



# Barriers to Learning Subcommittee

Georgia

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## **Barriers to Learning Subcommittee of the K-12 Working Group Georgia**

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#### **Preamble**

Literacy serves as the foundation for both personal and societal growth, yet numerous barriers hinder effective learning and literacy acquisition for far too many students. These barriers include environmental challenges, sensory issues, chronic health conditions, mental health struggles, socio-economic disadvantages, technological inequities, and other more subtle barriers. These barriers disrupt or interrupt a student's ability to become a proficient reader, thereby interfering with academic success and future growth.

One of the most pervasive barriers to learning and literacy is unequal access to learning resources and supportive environments. Children from low-income families often have limited exposure to books, educational technology, and academic support—placing them at a disadvantage. Additionally, a lack of access to behavioral and physical health

services—both in schools and in the broader community—further impedes children’s ability to learn. These barriers to learning are exacerbated by teacher shortages and teacher attrition.

The Barriers to Learning Subcommittee examined these issues closely—exploring their root causes, impacts, and potential solutions. By better understanding these barriers, educators, policymakers, and communities can design more inclusive and effective strategies to close the literacy gap and promote equitable learning opportunities for all students.

Based on the Four Pillar Framework of the Get Georgia Reading Campaign,<sup>1</sup> the work of the Barriers to Learning Subcommittee was guided by a shared vision - North Stars - clear, overarching goals that align strategies, decisions, and actions toward long-term success. A North Star is not just an inspiring ideal; it is a measurable and focused aspiration that paints a vivid picture of success while serving as a benchmark for tracking progress. North Stars help unify educators, families, community leaders, and organizations around a common purpose and expected outcomes. They clarify priorities and act as a filter for decisions about where to invest time, energy, and resources.

The Barriers to Learning Subcommittee identified four North Stars to guide solution-focused efforts aimed at overcoming specific barriers to literacy, each with measurable outcomes:

1. Children and their families have access to, and support for, healthy development, emotional well-being, and educational achievement.
2. Children experience abundant, positive, language-rich social interactions with caregivers, educators, and peers.
3. Caregivers and educators are equipped with evidence-informed skills to effectively engage all children through developmentally responsive practices and supportive conditions for teaching.
4. Children feel safe, nurtured, and connected from birth through early childhood and throughout the school years.

This report is grounded in the belief that every student has the right to become a proficient reader. Achieving this requires a holistic and proactive approach—one that identifies and addresses all barriers to learning, while placing each learner’s unique context at the center of intervention planning. At the same time, the Barriers to Learning Subcommittee acknowledges that the Literacy Council cannot and should not be expected to do it all alone. The complexity of the challenge demands shared responsibility. While it is neither realistic nor sustainable for one body to bear the full weight of this mission, the Literacy Council can continue to serve as a catalyst for collective action and change.

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<sup>1</sup> The Get Georgia Reading Campaign Four Pillars: language nutrition, access, positive learning climate, and teacher preparation and effectiveness. These pillars were developed in 2013 by a coalition of K–12, early learning, health, civic, nonprofit, and governmental leaders as a framework for collective action.

## Table of Contents

<b>CONTENTS</b>	<b>PAGE</b>
<b>Barriers to Learning Subcommittee Process</b>	4
<b>North Star #1</b>	4
Environmental Factors	
Summary and Recommendations	5
Sensory Barriers	
Summary and Recommendations	7
Chronic Health Conditions	
Summary and Recommendations	12
Dental Health	
Summary and Recommendations	14
Medical Care Access	
Summary and Recommendations	17
Misdiagnosed Health Conditions and Medication Impacts on Learning	
Summary and Recommendations	19
Maternal and Specialized Health	
Summary and Recommendations	21
Nutrition, Food Security, and Clothing	
Summary and Recommendations	24
<b>North Star #2</b>	25
Barriers to Language Development	
Summary and Recommendations	26
<b>North Star # 3</b>	30
Teachers and Parents/Caregivers	
Summary and Recommendations	30
<b>North Star # 4</b>	34
School Climate, Classroom Climate, and Safety	
Summary and Recommendations	36
Mental Health Support	
Summary and Recommendations	39
<b>Moving Forward</b>	47
<b>Resources</b>	48
<b>References</b>	52

## Barriers to Learning Subcommittee Process

Formed by the Georgia Council on Literacy, the Barriers to Learning Subcommittee (Subcommittee) met biweekly from February to June 2025. Throughout this period, the Subcommittee identified a wide range of barriers to learning that directly and indirectly affect literacy—both in the short term and over the long term. In addition to identifying these challenges, the Subcommittee focused on exploring practical, resource-conscious solutions that schools and communities can realistically implement to support improved literacy outcomes.

**1. NORTH STAR: Children and their Families have Access to, and Support for, Healthy Development, Emotional Well-Being, and Educational Achievement**

*[Caregivers/families, educators, healthcare providers, and others are aware of, advocate for, and notice when resources are accessible, accommodating, and are provided in an acceptable way, including the importance of sensory-supported environments]*

### Environmental Barriers

Many students struggle with environmental factors that hinder their ability to concentrate and engage in learning. Issues such as inadequate classroom conditions, lack of clean and safe restrooms, and external distractions significantly affect student performance. Mold, dust, and poor ventilation can trigger allergies and asthma, leading to increased absences. Classrooms that are too hot or too cold make it difficult for students to concentrate and remain engaged. Outdated plumbing or limited access to clean water can contribute to illness and further absences. Malfunctioning HVAC systems and outside noise—often due to poor insulation—make it challenging for students to focus on instruction. Inadequate lighting can cause eye strain and headaches, which impair reading and comprehension. Poorly maintained desks and chairs create physical discomfort, adding to distractions. Schools with peeling paint, broken equipment, or unsanitary restrooms can cause students to feel undervalued, reducing their motivation and interest in learning. Frequent maintenance-related disruptions—such as leaks, power outages, or classroom closures—also lead to lost instructional time. Additionally, teachers working under uncomfortable conditions face greater challenges in delivering effective instruction.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Mold, dust, and inadequate ventilation can trigger allergies and asthma, leading to increased absences. Classrooms that are too hot or too cold make it difficult for students to concentrate and stay engaged in learning. Outdated plumbing or a lack of clean water access can contribute to illness and absences. Malfunctioning HVAC systems, or outside noise from poor insulation can make it hard for students to focus on instruction. Classroom lighting issues can cause eye strain and headaches, reducing reading and comprehension ability. Poorly maintained desks and chairs can make learning physically uncomfortable and distracting. Schools with peeling paint, broken equipment, and dirty restrooms can make students feel undervalued, reducing motivation and interest in learning. Frequent maintenance-related closures, leaks, or power outages can cause lost instructional time. Teachers struggling with uncomfortable conditions (e.g., extreme heat, malfunctioning tech) have a harder time delivering lessons effectively.

- **Inadequate Classroom and School Conditions:** Schools often face challenges related to poor lighting, extreme temperatures, overcrowding, and outdated HVAC systems. When students are uncomfortable or distracted by their environment, they may have difficulty focusing, retaining information, and participating in lessons. Providing facility support or securing additional funding can improve these conditions and enhance student comfort.

Missing instructional time due to unsafe or unclean restrooms can affect academic progress. If students avoid using restrooms due to poor conditions, it can lead to discomfort and distraction, reducing their ability to focus on learning. Improving school climate and facility maintenance is essential to ensuring students have access to proper hygiene facilities.

- **Distractions in the Learning Environment:** Excessive noise and cell phone use can disrupt focus, making it difficult for students to engage with lessons. Lack of restrictions on distractions can lead to decreased comprehension, lower academic performance, and behavioral issues. Enforcing cell phone policies, introducing white noise machines, and providing leadership support can help mitigate these distractions.
- **Neighborhood Environmental Conditions:** External factors such as air pollution and unsafe neighborhoods can affect student well-being, leading to increased absenteeism and decreased cognitive function. Schools should inform parents about resources like CDC's [Environmental Public Health Tracking Network](#)<sup>3</sup> and EPA's [Air Now](#)<sup>4</sup> for real-time data on environmental hazards. Collaborating with research institutions, such as the University of Georgia, to conduct environmental scans can further support students in affected areas.

## Summary and Recommendations: Environmental Barriers

Environmental barriers significantly affect students' ability to focus, retain information, and actively engage in learning. Factors such as inadequate classroom conditions, unclean restrooms, excessive distractions, and adverse neighborhood environments contribute to absenteeism, reduced cognitive functioning, and lower academic performance. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that improves both the physical and external learning environments.

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<sup>3</sup> Environmental Public Health Tracking Network (Tracking Network) brings together health data and environmental data from national, state, and city sources and provides supporting information to make the data easier to understand. The Tracking Network has data and information on environments and hazards, health effects, and population health.

<sup>4</sup> AirNow website a resource for current air quality information and forecasts for ozone and particle pollution from nearly 500 cities.

## Recommendations:

### 1. Improve Classroom Conditions:

- a. Seek additional funding for school districts to upgrade lighting, HVAC systems, and classroom renovations.
- b. Encourage school districts to reduce classroom overcrowding by optimizing existing space, creating additional learning environments such as media centers or breakout rooms, and/or implementing class size reduction strategies based on student needs and evidence-based formulas.

### 2. Enhance Restroom Accessibility & Cleanliness:

- a. Encourage school districts to address maintenance efforts to ensure restrooms remain clean and safe.
- b. Encourage school districts to implement student and staff feedback mechanisms to report restroom issues.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Minimize Distractions in the Learning Environment:

- a. Enforce cell phone usage policies to reduce disruptions in class and consider adding the ban/restrictions to include high schools.<sup>6</sup>
- b. Provide professional development for teachers on classroom management techniques that minimize distractions.

### 4. Address Neighborhood Environmental Concerns:

- a. Inform schools and parents on how to find neighborhood environmental conditions: CDC's [Environmental Public Health Tracking Network](#)<sup>7</sup> – Provides data on air quality, water safety, and environmental health risks; [EPA's AirNow](#)<sup>8</sup> – Provides real-time air quality data, including pollution levels for specific locations. This will allow schools and parents to judge air quality before students are exposed to long-term outdoor activities and when an environment incident occurs in the neighborhood.

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<sup>5</sup> The Georgia Department of Education's School Safety Assessment recommends that schools implement systems allowing students and staff to confidentially report problems, incidents, or concerns. This guidance supports the development of feedback mechanisms that can address various issues, including those related to restroom conditions and safety.

<sup>6</sup> The Distraction-Free Education Act (House Bill 340) was signed into law by Governor Brian Kemp in May 2025. It mandates that students in kindergarten through eighth grade in public schools are not permitted to use personal electronic devices during school hours.

<sup>7</sup> Environmental Public Health Tracking Network (Tracking Network) brings together health data and environmental data from national, state, and city sources and provides supporting information to make the data easier to understand. The Tracking Network has data and information on environments and hazards, health effects, and population health

<sup>8</sup> AirNow website a resource for current air quality information and forecasts for ozone and particle pollution from nearly 500 cities.

- b. In communities where air quality may be an issue, school districts could be encouraged to work with universities or research institutions to conduct environmental scans and develop community-driven solutions.
- c. Encourage school districts to learn about the Neighborhood Revamp Watch<sup>9</sup> model for the purpose of sharing school-related concerns in neighborhood and community efforts to address environmental concerns, including crime.

Collectively, these strategies aim to create safer, more inclusive, and more effective learning environments that support the academic and personal well-being of all students. By addressing both physical conditions and environmental factors, these efforts promote equity, reduce health-related barriers to learning, and strengthen the overall school climate. They also foster greater collaboration between schools, families, and communities—ensuring that all students, regardless of background or zip code, have the opportunity to thrive in a healthy, supportive educational setting.

### **Sensory Barriers**

Students must be able to process, engage with, and respond to their environment in order to learn effectively. However, this ability can be hindered by sensory barriers resulting from sensory processing disorders, neurodivergence (such as autism or ADHD), or environmental factors within the classroom. When a student struggles with sensory input, it can interfere with focus, comprehension, and participation in both academic and social activities.

For some students, sensory sensitivities make everyday classroom experiences overwhelming. Bright fluorescent lighting, loud noises from classmates or school bells, and even the texture of classroom materials can cause discomfort or distress. Others may exhibit sensory-seeking behaviors, needing movement or stimulation to stay engaged in learning. These challenges are often invisible, leading to misunderstandings about a student's behavior, attention, or abilities.

Without appropriate support, sensory barriers can lead to frustration, anxiety, and avoidance of certain tasks or environments. Recognizing and proactively addressing these barriers is essential to fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment. When schools implement sensory-friendly strategies, they create spaces where all students—regardless of their sensory needs—can feel safe, focused, and ready to learn.

- **Assistive Technology:** Many students lack access to essential assistive tools, such as augmentative communication devices. Without these resources, students may

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<sup>9</sup> Neighborhood Watch Revamp refers to the process of revitalizing and modernizing an existing neighborhood watch program to enhance its effectiveness in crime prevention and community engagement. This initiative typically involves updating strategies, incorporating new technologies, and fostering stronger collaboration between residents and local law enforcement agencies.

struggle with literacy, communication, and classroom participation. Increased state funding for assistive technologies would enable students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504 Plans to access the tools they need to succeed.

