

NEW
THIS YEAR!
See Page 2

– Seventh Edition –

Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2011

What Georgia Must Do To Become A National Education Leader

1

Georgia's New
Leaders:
Where Will
They Take Us?

2

Continuing
Our Race
to the Top

3

Early Learning:
Quality and
Access for
Our Children

4

Confronting
Poverty:
A Dire Need

5

Eradicating
Gaps in
Student
Achievement

6

College & Career
Readiness:
Are We Getting
It Right?

7

Getting a
Handle on
School Choice

8

Scraping the
Barrel: Our
New School
Funding Model

9

Understanding
Teacher
Effectiveness

10

The Need for
Honest and
Accurate Data



GEORGIA PARTNERSHIP
FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION



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FEBRUARY 2011

The Top Ten Issues to Watch is an annual publication of the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education.
Past editions are available for download on our website, www.gpee.org.

This edition was researched and written by Susan Walker, Director of Policy and Research,
and Adrienne Goss, Research Assistant.

OUR MISSION

Inform and influence Georgia leaders through research and non-partisan advocacy
to impact education policies and practices for the improvement of student achievement.

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Introduction

Welcome to 2011. We have entered a new year, and many of us will honor the time-old traditions of reflecting on 2010 and resolving to give more, be better, act differently, or work smarter over the next twelve months. As I turned the page in my own calendar and contemplated not only my personal goals but those for the Georgia Partnership this year, I had an interesting thought. What if all of us who are stakeholders in public education stopped to reflect on the actions we took as advocates in the immediate past and consider the future aspirations we have for our state's system of schools? What would that look like?

Last year, did we pay attention as the General Assembly debated ways to address the budget shortfall? Did we weigh in by calling our own elected officials? Did we put our own children in school, ask questions about the curriculum being taught, and volunteer our time in the classroom? Did we head to the theater last year to view “Waiting for Superman” and contemplate its implications for Georgia? Did we go to the polls in November and cast an educated vote for state leaders and local officials?

And this year, will we commit to not just reading the news about schools and politics, but seeking active ways to be part of a vision for excellence? Will we learn new information about the issues that matter to us – whether that is children’s healthcare, school leadership, or state revenues – and share that knowledge with our personal networks? Will we seek out allies, engage in dialogue, visit new communities, and step outside our comfort zone to advocate for an excellent education for every child in the state of Georgia?

Whatever your own resolution, I hope you will use this publication as a resource. The *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2011* is the seventh in a series of annual reports profiling the education policy, legislative, and programmatic issues that will shape our public school system in the coming year. As in

previous editions, this latest *Top Ten* draws on current research, national trends, and state policy developments to identify 10 issues that will impact the work of educators and the outcomes of students in Georgia. The discussion of each issue is organized in three distinct sections, beginning with an issue overview that provides a simple introduction to the political urgency of the topic. Next we examine the significance of the topic, providing research findings and exploring the policy context of the issue. Lastly, we highlight what is next for Georgia, drawing attention to the imminent decisions facing our leaders and recommending action steps for our state. This year we are also introducing a new addition to our annual publication, the “Top Ten Indicators to Watch” (see page 2), which will allow us to continually track Georgia’s progress in key indicators that trace our state’s comparative success in moving children from birth to work.

Enjoy your reading and good luck with your education resolutions. Let us know what you are doing to improve education in Georgia; we’d love to hear from you.



Dr. Stephen D. Dolinger
President, Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education

TOP TEN INDICATORS TO WATCH: WHERE IS GEORGIA TODAY?

How does Georgia fare in producing excellent results for our citizens from birth through work?

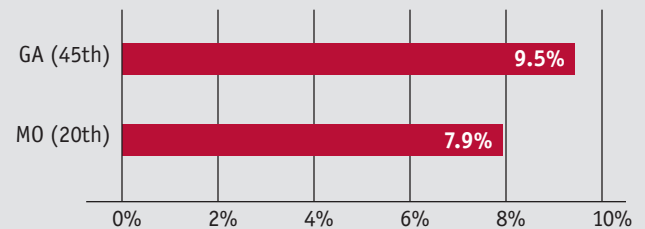
What additional progress is necessary to move our state into the top 20 among all states and make Georgia a national leader?

This new addition to the *Top Ten Issues to Watch* reveals where Georgia stands on 10 critical indicators of child well-being, educational attainment, and workforce readiness. Shown in each graph is a comparison of Georgia's current status and rank with those of the state currently ranked 20th. These data represent outcomes, and to drive change in outcomes will require focused, collaborative work on each of the 10 issues discussed in this publication. The Georgia Partnership is committed to tracking these 10 indicators over time and advocating for policies and practices that will enable our state to emerge as a national education leader.

Note: Each graph represents the most recent data available for that indicator. This compilation of Georgia education indicators is a derivative of earlier work done by the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence in Kentucky. The Georgia Partnership thanks them for their support.

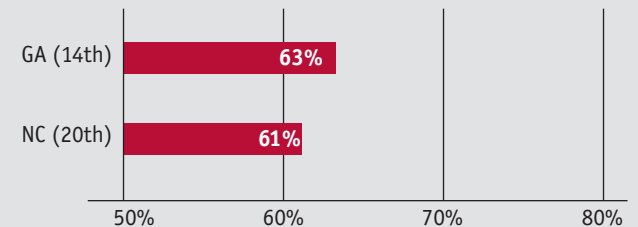
LOW-BIRTHWEIGHT BABIES 2007

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics.



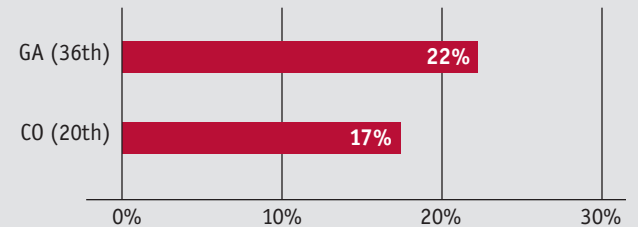
CHILDREN AGES 3 TO 5 ENROLLED IN EARLY EDUCATION 2008

Source: Population Reference Bureau, Analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey.



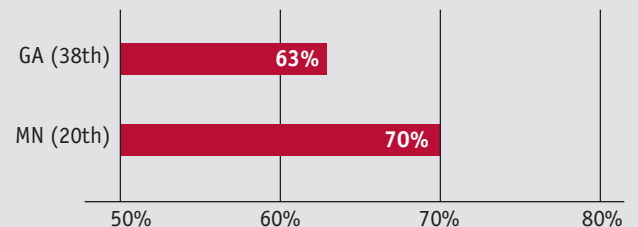
CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY 2009

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2009 American Community Survey. In 2009, a family of two adults and two children met poverty criteria if their annual income fell below \$21,756.



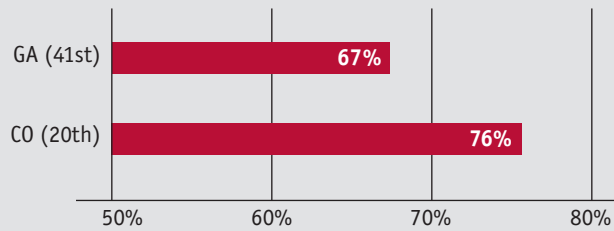
FOURTH GRADE READING PERFORMANCE 2009

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Education Progress, 2009. Percentages shown are students scoring at or above basic.



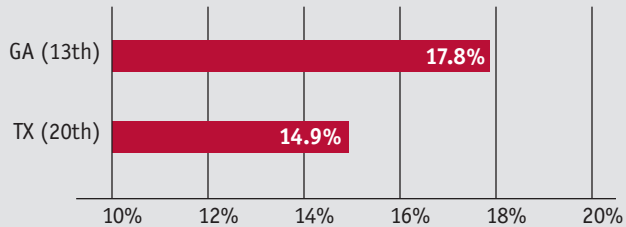
EIGHTH GRADE MATHEMATICS PERFORMANCE 2009

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Education Progress, 2009. Percentages shown are students scoring at or above basic.



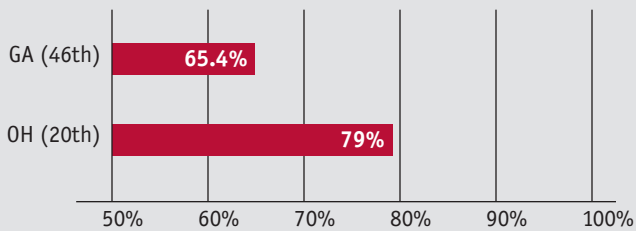
STUDENTS EARNING AP COLLEGE CREDIT IN HIGH SCHOOL 2009

Source: The College Board. February, 2010. Results show the percentage of the graduating class of 2009 scoring a 3 or higher on an AP exam during high school.



HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE 2008

Source: National Center for Education Statistics.



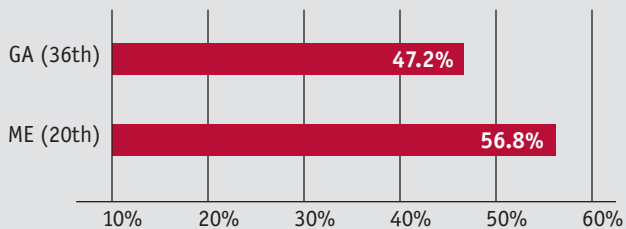
GRADUATION RATE FROM TWO-YEAR COLLEGES IN THREE YEARS 2006

Source: NCHES Information Center for Higher Education Policymaking and Analysis.



GRADUATION RATES FROM FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES IN SIX YEARS 2006

Source: NCHES Information Center for Higher Education Policymaking and Analysis.



ADULTS 25 AND OLDER WITH A BACHELOR'S DEGREE 2009

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2009 American Community Survey.



1

Georgia's New Leaders: Where Will They Take Us?

ISSUE OVERVIEW

Even Georgia residents who don't like politics could not steer clear of the campaign messages, robo-calls, televised debates, and vocal advocates that dominated every corner of the state throughout the majority of 2010. On the national stage, political pundits kept their eyes on Georgia as our Republican and Democrat Congressional candidates jockeyed for the votes that would help determine control of the U.S. House of Representatives. And here at home, Georgia's own commentators and politicians carefully tracked every development in the tension-filled races for governor, lieutenant governor, state superintendent of schools, and many other state and local offices.

After a long campaign and a prediction that gubernatorial candidates Nathan Deal and Roy Barnes would end up in a runoff, Georgia voters elected Deal, the former U.S. Representative, as the new state leader by a margin of 10 percentage points (Deal earned 53 percent of the vote as compared to Barnes's 43 percent). In his victory speech, Deal pledged to "show the rest of this nation what Georgia can do."

As other election results poured in, it quickly became clear that the Republican Party in Georgia had won control of state government by sweeping every major statewide office.¹ Dr. John Barge, an experienced educator and administrator most recently employed by Bartow County Schools, succeeded in winning the office of State Superintendent with a 54-42 vote against Democrat Joe Martin. In the final two months of the year, the newly elected leaders began assembling transition teams, identifying advisors, and preparing to take the helm of Georgia in 2011. What will it mean for our state? What have our new leaders promised to do in office, and how will they address the staggering issues of unemployment, revenue shortfalls, and education reform?

WHAT'S THE SIGNIFICANCE?

Our state's newly inaugurated governor and state superintendent of schools are far more than figure heads, particularly when it comes to public education. (See tables 1.1 and 1.2 for more information about the new leaders.) These men will play powerful and critical roles in the governance of our schools at a time when resources are scarcer than ever and demands for service are increasing.

Georgia's governance structure affords a substantial amount of authority to these elected leaders, particularly to the governor who holds appointment powers over multiple education agencies. As the new head of state, Deal has the power to:

- Appoint members of the State Board of Education;
- Appoint the commissioner of the Department of Early Care and Learning;

¹ Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "Georgia Election: GOP Rides Wave to Control Every Statewide Office." November 2, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.ajc.com>.

- Appoint members of the State Board of Technical and Adult Education (who then appoint the commissioner of the Technical College System of Georgia);
- Appoint the executive director of the Office of Student Achievement;
- Appoint the members of and the executive secretary of the Professional Standards Commission; and
- Appoint the members of the Board of Regents (who then select the chancellor of the University System of Georgia).

How the new governor uses his powers and the extent to which he makes education a priority for his office are yet to be seen. As Deal began naming members of his transition team in the post-election weeks, education advocates were speculating about the implications of his choices on the public school system. Deal pledged during his campaign to involve a broad base of stakeholders in the work of improving schools. In his words, "improving public education in Georgia begins with collaboration among all of those involved, including teachers and parents, local school administrators, school boards and state school officials."² But collaboration may be difficult to muster as Deal inherits a state facing a \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion shortfall in the current budget year.

An analysis of Deal's campaign statements regarding education reveals a few common themes: funding; flexibility; local control; and new and innovative approaches. Table 1.3 provides excerpts from his plans on these issues.

Just as Governor Deal is stepping into the state capitol amid change and fiscal uncertainty, new Superintendent of Schools John Barge also comes to his office at a very dynamic time for state education. The new leader of our K-12 public education system inherits two major initiatives with national importance: the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards and Georgia's Race to the Top grant implementation. Despite having been vocal about his opposition to these national and federal efforts (Barge has said that "constitutionally, the federal government has no role in education"), the new Superintendent has pledged to uphold the integrity of the state's intentions as set forth in the Race to the Top grant application. (For more about Race to the Top, see Issue 2 on page 8.)

A close read of John Barge's campaign statements suggests that the state could see a few shake-ups in education policies during Barge's tenure. Among the issues the new superintendent wants to tackle are Georgia's math curriculum, our system of student assessments, and the efficiency of the state education department.

TABLE 1.1. FAST FACTS ABOUT NATHAN DEAL, GEORGIA'S 82ND GOVERNOR

- Raised in Sandersville, Georgia; currently resides in Gainesville.
- Graduated from Mercer University in 1964 and Mercer Law School in 1966.
- First elected to the U.S. House in 1992.
- Is the second Republican to win the state's top post since the 19th century.
- Has worked as a lawyer, assistant district attorney, judge and member of the Georgia Senate from 1981-93, serving as president pro tem in his last term.
- Is a former Juvenile Court judge and Army veteran.

