

Tackle Poverty's Effects to Improve School Performance

By Claire Suggs, Senior Education Policy Analyst

Seventy percent of Georgia school district leaders say poverty is the most significant out-of-school issue that limits student learning. That key finding in a new Georgia Budget and Policy Institute survey reinforces an analysis of the grades issued to schools in 2016 that reveals a tight connection between whether a school sits in a high-poverty area and if it meets target benchmarks.

Challenges of poverty are most difficult to overcome in schools where students from low-income households are the majority. Most schools where at least half of students come from low-income families received a D or F from the [Governor's Office of Student Achievement](#).¹ Here are the percentages of schools based on income level that received a D or F.

Higher Poverty Schools More Likely to Receive Grade of D or F

99% Extreme-poverty schools	79% High-poverty schools	40% Moderate-poverty schools	5.4% Low-poverty schools
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Georgia needs to do more to compensate for high-poverty environments to do a better job educating its children, and to improve the prospects of its future workforce. It must also make sure that each school has the elements students need to be successful learners. Every student in Georgia should leave high school prepared to enter and complete a training or degree program in the state's technical colleges or university system. That sets them on a path to financial security and helps the state foster economic growth. Yet today, too many children fall short of educational benchmarks, especially young people from low-income families or minority communities, which have historically been excluded from economic and educational opportunities. For Georgia to thrive long-term, state policymakers need a comprehensive approach to strengthen K-12 public schools and put more children on the path to success.

Most efforts to improve student learning and outcomes focus on changing schools or a particular aspect of what happens in the classroom. Some yielded valuable gains but fell short of significant and widespread improvements. Part of Georgia's challenge is that much of the public debate revolves around a misdiagnosis of the problem specifically schools are the primary cause children struggle academically.

Students struggle in higher-poverty schools because they face serious challenges at home that often interfere with their learning. Not enough food on the table or erratic housing can cause children to lose focus, increased anxiety and damaged

70%
Share of Georgia districts cite poverty as most critical out-of-school challenge

mental health. Other common challenges for these students include more school absences and less parental support. In sum, external factors, particularly poverty, matter more than other issues in shaping students' academic success.²

In-school factors, though not as influential as external ones, matter too. Some schools meet students' learning needs better than others. These schools have the core components needed to encourage students' academic success: an effective principal, skilled teachers, ambitious instruction, supportive school climate, close parent-community connections, and adequate resources.

Improving learning outcomes for low-income students is more urgent than ever. The state faces a skills gap and needs more people entering the workforce with some type of postsecondary training. At the same time, the percentage of low-income students in public schools is growing. Participation in the federal free and reduced lunch program shows the proportion of economically disadvantaged students in Georgia's public schools increased to more than 60 percent today from about 45 percent in 2002. The state cannot afford to leave these students behind. Changing the trajectory of high-poverty schools and better serving those students requires a multi-pronged approach that combines strategies to reduce poverty among students and their families over the long term, mitigate its impact on students and schools now, and strengthen the schools they attend.

State lawmakers can improve outcomes for impoverished students and the schools where they are concentrated with a coordinated set of strategies that respond to both external and internal factors.

- Foster socioeconomic integration in schools
- Invest adequate resources in low-income students and schools
- Build a statewide principal pipeline
- Enhance teacher compensation
- Develop state research capacity to support school improvement
- Establish a task force of state agencies to support school and community improvement

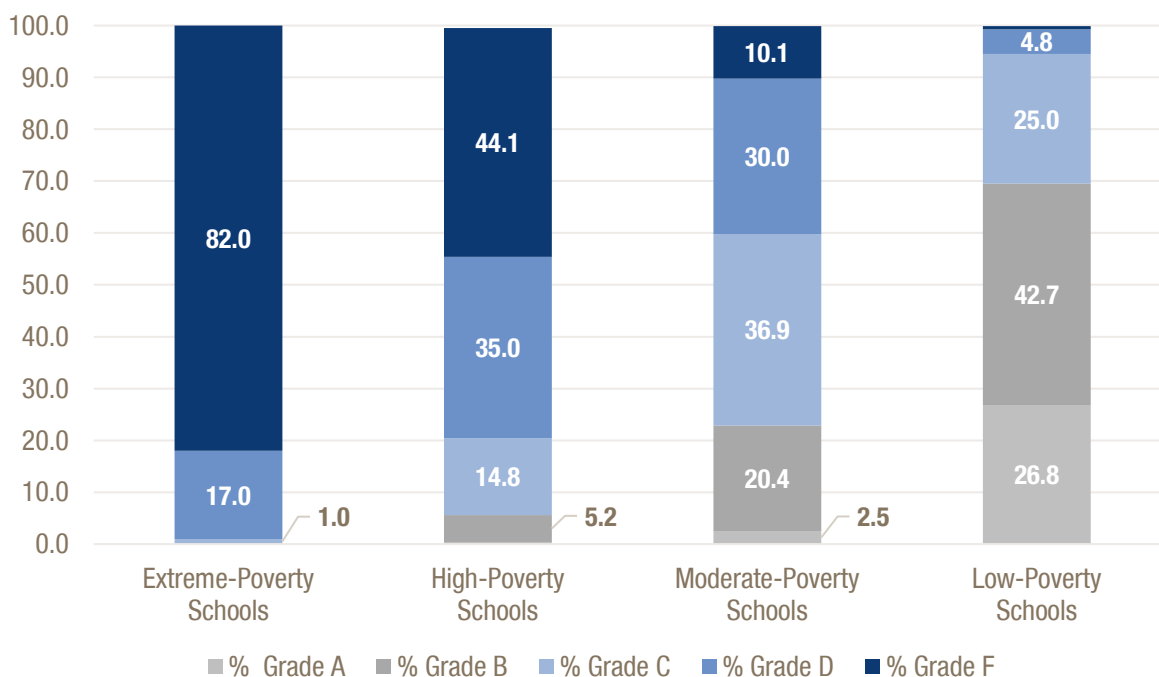
These are first steps along a pathway toward better outcomes for students. Lawmakers can take additional steps to help students succeed in school and the workforce by investing in proven solutions that support families and reduce poverty such as high-quality child care³, affordable health services⁴ or a state earned income tax credit.⁵

Most of Georgia's Struggling Schools Have High Concentrations of Poverty

At least half of all students in more than 500 schools across Georgia come from low-income families and they are a significant share of students in many others. Students are considered low-income if they are identified as direct certification. (For more on direct certification and the schools included in this analysis and methodology used, please see Appendix A.) Their needs spill into schools and shape teaching and learning. With limited exceptions, schools where they comprise the majority of students earn low scores under the state's accountability system and poor grades from the Governor's Office of Student Achievement. Schools with fewer low-income students typically receive higher grades.

A review of schools' 2016 grades by their poverty concentration highlights the connection between poverty and student outcomes.