- **Sensory-Inclusive Classrooms:** Overstimulation from noise, lighting, and crowded spaces can make learning environments overwhelming for students with sensory sensitivities. Schools should invest in staff training using frameworks such as SCERTS and CLIMBE and collaborate with advocacy groups to develop action plans for creating inclusive environments. Simple adjustments—like dimmable lighting, noise-canceling headphones, and alternative seating—can make classrooms more accommodating and accessible.
- **Individualized Sensory Plans:** Without tailored accommodations, students with sensory challenges may exhibit frustration and avoidance behaviors that hinder academic engagement. Schools should develop individualized strategies informed by occupational therapists and ensure sensory accommodations are incorporated into students' 504 Plans. Partnerships with university research labs and assistive technology centers can provide valuable support to both teachers and parents.
- **Updated Learning Technology:** Outdated or inaccessible technology can hinder students' ability to engage with digital learning materials, leading to frustration and disengagement. Schools should conduct regular assessments of existing technologies, implement one-to-one device programs, and pursue funding through state and federal grants to ensure all students have access to modern, inclusive learning tools.

### **Summary and Recommendations: Sensory Barriers**

Students with sensory processing challenges—including those with disabilities or neurodiverse conditions—often face significant obstacles in the classroom. Sensory overload, lack of appropriate accommodations, and outdated technology can contribute to anxiety, disengagement, and difficulty processing information. Creating a supportive learning environment through tailored interventions, assistive tools, and inclusive classroom strategies is essential to helping these students succeed.

#### **Recommendations:**

- 1. Increase Access to Assistive Technology:**
  - a. Recommend additional state funding for augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices and other assistive technologies.
  - b. Ensure students with IEPs and 504 Plans have access to necessary learning tools that enhance communication and participation and engagement in classrooms.

- c. Provide professional development for educators on how to effectively integrate assistive technology into instruction in the classroom.
- d. Provide training and equip educators on when and how to engage occupational therapists for ongoing support and training and provide sensory assessments with input from occupational therapists (OTs), educators, and families to identify specific needs.<sup>10</sup>
- e. Arrange for OTs to train teachers on how to engage students with sensory issues in learning.

## 2. Create Sensory-Inclusive Classrooms

- a. Recommend funding for training and technical assistance to expand implementation of the evidence-based [SCERTS](#)<sup>11</sup> framework in schools to address the needs of students with sensory-based behavioral issues.
- b. Inform parents about the [Georgia Tech Center for Inclusive Design](#)<sup>12</sup> and Innovation that can provide individualized assistive technology devices.
- c. Promote and inform schools about early intervention programs like the CLIMBE program (Augusta, Georgia), which helps young students develop critical motor and literacy skills while also providing access to occupational therapy and mental health support.
- d. Encourage school districts to designate quiet areas in special education classrooms where children can self-regulate; adjust Lighting and use dimmable lighting, noise-reducing headphones, and soft furnishings to minimize sensory overload; provide alternative seating options such as wobble chairs, fidget-friendly desks, or floor cushions.<sup>13</sup>
- e. Inform school districts about teaching strategies that allow multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression; integrate short, structured breaks with movement or calming activities to help children with IEPs and

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<sup>10</sup> Pfeiffer, B., Koenig, K., Kinnealey, M., Sheppard, M., & Henderson, L. (2011). Effectiveness of Sensory Integration Interventions in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Pilot Study. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 65(1), 76–85.

<sup>11</sup> Social Communications (SC) Emotional Regulation (ER) and Transactional Support (TS) (SCERTS) is a comprehensive intervention model for children and older individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their families. SCERTS provides specific guidelines for helping an individual become a competent and confident social communicator and an active learner.

<sup>12</sup> The Center connects people with disabilities and older adults, AT providers and social service case managers, and AT industry representatives through an innovated social media platform. The community encourages interactive multi-media dialogues about assistive technology discovery, selection, application, customization, and training. The Community of Practice builds on previous development products from CIDI, including AssistiveTech.net and its associated ATWiki.

<sup>13</sup> Dunn, W. (1999). *The Sensory Profile: User's Manual*. Psychological Corporation

504 plans to self-regulate; use visual schedules, social stories, and alternative communication tools.<sup>14</sup>

- f. Provide professional development on recognizing sensory processing challenges and effective classroom strategies. Equip educators with tools to support students during sensory overload episodes; engage occupational therapists or behavioral specialists for ongoing support and training.<sup>15,16</sup>
- g. Increase funding or grants for special education programs/equipment such as neuroinclusive playgrounds.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. Develop Individualized Sensory Plans:

- a. Provide funding for schools to access occupational therapists to work with educators and families of students with sensory needs.
- b. Provide training for educators on when and how to engage occupational therapists for ongoing support to provide sensory assessments to identify specific sensory needs of students.<sup>18</sup>
- c. Develop a training module for teachers on recognizing and managing sensory overload episodes to prevent distress and disengagement for students who have issues with sensory overload.<sup>19</sup>
- d. Inform parents of students with assistive technology needs about the [Georgia Tech Center for Inclusive Design](#)<sup>20</sup> that can provide individualized assistive technology devices.

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<sup>14</sup> Kranowitz, C. S. (2005). *The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder*. Penguin Books.

<sup>15</sup> Ayres, A. J. (2005). *Sensory Integration and the Child*. Western Psychological Services.

<sup>16</sup> Tomlinson, C. A. (2017). *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms*. ASCD

<sup>17</sup> A neuroinclusive playground is a thoughtfully designed play space that accommodates the diverse sensory, cognitive, social, and physical needs of neurodivergent children—such as those with autism, ADHD, sensory processing disorders, or other developmental differences—alongside neurotypical peers. The goal is to create an inclusive, welcoming, and engaging environment where all children can play safely, comfortably, and meaningfully.

<sup>18</sup> Pfeiffer, B., Koenig, K., Kinnealey, M., Sheppard, M., & Henderson, L. (2011). Effectiveness of Sensory Integration Interventions in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Pilot Study. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 65(1), 76–85.

<sup>19</sup> For example, students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia and other learning differences, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, Tourette's syndrome and some mental health conditions (e.g., OCD, anxiety).

<sup>20</sup> The Center connects people with disabilities and older adults, AT providers and social service case managers, and AT industry representatives through an innovated social media platform. The community encourages interactive multi-media dialogues about assistive technology discovery, selection, application, customization, and training.

- e. Create a sensory guidance document for schools that provides information about conditions that can prevent or trigger episodes with students with sensory issues.<sup>21</sup>
- f. Inform teachers on how to customize strategies for each student with sensory issues - outlining accommodations such as movement breaks, sensory-friendly seating, and noise reduction tools.
- g. School districts should consider partnering with advocacy groups specifically those who are informed through lived experience to create Action Plans around inclusive settings.

### **1. Upgrade and Expand Learning Technology**

- a. School districts routinely conduct regular assessments of existing technology to identify outdated or ineffective tools and prioritize updates. Collect this information across the state to determine and assess the current status of technology equipment and access to software and internet services that support students with sensory needs for the purpose of developing or enhancing a long-term technology plan.
- b. Continue to apply for state and federal education grants, such as those offered by the U.S. Department of Education, E-Rate program, or private foundations, particularly grants that are aimed at sensory needs of students.
- c. Work with tech companies, nonprofits, and local businesses to secure donations, discounted software, or refurbished devices to augment what school districts have access to and to provide for families that otherwise do not have technology in the home.

By implementing these strategies, schools can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment that not only accommodates students with sensory processing challenges but also empowers them to fully engage in their academic journey. This includes active

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<sup>21</sup> Guidance could include but is not limited to: Designate quiet areas in classrooms and schools where children can self-regulate; adjust lighting and use dimmable lighting, noise-reducing headphones, and soft furnishings to minimize sensory overload; provide alternative seating options such as wobble chairs, fidget-friendly desks, or floor cushions. Implement teaching strategies that allow multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression; integrate short, structured breaks with movement or calming activities Provide professional development on recognizing sensory processing challenges and effective classroom strategies. Equip educators with tools to support students during sensory overload episodes; engage occupational therapists or behavioral specialists for ongoing support and trainings to help children self-regulate; use visual schedules, social stories, and alternative communication tools. Dunn, W. (1999). *The Sensory Profile: User's Manual*. Psychological Corporation; Kranowitz, C. S. (2005). *The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder*. Penguin Books; Ayres, A. J. (2005). *Sensory Integration and the Child*. Western Psychological Services. Tomlinson, C. A. (2017). *How to Differentiate Instruction in Academically Diverse Classrooms*. ASCD.

participation in classroom activities, meaningful access to literacy instruction, and improved social-emotional development. Creating sensory-responsive learning spaces helps reduce barriers to learning, promote self-regulation, and ensure all students—regardless of their sensory needs—have the opportunity to thrive academically and personally.

### **Chronic Health Conditions**

Chronic health conditions can significantly affect a student’s learning by impacting their physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being. Conditions such as asthma, diabetes, epilepsy, autoimmune diseases, and other disorders present ongoing challenges that can interfere with academic performance, social development, and overall well-being. Unlike temporary illnesses, chronic conditions require continuous management, often resulting in disruptions to learning due to frequent absences, medical appointments, and periods of fatigue or discomfort. These frequent absences—caused by hospital visits, treatments, or symptom flare-ups—can create substantial learning gaps. As a result, students may fall behind in coursework, struggle to keep up with new material, and experience increasing stress from trying to catch up.

- **School-Based Health Programs:** Expanding telehealth services, mobile clinics, and school-based health centers can provide students with accessible treatment options and minimize absences, helping them stay engaged in their education.
- **Medicaid and CHIP Enrollment:** Students without proper healthcare access may struggle with untreated conditions that lead to poor concentration and increased school absences. Increasing outreach efforts can help eligible families enroll in health coverage programs, ensuring children receive the necessary medical care.

### **Summary and Recommendations: Chronic Health and Other Conditions**

When students lack access to proper medical care or experience unmanaged health issues, they may struggle with academic achievement and engagement. Schools play a crucial role in bridging healthcare gaps to ensure students can attend school regularly and perform at their best.

#### **Recommendations:**

1. **Expand School-Based Health Programs**
  - a. Increase funding for school-based health centers, mobile clinics, and telehealth services to provide accessible screenings and treatment.
  - b. Partner with local hospitals, community health organizations, and universities to bring healthcare professionals into schools.

- c. Schools could consider designating a “health care” space open to physicians, dentists, mental health providers, etc., to care for students in the school setting.<sup>22</sup>
- d. Increase funding for school nurses and school nursing programs.
- e. Provide technical assistance and training to support school districts in billing for nursing services; consider a partnership with DCH, DPH, RESAs to organize TA and training; conduct listening sessions (virtual/in-person) to determine both needs/issues as well as where LEAs are successfully implementing health programs.
- f. Create a package of information including information about TA and training for school districts to make certain they know that the Georgia Department of Community Health (DCH) has expanded the scope of school nursing services provided to eligible Medicaid and PeachCare for Kids members through its Children’s Intervention School Services program.<sup>23</sup>

## **2. Enhance Medicaid and CHIP Outreach**

- a. DCH expands awareness campaigns to inform families about available health coverage options, such as Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP).
- b. Schools provide CHIP enrollment assistance through school social workers, counselors, and family resource coordinators.
- c. DCH, DPH, and RESAs work together with local health departments to simplify the CHIP enrollment process for eligible families.

## **3. Improve Chronic Condition Management in Schools**

- a. Train teachers and staff on recognizing and responding to students with chronic health issues.
- b. With the assistance of local boards of health and/or pediatricians, schools could establish individualized health plans (IHPs) for students with chronic conditions to outline necessary accommodations.
- c. Schools work with local boards of health and pediatricians to provide access to necessary medical supplies (e.g., inhalers, glucose monitors, EpiPens) and ensure proper storage and administration protocols are in place.

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<sup>22</sup> Providers could reserve the space to provide care to established pediatric patients.

<sup>23</sup> DCH will reimburse Local Education Agencies (LEAs) for medically necessary nursing services provided to children with an Individualized Education Program (IEP), as well as currently enrolled Medicaid and PeachCare for Kids members who do not have an IEP. Expanding School Nursing Services, [Children Intervention School Services Handbook](#), Georgia Department of Community Health.

- d. Inform schools about the Georgia Department of Public Health’s [Asthma Friendly Schools](#) program<sup>24</sup>

By implementing these strategies, schools can significantly reduce the impact of chronic health conditions on student learning, minimize health-related absences, and foster a healthier, more supportive educational environment. This proactive approach not only ensures that students with chronic conditions receive the care and accommodations they need but also promotes equity by helping all students stay engaged, achieve academic success, and build positive relationships at school. Ultimately, a school environment that prioritizes health supports the whole child—academically, physically, and emotionally.

### **Dental Health**

Oral health problems can cause pain and discomfort, leading to absenteeism and difficulty concentrating in class.<sup>25</sup> If untreated, dental issues can contribute to poor nutrition, speech difficulties, and self-esteem issues, all of which impact learning.

- **Access to Dental Care:** Partnering with higher education institutions to provide internships for dental students could allow students to receive free or low-cost dental care. Piloting such programs in schools would help address these issues at a systemic level, ensuring students are not distracted by pain or embarrassment related to dental issues.

### **Summary and Recommendations: Dental Health**

When we think about student success, we often focus on reading levels, attendance, and test scores—but one critical factor is frequently overlooked: dental health. Oral health is a foundational aspect of a child’s overall well-being, yet it remains one of the most common—and most untreated—health issues among school-aged children. Poor dental health can lead to chronic pain, difficulty eating, sleep disruptions, and serious infections. These issues don’t stay at home—they follow children into the classroom, making it harder to concentrate, participate, or even attend school. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that children with poor oral health are nearly three times more likely to miss school due to dental pain, and those absences can directly impact academic performance.