TABLE 1.2. FAST FACTS ABOUT JOHN BARGE, GEORGIA'S STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

- Born and raised in Cobb County, Georgia; attended Berry College in Rome, Georgia.
- Has a Master's degree and a Specialist's degree from the University of West Georgia and a doctoral degree from the University of Georgia.
- Has served as a high school English teacher, assistant principal and principal, and a district career and technical education director.
- Prior to assuming his role as Superintendent, was the Director of Secondary Curriculum & Instruction with the Bartow County School System.
- Served as Director of Career, Technical and Agricultural Education at the Georgia Department of Education in 2004-2005.

² Georgia School Boards Association. "Candidates' Views on Public Education: 2010 Edition."

TABLE 1.3. GOVERNOR NATHAN DEAL'S POSITIONS ON KEY EDUCATION ISSUES

Funding	<p>A focus on charter schools and career academies is a plan for the short term: "I think those are the kind of approaches we can do without a huge infusion of new dollars."</p> <p>"I will work to ensure public schools across our state are funded as fully as possible, prioritizing the needs in the classroom over the boardroom."</p> <p>"One of the things I have proposed early on is to appoint a group of individuals representative of every aspect of the public education system, also from the private employer and the parent communities, to take a very serious look at Quality Basic Education [the current funding mechanism for public schools]."</p>
Flexibility	<p>"Our state must provide significantly greater flexibility and local control to harness the power of teachers and local school administrators who know their students the best. Flexibility for schools that are accountable for student achievement will help produce students who are life-, college- and work-ready."</p>
Local Control	<p>"Creative new ways to achieve better outcomes are thwarted by 'top down' control by the state. Instead of serving as a roadblock to innovation, we must provide greater flexibility and local control to our schools."</p>
New and Innovative Approaches	<p>"We will allow students to progress at their own pace, not at a rate that is contingent upon meeting state-mandated 'seat time' requirements."</p>

Sources: Visser, S. "Deal, Barnes Debate Before Educators." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 16, 2010.; Georgia School Boards Association. *Candidates' Views on Education: 2010 Edition*; Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "Atlanta Forward: Nathan Deal, Republican for Governor." October 2010.

Table 1.4 presents some of Barge's thoughts and ideas for change. Joining Barge in the Department of Education will be many new senior staff members, several of whom left administrative posts in north Georgia's school systems to transition into their new roles.

TABLE 1.4. SUPERINTENDENT JOHN BARGE'S IDEAS FOR GEORGIA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

On the role of the Department of Education:

- "We have to learn to do more with less. This means that beginning at the State Department of Education we must get rid of waste by reallocating money so that it is spent directly on educating our children and reaches into the classrooms of Georgia rather than being spent on bureaucratic waste."

On standardized testing:

- "We must return to common sense in our assessing of students. We should not be testing in grades that are not directly required by the federal government. We have to move away from high-stakes testing that is threatening to harm our state's ability to properly educate our students."

On curriculum and instruction:

- "We need to return to a traditional math curriculum that is portable. We cannot continue to teach integrated math as it will only produce lower graduation rates. At the same time, we must return career, technical and agricultural education to its rightful place as a legitimate pathway to our single diploma."

Source: Georgia School Boards Association. *Candidates' Views on Education: 2010 Edition*.

ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

Even armed with excellent leadership skills and knowledgeable policy teams, our state's new leaders will face substantial challenges this year. Despite some positive signs that the recession is waning, Georgia's unemployment rate remains high and state revenues are still alarmingly low. In the realm of public education, federal dollars from the Race to the Top grant are flowing, and concerns over school board governance, the integrity of standardized testing, and accountability are increasing. From the Governor's Office, the Department of Education, the General Assembly, and local school boards, Georgia's citizens will expect the new leadership to tackle the tough issues while also continuing support for the programs and policies that have shown promise in recent years. Here are three recommendations for our recently elected officials.

First, our new leaders must make education a priority. Never before has the role of public schools as the great equalizer for all Americans been more apparent than now, in this continuing economic downturn. The investments our state makes now in quality education programs that carry our youth from birth to work will foretell Georgia's future place among its peers. Despite a grim budget outlook, our leaders cannot afford not to put excellence in education at the top of their to-do lists.

Second, our new leaders must stick with what is working in our public schools today. Too often education reforms change with the political winds, as each new governor or superintendent enters office ready to erase all vestiges of his predecessors and institute his own silver bullet solutions. But ensuring excellent educational opportunities for all of Georgia's children should not be a goal that swings on a political pendulum. While there is no shortage of challenges to tackle in our public schools – dropout rates, achievement gaps, unequal financial resources, etc. – there are also great successes in our state's recent past upon which to build. Georgia's children and families need to see a lasting commitment to existing policies such as the state's new curriculum, the single high school diploma, and state-funded pre-kindergarten.

Lastly, our new leaders must ensure that the policymaking process is open, transparent, and truly involves all stakeholders. Education impacts every single resident, community, and business in this state. By encouraging constituents to be engaged in the democratic process, by seeking input and listening to the concerns of teachers, parents, students, and businesses, and by improving the broad communication of key education policies and practices, our new leaders will better serve the citizens who elected them and who depend on them to carry our state forward during these challenging times.

2

Continuing Our Race to the Top

ISSUE OVERVIEW

In late summer 2010, as schools across the state were gearing up for the start of the new academic year, a host of education officials and policy leaders in Georgia were celebrating – and it was not just back-to-school enthusiasm. On August 24, the state’s leaders learned that Georgia had been selected as a winner by the U.S. Department of Education for the second round of Race to the Top grants. Our state will receive \$400 million over four years to implement its detailed plan for public school improvement. The award places Georgia in the company of 11 other states and the District of Columbia, all of which are receiving grant funds to actualize reform plans in four primary areas: standards and assessments; teacher and leader effectiveness; robust data systems; and the turning around of low-achieving schools. After a long and arduous application process that involved dozens of key education and thought leaders (and entailed the revision of Georgia’s original application, which was not funded during the first round of the competition), our state is now moving ahead with the real work of bringing the elaborate plan to life. And from members of the federal administration to national news reporters, from state advocacy groups to local school personnel, the entire education world is watching this new leg of the race.

WHAT’S THE SIGNIFICANCE?

Soon after taking office, President Barack Obama signed into law the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), legislation that provided an infusion of funds into the economy to stimulate recovery from the recession, support job creation, and invest in critical sectors such as education. In addition to providing federal aid to shore up state education budgets and increase resources for existing federal programs such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Title I services for low-income students, the ARRA established the \$4.35 billion Race to the Top (RTTT) fund that is the largest amount of discretionary funding for K-12 education reform in the history of the United States.³

The RTTT fund is a competitive grant program designed to encourage and reward states that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform and

implementing ambitious plans in four core education reform areas:

- Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace;
- Building data systems that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals how to improve instruction;
- Recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most; and
- Turning around their lowest-performing schools.

Georgia’s original RTTT application was submitted in January 2010 as part of the first phase of the competition. The application was prepared through a partnership between the Governor’s Office, the Office

³ Excerpted from the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education’s Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2010. Please see the 2010 publication (available at www.gpee.org) for additional background information on Race to the Top.

of Student Achievement (OSA), the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), and education stakeholders. Four working groups and a fifth critical feedback team consisting of teachers, principals, superintendents, higher education faculty, non-profit and informal education organizations, state policy makers, and members of the business and philanthropic communities developed the ideas for inclusion in the state’s application.⁴

Though our state received positive feedback on the 200-page application, Georgia was not a winner in the initial round of grant awards. But the efforts by state leaders to revise and resubmit the application in June for the second phase of competition proved successful, and Georgia was named a winner of \$400 million to implement its ambitious plan. The funds will allow our state and the 26 partner school systems listed in table 2.1 to work toward the vision set forth in the application: “To equip all Georgia students, through effective teachers and leaders and through creating the right conditions in Georgia’s schools and classrooms, with the knowledge and skills to empower them to 1) graduate from high school, 2) be successful in college and/or professional careers, and 3) be competitive with their peers throughout the United States and the world.”⁵

TABLE 2.1. SCHOOL SYSTEM PARTNERS IN GEORGIA’S RACE TO THE TOP PLAN

Georgia is partnering with 26 school systems around the state. Half of the RTTT funds will go directly to partnering school districts via their Title I formula to implement Georgia’s RTTT plan. These districts make up 40 percent of public school students, 46 percent of Georgia’s students in poverty, 53 percent of Georgia’s African American students, 48 percent of Hispanic students, and 68 percent of the state’s lowest achieving schools.

Atlanta City	DeKalb County	Pulaski County
Ben Hill County	Dougherty County	Rabun County
Bibb County	Gainesville City	Richmond County
Burke County	Gwinnett County	Rockdale County
Carrollton City	Hall County	Spalding County
Chatham County	Henry County	Treutlen County
Cherokee County	Meriwether County	Valdosta City
Clayton County	Muscogee County	White County
Dade County	Peach County	

Source: Georgia Department of Education.

Georgia’s leaders took an important first step toward turning the RTTT plan into reality in late 2010 when a dedicated implementation director was hired to oversee the grant program for the state. Detailed plans have been made for each of the core reform areas and teams of personnel tasked with carrying them out. Shown in table 2.2 are the highlights of Georgia’s work, much of which is already underway.

In addition to the plans outlined in table 2.2, there are three additional components to Georgia’s overall RTTT plan. To strengthen the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) instruction in our schools, Georgia will require science as a second Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) indicator for all elementary and middle schools. Currently, the AYP process allows elementary and middle schools to choose their second indicator from a menu of choices including attendance rate, performance on writing, science, and social studies assessments, and other measures.

To incentivize innovations in teaching and learning, Georgia will also use RTTT funds to establish an Innovation Fund which will be available for participating school systems to launch innovative partnerships with higher education, informal education and non-profit organizations, or businesses for the purpose of increasing student achievement.

Lastly, a portion of the state’s RTTT monies will be used to provide targeted technical assistance to specific Georgia pre-kindergarten classrooms, help with student transitions to school, and participate in the national Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Grade Level Reading Initiative.

⁴ Georgia Department of Education. “Georgia Wins Race to the Top (Press Release).” August 24, 2010.

⁵ Georgia Department of Education. “Georgia’s Race to the Top Plan.” Retrieved from <http://gadoe.org/RT3.aspx>.

TABLE 2.2. KEY ELEMENTS OF GEORGIA'S RACE TO THE TOP PLAN

Reform Area	Scope of Work
Standards and Assessments	<p><i>Led by the GaDOE Office of Standards, Instruction and Assessment.</i></p> <p>The state will provide face-to-face training to teachers on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) through regional meetings, develop new formative and benchmark assessments to provide teachers with critical feedback so they may improve their instruction throughout the course of the school year, and create proficiency-based pathways for Georgia students to waive seat-time requirements and advance upon mastery of subject material.</p> <p>Georgia has also applied for additional RTTT funds as part of an assessment consortium to develop a common assessment aligned to the CCSS. These new assessments will be available to all states in the 2014-15 school year and will allow the state to measure the “college and career readiness” of Georgia students compared to their peers across the nation and globe.</p>
Great Teachers and Leaders	<p><i>Led by GaDOE’s Office of Educator Support and Innovation and the Office of Student Achievement.</i></p> <p>Georgia will put in place a common evaluation system that will allow the state to ensure consistency and comparability across districts, based on a common definition of teacher/leader effectiveness. To align Georgia’s evaluation system with the state’s primary goal of student learning, Georgia will create a single Teacher Effectiveness Measure (TEM), Leader Effectiveness Measure (LEM) (for principals and assistant principals), and District Effectiveness Measure (DEM).</p> <p>TEM/LEM will be used to inform all talent management decisions: professional development, compensation, promotion, retention, recertification, interventions, and dismissals and effective teachers will have higher earning potential under this system.</p> <p>To increase the pipeline of effective teachers in high-need schools and hard-to-staff subject areas, Georgia is entering into partnerships with external organizations with proven records of recruiting and training effective teachers in shortage areas: Teach for America (TFA) and The New Teacher Project (TNTP).</p>
Data Systems to Support Instruction	<p><i>Led by a newly created position at OSA, the State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) Director.</i></p> <p>Georgia will use RTTT funds to complete the longitudinal data system. Through improvements to the system, teachers will be able to use real-time student-level performance data to inform and improve their instruction.</p>
Turning Around Low-Achieving Schools	<p><i>Led by a new office, the State Office of School Turnaround, at GaDOE.</i></p> <p>Georgia will employ one of four intervention models, as prescribed through RTTT, in turning around the state’s lowest achieving schools: turnaround (replace principal and remove 50 percent of staff); conversion to charter management organization or education management organization; school closure; or transformation (combination of aforementioned strategies).</p> <p>The appropriate model for each school will be selected by the state in collaboration with the local district. Additionally, participating districts must agree to a series of actions including state-level diagnostics of school, institution of common planning time for teachers, and use of graduation and math coaches.</p>

Source: Georgia Department of Education.

ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

Despite the intentions of the RTTT grant competition – to spur innovation and boost student outcomes – the program has not been without controversy. From the beginning of the race, critics across the country have complained that the process was flawed and too opaque. Fifteen states, including Georgia, were chosen by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to receive in-kind technical assistance with their applications from renowned consulting firms – a move that some saw as introducing bias from the very beginnings of the grant process. And at its most fundamental level, the RTTT competition has fueled debates about the federal role in public education, a system seen by many as solely the responsibility of state and local policymakers.

While the debates may linger, the federal funds have begun to flow and Georgia's leaders must turn their attention to the implementation, oversight, and accountability of this mammoth educational grant. Maintaining the integrity and momentum of Georgia's RTTT application will be the first hurdle to overcome as many of the individuals who were instrumental in laying the groundwork for the grant have been replaced by new state level leaders, some of whom have been vocal in their criticism of the grant program. Critical to maintaining the integrity and momentum of the grant is the provision of adequate professional training for teachers and leaders on all aspects of the RTTT plan. In the immediate future and throughout the life of the grant, communication with all stakeholders must be a top priority of the RTTT implementation team. With such a sizeable infusion of money that will be used for some truly ground-breaking reform efforts, our state's leaders must be open and transparent about the use of funds, the progress of implementation, and the resulting impacts on our students, teachers, and schools.

3

Early Learning: Quality and Access for Our Children

ISSUE OVERVIEW

For decades, scientific research has shown us that investments in quality early childhood care and education pay large dividends for individuals and communities. Nobel-winning economist James Heckman, one of the most renowned experts on this subject, has researched and written extensively on the importance of investing in children in their early years, and his succinct conclusion is this: “Early investment produces the greatest returns in human capital.” Heckman’s research has found that “early nurturing, learning experiences and physical health from ages zero to five greatly impact success or failure in society. The most economically efficient time to develop skills and social abilities is in the very early years when developmental education is most effective.”⁶

Today, Heckman’s message is echoing louder than ever before, as business partnerships, national research centers, and advocacy groups across the country are increasing their efforts to raise awareness of and boost supports for quality early care and learning programs. In Georgia, education and political leaders have had cause to celebrate since 1995, when our state became the first in the country to offer universal pre-kindergarten to four-year-olds.

