

Georgia Landscape - Supportive Learning Environments

Nearly 25% of Georgia's children currently live in households with an income at or below the federal poverty level, and more than 60% of all public-school students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Many of these students need extra supports that can be provided by their communities and schools, because they are at high risk of not receiving those supports at home. One way the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) has responded to this challenge is by emphasizing the “whole child” at the center of its internal System of Continuous Improvement.¹⁴¹

According to the plan GaDOE submitted to the US Department of Education in fulfillment of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the department's efforts toward addressing the whole child begin with supporting the well-being of children. Many state agencies, statewide coalitions, and local governments have joined GaDOE in this effort and are working with local schools. These partnerships are addressing child well-being across the four areas of support where students most need it: positive conditions for learning, physical and mental health supports, specialized school supports, and out-of-school time options.

Positive Conditions for Learning

School Climate

Students will not meet their academic potential if they do not feel safe, welcome, and respected within schools. When the school climate is positive, students show improved performance in school both academically and socially. A positive school climate has been associated with increased student achievement and decreased student absenteeism.¹⁴²

As of 2013, Georgia has two state statutes that ensure school climate is measured.

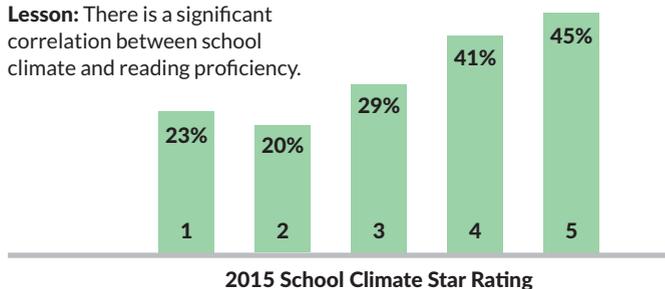
- GA. CODE ANN. § 20-2-155 (2013): The State Board of Education shall establish a statewide school climate management program to help local schools and systems requesting assistance in developing school climate improvement and management processes.
- GA. CODE ANN. § 20-14-33(a) (2013): The Department of Education shall adopt and annually review . . . indicators of the quality of learning by students, financial efficiency, and school climate for individual schools and for school systems.

Georgia is one of only four states as of December 2016 that includes a culture or climate variable in its accountability system, the College and Career Ready Performance Index. The School Climate Rating shows whether a school is working to improve its school climate, and schools earn a rating of one to five stars. This rating incorporates results from student, teacher, and parent surveys of perceptions on climate; data on student discipline; and data on attendance of both students and staff.

Research shows a significant correlation between student academic performance on state standardized tests and school climate (see Figure 5.3).

FIGURE 5.3 SCHOOL CLIMATE AND GEORGIA MILESTONES THIRD-GRADE ENGLISH/ LANGUAGE ARTS SCORES, 2015¹⁴³

Lesson: There is a significant correlation between school climate and reading proficiency.



141 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.

142 Duckworth, K., and DeJung, J. (1989). Inhibiting Class Cutting Among High School Students. *The High School Journal*, 72, 188–195.

143 McGibeony, G. (2016). *Changing the Conversation*. Atlanta: Georgia Department of Education.

Percentages in the table reflect the percent of students score “Proficient or Above” on the Georgia Milestones Assessment in English Language Arts at schools with the corresponding School Climate Rating, i.e. at schools with a 5 star School Climate Rating the average percentage of students scoring Proficient or Above was 45%.

GaDOE has instituted a system of practices geared at improving school climate across the state. This system of practices has three primary strategies:

- PBIS – Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports
- MTSS – Multi-Tiered System of Supports
- ISF – Interconnected Systems Framework

These efforts are evidence-based and data-driven with the goal of reducing disciplinary incidents, increasing safety, and providing students with the support they need. PBIS is the cornerstone of these practices, and more than 24,500 US schools are implementing this system. Its premise is that continual teaching, combined with acknowledging positive student behavior, will reduce unnecessary discipline and promote a climate of greater productivity, safety, and learning.¹⁴⁴

Physical and Mental Health Supports

School Nutrition

Georgia participates in the US Department of Agriculture’s federal school lunch program, which provides free and reduced-price lunches to students from low-income families. The School Nutrition Program helps local school systems provide more than 60% of public school students with breakfast and lunch meals, along with nutritional education.

