuhns, C., E. Mefford, and H. Sandstrom. 2025, April. *A Case Study of the Family Peer Ambassador Program in Georgia*. Administration for Children and Families. Retrieved from <https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/opre-cepc-case-study-brief-GA-apr25.pdf>

¹¹ Department of Early Care and Learning. n.d. "Child Care Resource & Referral System." Retrieved from <https://www.decal.ga.gov/ccs/crrsystem.aspx>

¹² Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. 2024. "2024 Early Childhood Workforce Index: Georgia." Retrieved from <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2024/states/georgia/>

¹³ Georgia Department of Community Health. 2025, January 22. "2025 Federal Poverty Guidelines." Retrieved from <https://dch.georgia.gov/document/document/2025-federal-poverty-guidelines/download>

During the 2025 legislative session, the Georgia General Assembly enacted House Bill 136, which created a corporate income tax credit for businesses that subsidize child care costs for their employees.¹⁴ The Georgia Partnership commends the legislature for supporting employer investment in early care programs. The EdQuest Coalition calls on the legislature and Georgia's child development agencies to explore additional incentives that encourage the creation of regional early care strategies that meet the needs of local communities.

CONNECTING THE DOTS: THE BENEFITS OF PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

1. **Cost share:** State and community leaders design new funding models that split the cost of early care between employees, employers, and the state.
2. **Employee benefits:** Employers boost staff retention by offering affordable early care options for their workers.
3. **Provider stability:** Centers benefit from a more stable funding model. Predictable investments allow centers to serve more families.
4. **Regional coordination:** State agencies and local governments partner to develop an administrative model to recruit employers and deliver payments to participating providers.

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.

The Department of Early Care and Learning and state-level nonprofits like Get Georgia Reading and Quality Care for Children support multigenerational efforts. New funding could help expand and scale proven initiatives already underway across the state.

¹⁴ Owens, I. 2025, May 13. "Lt. Governor Jones Priority Signed into Law: Child Tax Credit and Childcare Tax Programs" [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://ltgov.georgia.gov/press-releases/2025-05-13/lt-governor-jones-priority-signed-law-child-tax-credit-and-childcare-tax>

| ACTION STEPS | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| GENERAL ASSEMBLY | <p>Tap the unrestricted lottery reserve fund to invest in research-based early education and health strategies.</p> <p>Design corporate tax incentives that encourage employers to invest in expanding access to early care options for their employees and the communities they serve.</p> |
| CORPORATE SECTOR | Subsidize the cost of child care through tuition reimbursement, dependent care flexible spending accounts, or on-site facilities. |
| STATE AND COMMUNITY ADVOCATES | Develop a state marketing campaign to ensure parents and caregivers know about education and health resources available in their communities. |



CAREER PATHWAYS – THREE SYSTEMS, ONE GOAL

ISSUE OVERVIEW

In 2022, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (Georgia Partnership) publicized a new state post-secondary attainment goal called the North Star. The Georgia Partnership recommended that state policymakers, education leaders, and the business community ensure 65% of working adults earn post-secondary credentials of value by 2033.¹⁵ In 2023, 42.2% of Georgians had earned credentials of value: degrees, certificates, or certifications that produce incomes of at least 15% above the national median salary of high school graduates.¹⁶

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?

The Georgia Partnership set the 65% attainment goal because it is proxy for family stability and prosperity, two factors that drive community and economic development.¹⁷

The leaders of Georgia's three career readiness systems — K-12 education, post-secondary education, and workforce training — have worked together to support student mobility and credit transfer. Their continued efforts to streamline educational career pathways and connect Georgians to career opportunities is crucial to the state's economic future.

In the 2026 *EdQuest Georgia State Plan*, the Georgia Partnership and EdQuest Coalition identified the Top State for Talent¹⁸ initiative as a key driver of expanding access to high-value pathways.

¹⁵ Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. n.d. "The North Star: Securing Georgia's Future by 2033." Retrieved from <https://gpee.org/edquest-georgia/northstar/>

¹⁶ Lumina Foundation. n.d. "A Stronger Nation: Credentials of Value." Retrieved from <https://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/credentials-of-value/georgia>

¹⁷ Institute for Higher Education Policy. 2025, October 8. "Higher Education's Economic Benefits to Communities." Retrieved from <https://www.ihep.org/higher-education-economic-benefits-to-communities/>

¹⁸ State of Georgia. n.d. "Top State for Talent." Retrieved from <https://topstatefortalent.georgia.gov/>

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 and quality of life.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Career pathways are programs that prepare individuals for employment in specific occupations. In K-12 environments, these pathways usually involve students completing a sequence of career-themed courses and earning industry-recognized credentials that allow for entry-level employment in their chosen careers. In post-secondary environments, career pathways focus on attaining one or more credentials in the same workforce sector. However, when Georgians want to change careers or develop skills in other fields, the current pathways strategies might not support smooth transitions.

This section highlights how Georgia's leaders could modernize and simplify career pathways to increase the number of residents enrolled in these programs and to fast-track talent development across the state.

Awareness Drives Student Behavior

Recommendation: Build The Case for Why Georgians Should Enter Career Pathways.

In Issue 5 of the *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2024*, the Georgia Partnership identified three outcomes that distinguish successful career pathways:

1. Students master skills that employers demand.
2. Students complete work-based learning opportunities that allow them to get occupational experience and build their social and career networks.
3. Graduates earn post-secondary credentials of value, i.e., a wage benefit above what one could expect to earn with only a high school diploma¹⁹

The Georgia Partnership further observed that state leaders lack data on employer demand for specific credentials and wage data to make the case that completing career pathways results in positive outcomes for graduates.

The lack of data on wage and employment outcomes affects whether students enroll in pathways offered in high schools and at technical colleges and whether parents support these choices. Without this information, school systems and post-secondary institutions may provide programming that does not prepare students for career success.²⁰

¹⁹ Smith, M. 2024, January 5. *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2024*. Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. Retrieved from https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/GPEE-Top-Ten-2024_Final.pdf

²⁰ Phillips, L., and T. White. 2024, October 10. "Career Pathways are Growing, but Challenges Remain. New America." New America. Retrieved from <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/career-pathways-are-growing-but-challenges-remain/>

The Top State for Talent Act, enacted in spring 2025, serves as a strong foundation for data collection and quality efforts in two important ways.

1. The law empowers the State Workforce Board to identify high-demand, high-wage career fields, informing how state and communities should invest.
2. The law requires that Georgia's K-12 Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (CTAE) program offerings align with the State Workforce Board's High-Demand Career List.²¹

State and local advocates and employers can — and should — use Top State for Talent to drive investments and efforts to understand and market the value of career pathways to residents.

Student, Community, and Employer Needs Drive Pathways Development

Recommendation: Retool Pathway Strategies to Meet Stakeholders' Needs.

While access to career technical education is important, especially in regions where opportunities are few, the emerging focus on high-demand careers should encourage education leaders to partner closely with employers, economic developers, and their local government leaders to align offerings with industry needs.

For example, education leaders have created programs based on major macroeconomic disruptions like the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI). The Gwinnett County School District has created an AI career cluster to meet employer needs in this area.²² In other situations, employers reach out to school districts or post-secondary institutions.

The Technical College System of Georgia's Quick Start program provides customized training based on the specific needs of workforce partners in eight fields, including automobile manufacture, aviation, and clean energy. Large multinational corporations like Caterpillar, Gulfstream, Hyundai, Kia, and NCR have used Quick Start to address their workforce needs.²³

Through the Top State for Talent, state policymakers have set priorities. They have begun to align funding to these priorities. What is now needed is a mechanism for replicating these innovative partnership models in communities across Georgia. State leaders can support community efforts in three ways:

1. Identify how school districts, post-secondary institutions, and workforce training providers can contribute to the state's high-demand career and economic development priorities.
2. Invest in strategies that create multiple on-ramps into careers, along with clear guidance on those options.

²¹ Georgia General Assembly. House Bill 192 (2025). Retrieved from <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/69701>. For more information on the Top State for Talent, also see <https://www.tcsq.edu/ga-high-demand/>

²² 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>

²³Starner, R. n.d. "Georgia Supercharges Growth Through Worker Training." Site Selection Magazine. Retrieved from <https://siteselection.com/georgia-supercharges-growth-through-worker-training/>

3. Encourage state education and workforce agencies to create a roadmap for cross-sector partnership that will help civic and corporate leaders develop regional talent development strategies.

CURRICULUM REDESIGN: ENGAGING EMPLOYERS

Leaders across the three systems — K-12 education, post-secondary education, and workforce training — could improve the success of pathways for graduates by partnering with employers. The Georgia Partnership has identified three ways employers can improve pathway programming:

1. **Identify skill prerequisites:** What foundational literacy and math concepts must pathway completers master before learning high-order technical skills?
2. **Develop performance assessments:** How well can students apply what they have learned?
3. **Offer work-based learning:** How does practical experience strengthen preparation and improve career prospects?

