

**ISSUE**  
**1****EQUITY –  
SHIFTING MINDSET  
AND STRATEGY****ISSUE OVERVIEW**

The pandemic spotlighted the social, economic, and educational inequities that affect all Georgians. This issue brief describes how an equity mindset and expanded access to high-quality education and workforce opportunities promote personal well-being, community resilience, and state economic security.

**SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA**

The Georgia Partnership defines “equity” as equipping Georgians with the tools and resources to be full participants in society and the workforce. Equity-focused policies and practices strategically provide needed resources to youth and adults who require them. These resources are available to all students based on individual need, as well as those from historically underserved groups.

Historical differences in achievement and opportunity have left Georgia vulnerable to recessions and pandemics. While the pandemic interrupted learning for all, students who did not have regular access to high-quality virtual learning options were disproportionately impacted by the interrupted learning time and fell further behind their peers academically.

**ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA**

Georgia is well-positioned for education and workforce revitalization. The number of Georgians with postsecondary credentials has increased steadily in the last ten years. The Technical College System of Georgia has worked with industry partners to develop high-demand credential and noncredit workforce programs. The Georgia Department of Education and numerous school districts have committed to career pathways that lead to industry-recognized credentials and align with community and technical college programs.

State policymakers and education leaders should build on these strengths and advance efforts to increase equity and opportunity for all learners, but especially the most vulnerable Georgians. The infusion of federal COVID relief funds could help launch coordinated efforts across the Birth to Work continuum.

Leaders and education advocates should unite around an ambitious 10-year goal – 65% of Georgia’s residents aged 25 to 64 will hold a postsecondary credential by the end of 2032. In support of this goal, Georgia needs a long-range plan, anchored in a common set of incremental education and workforce targets, that addresses how the state will lead the nation in post-secondary completion by 2032. The “Recommendations for Moving Georgia Forward” section describes concrete strategies that could create a more resilient and prosperous Georgia.

## ISSUE 2

## UNFINISHED INSTRUCTION – EQUITY THROUGH ACCELERATION

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic. Two weeks later, nearly all school districts had shifted to online-only instruction. By May 6, education leaders in 48 states chose to end the school year early, ending the 7-week virtual learning experiment.

When students returned to the school in fall 2020, teachers started to assess how the pandemic interrupted student learning. Research studies conducted in fall 2020 and spring 2021 found that the pandemic contributed to learning losses of about 4 months in reading and 5 months in math.

**Unfinished instruction** describes the “combination of teaching and learning within an academic year that fails to provide students with an opportunity to demonstrate [grade-level] proficiency.” Unfinished instruction recognizes that structural barriers and inequitable practices stunt student learning, and that **accelerated learning models** and an **equity focus** could address learning gaps.

### SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA

When students are not performing on grade level, schools often focus on foundational skills and content presented in previous grades. This approach is called **remediation**.

An emerging approach called **accelerated learning** looks forward, not backward. Teachers deliver grade-level content while interventionists or tutors provide supplemental academic support.

Accelerated learning usually evokes images of high-performing students taking advantage of early college and career opportunities. Accelerated learning can also involve personalizing instruction based on students’ needs, regardless of background or current performance. Since the starting line differs for each student, accelerated learning models could address unfinished learning, meeting students where they are and ensuring that they perform to their own level of capability.

### ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

Students of color and youth attending high-poverty schools are more likely to endure cycles of remediation and inequity. Disrupting these cycles will require school and district leaders to redesign instruction, address outdated school structures, and provide personalized support for students and teachers. Federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds could provide the resources necessary for schools to pursue accelerated learning models.

In the “Recommendations for Moving Georgia Forward” section, the Georgia Partnership highlights three actions that school systems could take – identifying effective uses of supplemental learning resources, evaluating if current educational technologies and instructional models promote accelerated learning, and reforming learning time by extending learning beyond the school day and redesigning school schedules to ensure teachers receive the resources and supports that they need to accelerate learning.

**ISSUE  
3****NON-ACADEMIC  
BARRIERS –  
THE SCHOOL'S ROLE****ISSUE OVERVIEW**

In 2019, nearly 20 percent of Georgia's school-age children lived in households with incomes at or below the federal poverty level, and 59 percent of youth qualified for free or reduced lunch. Many of these students encounter **non-academic barriers to learning** – health and environmental conditions that impede their ability to learn, engage with teachers and peers, and succeed in school.

