



GEORGIA PARTNERSHIP FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

Georgia's Education System: Much Better Than We Hear About

Have you ever heard that Georgia is first in education? Probably not. Have you ever heard that Georgia is last in education? Probably so.

When you hear Georgia is last in education, that is typically based on one measure – SAT results. Like many education measures, apples-to-apples comparisons are difficult to glean from SAT results. For example, the top-ranked state in the nation based on the most recent comparable (2016) SAT results was Illinois. Only 3% of their students took the SAT, compared to 67 percent of Georgia students.

However, if someone insists on using the SAT to rank states, Georgia is far better than “last in the nation.” While not exactly where we want to be, we ranked 36th in the nation on the 2016 comparison, with 67 percent of Georgia’s students taking the test.

The same story can be told with the ACT. This year’s ACT results revealed Georgia’s average composite score of 21.4 was higher, for the second consecutive year and the second time in history, than the national average of 21.

In fact, over the past decade, educational outcomes have been steadily improving as Georgia has raised expectations around standards and instructional systems to ensure that students are college- and career-ready when they graduate high school. Georgia has implemented some of the highest graduation requirements in the country, including four credits of both science and math.

Georgia is seeing the results of these changes. The high school graduation rate has increased more than 10 percentage points since 2012 and is above 80 percent for the first time since using the adjusted cohort calculation now required by federal law. Even better, 50 Georgia school districts recorded 2017 graduation rates at or above 90 percent. Since 2010, the number of graduates requiring remediation upon entering post-secondary education has dropped over six percentage points for English and nearly 10 percentage points in math. We are increasing the percentage of graduates and better preparing them for college and careers.

Despite these gains and achievements, considerable public discourse involving the K-12 public schools is around how they are “failing.” While much of this narrative began under the era of No Child Left Behind, it has most recently been fueled by debate over the Opportunity School District (OSD) and Chief Turnaround Officer legislation. The public attention has primarily been focused around schools on “the list,” which schools received an “F” and how long have they been “failing.”

That narrative needs to change. This is not to suggest that addressing the needs of schools, especially schools that are chronically underperforming expectations, is not a real and pressing issue. There are in fact students who attend schools for their entire academic career that are unable to provide the teaching and resources needed for them to be successful. This is not acceptable. However, labeling these schools – and by extension the students, educators, families and communities that make-up the schools – as failures inaccurately identifies the problem and hinders the ability to find a solution.

Much of the root problems around chronically low-performing schools can be found in the impacts of poverty and a history of disinvestment in local communities. In an excellent article examining the costs of educating low-income students, a metro Atlanta elementary school was highlighted as having more than 50 students living in an abandoned apartment building with no electricity or water. When the building was demolished, educators struggled to help their suddenly homeless students and families find new housing and MARTA passes. They provided luggage and clean clothes, and other needs of homeless children. Knowing this, I ask: Is this a school that is failing its students?

The existence of chronically struggling schools is but a symptom of a larger problem. The problem is that many schools are being overwhelmed by issues of poverty and community disinvestment at a time when expectations around student achievement are being raised exponentially. Yet still, on average, student achievement is rising. It's not where we ultimately want it, but educators are getting impressive results under difficult circumstances.

As I ponder Georgia's public education system, I think about all the students and the educators who serve them. Educators, particularly those who work in impoverished communities, need support and encouragement. They need resources and training to serve all the growing needs of their students. These needs include the gaining of knowledge, to be sure. But their needs also run the gambit of social, emotional, and physical health supports. Sometimes that need is as basic as a winter coat and breakfast.

There is much to celebrate in Georgia's schools. Georgia is no longer ranked in the cellar but has moved up to the middle of the pack. We need to be talking about our successes and how we can get better, rather than past failures. We need to identify problems, lift up solutions, and provide supports to help communities improve their schools. These are things we can do to build a stronger Georgia and keep it the number one state in which to do business.

The next time you hear someone say Georgia is last in education, let them know they are living in the past and that our schools and students are having successes that are going to keep Georgia's future bright.

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