Regional Partnerships Drive Momentum and Sustainability

Recommendation: Integrate Career Pathways into a Comprehensive Regional Talent Development Strategy.

Cross-sector partnerships create more robust career pathways. The verve and activity around partnerships is infectious. Residents hear about new programs from their neighbors.

Partnering with employers and boosted by a system that provides the necessary resources, local education leaders can provide innovative programming at scale, increasing the number of students who have access to quality education and training opportunities. By mastering new skills and collaborating with employers in their chosen field, students enter careers that support higher quality of life.

The Georgia Partnership recommends that the state's three career readiness systems strengthen and rebuild career pathways based on what graduates need: mastery of in-demand skills, access to high-wage employment, and the opportunity to continue their training when life situations shift.

CONNECTING THE DOTS: WHAT DO WE NEED?

1. Students need information, clarity, and certainty. They are more likely to enroll in a career pathway if they know the benefits are worth the effort and if the pathway across systems is clear.
2. Education leaders need a roadmap that drives their partnerships with civic and corporate leaders.
3. Community, civic, and corporate leaders need incentives to collaborate and partner across sectors.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

Focusing on high-demand careers is critical, and the state's technical education assets are already positioned to support this priority. However, Georgia's leaders need to invest in specific and actionable data on wage and employment outcomes, as well as in marketing programs to ensure more individuals enroll in these pathways.

The Georgia Partnership recommends state and community leaders restructure pathways around three specific guarantees.

1. Students will master skills that employers demand.
2. Students will earn credentials of value that support career advancement and economic prosperity.
3. Students will participate in work-based experiences that promote smoother transitions between training and employment.

State policymakers can make good on these guarantees by continuing to invest in accessible, affordable, and quality pathways programming.

| ACTION STEPS | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| GENERAL ASSEMBLY | Pilot an investment strategy that provides extra funding for career pathways programs that address local and regional workforce needs. |
| DISTRICT AND SYSTEM LEADERS | Ensure that pathway completers receive skill-based training that culminates in earning credentials of value and participating in internship and apprenticeship experiences. |
| BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY REPRESENTATIVES | Expand access to work-based learning experiences for pathways students enrolled in their post-secondary programs. |



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 state agencies and educational associations develop a statewide strategic plan to support teacher recruitment and retention.²⁴ The State Strategic Plan on Educator Recruitment and Retention took shape during monthly meetings conducted between June and November 2025. The Georgia Professional Standards Commission (PSC) hosted the meetings and tapped the Southern Regional Education Board to facilitate and provide outside expertise.

| GUIDING QUESTIONS | |
|--|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">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? | <p>Most of the EdQuest Coalition members serving on the Teachers and Leaders Working Group participated in the PSC-led effort. In the 2026 <i>EdQuest Georgia State Plan</i>, the working group committed to supporting the implementation of the statewide strategic plan for teacher recruitment and retention.</p> <p>In Issue 4 of the <i>Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2025</i>, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (Georgia Partnership) introduced three pillars of teacher excellence: readiness, resilience, and retention. The Georgia Partnership called on district and school leaders to leverage existing professional learning strategies to promote teacher readiness and resilience. It also recommended that school systems develop formal teacher leadership roles to support the implementation of educator growth strategies, aiding retention.²⁵</p> |

²⁴ Georgia General Assembly. 2025. SR 237. Retrieved from <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/70642>

²⁵ Smith, M. 2025, January 10. *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2025*. Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. Retrieved from https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/GPEE-Top-Ten-2025_Final.pdf

This Issue describes how this “readiness, resilience, retention” framework can help state partners design a comprehensive strategy that reimagines how school districts recruit and prepare candidates, support early-career educators, and deploy teacher leaders.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Readiness: Preparing Educators for Success

The Opportunity: Deliver preparation experiences that equip educators for excellence.

The Georgia Partnership defines readiness as teachers’ mastery of the professional practices that enable them to deliver engaging lessons, provide meaningful instructional feedback to students, and model deeper learning mindsets.²⁶

The 2026 *EdQuest Georgia State Plan* calls on districts and educator preparation providers (EPPs) to partner to address barriers to entering the profession and provide extensive opportunities for school-based clinical experiences.

Both districts and EPPs have invested in residencies and apprenticeships. Both options provide low-cost training for candidates who want to earn a salary or stipend while they learn. Districts pay for the cost of training; in exchange, participants agree to teach in the school system.²⁷

While most apprenticeship programs are relatively new, research on residency programs has found that graduates stay in their schools and districts longer than individuals completing other preparation models.²⁸ Although most residencies and apprenticeships require a larger upfront investment, the economic model could make sense when one considers how much districts invest in inducting, coaching, and mentoring new educators who leave the profession.²⁹

STATE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION STRATEGIC PRIORITY: SEAMLESS PATHWAYS

The state strategic plan includes several actions to support smoother transitions into the teaching profession. Agency and association representatives requested that the General Assembly fund the expansion of the state teacher apprenticeship program to a new group of districts and create a stipend for candidates completing their student-teaching or clinical residency requirement.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Garcia, A. 2024, February 6. “What’s the Difference Between Grow Your Own, Teacher Residency, and Teacher Registered Apprenticeship?” New America. Retrieved from <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/whats-the-difference-between-gyo-teacher-residency-and-teacher-registered-apprenticeship/>

²⁸ Saunders, R., J. Fitz, M. A. DiNapoli, and T. Kini. 2024. *Teacher Residencies: State and Federal Policy to Support Comprehensive Teacher Preparation*. Learning Policy Institute and EdPrepLab. Retrieved from https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/media/4413/download?inline&file=State_Federal_Support_Teacher_Residencies_REPORT.pdf

²⁹ Worley, L., and N. Zerbino. 2023, May 22. “Teacher Residencies Offer Compelling Solution to Staffing Shortages, Although at a Large Investment.” Brookings. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/teacher-residencies-offer-compelling-solution-to-staffing-shortages-although-at-a-large-cost/>

Resilience: Cultivating Teacher Excellence

The Opportunity: Leverage current educator growth strategies, including new-teacher induction and professional learning communities, to increase teacher resilience — the capacity of educators to execute and sustain quality practices.

Resilient teachers possess the personal and professional resources to manage stress and navigate unfamiliar circumstances. Some resilience factors are internal, such as emotional intelligence, executive functioning, and a sense of purpose. Other factors are interpersonal, focused on building strong adult professional cultures and support networks for teachers, and increased autonomy and input into their own pedagogy.³⁰

District and school leaders can support resilience by valuing teacher satisfaction, collaborative input, and well-being. Satisfaction is a leading indicator of whether teachers stay in the profession. In addition, satisfied teachers are more likely to forge strong relationships with students and identify ways to reach all learners.³¹

STATE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION STRATEGIC PRIORITY: RETHINKING THE VALUE PROPOSITION

A value proposition defines the reasons why candidates enter the profession. Many of the reasons involve a sense of purpose and the value of preparing students for life and careers. Other reasons relate to tangible factors, such as compensation and rewards, working conditions, and professional growth opportunities.³²

Agency and association representatives identified several priority actions, including implementing a statewide induction and mentorship strategy modeled on the Georgia Department of Education's Certified Teacher Induction Guidance document and convening a study committee to produce a long-term plan for improving teacher salary and benefits packages.

Retention: Recognizing and Rewarding Excellence

The Opportunity: Create formal teacher leadership roles to support instructional excellence and provide an outlet for highly effective educators who might leave the profession if these opportunities do not exist.

While increasing the number of adults in the preparation pipeline is essential to maintaining the size of the teaching workforce, district leaders can also expand teacher leadership programs to address student and educator needs. Teacher leader initiatives offer career pathways that keep highly

³⁰ Tunnell, K. 2025, March 17. "Creating Resilient Educators." Education Advanced. Retrieved from <https://www.educationadvanced.com/blog/creating-resilient-educators>

³¹ Ewing, M., K. Fletcher, J. Howell, A. Jacklin, and L. Ovcjak. 2024, July. *Job Satisfaction and Retention Among High School Teachers in the United States*. College Board. Retrieved from https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/TeacherJobSatisfaction_ResearchBrief072024.pdf

³² TNTP. n.d. "Refining Your Teacher Value Proposition." Retrieved from <https://tntp.org/wp-content/uploads/Tools/refining-your-teacher-value-proposition.pdf>

effective educators in the classroom, allowing them to receive recognition and greater compensation without having to take an administrative role.

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 student-learning approaches.