Today, however, current events are signaling the need for Georgia’s policymakers to reconsider our state’s commitment to early childhood care and educational programs. In 2010, Georgia ranked 42nd among all states for overall child well being. A 2009 study by researchers at the University of North Carolina’s Child Development Institute found that on average, center-based childcare across Georgia was of “low” to “medium” quality. And fiscal researchers in the state are predicting that in the very near future, revenues from the Georgia Lottery (which funds the state pre-kindergarten program) will not be able to keep pace with the demands for services. How will Georgia’s leaders confront these challenges and ensure that our youngest children become a top priority for the state?

WHAT’S THE SIGNIFICANCE?

The Georgia Partnership has long championed the need for investments in early childhood programs. As stated in our 2010 release *The Economics of Education*:

“The early years of a child’s life indelibly shape his or her future. During the critical time between birth and age five, when the brain undergoes its most rapid

development, children learn more than during any other five-year period of life. Early experiences influence the development of children’s cognitive and social skills and behavioral and emotional health. The first years of life largely determine a child’s readiness for school and may be predictive of future academic success.”⁷

⁶ The Heckman Equation. Retrieved from <http://www.heckmanequation.org>.

⁷ Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. “The Economics of Education: 3rd Edition.” May 2010.

Fortunately, an abundance of research – including that of James Heckman – has shown us what works for young children. High quality early education experiences strengthen the development of language, mathematics, and social skills that children need in order to be school-ready by age five. A review of eight successful early childhood programs found numerous positive effects, both immediate and long-term, for participating children, which include:

- Improved language, listening, word analysis, vocabulary, and math skills;
- Higher reading and math achievement from 6-15 years of age;
- Lower rates of grade retention and special education placement;
- Decreased likelihood of dropping out of school; and
- Decreased likelihood of involvement in the juvenile justice system.⁸

Beyond producing academic benefits for individual students, quality early childhood programs boost economies by generating future revenue and producing productive and valuable citizens. As a recent policy brief published by the Partnership for America’s Economic Success articulates, states cannot afford disinvestment in our children. Consider the following points:

- Quality home visiting and parent mentoring programs for at-risk families can decrease by nearly half the incidence of low-birthweight births, saving \$28,000–\$40,000 for each one averted.⁹
- By cutting child abuse and neglect up to 80 percent, quality parent mentoring programs can save states collectively some of the \$33 billion in annual hospitalization, legal, and other costs.¹⁰
- Graduates of the Chicago Child-Parent Centers had 35 percent less grade retention and 26 percent less special education placement than their third-grade peers. They also experienced 30 percent less child abuse and neglect.¹¹
- Parents whose children are in reliable, quality care work more productively and rely less on public assistance.¹²

Because of Georgia’s original commitment to provide voluntary state-funded pre-kindergarten to all families, our state remains in high ranking among other states for access to programs for four-year-olds. Nearly 58 percent of Georgia’s four-year-olds are served in this program. During the 2009-10 school year, 81,000 children enrolled in a public pre-kindergarten program.

Despite growth in the number of states offering state-funded pre-kindergarten for three-year-olds (25 states currently have such a program), Georgia has not extended its program to this younger age group. Instead, many of Georgia’s younger children are served in other settings, including approximately 3,000 child care learning centers, 250 group day care homes, 4,500 family day care homes and approximately 2,000 informal care providers. Tables 3.1 and 3.2 provide additional statistics and rankings of Georgia’s state-funded early education programs.

TABLE 3.1. RANKINGS OF GEORGIA’S PRE-KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM

Program Element (in 2008-09 school year)	
Percent of 4-year-olds enrolled in state pre-kindergarten	53.4% (Ranked 3rd among 50 states)
State \$ per child enrolled in pre-kindergarten	\$4,234 (Ranked 17th among 50 states)
Percent change in enrollment of 4-year-olds from 2001-02 to 2008-09	23.1%

Source: The National Institute for Early Education Research. “The State of Preschool 2009.”

TABLE 3.2. STATISTICS OF GEORGIA’S EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Enrollment of 3- and 4-year-olds in State Pre-Kindergarten, Preschool Special Education, and Federal and State Head Start

3-year-olds	
Number Enrolled	Percent of State Population
14,053	9.6%
4-year-olds	
Number Enrolled	Percent of State Population
89,527	61.1%

Source: The National Institute for Early Education Research. “The State of Preschool 2009.”

8 University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development. “Investing Today for Tomorrow: The Costs and Benefits of Early Childhood Care and Education.” June 2003.

9 Partnership for America’s Economic Success. “The Costs of Disinvestment: Why States Can’t Afford to Cut Smart Early Childhood Programs.” Issue Brief #13. April 2010.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

Despite Georgia’s success over the last 15 years in building and sustaining a pre-kindergarten program that reaches a substantial proportion of our children, the conversation about early education in 2011 must extend beyond enrollment. Access to state pre-kindergarten, or any other publicly funded early education program, is of significant value to children and the nation only if those programs are educationally effective. Unfortunately, quality and effectiveness remain areas for improvement in many early education settings: “even when children do have access to preschool, research shows that quality is highly varied, with many programs providing mediocre instruction that is not tailored to the natural curiosities and motivations of young children.”¹³ (See table 3.3 for examples of what quality early education entails.)

In Georgia, there is ample work to be done by policymakers, practitioners, and advocates to ensure that the quality of our early learning programs matches the high marks we receive for pre-kindergarten access. Recently, the state’s Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) commissioned a statewide study of quality across licensed child care centers and Georgia’s pre-kindergarten programs. Researchers from the FPG Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill collected data from a representative sample of 320 classrooms in 173 programs. Among the findings of the study are the following:^{14, 15}

- On average, center-based care across Georgia was of “low” to “medium” quality. Specifically, only 5 percent of infant/toddler classrooms and 5 percent of preschool classrooms were rated as high quality.
- The quality of care for infants and toddlers was lower than the quality of care for preschoolers: 35 percent of preschool classrooms and 67 percent of infant/toddler classrooms were rated as having low quality.
- In Georgia’s pre-kindergarten classrooms, the quality of emotional support and classroom organization was generally “high”; whereas the quality of instructional support was generally “low.”

Recognizing the gravity of the study’s findings, DECAL is making substantial investments to improve the quality of our early care and education centers. The state agency is raising core health and safety licensing requirements; raising the credentialing requirements of child care providers, including directors, teachers and assistant teachers; providing numerous incentives to help providers achieve higher levels of education and higher credentials; and initiating an alignment review of all learning standards, birth through third grade. These actions are important steps toward building a strong foundation for Georgia’s children.

TABLE 3.3. WHAT DOES A HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM LOOK LIKE?

Children are respected, nurtured, and challenged.
 Children have ongoing opportunities to learn important skills, knowledge, and dispositions.
 Children are able to make meaningful decisions throughout the day.
 The children’s home language and culture are respected, appreciated, and incorporated into the curriculum and the classroom.
 Children participate in individual, small-group, and large-group activities.
 Children learn the skills necessary for future academic success.
 Children have the opportunity to learn basic school readiness skills.
 Children’s natural curiosity is used as a powerful motivator.
 Children are given variety in their daily schedule.

Source: National Institute for Early Education Research. Preschool Policy Matters. November 2002.

The best early childhood teachers are opportunists – they know child development and exploit children’s interests and their interactions with them to promote developmental change – some of which may involve structured lessons and much of which may not. To be effective, teachers of young children must strategically weave instruction into activities that give children choices to explore and play. Several aspects of teachers’ interactive behaviors appear to uniquely predict gains in young children’s achievement:

- explicit instruction in certain key skills
- sensitive and emotionally warm interactions
- responsive feedback
- verbal engagement/stimulation, and
- a classroom environment that is not overly structured or regimented.

Source: “Preschool in School, Sometimes.” Education Next. Winter 2007.

13 Guernsey, L. & Mead, S. “Transforming Education in the Primary Years.” Issues in Science and Technology. Fall 2010.

14 Maxwell, K. L., Early, D. M., Bryant, D., Kraus, S., Hume, K., & Crawford, G. “Georgia study of early care and education: Child care center findings—Executive summary.” Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, FPG Child Development Institute. 2009.

15 Maxwell, K. L., Early, D. M., Bryant, D., Kraus, S., Hume, K., & Crawford, G. “Georgia study of early care and education: Findings from Georgia’s Pre-K Program — Executive summary.” Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, FPG Child Development Institute. 2009.

High quality, educationally effective early learning programs will not be possible absent adequate funding at the state level. The National Institute for Early Education Research estimates the cost of providing a quality preschool education to every three- and four-year-old in the nation would be just under \$70 billion dollars a year, based on an annual cost-per-child of approximately \$8,700. This figure would cover the full costs of the programs, including facilities, administration, and support services. In reality, particularly the current economic reality, few states, if any, come close to funding early education at this level. During the 2008-09 school year, state spending per child averaged \$4,143, an increase of \$86 per child in nominal dollars, but a decrease of \$36 per child after adjusting for inflation.

According to current research from early education experts, “almost 60 percent of all three- and four-year-olds in state-funded pre-kindergarten were served in six states – California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, New York, and Texas – none of which report enough per-child funding from all sources to adequately fund a high-quality pre-kindergarten program.”¹⁶ While dips in funding levels may be necessary – or at least expected – in today’s financial climate, early education advocates worry that “this could be the start of a new downward trend that will erode the value of these programs and turn them into ineffective, cheap substitutes for real education.”¹⁷ For Georgia’s early education programs, adequate funding will soon become an urgent need, as the state lottery, our mechanism for funding pre-kindergarten and the HOPE scholarship, is currently at a tipping point. Although Georgia’s lottery is considered one of the most successful in the country, its revenues aren’t keeping up with the growth in the cost of these two programs.

ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

Without a doubt, Georgia’s leaders will be focused in 2011 on increasing the graduation rate, implementing Georgia’s Race to the Top plans in our K-12 school systems, and rolling out the new Common Core Georgia Performance Standards. The authorization of quality charter schools and other avenues for school choice will also be likely topics for policymakers, particularly

those looking for immediate solutions to low-achieving traditional schools. But as our leaders seek solutions and innovations to improve our state’s education system and increase the quality of our workforce, they must acknowledge that early education is a big part of the solution. To borrow the words of policy and early education experts:

“Governments at the local, state, and federal level must start investing in systems that reach children before kindergarten and get serious about providing children with high-quality instruction in the earliest grades of their schooling. To do otherwise is to waste taxpayer dollars, ignore decades of research, and disregard the extraordinary potential of millions of children who otherwise have little chance of succeeding in school.”¹⁸

Even in this difficult budget climate, Georgia’s policymakers must safeguard the financial resources and harness the political will to increase the access, quality, and affordability of quality early learning opportunities for all children. State funding for pre-kindergarten must be – at the very least – maintained at its current level. Cuts to the program that result in a reduction in per student allocation will not only harm children, but will do little to solve the larger issue of lottery revenue stability.

In addition to maintaining access to pre-kindergarten programs, states must monitor the quality of those programs. Implementing a quality rating system for pre-kindergarten programs will hold those programs accountable and help parents make informed decisions about where to send their children. Furthermore, state leaders and child advocates should support the work and legislative priorities of the Georgia Birth to Five Coalition, a collaborative effort of organizations and individuals working to improve public policy associated with early care and learning.¹⁹ In 2011 and in future years, the best use of our collective resources and political resolve will be the investment in Georgia’s children to provide supports for them and their families to develop into safe, healthy, emotionally stable children who enter school ready and eager to learn.

¹⁶ The National Institute for Early Education Research. “The State of Preschool 2009.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Guernsey, L. & Mead, S. “Transforming Education in the Primary Years.” Issues in Science and Technology. Fall 2010.

¹⁹ For more information about the Georgia Birth to Five Coalition and a list of the group’s 2011 legislative priorities, visit <http://www.georgiavoices.org>.

4

Confronting Poverty: A Dire Need

ISSUE OVERVIEW

The United States has long been recognized as the land of opportunity, a place where individuals of all backgrounds can find a brighter and better tomorrow. Yet increasingly, statistics on family and child wellbeing suggest that the American dream is not that broadly accessible and that far too great a proportion of our most vulnerable population – our children – live in poverty. Among 24 of the world’s wealthiest nations, the United States ranks 23rd on a measure of child material inequality.²⁰ In other words, America’s children have substantial disparities in access to material resources. Recent data from the U.S. Census reveal that rates of family and child poverty have increased in recent years; in fact, extreme poverty was the fastest growing income group in America in 2009.²¹ Income disparities are magnified in Southern states where poverty rates have been historically higher than in other parts of the country. In 2009, 22.3 percent of Georgia’s children under the age of 18 were living in poverty, a rate that has seen little improvement in recent years. Among Georgia’s public school population in October 2010, 57 percent of students qualified for free or reduced price lunch, a proxy for low-income in the public school setting.

Research has clearly shown that economic hardship can have a profound effect on children’s development and prospects for the future. Low family income can impede children’s cognitive development and their ability to learn, can contribute to behavioral, social, and emotional problems, and can cause and exacerbate poor health as well.²² A quality education is a critical part of improving families’ economic status, and improving educational outcomes for low-income children is essential to enabling us to reduce rates of child poverty over the long term. Georgia is still recovering from the effects of the recession on top of a history of economic inequality, but its citizens need the state’s support to ensure economic security and a reduction of poverty.

WHAT’S THE SIGNIFICANCE?

