

# Investing In What Works



AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN  
STRATEGIES FOR STRONG  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN  
GEORGIA DECEMBER 2015



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The lead author of this report is Leigh Dingerson, a consultant with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. Annenberg's Research and Policy Department, including Director Rosann Tung and Principal Research Associate Christina Mokhtar conducted the data analysis used to compare characteristics of the schools targeted for OSD inclusion with the state's public schools as a whole. At the Southern Education Foundation, invaluable research and writing assistance was provided by Program Director Katherine Dunn and Doctoral Intern Thais Council. Additional support was provided by Janet Kishbaugh, Carolyn Wood and Cecily Harsch-Kinnane with Public Education Matters, Georgia; La'Die Mansfield with ProGeorgia, Chris Baumann, Bette Holland, Samia Abdullah, Cynthia Kain, Karen Langford and Tim McCluskey. Layout and design was provided by Pamela Barba

# FOREWORD

**Kent McGuire, President and CEO,  
Southern Education Foundation**

Since its founding, the Southern Education Foundation (SEF) has worked to advance public education for low income children and children of color. Specifically, we have committed ourselves to combating poverty and inequality through education. SEF accomplishes this through research, advocacy, and collaborative efforts that highlight not just the challenges we see in providing an excellent education to all students, but show what is working on a local, state and regional level to close these achievement and opportunity gaps. This report showcases what's working in our communities and why the proposed Opportunity School District (OSD), which would create a state-run district of schools the state deems "failing" in Georgia, could send us back to a dark past we've all worked so hard to overcome.

Consistent growth is the acknowledged measure of improvement. On this basis, many of the OSD eligible schools are not failing. The architects of the OSD are targeting low income communities using arbitrary achievement levels to declare their schools and the students in them as failing, as if these communities have no idea what they need and want for their children. This would not be tolerated in middle and upper middle income communities. So one has to wonder what interests are actually being served here. Are there schools that need help in getting better at serving students? Yes. Do we need more qualified teachers, with training and support, in our schools with some of the highest needs? Yes. Do the children in these schools need and deserve additional supports so that they have a genuine opportunity to learn? Absolutely. Should we amend Georgia's constitution to strip low-income communities of their right to determine (in contrast to what rights everyone else enjoys) what learning opportunities they desire for their children? No. There are better ways to go about this. In fact, state education

officials are already focused on ways to improve student learning outcomes in many of the schools that would fall prey to the OSD.

In this report, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and SEF highlight instructional and community-based strategies for strong public schools in Georgia.

**We offer eight essential, evidence-based strategies for success:**

1. Access to high quality early childhood and pre-K education;
2. Collaborative and stable school leadership;
3. Quality teaching;
4. Restorative practices and a student-centered learning environment;
5. A strong curriculum that is rigorous, rich and culturally relevant;
6. Wraparound supports for students and their families;
7. Deep parent-community-school ties, and
8. Investment, not divestment.

This report provides a window into the ways in which relevant and life-changing classroom instruction happens through ongoing community support and why Georgia communities must have a stake in their beloved community schools. Now is not the time to turn our education system over to organizations who have no abiding interest in our communities.

# INTRODUCTION

Across the country, schools, communities, and states are investing in community-driven strategies for strong public schools. With a majority of our public school students now low income, we have a lot of work to do to ensure that our schools and communities together, are meeting their needs in the face of persisting opportunity gaps. But across the country and in Georgia, educators, parents, principals, superintendents and school board members are demonstrating that we must repair communities from the inside out – not the outside in.

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More than a decade ago, the Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) forged a partnership with the State of Ohio, local taxpayers and community allies to rebuild the district's crumbling school infrastructure. CPS leadership wanted the initiative to result, not just in new buildings, but in a new, more comprehensive vision for the city's public schools.

The resulting "Community Learning Centers" (CLCs) are not just schools but neighborhood hubs for a range of services and supports. The centers might provide after-care, English language classes, health care services, arts programs and more to students as well as the community at large. The programs offered at each school vary because they are selected and designed by teams of local parents, educators, small business owners, social service agencies, and others and are based on the unique needs of the individual neighborhood.

Funded with both state and local dollars, the CLC initiative has transformed 34 of Cincinnati's 55 public schools and engaged over 600 local partnering organizations. The initiative has been at the center of a revival in the Cincinnati Public Schools that has seen attendance and graduation rates climb and student learning growth soar (see a more extensive profile on page 18).

In Kentucky, a 25-year-old commitment to school funding reform has focused on reducing resource and outcome disparities in a state with some of the wealthiest and some of the poorest coun-

ties in the country. Key to the effort has been a network of Family Resource and Youth Service Centers that provide pre-kindergarten programs, professional development for teachers, before- and after-school care, substance abuse programs, family literacy classes and more. These Centers are now available in 93% of schools statewide. The Centers complete over 12 million student, and 2 million family contacts annually. While funding disparities between districts stubbornly remain, student educational outcomes are improving (see the more extensive profile on page 14).

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**When public schools become community hubs—offering services and programs beyond the school day, creating strong learning cultures and safe and supportive environments for both students and educators—student outcomes improve. Across the country, states, districts and individual schools are taking on the challenge of building ground-up reform that works.**

These types of efforts are taking place in Georgia as well: The Clarke County School District in Athens, Georgia has a commitment to public schools serving as community hubs. Under the six-year tenure of Philip Lanoue, the 2015 national Superintendent of the Year, Clarke County Schools has significantly increased their graduation rate while simultaneously closing achievement and opportunity gaps.

Clarke County Schools has multiple partnerships with local nonprofit groups that are addressing issues such as preventing the "summer slide" in learning, food insecurity and the need for after-school enrichment programs that extend learning beyond the classroom and the school day. The district's core belief is that all children can learn. All of the district's middle schools now incorporate an International Baccalaureate Middle Years program, and a garden program that was first piloted, then extended to all middle schools.

Clarke County's wrap-around services extend beyond the necessary basics of day-to-day living; they also recognize the digital demands of the global world. The district has been named a "Model Technology District" where every single student has an electronic notebook that travels to and from school daily. School computers have also been loaned to parents in an effort to alleviate the digital divide in homes.

