



EQUITY – THE IMPERATIVE FOR RECOVERY TO SUCCESS

Issue Overview

At the beginning of 2020, Georgia faced serious challenges in meeting its workforce needs by 2030. Research conducted by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) concluded that the impact of automation and the changing economy, coupled with the current education level of the state's population, put Georgia in danger of seeing 1.5 million of its workers and their children unemployed or underemployed in low-wage jobs by 2030. Since that grim reality was revealed, the impacts of COVID-19 and the subsequent economic crisis have accelerated the automation trends underpinning that prediction and exposed many of the systemic, structural barriers that have historically been preventing a significant percentage of Georgians from fully participating in and benefiting from the state's economy and economic growth.

Georgia's economic pipeline is fueled by its education system, from early learning through post-secondary completion and adult training and reskilling. Consequently, the path from recovery to success must consider a new normal that revolutionizes the role of education, how instruction is delivered, and the role the entire education system plays in economic recovery and development.

Significance for Georgia

The pandemic exacerbated many of the inequalities already existing in the education system, from domestic learning environments, to the availability of devices and online learning opportunities commensurate with quality teaching and learning. Much like the economic fallout from the pandemic, learning losses suffered are estimated to be greater for low-income, Black, and Latino students compared to their more affluent, White counterparts.

These cumulative and disproportionate impacts of academic learning loss and increased stress are not likely to be temporary shocks to the system that can be easily regained within one academic year. There is a strong probability that they will lead to long-term harm for individuals and communities. It is estimated that an additional 2% to 9% of high school students could drop out due to the pandemic and associated school closures, representing between 232,000 and 1.1 million students in grades 9-11 nationwide.

Action Steps for Georgia

As Georgia moves from response to recovery and ultimately to success, it is important to take a step back and consider the longer-term imperative to create a better system for all individuals. Simply "catching up" to pre-pandemic achievement does not address the academic and economic inequities that now plague a majority of Georgians and does not address the economic skills gap that Georgia faced pre-pandemic when the state was looking at potentially 1.5 million unemployable people by 2030.

Because Georgia's most vulnerable students were hit first and hardest by the impacts of the pandemic, it is imperative that state and local leaders intently focus on equity to ensure they are among the first to recover and at the forefront of the state's overall economic recovery. Moving forward, Georgia should ensure that resources and policy decisions are focused on correcting past inequities and distributing resources to the most vulnerable populations first. Decisions should prioritize support for growing student concerns, not only related to academic needs but also economic, social, and emotional needs; expanding and improving remote access and learning; extended learning time; and easing high school to college transitions.

The other issues in the Top Ten Issues to Watch 2021 will apply a social/racial equity lens across the birth-to-work pipeline to highlight where the pandemic revealed strong foundations upon which to build, cracks that were exposed or exacerbated, and systemic barriers to access and achievement that need to be addressed.



FUNDING – ESSENTIAL FOR ACHIEVING EQUITY

Issue Overview

As schools across the country reopened in the fall 2020, they faced extensive new expenses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the short term, they faced unplanned costs associated with just operating a school and trying to make up for the lost learning time. A conservative estimate for Georgia based on addressing the digital divide, expanding nutritional supports and increasing learning time projects that Georgia schools will need an additional \$300,828,448. That estimate does not include other costs related to changes in instructional staff required by smaller class size demands, increased transportation costs as buses must transport fewer students per busload, personal protective equipment, additional cleaning materials and health supplies, school health staffing, and investments in meeting the social, emotional, and mental health needs of students and staff.

At a time when schools are facing these dramatic increases in costs, state revenues have seen significant declines due to the economic fallout from the pandemic. As lawmakers implement budgetary cuts to education funding due to COVID-19, they must understand the impacts that spending reductions that took place during the Great Recession had and the impacts that districts, schools, and most importantly students continue to experience. This is importantly true for students of color, students from low-income families, and English language learners, as well as those with special needs, those who are experiencing homelessness, those who are in foster care, and those whose families are engaged in seasonal work. These are also the populations hit hardest by the pandemic and will need the most supports to recover.