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<sup>24</sup> In 2023, 8.7% of children in Georgia aged 0-17 years had been told at some point in their lives they have asthma. The Asthma Friendly Schools toolkit provides a structured framework school districts can use to create a comprehensive approach to asthma management. Comprehensive Asthma Friendly School programs include planning tools, school policy recommendations and asthma self-management education programs.

<sup>25</sup> Dental issues can significantly impact a student’s learning by affecting their physical health, concentration, self-esteem, and attendance. Poor oral health is often overlooked as a factor in academic performance, yet problems such as cavities, gum disease, and untreated dental pain can create substantial barriers to a student’s ability to focus, participate, and succeed in school. Persistent or periodic toothaches, gum infections, or cavities can cause chronic discomfort, making it difficult for students to concentrate in class. Pain can be especially distracting during tests, reading assignments, or problem-solving activities that require focus.

## Recommendations:

### 1. Expand Access to School-Based Dental Care

- a. Partner with higher education institutions to create internship opportunities for dental students, allowing them to provide free or low-cost dental care to school-aged children.
- b. Implement mobile dental clinics or on-site dental programs that offer screenings, cleanings, and preventive treatments.
- c. Collaborate with local dental associations, nonprofits, and public health organizations to increase access to affordable dental care in the community and in schools.
- d. Inform schools that the Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) provides public health dental services to children enrolled in Medicaid and PeachCare programs, as well as to low-income patients on a sliding-fee scale. These services include exams, cleanings, sealants, fillings, crowns, and extractions. Clinic locations and hours vary based on local and state resources. Information about specific dental services, hours, and locations can be obtained by visiting the Georgia Oral Health Coalition's Map of Dental Sites or by using the Service Locator by zip code.
- e. Inform schools about **Help A Child Smile**, which is a mobile dental program that can partner with school districts to deliver full-service dental care directly at schools.
- f. Inform schools about the **Family Health Centers of Georgia, Inc.** that operates mobile medical and dental units equipped to provide primary care, immunizations, physicals, and dental services.

### 2. Increase Preventative Dental Health Education

- a. Integrate dental hygiene education into the school curriculum to teach students about proper oral care habits and when to report dental issues to the school nurse or other school staff member.
- b. Schools can work with local department stores, pharmacies, public health, and dentist to receive free dental supplies, such as toothbrushes and toothpaste, to provide to students.
- c. Educate parents and caregivers on the importance of early dental care and available resources for low-cost or free treatment.

### 3. Address Policy and Funding Gaps

- a. Advocate for state and federal funding to support school-based dental programs, ensuring long-term sustainability.
- b. Ensure that schools know that Medicaid expansion includes dental services for children, ensuring that all students, regardless of income, receive necessary care.
- c. Schools should work with DPH to establish dental screening requirements and referral systems for students with urgent dental needs – ensure that students with dental needs as noted on DPH’s Form 3300 receive follow-up care.

By implementing these strategies, schools can significantly reduce dental-related absences, enabling students to attend class more consistently and engage more fully in learning. Improved oral health can also alleviate pain and discomfort that may distract students during the school day, helping them maintain focus, participate actively, and perform better academically. In addition, regular dental care supports students’ confidence and self-esteem, which are closely linked to positive social and educational outcomes. Collectively, these efforts contribute to a healthier, more equitable school environment where all students are better positioned to succeed.

### Medical Care Access

For students who lack regular access to medical professionals, schools can serve as a crucial link to healthcare services, ensuring that health-related barriers do not impede academic success. Without consistent medical care, students may struggle with undiagnosed or untreated conditions such as asthma, diabetes, vision or hearing impairments, and other chronic illnesses. These issues can lead to frequent absences, difficulty concentrating, and a decline in overall academic performance.

Additionally, when medical concerns go unaddressed, students may experience increased stress, anxiety, or physical discomfort, further impacting their ability to engage in classroom activities and retain information. By integrating healthcare services into schools—through on-campus health clinics, telehealth options, and partnerships with local healthcare providers—schools can help students receive timely medical attention, reducing absenteeism and promoting overall well-being. Schools that offer regular health screenings and preventative care can also identify and address medical concerns early, preventing minor issues from escalating into significant health challenges. Expanding access to school nurses and medical professionals is essential to ensuring that students remain healthy, present, and ready to learn.

- **On-Campus Health Clinics:** Higher education institutions could offer medical students internship opportunities in school-based health programs, allowing them to provide essential medical care to students.

- **School Nursing Services:** Providing technical assistance to districts for Medicaid billing would enable schools to secure funding for expanded nursing services. Additionally, creating informational resources for school districts regarding the Department of Community Health’s expanded Medicaid reimbursement options can support access to care.
- **Pediatricians/Primary Care Services at School:** Schools provide space for pediatricians and primary care physicians to visit and treat their clients in the school setting, which increases access due to the difficulty families have in rural and urban areas with transportation to the physician’s office.

## Summary and Recommendations: Medical Care Access

Access to medical care is essential for students to maintain their health and stay engaged in learning. Untreated medical conditions can lead to chronic absenteeism, reduced concentration, and long-term academic challenges. Many students—particularly those from low-income families—may lack regular access to healthcare professionals, making schools a critical access point for medical services. Strengthening school-based health programs can help ensure that students receive the care they need to remain healthy, present, and focused in the classroom.

### Recommendations:

#### 1. Expand On-Campus Health Clinics

- a. Schools could partner with higher education institutions to create internship opportunities for medical students to provide school-based healthcare. Higher education offers internships for students, including those who may need 100 to 300+ hours of field/clinic experience to complete their training, which can be done in the school setting.<sup>26</sup>
- b. Some communities have schools of higher education with students in a variety of specialties. Often these students will work for a stipend of \$1,500 to \$2,500 or in cases free for a semester to gain these experiences. Higher education stipends should be offered for students willing to work in the most underserved schools.
- c. Schools could consider designating a “health care” space open to physicians, dentists, mental health providers, etc., to care for students in the school setting.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Potential professions for expansion with internship programs: Social Work Students; Psychology and Counseling Students – master’s level and post doctorate students; Nurse Practitioner students – with specialties in family medicine, pediatrics, and behavioral health; Physician Assistant students; Speech, Occupational, and Physical therapy students; Students in Public health related studies.

<sup>27</sup> Providers could reserve the space to provide care to established pediatric patients.

- d. Work with the State’s Medicaid Office to add a *modifier* that allows pediatricians and primary care physicians to bill when they provide services in a school setting.
- e. Explore telehealth<sup>28</sup> options to connect students with medical professionals, ensuring access to care especially in underserved areas where access to healthcare services is limited.

## 2. Strengthening Partnerships with Healthcare Providers

- a. Incentivize local hospitals, clinics, and nonprofit organizations to establish mobile health units that provide preventive care and screenings.<sup>29</sup>
- b. Collaborate with public health agencies to increase awareness of healthcare programs available to students and families, including Medicaid, CHIP, and community health services.
- c. Encourage school districts to designate spaces where physicians, dentists, and mental health professionals can offer in-school services.
- d. Engage members of the medical community to talk to school staff members about topics such as: child development, ADHD, anxiety, depression, trauma informed care, trust-based relational interventions, chronic conditions, etc., at the start of the school year as teachers are preparing for new students. This could include the Pediatric Speakers Bureau.<sup>30</sup>

## 3. Provide Vision and Hearing Screenings at Multiple Grade Levels

- a. Expand mandatory vision and hearing screening of students at Pre-K, K, 1st, 3rd, 5th and 8th grades and for transfer students, as recommended by the

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<sup>28</sup> Telehealth services in schools have been effective in managing chronic conditions and reducing emergency care needs. For instance, students with asthma who had access to school-based telehealth reported more symptom-free days and fewer asthma attacks. Similarly, children with type 1 diabetes experienced fewer hospitalizations and emergency department visits when provided with telehealth support at school. Ward, M.M., Kimberly Merchant, Fred Ullrich, D. Bhagianadh, and Knute Carter (2023). Telehealth Services for Primary Care and Urgent Care in Rural Schools, Telemedicine and E-Health, Vol 29, No. 7, doi/10.10899/lmj2023.

<sup>29</sup> Washington State: Through the Washington Health Corps, the state provides loan repayment assistance to healthcare professionals who serve in underserved areas, which includes school-based settings.

<sup>30</sup> [Georgia Department of Public Health \(DPH\) Speakers Bureau](#) Atlanta, GA - Offers speakers on various public health topics, including child health. To request a speaker, visit their Speakers Bureau page; [Georgia Department of Public Health; Northeast Georgia Health System Speakers Bureau](#); Gainesville, GA - Provides health education speakers for community organizations; [Northeast Georgia Health System; Cobb & Douglas Public Health Speakers Bureau](#). Marietta, GA - Offers speakers on public health topics; [Cobb and Douglas Public Health; North Georgia Health District Speakers Bureau](#), Dalton, GA - Provides public health lecturers and keynote speakers on various topics. Speaker requests can be submitted online. [nghd.org](#); [Southeast Georgia Health System Speakers Bureau](#), Brunswick, GA - Offers health-related educational programs with speakers including physicians and health professionals. Request a speaker through their website. [sghs.org](#); [Tanner Health System Speakers Bureau](#), Carrollton, GA - Comprises physicians and healthcare professionals available for presentations on various health topics. [tanner.org](#); [Fulton County Board of Health Speakers Bureau](#); Atlanta, GA - Provides speakers on public health topics.

American Academy of Pediatrics. (See the Georgia Council on Literacy’s 2024 *Vision and Hearing Report*.)

- i. The requirements should include how parents are informed about the screening, how parents are informed of the screening results and what resources are available to meet the child’s needs (including insurance, Medicaid, non-profits that provide aids), and when appropriate and how to inform educational staff of the screening results.<sup>31</sup>

By expanding medical care access within schools, students can receive timely treatment for health issues, reducing barriers to attendance, concentration, and overall academic success.

### **Misdiagnosed Health Conditions and Medication Impacts on Learning**

When students struggle in school, the root cause is not always immediately clear. For some, undiagnosed or misdiagnosed health conditions can create significant barriers to academic success, emotional well-being, and social development. Whether the issue is medical, psychological, or learning-related, a lack of proper diagnosis and treatment can lead to long-term challenges that affect every aspect of a child’s education. In some cases, chronic health conditions such as asthma, diabetes, or autoimmune disorders remain undiagnosed, resulting in frequent absences, fatigue, and difficulty focusing in class.

Medication can have a profound impact on a student’s ability to learn by influencing focus, emotional well-being, and overall academic performance. For many students, medication is essential in managing conditions such as ADHD, anxiety, depression, and chronic illnesses, enabling them to fully engage in the learning process. When properly prescribed and monitored, medication can enhance concentration, regulate emotions, and reduce physical symptoms that might otherwise disrupt education.

For example, students with ADHD who take stimulant medications often experience improved attention, organization, and task completion, enabling them to keep pace with their peers. Similarly, students with anxiety or mood disorders may benefit from medications that help manage stress and maintain emotional stability, allowing them to participate more confidently in classroom discussions and social interactions. Additionally, students with chronic illnesses such as asthma or diabetes rely on medication to control symptoms, prevent frequent absences, and ensure they have the energy to focus on their studies.

- **Holistic Health Trainings for Educators:** Providing training for teachers, student support staff, and leaders designed at identifying key diagnostic factors could help guide education plans for students.

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<sup>31</sup> For additional recommendations, see the 2024 report from Literacy Commission’s Vision and Hearing Working Group.

- **Holistic Health Trainings Regarding Medications:** Providing information about the effects of medication on children would assist educators working with students on medications, specifically psychotropic medications. Trainings can be conducted by Georgia Pediatric Association or Psychiatric organizations

### **Summary and Recommendations: Misdiagnosed Health Conditions and Medication Impacts on Learning**

When students feel unwell or frequently miss school due to undetected medical issues, they may struggle to keep up with coursework, resulting in falling grades and diminished motivation. Without proper identification and support, these students face unnecessary barriers that can hinder their academic potential. Recognizing the signs of undiagnosed conditions, conducting regular screenings, and fostering collaboration between educators and healthcare professionals can help ensure every student receives the care and accommodations needed to thrive.

Medication can have a profound impact on a student’s ability to learn by improving focus, emotional well-being, and overall academic performance. For many students, medication is essential for managing conditions such as ADHD, anxiety, depression, and chronic illnesses, enabling full engagement in the learning process. When properly prescribed and monitored, medication can enhance concentration, regulate emotions, and reduce physical symptoms that might otherwise disrupt education.<sup>32</sup>

### **Recommendations**

#### **1. Enhance and Expand Trainings**

- a. Offer Holistic Health Trainings for Teachers/Support Staff/Administrators designed at identifying key diagnostic factors. Trainings can be conducted by Georgia Pediatric Association or participating Medical Schools.
- b. Request that the Georgia Pediatric Association or participating medical colleges develop online and in-person training for educators and medical professionals to address the most frequent undiagnosed medical conditions.
- c. Request that DPH and/or other experts such as from medical centers provide enhanced training for school nurses on how to identify possible

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<sup>32</sup>When students struggle in school, the root cause is not always immediately clear. For some, undiagnosed or misdiagnosed health conditions can create significant barriers to academic success, emotional well-being, and social development. In some cases, chronic health conditions like asthma, diabetes, or autoimmune disorders remain undiagnosed, leading to frequent absences, fatigue, and trouble focusing in class.

undiagnosed medical conditions, which includes how to contact appropriate medical professionals.

