



## **Rural Task Force**

**2020 Rural Report**

**EARLY LEARNING**

## **Early Learning Matters**

High-quality early learning programs put young children on a path to academic success, particularly low-income children. Low-income students trail classmates across their academic career including in early literacy development, third-grade reading skills, high school graduation, and postsecondary enrollment and completion. These gaps open early. At 18 months, toddlers from low-income families show lower levels of vocabulary proficiency than toddlers from families with greater earnings.<sup>1</sup>

High-quality early learning programs are an essential lever to close the achievement gap between low-income students and their peers. They are linked to greater readiness for kindergarten and increased likelihood of reading on grade level by third grade. Reaching this reading benchmark is critical. Students who read proficiently in third grade are much more likely to graduate from high school than those who do not.<sup>2</sup>

Additional benefits of high-quality early learning programs for young children include reduced likelihood of special education placement, higher postsecondary enrollment rates, greater adult earnings, and lower smoking rates.<sup>3</sup> These benefits are particularly evident among low-income children.

### **Current Context: Early Learning in Georgia**

Georgia has built a strong framework to support high-quality early education. The centerpiece of this framework is the state's Pre-Kindergarten program. Launched in 1992 and funded with proceeds from the state lottery, the Pre-K program serves about 60 percent of the state's four-year-olds. The program is funded to enroll 84,000 children across the state. It is a public-private partnership with the Pre-K program delivered by school districts, private schools, childcare centers and other childcare providers. Children who participate in the Pre-K program demonstrate improved school readiness as well as higher scores on Georgia's third grade Milestones exam, the state's annual assessment of student learning.<sup>4</sup>

Another central component of Georgia's early education system is its voluntary Quality Rated program, which sets quality standards for childcare programs. These standards exceed licensure requirements. Through Quality Rated's comprehensive assessment, childcare programs can earn one, two or three stars signifying that they meet progressively higher benchmarks of care and learning. Those that earn a star receive free supplies and materials as well as professional development from the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), which administers the state's early childhood education programs.

Quality Rated programs must demonstrate that their curricula align with the Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards (GELDS). The GELDS are research-based early learning standards for children from birth to five, which use a holistic approach to child development. The GELDS are aligned with Georgia's K-12 standards, the Georgia Standards of Excellence.

According to a [2016 report](#), participants in Quality Rated report positive changes including improved classroom environment, fewer discipline problems, and better teacher-student interactions.<sup>5</sup> Providers that earned more stars saw other benefits. Children in three-star programs show stronger math and social skills than children in lower-rated programs.<sup>6</sup> These gains often come with additional costs to providers including materials and equipment, professional development, and hiring more staff.

DECAL requires childcare providers that take part in the Childcare and Parents Services (CAPS) program to participate in Quality Rated. The initial deadline to meet this requirement was December 30, 2020, but this has been extended to July 1, 2021 because of the coronavirus pandemic. This requirement will expand the number of early childhood programs that use the GELDS. The CAPS program subsidizes the cost of childcare for low-income families. Three-quarters of licensed childcare centers and nearly 40 percent of licensed family providers participate in CAPS.<sup>7</sup> Childcare programs that do not participate in CAPS or Quality Rated are not required to adopt the GELDS.

While Georgia has built core elements of a strong early learning system, challenges remain in meeting the needs of the state's youngest children. One is the high cost of childcare. The estimated average annual cost of infant care in Georgia is \$8,530, and childcare for a four-year-old averages more than \$7,300 annually.<sup>8</sup> Though lower than in urban areas, costs in rural communities remain sizable. Covering childcare consumes a large portion of wages for median-income families and even more for low-wage workers. The CAPS program can offset costs for low-income families, but its funding falls far short of need. Less than 15 percent of income-eligible children in Georgia are served by CAPS.<sup>9</sup> DECAL has prioritized families with greatest need including those who are very low-income and earn 50 percent or less of the federal poverty line. To meet this benchmark, the maximum income for a family of four is \$13,100 in 2020.