Superintendent Lanoue advocates for strong volunteerism in schools. Volunteers are called in to serve in a number of capacities—from escorting children to classrooms to making copies, decorating bulletin boards or reading aloud to students. All of these efforts use community support to free-up teachers' time to teach, according to long-time Clarke County resident and school volunteer, Myra Blackmon.

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Through examples like these, and in spite of devastating budget cuts over the past several years, Georgia's public schools are struggling forward. The state's graduation rate jumped from 72.5% in 2014 to 78.8%—in 2015—the fourth straight increase, according to the state Department of Education.<sup>1</sup> Scores on the nationally recognized National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have improved steadily in every area over the last decade.<sup>2</sup>

There is much more to be done. Too many Georgia students are struggling to achieve the basic skills necessary to attend college and find productive employment. The challenge is to understand how to approach these problems in a systematic, coordinated and effective way.

Over the next twelve months, Georgians will be debating the future of public education. Four issues will be at the heart of the discussion:

- What constitutes school "failure;"
- Whether struggling schools are supported or penalized;
- Whether schools and districts should be publicly operated or privately managed, and

- How to best address the persistent challenges and deep inequities that exist across Georgia's public schools.

Georgians will be called on to build a vision for the kind of schools that all children deserve.

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In early 2015, Governor Deal proposed and the Georgia State Legislature passed legislation to create a state-run "Opportunity School District" (OSD) that would take control of some of the state's lowest-performing schools. The OSD proposal is based on initiatives in Louisiana, Michigan and Tennessee where state-run districts have removed public schools from local authority and imposed strategies including charter conversion, wholesale staff and leadership removal or school closure. Despite these interventions, takeover districts have failed to consistently improve student outcomes. Instead they have destabilized schools, angered parents and demoralized educators.

In conversations with dozens of Georgia parents, advocates for and experts in public education, we have heard a strong preference for a different approach to school turnaround. Today, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, and the Southern Education Foundation offer a snapshot of possible alternative directions.

Instead of taking schools *away* from communities, we suggest that Georgia embrace proven strategies that can (and *should*) be implemented without lifting schools away from local control. We introduce eight specific, research-proven ingredients that show the potential for increased student learning, better school climates and stronger public commitment. The strategies include the following:

1. Access to high quality early childhood and pre-K education;
2. Collaborative and stable school leadership;
3. Quality teaching;

4. Restorative practices and a student-centered learning environment;
5. A strong curriculum that is rigorous, rich and culturally relevant;
6. Wraparound supports for students and their families;
7. Deep parent-community-school ties, and
8. Investment, not divestment.

These strategies build from the bottom-up. They ensure that schools have strong teaching and instructional leadership; that they are safe and culturally sensitive; that students—and surrounding neighborhoods—have the supports and services they need. These reforms are built *with* parents, students and educators, rather than *imposed on* them. These are the kinds of schools that students and parents in Georgia’s most affluent counties have already. They are the public schools that *all* our children deserve.

## THE OPPORTUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT PROPOSAL

In February 2015 the Georgia State Legislature passed legislation that would create a statewide “Opportunity School District (OSD)” to manage a set of low-performing schools across the state. These schools, selected solely on the basis of the state’s relatively new College and Career Readiness Performance Index (also known as the CCRPI score), would be removed from local authority and placed in the hands of an appointed state-level superintendent.

The OSD’s enabling legislation—Senate Bill 133—authorizes the appointed OSD Superintendent to impose one of four interventions on any school taken over by the State:

- Direct management by the State;
- Joint management by the OSD and local school board;
- Conversion to a charter school, or
- Closure.

The plan is modeled after state-run school districts in Louisiana, Michigan and Tennessee. The oldest of these, Louisiana’s Recovery School District (RSD), has been in effect for just over a decade. Tennessee and Michigan’s state takeover districts have been in place for just 5, and 3 years, respectively. None of these initiatives has proven to be effective at broadly transforming student outcomes. *All* of them have generated significant bad will in the communities and schools that have been targeted by them.

***“To take away democratic principles is monumental and allows Georgia communities to be stripped of their identities as having primary responsibility of educating their children...In a time where collaboration is the key to systemic change, simply changing governance as the key to reform has a greater result of creating divisions—not unity.”***

–Clarke County Schools, Superintendent Dr. Philip Lanoue

## The Opportunity School District Requires an Amendment to the Georgia State Constitution

The Georgia State Constitution currently limits control of public education “to that level of government closest and most responsive to the taxpayers and parents of the children being educated.”<sup>3</sup>

This clause renders the proposed OSD unconstitutional. The legislature, therefore, is calling on the citizens of Georgia to amend the Constitution. A referendum allowing state control of schools will be on the ballot in November of 2016—a year from now.

If the referendum is passed, the operational aspects of the OSD will likely be again debated in the State Legislature. While Senate Bill 133 offered some indications of how the OSD would be managed and what the school interventions might include, the Legislature will be free to reshape these details in its 2017 legislative session and in all sessions beyond.

### State Takeover Models Have Not Proven Effective

State control over public schools or school districts is not new. Individual schools, or entire districts (Philadelphia, Newark and others) have been seized by state education departments for financial reasons, academic performance, or both. Despite more than two decades of state takeovers, these schools and districts have shown little improvement.

Georgia's Opportunity School District is based on a different approach. The OSD would create a new, state-run school district composed solely of low-performing schools from all across Georgia. These schools would be managed by appointed state officials, closed, or turned over to private management (in the form of charter schools) as determined by the OSD superintendent. As many as 20 schools could be brought in to the OSD each year, and the district would have the authority to include as many as 100 schools at any given time. Schools that are chartered would be transferred to the State Charter School Commission for oversight.

Three states have experimented with takeover districts to date.\* None has demonstrated sustained improvement in student outcomes across the board, and each has raised additional concerns:

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\* In addition to Georgia, the legislatures of Wisconsin and Nevada passed state takeover legislation in 2015. These districts are not yet in operation.