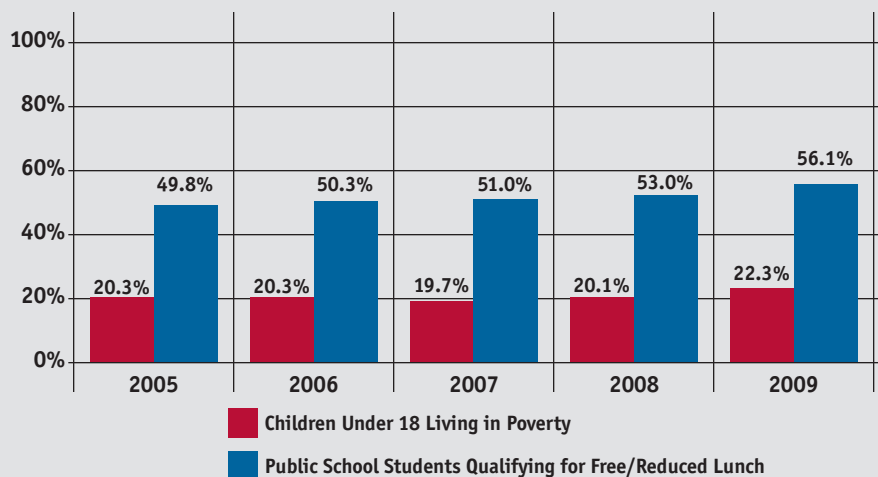
The rate of child poverty in Georgia has hovered close to 20 percent over the last several years, but the actual number of children living in poverty has continued to increase since 2005. Nearly 100,000 more children were living in poverty in 2009 than in 2005, giving Georgia the 12th highest poverty rate in the nation.²³

For students of color, who comprise the majority (54 percent) of the state’s population, poverty rates are much higher: 33 percent of African American children and 42 percent of Hispanic children live in poverty.²⁴ Figure 4.1 provides an illustration of the economic status of our state’s youth over the past five years.

20 Adamson, P. “The Children Left Behind: A League Table of Inequality in Child Well-Being in the World’s Rich Countries.” Innocenti Research Centre, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), November 2010. Measures of material inequality included household income, access to educational resources, and living space.
21 Southern Education Foundation. Update: The Worst of Times: Extreme Poverty in the United States, 2009. December 2010. www.southerneducation.org. A person in extreme poverty lives in a household where the income is less than half of the federal poverty threshold.
22 Cauthen, N.K., and S. Fass. “Ten Important Questions About Child Poverty and Family Economic Hardship.” December 2009. National Center for Children in Poverty.
23 Richie, C. S. “Establishing an Economic Security Task Force in Georgia: Building on Neighbor State Models and Local Efforts.” Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, September 28, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.gbpi.org>.
24 Southern Education Foundation. “A New Diverse Majority: Students of Color in the South’s Public Schools.” 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.sefatl.org>.

FIGURE 4.1.
ECONOMIC STATUS OF GEORGIA'S
CHILDREN, 2005-2009

Sources: Annie E. Casey Foundation, National KIDS Count Program; U.S. Census American Community Survey; Georgia Department of Education.



A substantial body of research has shown that in countries across the world, high poverty rates correlate with compromised academic opportunities. As articulated by the International Institute for Educational Planning, “the relationship between poverty and education operates in two directions: poor people are often unable to obtain access to an adequate education, and without an adequate education people are often constrained to a life of poverty.”²⁵ In Georgia, as in other states, children who live in low-income households are less likely to achieve successful academic outcomes, as evidenced by data from multiple indicators of educational attainment (see figure 4.2).

The impact of poverty on children’s lives is particularly devastating, as it contributes not only to reduced educational opportunities but to a host of other challenges as well. Children in poverty are more likely to suffer from asthma and other health issues; be exposed to abuse and neglect; suffer from traumatic stress and emotional disturbance; have inadequate child care arrangements; be in contact with the juvenile justice system; and eventually drop out of school.²⁶ Because the economic recession affected so many families, more of Georgia’s children are likely to suffer from these poverty-related issues.

Yet even before the recession one out of seven working families lived in poverty in Georgia, and many Southern states, including Georgia, were experiencing a rise in child poverty.²⁷ Even if a financial setback is not permanent, as may be the case for thousands of families impacted by the recent recession, the effects of poverty can still be life altering, particularly for children.

For many families even a temporary period of low-wage work or poverty can create housing instability, a condition that can have long ranging effects on a child’s future development and educational outcome. Georgia ranks 47 out of 50 states in the number of homeless children, and among children living in poverty in our state, 12 percent are homeless. Children without stable housing often have high rates of mobility, which causes interruptions to their schooling and challenges to their attainment. Research has shown that homeless children are more likely to score poorly on math, reading, spelling, and vocabulary tests and are more likely to be held back a year in school. In Georgia, less than 25 percent of homeless children graduate high school.²⁸ Without at least a high school diploma, homeless students and students in low-income families will have a more difficult time breaking out of the cycle of poverty.

25 van der Berg, S. Poverty and education. The International Institute for Educational Planning. UNESCO. 2008.

26 The National Center on Family Homelessness. “America’s Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Child Homelessness.” Retrieved from <http://homelesschildrenamerica.org>; Sell, K., Zlotnik, S., Noonan, K., & Rubin, D. “The Effect of the Recession on Child Well-Being: A Synthesis of the Evidence by PolicyLab, The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia.” PolicyLab, November 2010. Retrieved from <http://firstfocus.net>.

27 Richie, C. S. “Establishing an Economic Security Task Force in Georgia: Building on Neighbor State Models and Local Efforts.” Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, September 28, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.gbpi.org>; Southern Education Foundation. “A New Diverse Majority: Students of Color in the South’s Public Schools.” 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.sefatl.org>.

28 The National Center on Family Homelessness. “America’s Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Child Homelessness.” Retrieved December 6, 2010 from <http://homelesschildrenamerica.org>.

ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

The National Center for Children in Poverty stresses that state policies that promote health, education, and strong families can help the development and school readiness of our youngest citizens. Unfortunately the economic recession has forced many states to cut back on family services and economic supports at a time when residents need them most. Yet these state policies are of critical importance to low-income families whose children lack access to the kinds of supports and opportunities available to their more affluent peers.

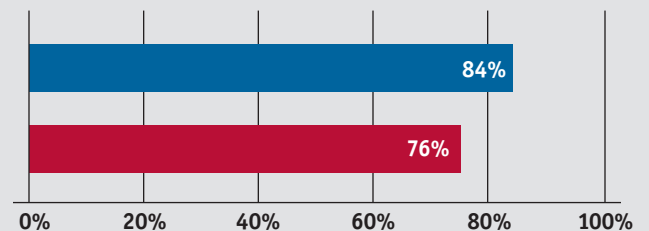
Research has found that it takes at least twice the official federal poverty level, or \$44,100 for a family of four in 2010, for families to provide the basic necessities needed for their children's healthy development. To begin chipping away at the rising levels of poverty in Georgia, our policymakers must consider implementing (or strengthening) programs and policies that encourage work, including child care supports, transportation assistance, and expanded paid leave policies. Beyond this, programs that focus on job retention, job advancement, and skills training could help protect families during weak economic times, since low-skill jobs are often the first to be eliminated.²⁹ Additionally, supports for parents such as home visiting programs, coaching, and financial literacy training may increase a family's self-sufficiency and improve the home environment of vulnerable children.

To ensure that poverty does not negatively impact the educational experience of school-aged children, Georgia needs to revisit school system equalization grants and the policies for teacher placement. The low economic status of a community should not mean that schools and students receive unequal resources or a lower supply of effective teachers. Additionally, local and state educational agencies must work with schools to make sure that they are upholding the rights of homeless children to a public education.

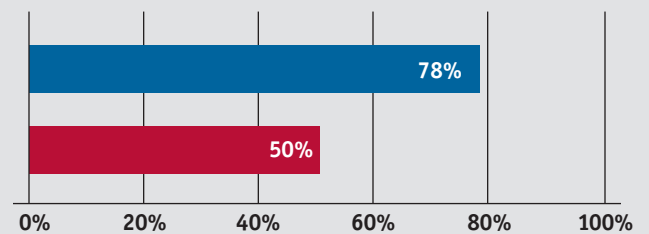
Without thoughtful policies and proactive initiatives by policymakers and educators to address the needs of Georgia's low-income families and children, our state's economic and educational prosperity will continue to lag behind that of the nation. It is in our state's best interest to invest in supports for impoverished children and families today in order to create a more secure future for all our citizens.

FIGURE 4.2.
EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES IN GEORGIA DIFFER BY
POVERTY STATUS

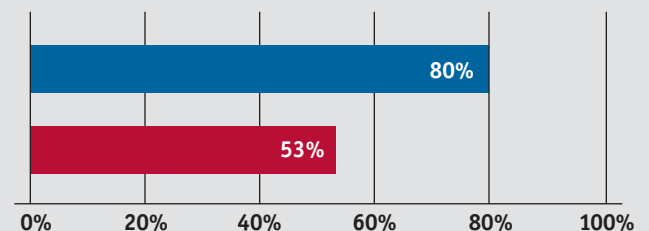
HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES, 2010



NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS, 2009 Percentage of Students Scoring At or Above Basic on Fourth Grade Reading



NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS, 2009 Percentage of Students Scoring At or Above Basic on Eighth Grade Math



■ Not FRL Eligible (Not Low-Income)
■ FRL Eligible (Low-Income)

Sources: Georgia Department of Education; National Center for Education Statistics.

²⁹ National Center for Children in Poverty. 2010. United States Early Childhood Profile. Retrieved January 4, 2011, from <http://www.nccp.org>; The Annie E. Casey Foundation. 2005. Building Family Economic Success: Centers for Working Families. Retrieved January 4, 2011 from www.aecf.org.

5

Eradicating Gaps in Student Achievement

ISSUE OVERVIEW

The issue is not a new one. Gaps in academic achievement have existed since the beginning of public education. A history of unequal access to education has left much of the United States' ethnic minority populations with huge disparities in academic achievement. Although statistics often paint a dismal picture of academic achievement for ethnic minorities, it is important to also acknowledge the incredible gains that they have made in spite of the many obstacles against them. As late as 1940, more than 80 percent of African American high school age students in Georgia were not enrolled in public secondary schools.³⁰ Today not only do all U.S. ethnic minorities have legal access to public education, but the majority of them also complete high school. Yet in spite of the gains that these students have made, many of them do not attain the level of academic success necessary for future educational and career opportunities.

Over the past year, Georgia has celebrated advancements in the educational outcomes of all our student groups. Results of the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that Georgia's minority students continued to score the same or better than minority students across the nation. Similarly, all groups of students saw significant increases in their graduation rate in 2010. While our state should take pride in these accomplishments, it remains critical to address the lingering achievement gaps among our school-aged youth. As a recent comprehensive study by the Center on Education Policy makes clear, achievement gaps remain large and persistent.³¹ And even though achievement levels have increased for all student groups, the gaps have not always narrowed. For gaps to narrow, the lower-achieving group must improve at a greater rate than the higher-achieving one – a fact that is true for the nation as a whole and for the students in Georgia's public schools.

WHAT'S THE SIGNIFICANCE?

In this age of increased standards and accountability for public schools, we often look to performance assessments for information about the outcomes of teaching and learning. Two frequently cited measures of the status of state education systems are levels of literacy by 4th grade and math proficiency by 8th grade, both of which are also research-based indicators of students' future academic success.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a test administered every two years to representative samples of students in all 50 states and D.C., is one standardized measure of these indicators over time. The most recent NAEP results for the state of Georgia show that there is a sizeable gap between the performance levels of racial subgroups. While overall achievement inches slowly higher with each test

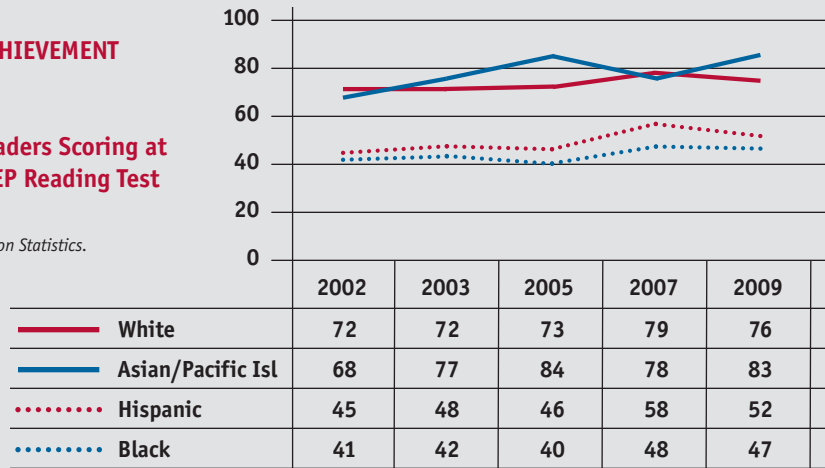
³⁰ Anderson, J.D. "The Historical Context for Understanding the Test Score Gap." *National Journal of Urban Education and Practice*, Vol.1, No.1, 2004.

³¹ Center on Education Policy. *State Test Score Trends Through 2008-09, Part 2: Slow and Uneven Progress in Narrowing Gaps*. December 2010.

FIGURE 5.1. GEORGIA'S PERSISTENT ACHIEVEMENT GAPS IN LITERACY

Percent of Georgia 4th Graders Scoring at or Above Basic on the NAEP Reading Test

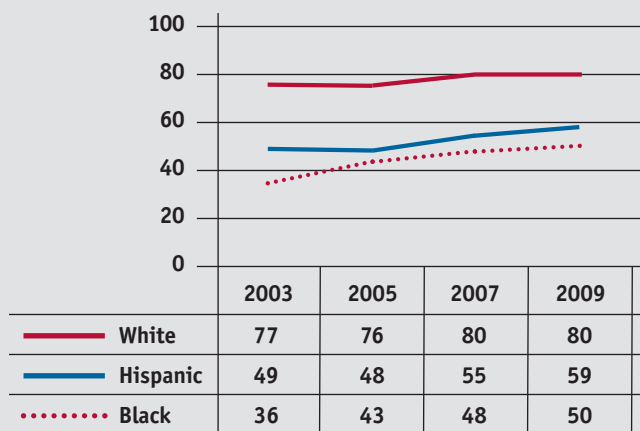
Source: The National Center for Education Statistics.



administration, white and Asian American students consistently score at much higher rates in reading than Hispanic and black students (see figure 5.1). Similarly the percent of students scoring at or above basic on the 8th grade mathematics NAEP increased for all student groups from 2003 to 2009, yet sizeable gaps remain between the performance levels of white, black, and Hispanic students (see figure 5.2). If Georgia is to truly be a national leader in educational improvement and prepare today's students to become tomorrow's workforce, then closing these gaps in achievement is imperative.