Significance for Georgia

Georgia lawmakers have been faced with lagging revenues caused in part by the pandemic in early 2020. Due to this shortfall, lawmakers passed a \$26 billion state budget for fiscal year (FY) 2021, which covers state spending beginning July 1, 2020. The budget included a 10% cut in state spending, totaling \$2.2 billion. This included a \$950 million reduction for K-12 education spending for local school systems. On average, revenue sources for local school systems in Georgia are split evenly between state and local funds, approximately 46% each, with the remaining 8% coming from federal funds. However, that percentage can vary significantly by district depending on available revenues. The percentage of state funds used to support local school systems varies in Georgia from 20% to over 80%. In fact, excluding state charter schools, 21 local school systems rely on state dollars for more than 70% of their total budget, making any sort of reduction potentially devastating for these districts.

Action Steps for Georgia

To address the enormity and intricacies of the challenge facing Georgia, leaders need a comprehensive plan to assess and then meet the needs of all students post-COVID that incorporates all aspects of teaching and learning. Georgia needs a comprehensive funding plan, that prioritizes equitable distribution and access to resources to support these changes. This comprehensive funding reform legislation must include a weighted student formula that allocates more funding based on student and district characteristics, including poverty. Foundational to developing a new funding formula, Georgia must conduct a cost study to determine actual costs associated with supporting student achievement to guide state and district policy. By not considering the actual cost of education, local districts' ability to meet the needs of their students could be limited while at the same time these districts are being increasingly held accountable for student outcomes. This could also further increase inequalities between districts instead of alleviating them.

Georgia has known for decades where educational inequities exist. The state knows which communities are being hardest hit by the pandemic, the level of investments needed, and where those investments should be made. To meet those needs and move Georgia from recovery to success, the state needs to invest in an equitable funding model that prioritizes the most at-risk communities and students and leverages federal and local dollars to ensure all children have access to a quality education.



EARLY LEARNING – THE FOUNDATION FOR AN INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC RECOVERY

Issue Overview

Due to its foundational importance to success in school, some aspect of early learning has always been included in the Top Ten Issues to Watch – from improved literacy rates and lifetime earnings to overall health and well-being. The 2020 economic disruption further accentuated the issues around early learning, including its role in supporting a statewide workforce and the lack of access to quality childcare in many areas of the state.

Availability and access to early learning are critical to many families in Georgia but are of utmost importance to marginalized families. On average, 30% of Georgia children in the birth-to-age 4 population live in low-income families with at least one parent working 50 hours a week during the previous year. As Georgia addresses the impacts of the pandemic and moves to recovery and success, how does the state create a new early learning system that addresses inequities as the state looks to strengthen this critical segment of the birth-to-work pipeline?

Significance for Georgia

Georgia has arrived at a critical crossroads in the early learning space. Expanding this issue to consider drivers of inclusive economic recovery, Georgia has the opportunity to rethink equitable access to high-quality early learning, particularly in rural and underserved communities. There is also an opportunity to develop a corresponding statewide funding structure for infant through pre-school, pre-K, afterschool, and early learning workforce education supports.

In Georgia, the early care and education industry generates \$4.7 billion in economic activity each year. The Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS) estimates that \$24 billion of parents' annual earnings is supported by the availability of child care in Georgia. Further, it is estimated that Georgia has lost \$1.75 billion in economic activity annually and an additional \$105 million in tax revenue due to child care issues, with 25% of Georgia parents signaling a significant disruption to family employment due to child care issues. Why?

Equitable access to early learning experiences, especially high-quality ones, is not available to all children. This is particularly true for low-income children – the population that benefits from it the most. In 2019, less than 50% of children from low-income families were enrolled in Georgia's Pre-K Program. Families in rural areas face the greatest challenges in finding licensed child care, with three in five rural communities lacking an adequate child care supply. Georgia has worked to expand its program offerings, but there are still areas of the state with no child care services.

Action Steps for Georgia

Georgia's future economic prosperity is at risk without proper support and funding for early child care and learning. Now more than ever, workers will need new skills to retain and gain employment in the new, post-pandemic economy – and for families, this escalates the urgency for high-quality, affordable, accessible child care. Improving equitable access to early child care, funding strategies, and pre-K-third-grade alignment are paramount for Georgia as the state transitions to post-pandemic learning and work environments.