**LOUISIANA** established its Recovery School District (RSD) in 2003. While the RSD is technically a state-wide district, the vast majority of the 57 schools overseen by the RSD are in New Orleans. Of the 110 schools taken over by the RSD, all have either been shut down or turned over to charter operators, making the Recovery School District the only all-charter district in the country.

The academic record of the RSD is complicated by the city's significant shift in demographics since Hurricane Katrina and by partisans on opposing sides of the charter and school reform debate. The well-respected Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE)<sup>4</sup> attempted to untangle the complex results from Louisiana last summer. SCOPE found that the reforms in New Orleans have created a set of schools that are highly stratified by race, class and educational advantage, and offer highly segregated experiences accordingly. They found that students' academic and disciplinary experiences are largely dependent on where, in this hierarchy of schools, they land. Many schools have continued to struggle with poor performance, posting among the lowest achievement and graduation rates in the state. The SCOPE review also found that school quality and accountability are impeded by the lack of a strong central system (within the RSD) to support instructional improvement or maintain safeguards to ensure equity and access to a



reasonable quality of education. In addition, the parent and community experience in New Orleans under the RSD has been mixed. While parents who have managed to get their children in to the RSD's higher echelon of charters are content, the majority of parents complain of long commutes, confusing and irrational enrollment procedures, extremely high rates of student push-outs and difficulty finding schools that will serve students with special needs.

In short, the Recovery School District, which was marketed (and continues to be lauded) as ushering in a miraculous transformation in New Orleans, has not kept its promise to some of the country's most disadvantaged students.

**TENNESSEE** created its Achievement School District (ASD) in 2010 (the first schools opened in 2012). This year, the ASD oversees 29 schools, 24 of which have been converted to charters. As in Louisiana, the schools are highly geographically and demographically concentrated. All but two are located in Memphis (the other two are in Nashville), and all serve large majorities of African American students.

The ASD, which is committed to converting the majority of takeover schools to charters through contracts with national charter networks, has had a difficult time finding and keeping corporate charter chains in the mix. Three operators—the highly-regarded KIPP network, Los Angeles-based Green Dot, and Memphis-based Freedom Prep—all pulled out of ASD management consideration in 2014 (some have since been wooed back to taking on schools). The first Superintendent of the ASD, Chris Barbic, himself the CEO of a national charter network, resigned in the early summer of 2015, conceding that transforming neighborhood schools (as compared to establishing new charters, more able to select their students) was harder than he had imagined.<sup>5</sup>

Student performance in the majority of ASD schools has been uneven and in some cases, has actually declined.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the overall performance of a local, district-led reform initiative in Memphis, has been stronger than the ASD schools. In addition, the district—as in New

***“The way that (ASD) was implemented, it gave the families a feeling that they were being punished or isolated from the rest of the school system because of the performance of the school.”***

*- Shelby County (Tennessee) Commissioner Chris Caldwell, on the state-run Achievement School District*

Orleans—is contending with parent frustration. Chris Caldwell, a member of the Shelby County (Tennessee) School Board noted that the state had “underestimated” the community’s loyalty to the local district. “The way that (ASD) was implemented, it gave the families a feeling that they were being punished or isolated from the rest of the school system because of the performance of the school,” Caldwell told the Commercial Appeal.<sup>7</sup>

**MICHIGAN** has the third operational state takeover district—the Education Achievement Authority (EAA)—created in 2013. Ironically, the EAA plucked its 15 schools, all in Detroit, from a district that was *already* under state management, and doing poorly. Three of the 15 EAA schools have now been converted to charters.

The EAA touted a new blended learning model in its schools, and contracted with a corporate vendor to provide computers and software to each student. A year later, the state admitted that the initiative had been a miserable failure. Teacher turnover within the EAA was high, leaving many classrooms without teachers. Newly hired Teach for America recruits walked off the job mid-year. District finances were in shambles as well, leading the Governor to appoint an emergency manager for the state-run district. Student achievement has actually declined in the schools.



***[The EAA is] “an unfettered, corporate-driven education scheme that focuses less on educational outcomes and more on profits.”***

*MI State Senator Bert Johnson, in a letter to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, May 6, 2013. <http://huff.to/1j9k1d>*

Far from standing as beacons for what is possible when schools are brought under centralized, top-down control, the experiences with state-run improvement districts in Louisiana, Michigan and Tennessee have been troubling at best. Student academic performance has not improved across the board (where outcomes are up, research suggests the schools have utilized selection procedures that weed out more disadvantaged or academically struggling students). Parents and communities have consistently objected to the loss of local authority and subsequent chaos, which has been imposed exclusively on already-disenfranchised communities of color.

A 2015 report by the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools<sup>8</sup> found that state takeover districts overwhelmingly target African American and low-income communities, leaving citizens disenfranchised and disconnected from those making the decisions about their children's education.

There is also growing recognition that state-run districts are being promoted by charter advocacy organizations as a way to facilitate the conversion of traditional public schools to charter schools—conversions that are often opposed by local parents and communities. Indeed, the vast majority of schools that have been taken in to the three existing state improvement districts have been subsequently turned over to charter operators. Leslie Jacobs, who was a key force behind the creation of the Recovery School District in Louisiana has acknowledged that the mission of the district was always to turn schools over to charter operators.<sup>9</sup>

Even if the proposed constitutional amendment is passed by voters in November of 2016, it is likely that the Georgia Opportunity School District will be contentious and considered suspect by many across the state.

But the larger question is whether state control and chartering are the right answers to the urgent need for stronger educational outcomes in Georgia's high-needs public schools. The research points in a different direction.

***The mission of Louisiana's Recovery School District was always to turn schools over to charter operators, says one of its founders.***

## A PROFILE OF THE SCHOOLS TARGETED FOR TAKEOVER

The current OSD legislation establishes that schools that have scored an “F” on the state’s A-F rating system for three consecutive years would be eligible for takeover. As he was introducing the legislation Governor Deal announced that a score of 60 or below on the state’s CCRPI index would be considered an “F” grade. Under this rubric 137<sup>†</sup> Georgia schools are currently eligible for takeover should the OSD go in to effect in 2017. The list of eligible schools will change as the scores from 2014-15 and 2015-16 are considered. ‡

This reliance on the narrow measure of a school’s CCRPI index has led to some confusion around which schools would be targeted for takeover should the constitutional amendment pass. For example in DeKalb County, 23 of the 24 “eligible” schools have seen improvement in their CCRPI scores in at least one of the past two years. Other schools now targeted for takeover by the OSD have previously been bypassed by the State’s existing intervention program.

