

Georgia Landscape - Advanced Instructional System

Over the past several years, Georgia has worked hard to develop a coherent instructional system that incorporates high standards and aligned assessments that will allow for the personalization of instruction. The state has also implemented an accountability system to ensure that students are meeting the high expectations that have been set for them. Much of this work was supported by Georgia's Race to the Top grant, but continues to be refined to this day and is being incorporated into Georgia's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) state plan developed by the Georgia Department of Education. Georgia's goal is to ensure that every school has the proper foundational supports to promote teaching and learning. Once those foundational supports are solidified, teachers, schools, and districts can use innovative approaches to meet the individual needs of their students.

Foundations of the Instructional System

The foundations of any instructional system are to clearly identify what a student should know and be able to do, monitor if students are understanding the content, and know what to do if they are not. Realizing this goal requires a combination of standards, assessments, and accountability.

Standards

Implementing rigorous college- and career-ready standards that prepare students for success has been an integral aspect of education reform in Georgia for years. In 2010, Georgia infused the Common Core State Standards¹⁷⁹ into its existing standards, the Georgia Performance Standards, to add a level of rigor, resulting in the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS). Districts implemented them at the start of the 2012 school year for all grades in English/language arts (ELA) and K-9 mathematics.

On February 19, 2015, the State Board of Education voted on revisions to the CCGPS and renamed the ELA and mathematics standards the Georgia Standards of Excellence (GSE). These standards were implemented beginning in the 2015–2016 school year. Georgia has continued its commitment to more rigorous standards by revising and updating both the science and social studies standards. The GSEs for science and social studies began to be implemented during the 2017–2018 school year.

The GSEs that Georgia has today are a set of standards, not to be confused with a curriculum. Standards are designed to outline what students should know at a certain point in their education so that when they graduate from high school, they are ready for college and/or a career. A curriculum involves how standards are taught, including teaching methods, lesson plans, textbooks, reading materials, and so forth. The GSEs outline the standards — the goals. Local school districts and teachers are left to develop their own curricula and are responsible for determining the resources and strategies that will be used for instruction to support their students' needs and interests.

To support local districts, the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) provides frameworks, which are “models of instruction” designed to help teachers implement the standards. GaDOE presents curriculum examples for each grade level and examples of frameworks aligned with the standards to illustrate potential ways to cover the standards within the grade level. School systems and teachers may use these models as they are, modify them, or create their own curriculum maps, units, and tasks.

179 Former Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue helped lead the coordinated effort of the National Governors Association and Council for Chief State School Officers to support states in developing internationally benchmarked ELA and mathematics standards. These standards became known as the Common Core State Standards.

Assessments

When Georgia decided to improve its standards, the state also decided to create a corresponding assessment system for measuring student learning, now called the Georgia Milestones Assessment System (Ga Milestones). This new system replaced the previously used Criteria-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) in grades three through eight and old end-of-course tests in high school. Georgia Milestones were first taken by students in the 2014–2015 school year.

The Georgia Milestones assessment system has changed Georgia’s assessment landscape. A formative assessment toolkit – comprising instructional practice techniques, assessment bank items, and benchmark assessments – was developed and lays a foundation for educators from which to prepare for the high-stakes end-of-grade (EOG) and end-of-course (EOC) tests that are part of the Georgia Milestones.

Recently, however, Georgia has been exploring ways to change the culture and purpose of testing through the implementation of GaDOE’s Vision 2020 Strategic Plan and its alignment with Georgia’s state ESSA plan, submitted to the US Department of Education (US Ed) in September 2017.

The first step is a shift away from the focus on high-stakes EOG and EOC tests, known as summative assessments, and more emphasis on formative assessments, which are used to provide the information necessary to adjust classroom strategies while teaching and learning are under way in the classroom.