At the local level, school staff identify learning barriers by observing student behavior. By reviewing the background factors affecting behaviors, school specialists provide an initial diagnosis and recommend specific interventions. Some of these interventions are called **wraparound supports** – student-centered resources that address one or more learning barriers. School and district leaders often partner with regional agencies and community organizations to deliver wraparound supports.

So, what's missing? An **equity-centered discussion** about the school's role in identifying family and community barriers, diagnosing student needs, and delivering wraparound supports. This brief describes how schools can address learning barriers through a whole-community approach – an engagement model in which the school is a resource hub for expanding access to community resources.

**SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA**

The education community recognizes the role of schools in supporting student health, safety, and well-being by developing integrated student support initiatives (ISS). The ISS initiatives offer specific services and supports to students and their families to build a foundation for academic success. These initiatives, referred to as community schools and wraparound supports as well as integrated student supports models, help schools connect struggling children with secure housing, medical care, food assistance, tutoring, and other critical supports. In some cases, assistance may go beyond student needs to provide critical services to parents and families.

**ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA**

The pandemic has placed additional stress on school systems to accelerate student learning and to mitigate the effect of non-academic learning barriers. School systems vary in their ability to deliver wraparound resources to students. As a community hub, schools can fulfill one of three roles – deliverer, partner, or referrer. To the extent possible, local leaders should locate community resources and collaborate with partners who have the expertise and capacity to address the out-of-school factors that stifle student learning.

School systems have a short window to partner, pilot, and evaluate the effectiveness of their wraparound supports using federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds that expire in 2024. After ESSER funds expire, local districts will need to find alternative funding sources or lean on community partners more to deliver the supports once provided in the school building.

**ISSUE  
4****IMPROVING SCHOOL  
CULTURE – THE IMPERATIVE  
OF SCHOOL LEADERS****ISSUE OVERVIEW**

The importance of school principals in improving student performance has long been underestimated. Research shows, however, that principals play a significant role in recruiting and retaining effective teachers and ensuring their success in the classroom through maintaining a positive school climate, motivating school staff, and enhancing teacher practices.

Amidst the pandemic, school leaders have more responsibilities than ever. As districts, schools, educators, and students look to emerge from the pandemic, a healthy school climate can empower accelerated learning, the delivery of non-academic support services, and increased family and community engagement. By inviting stakeholders – teachers, students, parents, and community members – to involve themselves in improving the school's health, vitality, and success, school leaders can co-create the conditions for safe and supportive learning environments. This facilitative approach to cultural change helps stakeholders identify school needs and develop a shared commitment toward achieving common goals.

**SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA**

Equity-focused school leaders champion academic and social-emotional competencies. Together, these two halves of culture reinforce one another. It means curriculum redesign to give all students, but especially traditionally disengaged or underserved students, the opportunity to feel a sense of belonging and representation within the curriculum.

Culture also affects professionals in the school building. The adult side of the school culture equation should focus on what teachers need – **the working conditions that enable them to succeed**. Similar to students, teachers thrive when expectations are clear and schoolwide strategies are coherent. Leaders should strive to build a culture that creates an expectation that all teachers can succeed provided they receive appropriate resources and training. Creating deliberate opportunities to build community among educators can set the stage for instructional experimentation and shared commitment.

**ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA**

Highly effective change leaders bring all stakeholders to the table. They do not rely on the classic, hierarchical arrangement where building leaders direct instructional delivery, teachers direct student learning, and students, parents and community members lack the agency to offer feedback on how to change their role in the ecosystem.

Equity-focused school leaders do not simply create a positive culture; they set a vision for school transformation. They help school stakeholders – teachers, students, parents, and community leaders – understand how their norms, beliefs, and efforts contribute to a vibrant school culture. In this ecosystem, school leaders facilitate change but let stakeholders negotiate how they fit within culture. Any friction that results from misalignment between the principal's vision and the efforts of other stakeholders provides an opportunity for considering how to reallocate resources and rethink strategies. To the extent that culture and vision create this opportunity, it also promotes more inclusive, equitable, and effective decision-making.

**ISSUE  
5****FUNDING – SCHOOL  
TRANSFORMATION ON  
A DEADLINE****ISSUE OVERVIEW**

Longtime educators remember the last time Georgia received a large federal investment in K-12 education. In 2010, the state received \$400 million through the Race to the Top Initiative.

A decade later, the state and its 233 local school systems received 1550% more in federal funding – \$6.6 billion – to transform K-12 education. While the department’s approved American Rescue Plan describes how the state department will invest its 10% allocation, district leaders should find out how to sustain funded strategies past the September 30, 2024 deadline.

