

Improving Literacy in Georgia

In 2019, nearly six out of 10 children (58%) completing third grade were not prepared to meet the literacy challenges of the next grade level.¹ Afterschool and summer learning programs offering high quality literacy instruction can help bridge the gap that impacts students' academic performance.



Literacy is Fundamental to Learning

Literacy is an essential foundation of education and builds comprehension and communication skills necessary for future success. While early elementary students use their skills to learn to read, older elementary students use reading to learn new content like math and science.² Children start to make this transition by third grade.³ Children who are not proficient readers by third grade struggle with future learning and suffer long term consequences including poor health, discipline problems, poor performance in eighth-grade math, and increased likelihood of becoming teen parents. As adults, they are more likely to be incarcerated, struggle with unemployment, and face shorter life expectancies.⁴ Reading proficiency is also crucial for job success as shown by a 2017 survey reporting more than 7 in 10 employers prioritized written and verbal communication skills in employees.⁵ Low literacy rates become a multi-generational issue: children of parents with low literacy levels have a 72% chance of being at the lowest reading level.⁶

Low reading proficiency leads to poor academic performance and long-term negative consequences.

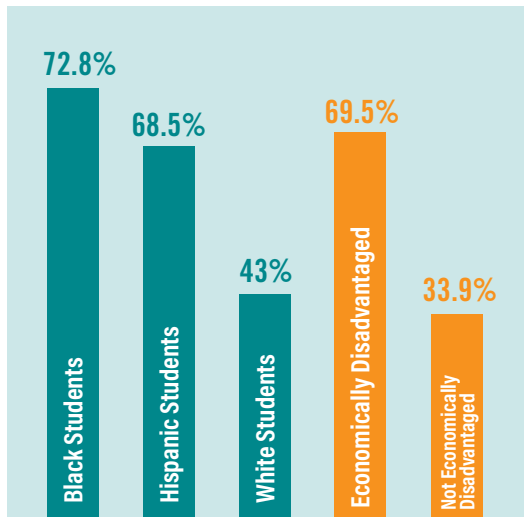
There is an additional “readiness gap” that fuels the achievement gap for students of color and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This is due to differences in availability of resources and opportunities for development of physical and behavioral health, linguistic and cognitive abilities, and social and emotional skills. They are more likely to experience health problems, lack opportunities to attend high quality pre-kindergarten programs, attend low-performing schools, suffer chronic absenteeism, lose ground during summer months, and experience food insecurity, housing insecurity, and family mobility. All of these factors undermine grade level reading proficiency.⁷ **Afterschool and summer learning programs can provide students with the additional supports they need to help build a strong foundation in literacy, including reading, writing and critical thinking skills.**

Literacy in Georgia

Two-thirds of Georgia's third grade students cannot read proficiently and therefore, are more likely to drop out of high school.⁸ The poverty rate for high school dropouts is 26%, which is twice as high as adults with a diploma. In Georgia, over 1 million adults have low literacy (measured by high school dropout rates) and earn 30% less than adults with a high school diploma.⁹ Since 1 in 6 Georgia adults have low literacy skills, this costs the state \$1.26 billion in social services and lost tax revenue annually.¹⁰

2/3 of Georgia's 3rd grade students cannot read proficiently and over 1 million adults have low literacy.

In the 2019 3rd grade Georgia Milestones assessment for English Language Arts (ELA), 72.8 % of Black students and 68.5% of Hispanic students performed below 3rd grade reading proficiency levels compared to 43% of White students.¹¹



Students Performing Below Reading Level in 2019 Georgia Milestones ELA: Historical inequities in educational opportunities, systemic barriers, and significantly fewer opportunities have resulted in unequal outcomes

In addition, 69.5% of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds compared to 33.9% of students not from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were below 3rd grade reading proficiency levels.¹² This is especially critical as almost 60% of Georgia's student population qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch, an indicator of low family income.¹³ Unfortunately, many students of color also disproportionately suffer from poverty, further exacerbating the conditions that lead to decreased reading proficiency. In 2019, Black children represented 28% and Hispanic children represented 27% of children in Georgia living under poverty compared to only 9% of White children. The remaining percentage of children living under poverty include 8% Asian and Pacific Islander and 18% children of two or more races.¹⁴