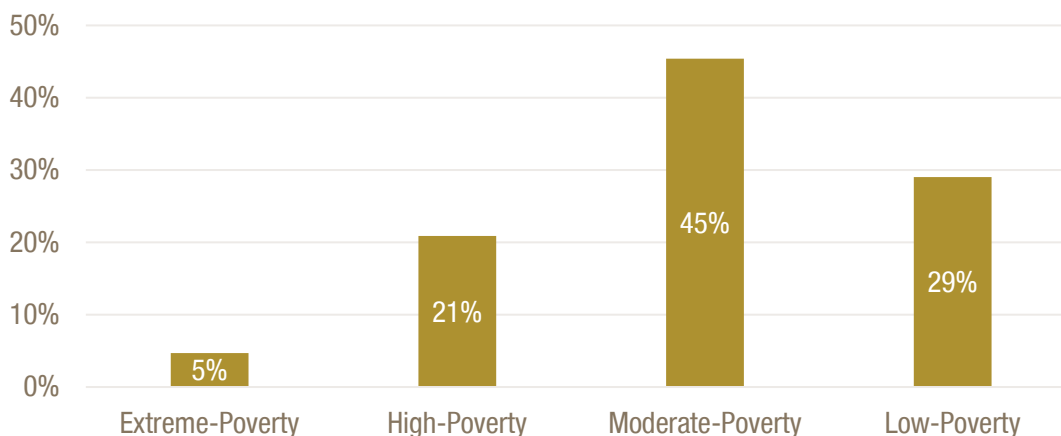
Distribution of 2016 Schools Grades by Poverty Concentration



Source: GBPI analysis of data from the Governor's Office of Student Achievement

Schools with 75 percent or more of students who come from low-income families are counted as extreme-poverty, schools with 50 to 74 percent of students from low-income families are counted as high-poverty, schools with 25 to 49 percent of students from low-income families are counted as moderate-poverty and schools with no more than 24 percent students from low-income families are considered low-poverty. Of the 2,135 schools included in this analysis, 100 are counted as extreme-poverty, 446 are high-poverty, 969 are moderate-poverty and 620 are low-poverty.

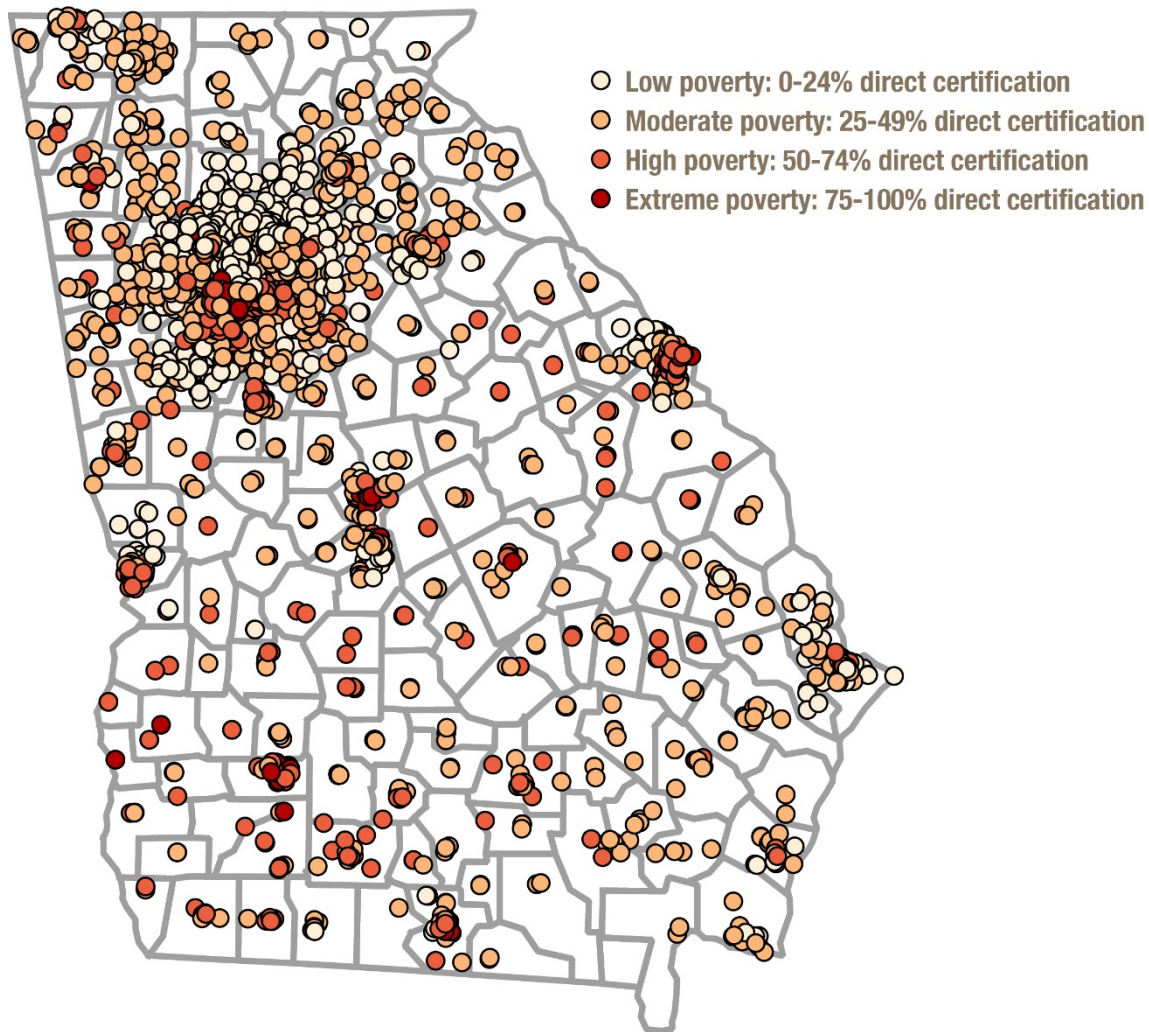
Distribution of Schools by Poverty Concentration



Source: GBPI analysis of data from the Governor's Office of Student Achievement

None of the extreme poverty schools earned a grade of A or B, and all but one earned a D or F. These schools are primarily in urban districts. Thirty-four are part of Atlanta Public Schools, the district with the most. But they are also scattered across some rural communities including Randolph, Terrell and Warren counties.