In its strategic plan, GaDOE is committed to assessments that *inform* instruction, rather than *drive* instruction. Teachers can use the following quality, effective diagnostic tools in their classrooms:¹⁸⁰

- **Formative Instructional Practices** – Online modules that support teachers in creating, administering, and using quality formative assessments in the classroom
- **Georgia Online Formative Assessment Resource (GOFAR)** – Gives teachers access to items aligned to the state’s Milestones assessments and gives them additional tools to build and administer diagnostic assessments in a classroom setting

In addition, in the strategic plan, GaDOE seeks to support local districts in developing formative assessments, such as portfolios, performance tasks, competency-based pathways, and embedded assessments.

Finally, for first and second grades, GaDOE is exploring innovative ways to assess students through online games. These games engage students in short tasks and carry information back to the student, teachers, and parents to help them understand what they know and what they need to learn next. This “gamification” of assessments gives learners a fun, engaging experience while also providing educators and parents with timely information about how to support the learner.¹⁸¹

To support the use of formative assessments and to work toward ensuring every child is on a path to reading on grade level by the third grade, Georgia is also making changes to GKIDS, the Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills. A year-long assessment, GKIDS is aligned to standards and provides teachers with information about the level of instructional support needed by individual students entering kindergarten and first grade.¹⁸²

180 Georgia Department of Education. (2016). *Vision 2020: Educating Georgia’s Future*. Retrieved from www.gadoe.org/Documents/VISION_2020.pdf.

181 Ibid.

182 See www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Assessment/Pages/GKIDS.aspx.

In partnership with Bright From the Start: The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, GaDOE has been developing a new component to the GKIDS, the Kindergarten Readiness Check. The Readiness Check is administered during the first six weeks of the kindergarten year and is aligned to the Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards. It is also correlated to the kindergarten content standards. The goal of the assessment is to provide information about the skills of students entering kindergarten.¹⁸³ This will help kindergarten teachers more quickly individualize instruction for young students.

While shifting focus to more diagnostic and formative assessments, Georgia has also reduced the number of high-stakes tests to a number closer to the federal minimum. In 2016, Senate Bill (SB) 364 eliminated eight high-stakes Georgia Milestones tests and gave districts the option to eliminate high-stakes Student Learning Objectives tests for teachers of non-tested subjects.¹⁸⁴

In 2017, SB 211 directly addressed the issue of assessments and Georgia's state plan required under ESSA. It calls for the ESSA plan to take advantage of the full flexibility allowed by US Ed. This flexibility will potentially allow local districts to pilot innovative approaches to assessments in grades other than high school. It also allows the state and local districts to potentially use nationally recognized high school assessments, provided comparability can be established, in place of the Georgia Milestones EOC assessments. However, it is important to note that this is not blanket flexibility given to all states. ESSA allows up to seven states to apply for an innovative assessment pilot that would involve a group of districts administering the same innovative assessment for a specified number of years, with the intent of ultimately scaling it statewide. The innovative assessment must be built and ready to implement before applying to participate in the pilot.

Therefore, SB 211 calls for a comparability study of other assessments aligned with state standards, such as the SAT/ACT and Accuplacer. Overall, this legislation is viewed as trying to separate out assessments used to inform teaching (formative) from those used for accountability.

Accountability

Accountability systems are used to assure college- and career-ready standards are being met as students move through the K-12 system. In Georgia, the accountability system is called the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI). The CCRPI is the school and district accountability system that replaced Adequate Yearly Progress when the state received a waiver from US Ed in 2012 of the federal requirements dictated by No Child Left Behind.

The CCRPI was designed as a school improvement, accountability, and communications measure. It rates schools using an index score comprising multiple measures, including student achievement, progress measures of student growth, achievement gap closures, and efforts to prepare students for college and/or career. School climate and financial effectiveness measures are also reported, but not included in the overall score calculation.

The new state ESSA plan developed by GaDOE also adjusts the CCRPI, both in its scope and in specific measures. Under the new plan, accountability is generally viewed as having a supporting role for schools and districts. Objective measures would be used to illustrate how well schools and districts are succeeding in providing improved opportunities and outcomes for all students.¹⁸⁵

183 See www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Assessment/Pages/Readiness.aspx.

184 Ibid.

185 Georgia Department of Education. (2017). ESSA State Advisory Committee Meeting, January 17, 2017. Atlanta: Georgia Department of Education.