Historical inequities in educational opportunities, systemic barriers, and significantly fewer opportunities have resulted in unequal outcomes and continue to prevent a significant number of Georgians from reaching their full potential. A prime example is Georgia's Black Belt, a historically underserved region that has significantly higher levels of economically disadvantaged students, a higher population of Black students, an under-funded public education system, and limited broadband access. An analysis of the region's test scores showed that 25.6% of 3rd graders score proficient or higher on the Georgia Milestones assessment for ELA compared to 40.4% of students outside the Black Belt.¹⁵

In 2019, disproportionately higher amounts of Black and Hispanic children lived under poverty in Georgia.

Afterschool Programs Build Literacy Skills

Low-income children lose 2-3 months in reading skills over the summer

Children spend more than 80% of their time outside of regular school hours – time that can be used to foster an appreciation for reading and provide opportunities to build literacy skills. Unfortunately, students who do not attend afterschool or summer learning programs not only miss out on enriching opportunities but also suffer learning loss, especially during the summer months. Afterschool and summer learning programs can support literacy efforts while offering opportunities for youth to explore their interests outside the structure of the regular school day. These programs are necessary supports to ensure that all children, no matter their zip code, develop a strong literacy foundation that will enable their success in school, college, and career.

Gains in Reading

Low-income children typically lose two to three months in reading skills over the summer if they do not have adequate learning opportunities.¹⁶ This loss is cumulative; in fact summer learning loss during elementary school accounts for two-thirds of the achievement gap in reading between low-income children and their middle-income peers by ninth grade.¹⁷



High quality afterschool and summer learning programs have proven to successfully develop students' literacy skills.

- These programs have the time and flexibility to find unique ways to engage students' interest in reading through creative hands-on experiences.
- According to America After 3PM, 7 in 10 Georgia parents with a child in an afterschool program report that their children's programs provide opportunities for reading or writing and homework assistance.¹⁸
- An analysis of 35 afterschool program studies nationwide found afterschool programs had positive and significant effects among students at risk of failure in reading.¹⁹

An evaluation of 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) in Georgia showed that 77% of regular attendees improved their grade or maintained an A, B, or C grade in English language arts.²⁰ **New American Pathways' Bright Futures 21st CCLC Afterschool Program** in Georgia, provided literacy support afterschool and during a summer camp to 60 students and found 100% of regularly participating middle school students increased at least one letter grade in English language arts and 97% were promoted to the next grade level on time.²¹ **Positive Direction Youth Center** in Terrell County (a rural area in Georgia) served middle school students by aligning literacy activities with the school day and reported 91% of students exceeded the reading, language arts or literature standards on End of Course Tests.²²

21st CCLC Programs in Georgia: 77% of regular attendees improved their grade or maintained an A, B, or C grade in English language arts.

Support English Language Learners

Afterschool and summer learning programs are crucial for English Language Learners (ELL) as they develop fluency in a new language, learn content in a language with limited proficiency, and navigate new cultures.

- ELL students are 2.5 - 3.5 times more likely to score below basic in reading than non-ELL students.²³
- In 2019, almost 10% of Georgia students were categorized as having Limited English Proficiency and 6.3% were categorized as being English to Speakers of Other Languages.²⁴

Afterschool and summer learning programs are crucial to provide culturally sensitive atmospheres to help develop ELL students' literacy skills and offer individualized support and literacy-related activities that promote their motivation and interest. **An evaluation of afterschool programs found that ELL students who attended afterschool programs for 25 days increased their likelihood of re-designation as English fluent by 25 percent and those who attended a program for 100 days increased the likelihood by 40 percent.**²⁵ One afterschool program serving 100 ELL students incorporated culturally relevant curriculum and found 62% of the students were proficient in writing by the end of the school year compared to none at the beginning. Another program used group activities, peer-to-peer learning, and visuals to help explain concepts, and saw improvements in attendance, attitudes toward school, and reading scores.²⁶

