CARES

DISTRICT CASE STUDY

STRENGTHENING SUPPORT FOR RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

PREPARED BY THE

Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education

Georgia Partnership
FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

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PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Between March 2020 and March 2021, Georgia was awarded $6.6 billion from the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund to operate schools safely during the Covid-19 pandemic and address students' academic and non-academic needs. The Georgia State Board of Education distributed 90% of these dollars ($5.9 billion) to local school districts and state-approved charter schools — also called local education agencies or LEAs. These LEAs received significant flexibility to use ESSER funds to help mitigate the adverse impacts of the global pandemic, accelerate learning, and improve student well-being.

In August 2021, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (Georgia Partnership) launched the CARES Impact Study, a multi-year research project designed to 1) understand how LEAs used ESSER funds; 2) identify best practices emerging from LEA efforts to accelerate student learning and foster student well-being; 3) and reveal common challenges LEAs have encountered as they carry out their plans.

Funded by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), the study has drawn on interviews with LEA leaders and other stakeholders and experts, as well as an annual survey of LEAs. Findings from previous surveys and interviews are available in the CARES Impact Study Baseline Report, Year-One Report, Year-Two Report, and Year-Three Report.

In March 2024, GaDOE commissioned the Georgia Partnership to produce three case studies that identify promising practices in three areas: closing learning gaps, improving student well-being, and strengthening the educator workforce. The first case study focused on closing learning gaps through literacy reform. The second case study focused on improving student well-being through robust support systems. The third case study focused on strategies to help more people enter and remain in the teaching profession. The Partnership received a second grant to produce this fourth case study, which focuses on identifying, understanding, and supporting the needs of rural school districts in Georgia.

The Georgia Partnership continues to advance our mission to inform and engage leaders to positively impact education and workforce readiness. The examples detailed in this case study can inform and engage leaders at the state and local levels about Georgia's education challenges and provide them with solutions that could improve education and economic outcomes for all Georgians.

Dr. Dana Rickman
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STRENGTHENING SUPPORT FOR GEORGIA'S RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

Georgia's rural school districts serve more than 255,000 students in communities from the Blue Ridge Mountains of north Georgia to the Okefenokee in the state's southeast corner.[1] Every rural district strives to match its services to the needs of its students, families, staff, and community. Brooks County Schools created the Early Learning Center to provide high-quality care for infants to three-year-olds in a community facing deep poverty. Gilmer County Schools partnered with Pilgrim's Pride to create a state-of-the-art research facility where students get hands-on experience exploring real-world questions about poultry science. Candler, Lumpkin, and Tattnall County Schools have developed creative approaches to help their paraprofessionals become classroom teachers.

Rural districts also face challenges that affect the educational experiences of their students and influence their academic success and well-being. While some challenges stem from state education policies and district operational capacity, many are rooted in broader concerns that stretch across rural communities and often constrain their economic growth and residents' well-being. Understanding these complex issues and developing effective responses is critical to ensure students in rural communities thrive in school, careers, and as engaged citizens.

Addressing the needs of rural districts is urgent. The population in many rural counties is falling, leading to enrollment declines and a shrinking pool of potential educators. Fewer rural Georgians have postsecondary credentials, which compounds the shortage of teachers and other educators in rural districts. Long distances and sparse populations impede the business and community partnerships that prepare students for success in school and out. Access to healthcare and mental health services is often fragmented or simply unavailable. Local funding sources are uneven and often tied to having a major highway crossing the county. Against this backdrop, educators in rural districts want their students to have the same opportunities and resources as students in Georgia's nonrural communities. As one rural superintendent said, "We have to make sure we are preparing every kid. We have to have every kid go out in that workforce and be a productive member

1 The number of students in rural districts is based on the 109 school districts and six state charter schools that are served by the Office of Rural Education and Innovation (REI) at the Georgia Department of Education. The Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center at Mercer University identifies 120 counties as rural; these counties enroll approximately 376,000 students.

of society who can raise their own family and participate in democracy. And that's what it's all about."

The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (Georgia Partnership) sought to identify and understand the needs of rural districts through interviews with district and community leaders and state experts. Participants highlighted the strengths of rural districts. Educators in rural communities know their students and families well, are adept at designing creative solutions, and can move quickly to try new strategies to support students. Interviewees also identified specific issues that undermine student success and well-being in rural districts:

1. **Gaps in fostering literacy development and strengthening literacy instruction.** Many low-income students in rural districts do not have the language-rich experiences in early childhood that foster literacy skills, leaving them significantly behind their peers when they enter school. Within K-12, recruiting coaches to support improving literacy instruction can be challenging for districts and Regional Education Service Agencies (RESAs).
2. **Escalating student mental health needs**. More students are experiencing mental health issues, which are often more complex and more difficult to resolve than in the past. Rural districts lack sufficient mental health staff to fully address student mental health needs.
3. **Constrained career and postsecondary opportunities**. While some rural districts offer robust opportunities for students to participate in career training, work-based learning and postsecondary courses, others cannot. These districts are limited by distance from postsecondary institutions, small student enrollments, and insufficient resources including lack of local partners. This leaves their students with few options to explore future career and postsecondary paths.
4. **Educator recruitment and retention challenges**. Many rural districts report difficulty recruiting teachers, principals and other educators. Retaining educators is also a common challenge as many opt to leave rural districts for higher pay, shorter commutes, and access to more affordable housing and childcare.
5. **Limited district capacity.** Small rural districts have the same responsibilities as large districts but far fewer people to complete them. Rural administrators also commonly fill multiple roles. This array of responsibilities leaves them stretched thin and hinders their ability to do each task effectively.
6. **Harmful effects of poverty**. Poverty affects students in every district, but it is more common in rural districts. Poverty undermines learning and well-being before

students enter school and throughout their K-12 experience. Poverty-related barriers to learning include lack of literacy development in early childhood, diminished opportunities for valuable non-school learning experiences that foster knowledge and a vision for their futures, food and housing insecurity, limited access to healthcare, and lack of transportation.