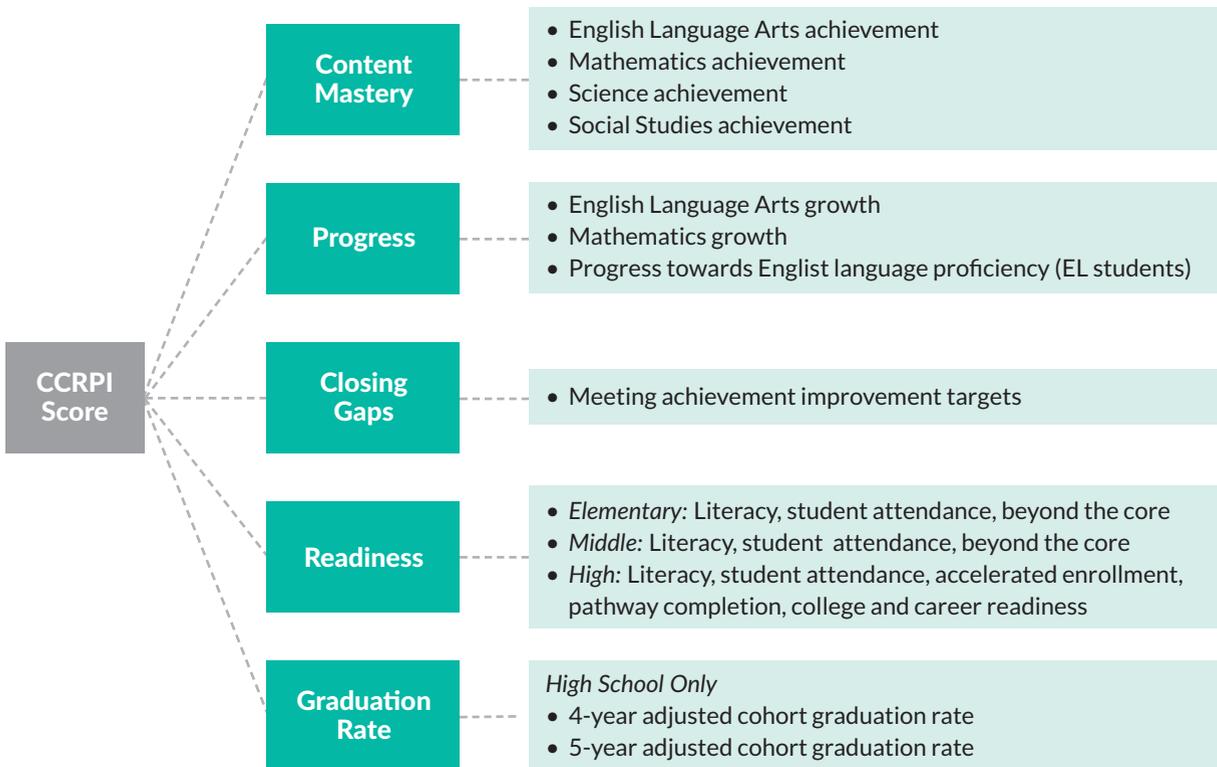
The ESSA state plan intentionally redesigns the CCRPI to be the ultimate school continuous improvement tool that will help guide long-term, sustainable improvement, not quick fixes. For Georgia, the CCRPI has several specific goals:¹⁸⁶

- Increasing student achievement for all students and making progress in closing achievement gaps
- Increasing graduation rates
- Increasing student performance in literacy and numeracy in the early grades
- Increasing student completion of advanced courses
- Increasing the percentage of students on the path to college and career readiness

The CCRPI combines scores across the five components shown in Figure 6.1¹⁸⁷

- 1. Content Mastery** – Are students achieving at the level necessary to be prepared for the next grade, college, or career?
- 2. Progress** – How much growth are students demonstrating relative to academically similar students?
- 3. Closing Gaps** – Are all students and all student subgroups making improvements in achievement rates?
- 4. Readiness** – Are students participating in activities preparing them for and demonstrating readiness for the next level, college, or career?
- 5. Graduation Rate** – Are students graduating from high school with a regular diploma in four or five years?