- d. Expand DPH's capacity to work in conjunction with school nurses and Federally Qualified Health Centers to train educators on how medications can impact student behavior and engagement in learning.

Recognizing the signs of undiagnosed conditions, conducting regular screenings, and fostering collaboration between educators and healthcare professionals can help ensure that every student receives the care and accommodations they need to thrive.

### **Maternal & Specialized Health**

Maternal and specialized health significantly impact a student's learning, as a mother's health during pregnancy and the postpartum period, along with the health of students with specialized medical needs, can have lasting effects on physical and cognitive development. These health factors influence students' ability to attend school regularly, engage in learning, and participate socially. Poor maternal health and limited access to specialized healthcare services can profoundly affect both mother and child, which in turn impacts the child's academic and emotional growth. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that prioritizes access to comprehensive maternal care, education, and support systems to promote the well-being of both mother and child.

- **Partners and Awareness:** Improve maternal health outcomes and provide comprehensive support for new and expectant mothers, through partnerships and awareness programs with key organizations and agencies.
- **Expanding Access to Prenatal and Postpartum Care:** By working with state agencies, schools and community organizations can help increase access to vital prenatal and post-natal health services.
- **Early Childhood Development Support:** Working with state agencies can allow for the integration of maternal wellness initiatives into early learning programs, ensuring that new mothers receive guidance on infant health, early literacy, and school readiness.
- **Nutrition and Wellness Programs:** Nutrition plays a key role in both maternal and child health.

### **Summary and Recommendations: Maternal and Specialized Health**

Maternal health during pregnancy and the postpartum period, as well as the ongoing health of students with specialized medical needs, can have a profound and lasting impact on a child's learning and development. Research consistently shows that a mother's physical and mental health—both prenatal and postnatal—plays a critical role in fetal brain

development, early childhood cognition, and long-term educational outcomes. Conditions such as prenatal malnutrition, exposure to toxins, maternal depression, or lack of access to prenatal care can contribute to developmental delays, learning disabilities, and behavioral challenges later in life.

Additionally, students with chronic or specialized medical needs—such as diabetes, epilepsy, asthma, or genetic conditions—may face frequent absences, fatigue, or difficulty concentrating in class. These health challenges not only affect academic performance but also impact social-emotional development by limiting participation in peer activities and increasing feelings of isolation.

Together, these health-related factors can significantly hinder a student’s ability to attend school regularly, stay engaged in learning, and build strong relationships with teachers and classmates. Addressing maternal and student health through early intervention, coordinated care, and school-based supports is essential to ensuring that all children have an equitable opportunity to learn and thrive.

## **Recommendations:**

### **1. Partners and Awareness**

- a. To improve maternal health outcomes and provide comprehensive support for new and expectant mothers, partnerships with key organizations such as the Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH), the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), and Georgia Mental Health America (MHA) can play a crucial role.
  - i. These collaborations can enhance access to medical care, mental health services, and early childhood development programs, ensuring that both mothers and their children have the resources they need to thrive. Partnering with Georgia Mental Health America on Postpartum Mental Health.
- b. Schools and community organizations can work with state and federal programs, such as Medicaid or the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), to increase awareness and enrollment in these services, because many mothers, particularly those in low-income communities, may lack access to adequate health insurance, preventing them from seeking necessary medical care. By assisting mothers in securing health coverage, schools can help ensure that both mothers and their children receive the care they need without the financial strain that can prevent them from seeking help.

### **2. Expanding Access to Prenatal and Postpartum Care**

- a. Expand the use of mobile health clinics, home visits, and community-based maternal care programs. This expansion can support early screenings for maternal health risks, provide educational resources on pregnancy and infant care, and connect mothers with essential health services.
- b. Community partnership can support early screenings for maternal health risks, provide educational resources on pregnancy and infant care, and connect mothers with essential health services.

### **3. Early Childhood Development Support**

- a. DECAL's expertise in early childhood education and family support programs can help bridge the gap between maternal health and child development – expand funding for this work.
- b. Partnering between and among state agencies can allow for the integration of maternal wellness initiatives into early learning programs, ensuring that new mothers receive guidance on infant health, early literacy, and school readiness. Additionally, DECAL can provide resources for early childhood screenings, developmental assessments, and support services for families.

### **4. Nutrition and Wellness Programs**

- a. By collaborating with DPH and DECAL, schools can promote and expand access to nutrition assistance programs such as WIC (Women, Infants, and Children), which provides nutritional support for pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and young children.

By addressing poor maternal health and the lack of access to specialized maternal health services, schools can help break the cycle of health disparities that hinder both the mother's and child's academic and emotional success.

#### **Nutrition, Food Security, and Clothing**

Access to nutritious food and appropriate clothing is fundamental to a child's ability to learn. Hunger and inadequate clothing can lead to fatigue, decreased concentration, and poor academic performance.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Nutrition, food security, and clothing play a critical role in a student's ability to learn by affecting their physical health, cognitive function, emotional well-being, and overall school participation. Students who experience hunger often feel fatigued, irritable, and unmotivated, making it difficult to participate in classroom activities. Low blood sugar levels can cause dizziness and an inability to focus. Students who do not have consistent access to food are more likely to miss school due to illness or fatigue. Chronic absenteeism results in gaps in learning and lower academic achievement.

- **School Meal Programs:** Students who are malnourished may struggle with memory, focus, and energy levels. Expanding free and reduced meal programs, supporting community food banks, and implementing farm-to-school initiatives can ensure students receive adequate nutrition.
- **Community Partnerships for Clothing & Supplies:** Lack of appropriate clothing, especially in cold weather, can result in missed school days and low self-confidence. Schools with limited storage can collaborate with local businesses and organizations such as Goodwill or the Salvation Army to establish off-site clothing and food pantries.

## Summary and Recommendations: Nutrition, Food Security, and Clothing

Proper nutrition and access to appropriate clothing are essential for student success. Hunger and food insecurity can lead to fatigue, poor concentration, and behavioral issues that interfere with learning. Similarly, inadequate clothing—whether due to extreme weather or lack of proper school attire—can contribute to absenteeism, low self-esteem, and social exclusion. Schools play a critical role in addressing these challenges by ensuring that students have access to basic necessities.

### Recommendations:

#### 1. Expand and Strengthen School Meal Programs

- a. Increase funding and participation in free and reduced-price meal programs to ensure all eligible students receive nutritious meals.
- b. Support community food banks and backpack programs that provide students with food to take home over weekends and school breaks.
- c. Schools could partner with local grocery stores to create a storage space at school for nonperishable foods for families.
- d. Expand farm-to-school initiatives, such as the *Georgia Farm to School Program*,<sup>34</sup> to provide students with fresh, locally sourced food while educating them about nutrition and agriculture.

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Without adequate clothing, some students may avoid attending school altogether, especially during winter months. A lack of clean, properly fitting clothing can also discourage participation in physical education and extracurricular activities, which are crucial for overall development. By addressing food insecurity and clothing shortages, schools can remove significant barriers to learning and create a more equitable educational environment. Ensuring that students have access to nutritious meals and proper clothing helps improve focus, academic performance, attendance, and social-emotional well-being, allowing them to thrive both inside and outside the classroom.

<sup>34</sup> The Georgia Farm to School Program is a statewide initiative that connects schools with local farms to provide students with fresh, locally grown foods while integrating agricultural education into the curriculum. This program aims to enhance student health, support local economies, and foster community engagement.

- e. Expand the *Feed My School for a Week Program*,<sup>35</sup> which promotes the inclusion of 100% locally grown food in school meals.

## 2. Establish Clothing and Basic Necessities Support

- a. Schools can partner with local businesses, nonprofits, and faith-based organizations to provide clothing, coats, shoes, and hygiene products for students in need.
- b. Encourage businesses to “Adopt a School” and donate clothing, shoes, and winter gear to students who lack appropriate attire.
- c. Schools can collaborate with organizations such as Goodwill and the Salvation Army to collect clothing for students with limited access to appropriate and seasonal clothing.

## 3. Improve Access to Community Resources

- a. Develop referral systems that connect families to food assistance programs such as SNAP, WIC, and community pantries.
- b. Schools can share the Find Help Georgia website with families to aid in their search for essential items and services: [FindHelpGa.org](https://www.findhelpga.org)<sup>36</sup> and [Georgia Gateway](https://www.georgiagateway.com).<sup>37</sup>

By addressing food insecurity and clothing shortages, schools can help ensure that students are physically, emotionally, and socially prepared to engage in learning—reducing barriers to academic success. Hunger and inadequate clothing can negatively impact a child’s ability to concentrate, retain information, and participate fully in classroom activities. When students arrive at school without having eaten a nutritious meal, they may experience fatigue, irritability, and difficulty focusing, all of which hinder their ability to learn. Similarly, students who lack proper clothing—whether due to extreme weather, rapid growth, or financial hardship—may struggle with discomfort, embarrassment, and diminished self-confidence, leading to absenteeism and social isolation. Creating an integrated system that offers comprehensive healthcare, education, mental health support, and community resources ensures young mothers receive support in their academic journeys while fostering an environment that promotes the health and well-being of their children. This holistic approach benefits not only current students but also future generations, laying a foundation for improved learning and life outcomes.

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<sup>35</sup> [Feed My School for a Week](#) – A Georgia Department of Agriculture program that helps schools incorporate Georgia-grown food into their meals for one week, promoting local farmers and fresh food.

<sup>36</sup> [Find Help Georgia](#) is a free, statewide resource platform designed to connect Georgia residents with local and statewide programs that offer support in various areas such as food, housing, healthcare, childcare, education, and more. The platform is a collaborative effort between the Georgia Department of Human Services and [findhelp.org](https://www.findhelp.org) (formerly Aunt Bertha),

<sup>37</sup> Georgia Gateway is the state government’s web portal for accessing assistance programs. When someone creates an account, he/she can apply for or renew benefits, upload documents, and report changes to their case.

## **2. NORTH STAR: Children Experience Abundant, Positive, Language-Rich Social Interactions with Caregivers, Educators, and Peers**

*[Caregivers, educators, healthcare providers and others are aware of the importance of language-rich environment and notice what it includes. Resources and supports are accessible, affordable, available, accommodating, and are provided in an acceptable way.]*

### **Barriers to Language Development**

Language development is essential for a child's ability to communicate effectively, build relationships, and succeed in school. However, various barriers can hinder this development, leading to long-term consequences for cognitive, social, and emotional growth. Some children experience delays in speech, have limited exposure to a rich vocabulary, or face challenges due to hearing impairments or language disorders. Additionally, English language learners often lack adequate support, making it harder for them to develop strong communication skills. Family and parenting challenges can significantly impact a child's ability to learn by shaping their cognitive, emotional, and social development.

- **Lack of Awareness:** A major issue contributing to language development challenges is a lack of awareness among caregivers and educators about key developmental milestones. Addressing these barriers through increased awareness, early intervention, and structured language support can help ensure that all children develop the communication skills necessary for academic and social success.
- **Critical Early Experiences:** Many children miss out on critical early experiences, such as engaging in developmentally appropriate conversations, being read to regularly, and participating in interactive activities like singing and storytelling.
- **Language-Rich Interactions:** Language-rich social interactions are essential for building expressive, receptive, and pragmatic language skills. Furthermore, limited exposure to discussions about books and other reading materials at an early age can delay literacy skills, making it harder for children to grasp reading comprehension and critical thinking as they grow.

### **Summary and Recommendations: Barriers to Language Development**

Children with language difficulties often struggle to understand instructions, express their thoughts clearly, or grasp new concepts. These challenges can lead to frustration, lower self-confidence, and reduced participation in the classroom. If not addressed early, such struggles may widen the achievement gap and contribute to long-term academic challenges. When parents themselves face language development difficulties or are unaware of the importance of language-rich interactions, children may enter school with a

limited vocabulary and less mature language skills. Additionally, parents unfamiliar with early intervention systems might miss critical opportunities to address speech delays, learning disabilities, or developmental concerns, which can further impact school success. Schools can play a vital role by leveraging both internal and external resources to support students and families in language enrichment.

## **Recommendations:**

### **1. Funding**

- a. Increase funds for ELL support at the school level, as well as through adult education programs.

### **2. Expand Implementation of Concepts and Practices that Support Language as a Well-Being Indicator**

- a. Invest in RESAs, technical colleges,<sup>38</sup> and childcare resource and referral organizations to support implementation of concepts and practices that support language as a well-being indicator from the [Language as a Missing Link Toolkit](#)<sup>39</sup> with school districts and RESAs; provide training for educators (including literacy coaches), mental and physical healthcare providers, other professionals, and parents/caregivers.

### **3. Encourage Parents to Read and Discuss Books with Their Children and Use Music and Singing to Develop Language Skills**

- a. Expand [Reach Out and Read-Ga](#) (ROR)<sup>40</sup> where pediatricians discuss the importance of reading to parents and distribute books to them to share with their children.
- b. Support the expansion of the [Ferst Foundation](#)<sup>41</sup> to provide free books to parents and organizations that work with parents and children.
- c. Support the expansion of the library system of Georgia to reach out to parents to offer books and other reading materials.

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<sup>38</sup> For example, Columbus Technical College had embedded language as a well-being indicator in the early childhood training programs.

