



Rural Task Force

2020 Rural Report

INTRODUCTION

Public Education in Rural Georgia

Georgia has always been a predominantly rural state. The largest state in land mass east of the Mississippi River, Georgia has 120 counties labeled rural by the Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center at Mercer University, outside the Atlanta metroplex and other cities such as Albany, Athens, Augusta, Columbus, Macon, and Savannah. And these counties are under unprecedented strain.

After a brief resurgence of immigration and economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s, Georgia's rural counties have suffered as employment centers such as mills and factories closed, and as agricultural patterns changed.

In the present day, Georgia's rural counties failed to rebound after the Great Recession of 2007-9, even as the Atlanta metro area's economy and population soared. That left many rural school districts with fewer resources to tap when the COVID-19 pandemic emerged. Now, leaders throughout rural Georgia are trying to find the best ways to serve students while mitigating risk, looking for a way to recover from yet another devastating blow to their communities.

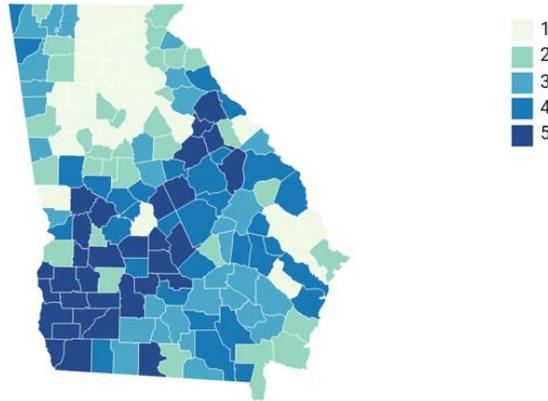
Prior to the pandemic, the Georgia School Board Association convened a task force to consider critical issues facing rural districts. To broaden the task force's impact and put its recommendations on the public agenda, GSBA is releasing four issue papers in the areas of greatest need, as identified by the task force:

- Healthcare
- School funding
- Teacher recruitment and retention
- Early learning

Background:

Georgia population growth, 2010-18

Georgia counties ranked by quintile of population change



Quintiles: 1 (10.1% - 39% growth), 2 (4.0% - 10%), 3 (-0.8% - 3.8%), 4 (-4.8% - -0.9%), 5 (-12.2% - -5.2%)

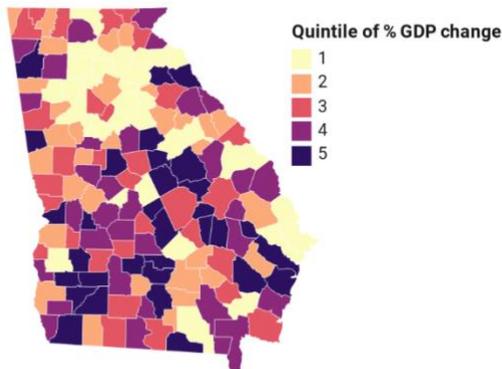
Map: Welch Suggs • Source: U.S. Census Bureau • Created with Datawrapper

Rural Georgia and its schools have undergone steady change over the past decade. Using rural/non-rural definitions from the Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center, Georgia's rural counties grew only two percent from 2010 to 2018, while non-rural counties grew 12 percent. Fourteen rural counties lost at least 10 percent of their population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. As

the attached map shows, population loss is concentrated south of the Fall Line, while most urban and rural counties in the northern part of the state are all growing.

Georgia counties and GDP growth, 2010-18

County rankings by GDP growth in 2018 dollars



1 (48% - 122% change), 2 (35% - 48%), 3 (25% - 35%), 4 (18% - 25%), 5 (-33% - 17%)

Map: Welch Suggs • Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis • Created with Datawrapper

Similarly, gross domestic product rebounded in metro and northern areas after the Great Recession, according to figures from the Bureau of Economic Analysis. As a whole, non-rural counties experienced GDP growth of a whopping 44 percent, lifting the state's overall GDP growth by 42 percent. Rural counties, on the other hand, grew by only 28 percent, and five counties—Baker, Calhoun, Chattahoochee, Putnam, and

Schley—reported negative economic growth. As the map to the left shows, growth is happening in the northern part of the state and on the coast, but far less in the southern interior.

Along with the population, schools are changing rapidly, according to data from the Governor's Office for Student Achievement. Between the 2010-11 school year and 2018-19, rural school districts lost 3 percent of their students, while nonrural districts as a whole grew 6 percent. Seven rural districts lost more than a quarter of their students, and non-rural districts in smaller cities, including Dougherty County, Floyd County, Bibb County, and Richmond County, also lost

students. Moreover, the average proportion of students directly certified as impoverished (i.e., receive SNAP or TANF, homeless, unaccompanied youth, foster or migrant) in rural schools reached 43 percent in 2018, compared with an average of 30 percent in non-rural schools.

At the same time, district revenues grew nearly twice as fast at non-rural districts (12.9 percent on average) as at rural ones (7.2 percent), adjusting for inflation. Funding provided to non-rural school districts through the state's QBE formula grew 24 percent from 2010-11 to 2018-19 in constant dollars, but only 13 percent in rural districts. And per-student costs rose 15.7 percent on average in rural districts, but only by 7.3 percent in non-rural districts.

The effects of the coronavirus pandemic are evolving as the 2020-21 academic year unfolds, but it is clear that the school shutdown in March left rural districts at an even greater disadvantage. For all districts, revenue losses loom at a time when student needs—and districts' costs—are rising, including the following:

- Electronic devices and accessible/affordable broadband
- Supplemental/remedial learning opportunities to make up lost instructional time
- Mental health supports for students dealing with virus-imposed hardships
- Food insecurity
- More extensive cleaning of school buildings and additional supplies needed to ensure student and staff health and safety

As the COVID-19 virus continues to spread, considerable uncertainty remains about the 2020-2021 school year. School operations may change week-to-week or even daily. The education workforce juggles new instructional demands with concerns about health risks. Though progress has been made, barriers to effective online instruction persist. More than all else, students' academic, developmental and physical needs must be attended to, especially those who are most vulnerable to falling behind and losing their way.

Whatever form the year may take, it is clear that Georgia's rural school districts need help—on finance, health care, early learning, and finding and retaining the best staff possible. The following papers provide a road map to revitalize schools, thereby bringing new life and new opportunities to communities across the state.

This report was prepared by Claire Handley Suggs and Welch Suggs. Welch Suggs is an associate professor of journalism and sports media at the University of Georgia and has written extensively on issues in higher education, including gender equity and athletics. Claire Suggs has worked in education policy for the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, the Southern Education Foundation, and currently the Professional Association of Georgia Educators. Her areas of expertise include school funding, teacher quality, and equity.