Finally, Georgia can now reimagine early education and dismantle long-standing funding and organizational disparities between early learning and K-12 systems. Better alignment between P-3 (pre-K to third grade) educators will build shared expectations and understanding of student benchmarks, school readiness, and child development. In addition to creating formal communication channels between ECE workers and public educators, Georgia needs to invest in tools, shared data platforms, and relationship building among agencies and across sectors. Without alignment, the gains made by children participating in high-quality early learning programs often fade or disappear completely – and given Georgia's literacy rates in K-8, transition learning loss is simply not something the state can afford.



DELIVERY OF INSTRUCTION – NEW APPROACHES TO LEARNING

Issue Overview

In March of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered the doors of the nation's public schools, parents and educators alike were left scrambling to find alternatives to the traditional, in-person instructional model. For the remainder of the school year, districts did their best to pivot toward distance learning strategies to engage students, while families found themselves searching for ways to accommodate their children's needs in an unfamiliar, remote learning environment. Since then, the broader impact of the pandemic on public schools and the communities in which they exist has come into clearer view. Challenges stemming from severe learning loss for students, schools and parents exploring alternative learning models, teachers weighing the benefits of returning to school or retiring and measuring the extent of the pandemic-related economic devastation are front and center.

These issues lay bare the many challenges and inequities that have an impact on the effectiveness of our public education system, particularly access to technology and high-quality online learning opportunities. However, they also reveal new opportunities for educators to think more boldly and innovatively about the ways we deliver instruction to a diverse population as a means of improving equity. Online, technology-driven learning is only going to become more common as we move forward, so it is imperative that the state develop a more comprehensive and robust strategy that will be inclusive and meet the needs of all Georgia students.

Significance for Georgia

Without the pressure of high-stakes accountability, coupled with a greater focus on addressing equity in schools, districts have had more flexibility to try different ways of educating and meeting the needs of their students, such as:

- Virtual Learning
- Hybrid Learning
- Competency-Based Learning
- Learning Hubs

Ultimately, Georgia's education leaders must position their districts to not only think differently about instructional delivery, but to also capitalize on opportunities to deliver instruction differently when circumstances dictate. Dr. Stephen Pruitt, president of the Southern Regional Education Board, noted that alternative instructional models are important because they help teachers cultivate multiple teaching styles that can be leveraged in a variety of instructional scenarios. In essence, the more instructional delivery models schools can deploy, the greater their capacity to effectively teach all students in their district. State leaders, then, must provide Georgia school districts with adequate resources to ensure schools and teachers are prepared to provide continuous, high-quality instruction for all students, no matter the circumstances.

Action Steps for Georgia

If 2020 taught us anything, it is that we cannot always predict the future, but we can do our best to be prepared for it. The pandemic was a watershed moment for education, simultaneously exposing the vulnerabilities in our education system and offering a tremendous opportunity to rethink how schools and teachers can deliver instruction, whether face-to-face in school or remotely or through some combination of the two.

The importance of prioritizing the thoughtful expansion of instructional models cannot be overstated, particularly in regard to our most vulnerable student populations (e.g., low-income, special education, English language learner students). Investing the resources necessary to provide these students with access to diverse but equitable learning opportunities, regardless of their circumstances, is essential to ensuring that Georgia has a robust talent pipeline to contribute to the vitality and economic health of the state, today and into the future.



TEACHERS – PROFESSIONALISM, PAY, AND PREPARATION

Issue Overview

The impact of the global pandemic has put unprecedented strains on the educational system and most directly on teachers. Educators across the country are asking themselves how to deliver instruction and stay connected to their students safely and responsibly. But they are also recognizing that schools may never look the same and instructional models may never go completely back to pre-pandemic approaches. As most educators acknowledge the value of and preference for in-person learning, many other education stakeholders are discussing what education should and could look like in the future.

This uncertainty over the future of education has led education leaders to reevaluate the strength of the current teaching workforce and the pipeline of future teachers. For the immediate future, education systems will be impacted by a series of questions around teacher workforce policies. How many teachers feel safe with reopening plans? How many are leaving the profession all together or asking to work from home full-time because they are high risk? How are educators coping with the challenges of distance learning? How are they dealing with the mental health needs of their students as well as their own trauma? In the long term, how many students entering college no longer want to become teachers? What does all this disruption and additional responsibilities put on educators mean for the long-term attractiveness of teaching as a career?

