

■ Opportunity School District Needs Transparency, Community Role

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A new legislative proposal to create a statewide “Opportunity School District” aims to boost student achievement at Georgia’s most challenged schools. Close scrutiny of the measure is warranted before its proposed drastic and permanent remedies are passed into law.

Georgia Senate Bill 133 sets out the parameters of Gov. Nathan Deal’s plan to allow the state to run public schools, partner with local school districts to run them, convert them into charter schools or close them. The special district would be overseen by a new superintendent who would report directly to the governor. A related resolution calls for a Constitutional Amendment on the November 2016 general election ballot to cement the plan into Georgia law.

A March 2015 Georgia Budget and Policy Institute assessment of the plan raises important unanswered questions, summarized here and explored in more detail later in this brief.

- The vast majority of schools identified as top candidates for the Opportunity School District (OSD) are attended by large numbers of children from poor and minority families, groups of Georgia students with test results already improving faster than the national average. How does this plan improve on existing reforms?
- The jury is still out on the causes for apparent successes of reforms in Louisiana and a similar effort in Tennessee is too new to show sustained improvement. Both efforts are cited as the model for Georgia’s proposal. How will Georgia know which elements of those reforms are most responsible for improved student performance?
- Local parents will not have all the information needed to ensure the hoped-for improvements take place nor can they appeal an intervention strategy once determined by the OSD superintendent. How will Georgia ensure families a clear view inside local school operations and give them a voice in their child’s education?

What follows is an attempt to shed some light on possible answers to these questions. It includes an examination of the students most likely affected by this proposal. It also includes an overview of student achievement in Georgia, in other states, which could be a resource for policy innovations, and in Louisiana and Tennessee. The last section makes the case for careful implementation, greater transparency and encouraging community engagement in local schools, should the state take over supervision.

GBPI is not advocating for or against the plan outlined in SB 133, but offers the analysis that follows to help Georgia lawmakers reach better-informed policy decisions.

Student Population

Students in Georgia schools now listed as eligible for the Opportunity School District are overwhelmingly low-income and minority. Nearly 92 percent participate in the federal free- and reduced-lunch program.ⁱ More than 88 percent are black and five percent are Hispanic.

High poverty schools are much different from those that are not. Students in high-poverty schools are more likely to be taught by teachers with neither a college major nor certification in their subject than students in low-poverty schools.ⁱⁱ High-poverty schools have greater teacher turnover rates and more new teachers, who are less effective than more experienced ones.ⁱⁱⁱ They also have greater principal turnover.^{iv} This instability makes it harder for staff to sustain improvement efforts as well as forge trusted relationships with students and families.

It is critical that reforms pursued by the state under SB 133 or similar initiatives improve these conditions, not exacerbate them. It is also important to make any reforms with parent and community approval, or in collaboration with them, to avoid a top-down imposition.

Student Achievement Already Improving in Georgia

Georgia is not yet among the highest achieving states for average scores in national reading and math tests for all fourth and eighth grade students, but the state is near the top in progress among low-income students.^v Test scores are just one way to measure student achievement but they are an important one. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is commonly regarded as the gold standard in assessment in K-12 education. Because it is administered nationally, it allows for cross-state comparisons, which are not possible with Georgia's Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests. Georgia's black students also made important gains in recent years, as measured by the NAEP tests. Data for poor and minority students are highlighted here as they comprise the vast majority of students enrolled in the schools that could be included in the Opportunity School District. The comparison years are 2005, the year the Recovery School District in Louisiana assumed control of most of the schools in New Orleans, and 2013, the most recent data available.^{vi}

How Would Georgia's Opportunity School District Work?

Senate Bill 133 calls for the state to take over persistently low-performing schools in an effort to improve student achievement. It proposes to create an Opportunity School District (OSD), a statewide district overseen by a superintendent appointed by and reporting to the governor.

Schools that earn an "F" for three consecutive years according to the state's accountability system are eligible for the new district in the pending legislation. The Opportunity School District could take control of up to 20 schools per year up to a maximum of 100 at a time.

The OSD superintendent would choose schools for the new district weighting several factors that include parent and community feedback. The superintendent of the Opportunity School District gets final say and can choose from four intervention models for each school:

1. Direct management by the new state district
2. Shared governance by the state district and the local board of education, in which the board operates the school and the OSD superintendent directs changes at the school
3. Conversion to a charter school if approved by the State Charter Schools Commission
4. Closure

The Opportunity School District superintendent selects principals for non-charter OSD schools as well as members of charter schools' governing boards in the proposed legislation. Charter school governing boards select principals for those schools. The OSD superintendent or OSD charter school governing boards can also decide whether or not to retain teachers and other school employees after a takeover.

The superintendent of the Opportunity School District establishes agreements with OSD school principals, local boards of education and charter school governing boards to meet goals for improving student outcomes that are specific to each school.

Schools remain in the Opportunity School District for at least five years unless they earn a grade of D or better for three consecutive years to earn an early exit. Effective charter schools could remain under the State Charter School Commission or transition back to their local boards of education. Ineffective charters will return to the Opportunity School District. Schools can remain in the new district for ten years at most.