The Georgia Afterschool & Youth Development Standards Support Literacy

High quality afterschool and summer learning programs that provide environments and experiences that benefit youth socially, emotionally, and academically are associated with gains in student outcomes. Endorsed by five state agencies, Georgia's own standards for afterschool programs, known as the Georgia Afterschool & Youth Development (ASYD) Quality Standards, have several standards related to literacy:

- **Standard 1.8** Includes opportunities for reflection and promotes critical thinking and problem solving skills.
- **Standard 2.2** Supports Georgia Milestones and local performance benchmarks.
- **Standard 3.8** Reflects and incorporates the culture and language of youth and their families.
- **Standard 6.3** Ensures that staff and volunteers are competent in academic and skill-based domains, as appropriate to their positions.

Whitfield County Community Partnerships Support Literacy

Whitfield county used the “Beyond the Classroom” GOSA implementation grant (2016 – 2018) to support a two-generational literacy strategy and build a pipeline of future educators. The partners included the Whitfield County School System, Dalton State College, Northwest Georgia Healthcare Partnership, E3Z North, and the Northwest Georgia Regional Library.

LEARNING ACADEMY: an afterschool program that operates for 6-8 weeks and provides weekly sessions to students and parents. Dalton State College teaching candidates prepare and deliver lessons.

- 99 students in grades K-3 were served at 6 schools;
- 53% of students met projected growth on Measures of Academic Progress compared to 49.9% of other students;
- 69% of students improved vocabulary scores on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test; and
- 73 unique parents of students in grades K-3 participated in Learning Academies.

POWER LUNCHESES: an 8-week long program consisting of short weekly literacy sessions delivered by teaching candidates in the summer in neighborhood locations with meals and literacy activities.

- 278 unique students, ages 2-14, attended Power Lunches in 4 neighborhood settings, and
- 72% of students improved vocabulary scores on a Picture Vocabulary Test developed by Dalton State College professors to use in the informal, neighborhood settings.

SUMMER: School libraries are made available to youth 3 days a week in June and offer a reading program through a partnership with the Northwest Georgia Regional Library.

- 2,821 visits to school libraries were made by students in the summer at 4 schools, and
- 1,048 elementary students and 645 adults attended Book Blasts, participated in literacy activities and received books to build home libraries.²⁷

City of Refuge Dalton and Dalton Public Schools have received a grant for the CORE Kid City 21st Century Community Learning Center Program to close academic and opportunity gaps. The program is serving over 125 students at 6 schools with built in family engagement to maintain a two-generational approach.

Recommendations

Afterschool and summer learning programs are essential to improving literacy rates in Georgia and ensuring the well-being of Georgia’s youth. Here are some ways that Georgia can support afterschool and summer learning programs and increase the amount of students reading proficiently:

- Increase investment in high quality afterschool and summer learning programs that support literacy efforts to increase the number of children reading at grade level in underserved communities.
- Provide grants to libraries to fund summer reading programs, free tutoring, and homework assistance programs and utilize existing resources including books and computers.
- Strengthen partnerships at the local, regional, and state level between school districts, afterschool programs, and community-based organizations such as food banks, parks and recreation, and housing authorities to increase stability in students’ lives and support literacy gains.
- Connect afterschool staff and community partners to literacy training to help them better support students and encourage parents to read and talk to children from birth.
- Create partnerships between schools and afterschool programs that lead to shared professional development opportunities for staff and data sharing agreements to optimize resources and increase student’s proficiency in literacy.
- Provide municipal broadband as a utility and build infrastructure to guarantee universal access, regardless of income or location.



For more information on afterschool in Georgia, go to www.afterschoolga.org.
For references, go to www.afterschoolga.org/afterschool-issues.



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GEORGIA STATEWIDE AFTERSCHOOL NETWORK