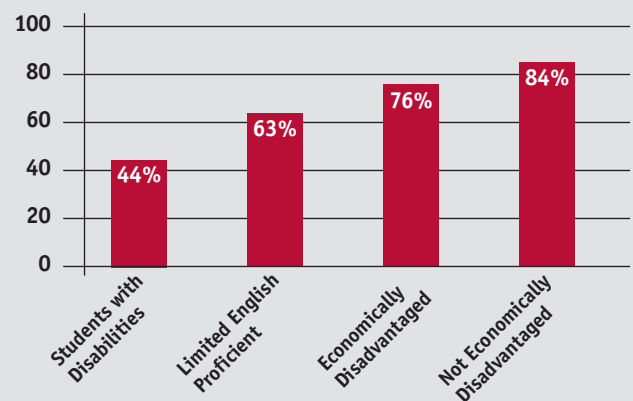
Gaps in achievement exist not only among racial groups, but among students with variations in ability, English proficiency, and income levels. Students with disabilities, students who qualify as limited English proficient (LEP), and students who are economically disadvantaged tend to have lower achievement rates than other students and are less likely to graduate high school, as illustrated in figure 5.3. Of course, these populations tend to overlap; students of color are disproportionately represented in special education classes and classes for English language learners and are more likely to live in a low-income household.

FIGURE 5.2. GEORGIA'S PERSISTENT ACHIEVEMENT GAPS IN MATHEMATICS

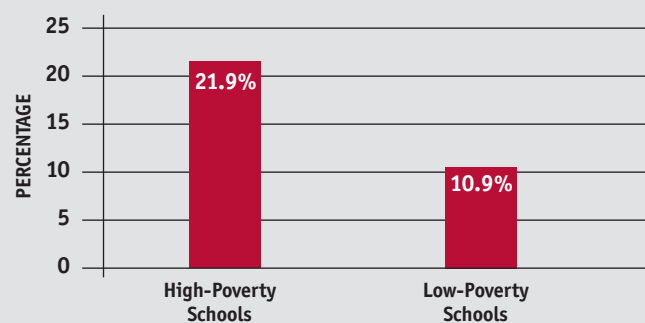


Source: The National Center for Education Statistics. NAEP reporting standards were not met for Asian/Pacific Islander students in 2007 and were therefore omitted from this graph.

FIGURE 5.3. GEORGIA'S PERSISTENT GAPS IN GRADUATION RATES, 2010



Source: Georgia Department of Education.

FIGURE 5.4. INEQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF TEACHERS**Percent of Classes Taught by Teachers with Neither Certification nor Major**

Source: Almy, S. & Theokas, C. "Not Prepared for Class: High-Poverty Schools Continue to Have Fewer In-Field Teachers." *Education Trust*, November 2010.

Ethnic minorities have made great strides in academic achievement but many structural factors continue to hinder them from making the kinds of gains necessary for future success. In many cases, unequal educational outcomes result from unequal educational opportunities. Ethnic minorities, including African American, Hispanic, Native American, and Southeast Asian students³², and students with limited English proficiency are more likely to attend schools in high poverty districts.³³ This means that they have fewer resources. At the secondary level, they are also more likely to have a teacher that lacks certification or a degree in the content area of instruction (see figure 5.4). In addition to fewer qualified teachers, high poverty schools have higher rates of teacher turnover, thereby making it more difficult to create strong, stable academic programs.

Previous policies have attempted to meet the needs of students in urban and high-poverty areas by providing supplementary educational services, such as tutoring and remediation. Research indicates, however, that these services do not always yield the intended benefits. Studies of the effects of remediation on African American students, for instance, actually indicate poorer academic outcomes. When African American students partic-

ipated in programs that focused on acceleration rather than remediation, however, they had better academic outcomes.³⁴ These results indicate a need to focus on the strengths rather than the weaknesses among African American students.

Gaps in the achievement levels of our country's students not only harm individuals' chances for success in work and life but also harm our nation's economy. Groundbreaking research by McKinsey & Company determined that "a persistent gap in academic achievement between children in the United States and their counterparts in other countries deprived the U.S. economy of as much as \$2.3 trillion in economic output in 2008."³⁵ Furthermore, each of the long-standing achievement gaps among American students of differing ethnic origins and income levels represents hundreds of billions of dollars in unrealized economic gains. This is an academic and economic crisis with which we cannot afford to live.

ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

Closing achievement gaps requires more than just higher standards and more money. When we consider that white students, who attend well-resourced schools at disproportionately higher rates than ethnic minorities, still make incremental gains in achievement, we should realize that resources alone cannot solve all of our problems. Additional financial resources are certainly needed to improve academic outcomes, but policymakers must also consider ways to address the social and cultural factors that impact academic achievement among diverse students. This belief is echoed by renowned education and social researchers:

"Active intervention is needed to support the needs of students who have less support or fewer resources at home, and leadership at multiple levels is required to ensure that excellence in teaching and a rigorous curriculum are available for the lowest-achieving students too. Without such interventions, the achievement gap will never close... and students will be denied the education they deserve."³⁶

32 Southeast Asian students, while typically clustered under the category "Asian American" tend to have educational experiences and academic outcomes similar to African American and Hispanic students.

33 Manz, P.H., Power, T.J., Ginsburg-Block, M., & Dowrick, P.W. "Community Paraeducators: A Partnership-Directed Approach for Preparing and Sustaining the Involvement of Community Members in Inner-City Schools." *The School Community Journal*, Vol. 20, No.1, 2010.

34 Steele, C.M. "A Threat in the Air: How Stereotypes Shape Intellectual Identity and Performance." *American Psychologist*, June 1997.

35 McKinsey & Company. *The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools*. 2009.

36 Noguera, P., and J.Y. Wing, eds. *Unfinished Business: Closing the Racial Achievement Gap in Our Schools*. Jossey-Bass: March 2006.

Some of the “active interventions” that we can take now include studying successful schools that have closed achievement gaps, publishing best practices, and training educators to modify instruction to meet the unique needs of students from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds. Partnerships between successful schools and communities and those needing additional supports can also help raise achievement levels of all

students. As the Georgia Partnership has expressed in the past, with such marked demographic trends shaping this state, never has it been more important, nor so necessary, to evaluate the educational progress of all student groups in our public schools. The future economic vitality and productivity of Georgia and of the nation will depend on the academic preparation and support all students receive in public schools today.

6

College & Career Readiness: Are We Getting It Right?

ISSUE OVERVIEW

Public education should afford all students the opportunity to pursue their dreams, whether those dreams are of a desired job or admission to a postsecondary institution. For the thousands of students enrolled in Georgia's public schools – and for their families, their communities, and their future employers – the high school diploma should be the key that unlocks their future aspirations. Signifying the seamless progression and success through the middle and high school years, the diploma opens the door to a lifetime of opportunity. High school graduates have not only the skills and knowledge necessary to enter college or the workforce, but also the educational foundation that will produce benefits throughout their futures.

Across the state and across sectors, leaders in Georgia recognize the importance of graduating young adults who are ready for college or careers. In recent years, Georgia's policymakers have refocused their efforts to improve our high school graduation rate and to increase college access for our youth. We have made great strides in reducing the rate of dropouts and strengthening the value of the high school diploma.

Yet even with the recent news that our high school graduation rate has reached an all-time high of 81 percent, Georgia still lags far behind other states in the percentage of high school students earning a diploma. (See Issue 10 for a detailed discussion of the calculation of graduation rates.) Worse still, research tells us that businesses and postsecondary institutions are experiencing an increase of high school graduates who enter college or the workplace without mastery of the basic skills necessary to succeed – a combination of both basic knowledge and applied skills in math, science, reading comprehension, and communication. What does Georgia need to do to make college and career readiness not just an empty promise but a reality for all our youth?

WHAT'S THE SIGNIFICANCE?

Georgia experiences growth in the number of students enrolling in colleges and universities every year. Compared to other states, Georgia has a relatively high college entrance rate for first-time freshmen directly out of high school.³⁷ In the fall of 2010, 49,368 freshmen entered a college or university in the University System

of Georgia (USG).³⁸ The graduation rate, however, remains unimpressive. Slightly less than half – 47 percent – of Georgia students attending public and private four-year colleges graduate within six years and only 26 percent graduate from two-year colleges within three years.³⁹

37 National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) Information Center for Higher Education Policymaking and Analysis. "Progress and Completion: Student Pipeline – Transition and Completion Rates from 9th Grade to College." Retrieved from <http://www.higheredinfo.org>. In 2006, Georgia's college-going rate for first-time freshmen was 69.6%. Only six other states had a higher rate.

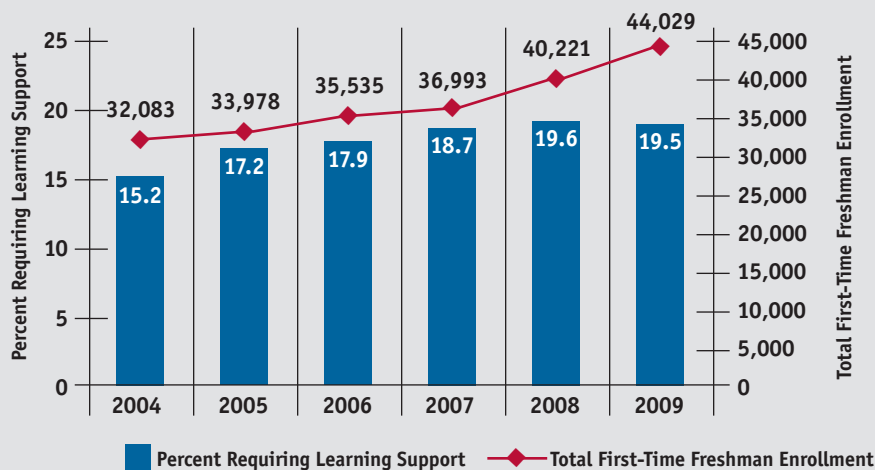
38 Board of Regents, University System of Georgia. "Semester Enrollment Report, Fall 2010." Retrieved from <http://www.usg.edu>. This number reflects total freshman enrollment, not limited to students directly out of high school. The University System of Georgia includes research, regional, and state universities, state colleges, and two-year colleges.

39 National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) Information Center for Higher Education Policymaking and Analysis. "Progress and Completion: Student Pipeline – Transition and Completion Rates from 9th Grade to College." Retrieved from <http://www.higheredinfo.org>.

FIGURE 6.1.
PREVALENCE OF REMEDIATION IN
GEORGIA'S PUBLIC COLLEGES AND
UNIVERSITIES

Percent of First-Time Freshmen
Requiring Learning Support

Source: University System of Georgia. "Learning Support Requirements for First-Time Freshmen." The percent of students requiring Learning Support only reflects those recent high school graduates who did not meet system requirements. Institutional requirements and the total number of entering freshmen actually make these rates higher. The total first-time freshman enrollment is a count of those students who graduated high school the same year that they enrolled in the USG and is therefore lower than the total freshman enrollment for each year.



While college enrollment has risen, so has the rate of enrollment in remediation courses, as illustrated in figure 6.1. Approximately one in every five college freshmen in Georgia required remedial coursework (also referred to as Learning Support) in 2009. Not only do remedial classes drive up the cost of postsecondary education – remediation costs the USG about \$22.3 million annually – but research has shown that students who require remediation in college are much less likely to graduate.⁴⁰ Only one in four students who take remedial classes earn an associate’s degree in three years or a bachelor’s degree in six years. In a measure designed to curb the increase in remediation requirements, the USG will no longer admit students who require remediation in all three areas of reading, English, and mathematics beginning in the fall of 2012.⁴¹

High and increasing rates of remediation among college freshmen along with stricter postsecondary admission requirements signal a need to strengthen college preparation at the secondary level. While Georgia has put in place strong college preparatory curriculum requirements (as shown in table 6.1), clear evidence exists that far too many students are graduating without a strong foundation in these content areas. According to the most recent results of Georgia students’ performance on the ACT examination, only 26 percent of high school graduates are prepared for college biology and 40 percent for college algebra (see figure 6.2).

TABLE 6.1. HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION AND COLLEGE ENTRANCE REQUIREMENTS IN GEORGIA

Course Requirements for High School Graduation

- 4 units of English
- 4 units of Math
- 4 units of Science
- 3 units of Social Studies
- At least 3 units required from: Foreign Language and/or CTAE and/or Fine Arts
- At least 4 additional electives
- 1 health/physical education course

High School Curriculum Requirements for Entrance to the University System of Georgia

- 4 Years of English
- 4 Years of Math
- 3 Years of Science
- 3 Years of Social Science
- 2 Years of Foreign Language or American Sign Language

Source: The Georgia Department of Education and the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia.

There is a clear gap between what students are expected to know and the knowledge they have actually acquired by the time they complete high school. The challenge for Georgia lies in determining how to eliminate this gap.

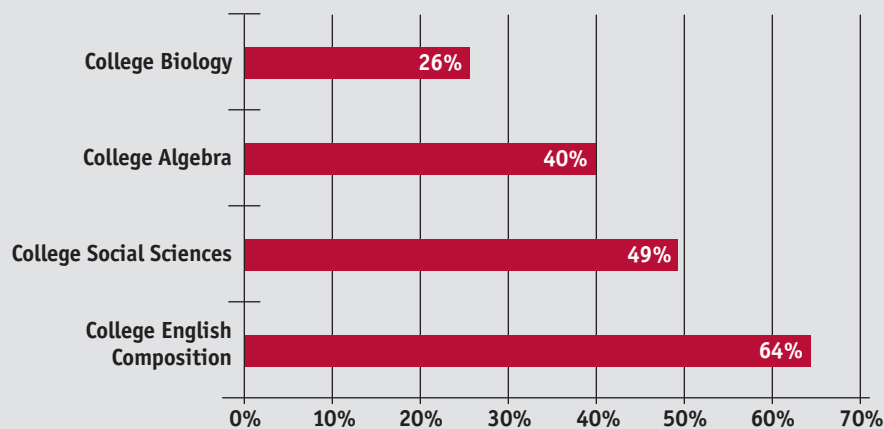
40 Diamond, L. "1/4 of Georgia College Students Need Remedial Work." Atlanta Journal-Constitution, August 10, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.ajc.com>.

41 Diamond, L. "Remedial Classes Cost Ga. Colleges Millions." Atlanta Journal-Constitution, November 1, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.ajc.com>.

FIGURE 6.2. GEORGIA STUDENTS' READINESS FOR COLLEGE

Percent of Georgia High School Graduates Prepared for College Courses

Source: ACT. "The Condition of College & Career Readiness: Class of 2010." 2010. Results are for all Georgia graduates, from public and non-public schools.



An alternate measure of the success of Georgia’s secondary education system is the readiness of our high school graduates to enter the workforce. Because not every student will pursue a four-year college degree, our state’s policies and educational programs must ensure that high school graduates can leave the twelfth grade equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary for careers that offer a livable wage.