Mapping Poverty in Georgia's Schools

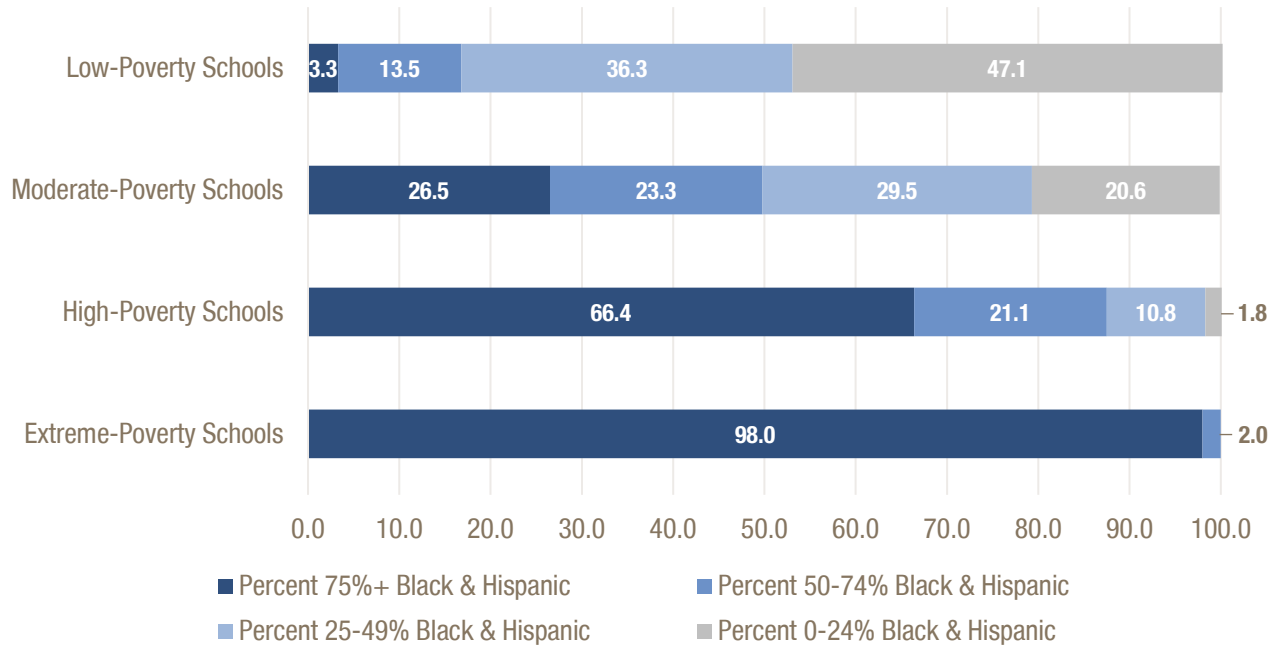


Source: Governor's Office of Student Achievement

A snapshot of schools with the lowest poverty rates shows this story from the flip side. Schools with few low-income students typically score well. Of Georgia schools where fewer than 25 percent of students live in poverty, about 70 percent received either an A or B. And in schools where fewer than 10 percent of children are poor, nearly 94 percent got an A or B.

Schools where the majority of students are low-income are also the schools with the most black and Hispanic students. Nearly all of the students in extreme poverty schools are black or Hispanic. Too often these schools are in communities whose members have long faced barriers to well-paying jobs, postsecondary institutions, healthcare, safe and affordable housing, and other resources that build the pathway to economic opportunity.

High-Poverty Schools Overwhelmingly Minority



Background on GBPI's District Survey

GBPI conducted a survey of Georgia's school districts in summer 2017 to gather information from district leaders about the in-school and out-of-school issues they believe pose the most significant challenges to student learning in their communities. A secondary goal is to understand the support they want from the state.

The survey questions were open-ended, and districts' responses varied widely and typically cited multiple issues. District leaders from 124 of Georgia's 180 districts responded to the survey. These districts enroll 83 percent of Georgia's K-12 public school students. Not all districts answered each question. Approximately 95 districts answered questions cited in this report. (See Appendix B for a list of participating school districts.)

Districts' responses shed light on ways poverty affects schools in Georgia and provide insight into issues connected to the core components of successful schools.

Students in Poverty Face Obstacles to Success



When you speak to many of our students, they are concerned where they will sleep tonight, will they have dinner, are mom and dad going to fight, or a parent is incarcerated. The issues and challenges our students face are those no child should have to worry about but they do. It is difficult to learn to read or calculate your facts when mom got arrested last night. Children need stability and adults who will listen to them.

Dr. Elizabeth Anderson
Principal, W. L. Swain Elementary School, Gordon County Schools



All children need a basic level of support for them to develop, learn and grow to become healthy, productive and successful citizens.

- Family encouragement and support
- High quality early learning
- Good health
- Adequate nutrition
- Safe and affordable housing

Poverty often strips one or more of these away from children. That void can create significant, often long-term barriers to learning. Poverty is so powerful because it ripples through students' lives in many harmful ways, which undermines their ability to learn and limits their educational opportunities.

Family Encouragement and Support

DODGE COUNTY SCHOOLS



Generational poverty is a challenge that we face in our rural area. We are working with a significant number of students who come from situations that do not provide the guidance and support that enhance their chances of success in school. The breakdown of the traditional family and the high rate of poverty has created situations where many students do not seem to respect adults or value the educational process.



Parents set children on the path to academic success. They foster healthy brain development through consistently caring parenting strategies. They lay the foundation for literacy when they read to children, sing songs with them, and engage them in conversations about the world around them. They help children develop self-control and resilience as well as social skills that help them get along with others. They are field guides on learning adventures when they take children to libraries, museums and zoos and create new learning opportunities by providing high quality after-school and summer programs. They encourage their children to master advanced skills and knowledge by setting high academic expectations for them. However, when children do not receive this foundational parent support, they are at a disadvantage.

Poverty's Effects

Poverty creates barriers that make it much harder for low-income parents and caregivers to provide this kind of support to children including:

- Overwhelming stress due to housing instability, health problems and other consequences of economic hardship
- Increased risk of mental health issues
- Lack of information on positive parenting practices
- Low levels of education
- Lack of financial resources to invest in children's enriching activities and materials
- Work schedules that limit time with children

Sometimes parents struggling with these issues are more likely to abuse their children.⁶ Angry at a job loss, utilities getting shut off, or another source of stress, a parent might become physically or verbally abusive with child discipline. Depressed about unemployment, a parent might neglect children's basic needs, not engage them in conversation or express much interest in their well-being.

Impact on Student Learning

Without consistent positive support from parents or other caregivers, low-income students are at greater risk for learning challenges including:

- Diminished literacy skills.⁷
- Cognitive difficulties^{8 9}
- Depression, anxiety and other mental health and behavioral disorders
- Lack access to after-school and summer learning opportunities^{10 11 12}

High Quality Early Learning



Students who do not have access or exposure to literacy prior to kindergarten (is our most significant out-of-school challenge).

Dr. Jeff Bearden
Superintendent, Forsyth County Schools



The foundation of children's academic success is built before kindergarten. The years from birth to age five are the period of greatest brain development. Parents provide this foundation for learning at home. High quality child care also fosters brain development and should be recognized as early learning. High quality early learning programs are staffed by responsive and caring teachers who work and play with children. They encourage children to be curious, teach them to get along with others, and build early literacy and numeracy skills. High quality early learning programs offer low class sizes so teachers can meet the needs of each child. Children who attend such programs earn higher grades and are more likely to take advanced courses and gain admission to more selective

colleges than children who attend lower quality programs.¹³ Many low-income children lack access to high quality early learning programs like these.

Poverty's Effects

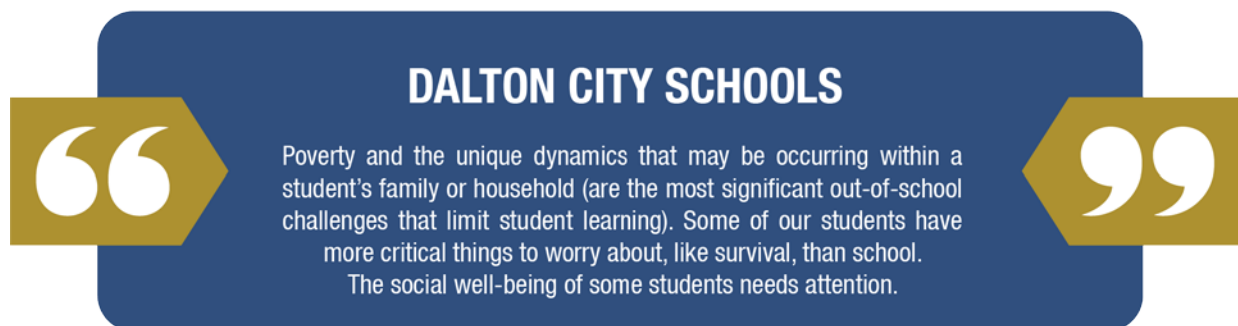
High quality early learning programs, or child care, are expensive and out of reach for low-income parents. Frequently they are not located in low-income communities, making transportation another barrier to access. Initiatives that help low-income families gain access to high quality early learning programs serve only a small portion of those families. Early Head Start, which serves children from birth to two, was funded to support fewer than 4,000 Georgia children in 2014-2015.¹⁴ About 14,000 3-year-olds in the state attended Head Start in that period.¹⁵ The Childcare and Parent Services Program (CAPS) helps cover the cost of child care for low-income families in Georgia. It serves about 54,000 children per week, but the state has more than 680,000 children under 13 in low-income working families.^{16 17} Without access to these programs, low-income families must often use poor quality child care programs or rely on relatives to provide care, alternatives that often lack the enriching activities and supports that foster learning and strong brain development.