FIGURE 6.1 REVISED CCRPI INDICATORS UNDER THE GADOE'S STATE ESSA PLAN¹⁸⁸



186 Ibid.

187 Georgia Department of Education. (2017). *Redesigned College and Career Ready Performance Index*. Retrieved from www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Documents/RedesignedCCRPIOverview.pdf.

188 Ibid.

Combining the Foundations

Under the leadership of Superintendent Richard Woods, GaDOE implemented a strategic plan that emphasizes the development of a common, continuous improvement framework to ensure all schools are receiving meaningful support in the foundational elements. Georgia's System of Continuous Improvement framework focuses on the specific systems and structures that must be in place (the what) for sustained improvement. It also uses a problem-solving model (the how) to ensure these foundational elements are leading to stronger student outcomes.¹⁸⁹ Figure 6.2 illustrates how the GaDOE's Continuous Improvement framework works.

To deliver a coherent instructional system, Georgia focuses on four primary elements:¹⁹¹

1. Planning for Quality

Instruction – The instructional system is structured so that teams use the Georgia standards to plan what the students should know and do, and they determine how their students will show that they know the content and can do a skill or performance task.

2. Delivering Quality Instruction –

The structure of the instructional system guides teachers in how in how to introduce content in engaging and relevant ways, to ensure that students gradually become independent in their understanding of content, and to provide students opportunities to apply their knowledge. This gradual release of responsibility for learning is made possible through regular feedback and attention to what “mastery” looks like.

3. Monitoring Student Progress – The instructional system includes the use of formative assessments that methodically determine whether the students are understanding the content, and what to do when they are or are not.

4. Refining the Instructional System – The system is structured to examine how to improve the planning for quality instruction, deliver quality instruction, and monitor student progress.

FIGURE 6.2 GEORGIA'S SYSTEM OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT¹⁹⁰



Innovation in the Instructional System

In any school or district, once the foundational systems are solidified, teachers, schools, and districts can use innovative approaches to meet the individual needs of their students. Georgia has many opportunities for innovation and multiple pathways that allow for educational innovation.

The Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) administers the Innovation Fund. The fund provides grants to organizations focused on planning, implementing, or scaling programs aligned with the Innovation Fund's priority areas. The Innovation Fund began as a \$19.4 million fund under Georgia's

189 Georgia Department of Education. (2017). Department of Curriculum and Instruction. Retrieved from www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Curriculum-and-Instruction/Pages/default.aspx.

190 See www.gadoe.org/School-Improvement/School-Improvement-Services/Pages/Georgia%E2%80%99s-Systems-of-Continuous-Improvement.aspx.

191 Ibid.

Race to the Top plan. During Race to the Top, the Innovation Fund focused on best practices to influence future education policy efforts in (1) science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education, (2) applied learning, and (3) teacher and leader recruitment and development.

To continue the Innovation Fund's Work beyond Race to the Top, Governor Nathan Deal appropriated state funding in fiscal years 2015, 2016, and 2017 to foster innovation in priority areas, including the following:

- Applied learning with a focus on STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math)
- Birth-to-age eight language and literacy development
- The development and replication of blended learning models
- Teacher and leader development for high-needs schools¹⁹²

Through the end of 2016, the Innovation Fund provided more than \$31 million in state and federal funding through 78 grants to 50 school districts, traditional public schools, charter schools, post-secondary institutions, and nonprofit organizations.¹⁹³ In 2017, GOSA awarded 20 additional Innovation Fund Tiny Grant awards¹⁹⁴ and 18 Innovation Fund awards for planning, implementing, or scaling projects.¹⁹⁵

Related to the Innovation Fund, GOSA also administers the Innovation in Teaching Competition, a recognition and reward opportunity for Georgia's most innovative educators. Since 2013, the Innovation in Teaching Competition has selected 33 winning teachers, provided more than \$237,500 in grant funding directly to those teachers and their schools, and made videos of each teacher, along with their unit plans and supplementary materials, available online for other educators.