Teacher leaders also provide formative feedback to their peers. They model practices and mindsets that allow educators to develop self-efficacy. By priming their peers for success and providing them with habits and knowledge that make them more resilient, teacher leaders create more supportive work environments, which contribute to higher job satisfaction and lower staff turnover.³³

District leaders interested in creating new teacher leadership positions could use advanced licensure to recruit highly effective professionals to mentor early-career educators and revamp instruction in a school. Also, state law empowers districts to design formal teacher leadership roles and compensate them accordingly through Charter or Strategic Waiver School System flexibility.³⁴

STATE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION STRATEGIC PRIORITY: EDUCATOR PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

Agency and association representatives committed to creating a Portrait of a Teacher, a profile that outlines the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that would ensure educators facilitate student learning. The strategic plan also endorses the revision of tiered certification rules to help streamline entry of professionals into teacher and school leadership roles.

CONNECTING THE DOTS: FOCUSING ON SATISFACTION AND WELL-BEING

1. **Reset Priorities:** Adapt strategies based on what teachers need and want.
2. **Measure What Matters:** Create formal feedback mechanisms.
3. **Boost Retention through Teacher Agency:** Involve teachers in the design, execution, and evaluation of school strategies.

³³ Richardson, K. 2025, August. "What Do Teacher Leaders Do?" Learning Forward. Retrieved from <https://learningforward.org/journal/maximizing-resources/what-do-teacher-leaders-do/>

³⁴ Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "District Flexibility." Retrieved from <https://gadoe.org/policy/district-flexibility/>

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

The Georgia Partnership and EdQuest Coalition members recommend that the Georgia General Assembly codify the priorities outlined in the PSC State Strategic Plan on Educator Recruitment and Retention. Importantly, legislative and agency 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 statewide 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.

| ACTION STEPS | |
|---------------------|--|
| GENERAL ASSEMBLY | Codify priorities based on the State Strategic Plan on Educator Recruitment and Retention led by the Professional Standards Commission and developed by state agencies and educational associations. |
| DISTRICT LEADERS | Recognize teacher leaders and mentors as learning specialists and provide pay, responsibilities, and release time commensurate with their new roles. |
| EDUCATORS | Use professional learning communities during the school day to diagnose current challenges, pilot new interventions, and observe quality lessons. |
| EDUCATION ADVOCATES | Survey teachers about how educator workforce strategies can be reimaged to support their social, emotional, and professional growth. |



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.

Attendance creates stability and predictability, ensuring students feel safe and supported.³⁵

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?

The opposite is also true. Chronic absence – missing more than 10% of the school year – stifles learning and the development of executive functioning skills.³⁶ When students fall behind and exhibit weak executive function, they are less able to adapt to new challenges and resist impulses that distract from learning.³⁷ As a result, student learning suffers and behavioral issues increase.

Across Georgia, chronic absence doubled from 2019 to 2022. Although the pandemic did not create this crisis, it provided a moment of reckoning, underscoring the need for a comprehensive, community-focused strategy that addresses the causes of chronic absenteeism.

A recent report by the Get Georgia Reading Campaign

explores the causes and consequences of absenteeism and reviews strategies for addressing the complex causes, including issues related to physical and mental health, socioeconomic challenges, and the overall learning environment.³⁸

³⁵ Chang, H.. 2022, September 28. "Attendance Is an Essential Ingredient for Educational Equity." Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/attendance-essential-ingredient-educational-equity>

³⁶ Attendance Works. n.d. "Chronic Absence: The Problem." Retrieved from <https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/the-problem/>

³⁷ Gottfried, M. A., and A. Ansari. 2023, April 14. "Detailing New Dangers: Linking Kindergarten Chronic Absenteeism to Long-Term Declines in Executive Functioning." Elementary School Journal. Retrieved from <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/712426>

³⁸ Get Georgia Reading. 2025, June. "Student Attendance Subcommittee Report and Recommendations." Retrieved from <https://getgeorgiareading.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Get-Georgia-Reading-Student-Attendance-Subcommittee-Report-Revised-June-2025-2-1.pdf>

Building upon this foundation, the General Assembly enacted Senate Bill 123 in 2025, which requires districts to convene student attendance review teams if their chronic absenteeism rates exceed 10%.³⁹

With broad consensus that chronic absence 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

Student absences result from a variety of factors, many of which are interconnected. Attendance Works, a national nonprofit, organizes factors into four categories.⁴⁰

| | |
|---|--|
| BARRIERS Chronic health conditions, housing and food insecurity, trauma, poverty | AVERSION Anxiety and depression, bullying, feeling unsafe, poor school climate |
| DISENGAGEMENT Lack of challenging instruction, trusted adult relationships, or academic and behavioral supports | MISCONCEPTIONS Perception that missing two days per month does not have a negative impact or assumption that children can learn as well at home as in school, especially if they are ill |

The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (Georgia Partnership) recommends school and community leaders use this model to identify assets, customize strategies based on student characteristics, and refine those strategies using student and parent feedback.

Recommendation No. 1: Know your data and discover your assets.

The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) produces the Attendance Dashboard, which allows users to view attendance rates by district, school, grade, and student subgroup.⁴¹ As chronic absenteeism is not evenly distributed across grades and student groups, district and school leaders should use the dashboard to identify where current needs are greatest. In most school systems, kindergarteners, high school juniors and seniors, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged youth are the four groups with the highest absenteeism.

³⁹ Georgia General Assembly. 2025. Senate Bill 123. Retrieved from <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/70077>

⁴⁰ Attendance Works. n.d. "Identify the Root Causes of Absence." Retrieved from <https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/addressing-chronic-absence/3-tiers-of-intervention/root-causes/>

⁴¹ Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "Attendance Dashboard." Retrieved from <https://georgiainsights.gadoe.org/dashboards/attendance/>

THREE RESOURCES FOR DISTRICT AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

1. The [KIDS COUNT Data Center](#) summarizes demographic, economic, education, and health data.⁴² The site helps school systems track community progress on indicators of educational success and well-being.
2. The [County Health Rankings](#) provides trend data related to health, quality of life, and community health infrastructure.⁴³
3. The [GaDOE Georgia School Climate Survey](#) asks students, educators, and parents to report their perceptions of campus safety, school climate, and community health resources.⁴⁴

During the pandemic, state agencies and school districts used federal funding to expand access to child care, create school-based health programs, and increase the number of students who received mental health services.⁴⁵ These investments in infrastructure helped community leaders identify assets that were available but underutilized by families with school-aged children. And many of these resources are critical to addressing student absenteeism. While many schools use these resources to serve as resource hubs, that is not universally true across Georgia.

Recommendation No. 2: Tailor strategies based on grade level.

Reasons for absenteeism vary not only by individual circumstance but also by age group. In elementary grades, factors that deter attendance often relate to poor health or family disengagement. For older youth, disinterest in school, mental health challenges, and competing family and work priorities can discourage regular attendance.

When tailoring strategies, the Georgia Partnership recommends that school systems look at their attendance data by grade level and subgroup. For middle and high school students, missing assignments and poor performance in their courses can contribute to disengagement. While district and school leaders cannot always address the family and community factors that hinder attendance, they can change conditions within the school that make students feel unsafe or unsupported.

Recommendation No. 3: Ask Students and Parents for Their Input.

Research suggests that school-aged youth feel more positive about school when they can identify at least one adult who they trust and believe cares about them.⁴⁶ When properly trained, these trusted adults in the building can ask students what they need and share these insights with their leaders.

⁴² Annie E. Casey Foundation. n.d. "KIDS COUNT Data Center: Georgia." Retrieved from <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data?location=GA#GA>

⁴³ University of Wisconsin. n.d. "County Health Rankings & Roadmaps: Georgia." Retrieved from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/georgia?year=2025>

⁴⁴ Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "Georgia School Climate Survey." Retrieved from <https://gadoe.org/whole-child-supports/school-climate/>

⁴⁵ Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. 2025, June. *CARES District Case Study: Creating Student Support Systems to Improve Learning*. Retrieved from https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/CARES-Impact-Case-Study-Mental-Health_Final.pdf

⁴⁶ Landers, E., and M. A. Rausch. 2025, February 28. "What Does It Mean to Be a Trusted Adult?" *Principal Magazine*. National Association of Elementary School Principals. Retrieved from <https://www.naesp.org/resource/what-does-it-mean-to-be-a-trusted-adult/>

Working with community partners, district leaders can coordinate wraparound services and supports to meet the needs surfaced by students.

School leaders also should build relationships with parents. Parents often feel like spectators, observing what happens in school without being an active partner in identifying how to strengthen student attendance and engagement. Engaging parents during the formulation of strategies is critical.

Feedback gathering is not a task on a checklist. The urgency to solve the attendance crisis is real, and missteps make matters worse. By encouraging early and frequent engagement, school leaders can set the foundation for subsequent community conversations focused on how to improve student engagement and implement deeper learning strategies.

CONNECTING THE DOTS: OPEN DIALOGUE IS CRITICAL!