Impact on Learning

Poor quality child care programs can exacerbate challenges low-income children face, leaving them at risk for:

- Increased behavioral problems¹⁸
- Lower levels of school readiness¹⁹
- Smaller vocabularies, which can affect literacy development²⁰

Toxic Stress

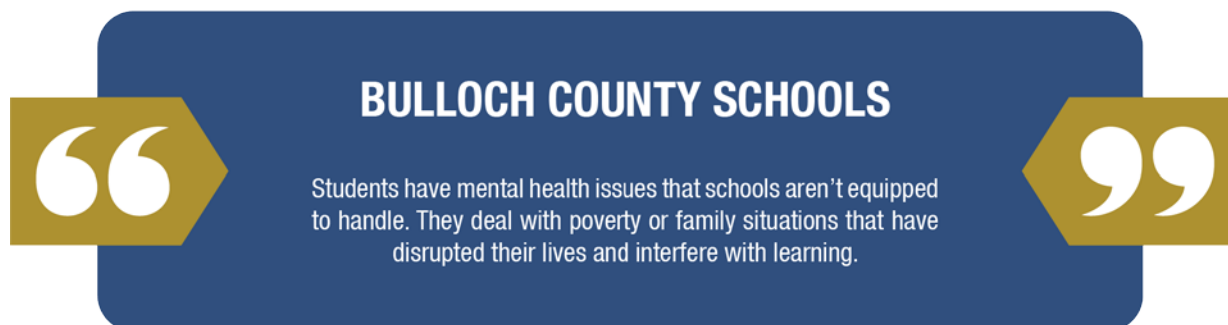
A graphic for Dalton City Schools featuring a dark blue background with a gold arrow pointing right on the left and a gold arrow pointing left on the right. In the center, white text reads: "Poverty and the unique dynamics that may be occurring within a student's family or household (are the most significant out-of-school challenges that limit student learning). Some of our students have more critical things to worry about, like survival, than school. The social well-being of some students needs attention." Above the text, the words "DALTON CITY SCHOOLS" are written in white capital letters.

DALTON CITY SCHOOLS

“Poverty and the unique dynamics that may be occurring within a student's family or household (are the most significant out-of-school challenges that limit student learning). Some of our students have more critical things to worry about, like survival, than school. The social well-being of some students needs attention.”

Every child experiences stress during childhood. When consistent and caring adults are in the child's life, these stresses are mitigated. The consequences are huge when these relationships are missing and children experience multiple stresses, such as eviction and a parent's mental health problems, or extreme stresses, such as abuse. When children are exposed to significant or constant stress, the architecture of their brain adapts to functioning in that state. They struggle to differentiate between normal stress sources and greater threats, often reacting strongly to minor problems or disagreements. Their working memories can be impaired, making it harder to complete multi-step assignments or activities. They often have difficulty controlling impulses and emotions and are at heightened risk of mental health problems. All of these make focusing on learning tasks and working collaboratively with peers harder. The changes in their brains are permanent. With support, though, children can learn coping strategies to help manage these responses.²¹

Good Health



Good physical and mental health is a necessary foundation for children to learn. A child born prematurely can face developmental delays that make it harder to learn and keep up with peers. An asthmatic child struggling to breathe will find it hard to concentrate and may miss days of school. A child who cannot clearly see the board or a page in a book will often give up, disengaging from learning. A child anxious about when the family will move again because they cannot pay rent or because a fight erupted between family members might lash out verbally or physically at classmates. Children are better able to learn when they are healthy and their physical and mental health needs are identified and appropriately treated.

Poverty's Effects

Low-income children are at higher risk for debilitating conditions including:

- Low birth weight
- Asthma
- Dental disease
- Diabetes
- Vision, hearing and speech problems
- Injuries
- Ear infections and frequent diarrhea²²
- Mental health problems including depression, anxiety and delinquent behaviors²³

These conditions are often undiagnosed and, even when identified, under-treated.

Impact on Learning

These conditions are linked to an array of learning challenges including:

- Cognitive difficulties²⁴
- Social, emotional and behavioral problems^{25 26}
- Poor literacy development²⁷
- Increased school absences^{28 29}

Adequate Nutrition

WHITE COUNTY SCHOOLS

“

Food availability and proper diet (are the most significant out of school challenges). In many areas, poverty is a big issue, which is very stressful on the kids and results in a lack of family support for the children and the educational process.

”

Children learn better when they get the nutritious food their growing bodies need. A child who is hungry is a child focused on finding something to eat, not learning.

Poverty's Effects

Low-income children are more likely to experience food insecurity than children from families with higher incomes. Food insecure families are unable to get enough food to feed everyone in their families, or worried about it.³⁰ About 15 percent of Georgia's households are food insecure³¹ and close to 6 percent reduce the amount of food they eat.³² Households with children are at higher risk of food insecurity than those without, especially those led by single parents.

Children who are food insecure are at higher risk of:

- Stomach aches, headaches and colds³³
- Anemia
- Aggression and anxiety
- Dental disease
- Asthma
- Poorer general health
- Hospitalization³⁴
- Poor non-cognitive skills³⁵

In addition, children whose mothers were food insecure during pregnancy are more likely to have birth defects, which are linked to higher incidence of learning problems.³⁶

Impact on Learning

Food insecurity can lead to multiple health conditions as well as developmental challenges that are connected to poor academic outcomes for students. These include:

- Lower literacy and numeracy skills³⁷
- Diminished non-cognitive abilities³⁸
- Increased school absences³⁹

Safe and Affordable Housing



Unstable housing, unstable home life, lack of parental involvement and high school students having to work to support their families (are the most significant out-of-school challenges that limit student learning).

Dr. Michele Taylor
Superintendent, Calhoun City Schools



Children need safe and welcoming places to grow and thrive. They need a home with proper ventilation and utilities and that is free of pests. They need a space that is clean and doesn't pose safety or environmental hazards like unsecure windows, poorly lit stairwells, or lead pipes. They need a neighborhood with green spaces to play without fear of violence or bad peer influences. They need a place where they have their own bed to sleep in and can trust there will be a home to come back to each day. Safe homes and neighborhoods are increasingly priced out of reach for low-income families.