Significance for Georgia

The K-12 workforce faces multiple challenges ranging from preparation to compensation to difficult working conditions and little lack of diversity in the teaching force. As Georgia looks to recover from the disruptions of the pandemic and move to success by addressing systemic barriers to access and achievement, the state must focus on overall teacher quality and retention as well as the racial disparities between the teaching workforce and the student population.

Districts across the country and in Georgia are facing a shortage of teachers, and those shortages are not distributed evenly across the state. The shortages are especially acute in certain subjects (math, science, special education, and bilingual education) and specific schools and regions (those that are underperforming, those that serve a high percentage of low-income students and students of color, and rural areas). Consequently, students who attend high-poverty schools are more likely to see inexperienced and/ or out-of-field teachers in their classrooms, compared to their more affluent counterparts.

The diversity of the teacher workforce also impacts student learning and student outcomes. Research has shown the significant benefits that teachers of color provide to all students, and to students of color, particularly. Georgia's K-12 student population is considered majority-minority; however, the teaching corps does not mirror that distribution. In fact, nearly 70% of the certified teaching workforce is White, compared to only 39% of the student body.

Action Steps for Georgia

Disruptions in the teaching workforce have consequences for every district, but research shows that high-poverty districts experienced a disproportionate share of funding and staffing cuts following the Great Recession. When there are shortages of qualified teachers, students of color and students from low-income families bear the brunt of the burden. As Georgia educational leaders at the state and local levels respond to the crisis of 2020, they have the opportunity to rethink instructional delivery and education models to better meet the needs of all students. Such decisions must be made in collaboration with teachers. A high-quality, diverse teacher pipeline requires policy decisions that support and enable teachers to work together as professionals and that provide adequate resources to allow teachers to respond to the needs of each of their students.



ACCOUNTABILITY AND ASSESSMENTS – THE OPPORTUNITY TO RETHINK AND GET IT RIGHT

Issue Overview

In February 2020, before the global pandemic upended education systems across the country, Governor Brian Kemp announced plans to cut the number of state-mandated assessments administered in K-12 public education to just four in high school and one in fifth grade. The governor also advocated shortening the overall length of the assessments and confining school testing to the last five weeks of the school year. In his announcement backing the legislation required to make these changes, Kemp stated, "Georgia simply tests too much."

Shortly thereafter in March, the US Department of Education, responded to the nationwide school closures due to the pandemic, by allowing states to cancel their annual assessments and school accountability ratings for the spring of 2020. All 50 states, Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico took advantage of this flexibility and spring assessments were cancelled across the country.

Moving forward into the 2020–2021 school year, districts and states were understandably tempted to continue to pause assessments for another year, as schools struggled to open safely for in-person instruction and students and educators continued to deal with the traumas and economic fallout of the pandemic. However, instead of simply pausing assessments, this crisis has offered an opportunity to rethink the purpose and uses of assessments and accountability to understand not only who has been the most impacted by the COVID crisis, but also which students have the greatest needs. Properly designed and utilized, assessments and accountability systems can match needs with appropriate levels of resources to ensure that all students succeed.

Significance for Georgia

One reason for the perception that there is too much state testing is that both parents and the public more generally often conflate state-mandated testing with the many district-administered interim, formative, and diagnostic tests that are not part of an overall assessment system. Studies have found that the average classroom spends about 2% of instructional time taking mandated tests, a small fraction of the school year. But some schools and school districts spend much more, contributing to perceptions of "overtesting." One study of a dozen urban districts found that test-taking ranged from three days in one district to two weeks in another and that test preparation ranged from 16 to 30 school days.

Nevertheless, GaDOE has already begun reducing the number of high-stakes tests. Through Senate Bill (SB) 367, which was signed into law in 2020, the department eliminated a total of five state-mandated tests, including reducing by half the number of end-of-course assessments required of high school students. These changes, of course, have implications for Georgia's accountability system, the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI), which has been used for nearly a decade. Due to growing concern among state leaders and the general public that Georgia has moved too far into high-stakes accountability and reliance on test scores and a single number or letter to "grade" schools, a handful of districts are in the initial stages of developing an alternative accountability system, True Accountability, which is designed to serve as a holistic performance measure and provide thorough accounting to students, families, and communities.