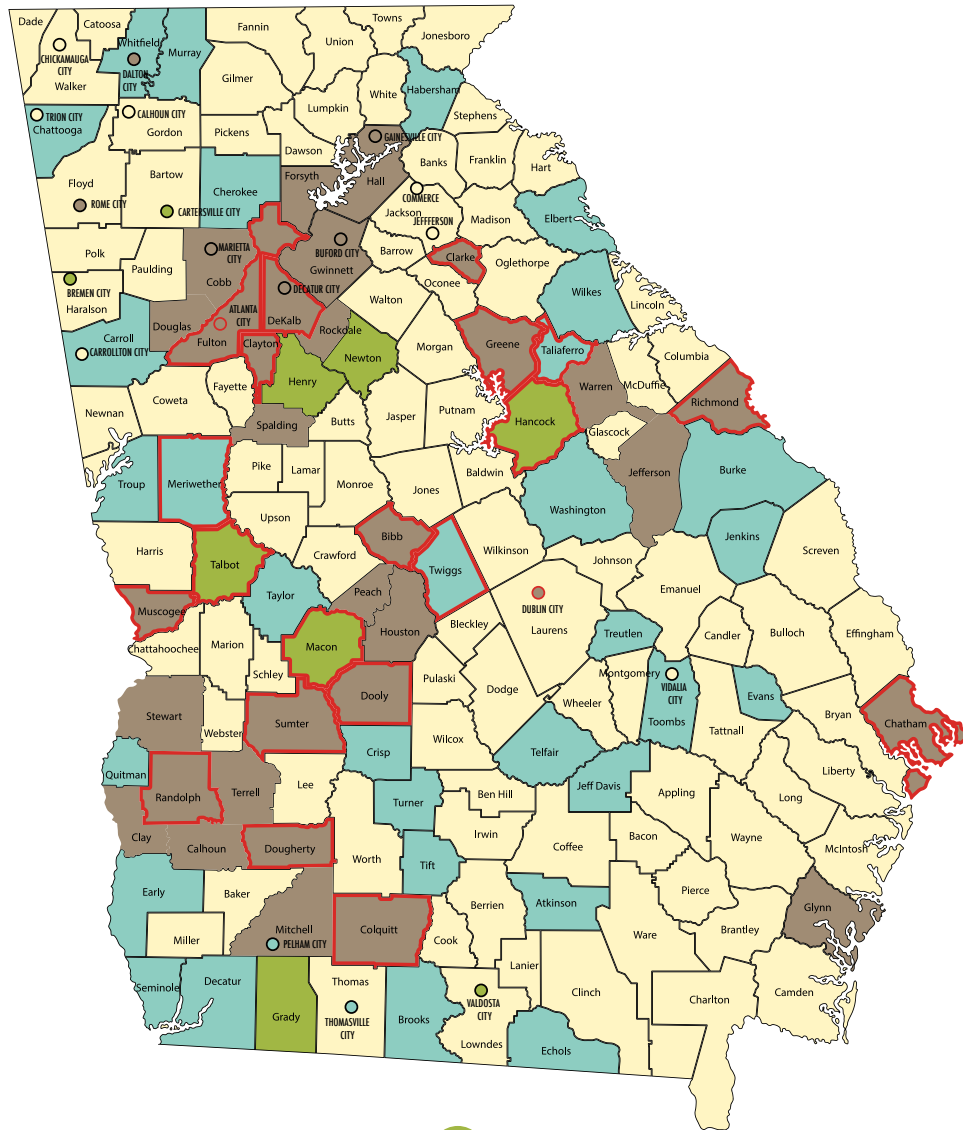
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<sup>†</sup> The list of OSD-eligible schools at the time of publication can be found here <http://bit.ly/1IWP3hz>

<sup>‡</sup> In Louisiana, the RSD was similarly premised on a specific cut score below which schools would become eligible for takeover. In the first 2 years of the RSD’s existence, only 5 schools were brought into the state-run district. After Hurricane Katrina slammed in to New Orleans in the summer of 2005, the Governor called a special legislative session to lower the cut score, allowing over 100 New Orleans schools to be swept in to the RSD. In Georgia, the Governor would be empowered to make this decision unilaterally.

# LOCATION OF OSD-ELIGIBLE SCHOOLS IN HIGH MINORITY / HIGH POVERTY DISTRICTS (2014)

Sources: Georgia Department of Education; gov.georgia.gov and the Southern Education Foundation



- High Minority + High Poverty Quartile
- High Minority Quartile
- High Poverty Quartile
- 2015 OSD-Eligible Schools by District

Of the schools that could be taken over under the current legislation, two are charter schools. The rest are traditional public schools. While many are concentrated in the state's urban centers including Atlanta (26 schools), Richmond County (21 schools) and DeKalb County (24 schools), the eligible schools are spread across the state in 21 different school districts—urban, suburban and rural.

Statewide, 50% of Georgia's public schools students are African American and Latino, and 62% of students statewide are considered economically disadvantaged.

Within the schools targeted for takeover by the OSD, 94% of students are African American or Latino, and 95% of students are eligible for federally funded free and reduced priced meals (a proxy for economic disadvantage).<sup>10</sup>

These figures do not explain why student performance in these schools is lagging. But they consistently correspond to other educational and community indicators that do have a direct bearing on student and school success. Georgia, like many other states, has a public school opportunity and equity gap.

Each of these schools sits in a high-poverty community that has been impacted by years of economic stress, budget cuts and declining

services. All of them have higher rates of teacher turnover,<sup>11</sup> concentrations of students with disabilities, higher percentages of students eligible for free or reduced meals and higher suspension rates,<sup>12</sup> larger class sizes and higher absenteeism<sup>13</sup> than Georgia's public schools as a whole.