Poverty's Effects

Home prices soared in many areas in recent years, as has the cost of renting an apartment or home but wages failed to keep pace. More than 30.3 percent of renters in Augusta and 25.3 percent in Atlanta spend more than half of their income on housing.⁴⁰ Utility costs also climbed significantly, adding to the strain of covering total housing costs and leaving little money left to cover other basic needs.⁴¹ Poor families often find themselves in housing that is:

- Unsafe due to environmental hazards, including lead exposure and mold, and poor physical quality, which increases the risk of injury and illness including asthma
- Overcrowded, with little to no space for privacy or activities like homework and reading
- In neighborhoods of concentrated poverty with limited community resources and often heightened risk of violence

Impact on Learning

The lack of safe and affordable housing poses health risks to children that can hinder their learning. It can also result in children growing up in settings that do not support their academic success and healthy development. Children in unsafe housing can experience:

- Diminished cognitive abilities⁴²
- Behavioral and mental health problems
- Increased school absences⁴³
- Switching schools frequently
- Harmful parenting practices

Elements of Successful Schools

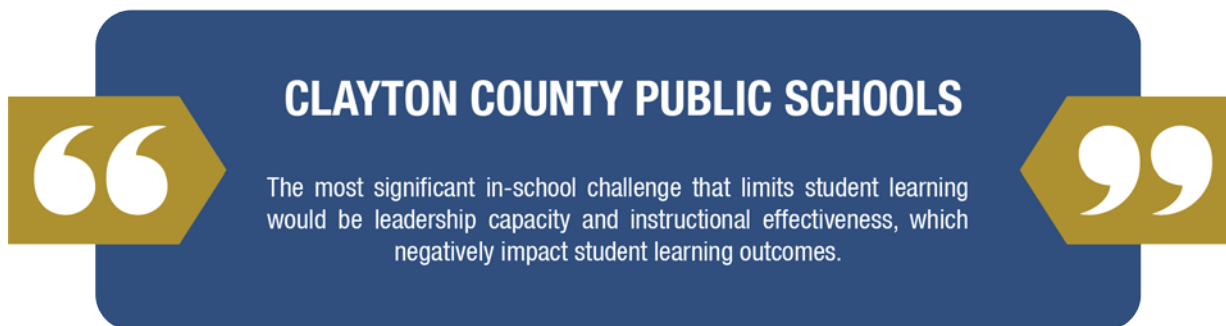
Poverty imposes significant barriers to learning on children. Low-income children often are not ready to learn when they enter the classroom, from kindergarten to twelfth grade. The issues causing them to struggle need to be addressed for children to master the knowledge and skills expected in K-12 schools and move on to postsecondary study and the workforce. At the same time, K-12 schools need to make all children feel safe and welcome and ensure they get the educational support needed to be successful learners.

There are six core components of effective schools.^{53 54} When these components are in place, schools are more successful in meeting students' needs. When one or more is missing, schools do not work as well and students are less likely to reach the high levels of learning needed for postsecondary study and success in the workforce.

- Effective leadership
- Skilled teachers
- Ambitious instruction
- Supportive school climate
- Close parent-community connections
- Adequate and flexible resources

These attributes are essential for schools to function well and should be in place in all schools across Georgia. Researchers caution, however, that educators are often overwhelmed in schools in the most stressed communities, where students' needs are vast and family and community supports are limited if they exist at all.⁵⁵ In these settings, meeting students' more basic needs is often prioritized ahead of pursuing the core components.

Effective Leadership



School leaders drive improvement in effective schools. They set strategic priorities, particularly to improve instruction, align resources with the priorities, put social and academic support in place, and build teams of staffers that can implement their priorities. They foster relationships among teachers, parents and community members, while supporting others who can help the school meet its goals.^{56 57} Among in-school factors, principals are second only to teachers in fostering high levels of learning among students.⁵⁸

Recruiting, training and keeping effective principals are challenges for many districts. About 45 percent of principals in the state served in that role for five or fewer years.⁵⁹ Principal retention rates are 80.4 in low-poverty schools compared to 71.4 percent in high-poverty schools. In addition, principals in high-poverty schools are more

likely to switch schools than those in low-poverty ones. Leadership churn makes it harder to design, implement and sustain school reforms.

Survey Insights

This summer's survey identified school leadership just twice as a significant in-school factor in student achievement in survey responses, but district respondents highlighted its importance in follow-up interviews. (See Appendix C for a list of interviewees.) They noted the role of principals in setting high expectations for student learning, which is particularly important in high-poverty schools. They also stressed the importance of supportive environments for students and teachers, which are shaped largely by principals. The need to train aspiring principals through internships or other hands-on experiences and continuing to provide guidance and constructive feedback was another emphasis. One respondent cautioned against placing new principals in high-poverty schools given their challenges but in many districts that might not be an option.

Skilled Teachers



FULTON COUNTY SCHOOLS

Lack of high quality teacher preparation in working with students with low levels of social-emotional competence and developing literacy skills across grade levels (are the most significant in-school challenges that limit student learning).

TALIAFERRO COUNTY SCHOOLS

It is incredibly difficult to find and keep qualified teachers, especially in a small system where the nearest housing is 20 miles away.

Teachers are the most influential in-school factor in student learning.⁶⁰ Effective schools attract and keep teachers with strong content and instructional knowledge, provide high quality professional development linked to schools' priorities, foster commitment to shared responsibility for student learning, and cultivate a professional community that focuses on core issues in teaching and learning.⁶¹

High-poverty schools face a greater challenge keeping teachers than low-poverty ones. The average teacher retention rate in high-poverty schools was 74.5 percent from the 2014-2015 to the 2015-2016 school years.⁶² It was 84.6 percent in low-poverty schools.⁶³ Teachers' certificate levels differ between high- and low-poverty schools. Teachers in high-poverty schools are more likely to hold a bachelor's degree while those in low-poverty schools are more likely to hold a master's degree or higher.⁶⁴

Survey Insights


More than 28 percent of responding districts reported concerns about teachers as significant in-school factors limiting student learning. Respondents identified recruitment and retention most frequently, but noted other issues related to teacher quality as well.

28%
**Share of districts cite
teacher quality issues
such as recruitment and
retention**

Districts from all regions across the state and of all sizes reported difficulty finding and keeping good teachers. Low pay, mandated testing and the shrinking number of people going into teaching are among the reasons for the challenges cited by several districts. About 12 percent of responding districts also flagged large class sizes or lack of sufficient instructional staff as problems.

About 9 percent of responding districts say poor preparation or lack of professional learning is a problem. A gap in preparation or training resulted in a lack of knowledge about the particular learning needs of low-income students, was noted often. Some respondents cited teacher quality as a general concern.

Ambitious Instruction




FAYETTE COUNTY SCHOOLS

Some significant in-school challenges that limit student learning are a lack of instructional strategies that enable students to access the curriculum at their reading level, inadequate engagement strategies that hook and sustain students' interest, and an overall lack of differentiation strategies that meet students where they are.

TATTNALL COUNTY SCHOOLS

We often cannot afford to purchase instructional materials that are proven to be highly effective because we lack the resources.



Instruction is the core work of schools. It is the information teachers impart to their students and the way they do it. Teachers must move beyond learning tasks that focus on developing students' basic skills and instead develop their ability to do advanced work. To do this, teachers need a content-rich curriculum, knowledge of effective instructional strategies, and the materials and tools to carry out those strategies.⁶⁵ These should be buttressed by aligned assessments to gauge students' progress and inform subsequent decisions about instruction.

Survey Insights

Nearly 30 percent of districts reported problems related to instruction as significant factors that limit student learning. Most of the concerns are about instructional strategies and lack of resources to support instruction.