7. **Negative narratives about public schools**. A narrative describing public schools as failing and public school educators as focusing on social issues instead of effective teaching and learning has emerged in recent years. This narrative compromises the relationship between educators and parents and community members and contributes to difficulty recruiting individuals into the teaching profession.
8. **Funding does not match rural students' needs**. State funding falls short of ensuring that many rural districts can provide services leaders believe their students need to thrive, including sufficient mental health counselors, comprehensive course offerings across subject areas, and wraparound services for struggling families. Districts also bear significant costs for student transportation and health insurance, which continue to climb. Rural districts often generate far less in property and local sales tax revenue than nonrural districts, which can result in them spending a larger portion of funding on these costs.

These issues are part of broader challenges that affect many rural communities and can undermine student learning and well-being. They include:

- **Shrinking population**, which can diminish communities' ability to attract industry and lead to declining school enrollment.
- **Limited access to healthcare**, which can undermine children's well-being resulting in lower academic outcomes.
- **Limited access to high-quality childcare**, which can prevent parents from working and impede early learning experiences that lay the foundation for academic success.
- **Limited access to mental health services,** which can undermine children's well-being resulting in lower academic outcomes.
- **Lower levels of educational attainment among adults**, which is linked to lower academic outcomes among children and makes recruiting teachers locally more difficult.

The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) took a critical step to address the needs of rural districts by establishing the Office of Rural Education and Innovation (REI) in 2021. With federal pandemic relief funds, the REI team delivered vital support to rural

districts to help them address pandemic-related needs and take proactive steps including removing barriers to learning, boosting literacy instruction, and addressing the educator pipeline. The REI team continues to support rural districts though its federal pandemic funds have expired.

Georgia policymakers can take additional steps to improve support for rural districts and to enhance the learning opportunities and services they provide to students.

1. Provide a base amount of $150,000 to districts that receive state funding for economically disadvantaged students to ensure districts have sufficient funds to better meet the additional needs of these students.
2. Expand and sustain the Georgia Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Program by funding annual grants of $25,000 for up to 30 districts as well as a teacher apprenticeship coordinator position at GaDOE.
3. Create and fund a rural transportation grant program to expand rural students' access to career and postsecondary opportunities.
4. Increase access to high-quality childcare through the Child and Parent Services (CAPS) program to build a strong foundation in literacy among economically disadvantaged children.
5. Build district administrative capacity by allocating an additional central office position to small, low-wealth districts.
6. Sustain the Office of Rural Education and Innovation by funding its staff positions.

METHODOLOGY

This analysis is part of the CARES Impact Study, a multi-year project the Georgia Partnership launched in 2021 to understand how districts across the state support student learning and well-being as well as educators following the pandemic. The project is funded by the Georgia Department of Education and includes annual reports, three case studies, and this report, an analysis of the needs of rural districts.

Georgia Partnership consultants interviewed 21 individuals with deep knowledge about rural school districts including superintendents, executive directors of Regional Education Service Agencies (RESAs), community leaders, and GaDOE staff to develop this analysis. The interviews were conducted in spring 2025. These interviews were supplemented with material review and research on rural communities.

All interviewees generously gave their time and knowledge to this project, enabling the Georgia Partnership to learn about and share their stories with communities across the state. This analysis is not an evaluation. The report aims to capture the issues rural education leaders believe are critical to ensure rural students have full opportunities to succeed in school and in the workforce and participate fully in their communities after graduation.

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES IN RURAL GEORGIA

Rural districts share many positive traits including meaningful relationships between educators, students and families that often cross generations, willingness to collaborate, and creative problem-solving. However, rural educators also report significant challenges that often impede student success and well-being. Not every rural district experiences each challenge outlined below, but these challenges are common across districts.

Gaps in Fostering Literacy Development and Strengthening Literacy Instruction

Georgia's rural districts are committed to significantly improving student literacy and have embraced the practices outlined in the Georgia Early Literacy Act, which the General Assembly approved in 2023. The goal of the act is to ensure every student is a proficient reader by the end of third grade through the adoption of structured literacy, an approach to teaching reading that provides explicit and systematic instruction in foundational literacy skills. One hurdle to achieving this goal is the lack of language-rich experiences young children receive before entering schools.

> "We have kids that will [come], not one or two but maybe more than half sometimes... and they have never had a book read to them, and they're coming to us at four or five years old."
> -**RURAL SUPERINTENDENT**

The process of learning how to read begins at birth. A language-rich environment in which adults talk, sing, play games, and read books with infants and toddlers fosters brain development, builds vocabulary, and strengthens contextual knowledge across subject areas. Early oral language development creates the foundation for learning to read.

Many low-income young children in rural communities are not exposed to language-rich environments, according to district leaders, and they enter school without the knowledge

and abilities that serve as a springboard to reading. This early gap in literacy development puts these young students behind their peers and can persist for years. One district leader described many upper elementary students as having limited vocabularies, which makes reading comprehension more difficult despite the explicit instruction in comprehension teachers provide.

Some districts have taken steps to address early learning gaps by offering literacy-focused events, parent universities, and other activities for young children and their caregivers. Another district provides high quality childcare for infants and toddlers to help close the gap. However, these initiatives cannot reach all young children who would benefit from them.

Providing ongoing and effective support for teachers is a concern for some leaders. The shift to structured literacy is a significant one for teachers. Many were trained in a different approach to literacy instruction. Learning a new approach and consistently applying it in the classroom requires more than high-quality training in structured literacy. Teachers need ongoing guidance and support from instructional coaches with expertise in literacy and effective coaching practices.

Many rural leaders have hired instructional coaches to help teachers implement literacy reform and strengthen instruction in other subject areas. GaDOE is providing literacy coaches to elementary schools in the bottom 5%.[2] However, recruiting coaches with deep expertise in structured literacy can be difficult. Georgia's Regional Education Service Agencies (RESAs) also have literacy coaches who work with teachers and district-based coaches to support literacy reform. Several RESA leaders similarly described difficulty recruiting literacy coaches. Both district and RESA leaders noted that expanding the number of literacy coaches can mean pulling the teachers most skilled at literacy instruction out of the classroom. Their experience is valuable as coaches, but their absence from the classroom leaves a gap that can be difficult to fill.

2 Comprehensive School Improvement, or CSI, schools are those in the lowest performing 5% of schools according to the state's accountability system. They receive additional support from GaDOE that, beginning in the 2024-2025 school year, included a full-time literacy coach in identified elementary schools. There are currently 57 CSI elementary schools across the state.