School system leaders have about 30 months to spend all Elementary and Secondary School Emergency (ESSER) funds. State and local leaders should learn from the Race to the Top experience by piloting programs and strategies that will exist beyond the next two or three years. By using ESSER funds to sustain effective initiatives, leaders could seed the strategies that drive improved school and student performance well into the post-pandemic era.

**SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA**

The 2021 edition of the *Top Ten Issues to Watch* described how the pandemic and earlier state budget cuts created a situation where districts encountered increased costs and declining revenue. Many local school boards used reserves to cover budget shortfalls.

With the infusion of more than \$4 billion in additional federal funds since March 2021, a new question has emerged: how to use the nonrecurring ESSER funds to promote equitable opportunities and effective programming now and in the future.

**ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA**

The Georgia Partnership is conducting a four-year ESSER impact study (The CARES Impact Study), which began in the summer of 2021. The Georgia Partnership is using surveys, focus groups, and interviews to ultimately identify how school systems are using the ESSER funds, how needs shifted over time, and how school and district leaders have monitored program implementation and effectiveness.

After analyzing the initial baseline survey responses provided in the fall 2021, the Georgia Partnership found that school systems are planning to use ESSER funds on a variety of activities, including hiring staff and purchasing devices, learning technologies, software, equipment, and consulting services.

When spending ESSER funds, school systems should balance two objectives: 1) meeting current needs but also, 2) planning for the future. School and district leaders should ask themselves the same question that education advocates posed in 2010 during the Race to the Top era – in five years, what will be fundamentally different about teaching and learning in my schools due to the use of these one-time federal funds?

**ISSUE  
6****ACCOUNTABILITY –  
WHAT’S THE FUTURE?****ISSUE OVERVIEW**

Twenty years ago, the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) ushered in a new era of standards and accountability. NCLB required annual performance reporting on standardized tests by race and ethnicity. Disaggregated performance data revealed persistent achievement gaps by race and income.

NCLB’s successor – the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) – still mandated the annual administration of standardized assessments and the publication of school and district report cards but provided significant flexibility to states and school systems to redesign assessment strategies and accountability systems.

During the pandemic, state leaders paused the publication of accountability results so that school systems could focus on reopening schools and accelerating learning for all students. By Fall 2020, the Georgia Department of Education recommended that the state adopt a new accountability system.

**SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA**

After the U.S. Department of Education approved Georgia’s ESSA plan, policymakers and agency leaders revised state-level strategies to take advantage of federal flexibility. The state department redesigned the state’s accountability tool – the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI)– during the 2017-2018 school year. The GaDOE participates in the Innovative Assessment Pilot, which allows school systems or district consortia to administer alternative assessments in place of state-required tests. In Spring 2020, the Georgia General Assembly reduced the number of required statewide assessments.

These efforts lay the groundwork for state and local leaders to create an accountability system that provides a more holistic view of how schools support accelerated student learning and more equitable access to educational opportunities.

**ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA**

State leadership has called for a new accountability system. In September 2020, the GaDOE released a new vision for state education policy. The Roadmap for Reimagining K-12 Education recommends that the state “[d]evelop an accountability system that aligns to the unique priorities of local communities and lifts up our schools.”

In considering what a future education accountability tool should do and look like, it needs to reflect the needs of all stakeholders. For consumers – parents, community leaders, and the public – the tool should provide data in a transparent format that situates current student and school performance in two contexts. First, the tool should provide a historical perspective for consumers to understand if current efforts are contributing to increased or declining performance. Second, the tool should allow consumers to see how current performance compares to all similarly situated schools in the state.

# ISSUE 7

## EARLY LEARNING – PROTECTING INVESTMENTS IN EARLY LEARNERS

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

State policymakers have developed a strong early learning infrastructure in Georgia over the last thirty years, anchored by the Georgia Pre-K program established in a voter-approved referendum in 1992. From its inception through the 2020-21 academic year, the Georgia General Assembly has allocated nearly \$8 billion in lottery funds to provide Pre-K to over 1.87 million of the state's four-year-olds.

Despite Georgia's position as a national leader in the early learning space, the continued lack of access to affordable child care and wage inequity for early childhood education (ECE) workers threaten state investments in early childhood education and could result in fewer students of color and low-income youth receiving high-quality early care and learning.

### SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA

Much like other industries, the early learning industry is experiencing a talent shortage. Industry turnover is high - 40-60% in independent learning centers is common. Teacher turnover is a perennial challenge that has been aggravated by the pandemic.

