



# FORTIFYING PATHWAYS

THEMES TO GUIDE COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS IN GEORGIA

BY: ERIC WEARNE AND AUNDREA GREGG | DECEMBER 2014



**GEORGIA**  
CENTER for OPPORTUNITY

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## ABOUT GEORGIA CENTER FOR OPPORTUNITY

Georgia Center for Opportunity is an independent, non-partisan think-tank dedicated to increasing opportunity and improving the quality of life for all Georgians. We research solutions to society's most pressing challenges, promote those solutions to policymakers and the public, and help innovative social enterprises deliver results on the ground. The primary pathways to opportunity – strong families, safe communities, quality schools, stable employment, and good health – which historically gave children a chance to succeed, have experienced a rapid decline over time. We study and understand the obstacles along these pathways and work to break through the barriers to opportunity so that Georgia's children and families will have a real chance to prosper.

Our work is focused on five primary impact areas:



## ABOUT THE EDUCATION INITIATIVE

Failure to graduate or properly prepare for life after high school significantly lowers one's future earnings, and high school dropouts are significantly more likely to use social services, be involved in the criminal justice system, and experience family breakdown. Georgia Center for Opportunity's College and Career Pathways Initiative is working to develop solutions that will help students stay in school, graduate from high school, and prepare for college and career success. Since November 2013, Georgia Center for Opportunity (GCO) has convened monthly meetings of education experts with diverse experience and perspectives to focus on identifying barriers to student success and solutions to remove those barriers. Based on the guidance of these experts, GCO is publishing reports and advocating for solutions that will help students graduate from high school prepared for the next stage in their lives, whether that is college or the beginning of a career.

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The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Georgia Center for Opportunity, the College and Career Working Group members, or others who were interviewed for this work. Likewise, any errors or omissions are inadvertent and are the responsibility of the authors alone.



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# INTRODUCTION

Supporting quality education is a pillar of Georgia Center for Opportunity's (GCO) mission to remove barriers to opportunity. Through sound reasoning and evidence-based research, we know that students who successfully move from high school on to college graduation and careers greatly increase their earning potential as adults,<sup>1</sup> and are less likely to experience family breakdown, need government assistance,<sup>2</sup> and become entangled in the legal system.<sup>3</sup> The vision of a thriving workforce and stable citizen-base thus hinge on correctly answering the question of what it actually means for students to be college and career ready.

## IS GEORGIA COLLEGE AND CAREER READY?

While education plays a tremendous role in shaping individual life outcomes, the number of students in Georgia who do not advance beyond K-12 remains astronomically high. Over 1 in 5 young adults in Georgia are not attending school, not working, and have no degree beyond high school.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, in 2014, more than 33,000 students did not graduate.<sup>5</sup> Of those who go on to college, nearly 40 percent do not finish in four years.<sup>6</sup>

To address these clearly pressing issues, over the past decade Georgia has created a seemingly robust framework of performance standards, curriculums, and accountability measures to drive education reform across the state. From the top down, the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) set the expectations of knowledge and skills all students should meet before being deemed ready for higher education and job placement.<sup>7</sup> State initiatives such as College and Career Clusters and Georgia Virtual School have guided the delivery of curriculum to students. Additionally, the College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) is now in its fourth year of evaluating schools on the initiative they take to prepare students.

Unfortunately, though all components of the current framework ostensibly encourage higher educational attainment and better outcomes, Georgia continues to lag behind other states. Whether due to the questionable effectiveness of some current policies, or because some reforms are still in the process of being fully implemented (such as the College and Career Clusters), there remains a need to fortify the pathways that lead young people from K-12 on to the next stage of life.

## COLLEGE AND CAREER PATHWAYS WORKING GROUP

To promote solutions that will give more Georgians a real chance to prosper, GCO convened a working group of education professionals as part of the College and Career Pathways initiative. Comprised of K-12, postsecondary, and local business leaders, the group sought to contextualize barriers faced by students, parents, and schools of varying circumstances across the state.

Through a series of nine meetings, the group not only considered the academic needs of readiness, such as rigorous learning standards, and systemic barriers, such as recruiting and preparing quality teachers, the group also considered the philosophical underpinnings of readiness such as the relationship between education and fulfilling one's purpose in life. This multifaceted lens led the group to a more holistic definition of college and career readiness:

"The body of knowledge, habits, and skills that a student must possess, along with sufficient resources, to succeed in college and career."



Additionally, much experiential insight and research pointed toward three foundational themes for effective college and career readiness strategies:

- Reforms must begin at the local level
- The right policy incentives matter
- Strong, individual relationships foster student success

The following is a review of these themes.