Escalating Mental Health Needs

Rural leaders highlighted student mental health as a significant concern. Student mental health needs were growing before the pandemic, which then accelerated their escalation. They describe seeing these issues across more students, including young students, and more difficult behaviors and complex problems than prior to the pandemic. Some leaders also flagged mental health issues as a contributing factor to the large increase in student absenteeism.

> "Our counselors don't have enough time to juggle that [individualized support for career placement and college enrollment] when you've got four girls cutting themselves and this kid's got anxiety issues, and we're chasing down [absent students]… it's just not enough, not enough help."
> **-RURAL SUPERINTENDENT**

Fully meeting students' mental health and well-being needs is difficult because rural communities often lack a sufficient number of mental health professionals to serve children and adolescents. As one superintendent described, school counselors are stretched thin providing support to students experiencing mental health challenges, delivering lessons to foster student well-being and a positive school climate, and guiding all students in course selection and preparing for college and career after graduation.

Recruiting mental health professionals to rural communities is a challenge. Two district leaders had allocated funds for additional counselors but could not fill the positions. There were not local professionals available, and it is difficult to attract and retain mental health professionals from other regions in the state.

The Apex program, an initiative of the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) that supports partnerships between districts and community mental health providers, helps students access mental health care. However, district leaders report that recruiting and retaining mental health counselors in the Apex program has also been a challenge in some rural areas. Districts use tele-mental health where possible, which is a useful resource, but it cannot fully replace in-person support.

Constrained Career and Postsecondary Opportunities

Opportunities for students to explore and participate in career training and dual

enrollment are uneven across rural districts. Some districts have robust career, technical and agricultural education (CTAE) pathways, career academies, and dual enrollment options. These are facilitated by strong partnerships with institutions within the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) and the University System of Georgia (USG). District leaders noted the responsiveness and flexibility provided by TCSG and USG institutions in designing or adapting program offerings to accommodate the needs of districts. Local employers in many rural communities have also collaborated with districts to launch or strengthen CTAE pathways and provide work-based learning experiences. GaDOE also works with business and industry and local districts to create Pathway options that align with local workforce needs.

> "We've got to think about [the increased focus on Georgia's high-demand careers] from the lens of [my] county because, while most kids in larger systems are going to be able to relate that to something they've seen or heard, that's not going to be the case often times in a rural district… we have got to be able to think through how do we ensure that the kids we're talking to, they can actually see themselves in those roles."
> -**RURAL SUPERINTENDENT**

Postsecondary and career exploration opportunities are more limited in other rural districts. Some districts offer fewer CTAE pathways, particularly in high demand areas, because the cost of equipment and supplies exceeds districts' resources. Recruiting instructors for CTAE pathways is a common difficulty as potential candidates would take a significant pay cut to leave their industry and move into teaching.

Some districts do not have nearby businesses or other organizations they can partner with on CTAE pathways, career academies, or work-based learning, narrowing the range of opportunities they can offer their students. Often the district is the largest employer in a rural county. Where there are available career and postsecondary partners that offer work-based learning or dual enrollment, participation is often limited to students who can provide their own transportation.

Transportation is also a frequent impediment to dual enrollment. Some districts collaborate with postsecondary partners to provide dual enrollment courses in high schools, but other classes, particularly those that require special equipment or supplies, cannot easily be offered in high schools. A related and common challenge is having few students interested in particular dual enrollment courses, which makes the cost of

offering the courses prohibitively expensive.

Strained Educator Workforce

Rural districts face teacher and leader shortages that make consistently delivering high quality instruction and services in every classroom difficult.

While teacher shortages have lessened somewhat in recent years, they have not been eliminated. Specific shortage areas vary by district and include elementary education, special education, math, CTAE, and foreign languages. Several leaders described hiring more individuals with bachelor's degrees in fields outside of education. These individuals begin teaching with a provisional certificate under the requirement that they earn certification within three years, which they can attain by earning a master's degree in teaching or completing the Georgia Teacher Academy for Preparation and Pedagogy (GaTAPP) program, an alternative certification program offered by RESAs and some districts. While many of these individuals become skilled teachers with training and time, they require significant support from mentor teachers, school administrators, and district staff to master core components of instruction and classroom management. Some leave after discovering that teaching is not a good career fit.

Retaining teachers is also a challenge in many rural districts. Leaders recounted losing young teachers they recruited from other areas of the state because the teachers want to return to their home communities. They lose teachers to neighboring districts that have greater local revenue and can provide higher pay. Lack of affordable housing, which results in long commutes, and lack of childcare are also common reasons teachers change districts. This churn between districts is disruptive within schools and can harm student learning.

Districts often struggle to recruit staff for other positions, including speech language pathologists, occupational therapists, and teachers with specialized training such as those who work with deaf and hard of hearing students. Finding and retaining bus drivers is a widespread challenge, and several superintendents said attracting paraprofessionals is difficult when they can earn more "peeling potatoes" in a restaurant or working in other local businesses.

Recruiting principals is a growing problem for rural districts. Most educators earn an advanced degree in an education-related area, such as a master's degree in instructional

technology or reading education or a specialist degree in curriculum and instruction. Educators deepen their knowledge and skills by earning a graduate degree. They also receive a salary increase when they complete an advanced degrees unless their degree is in educational leadership.

Educators who earn an advanced degree in leadership, which is required to become an assistant principal or principal, do not receive a salary increase until they move into a leadership role. This is a change from previous state policy. Until 2010, educators received a salary increase for completing an advanced degree in leadership. However, many did not serve in leadership roles and, as a result, lawmakers required educators to be in a leadership role to receive the salary increase.

> "We've got these top-notch folks who decide, 'Oh, I can't get my degree in [leadership]. I'm going to get one in instructional technology or curriculum and instruction, or teacher leadership...' that has stifled our leadership pipeline."
> -**RURAL SUPERINTENDENT**

District leaders report that many educators, faced with tuition and the rising cost of living, are pursuing graduate degrees in non-leadership subjects. This has resulted in a smaller pool of candidates for the principalship.

Educators can become assistant principals or principals without an advanced leadership degree, but they must earn one in the role. Taking graduate courses while being a first-year assistant principal or principal is not easy and deters some potential leaders from pursuing the principalship.

Educators who become principals are often less experienced than those in earlier generations according to district leaders, and they need more support to master the complex responsibilities of the principalship.