Action Steps for Georgia

With COVID-19 amplifying equity gaps and with traditional assessment and accountability systems paused, now is the time for state leaders to consider how to drive more equitable student achievement over the short, medium, and long term. Assessments are the key to understanding which of these new schooling arrangements are working, which are not, and how best to identify needs and offer supports to the most vulnerable students. And as schools and districts experiment with different forms of instructional delivery, accountability systems can be used for identifying students who need additional support and to provide additional focus to students who are English language learners, are experiencing homelessness, have a disability, live in rural areas, or are impacted by the juvenile justice or foster care systems.



PARENT ENGAGEMENT – POSITIONING FAMILIES AS PARTNERS

Issue Overview

Many educators have lamented that it took a global health crisis to heighten awareness of the family's role in a child's academic success. At the same time, however, families have discovered a newfound appreciation for teachers – recognizing the amount of work they do, the challenges they face, and their impact on the social and cognitive development of children. There is now, consequently, an opportunity for educators and families to harness this new understanding to ensure student success in and out of the classroom. A global Brookings Institute study goes so far as to say that increased family engagement has the “potential to influence important cultural and structural leverage points,” from shaping public perception on expected outcomes of education to creating new communication loops that bring all stakeholders to the table.

In effect, the pandemic pushed family engagement from the edge to the center of education conversations – giving Georgia an opportunity to rethink education, engagement, and equity. The question now is around how we can transform education systems to amplify innovations and family involvement in a way that creates equal access so all children gain the skills they need to build a better future.

Significance for Georgia

There are strong indications that the virtual component of learning is here to stay. The only way to prevent significant disruptions, like a pandemic, from deepening inequality for an entire generation is to equip families to support at-home and virtual learning. As Georgia continues to integrate families into the learning process, return on investment comes in the form of improved learning outcomes and empowering parents to be advocates. Increased family engagement also prepares parents/caregivers for advocacy on important issues, including testing and standards. Understanding specific student needs helps parents be better advocates for resources and multiple community connections that improve the outcomes of broader student populations.

The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) is already trying to engage families in new ways. The concept of “community + school + families” is at the foundation of GaDOE's “Whole Child” model for meeting children's physical, mental, and social needs. As part of the commitment to the whole child, the Georgia State Board of Education adopted six family engagement structures, aligned with the National PTA Family and Community Engagement Standards: 1) welcoming all families and the community to promote active participation in the life of the school; 2) communicating effectively; 3) collaborating to support student learning and healthy development; 4) empowering families to be advocates for their own and other children; 5) sharing leadership on decision making; 6) and connecting students, families, and staff to expanded learning opportunities, community services, and civic participation.

Action Steps for Georgia

Imagine what school could look like for students and parents/caregivers alike. Can Georgia leverage increased family engagement to improve the education experience and lifelong outcomes? Will parents advocate for education systems that enhance creative, critical thinking and the pursuit of lifelong learning? Could we redefine “success” and encourage students to achieve beyond grade 12?

Including parents in the education process has a valuable, long-term impact for Georgia students. Achievement through family goal setting – whether it is a literacy goal or preparing for a career pathway – has implications far beyond the classroom. Equipped with a better understanding of their children's levels of mastery, aptitudes, and learning styles, parents will become better advocates for resources to help their children succeed. To improve learning outcomes, Georgia must elevate the relevance of every step of education and the central role of the family – looking through the lens of equity and inclusion.



POST-SECONDARY COMPLETION – A PATHWAY TO PROSPERITY

Issue Overview

The pipeline to and through post-secondary education in the United States has long been known to have notable cracks when it comes to serving students of color. Dr. Anthony Carnevale, professor and director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, has studied these inequities, finding that class and race play a significant role in educational and workforce outcomes. Preliminary data show that the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated these trends of racial inequity in post-secondary success and that the pressures to postpone or pause the pursuit of higher education are growing.