***No reform strategy that fails to explicitly address these conditions is likely to offer sustained improvement.***

Low income and African American and Latino students in Georgia have been making steady gains in performance since 2002.<sup>14</sup> District-based interventions and the Georgia Department of Education's (GDE) statewide assistance for low-performing schools, have made a difference. The proposed Opportunity School District would run parallel to the GDE program, creating a disjointed and confusing patchwork of state interventions. "We absolutely need a singular, systematic approach to supporting struggling schools," wrote Valarie Wilson, the executive director of the Georgia School Boards Association.<sup>15</sup> "That approach must include the input of the professionals in this state who have not only the knowledge base, but who have been in the trenches and understand the specific needs for providing a quality education. Georgia's current intervention program, if fully implemented, could be the foundation for creating this systematic approach."

## EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Research and analysis of successful school reform efforts nationally have pointed to several supports that consistently contribute to stronger public schools and student outcomes. Below, we provide brief snapshots of eight of those strategies that are frequently included on lists of "key indicators" or "essential supports."

### **1. Access to High Quality Early Childhood and Pre-K Education**

As early as 1972, researchers found that early childhood education improves not only academic outcomes, but social outcomes as well.

The groundbreaking work of the Abecedarian Project in North Carolina<sup>16</sup> found that students who had access to early childhood education programs have stronger learning gains throughout their school years. Additionally, these same children reaped benefits in some cases as much as two decades later.

According to the project, children who participate in pre-K programs are less likely to become teen parents, more likely to be employed, less likely to be enrolled in public assistance programs, and more likely to enter and complete college than their peers without a pre-K experience.

Georgia Pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) was established in 1995 and was the nation's first universal preschool program available to any and all four-year-old children whose parents wanted to enroll them. From 1995 to 1997, enrollment in Georgia Pre-K almost quadrupled--growing from about 15,000 to more than 55,000 children. It has been cited nationally as a model for its unique delivery system involving both public and private agencies to provide public pre-K. In recent years however, state funding of Georgia Pre-K has barely kept up with the need. In 2014, Georgia Pre-K is serving just over 81,000 students — approximately 60 percent of the state's fast-growing population of four-year-olds.<sup>17</sup>

Ensuring adequate funding of Georgia Pre-K is critical to building a population of 5-year olds adequately prepared to enter the state's public kindergartens. Yet, state funding for the program has fallen by 17% since 2009.<sup>18</sup>

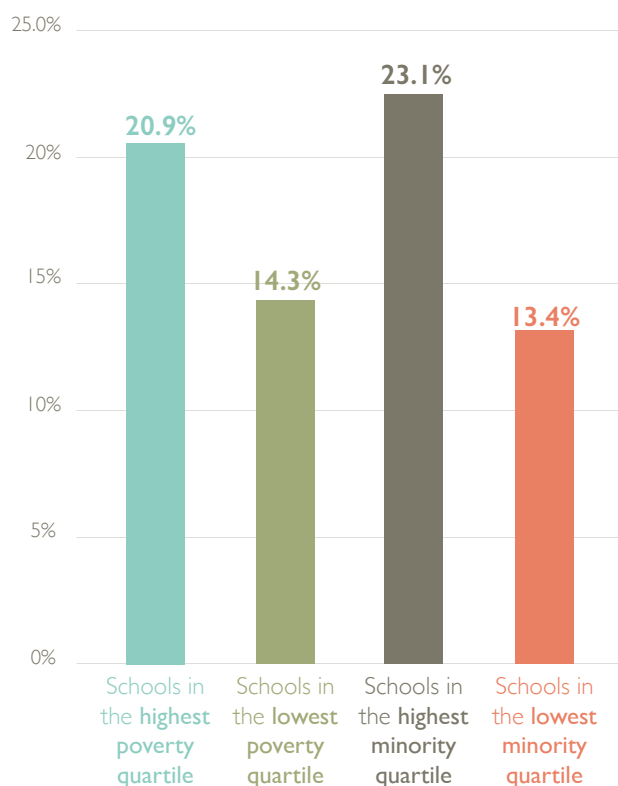
## 2. Collaborative and Stable School Leadership

The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) has studied school turnarounds extensively in Chicago, and found that collaborative and stable leadership is one of several “essential supports” for success.<sup>19</sup>

CCSR found that school leaders who foster collaboration, give teachers a voice in the school, and work intentionally to engage parents and communities in the school have greater success in transforming low-performing schools than those that lead in a top-down manner and/or create strict “my way or the highway” atmospheres inside the school. Stability is important as well. Georgia's high-poverty schools show significantly higher rates of both teacher and principal turnover than the state averages. In the 2012-2013 school year, 23% of principals and 21% of teachers left these schools at the end of the year, compared to 16% and 14% respectively, statewide, in low-poverty schools.

Highly skilled and collaborative leadership is critical in turning around schools that have suffered from a revolving-door of school principals year after year.

**GEORGIA TEACHER TURNOVER**  
% of teachers turnover; fall 2012-fall 2013



## Education Reform in Kentucky

It's been 25 years since the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) was enacted. The 1990 law paved the way for a statewide effort not only to equalize funding across Kentucky's highly diverse districts, but to ensure that students have access to the full range of resources they need to succeed.

In the 1980s, Kentucky was home to the highest illiteracy rate in the country, ranked 43rd in per pupil funding, 49th in college attainment and dead last in the percentage of adults with a high-school diploma.<sup>47</sup> Vast disparities existed across Kentucky, with local funding for schools ranging from as low as \$80 per pupil to as high as \$3,716 per pupil across the state.<sup>48</sup> As in other states, Kentucky's school funding system was challenged based on these disparities and was invalidated by the Courts for its failure to provide adequate opportunity to all students. The State Supreme Court called on the General Assembly to establish an "efficient system of common schools."<sup>49</sup>

KERA was the outcome of that debate. The legislature viewed KERA, not just as an overhaul of the state's school funding formula, but as a means to address educational outcomes. The new formula sought to provide high-poverty districts with a larger share of state aid, in part by creating a system under which funding was calculated on a per-pupil basis. Where previously most state dollars had been distributed as flat grants to districts based on average daily attendance, KERA offers additional state dollars based on student needs.<sup>50</sup> The law also allows school districts to access other state monies to support Family Resource and Youth Services Centers, or FRYSCs, pre-school programs, extended school services, vocational programs and professional development.