Teachers are the most influential in-school factor in student achievement.[3] Principals have a similarly significant impact on student outcomes as well as school climate and teacher retention. Ensuring rural districts have effective principals as well as a strong pipeline of future school leaders is critical.

3 Levin, S. and Bradley, K. (2019). Understanding and Addressing Principal Turnover: A Review of the Research. Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Limited District Capacity

Operating a district of any size is a complex and demanding undertaking, one leaders in rural districts often carry out with administrative teams made up of only a few people. But having fewer students and fewer schools does not mean these administrators have fewer responsibilities than leaders in larger districts.

> "It is hard when you don't have enough heads to wear all these hats in a small district. That's the hardest thing."
> -**RURAL SUPERINTENDENT**

In many small rural districts, one person may be responsible for curriculum and instruction across all grade levels and content areas, while in larger districts, there are often administrators available to coordinate each content area and grade span. Having only one person managing all issues related to curriculum and instruction can make providing routine support to teachers, as well as designing and implementing improvement strategies difficult. Staff members with specific expertise in each core content area and its performance standards, curriculum, and most effective instructional strategies can offer targeted guidance to teachers. District leaders often lack the bandwidth to examine research on best practices, evaluate instructional strategies, write grants to garner funding for new initiatives, or complete similar tasks. This scenario often repeats across function areas.

Many administrators in small rural districts, including superintendents, fill multiple roles. In one district, the superintendent is also the technology director, and in another district, the superintendent also serves as the human resources director. Other examples include the associate superintendent who oversees human resources and curriculum and instruction for grades 6-12, while a colleague manages federal programs, special education, services to homeless students and more. CTAE directors are often assistant principals or still in the classroom teaching. Administrators also frequently jump into tasks outside their formal roles including developing curriculum, driving school buses, and filling out purchase orders. Working across functional areas can foster collaboration and creativity, but it also takes time away from administrators' core responsibilities.

Turnover in district administrative roles can have particularly difficult consequences in rural districts. Because one person is often responsible for an entire area, or areas, of work, his or her departure can be very disruptive as there are not others who understand and can readily continue the work. This also makes training a new person difficult,

particularly if the role requires detailed technical knowledge.

Harmful Effects of Poverty

Every Georgia district serves students who are economically disadvantaged, but the portion of low-income students is higher in many rural districts than in non-rural -- particularly in South Georgia. On average, 25% of children in rural Georgia counties are below the federal poverty level compared to 19% of children statewide. In 22 rural counties, more than one-third of children live below the poverty level. And there are many more children whose families are just above the poverty line. Children and families experiencing poverty face an array of challenges that can ripple through their lives and negatively affect learning and well-being.

Food and housing insecurity, common consequences of poverty, are both linked to lower academic performance.[4, 5] Rural superintendents described students who cope with food insecurity. Statewide, about 20% of children are food insecure, but that number is higher in many rural counties, especially in south and middle Georgia. Nearly 47% of children in Hancock County are food insecure, the highest in the state.[6] Lack of stable housing is another challenge highlighted by superintendents.

Some students have parents or other family members grappling with mental health issues including addiction, which is very disruptive for students. Coming to school ready to learn and engage in instructional activities is a steep challenge for students in these circumstances.

Lack of transportation is another common challenge for low-income families in rural areas and can prevent students and families from being involved in extracurricular activities or other events outside the normal school hours. If students miss the school bus, they often do not have another way to get to school. With ongoing gaps in rural broadband coverage, students cannot do schoolwork from home in these instances.

Not having reliable transportation is also a barrier to receiving healthcare, mental health,

4 Gallegos, D., Eivers, A., Sondergeld, P., and Pattinson, C. (2021). Food insecurity and child development: A state-of-the-art review. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8431639/pdf/ijerph-18-08990.pdf

5 Habitat for Humanity. How Does Housing Affect Children's Education? https://www.habitat.org/sites/default/files/documents/21-81776_RD_EvidenceBrief-6-Education_FASH-lores_1.pdf

6 Feeding America. (nd). 2023 Food Insecurity in Georgia. https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2023/child/georgia

and other support services for many low-income rural students and families. It is even more challenging in communities that do not have pediatricians or other local providers, which means traveling long distances to see a doctor if families go at all. Many do not. Some districts have established school-based health clinics to address this problem. However, clinics require a partnership with a healthcare provider that can deliver services, and some rural counties do not have providers available to fill this role.

> "I often think people, they fail because they don't have hope. They don't clearly see a vision. So overcoming the blurred vision of those students who are in poverty, who do not have the models to follow of people who [they're] related to, who live in [their] neighborhood, that truly, through education, are able to attain a better lifestyle."
> -**RURAL SUPERINTENDENT**

Low-income students face other, less visible but equally difficult challenges. As previously described, low-income students often do not have the same exposure to literacy-rich environments their middle- and upper-income peers do, which can impede language and reading development. Similarly, low-income students often are not exposed to experiences that build their knowledge of the world beyond the boundaries of their home and school, nurture executive functioning skills, or help them envision possibilities for their futures. District leaders described students who have never seen the ocean despite living 30 minutes away from it, gone swimming because there is no public pool in their county, or participated in common childhood experiences like youth sports or dance class because these activities cost too much or are not offered in their communities. Some students have never left their counties and struggle to imagine future possibilities for themselves and how to get there.

Districts aim to meet the basic needs of students living in poverty. They operate food programs during summer months, clothing closets and other wraparound services. District leaders describe teachers donating food, toiletries, and clothing to keep school pantries stocked for students. They stretch funds when possible to "roll the buses," taking students on field trips to museums, farms, businesses and other sites where students can see and learn about new places and ideas. Some districts have won federal grants to provide after-school and summer academic support and enrichment programs.

Some rural districts have strong community partners that help them fill these gaps. Community partners collaborate on food pantries and clothing closets, mentoring and

entrepreneur programs, and grant writing and fundraising to support specific initiatives. However, not all communities have organizations that districts can partner with, leaving districts to shoulder the responsibility.

While recognizing the importance of providing additional services that low-income students often need, several leaders noted the strain of doing so. They are not staffed or funded to meet these needs, and balancing their core work of teaching and learning with providing these critical services is difficult.