## THE SCALE OF REFORM

**“If a child can’t learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn.”**

**-Ignacio Estrada**

Education can be overwhelming; both in its vastness as an industry, and in its role shaping the future of Georgia’s students. Focusing on the “bigness” of education has prompted many big reforms, big policies, and big programs. The problem is, big does not always equal better.

Equipping students to succeed in school and advance to college and a career is not facilitated by big policy alone. Georgia’s nearly 2 million K-12 students depend on parents, teachers, principals, counselors, and community members alike to shape their daily learning ecosystems. Well-intentioned large-scale policies and one-size-fits-all planning can quickly obscure the very personal experiences that underlie an effective, high quality education. This often does more to entrench destructive practices and systems than improve them.

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The College and Career Pathways working group found that successful college and career readiness strategies are extremely context specific. For example, a vast difference exists between the intended curriculum, the enacted curriculum, the assessed curriculum, and the learned curriculum. The methods that work for students in one school or system may prove ineffective at others sites. Additionally, even as broad policies have outlined new standards,<sup>8</sup> new accountability measures,<sup>9</sup> and new learning platforms,<sup>10</sup> the work to implement and insure results still falls to local school personnel working with individual students.

Despite calls for large, top-down reforms, it is often the case that significant reforms are possible but hampered by a resistance to change grounded in a lack of creativity or an environment that discourages risk-taking altogether. Adopting the “whatever it takes” mantra, leveraging resources, and pursuing collaboration where good ideas already exist is within the power of local actors but is all too often overlooked. Initiating reform at local schools also requires local actors to recognize the power they already possess to enact change, combined with a willingness to upset the status quo.

In his book *Cage-Busting Leadership*, Frederick Hess notes:

**“It is true, as would be reformers often argue, that statutes, policies, rules, regulations, contracts, and case law make it tougher than it should be for school and system leaders to drive improvement and, well, lead. However, it is also the case that leaders have far more freedom to transform, reimagine, and invigorate teaching, learning, and schooling than is widely believed.”<sup>11</sup>**

**-Fredrick Hess**



Being more attuned with the needs of students, policy should focus on supporting decisions made by parents, students, teachers, schools, and school systems, rather than aiming to fix specific problems from afar. Empowering schools to lead innovation and more effectively problem solve requires more autonomy at local schools to preside over governance functions such as allocating school funds, adjusting teaching structures, and tailoring curricula. Most importantly, limiting the scale of education reforms provides an opportunity for big ideas to begin as pilot projects within communities across the state that, once shown to work, can be adopted by other reformers.

## INCENTIVES MATTER

**“If we did all the things we are capable of, we would literally astound ourselves.”**

**-Thomas. A. Edison**

Policy incentives play an important role in motivating educational institutions to improve on measures in a systematic way. However, many reforms miss the vital step to clearly define their goals—opting instead to treat the symptoms of problems rather than the root cause of low performance. As a result, educational institutions are, generally, incentivized to worry about themselves as institutions, or on policy as an abstract, and not on students as individuals. Schools worry about test scores. Colleges and universities worry about enrollment and retention. These are all measures that point back to the institutions themselves, but say nothing about how well-prepared their students are to move on to college or a career.

Finding the right policy incentives remains vital for would-be reforms, particularly as Georgia still lacks a full-bodied list of school options to drive low performing schools out of the market place. Until school choice becomes more established and competitive incentives become more prominent, we must continue to reinforce policy with appropriate incentives.

**A good test for any policy proposal, or a question any proponent of a new program should ask themselves is; “Does this solution empower students and parents to find the best answer for themselves?”**

A good test for any policy proposal, or a question any proponent of a new program should ask themselves is; “Does this solution empower students and parents to find the best answer for themselves?” Where the answer to this question is in the negative or vague (or where this question is not posed at all), quite likely the policy or incentives used to improve outcomes are misaligned with the needs of the students they intend to help. Good policies have clear goals for the administrators, teachers, and students within an educational institution. They outline a set of parameters within which educators can operate to reach those goals. And lastly, they only employ incentives that truly motivate stakeholders to perform the actions needed to reach desired goals.



# BUILDING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

**“Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.”**

**-Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**

Large-scale reforms and misaligned incentives hide one of the most important factors for improving student outcomes: personal relationships. Strong relationships between children and their parents, teachers and students, and families and schools are the cornerstones of student success. Strong relationships not only fortify schools’ understandings of students’ needs, but they also establish trust, communication, and respect between stakeholders. Where positive personal connections exist between educators and families, students are more likely to find the support they need to navigate the paths from schools adulthood.