<sup>39</sup> Language as a Missing Link Toolkit (Sandra Deal Literacy Center) is designed for individuals, practitioners, and policymakers to integrate and sustain a proactive approach that employs language as a well-being indicator that is foundational for educational, mental health, and well-being outcomes.

<sup>40</sup> Pediatricians, including those in training, are taught how to engage families in reading to their children through modules they have to complete for the program. <https://reachoutandread.org/>.

<sup>41</sup> Ferst Readers addresses the growing problem of children, many from low-income communities, entering kindergarten without basic early literacy skills and school readiness, a preventable problem that has far-reaching impacts throughout students' lives. Children in the Ferst Readers literacy program receive a bookstore-quality, age-specific book and resources mailed to them at home every month until their fifth birthday. This access to books helps create a language-rich environment in the home.

- d. Share programs that promote language development such as [Dolly Parton's Imagination Library](#)<sup>42</sup>.
- e. Encourage parents to sing nursery rhymes, lullabies, or make up songs during routines like bath time or brushing teeth. Repetition helps children learn new words and rhythms of language.<sup>43</sup>

#### **4. Develop and/or Identify Resources for Parents**

- a. Schools can partner with groups like [Corners Outreach](#) that specialize in supporting Latino parents in this space.
- b. Schools and partners develop easy-to-understand materials (brochures, infographics, videos) about early intervention services, eligibility, and how to access support.
- c. Schools, DPH, FQHC, CSBs, community groups, and others should be encouraged to offer free workshops or webinars to educate parents on child development milestones and the importance of early intervention.
- d. Make parents aware of the Certified Peer Support Specialist Program through the Georgia Parent Support Network<sup>44</sup> where parents with lived experience guide other parents through support systems.
- e. Make parents aware of the one-on-one coaching through trained Family Navigators<sup>45</sup> to help parents complete paperwork, attend meetings, and advocate for support services.

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<sup>42</sup> Mails free books monthly to children (birth–age 5) to build home libraries. Increases shared reading at home and improves early literacy exposure. Additionally, it is scalable statewide and is a strong public-private partnership model.

<sup>43</sup> National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) recommends music as a tool for early literacy and language development in its position statements and curriculum guides.

<sup>44</sup> Georgia Parent Support Network (GPSN) Certified Peer Specialist-Parent (CPS-P) Program trains and certifies parents or caregivers of children with emotional, behavioral, or mental health challenges to provide peer support to other families facing similar experiences.

<sup>45</sup> Georgia offers several Family Navigator programs to assist families in accessing and coordinating various services: Families First Navigator Services: Serving the Metro Atlanta area, Families First provides personalized case management, connecting individuals and families to community resources such as housing, counseling, employment, and education support. Georgia Department of Human Services Kinship Navigator Program: This statewide initiative supports grandparents, relatives, and other caregivers raising children, offering information and referrals to aid in navigating available support systems; Georgia Department of Human Services; Exceptional Futures Family Navigator Program: Assisting parents of children with special needs, this program guides families in securing resources like Medicaid waivers, family support funding, and guardianship assistance. Exceptional Futures; Easter Seals North Georgia Family Navigator Program: Focused on children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, this program connects families to community resources, including therapy, parent education, and financial assistance, [eastersealsnorthgeorgia.org](http://eastersealsnorthgeorgia.org); Parent to Parent of Georgia's Navigator Project: A volunteer leadership program that trains parents to support others in their communities, helping them access resources and services for children with disabilities or special healthcare needs.

- f. Make parents aware of workshops through schools, libraries, and community centers that highlight the benefits of talking, reading, and singing to children - use existing videos, infographics, and real-life examples to illustrate how everyday conversations boost language development.
- g. Increase parent education programs (through schools, libraries, or other outlets); refer parents and parent mentors to the *Language as a Missing Link Toolkit* and *Cox Campus*.
- h. Make parents aware of the Family Care Ambassador Program (DECAL) - community events provide resources to families and caregivers of young children, including ambassadors with literacy training who share information on early intervention and developmental monitoring.

#### **5. Lack of access to parent-child psychotherapy**

- a. Expand access to teletherapy in schools with parental access, especially in rural areas
- b. Inform parents of the availability of teletherapy, so they can contact their healthcare provider to request access to teletherapy.
- c. Infant Early Childhood Mental Health in the [Georgia Association for Infant Mental Health](#) is working on building access to parent-child psychotherapy – support expansion of this work.
- d. Georgia American Academy of Pediatrics has a list of resources that can be shared through RESAs, schools, and libraries.
- e. Encourage schools to start parent support groups because sometimes parents will talk to each other more often than to a therapist. National Alliance on Mental Illness, Mental Health of Georgia, Georgia Parent Support Network, and Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities have resources and can provide information on how schools can start and facilitate support groups.

By tackling these barriers early through education, parental involvement, and community support, literacy rates can rise, empowering individuals with the skills they need to succeed academically and beyond.

**3. NORTH STAR: Caregivers and Educators are Equipped with Evidence-Informed Skills to Effectively Engage All Children Through Developmentally Responsive Practices and Teacher-Focused Conditions for Learning**

*[Teachers and caregivers know what skills are needed and why. Training is accessible, affordable, available, accommodating, and provided in an acceptable way.]*

**Teachers and Parents/Caregivers**

Providing teachers and caregivers with a strong understanding of the importance of literacy and effective teaching strategies can significantly enhance students' reading and learning outcomes. When teachers and caregivers understand the value of early literacy, they incorporate reading, storytelling, and conversations into daily routines.

- **Address teacher impact on student learning:** Teachers play a critical role in shaping a child's ability to learn and their motivation to engage in education. A skilled, supportive, and enthusiastic teacher can inspire curiosity, build confidence, and create a love for learning that lasts a lifetime.
- **Address the importance of parent/caregivers on learning:** Parents and caregivers play a crucial role in shaping a child's ability to learn and succeed academically. Their involvement provides essential support that enhances cognitive, emotional, and social development.

**Summary and Recommendations: Teachers and Parents/Caregivers**

When teachers and parents work in partnership, they establish a powerful and consistent support system that significantly enhances a child's ability to learn to read. This collaboration ensures that literacy instruction is reinforced across environments—at school and at home—creating a cohesive and supportive learning experience. When educators share strategies, goals, and progress with families, parents become empowered to engage in meaningful reading activities, offer encouragement, and address challenges early.

This dual support not only strengthens foundational reading skills such as phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension, but also nurtures confidence, motivation, and a positive attitude toward reading. Over time, children are more likely to develop strong reading habits and a lifelong love for learning when they experience the message that literacy is important, valued, and celebrated by the adults in their lives—both in the classroom and beyond.

## Recommendations:

### 1. Address teacher attendance:

- a. Research possible flexible scheduling options for teachers.<sup>46</sup>
- b. Review results of Georgia School Climate Survey for the purpose of determining reasons for absences.<sup>47</sup>
- c. Work-Life Balance – Schools should encourage reasonable workloads, adequate planning time, and manageable class sizes.
- d. Schools, state agencies, and professional associations could work together to expand access to counseling, stress management workshops, and wellness programs to help teachers cope with stress.
- e. Encourage schools to celebrate teacher achievements through incentives, awards, or simple gratitude boosts morale.
- f. Provide attendance incentives for teachers, such as a monetary incentive at the end of the school year for perfect, excellent attendance, and/or improved attendance.
- g. Improving school climate can also improve teacher attendance.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Options being explored by school districts: job sharing, where two teachers split one full-time position. This gives both more time for personal responsibilities or professional growth while still keeping a strong presence in the classroom; compressed workweek. Instead of working five shorter days, teachers might work four longer ones, gaining an extra day off each week. While longer days can be tiring, the extra time off can make a big difference in avoiding burnout; staggered start times, letting teachers begin and end their days at different hours. This can help with personal schedules and even reduce commuting stress; remote or hybrid work days, where teachers spend certain days working from home—often for planning, grading, or professional development. This offers more flexibility and focus time away from daily classroom demands; part-time teaching or reduced workloads, giving them more time for family or other pursuits, though this does come with reduced pay; like flexible planning periods, which allow teachers more say in when they use their prep time. Similarly, co-teaching models, where two educators share a class, can allow for shared responsibilities and greater flexibility in day-to-day planning.

<sup>47</sup> The Georgia School Climate Survey (GSCS) is an anonymous, statewide instrument developed by the Georgia Department of Education to assess perceptions of school climate and safety among students, parents, teachers, and staff. It aims to identify factors that impact student achievement and inform strategies for creating supportive learning environments.

<sup>48</sup> Research indicates a significant correlation between school climate and teacher attendance. A positive school climate—characterized by supportive leadership, collegial relationships, and a safe environment—can enhance teacher satisfaction and reduce absenteeism. Conversely, a negative school climate may contribute to increased teacher absences. For example, the Learning Policy Institute reports that positive school climates are associated with lower teacher attrition rates, suggesting that when teachers feel supported and valued, they are more likely to remain present and engaged in their roles. The research stated that fostering a positive school climate is essential for improving teacher attendance and, consequently, student outcomes. The study titled "Effects of school climate and teacher self-efficacy on

## 2. Teacher preparation – impact on student learning, teacher efficacy, career

- a. Review the Georgia School Climate Surveys results to identify areas to improve teacher preparation.
- b. RESAs, school districts, and schools share teacher experiences with colleges and universities to build more relevant teacher preparation programs, so teachers are prepared to organize and manage the classroom climate, address different learning styles of students, know how to measure the engagement level of students, and learn how to acknowledge students.

## 3. Enhance Teacher Ability to Support Student Engagement

- a. Provide coaching for teachers by trained professionals with teaching experience in a variety of school and classroom settings.<sup>49</sup>
- b. Provide support to teachers to implement the practices in the *Language as a Missing Link Toolkit* so teachers can more effectively enhance student engagement in learning.
- c. Work with USG and RESAs to include more course work on child development, effective classroom management practices, understanding student behavior, and make teachers aware of existing training courses.<sup>50</sup>
- d. Introduce mediation skills to teachers to help them learn how to deescalate conflicts – create an endorsement for mediation training.
- e. Increase opportunities for student teaching/internships or hands-on experience for new teachers in a variety of classroom settings – urban, rural, suburban, large classes, small classes, diverse students, low income, high income.

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job satisfaction of mostly STEM teachers: a structural multigroup invariance approach," authored by Yusuf F. Zakariya and published in the *International Journal of STEM Education* (2020), examines the relationships between school climate, teacher self-efficacy, and job satisfaction secondary school teachers. The research found that a positive school climate significantly enhances teacher job satisfaction, with teacher self-efficacy playing a mediating role in this relationship.

<sup>49</sup> A 2024 study by McGuire et al. found that teachers in their first year benefited from coaching that included direct application of behavior strategies with students. This hands-on approach led to increased self-efficacy and practical skill development: Stacy N. McGuire, Yan Xia, Aleksandra Guzy, Talitha S. Akoto, Hedda Meadan, (2024). Behavior management training for teachers in the induction phase, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.23176>

<sup>50</sup> Georgia College and State University offers online courses such as Classroom Management Processes and Student-Led Classroom Management through Ed2Go. These courses focus on establishing efficient classroom routines and promoting student accountability; Georgia Southern University: Build School Communities: Brain Smart Classroom Management course, emphasizing emotional intelligence and positive behavior strategies; University of West Georgia Teacher Training includes classes with topics on solving student discipline problems.

#### **4. Improve teachers' skills to measure student engagement in learning and address how teachers can create positive classroom conditions for learning**

- a. Train teachers of methods for measuring the engagement of students in class using observation, notice tools<sup>51</sup>, and student feedback (written and/or oral).
- b. Encourage teachers (and schools) to video some classes for teachers to then review to measure student engagement, which could lead to instructional improvements.

#### **5. Increase Awareness of Early Child Development with Teachers and Parents**

- a. Colleges and universities should include SED-focused courses in teacher preparation programs. Encourage parents to reinforce SEL at home through storytelling, guided conversations, and structured play.
- b. Encourage schools to provide ongoing SEL training to help teachers recognize and nurture emotional growth. Provide teachers with structured methods to observe and document emotional responses, peer interactions, and coping skills.
- c. Provide teachers with structured methods to observe and document emotional responses, peer interactions, and coping skills for the purpose to discover what is most effective when engaging students in learning.
- d. Train parents to use tools like the Ages & Stages Questionnaires: Social-Emotional (ASQ:SE-2)<sup>52</sup> to identify early social-emotional challenges.

#### **6. Teachers are not aware of developmentally responsive teaching practices**

- a. Work with USG Teacher Preparation Program and RESA Teacher Preparation NPL programs, as well as TCSG Early Childhood Education programs to ensure that teachers are aware of developmentally responsive teaching practices.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Example: SEE-KS Tools for Measuring Engagement: <https://cld.gsu.edu/files/2022/09/4-SEE-KS-Tools-for-Enhancing-Engagement-in-Classroom-Lessons-pdf>

<sup>52</sup>The Ages & Stages Questionnaires: Social-Emotional, Second Edition (ASQ:SE-2) is a highly reliable, parent-completed screening tool designed to evaluate the social-emotional development of young children aged 1 to 72 months. It focuses on key areas such as self-regulation, compliance, social-communication, adaptive functioning, autonomy, affect, and interaction with people. By identifying potential social-emotional challenges early, ASQ:SE-2 aids in ensuring timely interventions, which are crucial for a child's overall development and school readiness.