- School systems should reach out to parents after students miss two days in the first month or three days in the first nine weeks. Missing more than five days of school during the year places students at risk for academic struggle.
- Connecting families to community resources is a proactive strategy that can prevent students from missing school.
- School climate is an important part of the student attendance and engagement puzzle. School personnel should investigate how to support students when they share that they feel unsafe or unsupported.

MOVING FORWARD GEORGIA

Attendance Is the Expectation, Not the Goal

While setting goals can help communities monitor progress, reducing chronic absenteeism is not only about improving attendance rates. It is about ensuring that every child can learn, thrive, and reach their full potential.

Attendance is the first stage in promoting student success and well-being. Think of a continuum where students who are present report higher levels of engagement. Highly engaged students are four times more optimistic about and 10 times more prepared for post-secondary opportunities than their disengaged peers.⁴⁷

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.

⁴⁷ Hrynowski, Z. 2024, August 20. "K-12 Schools Struggle to Engage Gen Z. Students." Gallup. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/648896/schools-struggle-engage-gen-students.aspx>

| ACTION STEPS | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| SCHOOL AND DISTRICT LEADERS | <p>Integrate measures of student attendance and engagement into district and school performance plans.</p> <p>Create student attendance strategies that trigger parent outreach when students are absent more than three days in the first nine weeks.</p> |
| PUBLIC HEALTH AND WORKFORCE LEADERS | <p>Collaborate with district leaders to develop tailored strategies to support students with chronic conditions, disabilities, or special needs.</p> <p>Explore creative ways for employers to provide leave time for parents to attend teacher conferences and school activities during the workday.</p> |
| STUDENTS AND PARENTS | <p>Provide individual and group therapies for students to develop skills related to emotional regulation, mindfulness, and executive functioning.</p> <p>Invite parents to share their input through surveys administered at the beginning and end of the year. The results provide insights into community needs and potential solutions.</p> |



LITERACY – SUPPORTING TEACHERS, IMPROVING INSTRUCTION

ISSUE OVERVIEW

In 2023, the Georgia General Assembly passed the Georgia Early Literacy Act, which created a comprehensive framework to improve reading proficiency in K-12 public schools. Over the last three years, school districts have adopted universal reading screeners, selected high-quality instructional materials, and provided literacy training to K-3 educators.⁴⁸

| GUIDING QUESTIONS | |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">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? | <p>In the wake of the act's passage, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (Georgia Partnership) released a case study on how three districts implemented early literacy reforms. District leaders interviewed by the Georgia Partnership highlighted school-based coaches as a primary driver of positive outcomes.⁴⁹</p> <p>Coaches provide professional development to teachers, monitor student progress, and evaluate the implementation of student interventions. Coaches support teachers, who then deliver the quality interventions that help struggling readers.⁵⁰</p> |

⁴⁸ Morgan, L., J. Wenke, and R. Free. 2024, February 22. *Preliminary Results of District Survey on Progress Toward Implementation of the Georgia Early Literacy Act (HB538)*. Deal Center for Early Language and Literacy. Retrieved from <https://gosa.georgia.gov/document/literacy-resources/implementation-georgia-early-literacy-act-hb538/download>

⁴⁹ Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. 2024, November. *CARES District Case Study: Rewriting How Reading Is Taught*. Retrieved from https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/CARES-Impact-Case-Study-Literacy_Final_v3.pdf

⁵⁰ White, E. 2025, September 11. "Beyond Compliance: Making Literacy Coaches Work for Your District." Ignite Reading. Retrieved from <https://ignite-reading.com/insights/literacy-coaches/>

In spring 2024, the General Assembly provided funding for regional literacy coaches. In 2025, lawmakers funded a state literacy coach coordinator position.⁵¹ The coordinator ensures all state and regional coaches have mastered the skills necessary to support K-3 educators implementing student interventions.

While a regional coaching model has shown promise in many states, most notably Mississippi⁵² the Georgia Partnership calls on state leaders to create a funding framework to hire and deploy 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. This Issue makes the case for why these two priorities warrant state attention.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Reading Coaches

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 serve as the point person in schools and districts to ensure the effective implementation of literacy initiatives. Coaches help educators adapt their practice based on the science of reading and use informal student assessment data to customize interventions. They are agents of change, adjusting culture to ensure more teachers reflect on their practice and look to their peers to refine instructional techniques.

By creating a data-driven instructional culture among educators, coaches can then focus on evaluating school-wide implementation of student interventions. As an advocate for their educators, coaches can work with district and school leaders to array resources and supports to maximize educator effort and promote ever-higher student outcomes.⁵³

⁵¹ House Budget and Research Office. 2025, April 4. "Fiscal Year 2026 Budget: Conference Committee Highlights." Retrieved from [https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/document/docs/default-source/house-budget-and-research-office-document-library/2026-fiscal-year/fy_2026_highlights_conference_committee_\(hb_68\).pdf](https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/document/docs/default-source/house-budget-and-research-office-document-library/2026-fiscal-year/fy_2026_highlights_conference_committee_(hb_68).pdf)

⁵² Butler, K. May/June 2024. Changing Course: Large Scale Implementation of the Science of Reading – The Long View of Literacy in Mississippi. The Reading League Journal. Retrieved from <https://www.thereadingleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Changing-Course-Article-for-EAC.pdf>

⁵³ White, E. 2025, September 11. "Beyond Compliance: Making Literacy Coaches Work for Your District." Ignite Reading. Retrieved from <https://ignite-reading.com/insights/literacy-coaches/>

MISSISSIPPI AND MARIETTA CITY SCHOOLS: THE BENEFIT OF EXECUTING REGIONAL AND SCHOOL-BASED COACHING APPROACHES AT THE SAME TIME

In 2013, Mississippi ranked second to last in the nation in third-grade reading proficiency. That year, the state legislature passed the Literacy-Based Promotion Act, which kicked off a decade of student growth on English Language Arts assessments. Mississippi ultimately led the nation in student growth on the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Assessment.⁵⁴

The state hired 85 regional coaches and provided centralized training and credentialing, which ensured coaches had mastered the skills and competencies to support tailored student interventions and provide effective adult professional learning support.⁵⁵

The Georgia General Assembly recently funded a regional coaching model like Mississippi's. By also creating a Literacy Coaching Coordinator position, the legislature has committed to a robust training and credentialing structure that ensures all state-funded coaches receive the training they need to support teachers.

This regional approach could be strengthened by incorporating school-based coaching. As part of a system-wide reading reform that began in 2021, the Marietta City School District ensured that each elementary school had a full-time reading coach. As the new approach to teaching reading was implemented, the coaches guided educators through literacy training and helped them apply the practices in their classrooms. They now provide ongoing support to ensure that educators deliver quality interventions to struggling readers.⁵⁶

As state leaders roll out the regional coaching model, the Georgia Partnership urges state and district leaders to also consider the value of funding permanent, school-based coaches — like those in Marietta City Schools — who receive robust training and technical support from their regional counterparts.

High-Dosage Tutoring

Tutors provide supplementary academic assistance. During the pandemic, education researchers identified high-dosage tutoring (HDT) as an effective model to accelerate student learning outcomes. The HDT model requires regular and frequent interactions with students: at least three times per week for 30 minutes per session with the same tutor. Tutors use informal assessments to analyze student progress. Learning outcomes for this intervention are promising. One study found tutees gained three to 15 months in learning growth.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Mississippi Department of Education. 2025, August. "Mississippi Success Story." Retrieved from <https://mdek12.org/superintendent/success/>

⁵⁵ Freitag, E. 2025, February 20. "A Bold State Move to Improve Reading." Fordham Institute. Retrieved from <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/bold-state-move-improve-reading>

⁵⁶ Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. 2024, November. CARES District Case Study: *Rewriting How Reading Is Taught*. Retrieved from https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/CARES-Impact-Case-Study-Literacy_Final_v3.pdf

⁵⁷ Robinson, C., M. Kraft, S. Loeb, and B. Schueler. 2021, February. *Design Principles for Accelerating Student Learning with High-Impact Tutoring*. EdResearch for Action. Retrieved from https://annenberg.brown.edu/sites/default/files/EdResearch_for_Recovery_Design_Principles_1.pdf

However, only 37% of the nation's schools offer HDT during the day.⁵⁸ Research highlights several reasons why some schools do not adopt this approach. The programs are resource and labor intensive. Identifying available and qualified tutors is difficult, and pulling students out of class can pose scheduling challenges.