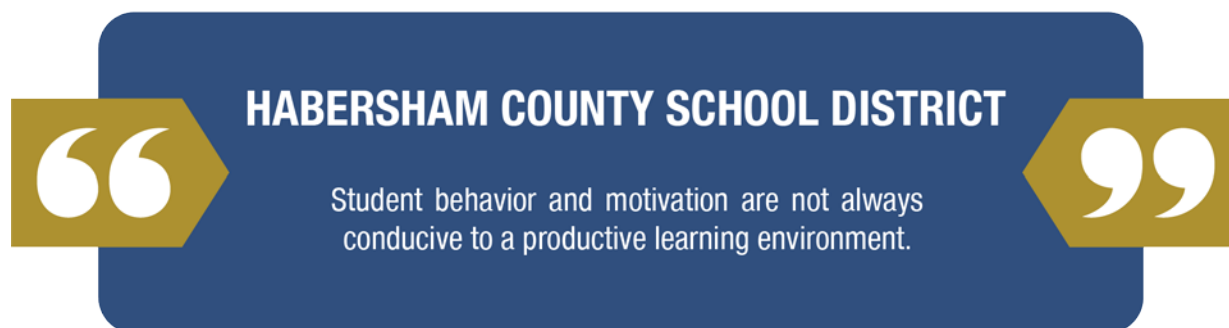
Districts reported challenges providing instruction that meets the differing needs of students. One district leader described this type of dynamic, individualized instruction as an area where progress has been made but much work remains to be done, noting it takes a lot of time and experience to become skilled. Respondents also said it is a challenge to provide students with engaging learning activities.

District officials also said a lack of instructional resources is a problem. Some said they are unable to provide teachers with materials and tools, including technology. Others reported an inability to provide intervention services to students who are behind while others said they lack resources to provide the variety of courses they would prefer, including STEM and enrichment.



And several districts said the scope of material teachers are required to cover is difficult to squeeze into the allotted time. Two expressed concern that students are moved ahead before they are ready as a result.

Supportive School Climate



A school's first charge is to keep everyone safe and to create order so it can function smoothly with students and teachers moving calmly from one class to the next every day. Successful schools do more. They set high expectations for academic success for each student. These schools also ensure students get support needed to reach these expectations and are not left alone to overcome challenges or setbacks. A supportive school also encourages students to believe in their own abilities and the value of investing their time, effort and hope in education.

Survey Insights

About 28 percent of districts cited at least one of the following issues as a significant in-school factor limiting student learning: student behavior/discipline, apathy/lack of motivation, attendance, and student mental health concerns. These issues shape school climate and often overlap.

A student struggling with anger or anxiety might misbehave and disrupt classroom activities, making it harder for other students to learn. Students who are depressed might skip school, or students might skip because discipline problems make them feel unsafe.

Several respondents reported they lack the support staff necessary to meet students' needs, including social workers, counselors and behaviorists. One district leader explained how a very small number of students with mental health and behavioral issues can disrupt a school for a day. When that happens, a principal must often divert hours to an individual student in a behavioral crisis instead of focusing on other critical components of her role. If these disruptions are frequent, it can ripple through the school.



Close Parent-Community Connections



EVAN COUNTY SCHOOLS

We operate in a small, rural community. Poverty is prevalent in our community. Student activities are limited primarily to school activities. The lack of access and resources leads to issues with teen pregnancy and juvenile legal issues.

WAYNE COUNTY SCHOOLS

There is a deficit of parental involvement and a lack of resources available to the students. There is no emphasis on the importance of education outside of the school day.



Parents shape students' motivation and participation in school. When parents read with young children, supervise homework, attend parent-teacher conferences, make clear they expect good grades and good behavior, they are partners with teachers in their children's learning and the school's success. Some parents fill this role readily, others need ongoing encouragement and guidance. Community organizations can also support students by supplementing school activities with their own programs, at times filling gaps schools and families cannot.⁶⁶

Survey Insights


Almost 40 percent of responding districts reported lack of parent involvement as a significant out-of-school factor that limits student learning. Several said some parents are not engaged in developing early literacy skills, helping with homework or encouraging their children to value education. A few respondents said the lack of involvement is linked to changes in family structure, including an increase in single-parent families or grandparents raising children. Others cited a lack of trust between parents and educators. Respondents attributed this to socioeconomic differences between parents and teachers.

40%
**Share of districts cite
lack of parent
involvement as key
learning factor**

Facilitating greater parent involvement is often not easy. One district reported little improvement from an initiative to bolster parent involvement. Another noted educators can invest considerable time in cultivating more parent participation to little result.

Community resources are not available in some areas. Eleven percent of responding districts said a lack of community resources is a problem, including enrichment programs and mental health services. Rural communities also lack transportation, an access barrier even where community organizations are in place.

Adequate and Flexible Funding




MADISON COUNTY SCHOOLS

Provide flexibility-focus on student learning needs/meeting students' need and not compliance. Fund austerity cuts. Add grants for more student services like grad coaches, mentors, social workers, etc.

PAULDING COUNTY SCHOOLS

Lack of funding has significant impact on student performance resulting in larger class sizes, less technology and curriculum materials, needed additional support staff, and lack of professional development.



Low-income students perform better when their schools get more financial resources sustained over time. They stay in school longer, earn higher incomes as adults and are less likely to be poor.⁶⁷ Their test scores also increase.⁶⁸ Additional resources help schools and districts invest in policies with a track record of improving student learning, including lower class sizes, more instructional time and higher teacher salaries.⁶⁹

The Georgia Legislature failed every year since 2003 to provide school districts with the full amount of money calculated by the state's own formula for funding schools. The amount cut from districts' budget topped \$1 billion **annually** from fiscal years 2010 to 2014. Meanwhile, local revenue plummeted in many districts due to sinking property values. In response, districts cut days off school calendars, eliminated teaching positions and furloughed teachers and administrators.

Squeezed districts also cut student programs, including elective courses like art and music, and intervention programs for low-performing students. A recent national review showed these cuts led to declines in student achievement, particularly in districts with more low-income students.⁷⁰ Districts struggled to maintain existing services, much less invest in school improvement efforts such as high-quality professional development for teachers and principals, small classes in early grades, support staff including school counselors, instructional materials and tools, or technology.

State funding cuts grew smaller since 2014. For the 2018 budget year that started July 1, 2017, the state is shorting districts \$167 million, based on its formula. This partial restoration of funds helped districts to restore some program and staff cuts but schools continue to face difficult financial constraints.

The state recently shifted the full cost of health insurance for non-teaching staff such as bus drivers and custodians to districts, a \$430 million tab. The state also handed districts most of the cost of student transportation. School systems are left to cover these gaps in state funding, leaving them with less local money to invest in the classroom.

School and district leaders also need flexibility to align spending with instructional priorities and student needs tailored to their community, which can vary considerably. State spending regulations can curtail flexibility at times, constraining what they can do to improve instruction and learning.

Survey Insights

Nearly 45 percent of districts report a lack of funding is a significant in-school factor limiting student achievement. Many linked specific challenges to inadequate funding:

- Larger class sizes
- Low teacher salaries and difficulty attracting and retaining teachers
- Lack of instructional resources and materials
- Absence of support staff, including social workers, counselors and intervention specialists
- Lack of technology
- No summer and after-school enrichment programs

More than three-quarters of districts said the state could better support their efforts to improve learning for low-income students with more funding. Some said they would use additional money to reduce class size, invest in strategies to attract and retain teachers, add support staff and offer enrichment programs. Several also called for increased investment in early childhood education. Respondents cited the lack of early literacy skills and school readiness as a non-school factor that limits student learning and aligns frequently noted concerns about lack of parent involvement.

45%
Share of districts say
more funding key to
improve low-income
student learning

The different priorities districts identified for extra money reinforces the importance of flexibility. About 13 percent of responding districts want more spending flexibility beyond their existing state-approved waivers. Some district leaders continue to feel constraints in resource allocation.