Negative Narrative about Public Schools

> "If all you see on the news is that your school is failing...why would you feel it's important to send your kid there?"
> -**RURAL SUPERINTENDENT**

District leaders repeatedly cited the negative narrative about public schools that has emerged in recent years as a challenge that diminishes support from parents and the broader community. In this narrative, public schools are characterized as failing without acknowledging poverty and other barriers to learning that lead to low student performance on state assessments. The narrative also questions educators' commitment to teaching students.

Recent national and state debates about private school vouchers compound this perception and dishearten educators. A district leader recounted the experience of one school, which serves many low-income students and had a poor score on the state's accountability system. The school's leaders and staff worked hard to analyze and improve instructional practices and made significant progress, enough to be recognized by GaDOE. Shortly after earning this recognition, the school was placed on the list of low-performing schools whose students are eligible for the Promise Scholarship voucher program. Being labeled failing after making hard-won progress was demoralizing for staff.

Rural leaders also said national debates about social issues in schools have spilled into their communities, often spread by social media, but these issues are not playing out in their schools. Educators focus on curriculum and instruction and building a positive school climate that fosters student engagement and learning. Yet the perception that educators are - or could be - pursuing social issues often leads to skepticism among parents and community members. One leader stated, "Teachers just feel like they are… under the microscope in a new and different way, and that, very often, parents walk in and from the

get-go are skeptical. It's almost like teachers need to prove that they really are working hard and want their children to thrive."

The negative narrative has contributed to teaching's declining appeal among young people, making it harder to recruit them into the field according to leaders. Teaching has become seen by some as a "lowly" profession, and students should aspire to more prestigious careers.

Funding that Does Not Match Rural Students' Needs

The financial circumstances of rural districts vary, but many cope with fiscal pressures that limit the services they provide students.

Current funding falls short of the staffing levels and learning opportunities that district leaders believe their students need to thrive academically, such as:

- having sufficient mental health professionals and academic coaches,
- providing comparable access to course offerings available in more affluent districts, and
- ensuring schools have the resources needed to provide wraparound services to children and families, particularly in districts where there are few local partners or access to philanthropic or other external funding sources.

> "By area code, you have more access than my kids. So how do you bring those opportunities? Because we struggle to make sure we're teaching as many sciences as we can. We struggle to teach more electives, more AP courses… We're just trying to get the core subjects taught so they can graduate. And CTAE is important."
> **-RURAL SUPERINTENDENT**

Rural districts also face high transportation costs. The state's contribution to the cost of student transportation is limited. In FY 2025, the state covered on average about 25% of the cost of transporting students to and from school. Districts picked up the rest of the tab, but rural districts have a higher per student cost. Rural districts spent on average $927 per FTE student on transportation in FY 2025 compared to non-rural districts, which spent approximately $808 per student.[7]

All districts are absorbing a hike of nearly 100% in the cost of health insurance

7 Rural districts are defined as those served by the Office of Rural Education and Innovation at the Georgia Department of Education.

for non-certified staff between FY 2023 and FY 2026. Non-certified staff include paraprofessionals, custodians, bus drivers, and administrative assistants. At the FY 2026 annual price tag of $22,620 per person, the cost of providing these valued employees health insurance sometimes exceeds their salaries. Until 2012, the state contributed to the cost of health insurance for non-certified staff, but the cost is now covered fully by districts.

Financing construction and other capital costs is another challenge for many rural districts. Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax for Education (ESPLOST), a one-cent local sales tax approved by voters, is a primary source of funding school construction, renovation, capital equipment or debt service on bonds issues for these purposes. Rural districts typically generate less in ESPLOST revenue than urban districts.[8] This hampers their ability to build new facilities and repair and update existing ones. Several rural superintendents reported their districts are building tracks and athletic fields, the first their districts have had. Until now, students have been bussed to neighboring districts to practice on their fields.

Community Challenges in Rural Georgia

The challenges education leaders in rural communities describe are bigger than school boundaries. They are challenges that ripple across rural Georgia and include:

- Shrinking population
- Limited access to healthcare
- Limited access to childcare
- Limited access to mental health services
- Lower levels of educational attainment

Beyond their community-wide impact, each issue affects student learning and often constrains their academic success and well-being.

8 Rubenstein, R., and Warner, N. (2019). Georgia's Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax for Education: Review of Trends and Policy Implications. Center for State and Local Finance, Georgia State University. https://cslf.gsu.edu/files/2019/04/cslf1906.pdf

Shrinking Population

Between 2010 and 2020, the population in 67 of Georgia's counties declined.[9] All but one of these counties are rural, and most are in middle and south Georgia. Population loss in Georgia's rural counties is driven by the state's falling birth rate, which aligns with national trends, and outmigration. Most rural counties in north Georgia saw stable or growing populations during this period. These patterns are expected to persist with rural districts primarily in the middle and south continuing to lose population while those in north Georgia and in coastal regions likely to see growth.[10] Losing population means there are fewer workers and customers for local businesses and a shrinking tax base to maintain public services, including education.

Population loss also leads to falling enrollment in public schools in many rural communities. Total full-time equivalent student enrollment declined 5.8% on average between 2015 and 2024[11] in rural districts.[12] Some districts saw enrollment climb, but enrollment fell in most districts. In some, the enrollment loss was large—18 rural districts saw enrollment fall by 25% or more. Changes in kindergarten enrollment indicate this decline will likely accelerate in many counties.

Figure 1: Enrollment Changes, 2015-2024[13]

	% Change Total Enrollment	% Change Kindergarten Enrollment
State	-0.7%	-8.6%
Rural Districts	-5.8%	-9.4%
Non-rural Districts	0.3%	-8.4%

Kindergarten enrollment slid 25% or more in 21 rural districts during this period, including seven where kindergarten enrollment plunged by 40% or more.

9 GPEE analysis of Intercensal Estimates of the Resident Population for Counties: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2010 and Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for Counties: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2024, U.S. Census Bureau.
10 Tanner, D. (2021, September 1). Rural Georgia in Focus. [PowerPoint slides].
11 GPEE analysis of Student Enrollment by Grade Level (PK-12) for October 6, 2015 and October 1, 2024 data from the Georgia Department of Education.
12 Rural districts are defined here as the 109 traditional school districts and 6 state charter schools served by the Office of Rural Education and Innovation at the Georgia Department of Education.
13 GPEE analysis of Student Enrollment by Grade Level (PK-12) for October 6, 2015 and October 1, 2024 data from the Georgia Department of Education.