LOUISIANA: STATE POLICYMAKERS FUND HIGH-DOSAGE TUTORING

In 2021, the Louisiana Legislature created the Steve Carter Education Program, which provided \$1,000 tutoring vouchers for students who score below proficient levels on state reading and math assessments. Expanded in 2024, the program now provides \$1,500 in vouchers for afterschool tutoring. Parents apply through an online portal and select an approved provider.⁵⁹

In 2024, the Louisiana Legislature further required high-dosage reading and math tutoring for low-performing K-5 students. Districts offer tutoring during the school day. The state education department developed district guidance for how to identify eligible students, structure tutoring experiences, and select qualified tutors.⁶⁰

CONNECTING THE DOTS: USE SPECIALISTS TO ACCELERATE LITERACY OUTCOMES

1. District leaders should clarify the roles and responsibilities of reading coaches, including how they deliver co-teaching, professional learning, and progress monitoring.
2. State leaders should provide resources for districts to hire paraprofessionals and teacher candidates to provide high-dosage tutoring.
3. District leaders should leverage regional coaches to identify current teachers who could fill school-based literacy coaching roles through a train-the-trainer model.

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. The Georgia Council on Literacy, staffed by the Governor's Office of Student Achievement, has created a space for stakeholders to achieve the goals outlined by the legislation.⁶¹

As the Georgia Partnership has identified in previous Top Ten Issues, literacy is a foundation to support student engagement, career exploration, and skills development. Investing in school-based coaches and tutors is a strategy that will help students maximize their potential.

⁵⁸ Institute of Education Sciences. n.d. "School Pulse Panel." Retrieved from <https://ies.ed.gov/schoolsurvey/spp/>

⁵⁹ Louisiana Department of Education. "Helping Students Be Their Best: Louisiana Tutoring Initiative." Retrieved from <https://doe.louisiana.gov/school-system-leaders/school-system-support/statewide-tutoring-opportunities>

⁶⁰ Louisiana Department of Education. n.d. "Accelerate: High-Dosage Tutoring Guidance." Retrieved from <https://doe.louisiana.gov/docs/default-source/teaching/accelerate-high-dosage-tutoring-guidance.pdf>

⁶¹ Georgia Reads. n.d. "Georgia Council on Literacy." Retrieved from <https://georgiareads.org/georgia-council-on-literacy/>

| ACTION STEPS | |
|---|---|
| GENERAL ASSEMBLY | Provide funding for districts to hire school-based reading coaches. |
| SCHOOL AND DISTRICT LEADERS | Work with educator preparation providers to identify teacher candidates who could address the shortage of qualified tutors. |
| COMMUNITY PARTNERS AND OTHER NONPROFITS | Identify mentors who can support the spread of reading and tutoring programs within the community. Broker relationships with parents and support awareness of available resources. |



COMMUNITY HUBS – EXPANDING HEALTHCARE ACCESS

ISSUE OVERVIEW

During the pandemic, two developments set the stage for expanding access to healthcare in communities across Georgia. First, the state legislature approved the Georgia Mental Health Parity

Act in spring 2022. Among other priorities, the law requires insurers to provide access to behavioral and mental health services at a similar scope and cost to physical health benefits.⁶² The act has inspired advocates and community health providers to explore how to integrate behavioral and mental health services within the primary care model.

Second, Governor Brian Kemp used federal pandemic-relief funds to provide grants for school systems to create school-based health centers. The number of these centers has grown exponentially, from two in 2013 to 129 in 2024.⁶³ During the same period, many districts invested one-time federal funds into creating health and resource hubs for students and their families.⁶⁴

The 2026 *EdQuest Georgia State Plan* identified community health hubs as a strategy that could expand healthcare access, which would result in better overall health for children and their families and increased academic outcomes for students. Community health hubs are a one-stop shop for health and social services. Residents receive preventative healthcare services and learn more about education and training resources that could improve economic mobility.⁶⁵

⁶² Georgia General Assembly. 2022. HB 1013. Retrieved from <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/61365>

⁶³ Georgia Department of Education. n.d. "School-Based Health Centers Map." Retrieved from <https://apps.gadoe.org/sbhc>

⁶⁴ Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. 2025, June. *CARES District Case Study: Creating Student Support Systems to Improve Learning*. Retrieved from https://gppee.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/CARES-Impact-Case-Study-Mental-Health_Final.pdf

⁶⁵ Pferr, L. 2023, November 17. "Community Care Hubs: What Evidence-Based Program Providers Need to Know." National Council on Aging. Retrieved from <https://www.ncoa.org/article/community-care-hubs-what-evidence-based-program-providers-need-to-know/>

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 for Excellence in Education (Georgia Partnership) recommends that communities build upon this strong foundation by creating community health strategies that support well-being for all residents.

This Issue describes how community health hubs could create a model for delivering healthcare, especially in areas where services are limited, and provides three recommendations for how a cross-sector group of community stakeholders could implement the hub model.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Health hubs help residents manage chronic conditions like heart disease, diabetes, asthma, depression, and anxiety. Patients can access primary care services, receive behavioral and mental health counseling, and undergo health screenings. At sites that do not treat acute issues, providers refer patients to specialists.

Hubs facilitate the delivery of health services to residents who lack transportation or who struggle to afford healthcare. Providing multiple services at a single location increases the likelihood that residents receive the health and social services that they need to maintain health and wellness. Further, hubs can reduce duplication and cost of service by ensuring that patients with chronic health conditions receive comprehensive care, including health education, routine screenings, and prescription drug benefits. Finally, by meeting residents' needs before their challenges become more acute, communities can rely less on emergency services and hospital medicine.⁶⁶

Recommendation No. 1: Tailor services to community needs.

Health, civic, and corporate leaders can use the Community Health Assessment and Group Evaluation Tool developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to determine residents' needs and determine where community resources are located.⁶⁷ As demographics shift or health needs change, providers adapt. If communities lack the population density to warrant full-time staffing of certain specialists or clinicians, then leaders can work with neighboring areas to pursue a more regional public health model that meets the complex and unmet needs of their residents. Accurate data and needs assessments can help guide community decisions, partnerships and investments.

Recommendation No. 2: Expand access through a cost-share model.

State and community leaders can support the replication of community health hubs by encouraging private-sector partners to invest in the model. Legislators and state agency executives can establish a set of state priorities that allow communities to improve and modernize their health infrastructure. For example, state leaders can use tax incentives to encourage public health providers and employers to invest in hubs.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2024, May 16. "Community Planning for Health Assessment: Frameworks & Tools." Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/public-health-gateway/php/public-health-strategy/public-health-strategies-for-community-health-assessment-models-frameworks-tools.html>

Government can also fund social impact bonds that support cross-sector collaboration. Such grants reward partners who develop comprehensive strategies that serve multiple dimensions of well-being, including social, emotional, physical, and occupational supports.⁶⁸

To address the healthcare workforce shortage, incentives can also be used to expand the number of clinical environments where residents can complete their medical training, helping prepare the next generation of public health practitioners. In particular, the General Assembly and state agencies can accelerate the development of community health infrastructure by funding graduate medical placements in underserved areas.

With the current uncertain federal funding environment, communities that blend and braid funding from multiple sources — public federal, state and local dollars, as well as private and philanthropic — will be better equipped to continue delivering comprehensive services.

Recommendation No. 3: Jumpstart efforts by providing core services to children and adolescents.

The pandemic was a stressful and traumatic time for students, educators, and parents. In a recent case study, the Georgia Partnership highlighted how three districts used federal pandemic-relief funds to support vulnerable students.

While each district invested in wellness strategies that offered preventive health care and early interventions for students, the strategies were also distinguished by how well they addressed the family and community risk factors that affected well-being. With schools serving as prominent public spaces, district and school leaders increased parent and community awareness about health and social resources.

SCHOOL-BASED HEALTH CENTERS: NORTH CLAYTON HIGH SCHOOL

Clayton County Public Schools partnered with Family Centers of Georgia to create a school-based health center in Fall 2014. Students receive healthcare from a behavioral health clinician, physician, and nurse. The center provides early intervention services to lower the number of students who access emergency or hospital medicine. By partnering with community providers, students also have access to specialists for more acute health conditions.⁷⁰

With the right local partners, schools can serve as health hubs in a community. School leaders can connect children and families to larger networks of providers that support prevention and early intervention. While health and wellness are the primary goals in providing services, hubs also can share information about wraparound services, tutoring, mentoring, and afterschool services that foster a culture of student success.

⁶⁸ Social Finance. n.d. "Social Impact Bonds." Retrieved from <https://socialfinance.org/social-impact-bonds/>

⁶⁹ Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. 2025, June. *CARES District Case Study: Creating Student Support Systems to Improve Learning*. Retrieved from https://gpee.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/CARES-Impact-Case-Study-Mental-Health_Final.pdf

⁷⁰ Clayton County Public Schools. n.d. "School-Based Health Center." Retrieved from <https://www.clayton.k12.ga.us/departments/student-services/student-health/school-based-health-center>

Providing physical, behavioral, and mental health services to children and adolescents creates a strong foundation on which local leaders can roll out more comprehensive health and wellness strategies. Over time, health, civic, and corporate leaders can ensure that adults receive core services that support educational opportunity and economic mobility.