Strong relationships also provide students with the examples, habits, and attitudes that set the stage for academic and work success. Just think, the best curriculum will matter little if schools have little interest in what happens to their graduates after they leave (or, in the case of colleges, whether their students graduate at all). Accountability will matter little if students graduate high school with higher test scores every year, but lack the discipline to show up to work or class on time, or give up as soon as they face a challenge. Both will matter little if students’ transcripts look good, but they have suffered through a program that is not a fit for their interests or abilities.

Helping Georgia’s students move to the next level of college and career readiness will not only require a move back to “the good ole days” of education when learning was personal, but also a philosophical shift towards treating students and parents as partners in the learning process.

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## COLLEGE AND CAREER PATHWAYS RESEARCH SERIES

Moving away from big policy, empowering schools to take the reins of innovation and reform, and helping students develop healthy habits through strong relational ties are important next steps toward improving student achievement and preparedness. Through the lens of the themes described above, GCO will publish over the coming months a series of reports addressing key issues impacting college and career readiness in Georgia:

### MEASURING NONCOGNITIVE VARIABLES IN SCHOOL AND BUILDING SMALL-SCALE RELATIONSHIPS

The skills needed to succeed in life extend far beyond just academic knowledge. What some call “soft skills,” “street smarts,” or “common sense” are really noncognitive factors—a diverse set of traits, habits, and competencies—that shape a student’s ability to learn and achieve in life. While in schools, students are often left to hone these additional skills and traits on their own, or indirectly through curriculums, much research has emphasized that focused engagement from supportive individuals is paramount building noncognitive variables. This paper will explore the connection between noncognitive factors and small-scale relationships, and how both can be better



facilitated in learning environments.

## IMPROVING ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES IN GEORGIA'S SCHOOLS

The College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) is meant to serve as Georgia's overarching accountability measure. However, the scores it provides through its complex formula limit its usefulness as a tool to policymakers, schools, and parents alike. In addition to ideas for streamlining CCRPI, this paper will provide solutions to incentivize schools to focus on student outcomes, rather than data inputs.

## EDUCATION REIMAGINED THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING MODELS<sup>i</sup>

Virtual experiences are a part of our lives at work, home, and in schools. In particular, a greater number of schools are turning to technology and online learning models to provide more support for students. For example, the well-known Khan Academy's goal is to provide "a free, world-class education for anyone, anywhere."<sup>12</sup> Other organizations, such as Carpe Diem<sup>ii</sup> and Matchbook Learning,<sup>iii</sup> use technology in various ways to customize educational experiences for students as well. These virtual learning models are ambitious and have already demonstrated an existing capacity to provide personalized instruction to all students while maximizing the time of effective teachers.<sup>13</sup> This report will not only expound on current suggestions made by the Governor's Digital Task Force Report,<sup>14</sup> it will also recommend how online learning can be used to revolutionize education across the state as a whole.

## INCREASING EXPERIMENTATION AND CREATIVITY IN TEACHER PREPARATION: CREATING "THE MISSING INSTITUTION"

Teacher quality is often described as the most important reform states and local school systems can leverage to improve student outcomes. In the U.S., almost all teacher preparation programs (93 percent) fail to ensure a high quality student teaching experience where candidates are assigned only to highly skilled teachers and receive frequent concrete feedback.<sup>15</sup> Current state efforts to improve teacher quality include the Teacher Keys and Leader Keys Effectiveness, and several other certification changes.<sup>16</sup> Still, most teacher preparation programs fall under the same accreditation standards, and even alternative programs tend to look very similar to traditional preparation programs in practice. True experimentation and creativity in teacher training, which could inform pedagogy and practice in both alternative and traditional preparation programs, are discouraged through standardized policies. These nonexistent, truly independent teacher training programs comprise what school leader Michael Strong calls "The Missing Institution." The Working Group's recommendations in this area will address how accreditation and Professional Standards Commission policy changes could encourage much more widespread experimentation in teacher preparation. Institutions with truly alternative, experimental approaches to teacher training are prevented from coming into existence.

<sup>i</sup> The title of this section draws from ideas such as those discussed in Salman Khan's *The One Room Schoolhouse: Education Reimagined*

<sup>ii</sup> "Carpe Diem Learning is a charter school management company that leverages technology, information, and human resources to ensure a superior learning experience at its schools" <http://www.carpediemschools.com/about/>

<sup>iii</sup> Matchbook Learning is a turnaround nonprofit. <http://www.matchbooklearning.com/>



# CONCLUSION

Through the College and Career Pathways Initiative and resulting research series, Georgia Center for Opportunity hopes to provide concrete recommendations to lawmakers, school administrators, and community stakeholders. For more information on GCO's work and how you can get involved please visit [www.georgiaopportunity.org](http://www.georgiaopportunity.org).

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