Recommendations: Drive Improvement to Low-Income Schools

Meeting the needs of students in Georgia's poorest schools is urgent. It is also complex and will not be solved with simple fixes. The path forward is a broad approach that reduces the impact of poverty on students and enhances the ability of schools to better meet their needs. In 2017, the General Assembly created the position of Chief Turnaround Officer, whose charge is to work closely with selected low-scoring schools to design and implement reforms. The turnaround officer could spur valuable gains in these targeted schools. Strengthening the ability of schools to meet the needs of students is also the goal of the school improvement team at the Georgia Department of Education. The team has recently revised its approach to offer more comprehensive and direct support to these schools.

Georgia can take several steps to build on these recent developments.

Foster Socioeconomic Integration. Low-income students do better in schools that are economically diverse than where the majority of students are poor.⁷¹ A growing number of school districts across the country are taking this into account, including Jefferson County, Ky., Hartford, Conn., and Dallas. These school systems are working to integrate schools based on family or neighborhood income level, parent educational attainment and other factors.⁷² The results are promising albeit uneven in a few places.

- **Jefferson County** uses controlled parent choice to ensure no school is home to a percentage of disadvantaged students above a certain level. The percentage of all students as well as those who are disadvantaged reaching the proficient or distinguished levels on Kentucky's state assessment is on the rise.⁷³
- In **Hartford**, the district operates about half of the region's 45 magnet schools, which were created by state lawmakers as part of an inter-district initiative to foster integration. A consortium of surrounding districts runs the remaining ones. The magnet schools are more racially and economically diverse than traditional schools, and their students do better academically than their peers in traditional schools.⁷⁴
- **Dallas** recently launched a new initiative to promote socioeconomic integration through expanded choice. The district is creating magnet-like schools but without admission standards, with the aim of enrolling students from different socioeconomic groups. The initiative is too new to offer student achievement data but the schools are more economically diverse than traditional schools.⁷⁵

Georgia can help schools with concentrated poverty through a pilot program that gives districts incentives to integrate schools of concentrated poverty to help improve student outcomes. Participating districts can get more money to cover development and implementation costs, including transportation. The pilot needs rigorous external evaluation to determine its impact on participating students, schools and districts.

Socioeconomic integration might not be feasible in all districts, nor should it be the sole strategy for improving student learning.⁷⁶ Still, it can be a valuable lever to improve student learning and should be used in Georgia.

Invest Adequate Resources in Low-Income Students and Schools. Georgia ranks 38th in the nation in school spending, even after accounting for regional cost differences⁷⁷. This is not surprising as the state formula for funding public school students was approved by the General Assembly in 1985. The formula is substantially the same as three decades ago, even though it's since been revised. Meanwhile, state officials ratcheted up performance standards: Students are expected to know and do far more today than 30 years ago. The state is not offering resources to match these elevated standards. The formula also does not account for the added needs of low-income children or the resources needed in high- and extreme-poverty schools. This is opposite the strategy pursued by Massachusetts, the state often cited as the national leader in student achievement. Massachusetts pushed performance and accountability standards high and supported them with a significant funding increase.⁷⁸

Efforts are launched periodically to revise Georgia's K-12 funding formula, the Quality Basic Education formula. The most recent was Gov. Nathan Deal's 2015 Education Reform Commission. The commission did not assess cost or consider the increased performance standards. Instead it examined ways to redistribute the current level of formula funding, which includes an austerity cut and does not account for cost shifting by the state.⁷⁹

Georgia's students and its public schools need a funding formula based on a comprehensive assessment of the cost of ensuring all students reach state standards and provides adequate and equitable funding to all schools. It should send more money to all districts to align the state's investment in public school students with current costs. It must also ensure high- and extreme-poverty schools get sufficient resources to meet student needs. Educating high-poverty and historically-marginalized students to high levels of academic achievement costs more.⁸⁰ The state must match its expectations of these students with a renewed commitment to provide the additional resources they need to reach them—it is accountable for that.

District and school leaders need more flexibility so they can direct resources to their greatest needs. This may mean extending instructional time, reducing class size, or purchasing up-to-date instructional materials. They might choose to hire additional support staff or adopt the community schools reform model.

Build a Principal Pipeline. Every school, especially high-poverty schools, needs an effective principal. Georgia is taking key steps toward reaching this goal, including new accountability measures for leadership training programs designed by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission.

Individual districts are also working on this issue. Gwinnett County Public Schools, Cobb County School District, Hall County Schools and Camden County Schools are among those that offer leadership programs for people who aspire to be principals and other kinds of leaders. The 2017 General Assembly created a legislative study committee to examine the creation of a leadership academy. The committee is examining district-level examples, particularly Gwinnett's. The committee is meeting late in 2017 and is expected to offer recommendations in time for the 2018 legislative session.

Approval and implementation of a leadership academy to serve districts across the state can ensure future school leaders get access to high-quality training. A second need is a statewide induction program for new principals. Gwinnett provides its first- and second-year principals with mentoring from experienced former principals. This type of support can help new principals successfully transition and improve retention, which is lower among principals serving high-poverty schools. To expand the leadership academy and induction program statewide, Georgia needs to invest adequate funds.

Enhance Teacher Compensation. Teachers are the biggest in-school influence on student learning but districts find it hard to hire and keep good ones. District leaders said low pay is a key cause. Their feedback aligns with results from a survey of 53,000 teachers conducted by the Georgia Department of Education in 2015.⁸¹

District leaders said if the state provided more funding their top two priorities will be increasing teacher salaries and lowering class sizes, which improves teachers' working conditions. Many districts already stretch their resources to boost teachers' salaries with local money though the amount varies greatly across Georgia.

The state provided a modest bump to its teacher salary schedule in the 2018 budget, the first increase since 2009. The salary for a first-year teacher increased \$668 to \$34,092. To keep pace with inflation the salary needs to be about \$39,000. The state should build on its progress and increase salaries again. It should also partner with districts to test and evaluate local initiatives that provide more pay based on geographic and subject area shortages or enhance teachers' economic security in other ways such as student loan forgiveness, both of which have been found to improve teacher recruitment and retention.⁸²

Develop State Research Capacity to Support School Improvement. Georgia collects and distributes extensive data on students and schools. It offers much less information on the programs and policies that consistently lead to increased student learning and more effective schools across the state. Georgia should expand its ability to conduct research to identify those programs and policies.

Establishing a research practice partnership is one way to do so. These partnerships bring state and district education leaders together with researchers to raise and prioritize key questions, analyze data, and distribute findings. The partnerships can assess and compare the effect of state and local tactics to help low-performing schools, and other efforts intended to improve student learning. They also can synthesize and make traditional academic research more accessible.⁸³

The Tennessee Department of Education partnered with Vanderbilt University to establish the [Tennessee Education Research Alliance](#). The alliance's analyses combined with those of the department's own internal research team

support a system of continuous research to create evidence-based improvement in schools and districts.⁸⁴ Massachusetts is also prioritizing research, making it a core component of its effort to improve student outcomes. Its Department of Elementary and Secondary Education works with external researchers to answer critical questions and makes findings accessible to district leaders and staff.⁸⁵

Georgia has several universities that can be tapped to carry out this type of research. It already has a home-grown research partnership model, the recently launched Metro Atlanta Policy Lab for Education at Georgia State University. Researchers are collaborating with Gwinnett County Public Schools, DeKalb County School District, Fulton County Public Schools, and Atlanta Public Schools to identify evidence-based strategies to improve student achievement. The state can collaborate with this effort or develop a complementary one. Georgia is investing \$9 billion in K-12 schools through the 2018 state budget. Dedicating a very small portion of that to practice-based research will help state and district leaders gain a better understanding of ways that money can best be used to improve student learning.