<sup>53</sup> Developmentally responsive teaching practices refer to instructional approaches that are tailored to the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical developmental stages of students. These practices recognize that learners grow and

- b. DECAL has been working with TCSG for the past two years on the Pyramid Model framework which deploys SEL training as part of teacher preparations. It was noted that this could be a recommendation – to expand the Pyramid Model to more teacher prep programs.
- c. It is recommended that [Language as Missing Link](#) be expanded to more colleges and universities, like is being done at Columbus Technical College.
- d. Inform teachers of [Cox Campus](#), which has numerous resources for teachers that are based on developmental awareness.

**4. NORTH STAR: Children Feel Safe, Nurtured, and Connected from Birth to Early Childhood and Through the School Years**

*[Caregivers, educators, and children know the importance of a positive learning climate, what it looks like, feels like, and is expected to include. Resources, supports, and engagement are available, accessible, accommodating, and are provided in an acceptable way.]*

**School Climate, Classroom Climate, and Safety**

A positive school climate is essential for ensuring that students feel safe, supported, and ready to learn.<sup>54</sup> School climate refers to the overall quality and character of school life, including relationships, teaching and learning practices, and the physical and emotional safety of students. Research underscores the critical role of a positive school and classroom climate in ensuring that students feel safe, supported, and prepared to learn.<sup>55</sup> Studies have demonstrated that when schools prioritize fostering a positive school and classroom climate, students are more likely to develop trusting relationships with peers and teachers, exhibit positive behaviors, and achieve better academic outcomes. Conversely, a lack of positive climate in schools and classrooms can lead to students feeling disconnected and unengaged in learning.<sup>56</sup>

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mature at different rates, and they adapt the curriculum, environment, expectations, and interactions to meet students where they are developmentally. Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE). (2010). *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*. AMLE. Copple, C., & Bredekamp, S. (Eds.). (2009). *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8* (3rd ed.). National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

<sup>54</sup> Darling-Hammond, L., & Cook-Harvey, C. (2018). *Educating the whole child: Improving school climate to support Student Success*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/145.655>.

<sup>55</sup> Durham, Rachel, Shiller, Jessica, and McDowell, Janae. (2025). *Building Better Learning Environments: The Positive Impact of Community Schools on School Climate*. Maryland Center for Community Schools, [https://www.towson.edu/coe/centers/maryland-center-community-schools/mccs-research-brief-2.pdf?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.towson.edu/coe/centers/maryland-center-community-schools/mccs-research-brief-2.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

<sup>56</sup> Create a positive school climate where students feel safe, supported, and welcome. (2024). School Safety.Gov, [www.schoolsafety.gov/school-climate](https://www.schoolsafety.gov/school-climate); Readiness Emergency Management for Schools (REMS): School Climate and Safety <https://rems.ed.gov/K12SchoolClimateAndEmerg.aspx>.

Creating a secure environment—both physically and emotionally—removes barriers to academic success by promoting feelings of safety and belonging. When students feel safe, they are more confident, willing to take intellectual risks, and open to participating actively in their learning. A positive school climate supports not only cognitive development but also the social-emotional growth of students by fostering resilience, empathy, and collaboration.<sup>57</sup>

Moreover, schools that invest in a nurturing school climate often see reduced disciplinary issues, lower absenteeism, and better mental health among students. Such environments empower educators to implement developmentally responsive teaching practices that honor students' diverse backgrounds and needs, further reinforcing an inclusive and supportive learning community.

Ultimately, cultivating a positive school climate is foundational for breaking down barriers to learning and creating conditions where every student can reach their full potential.

- **Support and Expand Strategies to Improve and Sustain a Positive School Climate:** Georgia has several strategies in place and in development that improve or will improve school climate, which will enhance students' feelings of being safe at school, including legislation.
- **Expand the Opportunities for Students to Feel Engaged in Learning:** Engagement is the fuel for learning.<sup>58</sup> Students who feel connected and motivated, understand what to do or expect, and can share what they know in their learning environment are more likely to engage with the material and their peers. Research shows that students who are consistently engaged in their classes are more likely to become engaged in learning. Higher levels of engagement are associated with improved knowledge acquisition and literacy development.<sup>59</sup>
- **Seek Ways to Enhance Student Belonging:** Research consistently demonstrates that a strong sense of belonging in K–12 students significantly enhance their academic performance, engagement, and overall well-being. When students feel connected and valued within their school community, they are more likely to participate actively in learning activities and exhibit positive behaviors.<sup>60</sup>
- **Addressing Student Behavior and Attendance:** While the research shows a link between school and classroom climate and student behavior and attendance,

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<sup>57</sup> McGiboney, Garry. (2021).

<sup>58</sup> Morgan, L., Close, S., Siller, M., Kushner, E., & Brasher, S. (2022). Teachers' experiences: Social emotional engagement—knowledge and skills. *Educational Research*, 64(1), 41–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2021.1988865>

<sup>59</sup> Wenting Zou, Amanda Purington Drake, Philipp K. Masur, Janis Whitlock, Natalie N. Bazarova (2024). Examining learners' engagement patterns and knowledge outcome in an experiential learning intervention for youth's social media literacy, *Computers & Education*, Volume 216, 105046, ISSN 0360-1315, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2024.105046>.

<sup>60</sup> Korpershoek, H., Canrinus, E. T., Fokkens-Bruinsma, M., & de Boer, H. (2019). The relationships between school belonging and students' motivational, social-emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes in secondary education: a meta-analytic review. *Research Papers in Education*, 35(6), 641–680. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2019.161511>

there are other methods and strategies available to address these issues in a proactive manner.

### **Summary and Recommendations: School Climate, Classroom Climate, and Safety**

Prioritizing students’ sense of safety and well-being by addressing bullying, harassment, and threatening behavior is crucial for effective learning. Implementing programs with clear frameworks that promote a culture of respect, responsibility, and positive behavior helps create a positive school climate, which in turn can improve attendance. When students feel safe, supported, and connected to their peers and teachers, they are more likely to attend school regularly. A positive school and classroom climate reduces absenteeism by fostering a strong sense of belonging—an especially important factor for students who may feel marginalized or disengaged.<sup>61,62</sup>

### **Recommendations:**

#### **1. Increase Students’ Feelings of Safety at School**

- a. Schools should provide opportunities for students to report safety concerns – anonymous hotline.
- b. Use the [Georgia School Climate Surveys](#)<sup>63</sup> to pinpoint student safety concerns and staff member concerns so they can be addressed.
- c. Support sustainability and expansion of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), which is now required in underperforming schools (2025 HB 268 - OCGA 20-2-741 (b)(2)(A-C)<sup>64</sup>). O.C.G.A. § 20-2-155 establishes a statewide school climate management program to assist local schools in developing and improving their school climate through technical assistance and model codes of behavior and discipline.
- d. Ensure that school districts are aware of the requirements in 2025 HB 268 that schools address the behavioral health needs of students as part of the School Safety Plan.

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<sup>61</sup> Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Guffey, S., & Higgins-D’Alessandro, A. (2013). A review of school climate research. *Review of Educational Research*, 83(3), 357-385.

<sup>62</sup> McGiboney, Garry. (2022). *The Psychology of School Climate* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

<sup>63</sup> Georgia School Climate Survey (GSCS) is a statewide initiative by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) aimed at assessing and improving the learning environment across public schools. As of the 2024–2025 school year, the GSCS has replaced the previous Georgia Student Health Survey (GSHS) .

<sup>64</sup> HB 268 – OCGA 20-2-741 (b)(2)(A-C):“Local boards of education shall implement PBIS and RTI programs and initiatives in each elementary and middle school that is a high needs school. Such implementation shall include but shall not be limited to: (A) PBIS Tier 1 supports for 100 percent of students and school personnel; (B) Specific PBIS Tier 2 supports and interventions for students who are at risk for developing more serious unwanted behaviors, such as small group resilience and behavioral health skills lessons approved by the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities....”

- e. Encourage schools to work with the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities to identify behavioral health resources.
- f. Encourage schools to partner with Georgia Education Climate Coalition (GECC)<sup>65</sup> to develop strategies to address school climate issues.

## **2. Increase Students' Sense of Belonging and Engagement**

- a. Encourage LEAs to include or expand strategies and programs aimed at increasing student belongingness, such as:
  - i. **Small Groups:** Assign students to small groups with a teacher or older student mentor who checks in regularly.
  - ii. **Peer Buddy Systems** – Pair new or struggling students with a peer buddy to help them integrate socially and academically.
  - iii. **Student Affinity Groups & Clubs** – Support clubs based on shared interests or identities (e.g., cultural clubs, hobbies, or academic interests).
  - iv. **Restorative Justice Circles** – Create a safe space for students to resolve conflicts, share experiences, and build a sense of community.
  - v. **Social Emotion Engagement-Knowledge and Skills** – Create training for teachers on how to engage students in the classroom and in learning and also train teachers on how to measure the levels of student engagement to determine what works.

## **3. Address Out-of-School Suspension (OSS) Rates**

- a. Increase awareness of and provide technical assistance and training for schools to implement existing statute (OCGA 20-2-742 ) focused on reducing out-of-school suspension of children—preschool through 3rd grade.
- b. Encourage implementation of PBIS in schools with high OSS rates. Schools with positive School Climate Star Ratings have fewer out-of- school suspensions and lower rates of bullying that can lead to conflicts.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Georgia Appleseed Center for Law and Justice leads the coalition of over 50 education, community, and legal organizations who support positive school climate reform and policies at the state and local levels.

<sup>66</sup> Georgia Department of Education data.

- c. Share Georgia Appleseed Center for Law and Justice’s information about student discipline with parents: [: Innovations & Best Practices – Keeping Kids in Class Toolkit](#).
- d. Inform schools about the use of the [Language as a Missing Link Toolkit](#) that contains strategies that can increase student engagement in the classroom and thus reducing disruptive behavior.
- e. Encourage schools to use peer mediation<sup>67</sup> and Restorative Practices<sup>68</sup> to address issues that could lead to discipline problems from unresolved conflict.
- f. Provide conflict resolution training for students and verbal de-escalation training for school staff members.

#### 4. Address Student Attendance Issues

- a. Share the [Get Georgia Reading Cabinet’s Student Attendance Report](#) with school districts. The report contains several strategies for schools and communities to utilize to improve student attendance.
- b. Share information with school districts from the [Attendance Works](#) website and the [GaDOE Whole Child](#) website that include strategies to address absences.
- c. Share information with school districts about 2025 SB 123<sup>69</sup> that requires schools to establish student attendance teams if the percentage of student absences reaches a certain threshold.

#### Mental Health Support

Mental health challenges can significantly impact a student's ability to focus, engage with peers, and complete academic tasks. Anxiety, depression, and trauma-related conditions can lead to behavioral issues, poor academic performance, and increased dropout rates.

- **Increase Mental Health Providers:** Advocating for additional funding for school counselors, social workers, and psychologists can provide students with essential mental health support.
- **Family Intervention Programs:** Expanding therapeutic interventions for families can help address mental health concerns early and holistically.

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<sup>67</sup> Junkermeir, Amy (2020). Addressing Peer Mediation: Conflict Resolution in Schools. <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1960&context=grp>

<sup>68</sup> Restorative practices focus on repairing harm and restoring relationships rather than punitive measures.

<sup>69</sup> [Georgia General Assembly - SB 123](#)

- **Early Intervention Programs:** Schools should be informed about initiatives like the CLIMBE program<sup>70</sup>, which supports elementary students’ development of essential motor and literacy skills while providing access to occupational therapy services.
- **Student Transition Support Plans:** Often students have a difficult time successfully transitioning from one school to another school, from one grade level to the next grade level, when returning to school after a long-term illness or accident.
- **Student Executive Function:** Strong executive function skills help children focus, follow instructions, plan tasks, and control emotions. These abilities develop over time and are essential for academic success, social interactions, and daily life.<sup>71,72</sup>

### **Summary and Recommendations: Mental Health Support**

Mental health is a critical component of student well-being, profoundly affecting academic performance, social relationships, and overall engagement in school. Mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, trauma, and other emotional disorders are increasingly prevalent among students and can significantly disrupt their ability to learn and thrive. Research consistently shows that students experiencing mental health issues are more likely to face behavioral problems, struggle academically, and, in some cases, have higher dropout rates compared to their peers without such challenges.<sup>73,74</sup>

Anxiety and depression are among the most common mental health conditions affecting school-aged children and adolescents. These conditions can impair concentration, memory, and motivation, which are essential for successful learning.<sup>75</sup> Additionally, trauma—whether stemming from adverse childhood experiences, community violence, or family instability—can cause emotional dysregulation and cognitive impairments, making

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<sup>70</sup> A pilot project with children enrolled in K-1st grades in the target school received CLIMBE learning segments for 24 weeks by seven Augusta University graduate Occupational Interns (OT) who completed 12-week professional rotations within the CLIMBE program and nine OT students who completed a mental health rotation in CLIMBE. Also, 24 teacher candidates completed lab hours in the CLIMBE classroom that was based on the academic needs of the students. At the end of the 24-week intervention, students improved academic outcomes.

<sup>71</sup> Children’s Executive Function delays cause inability to self-regulate emotions when facing interruption, challenges, disappointments or errors that are part of the learning experience or during interpersonal interactions or while encountering undesirable responses from the peers, teachers or families.

<sup>72</sup> Children’s Executive Function delays can lead to the inability to formulate goals for self, understand how to persist to achieve these goals (in many facets of life including classroom learning, playground, homework etc.) or inability to have accept goals that trusted adults may have for them or formulate partnerships to create shared goals.