CONNECTING THE DOTS: HEALTH ACCESS DRIVES WELL-BEING

1. Physical health impacts behavior, mood, and mental health.⁷¹ Community leaders should build awareness of available services.
2. Access to healthcare also improves community outcomes like social connectedness and civic participation.⁷²
3. Hubs can pay for themselves by improving residents' health literacy, increasing employee productivity, and alleviating the effects of poverty.⁷³

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

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.

⁷¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2025, June 9. "About Mental Health." Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/mental-health/about/index.html>

⁷² Salinsky, E. 2022, April. *Civic Engagement Is a Social Determinant of Health*. Grantmakers in Health. Retrieved from <https://www.gih.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Issue-Focus-Civic-Engagement-Is-a-Social-Determinant-of-Health.pdf>

⁷³ National Association of Community Health Centers. 2023, March. *Economic Impact of Community Health Centers in the United States*. Retrieved from https://www.nachc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Economic-Impact-of-Community-Health-Centers-US_2023_final.pdf

| ACTION STEPS | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| COMMUNITY HEALTH ADVOCATES | Create a health and wellness index that monitors the progress of community health efforts. |
| PUBLIC HEALTH PROVIDERS | Offer clinical expertise to create coordinated service delivery models. |
| LEGISLATORS | Develop a system of tax incentives and abatements that allow for the creation of community hubs. |
| STATE PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCIES | Establish pilots and competitive grants that support the creation or expansion of community hubs. |



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

ISSUE OVERVIEW

About one-third of Americans (35%) surveyed by Gallup in 2025 rated a college education as “very important,” down from 75% who expressed the same sentiment in 2010. During the same period, the percentage of respondents who rated a college education as “not too important” grew from 4% to 24%, a 500% increase⁷⁴

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?

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.⁷⁵ 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.⁷⁶

With the increasing need for post-secondary credentials to support Georgia’s growing economic prosperity, the concerns over the return on investment (ROI) of post-secondary participation are worrisome and must be addressed. When evaluating how to increase post-secondary ROI, the Georgia Partnership recommends that leaders consider how to maximize benefits for individuals, community, and the state.

⁷⁴ Saad, L. 2025, September. “Perceived Importance of College Hits New Low.” Gallup. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/695003/perceived-importance-college-hits-new-low.aspx>

⁷⁵ Brown, C. 2024, April 19. “Sticker Shock: Americans Say College Costs Are Too High—and Unclear.” Lumina Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.luminafoundation.org/news-and-views/sticker-shock-americans-say-college-costs-are-too-high-and-unclear/>

⁷⁶ Dickler, J. 2025, November 15. “AI Puts the Squeeze on New Grads — and the Colleges That Promised to Make Them Employable.” CNBC. Retrieved from <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/11/15/ai-puts-the-squeeze-on-new-grads-looking-for-work.html>

Georgians would benefit from an expanded definition of “affordability” that draws on new investments from state, civic, and corporate partners. By leveraging the Top State for Talent initiative, communities can develop regional talent strategies that forge greater alignment between post-secondary programs and regional workforce needs. State policymakers can support both individual well-being and community transformation by accelerating opportunity for Georgians who have not yet earned a post-secondary credential, but who hold a high school diploma.

State policymakers take pride in Georgia being the Number One State for Business.⁷⁷ Georgia will retain this important distinction if state leaders also strive to be the Top State for Post-Secondary Opportunity.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Affordability

College affordability is the ability of students and their families to cover the cost of post-secondary education. Although financial aid increases affordability, other factors like program and institution type and the time to complete credentials drive how much post-secondary education costs.⁷⁸

The Senate Study Committee on Higher Education Affordability met several times in fall 2025 to explore options for making higher education more affordable, including the creation of a need-based scholarship program.⁷⁹ During the meetings, senators also expressed interest in revisiting how the legislature funds the Technical College and University Systems of Georgia and considering how to increase awareness of nondegree and noncredit options aligned with high-demand careers. In December 2025, the Study Committee issued a final recommendation to the Georgia State Legislature to create a state-wide needs-based aid program.⁸⁰

Georgia has funded the HOPE Scholarship, a merit-based award, for over 30 years. More recently, the Georgia General Assembly created the HOPE Grant and Career Grant programs, which provide financial aid for residents enrolled in nondegree programs at one of the state’s technical colleges.⁸¹

In 2023, Governor Kemp announced the rollout of Georgia MATCH, a direct admissions program that informs students of where they are pre-qualified to attend based on their Grade 11 GPA. Students receive a personalized letter that encourages them to set up a GaFutures account, a free online resource from the [Georgia Student Finance Commission](#) that helps Georgians plan for and pay for college and other post-high school education. Once they sign up, students learn about how to apply for financial aid.⁸²

⁷⁷ Office of the Governor. 2025, September 24. “Gov. Kemp: Georgia No. 1 for Business for 12th Straight Year” [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://gov.georgia.gov/press-releases/2025-09-24/gov-kemp-georgia-no-1-business-12th-straight-year>

⁷⁸ Urban Institute. n.d. “Understanding College Affordability.” Retrieved from <https://collegeaffordability.urban.org/>

⁷⁹ Georgia General Assembly. 2025. SR 474. Retrieved from <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/71714>

⁸⁰ Georgia General Assembly. 2025. Final Report of the Senate Study Committee on Higher Education Affordability (SR 470). Retrieved from <https://www.legis.ga.gov/other-committees/senate/2025/higher-education-affordability>

⁸¹ Technical College System of Georgia. n.d. “Paying for College.” Retrieved from <https://www.tcsd.edu/for-students/paying-for-college/>

⁸² Georgia Student Finance Commission. n.d. “College Planning.” Retrieved from <https://www.gafutures.org/college-planning/>

NEXT STEPS FOR COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY

1. Create an opportunity scholarship that provides financial aid for students with unmet need.
2. Develop a state task force to redesign Georgia's technical education and university system funding formulas.
3. Provide financial incentives for adults to re-enroll and earn post-secondary credentials.

Alignment

Signed into law by Governor Brian Kemp in May 2025, the Top State for Talent Act creates a cross-agency initiative to better align Georgia's post-secondary strategies with employer needs. Top State for Talent leverages key state assets, including the Georgia MATCH program, the High-Demand Career program, and Quick Start.⁸³

Three systems provide career-themed opportunities: the Georgia Department of Education's Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (GaDOE CTAE) program; the Technical College and University Systems of Georgia (TCSG and USG); and workforce training delivered at technical colleges and via private providers.

Georgia's leaders are recasting state and community priorities based on the Top State for Talent initiative. These new priorities should guide investments in the state's three career education systems. Feedback from education and workforce leaders will inform how the General Assembly achieves greater alignment among the three systems.

NEXT STEPS FOR WORKFORCE ALIGNMENT

1. Create corporate tax credits that encourage employers to invest in "earn and learn" strategies for students enrolled in post-secondary programs.
2. Reward academic credit for individuals who complete nondegree and noncredit workforce credentials, allowing them to pursue associate or bachelor's degrees.
3. Provide incentives for institutions that achieve specific performance goals, such as increasing the number of students who complete credentials in high-demand fields.

Acceleration and Articulation

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

⁸³ State of Georgia. n.d. "Top State for Talent." Retrieved from <https://topstatefortalent.georgia.gov/>

Just over half (53%) of Georgians have earned a post-secondary credential: a degree, certificate, certification, or occupational license.⁸⁴ An additional 37% of Georgians have earned a high school diploma or equivalency, making them eligible to enroll in post-secondary education and workforce training programs.⁸⁵

The Georgia Partnership recommends that state post-secondary systems accelerate opportunity for three categories of individuals: eligible, potential, and near completer.

| ELIGIBLE | POTENTIAL | NEAR COMPLETER |
|---|--|---|
| Georgians who hold high school diplomas or equivalency but have not earned post-secondary credentials | Georgians who enrolled in post-secondary programs but did not complete credentials | Georgians who have completed 75% or more of the credits required to receive credentials |

State policymakers and post-secondary system leaders can support credential attainment for these categories in three ways:

1. **Eligible:** Expand and deepen incentives for adults to earn short-term post-secondary credentials in high-demand careers.
2. **Potential:** Create accelerated programs that reduce time-to-degree by rewarding adults for prior post-secondary credit and work experience.
3. **Near Completer:** Award post-secondary credentials for individuals originally enrolled in bachelor's degree programs who have met the requirements for associate degrees or nondegree credentials.