The quality of Georgia's early learning workforce has a direct impact on ensuring most students are ready for kindergarten. DECAL is working hard to expand access to high-quality early learning experiences for Georgia's youngest residents. However, to support both historical and current investments as well as continuing to expand access, a strong early learning workforce is critical.

By any measure, Georgia's early childhood workers are underpaid. The average hourly wage for Pre-K and Head Start lead teachers is \$16.45 per hour. Alarming, educators in nonsubsidized programs earn \$10.14 on average — a 38% difference. For ECE workers, jobs in retail, food services, or hospitality could pay more than the \$10.14 average hourly wage. Noncompetitive wages and challenging working conditions contribute to high industry turnover.

Overall, early educators earn 20.4% less than their licensed colleagues in K-8 classrooms. One in seven teachers lives below the federally defined poverty line, which is \$26,500 for a family of four. **Nearly half — 46% — of child care workers receive government benefits.** However, costs to parents are already really high so we can't just pass the costs along, charge more to the public to increase pay, and expect Georgia's children to retain access to early childhood education.

### ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

Research shows that the economic security of early care workers is linked to their ability to create enriching learning environments for their students. Thus, improving pay and working conditions are critical strategies for maintaining equitable access to high-quality early care and learning for all students. Industry workforce is a critical pillar of Georgia's overall plan to build on previous investments and expand its early learning system. Continued support for a quality workforce is needed. However, despite current state and federal investments, Georgia must do more to improve ECE worker pay and increase retention rates. The average hourly wage for educators in child care centers is unacceptable given the importance they play in the economic recovery.

The drivers of early childhood policy must shift from relying on low-wage workers to serve the majority population to those that place value on a diverse, skilled workforce. Georgia needs to consider health insurance, debt forgiveness, refundable tax credits, and professional development support to bolster the early learning and child care workforce – and in turn, improve outcomes for the children, families, and communities they serve.

**ISSUE**  
**8****REVAMPING THE  
TEACHING PROFESSION –  
A NEW MOONSHOT****ISSUE OVERVIEW**

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy proclaimed that an American would land on the moon by the end of the 1960s. Kennedy's moonshot required significant investment and an overriding commitment to that singular goal. After 20 separate cycles of experimentation and refinement, NASA engineers pulled off the unthinkable: creating a lunar module that enabled two astronauts to land on the moon.

Georgia would benefit from a similar call to action – this time to transform the teaching profession by 2030. To revamp the profession, school and district leaders should address three policy areas critical to developing coherent educator workforce strategies: 1) recruitment and hiring, 2) teacher leadership programs, and 3) expanded professional learning opportunities.

**SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA**

To transform the profession, state and district leaders should consider how to broaden teaching pathways, deepen the effectiveness of the teacher workforce through teacher leadership programs, and extend the effectiveness of teacher teams by providing more time for frequent, job-relevant professional development opportunities.

While non-traditional teaching pathways could increase the number of educators entering the profession, current state recruitment strategies are not targeted enough to increase faculty diversity.

School systems can cultivate teacher leadership as a strategy to increase the effectiveness of classroom teachers. By identifying talented educators and providing them with professional learning, school systems can create a cadre of teacher leaders to provide mentorship and deliver professional learning that improves the instructional effectiveness of early-career educators and struggling teachers.

However, increasing equitable access across Georgia requires a system response. A focus on high-quality induction models for new teachers and rewarding educators that take on advanced roles like mentoring their peers could set the stage for more equitable distribution of effective teachers.

**ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA**

To launch the moonshot in Georgia, state policymakers and local leaders should reframe the value proposition around teaching defining what the profession offers an individual. To recruit more talented individuals, leaders should focus on career advancement opportunities and how teacher leadership roles allow highly effective practitioners to stay in the classroom.

Communicating the benefits of choosing teaching as a career is only the first step. State agencies and RESAs (Regional Education Service Agencies) should identify a cohort of early-adopter districts that are piloting promising practices and contribute to the state's knowledge base related to recruitment, teacher leadership, and job-embedded professional learning.

District leaders who develop formal teacher leader roles signal to aspiring professionals that their school systems award highly effective teachers. Put simply, investments in teacher leadership today could seed the teaching profession that Georgia needs by 2030.

# ISSUE 9

## WORKFORCE READINESS – A STRATEGY THAT PAYS OFF

### ISSUE OVERVIEW

In 2019, 42.4% of Georgians held a post-secondary degree. Including post-secondary certificates and certifications bring the total to 52.8% – still 7.2% short of the goal set by the Complete College Georgia initiative. Post-secondary attainment for African Americans and Latinos lags their peers – at 35.4% and 23.3%, respectively. A look at Georgia's post-secondary enrollment trends suggests workforce equity gaps by race and ethnicity will continue to worsen without bold action.