As a result of KERA, the prospects for Kentucky school children have brightened. In 2013, Kentucky ranked 10th nationally in the Quality Counts survey on state education performance—a survey that examines several indicators including accountability and assessment, teacher quality, school funding and overall student achievement.<sup>51</sup> Much of the change is attributable to the FRYSCs.

The Kentucky Family Resource and Youth Services Centers have been a key component of the new funding law's success. These school-based Centers focus on eliminating barriers to learning for academically at-risk students. A statewide coalition of the Centers—the Family Resource and Youth Services Coalition of Kentucky (FRYSCKy)—provides legislative advocacy, training and support for FRYSC coordinators and their staff.

The Centers focus on three key areas: early learning and successful transition to school; academic achievement and well-being; and graduation and transition into adult life.<sup>52</sup> Family Resource Centers serve kids under school age and those in elementary school. They offer preschool child care, after-school child day care, family literacy services, and health services and referrals. Youth Services Centers serve students in middle and high school and offer access to referrals to health/social services, career development, substance abuse education/counseling and family crisis/mental health counseling.<sup>53</sup>

The Coalition now employs more than 1,400 people statewide and impacts approximately 98% of all eligible schools in Kentucky.<sup>54</sup> There are more than 625,000 students enrolled in schools served by the FRYSCs – roughly 93% of all public school students in the state. On an annual basis, on average, the Coalition makes 12 million student contacts and four million family contacts.<sup>55</sup>

Since KERA began, Kentucky has seen consistent increases in its education funding (local, state, and federal). According to the Bluegrass Institute, between the 1989-90 school year and 2012-13, education spending, in inflation-adjusted dollars, grew by 188 percent.<sup>56</sup> But problems still exist and the state's budget difficulties in recent years have created new challenges. Public schools in many suburban communities continue to have access to more funding than in poorer parts of the state, such as Appalachia: Barbourville is a town in Knox County. More than one-third of its residents have incomes below the poverty line and almost 50% of its children live below the poverty line.<sup>57</sup> In 2013, Barbourville public schools received an average of \$8,362 per pupil from all funding sources. About 170 miles away in Jefferson County is the town of Anchorage, where the median home value is well above \$600,000. In 2013, Anchorage's revenue per student approached \$20,000, more than double that of Barbourville.<sup>58</sup>

The Great Recession forced the State to cut education funding by more than 11 percent. Poorer counties with a smaller tax base, are disproportionately disadvantaged by the loss of state support. But in Kentucky, the legislature is working to rectify this shortfall. In 2014, the General Assembly increased the state's main school funding formula by \$189 million over the next two years. The money was allocated to support technology, textbooks, staff pay increases and teacher training. Even these increases won't bring Kentucky school funding back to pre-recession levels. But the State has shown commitment to the success of the FRYSCs,<sup>59</sup> and to continuing to work towards a statewide structure that advantages all students and schools.

### 3. Quality Teaching

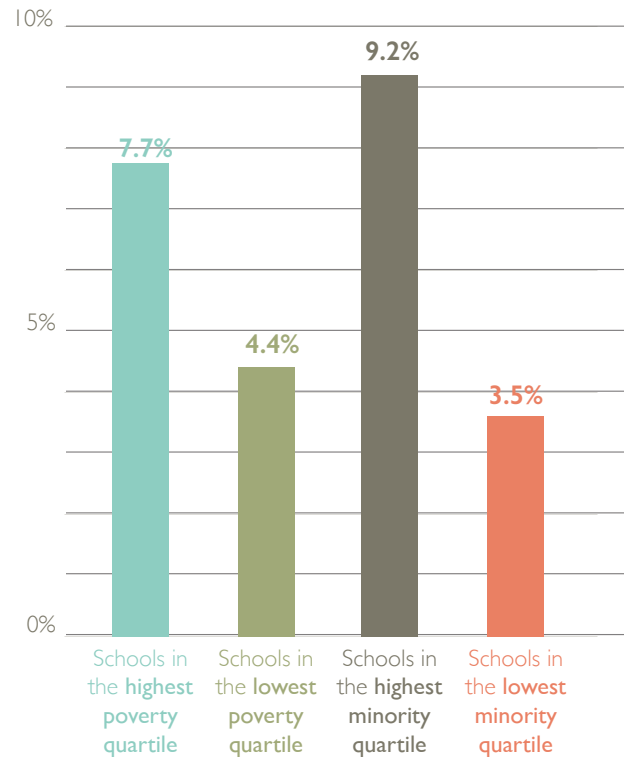
Quality teaching matters. That means that teachers must have extensive pedagogical training as well as subject-level mastery. Learning to teach is an ongoing process, with most teachers requiring at least 5 years in the classroom to hit their stride.<sup>20</sup> Strong induction programs work. Professional development must be robust, relevant and embedded in the school on an ongoing basis. Georgia's failure to fully fund public schools over the past decade has negatively impacted teaching quality and teacher supports. A survey of school systems conducted by the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute (GBPI)<sup>21</sup> found that Georgia's teachers have fewer resources to help them reach the high expectations imposed on the state's students. Nearly 85% of school districts that participated in the survey reported that class sizes had grown since 2009-2010, meaning teachers are working with more children in the classroom and are less able to differentiate instruction. In addition, the GBPI survey found that nearly 87% of participating districts had cut funds for professional development for teachers.

Many districts reported difficulty recruiting and retaining good teachers, in the face of these challenges. This lack of experienced teachers is not spread evenly across schools. As in many states, schools in Georgia's highest-poverty communities have a disproportionate share of inexperienced teachers.