The GaDOE, TCSG, and USG can build on these acceleration strategies through articulation agreements. The three systems have a strong track record of ensuring courses and credits transfer. However, to meet the needs of tomorrow's graduates, the two post-secondary systems, in partnership with GaDOE, should create skill and credential maps that show how knowledge, skills, and abilities progress from short-term credentials to advanced degrees. Providing Georgians with career roadmaps could help them make informed choices about what to do next.

⁸⁴ Lumina Foundation. n.d. "A Stronger Nation: Educational Attainment in Georgia." Retrieved from <https://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/attainment/georgia>

⁸⁵ Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. n.d. "High School Graduate or Higher for Georgia." Retrieved from <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/GCT1501GA>

CONNECTING THE DOTS: THREE FACTORS DRIVING HIGHER RETURNS

Program Type and Length: Individuals can lower their post-secondary costs and achieve higher immediate earnings if they complete short-term credential programs in high-demand fields that are tied to a career trajectory.

Earn and Learn Programs: Students receive valuable work experience while earning a paycheck and building their professional networks. Employers boost recruitment by hiring high performers.

Streamlined Pathways: System leaders create clear pathways that provide flexible options for students and provide multiple entry points.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

This Issue highlights three factors that should guide policymakers should consider as they advance the priorities outlined in the Top State for Talent strategy: affordability, alignment, and acceleration. 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.

Finally, the 2026 EdQuest Plan recognizes the progress made by GaDOE, TCSG, and USG to create more seamless career pathways. Ensuring Georgians have more entry points to post-secondary opportunities is critical to improve return on investment at all levels.

| ACTION STEPS | |
|------------------------|--|
| GENERAL ASSEMBLY | Develop a post-secondary affordability strategy that provides additional aid for needy students, revises funding formulas, and encourages corporate investment in work-based learning. |
| POST-SECONDARY SYSTEMS | Enhance existing credit articulation agreements to ensure public institutions award credit for alternative credentials and nontraditional experiences earned across the K-12, post-secondary, and workforce domains. |
| INSTITUTIONS | Prioritize recruitment of adult learners via flexible scheduling, employer placements, and quality academic and career advising. |
| EMPLOYERS | Partner with civic and education leaders to create, revise, or expand high-demand career pathways aligned to regional needs. |



RURAL COMMUNITIES – INVESTING IN TRANSFORMATION

ISSUE OVERVIEW

Popular culture often defines rural communities by their challenges: population decline, limited access to education and economic opportunities, and intergenerational poverty.⁸⁶ This deficit-based mentality stifles the search for cross-sector solutions to problems common in rural communities and ignores the many assets rural communities possess. Also, portraying rural residents as “needing saving” perpetuates top-down strategies that fail to reflect the specific and diverse needs of these communities.⁸⁷

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?

The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (Georgia Partnership) proposes shifting mindsets on rural development by focusing on building on existing community assets, forging cross-sector partnerships, and investing in local capacity.

Rural leaders can develop sustainable solutions to perennial challenges by crafting a comprehensive strategy founded on three pillars:

1. **Talent Development:** A regional approach focused on reskilling, which involves training residents to master skills that local employers demand⁸⁸
2. **Quality of Life:** A multifaceted plan that invests in infrastructure to attract new residents and businesses
3. **Leader Capacity:** A support system that protects rural leaders' resources and ensures they have opportunities to engage in cross-sector strategies

⁸⁶ Cahill, E. 2024, November 1. “A Reminder to Reporters: If You've Seen One Rural Place ... You've Seen One Rural Place.” Poynter Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.poynter.org/ethics-trust/2024/rural-america-is-diverse/>

⁸⁷ Harris, C. 2020, December 14. “After Generations of Disinvestment, Rural America Might Be the Most Innovative Place in the US.” Kauffman Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.kauffman.org/currents/rural-america-most-innovative-place-in-united-states/>

⁸⁸ Cornerstone. 2020, May 11. “Understanding the Difference Between Reskilling, Upskilling and New Skilling.” Retrieved from <https://www.cornerstoneondemand.com/resources/article/difference-between-reskilling-upskilling-new-skilling/>

This Issue describes how community leaders can develop cross-sector strategies and identifies roles that state policymakers can play to foster these efforts.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Talent Development

To date, most rural development approaches have focused on enterprise employers partnering with K-12 and post-secondary partners to create training programs. Georgia's Top State for Talent initiative builds on this strong foundation by fostering cross-sector regional approaches focused on aligning post-secondary offerings with community and workforce needs.⁸⁹

Before the kickoff of the Top State for Talent initiative, local workforce investment boards produced high-demand career lists for the regions they serve. Now, the State Workforce Board approves and publishes the annual state and regional lists.⁹⁰

Education, civic, and corporate leaders can use these lists to identify career pathways that address workforce needs. In cases where education and training options misalign with employer demand, K-12 and post-secondary leaders should collaborate with business and industry partners to explore ways to adapt programs to address skill and talent gaps.

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

INVESTING IN TALENT: PHOEBE PUTNEY HEALTH SYSTEM

To address a significant nursing shortage, the Phoebe Putney Health System partnered with Albany Technical College (ATC) to prepare the next generation of nurses from their own community. The cornerstone of their partnership is the Living & Learning Community, which allows ATC aspiring nurses, nurse assistants, and phlebotomists to live where they learn. Phoebe also supports a health science pathway at a local college and career academy, where students can work as certified nursing assistants while still enrolled in high school.⁹¹

Quality of Life

State policymakers and agency leaders have addressed rural development challenges by investing in broadband infrastructure, expanding access to physical and behavioral health services, and tackling rural poverty. To further improve quality of life, regional and community leaders can prioritize three specific areas: healthcare, early learning, and revitalizing main streets.

⁸⁹ State of Georgia. n.d. "Top State for Talent." Retrieved from <https://topstatefortalent.georgia.gov/>. For more information on The Top State for Talent, also see <https://www.tcsq.edu/ga-high-demand/>

⁹⁰ The Technical College System publishes the state and regional high-demand career lists at <https://www.tcsq.edu/ga-high-demand/>

⁹¹ Phoebe Health. n.d., "Living & Learning Community." Retrieved from <https://phoebehealth.com/better-future/living-learning-community/>

Healthcare

Nine rural Georgia hospitals have closed over the last 15 years, with another 18 facilities currently at risk for closure.⁹² At the time of this writing, uncertainty surrounding future Medicaid and Medicare funding could place even more facilities in jeopardy.

More than half of Georgia's counties — 82 of 159 — do not have obstetrician-gynecologists (OB-GYNs).⁹³ Sixty-two counties do not have pediatricians.⁹⁴ The combination of hospital closures and lack of access to health professionals contributes to higher maternal and infant mortality rates. In Georgia, the maternal mortality rate is 66.3 per 100,000 live births, the second highest in the country. However, women living in rural Georgia face mortality rates 50% higher than their urban counterparts.⁹⁵ Further, a lack of appropriate prenatal care leads to an increase in preterm births. Infants born before 37 weeks or under 5.5 pounds have an increased risk of chronic morbidity, developmental delays, intellectual deficits, and academic difficulties.⁹⁶

Rural leaders can expand access through telehealth, school- and community-based health centers, and mobile clinics. Since some counties lack the population density to support a community health system, the Georgia Partnership and EdQuest Coalition recommend that leaders create regional health strategies that allow specialists to serve multiple counties.

Early Learning

While many rural communities have licensed child care options, the current provider pool might be unable to meet the needs of all families. The lack of child care slots can result in parents choosing not to pursue full-time employment. Finding available child care for non-traditional work hours (evening and weekend shifts) is particularly problematic. Underemployment or workforce exits depress economic activity in communities and reduce family incomes.⁹⁷

The primary sources of child care funding are federal dollars and parent tuition. A cross-sector, community-based strategy could expand access to quality options by funding facility start-up costs and providing professional development to prospective center directors or home-based providers.

Main Street

Increasing access to healthcare and child care also supports local economies. Building out community health infrastructure and supporting emerging health care providers increases economic activity in rural downtowns and attracts businesses that would not otherwise relocate without viable

⁹² Crawford, N. 2025, September 15. "Expiration of Premium Tax Credits Spells Disaster for Rural Georgia." Georgia Recorder. Retrieved from <https://georgiarecorder.com/2025/09/15/expiration-of-premium-tax-credits-spells-disaster-for-rural-georgia/>

⁹³ Voices for Georgia's Children. n.d. Whole Child Primer: 4th Edition. Retrieved from https://www.georgiavoices.org/_files/ugd/024d26_c5293093ebcd4aef953bf369979b14d6.pdf

⁹⁴ Livingston, A. 2024, July 17. "Kids Alliance for Better Care Expands Its Rural Reach to Additional Pediatric and Family Medicine Practices." Mercer University. Retrieved from <https://den.mercer.edu/kids-alliance-for-better-care-expands-its-rural-reach-to-additional-pediatric-and-family-medicine-practices/>

⁹⁵ Robinson, J., J. Screen, and C. R. Bayer. 2025, July 10. *Confronting the Crisis: Actions to Address Maternal Morbidity and Mortality Among Black Women in Rural Georgia*. Preventing Chronic Disease. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.5888/pcd22.250125>

⁹⁶ Get Georgia Reading. n.d. "Preterm Birth." Retrieved from <https://getgeorgiareading.org/data/relevant-data-points/preterm-birth/>

⁹⁷ Lutz, A. 2025, October 6. "Underemployment or Workforce Exits Depress Economic Activity in Communities and Reduce Family Incomes, KPMG Research Finds." Fortune. Retrieved from <https://fortune.com/2025/10/06/why-are-working-mothers-leaving-great-exit-kpmg-labor-force-participation/>

options for their future employees.⁹⁸

Downtowns are the center of social life in a community. They preserve a sense of identity and a connection to the past. They also provide a space for entrepreneurs and community leaders to meet, network, and grow.