Health and Physical Education

State law requires that all Georgia students must be enrolled in a physical education course in grades one through 12. According to the 2009 Student Health and Physical Education Act, students must also participate in an annual fitness assessment.

Additionally, Georgia Shape was launched by Governor Nathan Deal as a statewide, multi-agency initiative combining government, philanthropic, academic, and business community supports to address childhood obesity in Georgia. The Governor’s Advisory Council on Childhood Obesity oversees this initiative. Strategies of Georgia Shape include physical activity before class, physical activity during class, and more structured recess.¹⁴⁵ The program received significant investment from the business community, including \$1 million from iconic Georgia company Coca-Cola in 2013.¹⁴⁶

Another cross-agency initiative working in concert with Georgia Shape is Power Up for 30, a statewide collaboration between the Georgia Department of Public Health and GaDOE. Power Up for 30 promotes increasing physical activity before, during, and after the school day in public schools across Georgia. Schools receive professional development for staff that focuses on integrating an additional 30 minutes or more of physical activity into before-, during-, or after-school time. Nearly 2,000 teachers and administrators have received direct professional development through this program and the training delivery partner, HealthMPowers, since 2013.¹⁴⁷

144 Georgia Department of Education. (2017). Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. Retrieved from www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Special-Education-Services/Pages/Positive-Behavioral-Interventions-and-Support.aspx.

145 Georgia Shape. (2017). Communications and Research. Retrieved from www.georgiashape.org/story/communications-and-research.

146 Gann, C. (2013, May 13). Coca-Cola Awards \$1 Million to Georgia SHAPE: Contribution Will Help Add 30 Minutes of Physical Activity to School Days [Blog Post]. *Georgia Department of Public Health*.

147 Georgia Shape. (n.d.). Power Up for 30. Retrieved from georgiashape.org/story/power-30-0.

In 2015 the Georgia House of Representatives established a study committee on school-based health centers or clinics (SBHCs), though these centers began to be established in Georgia as early as 1994. SBHCs place a general medical clinic on the grounds of a public school, bridging the access gap for health care faced by many students. An estimated 166,000 children in Georgia are uninsured, and 250,000 children in Georgia stay home sick more than six days each year.¹⁴⁸

SBHCs work to ensure that more children are healthy and able to attend school. SBHCs are currently in 41 Georgia counties thanks in part to PARTNERS for Equity in Child and Adolescent Health, a grant-making organization based out of Emory University that has helped to provide startup funds to centers since 2010.¹⁴⁹

One way that SBHCs have expanded their capacity is through telemedicine. Since 2009, the Georgia Partnership for Telehealth has introduced telemedicine to Georgia schools, and as of 2017, there were 63 SBHCs equipped for telehealth. These centers operate in a “hub and spoke” model. Hospitals are the “hubs,” and the “spokes” include smaller extension services and facilities like wifi- and telemedicine-equipped ambulances and school clinics. The 2005 Georgia Telemedicine Act supports telehealth by ensuring health service providers can receive standard insurance reimbursement for patient services.

Mental Health

With increased attention given to school climate, many Georgia schools are also focusing on addressing and identifying behavioral issues and their relationship to student mental health. The US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency is working with GaDOE to institute Now Is The Time: Project AWARE (Advancing Wellness and Resilience in Education) to increase awareness of mental health issues among school-aged youth. The project provides training in youth mental health first aid and connects students and families struggling with behavioral or mental health issues to appropriate services.

As of 2017, Project AWARE was in three school districts, but the youth mental health first aid training had expanded across the state, with more than 1,500 school staff members trained so far. Project AWARE has three primary goals:

1. Increase participation of the community and mental health providers in identifying resources available to help students.
2. Raise awareness and identification of mental health and behavior concerns, and increase student and family access to mental health providers.
3. Train educators, first responders, and parents to appropriately respond to youth mental health needs.¹⁵⁰

GaDOE has also teamed up with the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities and the Georgia Health Policy Center at Georgia State University to strengthen mental health services through the Georgia Apex Project. The project works to build infrastructure and increase access to services for school-aged youth.¹⁵¹

148 Voices for Georgia's Children. (2017, January 14). School-Based Health Centers in Georgia. Retrieved from georgiavoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/SBHC-GA_Centers_12317.pdf.