A second concern is the wages of staff in the early learning sector. The median hourly pay for a childcare worker in Georgia was \$9.53 in 2017 or about \$20,000.<sup>10</sup> Workers in the early learning sector often lack benefits. Less than 30 percent of full-time, non-Pre-K or Head Start employees in childcare centers and family childcare homes across the state receive health insurance or a retirement plan.<sup>11</sup> Less than half receive payment for training or tuition though slightly more than 50 percent are paid for time spent attending training. Over a third do not get paid holidays.

Low compensation leads to high staff turnover rates. In 2015, 80 percent of licensed childcare centers reported losing at least one permanent employee a year.<sup>12</sup> Childcare centers, which have 16 employees on average, lose an average of five employees annually. This level of staff churn can undermine the quality of programs and generate additional costs to recruit new staff and train them in curriculum, best practices, and health and safety.

The majority of lead teachers in Georgia’s childcare centers have some postsecondary training such as a Child Development Associate credential. However, with the exception of lead Pre-K teachers, fewer than one in four lead teachers have a bachelor’s degree.

## Rural Needs in the Spotlight

Young children in Georgia’s rural communities need high-quality early learning programs. One of every three children in rural areas are poor compared to about one in five in urban areas.<sup>13</sup> Nationally, Black children in rural areas have an even higher poverty rate: 47.3 percent. Data indicates that this disparity exists in Georgia.<sup>14</sup> Another issue that heightens the need for high-quality early learning is lower levels of parent educational attainment, which is linked to lower levels of student achievement.<sup>15</sup> Approximately half of adults in metro Atlanta have a bachelor’s degree, well above rural areas.<sup>16</sup> Less than 20 percent of adults in about half of Georgia’s 159 counties have earned a bachelor’s degree.

There are several barriers to high-quality early learning experiences in rural Georgia. Rural areas face a shortage of providers. Lack of transportation is also a challenge that can prevent rural families from accessing an early learning program.<sup>17</sup>

The cost of childcare is also a challenge in rural communities in Georgia. In rural areas, the average cost of care for a toddler in a licensed early learning childcare center was over \$4,800 in 2016.<sup>18</sup> This can easily exceed seven percent of a family’s income, the benchmark set by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for determining affordable childcare.<sup>19</sup> In Jenkins County, for example, this amount would consume nearly 18 percent of the median family income. For families earning less than the median, it would consume far more.

Finding qualified teachers for early learning programs is often difficult in rural areas.<sup>20</sup> As in other areas of the state, low levels of pay contribute to this shortage though early learning staff in rural areas earn even less than their peers in urban areas.

Median Hourly Wages <sup>21</sup>			
	State	Urban	Rural
Lead teachers (Excludes GA Pre-K & Head Start)	\$ 9.00	\$ 9.36	\$ 8.00
Assistant teachers (Excludes GA Pre-K & Head Start)	\$ 8.23	\$ 8.50	\$ 7.75
Other teaching staff	\$ 8.00	\$ 8.35	\$ 7.65

## COVID-19 and Early Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic has destabilized the childcare/early learning sector. During the economic shutdown triggered by the pandemic, over half of the state’s childcare providers closed, cutting off their revenue.<sup>22</sup> As they reopen or seek to remain open, providers may face

higher costs due to new health and safety requirements. At the same time, with rising unemployment across the state, they may experience enrollment declines, reducing their revenue. Childcare providers operate with slim profit margins so even short-term revenue drops can create significant financial difficulties.<sup>23</sup>

DECAL provided some fiscal relief. The department received approximately \$144 million in federal funds under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act.<sup>24</sup> It distributed \$50 million of this allotment in one-time payments to licensed childcare centers and family learning homes in the spring of 2020.<sup>25</sup> The department will survey providers to determine their needs for additional support.

Childcare providers will likely continue to face financial strain despite these payments based on their experiences in previous economic downturns. Enrollment in childcare centers and family childcare homes dropped during the Great Recession as unemployment in Georgia climbed to over 10 percent.<sup>26</sup> In the years after the recession, many providers reported that enrollment had not returned to pre-recession levels. About 40 percent of providers said earning enough income was a challenge well after the recession's official end.