<sup>73</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2021). *Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data*. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/data/yrbs/index.htm>.

<sup>74</sup> Merikangas, K. R., He, J. P., Burstein, M., Swanson, S. A., Avenevoli, S., Cui, L., ... & Swendsen, J. (2010). Lifetime prevalence of mental disorders in U.S. adolescents: Results from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication–Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A). *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 49(10), 980-989.

<sup>75</sup> Costello, E. J., Mustillo, S., Erkanli, A., Keeler, G., & Angold, A. (2003). Prevalence and development of psychiatric disorders in childhood and adolescence. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 60(8), 837-844.

it difficult for students to focus, regulate emotions, or trust adults and peers in the school environment.<sup>76,77</sup>

Providing adequate mental health support within schools has been shown to improve outcomes for students facing these challenges. School-based mental health services, including counseling, social-emotional learning programs, and crisis intervention, contribute to enhanced emotional well-being, increased attendance, improved academic achievement, and reduced behavioral issues.<sup>78</sup> Early identification and intervention are particularly important, as untreated mental health conditions can lead to chronic absenteeism and disengagement from school.<sup>79</sup>

Moreover, integrating mental health education and stigma reduction programs in schools fosters an inclusive environment where students feel safe to seek help. Training educators to recognize signs of distress and provide referral pathways to professional support further reinforce a supportive school climate.<sup>80</sup>

Addressing mental health needs is essential for creating an educational environment where all students can succeed academically and socially. Schools that prioritize mental health services and promote emotional resilience equip students with the tools to overcome challenges, reduce dropout rates, and build a foundation for lifelong well-being.

## **Recommendations:**

### **1. Increase the Number of Mental Health Providers and Improve Collaboration**

- a. Advocate for increased funding for school counselors, social workers, psychologists, Apex providers, and telemental health.
- b. Seek funding to reach recommended student-to-staff ratios by increasing funding for school counselors (250:1<sup>81</sup>), school social workers (250:1<sup>82</sup>), school nurses (225:1<sup>83</sup>), and school psychologists (500:1<sup>84</sup>) as recommended by professional associations.

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<sup>76</sup> Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., ... & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4), 245-258.

<sup>77</sup> Burke Harris, N. (2018). *The deepest well: Healing the long-term effects of childhood adversity*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

<sup>78</sup> Greenberg, M. T., Weissberg, R. P., O'Brien, M. U., Zins, J. E., Fredericks, L., Resnik, H., & Elias, M. J. (2003). Enhancing school-based prevention and youth development through coordinated social, emotional, and academic learning. *American Psychologist*, 58(6-7), 466-474.

<sup>79</sup> Kearney, C. A. (2008). School absenteeism and school refusal behavior in youth: A contemporary review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 28(3), 451-471.

<sup>80</sup> Reinke, W. M., Stormont, M., Herman, K. C., Puri, R., & Goel, N. (2011). Supporting children's mental health in schools: Teacher perceptions of needs, roles, and barriers. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 26(1), 1-13.

<sup>81</sup> American School Counselors Association

<sup>82</sup> School Social Work Association of America

<sup>83</sup> National Association of School Nurses

<sup>84</sup> National Association of School Psychologists

- c. Based on the requirements specified in HB 268 (2025), BHDD will provide BHDD will provide guidance to schools on how to address the behavioral health needs of students in their School Safety Plan, which will include behavioral health screening, behavioral threat access process, access to behavioral health services, and staff training, including annual training of your violence awareness and suicide prevention. BHDD will provide information to school districts on the “Student Advocacy” position. The State Board of Education shall provide grants to local school systems for the purpose of reimbursing local school systems for qualified student advocacy specialists
- d. Increase access to mental health providers at school and/or through teletherapy to provide timely interventions for students experiencing anxiety, depression, trauma-related conditions, or other mental health conditions.
- e. With assistance from BHDD, schools should consider using a comprehensive mental health screening process to identify students in need of support early on, ensuring interventions can be tailored to their specific needs.
- f. Promote partnerships between schools and local mental health providers such as Community Service Boards and Certified Community Behavioral Health Centers to create accessible student and family counseling services, offering a more holistic approach to addressing student needs.
- g. Increase funding for school-based supports such as [Chris180](#)<sup>85</sup>.
- h. The stigma around mental health issues preventing students from seeking help could be addressed by asking the National Alliance on Mental Illness-Ga, Mental Health America-Ga, Council on Alcohol and Drugs, Mental Health Policy Partnership, Carter Center, and others to create a statewide campaign around the message that mental health is part of life and asking for help is okay.

## **2. Expand Educators’ Awareness of Mental Health, Trauma, Substance Abuse**

- a. Expand the Mental Health Awareness Training (MHAT)<sup>86</sup> for Educators at the GaDOE and RESAs.

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<sup>85</sup> CHRIS 180 supports children, youth, adults, and families overcome trauma to become productive citizens through inclusive and innovative counseling, foster care and adoption, family and community support programs, preventing homelessness and violence, and providing professionals with the tools they need to serve their community.

<sup>86</sup> MHAT is a statewide initiative designed to support the mental health and well-being of Georgia students by training school personnel, educators, and other key staff to better understand and respond to mental health issues in schools. The purpose is to increase awareness of mental health conditions, reduce stigma, and equip educators with tools to recognize early warning signs and respond appropriately.

- b. Make MHAT available to preschool center teachers and other staff member
- c. Expand collaboration of RESAs with the [Council on Alcohol and Drugs](#) for substance prevention.

### **3. Expand Family Intervention Programs**

- a. In coordination with RESAs, National Alliance on Mental Illness-Georgia, and Mental Health America-Georgia integrate mental health education into parent-teacher conferences, workshops, and school communications to increase awareness and reduce mental health stigma.
- b. CSBs/CCHCs work with schools to create accessible family counseling services, offering a more holistic approach to addressing student needs.

### **4. Implement Early Intervention Programs and After-School Program**

- a. Promote and inform schools about early intervention programs like the CLIMBE program (Augusta, Georgia), which helps young students develop critical motor and literacy skills while also providing access to occupational therapy and mental health support.
- b. Expand professional development for after-school staff to identify early signs of behavioral health issues and respond with appropriate referrals or interventions – use school social workers, school psychologists, school counselors, and CSB/CCBHC staff to provide the training or work with after-school providers to ensure that they offer the training to their staff members.
- c. Develop after-school programs or “club” based on area of expertise or student interests, which could include partnering with Boys and Girls club, parks and recreation, Scouts, and others.
- d. Inform schools about the Resilient Teen program that teaches middle and high school students’ resilience and coping skills:  
<https://resilientteens.org/><sup>87</sup>

### **5. Integrate Mental Health Support into School Climate**

- a. Ask BHHD, Georgia School Superintendent’s Association, CSB/CCBHCs and RESAs to develop a protocol to enhance collaboration between mental health providers and school

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<sup>87</sup> Program is expanding to offer a Resilient Teen club in two underserved middle schools in the fall 2025 as a pilot program.

- b. Create safe spaces within the school where students can access mental health resources, such as quiet rooms for students to decompress or connect with counselors.

## **6. Understanding the Interactions Between Behavioral Health and Physical Health**

- a. To address the connection between behavioral problems and health conditions, whereby behavior may be a manifestation of a health issues, BHDD and the American Academy of Pediatrics-Georgia could create information packets or other types of information sharing methods about this topic to share with educators and parents.

## **7. Reducing the Stigma about Mental Health with Students**

- a. Ask the National Alliance on Mental Illness-Ga, Mental Health America-Ga, Council on Alcohol and Drugs, Mental Health Policy Partnership, Carter Center, and others to create a statewide campaign around the message that mental health is part of life and asking for help is okay.
- b. Mental Health Curriculum: Integrate age-appropriate mental health lessons into health, science, or advisory classes.<sup>88</sup>

## **8. Develop Plans to Aid Students Transitioning Back to School After Long-Term Absences<sup>89</sup>**

### *Transitioning to a New School*

- a. Orientation Programs – Host school tours, meet-the-teacher events, and buddy programs for new students.
- b. Peer Mentoring – Pair new students with an older or more experienced student to help them adjust.

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<sup>88</sup> Szota, Katharina, Hanna Christiansen, Nele Dippel, Julia Asbrand (2025), Let's talk about mental health! – Pilot study on school-based mental health literacy interventions for adolescents, *Mental Health & Prevention*, Volume 38,200416, ISSN 2212-6570, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mhp.2025.200416>.

<sup>89</sup> Many students experience difficulties navigating and emotionally coping with transitions to another grade level, a new teacher, a new school, returning to school from another facility or program (e.g., hospital/homebound), and from a long-term absence due to a family emergency. The shift from primary to secondary education can be particularly demanding. A study published in the *Journal of School Psychology* found that during this transition, students may experience decreased behavioral engagement and increased conflict with teachers, which can adversely affect their academic performance and emotional well-being. Maaike C. Engels, Eija Pakarinen, Marja-Kristiina Laukkanen, Karine Verschueren, Students' academic and emotional adjustment during the transition from primary to secondary school: A cross-lagged study, *Journal of School Psychology*, Volume 76, 2019, Pages 140-158, ISSN 0022-4405,

- c. Welcome Packets – Provide materials with maps, schedules, key contacts, and tips for navigating school life.
- d. Teacher and Counselor Check-ins – Schedule one-on-one meetings to assess how new students are adjusting.

*Moving to a New Grade Level*<sup>90</sup>

- a. Step-Up Days – Allow students to visit the next grade level, meet teachers, and learn about expectations.
- b. Vertical Teaming – Encourage collaboration between teachers across grade levels to ensure curriculum continuity.
- c. Advisory Groups – Assign students to a consistent teacher or mentor who supports them throughout transitions.

*Returning After a Long Illness*<sup>91</sup>

- a. Personalized Reintegration Plan – Develop a tailored schedule for the student’s return, including flexibility for breaks.
- b. Teacher and Staff Coordination – Ensure all teachers are aware of the student’s needs and any necessary accommodations.
- c. Academic Support – Offer tutoring, modified assignments, or online learning options to help the student catch up.
- d. Social Support – Assign a peer buddy and provide counseling to address any emotional challenges.
- e. Health Considerations – Work with the school nurse and family to accommodate medical needs and any required modifications.

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<sup>90</sup>Studies have shown that the transition to secondary education can negatively affect academic achievement. For instance, research published in *Frontiers in Psychology* highlights that approximately 40% of students fail to make expected progress in core subjects such as English and mathematics during this period. Factors contributing to this decline include adjusting to larger school environments, increased academic independence, and heightened performance expectations. Evans D, Borriello GA, Field AP. A Review of the Academic and Psychological Impact of the Transition to Secondary Education. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2018 Aug 29;9:1482. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01482. PMID: 30210385; PMCID: PMC6123573.

<sup>91</sup>A study in the *Journal of School Nursing* emphasizes that structured transition plans, involving collaboration between educators, healthcare professionals, and families, significantly improve students’ reintegration and academic success. Transition Planning for Students with Healthcare Needs, National Association of School Nurses Position, *NASN Journal* 2024 (40)4, doi.org/10.1177/1059840524185. Students re-entering school following psychiatric hospitalization often encounter significant obstacles. Research published in the *Journal of Adolescent Research* highlights that these students may struggle with social reintegration, academic pressures, and a lack of understanding from peers and staff. The study emphasizes the importance of comprehensive transition planning to support these students effectively. Midura S, Fodstad JC, White B, Turner AJ, Menner S. Supportive Transition Planning for Adolescents Transitioning From Psychiatric Hospitalization to School: A Systematic Literature Review and Framework of Practices. *Continuing Education* 2023 Jan 30;4(1):23-40. doi: 10.5334/cie.61. PMID: 38774904; PMCID: PMC11104309.

### *Returning After a Discipline Suspension*<sup>92</sup>

- a. Before the student returns, hold a meeting with school staff, parents/guardians, and the student to discuss expectations, academic recovery plans, and behavioral support.
  - b. Develop a personalized reentry plan that outlines clear goals, support systems, and available resources.
  - c. Assign a Mentor or Check-in Person
  - d. Pair the student with a trusted staff member, counselor, or mentor to provide guidance and emotional support.
  - e. Implement weekly or biweekly check-ins to monitor academic progress, behavior, and overall well-being.
- a. Assess missed coursework and create a catch-up plan with flexible deadlines and offer tutoring, study halls, or online learning tools to help bridge learning gaps when needed.
  - b. Provide counseling services to address anxiety, frustration, or feelings of isolation.
  - c. Connect families with community resources that provide additional mentoring, after-school programs, or mental health services.

### *Returning to School After an Extended Absence (non-medical related):*<sup>93</sup>

- a. Assign a Mentor or Check-in Person.
- b. Pair the student with a trusted staff member, counselor, or mentor to provide guidance and emotional support. Implement weekly or biweekly check-ins to monitor academic progress, behavior, and overall well-being.<sup>94</sup>
- c. Assess students missed coursework and create a catch-up plan with flexible deadlines and offer tutoring, study halls, or online learning tools to help bridge learning gaps when needed.

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<sup>92</sup> A study from the American Institutes for Research (AIR) found that students who return from long-term suspensions are more likely to struggle with attendance and academic performance, highlighting the need for structured reentry programs. *Students Returning to School From Out-of-School Suspension*, American Research Institute, 2019.