149 Georgia School-Based Health Alliance. (n.d.). Georgia Planning Grantees. Retrieved from gasbha.org/georgia-planning-grantees/.

150 Georgia Department of Education. (2017). Georgia Project AWARE. Retrieved from www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Special-Education-Services/Pages/Georgia-Project-AWARE.aspx.

151 Georgia Health Policy Center. (2017). Georgia Apex Project. Retrieved from ghpc.gsu.edu/project/4745415/.

Specialized School Supports

Language Development

Being read to at an early age exposes children to language, fostering the development of language and early literacy skills. Literacy, especially third-grade reading proficiency, is commonly shown to predict student academic performance later in life.¹⁵² Children experiencing impairment in language skills are at a greater risk for behavioral, social, and emotional problems.¹⁵³

One strong effort addressing child literacy skills in Georgia is the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. Known as “Get Georgia Reading,” this campaign is working throughout the state to educate students, parents, and teachers on the importance of literacy and reading by third grade. The campaign consists of a coalition of more than 100 public and private partners that are working together across sectors, agencies, and organizations to promote the use of a common agenda and shared language around the goal of all students on a path to reading proficiency by the third grade. The campaign operates under the guidance of a cabinet composed of high-level statewide public and private organizations and leaders.¹⁵⁴ The program consists of four main research-based pillars: language nutrition, access, productive learning climates, and teacher preparation and effectiveness.

“Language nutrition” is a term coined by the campaign that refers to the use of language, beginning at birth that is sufficiently rich in engagement, quality, quantity, and context that it nourishes the child socially, neurologically, and linguistically.¹⁵⁵ Get Georgia Reading has developed programs for parents to enable them to better provide language nutrition to their children, set up a statewide mentor program for low-income students, and provided widespread teacher education on the benefits of supporting the pillars of Get Georgia Reading.

Governor Deal has further supported literacy and language through the 2017 founding of the Sandra Dunagan Deal Center for Early Language and Literacy at Georgia College. This center will work with universities, technical college early childhood education programs, alternative educator preparation programs, and other public and private stakeholders to engage the community at large. Its mission is to improve Georgia’s literacy rate by promoting research-based practices for children from birth to age eight and providing professional learning and training to educators in K-3 classrooms, child care centers, and preschools.

Extra Support for Special Populations

English Language Learners (ELL)

English to Speakers of Other Languages is a state-funded instructional program for eligible ELL students in grades K-12, included in Georgia statute since 1985. This standards-based curriculum emphasizes academic and social language development. Classroom teachers integrate English Language

152 Hernandez, Donald J. 2011. Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation. The Annie E. Casey Foundation: New York, NY.

153 Rvachew, S. (2010, September). Language Development and Literacy. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development*. Canada.

154 Cabinet members include the Alliance of Education Agency Heads, the Annie E. Casey Foundation – Atlanta Civic Site, Bright from the Start: Department of Early Care and Learning, Governor Nathan Deal, First Lady Sandra Deal, the Department of Community Health, the Division of Family and Children Services, GaDOE, the Department of Public Health, the Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students, the Georgia Family Connection Partnership, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education, the Georgia Professional Standards Commission, the Georgia Public Library, the Georgia School Superintendents Association, the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement, the Marcus Autism Center, Polk Family Connection, the Rollins Center for Language and Literacy at the Atlanta Speech School, the Technical College System of Georgia, and Voices for Georgia’s Children.

155 Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. 2014. *Pacesetters 2014: Georgia*.

Development Standards in conjunction with Georgia Performance Standards to encourage ELL students to communicate in English and demonstrate academic, cultural, and social proficiency.¹⁵⁶

Additionally, GaDOE administers ACCESS for ELLs (Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State to State for English Language Learners), a standards-based, criterion-referenced English language proficiency test designed to measure English learners' social and academic proficiency in English.¹⁵⁷ This test helps to provide developmentally appropriate instruction for ELL students and helps teachers ensure that students receive the support they need to continue to strengthen their English language proficiency and progress academically.