Students entering the workforce directly out of high school often require the same level of English and math skills as students who enter college.⁴² Academic skills are not the only determining factor; employers want workers who are punctual, diligent, and have good social skills.⁴³ Georgia is among the top 20 states in the percentage of schools that offer work-based internships.⁴⁴

The Georgia Department of Education’s Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (CTAE) Program strives to prepare students to be successful in their transition to the workforce. Last year, 62 percent of all Georgia high school students were enrolled in at least one CTAE course, with the largest enrollments in the business and computer science program (see table 6.2). The variety of programs that CTAE offers improves the chances that students will complete high school and be prepared for the jobs that await them. In 2009, the high school graduation rate of students with CTAE concentrations was 91 percent compared to the state overall rate of 79 percent.

TABLE 6.2. ENROLLMENT IN GEORGIA’S CTAE PROGRAM, 2008-09

PROGRAM	PERCENT OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS ENROLLED
Culinary Arts	1.6%
Government & Public Safety	1.8%
Marketing, Sales, & Services Education	4.0%
Education	5.6%
Healthcare Science Education	6.2%
Agricultural Education	6.8%
Engineering & Technology Education	7.0%
Family & Consumer Science	15.7%
Architecture, Construction, Communications, and Transportation	15.9%
Business & Computer Science	35.5%

Source: Georgia Department of Education. "Career, Technical and Agricultural Education Annual Report 2009."

42 ACT College and Workforce Training Readiness. "Ready for College and Ready for Work: Same or Different?" 2006; Rosenbaum, J. E. "All Good Jobs Don't Require a College Degree...But Getting a Good Job Without a College Degree Depends A Lot on High School Effort – And the Support a High School Provides." American Educator, Spring 2004.

43 Rosenbaum, J. E. "All Good Jobs Don't Require a College Degree...But Getting a Good Job Without a College Degree Depends A Lot on High School Effort – And the Support a High School Provides." American Educator, Spring 2004.

44 Center for American Progress, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and F. M. Hess. "Leaders and Laggards: A State-by-State Report Card on Educational Innovation." November 2009. Retrieved from <http://uschamber.com>.

ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

Georgia has laid a strong foundation for college and career readiness. We have rigorous academic standards and a strong career preparation program. Our high school graduation rate is increasing annually. Still, far too many of Georgia's students are entering college and careers without the necessary skills to succeed. There remains a considerable disconnect between what students need to know for postsecondary and workplace success and their levels of preparedness upon high school completion.

While celebration of Georgia's increased number of high school graduates is certainly warranted, our policymakers must remain

committed to ensuring that a high school diploma truly signifies college and career readiness. Our leaders can take several actions toward this goal, many of which are included in the Georgia Partnership's Economics of Education publication. Some of these actions include supporting dual enrollment programs and offering "real world" work experiences through internships and apprenticeships. All students need a strong academic preparation in high school, which requires that the state maintain the current single high school diploma. We must also promote students' pursuit of higher education by providing academic and financial counseling, and encourage schools to include workforce readiness skills in all courses. Additionally, policymakers must focus on identifying and supporting the most effective interventions for decreasing our number of dropouts and increasing the career-based offerings in our high schools.

7

Getting a Handle on School Choice

ISSUE OVERVIEW

In 1955, economist Milton Friedman published an essay entitled “The Role of Government in Education” in which he proposed that our country’s system of schools should mirror the free market.⁴⁵ Friedman argued against the natural monopoly of government-run schools and suggested that families be given the freedom to choose the schools to which they send their children:

“Let [a] subsidy be made available to parents regardless where they send their children — provided only that it be to schools that satisfy specified minimum standards — and a wide variety of schools will spring up to meet the demand. Parents could express their views about schools directly, by withdrawing their children from one school and sending them to another, to a much greater extent than is now possible.”

Over the last fifty years, Friedman’s vision has gained momentum and has been adopted by countless advocacy groups across the country. Nearly every state has seen expansions of school choice options, whether through a growth in the number of charter schools, adoption of a voucher program, or increased homeschool enrollments.

In Georgia, parents can choose to send their children to the neighborhood public school, compete for a seat at a magnet or charter school, or apply for a special needs scholarship to fund private school tuition. Businesses and individuals can now receive tax credits for their contributions to student scholarship programs which are used to help families afford non-public schools. Parent and community leaders can seek approval from local boards of education, the state board of education, and Georgia’s Charter School Commission for their own plans to open a charter school. While Friedman’s vision of expanded school choice has manifested in many ways in Georgia, important questions remain about the choice movement. Does education belong in the free market? Are the school choice options in our state improving the academic outcomes of students? And what lessons can traditional public schools glean from the growing network of charter schools?

WHAT’S THE SIGNIFICANCE?

While researchers and practitioners continue seeking solutions to the chronic low achievement of many public schools in Georgia, a growth in many different choice options has opened some new doors for families and students searching for immediate access to a quality education. Consider the following milestones in Georgia’s educational history:

- From the initial passage of Georgia’s charter law in 1993 and the subsequent opening of three charter schools in 1995, our state’s charter sector has grown to 170 charter schools today in approximately 46 systems.

⁴⁵ Friedman, M. “The Role of Government in Education.” In R. A. Solo (Ed.) *Economics and the Public Interest*. Rutgers University Press, 1955.

- The Georgia Virtual School (GaVS) bill became law in 2005, establishing the first official state virtual school. GaVS continues to provide course offerings for more students, and enrollment increased 22 percent from the 2008-09 to 2009-10 school year. In addition, Georgia students are now also served by virtual charter schools.
- The Charter Systems Act was established in 2007, allowing local school boards to submit a petition to the state whereby all schools in the system would become chartered. Presently, eight districts in the state have been granted Charter System status.
- Georgia enacted the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship (GSNS) Program in 2007 to provide scholarships for private school tuition to public school students with disabilities. During the 2009-10 school year 2,068 students enrolled in the program.
- In 2008, policymakers established the Georgia Private School Tax Credit law, a program that allows taxpayers to qualify for an income tax credit for contributions to approved student scholarship organizations (SSOs). The SSOs, in turn, provide scholarships to parents who wish to enroll their children in private schools. As of December 2010, 32 approved SSOs were in operation.
- Also in 2008, Georgia legislators passed House Bill 881 that created the Georgia Charter Schools Commission, an independent, state-level charter school authorizer. Though the Commission is currently at the center of a lawsuit regarding its legality, it has approved seven charter schools that are now in operation.
- In 2009, Georgia lawmakers passed House Bill 251 – the Public School Choice Framework – that allows parents to request an intradistrict transfer as long as there is enough space in the receiving school.

Over the years our state leaders have succeeded at creating a patchwork of choice offerings that have begun to take student learning outside of the traditional box. This remarkable growth in Georgia's school choice offerings has not only brought

families greater options for their children's educational experience but has also enhanced our state's reputation throughout the country as a leader in educational reform and innovation. Georgia has been recognized by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools as one of 10 states with the strongest policy environments for public charter schools to succeed.⁴⁶ And our state earned points in the Race to the Top grant competition for the successful conditions already in place that allow for the creation of high-performing charter schools.

As Georgia continues the dialogue and pursuit of enhanced school choice initiatives, one of the biggest questions to consider is the impact on student achievement. While positive results have been documented, we still do not have definitive answers to the question of how charter schools impact students across the nation, and a sampling of the most recognized research studies reveals some mixed results. A study of charter schools in New York City found that these schools are having positive effects on the academic progress of the students who attend them. Specifically, for every year they spend in a charter school, students make up 12 percent of the distance from failing to proficient in math. They make up 3.5 percent of the distance from failing to proficient in reading.⁴⁷ The Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) found that students in 37 percent of charter schools nationwide performed worse than they would have had they remained in a traditional public school. Students in 46 percent of charter schools performed comparably to traditional public school students, and only 17 percent fared better than their public school counterparts.⁴⁸ And a recently released study by the Institute of Education Sciences, which examined student performance in 36 charter middle schools across 15 states, found that, on average, the charter schools were "neither more nor less successful than traditional public schools in improving student achievement, behavior, and school progress."⁴⁹

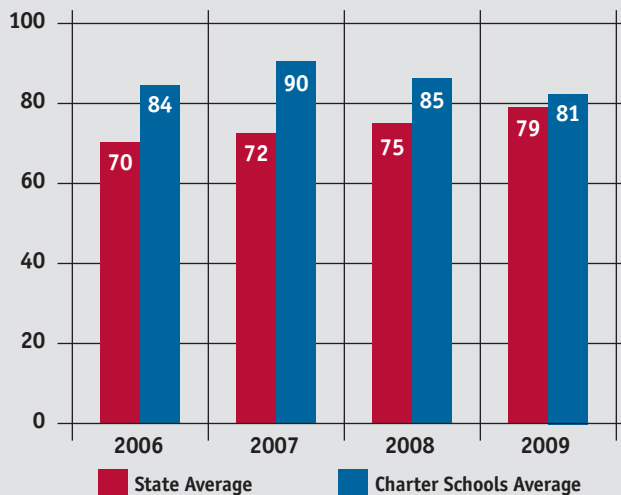
With the new Georgia Charter Schools Commission approving school charters, an increasing number of system charters, and the growing national discourse on charter schools as a vehicle of reform, it is highly likely that the trend toward this model of school choice will continue. The available evidence on charter schools in Georgia shows that overall these schools have produced comparable student results to those of traditional

46 National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. *Measuring Up to the Model: A Ranking of State Charter School Laws*. January 2011.

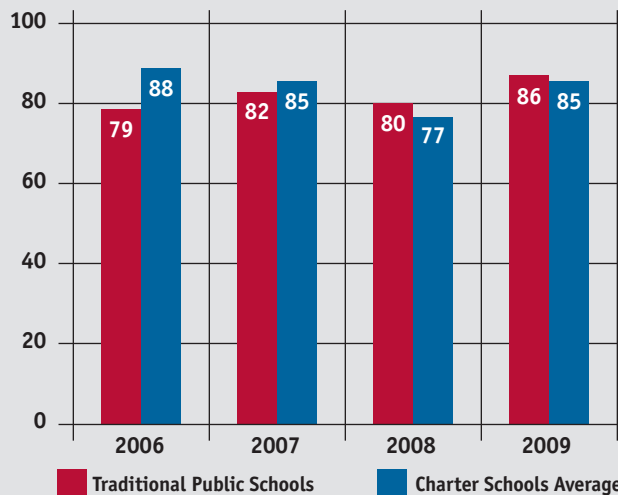
47 Hoxby, C. , & Murarka, S. "New York City Charter Schools: How well are they teaching their students?" *Education Next*. Summer 2008.

48 Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO). "Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States." June 2009. Retrieved from <http://credo.stanford.edu>.

49 Hess, F. "Does School Choice 'Work'?" *National Affairs*. Fall 2010.

FIGURE 7.1. HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES OF CHARTER SCHOOLS IN GEORGIA**High School Graduation Rate, 2006-09**

Source: Georgia Department of Education. "2008-2009 Annual Report on Georgia's Charter Schools." December 31, 2009.

FIGURE 7.2. ADEQUATE YEARLY PROGRESS AMONG GEORGIA CHARTER SCHOOLS**Percent of Schools Making AYP, 2006-09**

Source: Georgia Department of Education. "2008-2009 Annual Report on Georgia's Charter Schools." December 31, 2009.

public schools. Over the past four years, high school graduation rates and Adequate Yearly Progress rates have been high among charters, as illustrated in figures 7.1 and 7.2. Although these indicators are noteworthy, Georgia could better understand the successes of charter schools and more strategically allocate state resources if we knew more about the impacts of these educational programs. Designating more resources for more robust evaluations will not only enable Georgia's leaders to better understand the outcomes of our school choice programs, but will enable the identification of best practices that can be replicated in other educational settings.

Vouchers are another school choice mechanism that has drawn fierce debate in Georgia and at the national level in recent years. More closely aligned with Friedman's original market-based theories, vouchers offer families an "exit strategy" from the public school sector by allowing a student to apply public funds toward the tuition at a private or parochial school. The research on vouchers consistently shows higher parental

satisfaction with the school of enrollment.⁵⁰ However, only some studies find positive academic growth for students who use vouchers to attend private schools. For example, an evaluation of the Washington D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program found growth in reading test scores but no significant growth in math scores after three years.⁵¹ These mixed research outcomes suggest that the true value of vouchers is unknown. With inconclusive research on vouchers' academic merit, many cities and states with these programs have been the sites of lengthy battles over the legality of vouchers. In 2009, Arizona's voucher program was deemed unconstitutional and thus eliminated. A voucher program that had served low-income students in Washington, D.C. was ended in 2009 after politicians cut the program's funding.

Currently in its fourth year of implementation, the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship (GSNS) Program has increased each year the number of students served. In the 2007-08 school year (the program's inception year), 825 students were served.

50 Wolf, P. J. "School Voucher Programs: What the Research Says About Parental School Choice." Brigham Young University Law Review. Retrieved from <http://www.byu.edu/>; Wolf, P., Gutmann, B., Puma, M. Kisida, B., Rizzo, L., & Eissa, N. "Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Three Years (NCEE 2009-4050)." National Center for Education Statistics, March 2009.

51 Wolf, P., Gutmann, B., Puma, M. Kisida, B., Rizzo, L., & Eissa, N. "Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Three Years (NCEE 2009-4050). National Center for Education Statistics, March 2009.

Student enrollment in the program grew to 1,596 the following school year and reached 2,068 during the 2009-10 school year.⁵² The program is funded according to the state's cost to educate the scholarship recipient in a public school during the previous year; in fiscal year 2009, Georgia paid \$9,294,728 for the scholarships to students. During the 2009-10 school year, the average scholarship amount awarded was \$6,342 with individual scholarships ranging from \$2,580-\$15,100.

While the scholarship program is growing in popularity among Georgia families, we have only limited data showing impacts of the program on students' academic outcomes. While the GSNS participating private schools are required to administer pre- and post-tests to students and report the results to the Georgia Department of Education, they do not have to administer the same state assessments by which we measure the progress of students and schools in the public education system. So while the data reports reveal that for the 2008-09 school year, the majority of students receiving scholarships showed progress of at least one school year (67 percent in reading and 66 percent in math), it is unknown whether this progress was significantly different than that of students not participating in the scholarship program.⁵³

As Georgia's lawmakers continue to allocate public dollars for the GSNS program, there are additional issues that should be part of the decision-making process about this program. It is possible that some students will not have their needs met by the voucher program, as private schools are not currently obligated by state law to offer special education services, not even for those students in the GSNS program. A limited number of openings in private schools could also make it difficult for every student in a low-performing school to take advantage of the voucher, leaving already disenfranchised students behind in under-resourced schools.

ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

Georgia has taken bold steps toward educational reform, including the expansion of charter schools, scholarship programs, and other choice-based initiatives. In recent years as the number of charter schools has increased, these schools have shown promise for many students in our state, but further empirical research would strengthen our understanding of their impacts and could encourage the replication of best practices. Likewise, Georgia's scholarship and tax credit programs should be more closely evaluated for their effectiveness; because these programs draw on public funds, they should be accountable to the public and show a return on investment to all Georgia taxpayers. Georgia needs to make the evaluation of its school choice programs at the state level a top priority, particularly in a year when decisions to expand certain school choice offerings could have substantial impacts on an already strained state budget.

⁵² Georgia Department of Education. "2009-2010 Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program Preliminary Quick Facts Report." May 27, 2010. Retrieved from <http://doe.k12.ga.us>.

⁵³ Ibid.

8

Scraping the Barrel: Our New School Funding Model

ISSUE OVERVIEW

In the last weeks of December, the popular dictionary publisher Merriam-Webster announced that the word of the year for 2010 was *austerity*.⁵⁴ Determined by the volume of user lookups at Merriam-Webster.com, the word of the year provides a glimpse into the minds of Americans and a reflection of the current events and global conditions. The word *austerity*, a noun defined as “the quality or state of being austere” and “enforced or extreme economy,” could easily have been the word of the year for Georgia. While the national economy was said to be recovering, citizens in our state continued to feel the harsh effects of the recession. Georgia’s unemployment rate remained high, changing from only 10.2 percent in November 2009 to 10.1 percent one year later. And even though state revenue collections began inching upward in the latter half of 2010, Georgia was one of 46 states that struggled to close a shortfall when adopting the budget for the current fiscal year (FY 2011).⁵⁵ For public agencies and school systems whose budgets have been cut repeatedly over the past three years, there was not much good news to be found in 2010. At least nine local school districts were reported to have ended fiscal year 2010 in budget deficits.⁵⁶

The fiscal outlook for 2011 does not seem to have any silver linings. Only a few weeks after his election, Governor Deal warned lawmakers that the state is facing a \$2 billion budget crunch and cuts to government spending are to be expected in the first few months of the new year. Doing more with less seems to have become the new normal mode of operations for public agencies, and our schools are certainly no exception. What will the coming year bring, and how will our state leaders address the dismal state budget?

WHAT’S THE SIGNIFICANCE?

A state budget is the most important and most telling policy document crafted by lawmakers. By allocating funds to public services and programs, the budget spells out those areas of government deemed by state leaders to be the most critical. In the years since the downturn in the national economy in December 2007, however, the budget process has been turned upside down, and political watchdogs have closely eyed not only the allocation of funds but the extent of cuts made to government spending. While some state leaders throughout the country pledged to hold education and other public services harmless throughout the repeated

budget reductions, the vast majority of states were forced to slash spending on even the most critical public programs. Since 2008, cuts in at least 46 states plus the District of Columbia have occurred in all major areas of state services, including health care (31 states), services to the elderly and disabled (29 states and the District of Columbia), K-12 education (34 states and the District of Columbia), and higher education (43 states).⁵⁷ In Georgia, funding for K-12 education for fiscal year 2011 was cut by \$403 million and funding for public higher education was cut by \$151 million.

54 Merriam-Webster Online. “Word of the Year 2010.” December 20, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/info/10words.htm>.

55 Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. “States Continue to Feel Recession’s Impact.” December 16, 2010.

56 Jones, W. “Nine Georgia School Systems Ended Their Budget Year With Deficits.” Morris News Service, November 24, 2010.

57 Johnson, N., Oliff, P., and Williams, E. “An Update on State Budget Cuts.” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, November 5, 2010.

A survey of school administrators conducted in December 2010 reveals some of the ways the drastic budget cuts have affected education systems across the country. According to the survey results:⁵⁸

- Nearly half of school districts (48 percent) laid off personnel for the 2010-11 school year and two-thirds (66 percent) anticipate doing so in 2011-12.
- Nearly one-fifth (16 percent) furloughed personnel for the 2010-11 school year and one-third (34 percent) anticipate doing so in 2011-12.
- More than half (57 percent) increased class size for the 2010-11 school year and two-thirds (65 percent) anticipate doing so in 2011-12.
- More than one-third (37 percent) eliminated/delayed instructional improvement initiatives for the 2010-11 school year and nearly half (49 percent) anticipate doing so in 2011-12.
- Only 6 percent reduced operations to a four-day school week (during the school year) for the 2010-11 school year, while 17 percent anticipate doing so in 2011-12.

What is the solution for schools reeling from reduced budgets? In recent months, leaders from the political, education, and private sectors have been weighing in on the implications of the current fiscal climate for public schools (see table 8.1 for a sampling of these leaders' thoughts). Much of the rhetoric reflects the theme of thinking creatively and spending education funds more wisely and efficiently. For school leaders, perhaps this means using web-based materials for instruction rather than purchasing new textbooks. Perhaps it entails increasing class sizes for all grade levels in order to reduce personnel costs. At the state level, perhaps this wiser spending philosophy means eliminating the requirement for standardized assessments in certain grades. These fiscal practices – all of which are being done by some, if not all, school systems in Georgia – can certainly help the bottom line for public education. But our public education system will soon reach a point at which budget cuts, no matter how much efficiency

TABLE 8.1. ADVICE FROM NATIONAL LEADERS ON ADDRESSING THE EDUCATION BUDGET CRISIS

“For more than 30 years, our costs have risen while performance stayed flat. Now we need our performance to rise while spending stays flat. There is only one way to do that: Innovation.

Smart budgeting does not mean paying teachers less. It can lead to new pay structures that let teachers earn more. If we pay... our best teachers for taking in more students, we accomplish three goals at once – we save money, we get more students in classrooms with highly effective teachers, and we give our best teachers a real raise, not just for being good, but for taking on more work.”

– **Bill Gates, November 19, 2010, Remarks to the Council of Chief State School Officers**

“Personnel costs comprise the bulk of education budgets, and teachers make up the majority of those costs. Yet historically, education leaders have had little ability or will to address teacher costs in order to save money: salaries, layoff procedures, working hours, and sundry other personnel issues are often constrained by teacher contracts or state law. The current fiscal crisis could encourage policy makers to change some of these laws and give union leaders incentive to reconsider such contract provisions.

Investments in the core academic subjects should take precedence over electives and extracurriculars.”

– **Frederick Hess and Eric Osberg, editors of *Stretching the School Dollar: How Schools and Districts Can Save Money While Serving Students Best***

“This challenge [of doing more with less] can, and should be, embraced as an opportunity to make dramatic improvements. I believe enormous opportunities for improving the productivity of our education system lie ahead if we are smart, innovative, and courageous in rethinking the status quo.

There are two large buckets of opportunity for doing more with less. The first is reducing waste throughout the education system. The second bucket of opportunities is doing more of what works – and less of what doesn't.

Doing more with less will likely require reshaping teacher compensation to do more to develop, support, and reward excellence and effectiveness, and less to pay people based on paper credentials. In secondary schools, districts may be able to save money without hurting students, while allowing modest but smartly targeted increases in class size.”

– **Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, November 17, 2010, Remarks at the American Enterprise Institute**

58 Ellerson, N. M. “Surviving a Thousand Cuts: America's Public Schools and the Recession.” American Association of School Administrators, December 2010.

they create, will negatively impact the core work of schools to educate our citizenry. As articulated in a recent report from the American Association of School Administrators:

“The continued and increasing budget cuts threaten the capacity of schools to deliver essential services and threaten the gains schools have made in student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap. Considered in total, the economic recession has exacted a heavy toll on schools, communities, families, and learning.”⁵⁹

Unfortunately, the new year will not bring much good news for Georgia’s budget. A recent report by the Fiscal Research Center of the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies explains that our state is facing a structural imbalance, a budget situation that occurs when expenditures exceed revenues and also when a state relies on revenues that are one-time or short-term in nature in order to cover ongoing operating expenses. Despite the hard choices made by state leaders in the recent past, Georgia is still facing a structural deficit of over \$1.5 billion per year. For the past two years, federal stimulus dollars have helped shore up the holes caused by declining revenues. Yet in fiscal year 2012, the state will continue to face around a \$1.8 to \$2.0 billion structural deficit, but most likely without federal assistance, reserves, and other one-time funds that can be used to make up the difference.⁶⁰ Based on the study’s projections, Georgia’s revenues will not surpass fiscal year 2007 levels until fiscal year 2015.

ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

As Georgia’s new governor enters office and the legislature convenes in January, they will again face unprecedented financial difficulties as they seek ways to balance the state budget. While some school systems are receiving Race to the Top funds, there will be no other new federal dollars to help shore up state funds for education. Fiscal researchers have provided clear proof that our state is facing a long-term deficit. A shortage in revenues from the Georgia lottery is jeopardizing pre-kindergarten and the HOPE scholarship programs. Despite the call from a number of advocate groups for a balanced approach to solving the fiscal crisis that includes revenue increases in addition to targeted budget cuts, Governor Deal has pledged not to support a tax increase. The fiscal situation seems untenable.

Some solutions may come from the recommendations of a panel called the Special Council on Tax Reform and Fairness. Comprised of business people and economists, the council worked for six months on its charge to create a modern, simple, fair, and business-friendly tax structure. The council’s recommendations were released in early January, and lawmakers may consider them during the 2011 session.⁶¹ Among the recommendations are putting the state’s 4 percent sales tax back on all groceries and reducing personal and corporate income taxes. Whether or not these ideas become law during the 2011 legislative session, they will not have much immediate impact on the massive fiscal shortfall with which our school leaders will have to contend.

To solve our state’s long-term financial challenges and to restore public funds to the vital service of education, Georgia’s policymakers must make policy changes that modernize our antiquated tax system and make it more relevant to Georgia’s 21st century economy. Doing so would better meet the needs of citizens, schools, and businesses going forward.

59 Ellerson, N. M. “Surviving a Thousand Cuts: America’s Public Schools and the Recession.” American Association of School Administrators, December 2010.

60 Bourdeaux, C., & Sjoquist, D. L. “Estimating Georgia’s Structural Budget Deficit.” FRC Report No. 209. Andrew Young School of Policy Studies Fiscal Research Center, July 2010.

61 For more information on the Special Council on Tax Reform and Fairness, visit <http://fiscalresearch.gsu.edu/taxcouncil/index.htm>.

9

Understanding Teacher Effectiveness

ISSUE OVERVIEW

In 2009, with the launch of the federal Race to the Top grant competition, President Obama and Secretary of Education Duncan challenged all stakeholders in education to take a closer look at four areas of educational reform. One of these areas was teacher and leader effectiveness, because as Secretary Duncan articulated, “it is no secret that when it comes to schools, talent matters – tremendously.”⁶² Decades of research back up the Secretary’s assertion; we have abundant evidence that the most significant school-based factor influencing student achievement is the classroom teacher. And as Duncan further stated, our ability to attract, prepare, and retain great teaching talent can transform public education in this country for the next 25 to 30 years.

The federal administration’s focus on attracting and keeping great teachers and leaders in America’s classroom has helped to reignite conversations about what qualities make an effective teacher. Several studies have shown that certain teachers produce more substantial gains on standardized exams than others.⁶³ Those teachers who can produce such gains are considered more effective. Many researchers believe, however, that standardized test scores are an insufficient measure of student achievement or teacher effectiveness. If states are expected to reward teachers for their effectiveness in the classroom, how can they measure this effectiveness in a valid and reliable way? And what work is left to do in Georgia to ensure that every child is taught by an effective teacher?

WHAT’S THE SIGNIFICANCE?

Ensuring high-quality teachers for all students was a major objective of the 2002 federal No Child Left Behind legislation. The law required states to ensure that by the 2005-06 school year (and in future years), all teachers of core academic subjects were “highly qualified,” meaning they had received state certification, held at least a bachelor’s degree, and had demonstrated subject-area competence. Despite the changes in education culture and practices triggered by the new NCLB requirement, to date there is no conclusive evidence that our nation’s quality teaching improved as a result of the mandate.

While schools may have had better “inputs” in their highly-qualified teachers, never were there any documented links to improved student outcomes. The current federal administration’s call for increased attention to our teacher workforce represents a shift in the language from teacher quality to teacher effectiveness, with a new emphasis on measurable outcomes. The questions remain, however, how to identify an effective teacher and how to measure the impact that teacher has on student achievement.

62 Duncan, A. “The Race to the Top Begins.” Remarks by Secretary Arne Duncan, July 24, 2009.

63 Hassel, B. C. & Hassel, E. A. “Opportunity at the Top: How America’s Best Teachers Could Close the Gaps, Raise the Bar, and Keep Our Nation Great.” Retrieved from <http://opportunity-culture.org>.

Through a variety of new policies, Georgia has taken great strides in recent years to improve our pipeline of quality teachers. In 2005, the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (PSC), and the University System of Georgia Board of Regents (BOR) adopted the *Georgia Framework for Teaching* as the state definition of quality teaching. The framework identifies six domains in which teachers should demonstrate a high level of performance and suggests that effective teaching results in evidence of student learning. Additionally, teacher and leader effectiveness are two of the six goals in the GaDOE's strategic plan.

In 2009 the Georgia General Assembly passed House Bill 280, a law that addresses the ongoing shortage of teachers in the fields of math and science by creating salary incentives to help recruit and retain these teachers. A second legislative measure passed in 2009, House Bill 455, addresses the salary increases paid for advanced degrees in leadership for individuals not assigned to leadership positions. Lastly, Georgia's leaders will begin to address the recruitment of teachers for high-need schools with the support of a federal grant award. The state was recently awarded a five-year, \$3.5 million Transition to Teaching Grant that will be used to place math, science, and special education teachers in eligible schools.⁶⁴

Apart from the above initiatives, the implementation of Georgia's Race to the Top (RTTT) plan is helping to drive new conversations about teacher effectiveness, evaluation, and compensation in our state. Georgia will use the RTTT funds to finalize a fair, transparent, and rigorous evaluation system for educators which prioritizes student growth in the definition of teacher and leader effectiveness, and ties compensation, certification, and employment decisions to teacher and leader effectiveness.⁶⁵ (See Issue 2: Continuing our Race to the Top for an overview of Georgia's implementation plan for this critical area of teacher effectiveness.) Despite the federal push toward linking student achievement data to educator evaluation and compensation – and Georgia's efforts to move in this direction – there is still much debate and uncertainty over the best ways to measure and reward teacher effectiveness.

