



Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education Forum
Wednesday August 11, 2010
Summary Report
(Updated 8/16/10)

Today's forum began with a welcome from Ann Cramer, Georgia Partnership Board Chair and IBM Executive, who expressed her gratitude for having the opportunity to serve in the educational arena. She remarked that we are at a precipice in the state of Georgia. There is a direct link between education and the economy, and Georgia will remain competitive as long as we continue to work on this connection.

Judy Agerton from AT&T also emphasized the important link between education and economics. She shared that whenever she speaks to youth, she tells them that education is the key to the rest of their lives. She demonstrated AT&T's commitment to this belief with a \$50,000 contribution to the Georgia Partnership. She encouraged all of the stakeholders in the audience to support the Georgia Partnership as well.

After a few brief remarks by Dr. Steve Dolinger, President of the Georgia Partnership, and a video highlighting last year's Annual Bus Trip, the policymakers panel discussion began. Donna Lowry, Education Reporter for 11Alive News, moderated the panel comprised of three candidates for state school superintendent and three education experts. The education experts included Susan Andrews, Superintendent of Muscogee County Schools; Daniel Shoy, Program Director of the East Lake Foundation; and Charles Tarbutton, Assistant Vice President of the Sandersville Railroad Company. The education experts posed several questions to the three state school superintendent candidates: Republican Candidate John Barge, Democratic Candidate Joe Martin, and Libertarian Candidate Kira Willis. The following highlights the candidates' responses to the moderator's and the expert panelists' questions.

What makes a successful relationship between the governor and the superintendent?

In response to this question, all three candidates emphasized the need to work collaboratively with the governor. Martin stated that the state superintendent must always be the chief advocate for education. Willis suggested that instead of pointing fingers and calling names, they need to build bridges and find out what they have in common. Barge insisted that they must discuss issues amicably.

What do you believe has been the most positive change to our state's education system over the past 5-10 years? And what is the greatest asset we have in this state to help us continue the work of improving our education system?

Barge responded that the greatest change in education in Georgia has been the revision of the curriculum to the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS). He acknowledged that there are some problems that need to be worked out, but it is still an important reform. In response to the second part of this question, Barge remarked that the greatest asset is teachers. He added that teachers are doing more than they have ever done with a lot less.

What role should Race to the Top (RTTT) and other competitive initiatives like it play in education reform?

Martin believes that Georgia needs to win Race to the Top (RTTT) and take advantage of the additional help that the federal government can provide. He expressed a need for those who will be affected by RTTT to support it. He also stated that adjustments need to be made in order for the major policy changes detailed in RTTT to be sustainable. Willis, on the other hand, does not express a financial or educational benefit of RTTT. She stated that RTTT is only 1 percent of Georgia's budget and even this small amount of money will not go to the students where it belongs. Willis also believes that RTTT polices teachers. Unlike Willis, Barge does not have an issue with the content of RTTT but he does raise concerns about possible intrusions on Georgia's decision-making autonomy.

How will each of the candidates address budget issues and what are their recommendations to state legislators?

Barge said that balancing the state budget without cuts is unrealistic. He suggested starting with cuts to non-critical projects in the state budget, reconsidering SPLOST dollars, looking for places of temporary flexibility, identifying alternative means for funding, and repairing funding that has been impaired. Martin stated that Georgia needs more revenue on a short-term basis. He argued that utilizing SPLOST funds is not a viable option. Instead, Georgia needs a blended mix of budget cuts and revenue adjustments. Willis stated that Georgia could save \$60 million a year by moving to biannual testing. She also suggested moving solely to national tests like the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) and eliminating testing in first and second grades.

Susan Andrews shared that her most difficult task as a superintendent was developing her local school system's budget. In light of this, she asked the candidates what their messages are to the school systems that are grappling with difficult fiscal conditions.

Martin believes that school systems are just trying to do what is best, but he is concerned about those districts cutting the number of school days and increasing class sizes. He argued that systems need to stop the furloughs because they are just a way to cut salaries. He did not necessarily advocate for tax increases, but he did suggest the need to reassess tax exemptions. Willis expressed empathy for teachers and declared that as state superintendent, she will take, without pay, double the highest number of furlough days given to teachers. Barge encouraged schools not to give up. He will set an example for school systems by streamlining everything that is done in the superintendent's department to cut expenses.

As a state, Georgia has seen substantial demographic changes over the past decade. Our public schools now serve a great diversity of students – urban and rural, low-income and non-low-income, multiple races and ethnicities. How do you propose to address gaps in achievement among these demographic groups? How do you propose to address student achievement among diverse student groups?

Because students are not the same in each part of Georgia, Willis argued that the state needs to allow communities to decide what is best for their students. Martin said that the true answer to this question is to focus on every child reading by the 3rd grade. He also advocated for increasing more dual enrollment, second chance schools, and ways to recognize the diverse needs of students. Barge said that teachers need training to reach students coming to high school who do not speak English and are also illiterate in their native languages. Admitting that he will probably depart from educational purists

on this next point, he argued for individualized instruction for students who either need special instruction or an accelerated learning environment. He also believes that students should not be constrained by seat time and should be allowed to move on to the next level after demonstrating proficiency in a subject area.

Most education stakeholders have been pleased to see our state's graduation rate increase over recent years. Yet from the standpoint of business leaders, it is not only important to improve our high school graduation rate, but to ensure that our youth are ready for college and work. How can the Department of Education help improve college access and workforce preparation for our students?

Barge advocated embracing the Work Ready initiative. He cited improved graduation rates in Bartow County as a result of focusing on work readiness among high school students. Martin promised to do his best to make dual-enrollment work. Willis suggested allowing different tracks, such as technical tracks or arts tracks, to meet students' individual needs.

Seventy-one percent of students in Georgia made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) this year. Is that good news or bad news? What should the take-away message be for our citizens?

Willis said that it is news, but she argued that the state simply lowered the scores needed to pass standardized exams, thereby lowering student expectations and making it easier for the state to make goals like AYP.

What is your commitment to charter schools?

Barge remarked that charter schools are wonderful; they offer the flexibility that a lot of school systems need. Martin also supports charter schools. He stated that they are a great way to increase parental involvement and they need to be a part of our public school environment. The host school system and its charter schools should have a good working relationship. Willis added that her belief is that charter schools get us one step closer to choice, and she is a proponent of school choice. She argues that we need to give our students and their parents and the communities the ability to choose where they go to school and how that school best fits their needs.

Research tells us that teacher effectiveness is the number one school-based factor contributing to students' success. What needs to be done to strengthen our teacher workforce and ensure that all students are being taught by an effective teacher? Would you support a system that links some portion of teacher compensation with student achievement?

Martin believes that as a teacher demonstrates proficiency based on a variety of measures of student achievement (not just standardized tests), the teacher should advance. Willis insisted that tying teacher pay to student achievement is not a good idea. Barge said that one of the first things that Georgia needs is a systematic teacher evaluation that is fair and equitable.

Closing Thoughts from Candidates

After a few questions from the audience on such topics as state employee salaries, the new math curriculum, and meeting the needs of Georgia's poor and minority populations, each candidate ended with some final thoughts, reiterating key points of their platform. Barge said that he envisions a system that creates opportunities for students. Martin shared that when he wakes up each morning, his focus

will be on literacy by the 3rd grade and making the most of student potential. Willis stated that her focus is on the ABC's of accountability, budget, and choice. Ann Cramer closed the forum by stating that the challenge for all of the stakeholders is to move out and make the state of Georgia the best for every child.