Current data in Georgia<sup>22</sup> show a gap of nearly 6 points in the percentages of teachers in their first year of teaching, between the state's majority white schools and majority Black and Latino schools. Similarly, in other measures of teacher quality—teachers teaching out of field, teacher

#### GEORGIA TEACHERS IN THEIR FIRST YEAR OF TEACHING

% of teachers in first year



turnover rates and average years of experience—the state's high-poverty and high minority schools all suffer as compared to state averages, as well as to the state's predominantly white, or low poverty schools.

Experience and training matter: Public schools do much better when states invest in career educators, and support them with strong induction, ongoing professional development and leadership roles in classrooms and schools.

### 4. Restorative Practices and a Student-Centered Learning Environment

Successful schools feel safe and are places where both students and educators feel respected. Schools and districts across the country are turning to restorative practices and positive behavior interventions to replace strict, zero-tolerance discipline policies. Many school districts, pushed by youth and adult or-



ganizing, have abandoned zero-tolerance, recognizing that it makes schools no safer, and instead pushes students out of school, sometimes forever.

Many charter schools continue to rely on harsh, punitive discipline policies, including some of the charter networks likely to be relied upon to assume management of schools brought in to the Opportunity School District.

Restorative and positive behavior practices are a proven reform.<sup>23</sup> To be effective, however, such programs must include robust training for all school staff, and full-time coordinators in the building to assist with ongoing coaching and monitoring.

Communities for Excellent Public Schools (CEPS)—a parent-led effort to identify research-based strategies that work to turn around struggling schools—identified several additional components of student-centered learning environments. These included ensuring access to guidance counselors and programs that engage students as mentors and peer mediators so that students themselves share responsibility for creating a positive school climate.<sup>24</sup>

## **5. A Strong Curriculum that is Rigorous, Rich and Culturally Relevant**

Our national obsession with “standards and accountability” over the past two decades has stripped our public schools of critical programming that enhances critical thinking, engages students and improves student outcomes. The GBPI survey found that austerity cuts over the past decade in Georgia have forced districts to reduce or eliminate art and music programs as well as other electives.

These eliminated curricular offerings have been tied to increased achievement for students in English language arts and math—the subjects at the core of our high-stakes testing regimes. The reduction of educational options for students, in exchange for high-pressure focus “drill and kill” test preparation is hurting our students. Yes, we must have high expectations for all students. But 20 years of relentless focus on tests, at the expense of the rich and varied offerings that our nation’s top-performing schools offer, has hurt, not helped our most disadvantaged students.

In addition, students do better when they see themselves reflected in their school, their teachers and their studies.<sup>25</sup> Many districts and schools are successfully integrating curriculum options that al-

low students to reflect on their own cultural backgrounds. Organizations like the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Teaching Tolerance curriculum helps teachers deliver culturally rich and sensitive topics to develop the broad range of skills students need to reduce prejudice, improve intergroup relations and support equitable school experiences. The materials that are provided through programs like Teaching Tolerance affirm diversity and bridge home, school and community experiences while creating a classroom atmosphere that is rigorous, rich and culturally relevant.

Many organizations like Illinois’ “Grow Your Own Teachers”<sup>26</sup> are developing strategies to increase the number of teachers of color in schools. Grow Your Own programs connect community leaders in low-income communities with teacher education programs in their state, and offer a variety of supports to help them become fully licensed to meet or exceed state standards for the profession.

## 6. Wraparound Supports for Students and their Families

Fundamental to school improvement in high-poverty communities is the availability of wraparound supports for students and families. Students cannot learn to their full potential when they are hungry, exhausted or ill, or when their parents cannot support them at home. Many schools, including Cincinnati's Community Learning Center model (page 18) and Kentucky's statewide school reform model (page 14) bring health services and other supports right into the building, along with programs that engage and support the entire community such as citizenship training for parents, English as a Second Language services, job training, and even sports leagues.

Many of these programs are financially supported by redirecting funds from other agencies or

services. For example, health clinics funded through state and federal programs can be relocated into school buildings, area social service agencies and non-profits can come together to offer programming in the school and to the school community using philanthropic and public dollars available to them. The key is creating the relationships, and establishing the school building as a hub for such community- and student-centered services.

School leaders shouldn't have to shoulder the burden of setting up and sustaining these programs. State level funding should provide full-time coordinators in each school to help build and maintain the relationships required to sustain the program.<sup>27</sup>

## 7. Deep Parent-Community-School Ties

An increasing body of research suggests that strengthening ties between schools and communities is a critical component of effective turnaround.<sup>28</sup>

As noted above, school leadership should focus intentionally on building community and parent ties, and ensuring that schools are welcoming and accessible, particularly to parents. Opportunities to engage parents in school programming and on local school advisory teams help parents feel more committed to the school and the work that goes on inside the school walls each day.

Parent-Teacher Home Visit programs (PTHV) train teachers to visit their students' homes once or twice during each school year, and provide teachers with stipends for the additional time commitment for both training and the visits. The programs have proven effective in increasing school attendance as well as test scores, decreasing student suspension and expulsion rates and increasing parent involvement in the school.<sup>29</sup>

***“Any systematic approach, if there is any hope of success, must fully engage parents and communities. Everything about the OSD model runs counter to that type of engagement and involvement. In all the other models similar to the OSD, the alienation of parent, community and local governance has led to what I believe to be its failure.”***

*Valarie Wilson, executive director, Georgia School Boards Association*

## Queen City Success Story – Cincinnati, Ohio

In 2002, more than a decade ago, the Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) forged an inventive new partnership with community allies to better meet the needs of students, parents, and communities. Cincinnati’s “Community Learning Centers” (CLCs) were financed through a \$480 million local tax levy, supplemented with a State contribution of \$205 million.<sup>35</sup> The funds were part of a decade-long, \$1 billion project to build and renovate the city’s public school facilities.<sup>36</sup>

Community leaders knew that the passage of the local levy provided a moment of opportunity. Cincinnati needed more than just new facilities—there were serious educational issues to address: The city’s schools were rated in “academic emergency” under the state’s assessment system, and 60% of city school students lived at or near the poverty line.<sup>37</sup>

City leaders recognized that the community would need to be invested in a larger effort to improve educational outcomes as well as buildings. So they created Local School Decision Making Committees (LSDMC) at each school across the district as a way to engage a cross-section of parents, business leaders, social service providers, educators, principals and school staff, and residents in each school community.<sup>38</sup>