Georgia is not immune to these pressures, but to meet the demands of the state's economy and to truly move from recovery to success in a post-COVID world, Georgia needs for more of its population to access and complete a post-secondary education. This is especially true for students of color, who have long faced systemic barriers to accessing higher education. Georgia has the opportunity to redesign access to post-secondary schooling, remove historical structural barriers to success, and connect higher education to high schools and labor markets.

Significance for Georgia

The degree attainment of students of color in Georgia reflects the racial attainment gaps found across the nation. A study by the Education Trust in 2016 found that 32.3% of Black Georgians and 20.8% of Latino Georgians aged 25–64 had a college degree (associate degree or above), compared to 43.8% of White Georgians. Black enrollment levels at Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) institutions were found to be slightly over representative of the Black population at-large. This was not the case at public four-year institutions, especially at flagship and more selective institutions, where the inequities in enrollment were significant. Wealth disparities contribute much to inequities in enrollment and attainment, as low-wealth students are less likely to earn their degrees and more likely to leave school with debt than their high-wealth counterparts.

These disparities are particularly true in Georgia, where no state-sponsored, statewide, needs-based aid program exists. The only state-sponsored, statewide financial aid programs in Georgia are merit based: the HOPE Scholarships and Grants, and the Zell Miller Scholarship. These programs have increased the accessibility and affordability of college for almost 2 million Georgians since the inception of the HOPE Scholarship in 1993, but they are more likely to be awarded to high-income students, White students, and Asian students, while Black students are the least likely to receive them.

Action Steps for Georgia

Considering Georgia's long-term recovery needs, in August 2020 the EdQuest Georgia Coalition published recommendations to support clear pathways to post-secondary success. The highest priority among those recommendations was equalizing institutional resources and accessibility across the state through funding models that meet the demands of changing post-secondary needs. Also of paramount importance is creating, promoting, and funding a statewide needs-based aid program that allows students to achieve success in higher education based on their own hard work and not the financial situation of their families. Such a system also requires keeping racial equity in mind when crafting and implementing policy to ensure our higher education population represents the demographic realities of our state population.

While the state budget is still in a weakened position, legislators can take steps to ensure that one of the strongest economic recovery engines, Georgia's post-secondary system, has the support it needs to produce the workforce we need. This includes a commitment to enrolling and graduating students from historically underrepresented groups in higher education.



GEORGIA'S WORKFORCE PIPELINE – CREATING EQUITABLE ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Issue Overview

The Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB) Workforce 2030 report sounded the alarm about worker displacement over the next 10 years. The pandemic and related industry adjustments have accelerated this timeline to 2025 and consequently the urgency for response. In light of these considerations, Georgia's efforts to develop reskilling, upskilling, and professional development programs are more important than ever.

Students and job seekers need career skills that qualify them for good jobs and equitable wages. This work cannot be siloed in education, government, or business. Rather, collaborative partnerships, with a continuous flow of timely and pertinent information, will allow educators, legislators, and employers to align academics and work-based learning experiences with in-demand jobs, improving individual career success and economic competitiveness. Inclusive economic development requires Georgia to address these gaps and improve how education, government, business, and the community work together.

Significance for Georgia

As students and job seekers navigate the career-planning journey, they need broader understanding of the value that the regional and state labor market place on credentials. Consider the data from Credentials Matter, an ExcelinEd platform that examines how industry credentials address the skills gap and create pathways to careers. The site gives Georgia a "low alignment" ranking on high school students earning credentials that align with workforce demand. Of the 43,353 Career, Technical and Agricultural Education (CTAE) credentials earned in the 2018–2019 school year, only 16% were aligned with workforce demand.

Similarly, adults seeking reskilling must understand the relationship between level of educational attainment, job availability, and earnings potential, and they must have equitable access to these programs. For FY 2020, 32,205 adult learners were enrolled in the TCSG's Adult Education program. GED awards totaled 6,271 in 2020, with 25% of those awardees enrolling in post-secondary coursework within the year. The Careers Plus pilot, launched in 2020 with 70 students at five TCSG campuses, allows learners to earn four credit awards in addition to their HSE. The largest age group of TCSG adult learners is between 24 and 44 (44%), with another 35% between the ages of 16 and 24. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Office of Adult Education was the first program of its kind in the US to arrange for online verification and enrollment of adult learners. The TCSG's flexibility of scheduling and online courses allow adult learners to fit education around family, work, and other commitments.