Establish a Task Force of State Agencies to Support School and Community Improvement. Schools with the highest concentrations of impoverished students frequently need external support to meet those needs. A task force of state agencies can assist local organizations in the communities surrounding these schools and offer more support to students. If needed, task force members should offer services directly. Based on an assessment of community needs and assets, task force agencies should also collaborate with local leaders to design and implement initiatives to strengthen the economic health of these communities.

Georgia needs to change the trajectory of its low-income students, a point of widespread agreement. These children need a chance to pursue their dreams and the state needs them to gain postsecondary knowledge and skills to attract and build high-wage industries. Piecemeal policies will not achieve this goal. What's called for is a more comprehensive approach that tackles the downward pull of poverty on student learning and improves the ability of schools to meet the needs of low-income students. That might be harder, but it is the pathway to a future of economic opportunity for Georgia and all its citizens.



Appendix A: GBPI's Analysis

Schools Included in the Analysis

The data used to conduct this analysis was retrieved from the [Governor's Office of Student Achievement](#) and the [Georgia Department of Education](#). We include 2,135 public schools in the analysis. Schools are excluded if they did not receive a 2016 score under the College and Career Ready Performance Index, the state's accountability system. Most of the schools excluded for this reason were primary schools serving grades K-2. State schools, including those serving students with vision and hearing problems, were excluded as well as those operated by the Georgia Department of Justice.

Defining Student Poverty

GBPI used direct certification data to identify low-income students. Under direct certification criteria, students are considered low-income if they:

- Live in a family receiving SNAP (food stamp) benefits
- Live in a family receiving TANF (welfare) benefits
- Are identified as homeless
- Are identified as in foster care
- Are identified as migrant

Georgia caps SNAP income eligibility at 130 percent of the federal poverty level or \$26,546 for a family of three in 2017. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families eligibility is set at a lower level, income for a family of three is limited to \$784 per month or about \$9,400 a year.

Using direct certification is a shift from the previous practice widely used across the education sector of identifying low-income students based on their participation in the federal free or reduced lunch program. Students qualify for free lunch if their families' income is below 130 percent of the poverty line or reduced price lunch if income is below 185 percent of the poverty or \$37,777 for a family of three.

Recent changes in the lunch program allow districts to classify all students in selected or all schools as qualifying for the program even if some do not. This overestimates the portion of students who are low-income in some districts. GBPI relied on school-level direct certification data to identify low-income students for this analysis. A limitation of this method is fewer students are classified as low-income, given the lower income caps, which excludes students from working poor families.

Appendix B: Districts Participating in Survey

1	Appling County Schools	39	Dalton Public Schools
2	Atlanta Public Schools	40	Dawson County Schools
3	Bacon County	41	DeKalb County Schools
4	Baker County Schools	42	Decatur County Schools
5	Banks County Schools	43	Dodge County Schools
6	Barrow County Schools	44	Dooly County Schools
7	Bartow County Schools	45	Dougherty County Schools
8	Ben Hill County Schools	46	Douglas County Schools
9	Berrien County Schools	47	Dublin City Schools
10	Bibb County Schools	48	Early County Schools
11	Bleckley County Schools	49	Evans County Schools
12	Brantley County Schools	50	Fayette County Schools
13	Brooks County Schools	51	Forsyth County Schools
14	Bryan County Schools	52	Franklin County Schools
15	Buford City Schools	53	Fulton County Schools
16	Bulloch County Schools	54	Glynn County Schools
17	Burke County Schools	55	Gordon County Schools
18	Calhoun City Schools	56	Grady County Schools
19	Calhoun County Schools	57	Gwinnett County Schools
20	Camden County Schools	58	Habersham County Schools
21	Candler County Schools	59	Haralson County Schools
22	Carroll County Schools	60	Heard County Schools
23	Cartersville City Schools	61	Henry County Schools
24	Charlton County Schools	62	Houston County Schools
25	Chattahoochee County Schools	63	Jackson County Schools
26	Chattooga County Schools	64	Jasper County Schools
27	Cherokee County Schools	65	Jeff Davis County Schools
28	Chickamauga City Schools	66	Jefferson City Schools
29	Clarke County Schools	67	Jefferson County Schools
30	Clayton County Schools	68	Jenkins County Schools
31	Cobb County Schools	69	Johnson County Schools
32	Coffee County Schools	70	Jones County Schools
33	Columbia County Schools	71	Lamar County Schools
34	Commerce City Schools	72	Lanier County Schools
35	Cook County Schools	73	Laurens County Schools
36	Coweta County Schools	74	Lee County Schools
37	Crisp County Schools	75	Lincoln County Schools
38	Dade County Schools	76	Long County Schools
77	Lowndes County Schools	101	Social Circle City Schools
78	Lumpkin County Schools	102	Stewart County Schools

79	Madison County Schools	103	Taliaferro County Schools
80	Marietta City Schools	104	Tattnall County Schools
81	Meriwether County Schools	105	Taylor County Schools
82	Miller County Schools	106	Thomas County Schools
83	Monroe County Schools	107	Thomaston-Upson County Schools
84	Morgan County Schools	108	Thomasville City Schools
85	Murray County Schools	109	Tift County Schools
86	Muscogee County Schools	110	Toombs County Schools
87	Newton County Schools	111	Treutlen County Schools
88	Oconee County Schools	112	Troup County Schools
89	Oglethorpe County Schools	113	Turner County Schools
90	Paulding County Schools	114	Union County Schools
91	Pelham City Schools	115	Vidalia City Schools
92	Pierce County Schools	116	Walker County Schools
93	Pulaski County Schools	117	Walton County Schools
94	Putnam County Schools	118	Warren County Schools
95	Quitman County Schools	119	Washington County Schools
96	Richmond County Schools	120	Wayne County Schools
97	Rockdale County Schools	121	White County Schools
98	Schley County Schools	122	Whitfield County Schools
99	Screven County Schools	123	Wilkinson County Schools
100	Seminole County Schools	124	Worth County Schools



Appendix C: Districts Participating in Survey

GBPI staff interviewed several district and state leaders to explore issues that emerged in the survey and literature review in greater detail. Interviewees are listed below:

Dr. Linda Anderson, Associate Superintendent, Human Resources and Talent Management
Gwinnett County Public Schools

Dr. Caitlin Dooley, Deputy Superintendent, Curriculum and Instruction
Georgia Department of Education

Dr. Steve Flynt, Associate Superintendent, School Improvement and Operations
Gwinnett County Public Schools

Dr. Will Hardin, Superintendent
Camden County Schools

Stephanie Johnson, Deputy Superintendent, School Improvement
Georgia Department of Education

Dr. Allen McCannon, Superintendent
Madison County Schools

Dr. Jonathan Patterson, Associate Superintendent, Curriculum and Instructional Support
Gwinnett County Public Schools

Dr. Bronwyn Ragan-Martin, Superintendent
Early County Schools

Endnotes

¹ The grades are based on schools' scores under the state's accountability system, the College and Career Ready Performance Index, which is overseen by the Georgia Department of Education. More information about school grades is available at <https://schoolgrades.georgia.gov/>. More information about the CCRPI is available at <http://www.gadoe.org/CCRPI/Pages/default.aspx>.

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