<sup>93</sup> Shiu, S. (2001). Issues in the education of students with chronic illness. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 48(3), 269–281.

<sup>94</sup> Shaw, S. R., & McCabe, P. C. (2008). Hospital-to-school transition for children with chronic illness: Meeting the new challenges of an evolving health care system. *Psychology in the Schools*, 45(1), 74–87.

- d. Provide counseling services to address anxiety, frustration, or feelings of isolation.
- e. Connect families with community resources that provide additional mentoring, after-school programs, or mental health services.

## 9. Address Executive Function<sup>95</sup> Development of Students

- a. Develop methods to teach Executive Function<sup>96</sup> skills to children K-12 grades -utilize Executive Function framework intentionally, specifically, strategically, and in a personalized way during classroom teaching.
- b. Introduce the concept of the *future-self*<sup>97</sup> to teach children how to engage in future-oriented thinking and decision making, which begins to develop during the preschool years.<sup>98,99</sup> Developing a strong connection with the future self can improve literacy in several ways. When students recognize that their future self depends on their present actions, they are more likely to engage in behaviors that enhance learning and literacy skills.
- c. Train teachers in the science of Executive Function to understand how it leads to engagement, motivation and self-regulation.
- d. Provide parents with essential training to support growth of best parenting practices that focuses on introspective self-correction to grow personal learning insight.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2011). Building the Brain's "Air Traffic Control" System: How Early Experiences Shape the Development of Executive Function. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu>

<sup>96</sup> Executive functioning refers to a group of mental processes that help children regulate their behavior, emotions, and thoughts in order to achieve goals. These processes are like the brain's "management system" — they allow children to plan ahead, stay organized, focus attention, remember instructions, and control impulses

<sup>97</sup> Research in psychology, particularly in self-continuity theory, suggests that individuals who feel a strong connection to their future selves are more likely to make long-term, beneficial choices (e.g., saving money, exercising, or studying): Adelman RM, Herrmann SD, Bodford JE, Barbour JE, Graudejus O, Okun MA, Kwan VSY. Feeling Closer to the Future Self and Doing Better: Temporal Psychological Mechanisms Underlying Academic Performance. *Journal of Personality*. 2017 Jun;85(3):398-408. doi: 10.1111/jopy.12248. Epub 2016 Apr 4. PMID: 26900025.

<sup>98</sup> Leech KA, Leimgruber K, Warneken F, Rowe ML. Conversation about the future self improves preschoolers' prospection abilities. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*. 2019 May;181:110-120. doi: 10.1016/j.jecp.2018.12.008. Epub 2019 Jan 31. PMID: 30711299. Building on this concept enables students to invest emotional and cognitive resources to practice self-control as a necessary skill for literacy acquisition.

<sup>99</sup> Children's Executive Function delays making self-directed error detection/ correction difficult. Their inability to learn from errors or mistakes, evaluate the nature or cause of those mistakes or recognize immediate or future unfavorable consequences can lead to inability to self-correct or predict future patterns in executionary errors which causes failures in personal problem solving

<sup>100</sup> Children's Executive Function delays can cause a lack of self-awareness, self-knowledge or desire to seek feedback. Children may present themselves with cognitive and affective rigidity unwilling to receive critical correction or unaware of the value of advice, support or recommendations. Ultimately children may not benefit from guided support or resources made available to them by adults.

By strengthening mental health services and integrating early intervention and family support programs, schools can provide students with the emotional tools they need to succeed academically and socially, ultimately improving overall student outcomes.

### **Moving Forward**

The Barriers to Learning Subcommittee made two key discoveries: (1) Barriers to learning are more critical to student success than previously understood, and (2) These barriers are more complex and interconnected than initially anticipated. As a result, addressing these challenges demands a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach—one that goes beyond academic remediation and tackles the social, emotional, physical, and environmental factors that influence a student's ability to thrive.

Barriers such as poverty, inadequate healthcare, housing instability, trauma, and unmet mental health needs are not isolated issues; they intersect and compound, creating systemic obstacles to learning. These challenges cannot be solved by schools alone. Tackling them effectively requires a coordinated effort that brings together educators, policymakers, healthcare professionals, community organizations, families, and students themselves.

The recommendations presented in this report draw from a robust foundation of best practices, academic research, and the lived experiences of educators, students, and families working daily to overcome adversity. For example, integrated student support models—such as those promoted by the Communities In Schools network and The Learning Policy Institute—demonstrate how partnerships between schools and community organizations can improve attendance, academic achievement, and emotional well-being.

Policymakers have a critical role to play. By prioritizing structural reforms and removing systemic inequities, they can help ensure that every student, regardless of background or circumstance, has access to a safe, supportive, and resource-rich learning environment. This includes investing in wraparound services, trauma-informed practices, expanded access to health and mental health care, and equitable funding models that recognize the increased needs of under-resourced schools.

Furthermore, by encouraging collaboration and resource-sharing across sectors—through federal, state, and local partnerships—communities can build sustainable systems of support. These systems can help schools address the full spectrum of student needs, ensuring that children are not only present in school but also mentally, emotionally, and physically ready to learn.

With shared commitment and strategic investment, we can bridge the gap between barriers and academic success, fostering an educational ecosystem where all students have the opportunity to read proficiently, succeed in school, and reach their full potential.

## Resources

Effectively addressing barriers to learning requires more than simply identifying the challenges—it requires delivering targeted, accessible, and sustainable resources that meet students where they are. Recognition without action leaves gaps unfilled; resources serve as the critical bridge between acknowledging a need and implementing meaningful solutions to overcome it.

In this context, resources encompass more than just textbooks or academic interventions. They include a wide array of supports—human, technological, material, and community-based—that collectively empower students to engage fully in their education. This broader definition includes:

**Human resources:** Skilled educators, school counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, paraprofessionals, and community mentors who provide individualized support, build trust, and offer expertise in navigating complex learning and life challenges.

**Technological resources:** Accessible and up-to-date technology, such as laptops, assistive devices, learning management systems, and reliable internet access, which ensure students can fully participate in digital learning environments and receive personalized instruction.

**Instructional and curricular resources:** Culturally responsive teaching materials, universal design for learning (UDL) strategies, tiered academic interventions (MTSS/RTI), and programs that support literacy, numeracy, and executive functioning skills.

**Community-based resources:** Partnerships with healthcare providers, food banks, housing support services, after-school programs, and local organizations that offer wraparound services to address the non-academic factors affecting student success.

To be effective, these resources must be intentionally designed to be accessible, meaning they are physically, culturally, and linguistically appropriate for the populations they serve. They must also be sustainable—not short-term fixes, but part of a long-term strategy to promote equity and resilience in school communities.

Schools cannot close opportunity gaps alone. Systemic investment and cross-sector collaboration are essential to ensuring that students have consistent access to the support they need—whether they are facing learning disabilities, trauma, poverty, or health-related challenges. When resources are well-coordinated, responsive to student needs, and rooted in community context, they enable every learner not just to survive—but to thrive.

## Resources Information

Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) provides public health dental services to children enrolled in Medicaid and PeachCare programs, as well as to low-income patients on a sliding-fee scale. These services include exams, cleanings, sealants, fillings, crowns, and extractions. Clinic locations and hours vary based on local and state resources. Information about specific dental services, hours, and locations can be obtained by visiting the Georgia Oral Health Coalition's Map of Dental Sites or by using the Service Locator by zip code.

**Help A Child Smile** is a mobile dental program that can partner with school districts to deliver full-service dental care directly at schools.

The **Family Health Centers of Georgia, Inc.** that operates mobile medical and dental units equipped to provide primary care, immunizations, physicals, and dental services.

The Georgia Farm to School Program is a statewide initiative that connects schools with local farms to provide students with fresh, locally grown foods while integrating agricultural education into the curriculum. This program aims to enhance student health, support local economies, and foster community engagement.

[Feed My School for a Week](#) – A Georgia Department of Agriculture program that helps schools incorporate Georgia-grown food into their meals for one week, promoting local farmers and fresh food.

Social Communications (SC) Emotional Regulation (ER) and Transactional Support (TS) ([SCERTS](#)) is a comprehensive intervention model for children and older individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their families. SCERTS provides specific guidelines for helping an individual become a competent and confident social communicator and an active learner.

Georgia Tech Center connects people with disabilities and older adults, AT providers and social service case managers, and AT industry representatives through an innovated social media platform. The community encourages interactive multi-media dialogues about assistive technology discovery, selection, application, customization, and training. The Community of Practice builds on previous development products from CIDI, including [AssistiveTech.net](#) and its associated ATWiki.

[Georgia General Assembly - SB 123](#)

[Georgia School Climate Surveys](#)

[Georgia Department of Public Health \(DPH\) Speakers Bureau](#) Atlanta, GA - Offers speakers on various public health topics, including child health. To request a speaker, visit their Speakers Bureau page.

[Georgia Department of Public Health](#) speakers bureau.

[Northeast Georgia Health System Speakers Bureau](#); Gainesville, GA - Provides health education speakers for community organizations

[Cobb & Douglas Public Health Speakers Bureau](#). Marietta, GA - Offers speakers on public health topics.

[North Georgia Health District Speakers Bureau](#), Dalton, GA - Provides public health lecturers and keynote speakers on various topics. Speaker requests can be submitted online. [nghd.org](#)

[Southeast Georgia Health System Speakers Bureau](#), Brunswick, GA - Offers health-related educational programs with speakers including physicians and health professionals. Request a speaker through their website. [sghs.org](#).

[Tanner Health System Speakers Bureau](#), Carrollton, GA - Comprises physicians and healthcare professionals available for presentations on various health topics. [tanner.org](#).

[Fulton County Board of Health Speakers Bureau](#); Atlanta, GA - Provides speakers on public health topics.

[GEEARS](#), the Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students, is a nonprofit organization established in 2010 and based in Atlanta, Georgia. Its mission is to support high-quality early learning and healthy development for Georgia's youngest children, from birth to age five, by championing policies, promoting innovative and evidence-based practices, and building public will.

[Language as a Missing Link Toolkit](#) (Sandra Deal Literacy Center) is designed for individuals, practitioners, and policymakers to integrate and sustain a proactive approach that employs language as a well-being indicator that is foundational for educational, mental health, and well-being outcomes.

Pediatricians, including those in training, are taught how to engage families in reading to their children through modules they have to complete for the program.

<https://reachoutandread.org/>.

[Ferst Readers](#) addresses the growing problem of children, many from low-income communities, entering kindergarten without basic early literacy skills and school readiness, a preventable problem that has far-reaching impacts throughout students' lives. Children in the Ferst Readers literacy program receive a bookstore-quality, age-specific book and resources mailed to them at home every month until their fifth birthday. This access to books helps create a language-rich environment in the home.

South Carolina funds the state Reach Out and Read program so every practice can offer books to children in their areas.

**Georgia Parent Support Network** (GPSN) Certified Peer Specialist-Parent (CPS-P) Program trains and certifies parents or caregivers of children with emotional, behavioral, or mental health challenges to provide peer support to other families facing similar experiences.

Family Navigator programs assist families in accessing and coordinating various services: Families First Navigator Services: Serving the Metro Atlanta area, Families First provides personalized case management, connecting individuals and families to community resources such as housing, counseling, employment, and education support - [familiesfirst.org](http://familiesfirst.org).

**Georgia Department of Human Services Kinship Navigator Program:** This statewide initiative supports grandparents, relatives, and other caregivers raising children, offering information and referrals to aid in navigating available support systems; assisting parents of children with special needs, this program guides families in securing resources like Medicaid waivers, family support funding, and guardianship assistance.

**Easter Seals North Georgia Family Navigator Program:** Focused on children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, this program connects families to community resources, including therapy, parent education, and financial assistance, [eastersealsnorthgeorgia.org](http://eastersealsnorthgeorgia.org).

**Parent to Parent of Georgia's Navigator Project:** A volunteer leadership program that trains parents to support others in their communities, helping them access resources and services for children with disabilities or special healthcare needs.

SEE-KS Tools for Measuring Engagement: <https://cld.gsu.edu/files/2022/09/4-SEE-KS-Tools-for-Enhancing-Engagement-in-Classroom-Lessons-pdf>

The **Ages & Stages Questionnaires:** Social-Emotional, Second Edition (ASQ:SE-2) is a highly reliable, parent-completed screening tool designed to evaluate the social-emotional development of young children aged 1 to 72 months. It focuses on key areas such as self-regulation, compliance, social-communication, adaptive functioning, autonomy, affect, and interaction with people. By identifying potential social-emotional challenges early, ASQ:SE-2 aids in ensuring timely interventions, which are crucial for a child's overall development and school readiness.

**Georgia Appleseed Center for Law and Justice** leads the coalition of over 50 education, community, and legal organizations who support positive school climate reform and policies at the state and local levels.

**Georgia Gateway:** Georgia Gateway is the state government’s web portal for accessing assistance programs. When someone creates an account, he/she can apply for or renew benefits, upload documents, and report changes to their case.

**Get Georgia Reading: Language Nutrition:** All children experience abundant, positive, language-rich social interactions with caregivers, educators, and peers. **Access:** All children and their families have access to, and support for, healthy development, emotional well-being, and educational achievement. **Positive Learning Climate:** All children feel safe and nurtured, from the early years through the early grades, so they can learn and grow—both emotionally and academically. **Teacher Preparation and Effectiveness:** All caregivers and educators are equipped with evidence-informed skills to effectively engage all children through developmentally responsive practice.

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