The Innovation Fund also focuses much of its work around encouraging STEM programs and has more recently expanded that to STEAM, acknowledging the importance of infusing fine arts into a STEM curriculum. In addition to individual STEAM-focused grants, GOSA also funds three other STEAM-initiatives:¹⁹⁶

- 1. Innovation in K-8 Math/ K-12 Computer Science and Coding Grants** – These grants are focused on improving instruction in the areas of mathematics and computer science/coding through targeted, intentional professional learning. The goal is to increase the availability of high-quality mathematics instruction and computer science/coding opportunities for students.
- 2. Rural Advanced Placement (AP) STEM Initiative** – The Georgia Rural AP STEM Initiative is the result of a partnership between GOSA and the College Board designed to create a vertical pathway to success in AP STEM courses in high-need, rural districts throughout Georgia.
- 3. Project Lead the Way** – These programs, described in the sidebar Project Lead the Way: Transforming and Expanding STEM Education in Rural Georgia, offer K-12 pathways in computer science, engineering, and biomedical sciences, along with in-depth teacher professional development in rural Georgia.

192 Ellis, R., and Colona, J. (2016). *Innovation Fund Annual Report, December 2016*. Atlanta: Governor's Office of Student Achievement.

193 Ibid.

194 Tiny GRANTS provide traditional public schools, charter schools, and school districts between \$1,000 and \$10,000 to implement an innovative project that will deeply engage students.

195 See gosa.georgia.gov/.

196 See gosa.georgia.gov/grants-initiatives.

In support of STEAM in Georgia, GaDOE's Vision 2020 strategic plan has the specific goal that "every child in Georgia will have access to a STEM- or STEAM-certified school."¹⁹⁸ As of 2017, more than 1,000 schools are in the pipeline to become STEM certified.¹⁹⁹ In 2015–2016, GaDOE developed criteria for STEAM, which adds a fine arts component to ongoing STEM education. STEAM guidelines layer on to existing STEM guidelines. A STEM and STEAM approach promotes a project-based, teamwork-driven, and solution-focused framework for education.²⁰⁰

Throughout Georgia, educators are also personalizing the learning process. To keep students engaged, educators are infusing technology into course curricula to make the learning experience more rigorous, relevant, and personalized to the student, their learning goals, and their individual needs.

These approaches have been described as personalized learning, learner-centered, or student-driven. Regardless of the name, these approaches all have specific elements in common that support rigorous college and career expectations.²⁰¹

PROJECT LEAD THE WAY: TRANSFORMING AND EXPANDING STEM EDUCATION IN RURAL GEORGIA

In 2015, Governor Deal and GOSA announced a significant Innovation Fund grant to Project Lead the Way (PLTW) to give schools in Southwest Georgia the opportunity to implement the program's K-12 pathways in computer science, engineering, and biomedical science.¹⁹⁷ PLTW is a national nonprofit organization that promotes STEM education in K-12 classrooms through course module development and teacher training. Programs by PLTW have been adopted at more than 8,000 schools across all 50 states. The organization seeks to provide transformative learning experiences by creating an engaging, hands-on classroom environment supporting empowered students. The program encourages students to apply knowledge from many disciplines to real-world scenarios and challenges. PLTW students are connected to college and career opportunities through the nonprofit's exclusive network. They can be recognized through scholarships, preferred admission at colleges and universities, and internships. Occupations in the STEM fields will bring nearly 80,000 jobs to Georgia by 2020; thus, PLTW is a great way to ensure that schools in the southwestern region of the state can better prepare their students to be part of the future workforce.

Personalized Learning – Data-driven frameworks that set goals, assess progress, and ensure students receive the academic and development supports they need

Performance-Based Learning – Also called competency-based education, allows students to demonstrate mastery of skills based on high, clear, and commonly shared expectations

Anytime, Anywhere Opportunities – Flexible and constructive learning environments beyond the boundaries of a classroom or traditional school schedules

This shift away from teacher-as-lecturer to a personalized learning culture has been shaped by technology and has led to the creation of e-learning systems that seek to manage and engage the needs of all students. Through online classes, schools, and blended learning models, resources and learning opportunities are now available to students beyond the traditional classroom.