Georgia would benefit from a comprehensive long-range post-secondary education and jobs plan that encourages recent high school graduates and working adults to complete credentials of value – degree, certificate, and certification programs that prepare Georgians for high-demand, high-wage careers.

By creating multiple, formal exits and on-ramps to post-secondary education, system and institutional leaders can eventually establish a statewide workforce readiness system that allows workers to maintain their position in a changing economy by completing more advanced credentials.

### SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA

Three factors serve as barriers to recent high school graduates and working adults enrolling in post-secondary programs – lack of exposure to early post-secondary opportunities, affordability, and misperceptions about the value of short-term credentials.

Dual enrollment, career pathways, and work-based learning opportunities could increase students' exposure to advanced instruction and reduce time to degree. Access to financial support would help as well, as Georgia is one of only two states that does not provide need-based financial aid for college students. The state does, however, provide the HOPE Grant for students enrolled in certificate and technical diploma programs and a concurrent award – the HOPE Career Grant – if they are in a high-demand career area.

Relatedly, there is also perception that non-credit and short-term credentials have less workforce value than two- and four-year degrees. Workers with associate degrees in engineering have median earnings between \$50,001 and \$60,000 per year. Workers with certain certificates in engineering technologies or drafting have median earnings between \$75,001 and \$150,000. Short-term credentials may provide immediate economic value while workers pursue further educational opportunities to advance in their career.

### ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA

Georgia has considerable assets to encourage increased post-secondary enrollment – a broad-based, merit aid program, a growing dual enrollment program, and robust technical system partnerships with active workforce sector involvement.

However, these assets do not always align with the needs of a diverse student population and the state's workforce needs. Allocating resources and redesigning strategies to expand equitable opportunities for Georgians disconnected from post-secondary education is crucial to increasing personal and economic resilience in the face of another pandemic or economic shock.

Georgia needs to take steps to ensure that residents disconnected from post-secondary education and training are not discouraged from enrolling because of barriers that are solvable by coordinated and coherent state policies. Connecting disparate policies is the way that Georgia policymakers can attack system inequalities and ensure that all students are able to succeed.

**ISSUE  
10****RURAL  
TRANSFORMATION –  
FROM THE INSIDE OUT****ISSUE OVERVIEW**

In recent years, state policymakers and agency leaders have addressed challenges confronting rural communities by investing in broadband infrastructure, increasing access to physical and behavioral health services, and tackling rural poverty through education and economic development initiatives.

The pandemic did not diminish these priorities. In fact, local school systems, county commissions, and regional health agencies have received billions in federal COVID funds to scale current development efforts and address barriers to rural transformation.

Rural leaders now face a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to leverage multi-sector relationships and utilize federal COVID funds to create a cooperative strategy to increase community resilience – preparing for the fallout from the next destabilizing social or economic shock.

**SIGNIFICANCE FOR GEORGIA**

Resilience can be difficult to achieve in rural communities because of underpopulation, less diversity in industry sectors, high poverty, and low post-secondary educational attainment. Often, rural economic development efforts focus on upskilling for displaced workers or technical training responding to local employer needs. While these efforts could improve personal well-being and contribute to greater economic output, rural leaders could make their communities more resilient by aligning education and economic development strategies.

This issue highlights five barriers to community resilience: challenging demographics, lack of access to healthcare, family and neighborhood poverty, education and workforce opportunity gaps, and racial distrust.

Many of these barriers can be addressed with coordinated action and cooperative funding to support improved outcomes related to: early learning, extended learning time for K-12 students, school-centered wraparound supports, and workforce-aligned, post-secondary programs, all of which lead to community resilience.

**ACTION STEPS FOR GEORGIA**

Community assets are present, but they are not always coordinated in ways that allow rural leaders to expand access to education and workforce opportunities. Rural leaders should focus on immediate challenges while simultaneously creating long-term plans to transform personal well-being and community resilience.

While the Georgia Department of Education's Office of Rural Education and Innovation is poised to provide significant training and technical assistance to high-poverty communities, to be sustainable, the solutions must be developed, implemented, and executed by rural leaders.

Leaders from rural Georgia can demonstrate and provide locally driven proof points of where community partners, philanthropy and business leaders, and state and national government leaders across a multitude of agencies and departments from education, public health, economic development came together to address the full spectrum of educational and economic disparities. With a shared commitment of these leaders we can dismantle historic barriers, build community resilience, and lead us to more prosperous Georgia.