Enrollment decline has a financial impact on districts, which receive funding from the state on a per-FTE student basis. When fewer students enroll, districts receive less state funding. This decrease in state funding can be particularly difficult for districts that rely heavily on state funds. There may be fewer expenditures in some cost areas when there are fewer students, but operating costs—utilities, maintenance, safety, administration—are largely fixed. Operating costs may also climb, consuming any reductions in spending that may occur due to enrollment loss. As pressure on their budgets grow due to enrollment declines, districts may cut offerings to students — such as fewer elective or Advanced Placement courses — or eliminate staff positions.

Access to Healthcare

Accessing needed healthcare is not easy for many families in rural communities. One cause is widespread shortages of healthcare professionals. In 2024 across Georgia's rural counties:

- 63 counties did not have a pediatrician
- 82 counties did not have an obstetrician-gynecologist
- 10 counties did not have a physician[14]

Many rural counties also lack health care facilities. Fifty-three rural counties do not have a hospital,[15] and 63 do not have a rural health clinic.[16] Only 24 rural counties have obstetrical services.[17] This often means residents must travel long distances to receive care.

Barriers to health care such as these put children and youth at risk for poor academic outcomes. One example is the higher risk of pre-term birth among women who see healthcare providers infrequently or not at all during pregnancy.[18] Babies born prematurely are more likely to have lower scores on math and reading assessments

14 Georgia Board of Health Care Workforce. (2025). Georgia Counties without Primary Care/Core Practitioners.
15 State Office of Rural Health, Georgia Department of Public Health. (2025). Georgia Rural Counties with Rural Hospitals, Critical Access Hospitals, Rural Emergency Hospital, and Rural Counties without a Hospital. https://dch.georgia.gov/divisionsoffices/state-office-rural-health/sorh-maps-georgia
16 State Office of Rural Health, Georgia Department of Public Health. (2025). State of Georgia Rural Health Clinics. https://dch.georgia.gov/divisionsoffices/state-office-rural-health/sorh-maps-georgia
17 State Office of Rural Health, Georgia Department of Public Health. (2025). Georgia Counties Offering CON-Authorized Obstetrical Services. https://dch.georgia.gov/divisionsoffices/state-office-rural-health/sorh-maps-georgia
18 Holcomb, D., Pengetnze, Y., Steele, A. Karam, A., Spong, C., and Nelson, D.B. (2021). Geographic barriers to prenatal care access and their consequences. American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology MFM (5)3.

in school.[19] Lack of pediatricians is another risk factor for poor academic outcomes. Pediatricians can identify developmental delays early, which enables interventions to begin sooner, and catch other factors that can impede learning, such as vision and hearing problems. Children and youth in communities with few or no pediatricians are more likely to have lower achievement levels on third grade assessments than their peers with more pediatricians nearby.[20]

Access to Childcare

Families across Georgia frequently struggle to find high-quality childcare, and this is especially true in rural counties. A pre-pandemic analysis found that 41% of rural zip codes in the state were classified as childcare deserts where the number of children under age five is three times more than licensed childcare centers can serve.[21]

Not being able to find childcare can prevent rural parents from working and threaten their financial security. Lack of access to high-quality childcare can also diminish their children's opportunities to participate in engaging activities that help prepare them for school. Children who participate in high quality childcare and early learning experiences have higher levels of academic achievement and better adult outcomes. Too many rural children miss out on these experiences and enter school behind their classmates.

Access to Mental Health Services

The shortage of mental health professionals is not limited to the boundaries of rural schools. Most counties in Georgia, including every rural county, have a shortage of mental health professionals, making it difficult for children and youth experiencing mental health issues to get needed care.[22] Other barriers to accessing mental health support include lack of transportation, cost, lack of in-network providers, and lack of parent or caregiver time off.[23]

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19 McBryde, M., Fitzallen, G.C., Liley, H.G., Taylor, H.G., Bora, S. (2020). Academic outcomes of school-aged children born pre-term: A systematic review and meta-analysis. JAMA Network Open (3)4

20 Drescher, J. and Domingue, B.W. (2023). The distribution of child physicians and early academic achievement. Health Services Research (58)S2. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1475-6773.14188

21 Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (n.d.) Access to Georgia's Early Childhood Programs and Services Needs Assessment: Report 5. https://www.decal.ga.gov/documents/attachments/PDG_B-5_NEEDS_ASSESSMENT_REPORT-Section5_AccesstoGeorgiaEarlyChildhoodProgramsandServices.pdf

22 State Office of Rural Health, Georgia Department of Public Health. (n.d.). State of Georgia Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas. https://dch.georgia.gov/divisionsoffices/state-office-rural-health/sorh-maps-georgia

23 Voices for Georgia's Children. (n.d.) Challenges Facing the Child and Adolescent Behavioral Workforce. https://www.georgiavoices.org/_files/ugd/024d26_3729fb1d5f83449b9d6afb1a2dcdd9a6.pdf

Receiving care from mental health professionals is critical for students experiencing mental health challenges, which are linked to increased absenteeism, disruptive behavior, and dropping out.[24] With the shortage of mental health professionals across Georgia, school counselors, social workers, and psychologists are often the only resource students and families have.

Lower Levels of Educational Attainment

Rural Georgians have lower levels of educational attainment than those living in urban areas. In rural counties, 29% of residents have an associate's degree or higher compared to 42% of all Georgians.[25] Education and training beyond high school is increasingly important for rural communities to attract skilled jobs that offer family-sustaining wages. It is also important because higher levels of parental education are connected to higher levels of academic achievement among their children.[26] Research links higher parent education with an increased likelihood of parents fostering behaviors and environments that can promote academic success such as reading to children.[27]

Having a relatively small number of college graduates can also result in districts having a smaller pool of individuals they can recruit into the teaching profession, exacerbating their teacher shortages.