197 See gosa.georgia.gov/project-lead-way.

198 Georgia Department of Education. (2016). *Vision 2020: Educating Georgia's Future*. Retrieved from www.gadoe.org/Documents/VISION_2020.pdf.

199 Certification is a rigorous process that requires schools to transform instruction to focus on innovation, collaboration, and creative thinking. For more information, see www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/CTAE/Pages/STEM.aspx.

200 Georgia Department of Education. (2016). *Vision 2020: Educating Georgia's Future*. Retrieved from www.gadoe.org/Documents/VISION_2020.pdf.

201 See Martinez, A., and Poon, J.D. (2015). *Innovation in Action: State Pathways for Advancing Student-Centered Learning*. Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers; Wolf, M.A. (2012). *Culture Shift: Teaching in a Learner-Centered Environment Powered by Digital Learning*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.

In terms of functionality, GaDOE has created multiple resources for digital learning, such as the Georgia Virtual School courses for grades six to 12, and free, downloadable courses and learning resources available online. Along with many local districts, GaDOE supports virtual learning opportunities so that students can move through the educational system at their own pace. These virtual options provide course flexibility and access, thereby cutting down on seat time for accelerated students and allowing extra time for students who need it.

Virtual classes (or online courses) are not the only innovative content delivery option being used in Georgia, or nationwide. Increasingly common is blended learning, which brings digital resources into the physical classroom. In this model, students continue to receive in-class instruction from their teachers and continue to participate in other traditional classroom activities. That learning is supplemented by online activities, some of which can be self-directed and self-paced, while others promote student collaboration. Research has shown that this combination of traditional classroom instruction and the digital environment has the potential to create a highly personalized and productive learning environment that may lead to better outcomes.²⁰²

For example, one of the most prominent of the blended learning models in Georgia has been the Direct to Discovery Program, which is a partnership between Barrow County Schools and the Georgia Institute of Technology. Direct to Discovery was supported by Georgia's Innovation Fund, which was part of the state's Race to the Top grant program.

Finally, the use of technology and digital learning has impacts beyond how and when students receive the material. Technology has a large role to play as education searches for new ways to translate rigorous standards of learning into actual skills. One such approach is competency-based education, which moves away from seat time (credit-hour measurements of courses/ classes completed) to content mastery. Once students demonstrate mastery of course content, they can gain credit for that course and move to the next level of learning. New Hampshire, Iowa, and Ohio have all recently established competency-based education systems.²⁰³

In February 2015, Governor Nathan Deal established the Education Reform Commission (ERC) to conduct a "top to bottom review of public education" during his second term.²⁰⁴ As part of this review, the ERC proposed that Georgia also move to a competency-based system. The Move On When Ready Subcommittee offered two primary recommendations to support this reform.²⁰⁵

- 1. Begin transitioning to a competency-based education system.** Allocate \$10 million for pilot programs that address the planning and development of proficiency-based competencies, professional development for implementation, appropriate assessments, and necessary data-reporting tools.
- 2. Increase the opportunity for advancement or remediation through flexible Georgia Milestones testing.** Develop a flexible assessment window, allowing testing every nine weeks to maximize instructional effectiveness.

The flexibility provided in these approaches, combined with other opportunities, especially in regard to high school-level academic pathways, allows students to personalize their K-12 experiences to meet their needs. For a full discussion on academic and career pathways, see *Chapter 7 – Clear Pathways to Post-Secondary Success*.

202 schoolwires. (2012). *Blending the Best of Online and Face-to-Face Learning to Improve Student Outcomes*. Retrieved from www.schoolwires.com.

203 Wolk, R.A. (2015, March 18). Competency-Based Education Is Working. *Education Week*.

204 Yarbrough, D. (2014, October 21). Everything on the Table, Public Education Reform, says Gov. Deal. *The Telegraph*.

205 Education Reform Commission. (2015, December 15). *Final Recommendations to Governor Nathan Deal*. Atlanta: Office of the Governor. Retrieved from gov.georgia.gov/education-reform-commission.