Students with Special Needs

To provide all children with a free and appropriate public education, the GaDOE Division of Special Education Services and Supports helps local school districts provide special education and related services to students with disabilities. Targeted areas for services and supports include accessible instructional materials, assistive technology, curriculum access and alignment, dropout prevention, family engagement, least restrictive environments, positive behavior supports, and transitions.¹⁵⁸

Foster and Homeless Children Supports

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is a federal law designed to ensure educational enrollment and stability for homeless children and youth. Under this act, each state education agency must identify homeless children and work to assess their needs. The GaDOE fulfills this requirement by requiring each local education agency to have a designated homeless education liaison who has been trained by the GaDOE to determine enrollment in this program and supports needed.

Out-of-School Time Options

Before School, Afterschool, and During the Summer

Georgia has a network of afterschool services supported through the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS). The Afterschool Care Program provides federal funding to public agencies and nonprofit organizations that serve youth and families during out-of-school time. The program aims to increase academic attainment and enhanced well-being through positive youth development. The program also works to ensure successful transition to young adulthood, especially for students from economically disadvantaged communities. The Afterschool Care Program funds Boys and Girls Clubs and other similar organizations across the state, and recent investment has allowed the program to support STE(A)M education at these organizations.

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CLC) program is a federally funded program that provides afterschool, before school, and summer learning opportunities for students. Programs feature enrichment opportunities and activities designed to complement students' regular academic programs. Georgia receives approximately \$38 million in funding for the 21st CLC program, which serves 27,000 children in the state at nearly 250 sites.¹⁵⁹ Funds for these programs are administered through the GaDOE.¹⁶⁰

156 Georgia Department of Education. (2017). English to Speakers of Other Languages. Retrieved from [www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Curriculum-and-Instruction/Pages/English-to-Speakers-of-Other-Languages-\(ESOL\)-and-Title-III.aspx](http://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Curriculum-and-Instruction/Pages/English-to-Speakers-of-Other-Languages-(ESOL)-and-Title-III.aspx).

157 Georgia Department of Education. (2017). ACCESS for ELLs. Retrieved from www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Assessment/Pages/ACCESS-for-ELLs.aspx.

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

159 Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network. (2017). 21st Century Community Learning Centers. Retrieved from www.afterschoolga.org/21st-cclc/

160 Georgia Department of Education. (2017). 21st Century Community Learning Centers. Retrieved from www.gadoe.org/School-Improvement/Federal-Programs/Pages/21st-Century-Community-Learning-Centers.aspx.

One important inter-agency contribution to afterschool programs is the Georgia Afterschool & Youth Development Standards, which were developed through a partnership between the DFCS Office of Prevention and Family Support, GaDOE, and the Georgia Department of Public Health. These standards, which were released in 2015, ensure that afterschool and youth development programs provide environments and experiences that benefit youth socially, emotionally, and academically.¹⁶¹

Licensing for afterschool and child care programs is done through the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL). This department licenses programs serving school-age children up to age 12. In addition, Quality Rated is Georgia's system to determine, improve, and communicate the quality of programs that provide child care. Similar to rating systems for restaurants and hotels, Quality Rated assigns one, two, or three stars to early education and school-age care programs that meet or exceed the minimum state requirements. By participating in Georgia's voluntary Quality Rated program, programs make a commitment to work continuously to improve the quality of care they provide to children and families.¹⁶²

DECAL also administers a Summer Transition Program annually. This is an academic program for rising kindergartners in high-need populations who need additional academic support the summer before entering kindergarten.¹⁶³

In addition to these efforts, the Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network is a public-private collaborative that works to advance, connect, and support quality afterschool programs that promote the success of children and youth throughout Georgia. The Afterschool Network also supports local governments in creating policy priorities to advance support for afterschool services in communities across the state. Many of these programs provide not only afterschool care during the school year, but also summer options for students. Summer services are crucial in helping prevent summer learning loss and to ensure students do not miss out on critical nutrition during that time.

161 The Georgia Afterschool & Youth Development. (2017). Quality Standards, Division of Family and Children Services. Retrieved from dfcs.georgia.gov/georgia-afterschool-youth-development-asyd-quality-standards.

162 Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning. (2017). FAQ for Quality Rated. Retrieved from dec.al.ga.gov/BftS/Faq.aspx?cat=QualityRSRated.

163 Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning. (2017). Pre-K Summer Transition Program. Retrieved from dec.al.ga.gov/Prek/SummerTransitionProgram.aspx.