OFFICE OF RURAL EDUCATION AND INNOVATION: RESPONDING TO RURAL DISTRICTS' NEEDS

Using federal pandemic relief funds, GaDOE established the Office of Rural Education and Innovation (REI) in 2021 to bring targeted support to rural students, their families, and the educators that serve them in 109 rural school districts and six state charter schools in rural counties. State Superintendent Richard Woods, a veteran educator from Irwin County, set three priority areas for REI:

24 DeSocio, J., and Hootman, J. (2004). Children's mental health and school success. The Journal of School Nursing, (20)4

25 Georgia Chamber Foundation. (2024). The Future of Georgia's Rural Workforce: Q3 Quarterly Report 2024. https://www.gachamber.com/data/q3-quarterly-economic-report-2024-the-future-of-rural-georgias-workforce/

26 Davis-Kean, P.E. (2005). The influence of parent education and family income on child achievement: The indirect role of parental expectations and the home environment. Journal of Family Psychology, (19)2.

27 Dubrow, E.F., Box, P., & Huesmann, L.R. (2009). Long-term effects of Parents' Education on Children's Educational and Occupational Success. Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, (55)3.

1. *Prosper*. Ensure students have a strong foundation in academic skills and supports to succeed in school and remove barriers to learning.
2. *Connect*. Ensure students have access to technological devices and increase broadband availability.
3. *Thrive*. Expand student opportunities outside core content areas, strengthen the educator pipeline, and foster economic growth.

Dr. Bronwyn Ragan-Martin, who began her career as a classroom teacher in Randolph County and served as a classroom teacher and in multiple district roles in Early County before becoming superintendent there, was tapped to lead REI, and she pulled together a team of experienced rural educators to fulfill these priorities. The REI team relies on a guiding practice to drive their work: consistent and close communication with rural districts to identify their needs and design tailored responses.

REI team members began their work by surveying and visiting rural districts throughout the state and communicating closely with RESAs to determine districts' priority needs. Relying on federal pandemic relief funds, the REI team moved quickly to respond to districts' needs.

Technology

Although the pandemic was subsiding when REI launched, districts were still coping with its disruptions to school operations. Students and educators frequently needed to work from home but were stymied by a lack of broadband and devices. REI's technology specialist, Russell Paine, gathered information on resources for free internet and devices and shared his findings with district leaders, who often lack staff to track down information. He built partnerships with internet providers to distribute hotspots to districts that needed them to get students connected at home. The REI team also created a grant program that distributed $100,000 to rural districts to help them purchase devices or increase district capacity for students.

Student Well-being

With workforce disruptions across sectors during the pandemic, many families were squeezed financially and struggled to meet basic needs. To help fill these gaps, REI facilitated partnerships between foodbanks and districts to create food pantries, distribute food "backpacks" to ensure children had food over weekends, or support other

strategies tailored to individual communities to help ensure children did not go hungry.

REI also addressed students' unmet vision and hearing needs by partnering with healthcare providers and districts in two RESAs to identify students who had not had their vision and hearing screened, conduct the screenings, and provide follow up care to students who needed it.

Literacy

Coming out of the pandemic, rural districts wanted to train their teachers in effective instructional practices for students with dyslexia, but the training was costly. REI stepped in to cover the cost of three nationally recognized literacy training programs: LETRS, Orton-Gillingham and Wilson Reading. Districts could send several teachers to the trainings, which were offered at RESAs. With the passage of the Georgia Early Literacy Act, districts sought to expand the number of teachers they trained, so REI supported several more cohorts of teachers. Districts could send additional teachers at their own expenses.

With REI's funding combined with their own dollars, some rural districts trained all their K-3 teachers in structured literacy through one of the programs. REI also invested in advanced training in LETRS and Orton-Gillingham for literacy specialists so they could lead training sessions for teachers in their regions at a much lower cost. The team covered training for school administrators so they would know how to guide and support teachers implementing the new literacy instructional strategies.

Teacher and Leader Pipeline

To help address the teacher shortage, REI developed a Rural Paraprofessional to Teacher grant program, which provided reimbursements for tuitions and fees for paraprofessionals enrolled in undergraduate teacher preparation programs. Using federal pandemic relief funds, the program provided tuition reimbursements to 233 paraprofessionals.[28]

REI team members conducted over 100 interviews with paraprofessionals in rural districts across the state to identify barriers that prevent paraprofessionals from pursuing

28 The Georgia Department of Education also launched the Georgia Paraprofessional to Teacher Grant program, which provides $5,000 grants to paraprofessionals who have four-year degree to help them earn certification through the Georgia Teacher Academy for Preparation and Pedagogy, (GaTAPP), an alternative certification program.

and completing certification and develop solutions to reduce these barriers. The team also convened discussions with deans of colleges of education to share their findings and facilitate the development of certification programs designed for the unique needs of paraprofessionals.

Drawing on this work, REI won a $4 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor to establish the Georgia Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Program. The apprenticeship program creates a pathway for paraprofessionals to earn their degree and certification while continuing to work as paraprofessionals. Participating districts are linking the apprenticeship program to the education programs within their CTAE pathways—Teaching as a Profession and Early Childhood Education—to encourage students in those pathways to become paraprofessionals and enroll in the apprentice program. Any district can participate in the apprenticeship program, but grant funds are targeted to rural districts. Under the GaDOE framework, apprentices are matched with experienced teachers who serve as mentors throughout the program. Grant funds also help cover the cost of tuition and fees, which eases financial burdens for paraprofessionals.

To help new leaders in roles across districts—from principals to CTAE directors to curriculum directors and more—master and apply leadership skills, REI collaborated with the Office of School Improvement at GaDOE to develop and fund a leadership coaching program in partnership with the Georgia Association of Educational Leaders (GAEL). The GAEL program pairs new leaders with experienced and successful leaders who provide one-on-one executive coaching to them.

Career and Technical Education

REI collaborated with the Georgia Chamber of Commerce to establish the Rural Workforce Development grant program. The grant program had three broad priorities: strengthen alignment with business and industry needs; expand awareness of postsecondary and high-demand career opportunities; and increase entrepreneurial and work-based learning opportunities. Over 60 rural districts received grants of up to $50,000, which supported a variety of activities including teacher and staff externships, industry certifications for students, skills bootcamps, and investments in healthcare and manufacturing programs.

The REI team is piloting a new initiative to help small districts strengthen their career and postsecondary opportunities. In many small districts, CTAE directors hold other positions

such as assistant principal or teacher and can spend only a portion of their time designing and coordinating career and postsecondary opportunities. This can result in limited options and inconsistent support for students. REI has developed a framework and tools district CTAE staff can follow to expand resources and help students identify and explore potential careers and develop individualized plans to pursue career options.