- Low-income students in Georgia accounted for the fifth largest fourth grade reading test score increase in the nation from 2005 to 2013 compared to peers in other states. Georgia's low-income fourth graders also surpassed the national average score for low-income students in 2013.
- Georgia's low-income eighth graders accounted for the fourth largest increase in test scores in the nation between 2005 and 2013, compared to their peers. They also exceeded the average score for low-income students in 2013.
- Black fourth graders in Georgia made the ninth largest gain in reading in the nation among their peers. Their average score was higher than the national average in 2013 among black fourth graders.^{vii}
- Georgia's black eighth graders accounted for the fifth largest increase in reading in the country among black eighth graders. Their average score was also higher than the average score of eighth grade black students nationally in 2013.

Improvements are also reflected in math test results, although not to the same degree as reading. Georgia's low-income fourth graders and eighth graders gained more ground from 2005 to 2013 than the national average for their peers. The average score for low-income Georgia fourth graders was at the national average while eighth graders ranked below the national average. Black fourth graders also increased their math scores more than the average increase among their peers nationally and their average score also beat the national average. The increase made by Georgia's black eighth graders was smaller than the average increase among their peers nationally though the average score closely tracked the national average.

The gains by Georgia's low-income and black students indicate the state is implementing policies and practices already improving teaching and learning. This existing foundation can serve to bolster the critical work that remains to close the achievement gap and improve results for all Georgia students.

High Achieving States Can Show the Way

States with higher NAEP test results are a likely resource for Georgia to identify policies and practices for use here to extend and accelerate gains the state is already making. States with low-income fourth and eighth graders who attained high scores on the NAEP reading exam include Maryland, Massachusetts, Maine and Wyoming.

These states use multiple strategies to reach high levels of achievement. Maryland takes a statewide, systemic approach to improve teaching and learning. Elements of its approach include:

- A comprehensive, highly-regarded assessment system first developed in the 1990s
- Rigorous curriculum standards in place since the early 2000s
- Reforming teacher preparation programs through the implementation of professional development schools, where university faculty and K-12 teachers work together to provide an intensive, site-based training for pre-service teachers, an effort launched in 2001
- High standards for professional development for teachers
- Increased funding with more money for low-income, limited-English proficient and special education students

To turn around persistently low-performing schools, the Maryland Department of Education established The Breakthrough Center in 2007. Staffers there work with district and school leaders and employees to build knowledge and skills to plan and implement site-specific reform strategies. Its work entails:

- Streamlining and differentiating requirements and supports across the department to eliminate redundancy and ensure relevancy and impact
- Partnering with districts to co-create customized programs and professional development that build organizational, leadership and instructional capacity
- Facilitating collaboration and opportunities among districts to share and inquire about breakthrough programs, practices, and people^{viii}

The Maryland Department of Education has adopted an approach where its interactions with districts are supported by deregulation and an emphasis on collaboration instead of compliance.^{ix}

Maryland's approach may not work everywhere, as each state operates within a unique context and has specific needs. Still, Maryland and other high-achieving states can serve as a guide for ways Georgia could make similar gains.

Achievement Success Story Muddy in Louisiana and Tennessee

Louisiana and Tennessee are cited as models for Georgia's proposed Opportunity School District. That makes recent NAEP scores in those two states relevant to this discussion. Louisiana's low-income fourth and eighth graders made gains in reading and math from 2005 to 2013, but the gains were smaller for those students than for low-income students in Georgia and nationally. The average score for these students in both subjects ranked lower than the average score for low-income students in Georgia and nationally.

The NAEP test scores are not broken down to the district level, so these results are not available for Louisiana's Recovery School District. Scores did improve on Louisiana's own test for state district students. The reason for the improvement is not clear. The test score gains in the state district could be due to a number of variables, according to an economist who directs the recently established Education Research Alliance for New Orleans at Tulane University. Dr. Douglas Harris says those include:

- Increased funding
- Teaching to the test
- Change in teacher workforce
- Charters
- Parental choice^x

What's missing is evidence to isolate which of these factors explain gains in student test scores—what's working and what isn't. Harris and his colleagues are conducting analyses to better understand what underlies the gains in the state district.

Most reports that look at the reforms underway in Louisiana are from groups that support or oppose the reform and seek to confirm their position.^{xi} They do not meet the benchmark of rigorous peer review.

Low-income fourth and eighth graders in Tennessee made gains in both math and reading greater than the national average but below those of low-income students in Georgia outside of fourth grade math. Average scores for low-income fourth and eighth graders in Tennessee fell below their Georgia peers, except for eighth grade reading.^{xii} The Achievement School District was launched in the 2012-2013 school year so data on student achievement is limited. To date, however, the results have been uneven.