Action Steps for Georgia

Aligning programs with earnings and regional demand is critical to unlocking post-secondary credential value. Students, their families, and educators who understand the earnings potential associated with various pathway and degree options can map a better path toward career fulfillment and advancement. Integrating workforce development into dual enrollment coursework is a cost-effective way to minimize college expense and graduate career-focused students. In support of this, Georgia should facilitate regional business collaborations to guide the work of high school career education – supporting both work-based learning opportunities and career pathways.

Georgia needs to take steps to ensure those workers disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, including workers of color, women, and immigrants, have equitable access to skills training, thereby improving their ability to weather future disruptions. Racial equity and inclusion can be advanced through job and training awareness campaigns, modified entry requirements, tuition and fee support, mentoring, tutoring, transportation, child care, and technology/internet access. Without system-level changes, Georgia risks perpetuating systemic inequality and racial discrimination through the very education system that should be the foundation of equity in our state.



REINVENTING EDUCATION IN GEORGIA – A CALL FOR LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

Issue Overview

In the fall of 2020, there was tremendous pressure for schools to open for in-person learning, with the recognition that schools are the foundation that needs to be in place for the economy and the rest of society to begin to recover from the pandemic. The recovery for Georgia schools, however, is intrinsically linked with the recovery and support of other government-led sectors such as economic development, health and safety, and social service providers. It also depends on the involvement of the private and nonprofit sectors, from business and industry leaders to community-based and faith organizations.

Truly reinventing a public education that removes systemic barriers to success and provides the opportunity for all residents to participate in a fully inclusive economic recovery requires a coordinated, collaborative response across multiple actors. In a state that values local control, where does the responsibility for coordination lay and who is ultimately responsible?

Significance for Georgia

Georgia's state constitution states: "The provision of an adequate public education for the citizens shall be a primary obligation of the State of Georgia." While the state government has the ultimate public K-12 education obligation, state leaders in Georgia, like in many other states, have been steadily moving away from state-mandated centralization toward a decentralized approach that gives decision-making authority for how students are educated to local school systems. For example, the 2007 Charter Systems Act granted school systems considerable autonomy by allowing them to choose system-wide flexibility from state mandates – such as class size, expenditure controls, teacher pay, or certification requirements – based on needs at the local level in exchange for increased accountability.

While most local leaders generally welcome autonomy in running their school systems, running them in the midst of a pandemic is a different animal all together. For example, when district leaders were weighing the risks of continuing in-person versus virtual learning options, there was no state-coordinated reporting system of school-related COVID cases to inform districts of the differing risk levels of in-person learning. All of Georgia's 180 districts put together their own systems of reporting. The information in these systems ranged from highly informative to incredibly opaque. This lack of consistency and coordination has led to incomplete records that continue to prevent parents and educators from understanding differing risk levels in their own neighborhood.

Action Steps for Georgia

To address the full spectrum of educational and economic disparities, the entire birth-to-work pipeline must be insulated through the coordination of community partners, philanthropy, business leaders, and state and national government leaders across a multitude of agencies and departments from education, public health, economic development, and more. The current systems must be replaced by a statewide policy agenda that lifts children up and reduces educational inequities. Such an agenda requires coordination across multiple systems that address serving the whole child, including their physical and mental health; elevating the teaching profession; reversing the impacts of poverty and discrimination; and coordinating education policy with economic development policy.

These goals around reinventing education are beyond any one system's or local district's ability to innovate. There certainly continues to be a vital role for local control and decisions, particularly around coordinating through the schools and the community to identify local needs and set local priorities. Local control still needs to flourish around issues related to innovative teaching delivery models, out-of-school time structures, teacher incentives and recruitment strategies, and workforce pathway priorities, among other issues. However, to truly empower local leaders to make decisions that best support their students and Georgia's long-term prosperity, a strong state policy framework centered on these systems-level issues, along with adequate and equitable resources and coordinated leadership, must be in place.