At the heart of Georgia's new plan to improve teaching is the use of a statistical value-added model (VAM), a method of measuring teacher effectiveness that is increasingly getting the attention of policymakers and researchers. Value-added measures use test scores to track the growth of individual students as they progress through each grade level and determine how much "value" a teacher has added to their academic experience.

VAMs are designed to distinguish the effects of teachers from the effects of other factors such as family background on student academic performance. While early VAM studies demonstrated large differences in teacher effectiveness, recent studies have been unable to substantiate these claims. Researchers have identified several methodological flaws and limitations with the use of VAMs in determining teacher effectiveness.⁶⁶ Researchers at the RAND Corporation argue that there simply is not enough support for the use of VAMs to make high-stakes decisions. Other researchers argue that VAMs can help to evaluate student progress on standardized exams, but these test scores are neither a sufficiently reliable or valid measure of teacher effectiveness.⁶⁷ Moreover, standardized tests to measure student achievement were never designed to measure teacher effectiveness or to account for all of the factors that impact student learning.⁶⁸

The value-added measure will be one part of the model of teacher effectiveness Georgia designed as part of the RTTT reform plan. The new Teacher Effectiveness Measure (TEM) will have four components:

- Qualitative, rubric-based evaluations,
- Value-added score,
- Reduction in the student achievement gap at the classroom/student roster level, and
- Other quantitative measures.

TEM will be used to make decisions for professional development, compensation, promotion, retention, recertification, interventions, and dismissals.⁶⁹

64 Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2010*. January 2010.

65 Georgia's Race to the Top Application. June 1, 2010.

66 McCaffrey, D. F., Lockwood, J. R., Koretz, D. M., & Hamilton, L. S. "Evaluating Value-Added Models for Teacher Accountability." RAND Corporation, 2003. One limitation is the availability of appropriate tests. VAMs should be vertically scaled, meaning that they test the same content from year to year. Most state tests now measure grade-level standards so they are incapable of assessing growth in a particular area. Another limitation is the problem of attribution. If a student receives supplemental instruction from a different teacher it is impossible to determine who should receive "credit" for the student's performance.

67 Baker, E. L. "Problems with the Use of Student Test Scores to Evaluate Teachers." Briefing Paper #278. Economic Policy Institute, August 29, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.epi.org/publications/entry/bp278>.

68 Goe, L. "The Link Between Teacher Quality and Student Outcomes: A Research Synthesis." National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, October 2007. Retrieved from <http://www.tqsource.org>.

69 Georgia Department of Education. "Race to the Top" [Presentation]. 2010.

The RTTT competition encouraged states to reevaluate how they compensate teachers. Currently, policymakers believe that pay for performance will improve teacher effectiveness. In most cases, pay for performance means rewarding teachers for their students' academic performance on standardized exams. Although the concept is not new, the first scientific study of performance pay in the U.S. was not concluded until this year. The National Center on Performance Incentives (NCPI) determined that performance pay alone does not improve student test scores.⁷⁰ Critics of the study's results suggest that the narrow focus on giving teachers more money for test scores is not the ultimate goal of performance pay; the focus should be on making the teaching profession more attractive to potential teachers.⁷¹ Either way, it is too early to say what impact performance pay will have on teacher effectiveness, recruitment, or retention in Georgia.

ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

Georgia has already taken important first steps toward restructuring teacher effectiveness measures. Before making high-stakes decisions with these measures, however, it is critical that we ensure our methods of measuring teacher value are valid and reliable. Leaders at the state level and within the 26 partner districts implementing RTTT plans must finalize the development and implementation of the longitudinal data system and then proceed cautiously with the work of overhauling our teacher evaluation, certification, and compensation systems. Without careful thought, advice from expert researchers, and overwhelming buy-in from the tens of thousands of teachers in Georgia's public school classrooms, the massive effort spurred by our RTTT application to improve teacher quality across the state could falter.

As our state rolls out the RTTT plan, we must dedicate time and resources to carefully study the impact of new teacher effectiveness policies. To that end, Georgia should convene a study commission that includes business leaders, education experts, teachers, and parents to assist in the work of monitoring the policy changes and making additional recommendations for strengthening the teacher workforce.

70 National Center on Performance Incentives. "NCPI Researchers Announce Results of POINT Experiment." September 21, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.performanceincentives.org>.

71 Connell, C. "Study: Paying Teachers for Student Performance Doesn't Raise Test Scores." Politics Daily, October 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.politicsdaily.com>.

10

The Need for Honest and Accurate Data

ISSUE OVERVIEW

The role of data in the improvement of teaching and learning and the setting of education policy has been a critical issue of advocates and lawmakers for many years. In fact, this topic has appeared repeatedly in earlier editions of the Top Ten Issues to Watch, beginning with the first release in 2006 that anticipated an end to Georgia's wait for a comprehensive student information system. Unfortunately, that wait would continue for several more years.

Over the past few years, the capacity of states to collect, analyze, and use data for educational practice has gained national attention. The Data Quality Campaign, launched in 2005, has grown to a collaborative effort involving over 50 organizations across the country and has succeeded in building the political will for states to implement the ten essential elements of a longitudinal data system. The Race to the Top (RTTT) grant competition required states to submit plans for building data systems that measure student success and inform teachers and principals how they can improve their practices.

Yet, as the Georgia Partnership articulated just one year ago, our state still has a great deal of work to do if we are to arm educators, policymakers, and the public with honest and accurate data about our public education system. It remains true that "without adequate investments in information technology infrastructure and absent the human and organizational capacity to employ data in transformative ways, Georgia's education system will continue to be data rich yet knowledge poor."⁷²

WHAT'S THE SIGNIFICANCE?

It seems that at all levels of public education – federal, state, and local; elementary, secondary, and postsecondary – we are finally having success at building longitudinal data systems and adopting the practices of data-driven decision-making. Even in those states and educational sectors where work remains to be done to complete a longitudinal data system, there is more political will and, thanks in part to the federal RTTT grant, more funding than ever before to make data an integral piece of improved teaching and learning.

Yet as policymakers designate additional resources to strengthen data systems and education leaders take actions to link previously independent data warehouses, are we running the risk of information overload? The executive director for education at the American Productivity and Quality Center captures this potential dilemma with these words:

"Just as the weary seamen in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' were surrounded by a vast ocean of water yet had none to drink, educators are drowning in seas of data they cannot use."⁷³

⁷² Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2010*. January 2010.

⁷³ Kline, D. "Data, Data Everywhere, But Not a Drop to Use." *EdWeek* Vol. 28, Issue 33. May 28, 2009.

As Georgia puts the finishing touches on its longitudinal data system, a student information system that ultimately will track every public school student from kindergarten through college, one challenge for state leaders is ensuring that educators and policymakers will not drown in the sea of data, but rather will have the knowledge and tools to use the data to improve teaching and learning in our schools. According to the state’s RTTT implementation plan, Georgia will provide professional development and tutorials on the use of data analysis to drive instructional improvement for school and district-level staff across the state.

Despite the work Georgia’s leaders have done in recent years to improve our longitudinal data system,⁷⁴ using data to compare our state nationally can be a difficult task for policymakers and education stakeholders. Currently, all states have their own academic standards, assessments, and methods for determining student achievement, making state-to-state comparisons on these measures challenging. In order to legitimately weigh Georgia’s education results against those of other states, we must use standardized national measures of achievement. Unfortunately, such measures are few and far between and cannot provide policymakers with all the data necessary to gain a holistic picture of education progress.

One example, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly used as a report card of states’ academic performance, provides a valid snapshot of student proficiency from state to state. However, the NAEP is administered only

every two years, tests only certain subjects, and does not provide results at the school or district level. A powerful tool with a wealth of historical data, the NAEP still can only provide pieces of information for state leaders.

Deciphering data can be an even trickier process when considering high school graduation rates. While it might seem like a simple measure – how many 9th graders earned a diploma after four years of high school? – each state currently has its own method of data collection and computation. To make a valid comparison of states’ graduation rates, it is necessary to use standardized data from a national source. Unfortunately, depending on the source and the exact calculation method, even standardized national data yields different results for graduation rates and often these data have a lag-time of two to three years. As shown in table 10.1., national sources consistently report different graduation data than the Georgia Department of Education. While the mix of strikingly dissimilar numbers leaves many stakeholders questioning the “real” high school graduation rate, the good news is that each source shows our state making progress over time.

New regulations issued in 2008 by the federal Department of Education are meant to drive improvements in graduation rate data and help produce uniformity in states’ calculation methods. Beginning with the 2010-11 school year, states are required to report a uniform, comparable, and accurate graduation rate known as a “four-year adjusted cohort rate,” which measures the percent of students in a ninth grade cohort that graduate with a

TABLE 10.1. WHAT IS GEORGIA’S “REAL” HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE?	DATA SOURCE	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
	National Center for Education Statistics	62.4%	64.1%	65.4%	n/a	n/a
	Education Week	55.9%	57.8%	n/a	n/a	n/a
	National Center for Higher Education Management Systems	55.9%	n/a	58.8%	n/a	n/a
	Georgia Department of Education	70.8%	72.3%	75.4%	78.9%	80.8%

74 For more information on Georgia’s longitudinal data system, see “Issue 4: A Data System to Support Instruction” in the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education’s *Top Ten Issues to Watch in 2010*, available at www.gpee.org.

regular diploma in four years or less. (Georgia currently uses the “leaver rate”; for an explanation of these two calculation methods, see table 10.2.) This rate also must be used for determining Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) beginning in the 2011-12 school year.⁷⁵

In addition to a four-year rate, the federal regulations also permit states to use an additional “extended-year” graduation rate that measures how many students graduate in more than four years, which could be incorporated into AYP calculations. For example, a state could use a rate that measures how many students graduate with a regular diploma within five or six years.

Unfortunately, the expectation of nearly every education data expert is that Georgia’s move to the new cohort calculation method will result in a sizeable drop in our high school graduation rate. Such has been the case in the few states that have already changed their data calculation. In Indiana, which began using the cohort rate for the class of 2006, the state graduation rate dropped from 89.8 percent in 2005 to 76.5 percent.⁷⁶ Similarly, internal data analysis from Mississippi’s state education agency found that for the class of 2005, the cohort graduation calculation yielded a rate of 61 percent, much lower than the state’s traditionally reported rate of 85 percent.⁷⁷ While Georgia is expected to follow federal regulations and report a cohort graduation rate for the first time in 2011, the state has not yet hinted at what the new rate might be.

TABLE 10.2. METHODS OF CALCULATING THE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE

LEAVER RATE

Currently used by Georgia

of students who graduate with regular diplomas

**# of dropouts in 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th,
from appropriate years
+
graduates
+
other completers**

COHORT RATE

Required by federal regulations for use in 2010-11

in adjusted cohort who earned a regular diploma

in adjusted cohort

The “adjusted cohort” is defined as the number of first-time ninth graders four years ago, plus students who transfer into the cohort, and minus students who transfer out, emigrate to another country, or are deceased.

Source: Alliance for Excellent Education. “Federal High School Graduation Rate Policies and the Impact on Georgia.” March 2009.

ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

Access to accurate, longitudinal data is critical for policymakers trying to drive education reform, teachers and school leaders working to improve student success, and public stakeholders seeking to determine the quality of schools in their communities. In the past year, Georgia has made significant strides in the implementation of a data system that is providing many school systems with access to more information than they have ever had. To continue the work in 2011, our state’s leaders must focus on the training of educators to use data as part of a continuous improvement process within classrooms, schools, and districts. Additionally, Georgia’s leaders must be honest and open about our cohort graduation rate and provide accurate data to the public. Without quality information about student and school performance, the best efforts of our policymakers, education practitioners, and advocates will be greatly hindered.

75 Alliance for Excellent Education. “Every Student Counts: The Role of Federal Policy in Improving Graduation Rate Accountability.” March 2009.

76 Swanson, Christopher. “Are We (Finally) Approaching a Consensus on Graduation Rates?” Presentation for the 2008 Kids Count Conference.

77 Ibid.

FIRST STEPS: What Georgia Must Do Now to Become a National Education Leader

1 Georgia's New Leaders: Where Will They Take Us?

- Make education Georgia's number one economic development priority.
- Maintain support for programs that are working in our public schools and avoid silver-bullet solutions that are not proven to be widely successful.

2 Continuing Our Race to the Top

- Continue to involve all stakeholders – including teachers, school leaders, business and community members – in the RTTT process and communicate regularly with updates on the implementation.
- Ensure that teachers and leaders at the school and district level receive adequate professional training on all aspects of the RTTT plan.

3 Early Learning: Quality and Access for Our Children

- Safeguard the financial resources that fund public pre-kindergarten.
- Develop a quality rating system for early education programs to assist parents in making informed decisions and to hold centers accountable for high standards of quality.

4 Confronting Poverty: A Dire Need

- Support and strengthen programs that encourage work, including childcare supports, transportation assistance, and expanded paid leave policies.
- Equalize educational resources by improving school system equalization grants and teacher placement policies.

5 Eradicating Gaps in Student Achievement

- Study successful schools that have closed achievement gaps, publish best practices, and train educators to modify instruction to meet the unique needs of students from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds.
- Create partnerships between successful schools and communities and those needing additional supports to bring all students to high performance levels.

6 College and Career Readiness: Are We Getting It Right?

- Promote and expand opportunities for students to take part in dual enrollment programs.
- Maintain support for the current single high school diploma policy and improve counseling services to help students customize their course of study to best meet their needs and interests.

7 Getting a Handle on School Choice

- Conduct a comprehensive evaluation of Georgia's current school choice programs, paying close attention to the academic outcomes of students in these programs.
- For proposed expansions of school choice initiatives, determine the associated goals for student achievement as well as the fiscal impact of implementation.

8 Scraping the Barrel: Our New School Funding Model

- Protect public K-12 education funding from additional cuts in the state budget.
- Take a long-term approach to solving the fiscal crisis by modernizing Georgia's tax system and making it more relevant to the 21st century economy.

9 Understanding Teacher Effectiveness

- Finalize development and implementation of the longitudinal data system and new teacher evaluation system.
- Convene a study commission to assist in identifying best practices for improving teacher effectiveness.

10 The Need for Honest and Accurate Data

- Provide accurate information about Georgia's cohort graduation rate.
- Train educators to use data as part of a continuous improvement process within classrooms, schools, and districts.



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