Opportunity School District Needs Careful Implementation and More Transparency

Lawmakers can strengthen the proposal by ensuring that implementation of the OSD, if passed, is careful and driven by reliable data, creating more transparency and a greater role for parents and community members. Some improvements to consider:

- Limit the number of schools included in the OSD to five in each of the first three years and 10 in years four and five
- Develop, fund and implement a comprehensive evaluation plan to assess the design, implementation and effects of the OSD, including its disparate components (e.g. school leadership change, training for school leadership, teacher training, governance changes, etc.).

- Allow an appeal to the State Board of Education if a majority of parents in an OSD school disagree with the intervention model selected by the OSD superintendent
- Require the inclusion of a parent on the governing board of an OSD school that is pursuing or has been granted a charter by the State Charter School Commission
- Require the OSD to make public the findings of the evaluation of any qualifying school
- Require the OSD to develop, and all OSD schools follow, a uniform suspension and expulsion policy
- Require the OSD to annually publish a report that provides for each district school and the overall OSD aggregate at least this much information:
 - o Student suspension and expulsion rates by race and gender
 - o Student transfer rates by race and gender
 - o Special education participation rates by race and gender
 - o Teacher turnover rates
 - o Percentage of teachers with fewer than three years experience, four to 10 years experience, 11 or more years experience
 - o The percentage of teachers with bachelor's, master's, specialist or doctoral degree
 - o Average, minimum and maximum teacher salary
 - o Principal and assistant principal turnover rate
 - o Summary of student services (e.g. special education) provided by the local board of education as well as the number of students who received them

Proceeding slowly is critical given the many questions about the effects of the reforms in Louisiana and Tennessee and uncertainty about what caused them. Leaders of the reform district in Tennessee have also cautioned policymakers in Georgia to move slowly given the challenges they have faced there. At the same time, reliable data is critical to know what is working, what is not and what are the most influential factors in improving student learning. It also facilitates the identification of emerging problems and allows for mid-course corrections. In addition, increasing transparency through the dissemination of data is critical to ensure that existing inequities are not inadvertently made worse.

Support to build the capacity of districts with OSD-eligible schools would be a valuable addition to the proposal. This would help ensure that gains made by OSD schools would be sustained and even extended after their exit from the OSD. The support could be provided by the Georgia Department of Education or through nonprofit entities with demonstrated success in district level reforms.

The department could also be positioned to provide training and support to develop effective school leadership, as well as “equip” teachers to meet goals instead of the OSD as is currently proposed. This would help avoid duplication of services between the department and the state district.

Conclusion: Big Picture Approach to Struggling Schools Still Needed

Any initiative targeted to improving the schools that struggle the most should be situated within a broader effort that ensures the state is adopting policies and practices Georgia schools and districts need to be highly effective, particularly when it comes to its most vulnerable students. This effort should be grounded in a comprehensive assessment of the state’s current practices, the efficacy of existing policy and practice, and gaps that must be addressed. The assessment should include a review of the assistance the state provides for persistently low-performing schools.

Experiments like the proposed new state school districts could be worthwhile, but Georgia’s challenges to improve achievement at its schools that struggle the most call for a more comprehensive approach.

ⁱGBPI calculations based on Georgia Department of Education data. Data on participation in free and reduced lunch is from fiscal year 2013, which is prior to the more widespread use of the community eligibility provision for that program as it can overestimate the number of eligible students. Data on students' race is from fiscal year 2015.

ⁱⁱAlmy, S. & Theokas, C. *Not Prepared for Class: High Poverty Schools Continue to Have Fewer In-Field Teachers*. Education Trust. November 2010. <http://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Not-Prepared-for-Class.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱIbid.

^{iv}School Leaders Network. *Churn: The High Cost of Principal Turnover*. 2014. https://connectleadsucceed.org/sites/default/files/principal_turnover_cost.pdf

^vLow-income students are defined as participating in the federal free and reduced lunch program.

^{vi}National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. NAEP State Comparisons Tool. <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/statecomparisons/>.

^{vii}Ranking of states by achievement among African-American students does not include states with African American student populations so small their reading scores are not reported on the NAEP in 2005 and/or 2013 (e.g. Idaho, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, etc.).

^{viii}Maryland Department of Education, The Breakthrough Center: What It Does, Who It Serves, How It Helps. <https://sites.google.com/site/thebreakthroughcentersde/home/about-the-breakthrough-center>

^{ix}Jochim, A. & Murphy, P. *The Capacity Challenge: What It Takes for State Education Agencies to Support School Improvement*. Center on Reinventing Public Education. December 2013. http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/pub_capacity%20challenge_dec13_0.pdf

^xHarris, D. "Not much evidence to support opinions about New Orleans schools," Times-Picayune. June 22, 2014. http://www.nola.com/opinions/index.ssf/2014/06/not_much_evidence_to_support_o.html

^{xi}DeBray, E., Scott, J., Lubienski, C., & Jabbar, H. Intermediary organizations in charter school policy coalitions: evidence from New Orleans, *Educational Policy* (28)2, 175-206, 2014.

^{xii}The Achievement School District in Tennessee is too new for any effect to be captured in the NAEP.