Supporting At-Risk Students

REI provides support to completion schools, which serve students who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out of traditional high schools. These students may be behind academically, carry family responsibilities that interfere with school, experience social issues with peers, or face other circumstances that make traditional school settings a poor fit. With limited resources, it can be difficult for individual rural districts to provide the targeted interventions and flexible settings and schedules these students need. Completion schools provide alternative learning settings and wraparound supports to students across multiple districts within a designated region.

The REI team is an information resource for established completion schools and assists with the development of new ones. This entails connecting completion school leaders with GaDOE staff, helping them navigate required policies and procedures, and facilitating collaboration across districts.

Across all areas of work, the REI team strives to build connections between rural districts and to other units within GaDOE. The team member who leads REI's work in each area has built a state network of educators working in these areas. They organize regular virtual meetings to bring educators together to ask questions, share ideas and information, and brainstorm solutions to challenges. REI also hosts monthly virtual "office hours," which have rotating topics and are open to all educators.

REI team members are a resource for rural educators. Staff in rural districts have limited time to invest in researching best practices. They often turn to REI to track down information. Team members also connect educators working to resolve a particular challenge with educators in other rural districts who are tackling the same problem, enabling them to share ideas, strategies, and lessons learned.

REI serves as a conduit to other units within GaDOE for rural educators who are often unsure who to contact within the department regarding programs or questions. More

broadly, REI is a voice for rural districts within GaDOE. The REI team brings the rural perspective to program and policy discussions. To cite one example, team members highlighted the limited capacity many rural districts have to complete detailed grant proposals and the extensive reporting requirements that often come with grant funding for GaDOE colleagues. They were able to streamline proposal and reporting requirements, making it easier for small districts to apply for funding.

REI relies primarily on federal funds to support its staff and the work they do. With the expiration of federal pandemic relief funds in 2024, it cannot sustain all its activities to support rural districts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Provide a base amount of $150,000 to districts receiving state funding for economically disadvantaged students. The General Assembly took a valuable step by adding $15 million for economically disadvantaged students to the FY 2026 budget, the first time the state has provided funding to address the additional needs these students have.

   Districts and state commission charter schools receive this additional funding if 40% or more of their students' families participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or receive assistance through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. Under this criteria, 59 districts and 11 state charter schools receive poverty funding in FY 2026. The amount each district and charter school receives is based on their number of direct certification students.

   Half of the districts received less than $150,000 and of these, 22 received less than $100,000 and seven received less than $50,000. Taliaferro County Schools, which has 177 students, received the smallest amount: $13,625.

   The additional funds are helpful, but their reach in many districts is limited. To boost their impact, a base amount of $150,000 should be provided to eligible districts. This amount would enable districts to hire a staff member in a critical need area such as an intervention teacher, literacy coach, mental health counselor, social worker, or nurse. A larger base amount would also extend districts' ability to provide wraparound services such as year-round food and clothing programs, summer enrichment programs or other services so critical to students in poverty.

2. *Expand and sustain the Georgia Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Program*. Rural districts must develop programs to recruit and train prospective teachers from their own communities to address the teacher shortage. The apprenticeship program provides a seamless framework and process districts can implement to help their paraprofessionals and recent graduates become certified teachers. A federal grant made the program possible by providing funds to cover tuition, mentors, and other direct costs as well as a portion of the REI's cost to design and coordinate the program.

   To sustain and expand the apprenticeship program beyond the grant period, the state should establish a grant program that would provide $25,000 annually to 30 districts to cover tuition and other expenses for apprentices and pre-apprentices. The state should also fund an apprentice coordinator position at GaDOE.

   This recommendation aligns with the recommendations of the Georgia Roundtable for Strategic Educator Recruitment and Retention, which was convened by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission pursuant to SR 237 in the 2025 legislative session. Roundtable members include the state's education agencies, education associations, and the Georgia Partnership.

3. *Create and fund a rural transportation grant program to expand student access to career and postsecondary opportunities*. Lack of transportation is a significant barrier to participation in dual enrollment, work-based learning, and other career and postsecondary opportunities for students in many rural districts. Rural districts spend more on per-student transportation costs on average than urban districts and strain to cover additional transportation costs.

   The state previously provided grant funds to help districts provide transportation for students participating in dual enrollment. These funds were eliminated in FY 2018.

   A renewed and broadened commitment of $2 million annually to help rural districts cover transportation costs would expand students' access to valuable career and postsecondary opportunities.

4. *Increase access to high-quality childcare through the Childcare and Parent Services Program*. Many more economically disadvantaged children need access to the Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) program to reach the state's goal of all children reading

proficiently by the end of third grade. The CAPS program provides scholarships to some working families with low incomes to help cover costs at quality-rated childcare centers. The program serves about 50,000 children, approximately five percent of children from potentially income-eligible families.[29]

With an infusion of federal pandemic relief funds, the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), which operates the CAPS program, was able to increase the number of children served by CAPS to about 74,000. However, the relief funds expired in 2024, and the number of children served has declined to pre-pandemic levels.

The Georgia Council on Literacy recognized the importance of high-quality childcare and included increasing access to CAPS in the state's literacy plan. A significant step to improving literacy among students experiencing poverty and increasing their families' economic stability is returning the number children served by CAPS to 74,000.

5. *Build district administrative capacity*. Small rural districts typically have few central office administrators. Those administrators they have are stretched thin. They also tend to fill several roles at once, limiting their capacity to be effective in each.

   To expand capacity in small districts with low-property wealth, policymakers should increase the number of state-funded assistant superintendent positions from two to three in districts with fewer than 5,000 students and whose average per FTE student local revenue is below the state average. These positions can be deployed flexibly to fill administrative roles as needed to serve students more effectively.

6. *Invest in and sustain the Office of Rural Education and Innovation*. Since its launch in 2021, REI has been funded primarily with federal dollars. The array of investments it made in key areas including literacy reform, technology, CTAE and wraparound services was made possible by federal pandemic relief funds, which expired in 2024. To ensure REI can continue supporting Georgia's rural districts, particularly if there are changes in federal funding, the state should fund REI's staff positions.

29 Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students. (n.d.) Georgia's Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) Program: Helping Working Families Afford Child Care. https://geears.org/wp-content/uploads/Child-Care-One-Pager.pdf

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Prepared by Claire Suggs for
The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education