Leader Capacity

To support resilience, one must first understand the unique pressures rural leaders face. They often live and work in communities where resources are scarce and infrastructure is underdeveloped. Rural leaders may have fewer opportunities for professional development or networking than their peers in urban and suburban communities.

FOCUSING ON RURAL ENGAGEMENT

The Georgia Partnership established the Rural Learning Network (RLN) to provide a platform for rural leaders to share best practices and network with their peers. Members represent key community sectors, such as early learning, education, health, housing, and social services. During monthly RLN meetings, experts present on relevant topics and identify key areas in which members can invest their time and influence.⁹⁹

Rural leaders who do not have systems of support available in their communities can access state and regional resources that deliver coaching and mentoring. The Georgia Department of Community Affairs, the Carl Vinson Institute of Government at the University of Georgia, and Resilient Georgia are but three examples of agencies and nonprofits that build regional capacity through professional development and networking supports.

CONNECTING THE DOTS: HOW STATE LEADERS CAN FOSTER RURAL TRANSFORMATION

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. Georgia Power's Community and Economic Development division supports cross-sector partnerships that help communities create talent development strategies.

⁹⁸ Economic Impact Catalyst. n.d. "Revitalizing Rural America: The Economic Power of Main Street Programming." Retrieved from <https://www.economicimpactcatalyst.com/blog/revitalizing-rural-america-the-economic-power-of-main-street-programming>

⁹⁹ Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. n.d. "Rural Learning Network." Retrieved from <https://gpee.org/rural-learning-network/>

¹⁰⁰ For more information on Georgia Power's Economic Development initiatives, visit <https://www.selectgeorgia.com/>

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

Local communities are best positioned to develop broad strategies that transform service delivery across several sectors. 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 expand access to education and workforce opportunities. The Georgia Partnership and EdQuest Coalition urge rural leaders to focus on immediate challenges while simultaneously creating long-term plans to transform personal well-being and community resilience.

| ACTION STEPS | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| GENERAL ASSEMBLY | Fund training and technical assistance hubs that pool resources from multiple agencies, including the Departments of Community Affairs, Economic Development, and Public Health. |
| STATE AGENCIES | Support efforts to evaluate local initiatives and determine which strategies merit scaling and which structures are best suited to foster ongoing local innovation. |
| COMMUNITY ADVOCATES AND NONPROFITS | Invest in rural leadership development through academies, fellowships, workshops, and networking events. |
| EMPLOYERS | Collaborate with K-12 and post-secondary institutions to create, revise, or expand high-demand career pathways aligned to regional needs. |



A MESSAGE FOR 2026 CANDIDATES

ISSUE OVERVIEW

Dear Candidate:

When you seek public office, you will craft a platform that identifies solutions to the education and workforce challenges confronting your community.

Your constituents — civic leaders, district superintendents, and employers, to name a few — will shape your perspective by sharing how state policy could support high-impact strategies.

The current uncertainty around federal government funding and oversight will complicate your mission. However, the potential transfer of policy authority from the federal government to states represents a unique opportunity for policymakers to recast priorities, evaluate investments, and adopt high-impact strategies.

The 2026 *EdQuest Georgia State Policy Plan* (2026 Plan) provides an affirmative vision for public education and workforce development that allows state leaders to make good on this opportunity.

Throughout 2026, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (Georgia Partnership) will disseminate policy resources that inform candidates and the public about education strategies and investments that support personal well-being, community resilience, and state economic security. In this Issue, the Georgia Partnership will make the case for why candidates like you can help Georgia succeed in an era of uncertainty and opportunity.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Effective state and community leadership is more critical than ever.

Georgia will have a new governor, lieutenant governor, and state attorney general starting in January 2027. Within the Georgia General Assembly, most of the senate leadership is running for higher office in 2026. Therefore, the state will lose significant institutional knowledge in that chamber. Georgia needs new leaders to step up and reshape strategies and investments.

A compelling, future-forward vision of what is possible could inspire a new generation of elected leaders.

Georgia needs an overarching vision that ensures all residents receive the resources and opportunities they need to succeed. The vision should address how state investments can expand access to quality early learning options, support teacher excellence, and promote high-value career pathways.

With a public agenda to guide and focus their decision-making, Georgia's leaders can rise above the current national negativity and polarizing rhetoric to move Georgia's public education and workforce systems forward.

The change initiative proposed by the EdQuest Coalition creates a framework for how leaders can encourage cross-sector productive 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.

Elected leaders are critical actors in promoting Georgians' quality of life.

When forming your policy positions, consider how Georgians progress through their life, from early stages of development with their families, to entering kindergarten, graduating high school, entering the world of work, and finding meaning in their chosen career and community.

This progression reflects a healthy economic lifecycle in which nurturing relationships, access to educational resources, and abundant social capital produce high quality of life.

Unfortunately, many Georgians do not experience such a straightforward path into adulthood. Expanding access to quality child care, affordable housing, and workforce training programs can increase the number of Georgians who launch into adulthood prepared to thrive — an outcome essential to the state's economic future. Georgia can execute on this vision by ensuring greater alignment between education, community, and economic development strategies.

FIVE POLICY PRIORITIES WITH BIPARTISAN APPEAL

1. Expanding access to affordable, high-quality early learning options
2. Integrating work-based learning and career-themed content into 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 risks¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Orth, T., and C. Bialik. 2024, August 16. "Finding Common Ground: 109 National Policy Proposals with Bipartisan Support." YouGov. Retrieved from <https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/50343-national-policy-proposals-with-bipartisan-support>

Connecting with Constituents

While negative messages could influence voter perceptions, the Georgia Partnership urges 2026 candidates to appeal to connect on a personal level with constituents and demonstrate how their platform will shape future opportunity.

MOVING GEORGIA FORWARD

A Call for Urgency and Shared Responsibility

As a candidate for public office, you demonstrate a commitment to bold leadership and achieving the outcomes that will improve quality of life for more Georgians.

The five priorities outlined in the 2026 *EdQuest Georgia State Plan* form the basis for policy reform. The state plan was developed by the Georgia Partnership and a coalition of state policymakers, advocates, and education leaders focusing on Georgia's greatest needs and opportunities.¹⁰² While the priorities are specific to Georgia, they are tightly aligned to the bipartisan policy priorities listed in the previous section. The timeline we set for building a strong foundation for advocacy and action guides our work and, hopefully, inspires yours.

| | |
|--|--|
| BIRTH-TO-8 STRATEGIES | Expand access to high-quality early care and learning options that leverage new state and corporate investments. |
| K-12 EDUCATION | Champion research-based strategies that improve student achievement and post-graduate outcomes, including often-overlooked factors such as attendance, engagement, and wellness. |
| POST-SECONDARY AND WORKFORCE READINESS | Leverage the "Top State for Talent" initiative to ensure more Georgians can achieve quality of life by earning credentials of value. |
| EDUCATOR RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION | Improve student achievement by focusing on the constellation of factors that support teacher growth and engagement, including professional autonomy, personal well-being, and strong school and district leadership. |
| BARRIERS TO LEARNING AND WELL-BEING | Address learning and wellness barriers by investing in shared infrastructure that allows for a multi-agency, cross-sector response to the factors that limit learning and wellness. |

Coalition members are ready to partner with you. We will show up. We will help you do your job more effectively. We will help you navigate competing priorities and forge consensus.

¹⁰² The EdQuest Coalition list can be found at <https://gpee.org/edquest-georgia/about-edquest-georgia/#coalition>

Let's make access to educational and economic opportunity the expectation, not the goal. Let's support local leaders who are doing the work to improve the quality of life of their neighbors. Let's embody what it takes to support personal well-being and community prosperity. The time to act is now. We stand ready to support you.

Sincerely,

The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education

SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR CORPORATE PARTNERS FOR THEIR GENEROUS SUPPORT

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Georgia Partnership
FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

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