Georgia's unemployment rate jumped to 12.6 percent in April 2020 from 3.1 percent in the preceding four months due to the pandemic though it declined to 7.6 percent in June.<sup>27</sup> It is uncertain what the unemployment rate will be in the remainder of 2020 and into 2021, but it is likely to remain high. The Congressional Budget Office projects an average unemployment rate for the nation of 10.6 percent for 2020 and 8.4 percent for 2021.<sup>28</sup> Enrollment may also drop as a result of parents' reluctance to send children to early learning/childcare programs due to pandemic-related health and safety concerns. In addition, the coronavirus has led to more parents working from home, and they may opt to keep their children home.

To cope with these financial pressures, early learning/childcare providers may reduce staff training, delay replacing supplies and making repairs, put off physical improvements, and take other steps to cut costs. Some may be forced to shut down.

## **Best Practices**

### *Shared Professional Development*

Some Georgia school districts have taken a direct role in providing professional learning opportunities for childcare providers. Newton County Schools became a DECAL-designated professional learning provider so that district staff can provide training for local childcare providers. The district does not charge the providers or their employees for the training, eliminating a financial challenge for providers.

Baldwin County Schools also hosts training sessions for childcare providers, which are held on Saturdays so they do not conflict with participants' work hours. The district secured a grant to

pay childcare staff for attending the training sessions. Floyd County Schools shares its Pre-K and kindergarten curricula with the providers in its area so they understand district expectations. It has also provided shared training sessions for its staff and provider staff.

Beyond Georgia, the Illinois Association of School Boards collaborated with the Ounce of Prevention Fund, an early learning research and advocacy organization, to create a [guide](#) school boards can use to expand and improve early education in their communities. The guidance includes strategies and best practices on engaging and working with community partners to expand early learning opportunities.

### *Aligned Curriculum*

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning has done extensive work to enhance the quality of early learning programs and build links between the curricula used in these programs with the Georgia Standards of Excellence, which are used in the state's public K-12 schools. Its efforts include the Georgia Early Learning Development Standards (GELDS), which are incorporated into the Quality Rating initiative. The department requires early learning providers who participate in the CAPS program for low-income families to also participate in Quality Rating.

## **Recommendations**

### *School District Recommendation*

- **The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends school districts collaborate with private, nonprofit and other early learning providers to deliver professional development to staff.**

Offering shared professional development will help ensure that early learning staff in districts and other provider settings gain a common understanding of the standards entering kindergarteners are expected to meet. Shared professional learning also leverages available resources to maximize learning opportunities for early learning educators regardless of provider type. This will enhance the ability of non-district early learning staff to ensure their students will be fully prepared to enter and thrive in kindergarten.

- **The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends that all early learning centers have curriculum aligned to the Georgia Performance Standards so that all children have the opportunity to be academically ready for kindergarten.**

Young children need engaging learning experiences that foster the knowledge and skills crucial to transitioning smoothly to and being prepared for kindergarten. A central element of such learning experiences is ensuring the curricula used by early learning providers aligns with the standards of Georgia's public schools.

- **The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends the distribution of materials and training opportunities to parents to help them foster literacy in young children.**

Parents are children's first and most important teachers. Building their knowledge about and providing resources to support literacy will help them best support their children's love of reading and academic success.

#### *Legislative Recommendation*

- **The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends additional funding for pre-kindergarten, transportation and space for additional students to ensure the foundational elements are established before starting kindergarten so that students are on level and able to learn.**

Boosting funding for pre-kindergarten will help ensure that all students whose families want to participate are able to do so.

- **The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends incentivizing the establishment of high-quality child care centers in underserved rural communities.**

Supporting the creation of new high-quality centers for young children will enhance school readiness, aid parents in fully participating in the workforce, and spur job development and entrepreneurship.

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## End Notes

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