Together, the LSDMC’s began to design their new school buildings based on the unique needs of their communities. The transformations were ambitious from the start. Plans included the schools offering health services, counseling, after-school programs, youth development, nutrition classes, the arts, and more. The committees envisioned the services not just for students, but for their families and neighborhood residents as well.<sup>39</sup>

Each Community Learning Center is funded to have a full-time Resource Coordinator to work with the LSDMC, families and community members to build the scaffold of supports to meet the Committee’s vision for the school. Adequate resources have come from a variety of sources, in addition to the public dollars. Cincinnati Public Schools leveraged funding from a variety of foundations, as well as the United Way of Greater Cincinnati. They have contracted with community agencies such as the YMCA, the Urban League and the Boys and Girls Clubs to employ Resource Coordinators. Local universities also have a role to play: Students from Xavier and the University of Cincinnati offer tutoring. Local non-profits such as FamiliesFORWARD and the Community Learning Center Institute ensure parents benefit too, with workshops on how to interview for a job, and how to write a résumé. These community

partners are responsive not just to the needs of each school, but also to the neighborhood.<sup>40</sup>

To date, the CLC initiative has transformed 34 of 55 Cincinnati schools into Community Learning Centers.<sup>41</sup> More than 600 CLC community partners have provided services to the district and its families.<sup>42</sup>

The results of the initiative are clear: Cincinnati Public Schools now rank among the top two percent of Ohio districts for students’ learning growth. Attendance rates increased from 88 percent in 1999-2000 to 95 percent in 2011-2012.<sup>43</sup> The district’s graduation rate rose from 51 percent in 2000 to 80 percent in 2011. Students are healthier as well: the district improved its immunization compliance, thousands of students annually are now screened for dental care, and a new asthma protocol includes almost 3,000 district students.<sup>44</sup>

Cincinnati voters stand behind their CLCs. In November 2014 voters approved—by a very large margin—the renewal of an existing five-year tax levy that will generate \$65 million annually for the district.<sup>45</sup> Cincinnati taxpayers do not want this progress to end.

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### CLC’s At Work: Oyler Community Learning Center

Cincinnati’s Oyler School is located in a diverse neighborhood where half of all families live below the poverty line. Before the CLC initiative, many students dropped out of school after the 8th grade, since there was no public high school in the Oyler neighborhood. When it came time for Oyler’s renovation, parents made clear that building a high school needed to be part of the plan. Today, Oyler Community Learning Center serves children from 6 weeks old through 12th grade.

The school has a health and dental clinic as well as mental health counselors on-site. Kids can eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner at school and bring home food for the weekends if they need it. High school students take advantage of college advising, and all students have the option of after-school activities and may utilize a large network of volunteer tutors and mentors.<sup>46</sup>

Communities for Excellent Public Schools (CEPS) proposed a model that focuses heavily on fostering greater community and parent ownership and leadership in schools, beginning with the turnaround process itself. CEPS was particularly insistent that families, students, communities and school staff play a meaningful role in designing and implementing a school transformation plan. This strategy is at the core of the successful Community Learning Center initiative in Cincinnati, where a team of parents, educators and social service providers was created at each school to help design the supports that would be available for students and staff.

Removing schools from local authority, as the OSD proposal would do, lifts educational policy

and practice away from those closest to the classroom—the teachers, administrators and locally elected leaders entrusted to follow the will of the community. “School board members are elected by the citizens in their districts to oversee local education,” says Valarie Wilson, executive director of the Georgia School Boards Association. “They are close to the districts, they know the educators and they know the environment they are teaching children in.”<sup>30</sup>

All schools and districts can do more to engage parents and communities more directly in their schools. That work becomes much harder when schools are managed by a state-level authority.

## 8. Investment, not Divestment

These strategies require investment. Experiences around the country—like those in Kentucky and Ohio—suggest that taxpayers are willing to pay for education when there are specific and proven plans and when they trust those who will carry out those plans. Too often over the past two decades, education “reformers” have promised to do more with less. Too often, the results are disappointing. In charter schooling—which is likely to be the lead strategy employed by the Opportunity School District—not only are the academic results disappointing, but millions of taxpayer dollars have been lost altogether to instances of fraud, waste and abuse.<sup>31</sup>

Education costs money. If our vision is to create strong communities, and healthy and successful adults, the investment is worth it.

Yet in Georgia, funding for public education has fallen short of identified needs. The state’s primary funding stream—the Quality Basic Education, or QBE formula was developed in 1985 by a task force appointed by then-Governor Joe Frank Harris. It was based on a careful analysis of what funding was needed to provide every Georgia child with an adequate education, and was premised on providing additional supports to

property-poor districts with little capacity to raise sufficient local funding to support their schools. But the QBE has not been fully funded since 2003.

This lack of adequate funding for Georgia schools has predisposed them—particularly schools in the state’s highest poverty districts (those now targeted for state takeover)—to academic distress. Class sizes have grown, teachers and support staff have been laid off, programs cut and schools consolidated or closed.

While the great recession of 2008 legitimately led to hard times throughout the country, Georgia has continued to short-change its schools, even as the economic recovery has gained steam.

The Georgia Budget and Policy Institute estimates that the fiscal year 2016 state appropriation for school districts is \$655 million less than what it should be under the QBE, including promised grants for transportation and “sparsity” grants which support the higher costs of small schools.<sup>32</sup> In all, GBPI found, since 2003, Georgia’s public schools have cumulatively foregone \$8.6 billion that the QBE formula identified as necessary to fully fund Georgia’s public schools.

The proposed Opportunity School District raises budget questions of its own. Apparently, few additional monies were envisioned for the district, though it would almost certainly require extensive central office capacities for the selection of schools, provision of supports, oversight and more. In Louisiana, the Recovery School District had well over 500 employees and a budget of almost \$400 million at its largest. Even after the RSD converted its final school to a charter, the district continued to employ almost 100 people.<sup>33</sup> According to the law establishing the OSD, up to 3% of each school's state and federal funding may be withheld for district administrative functions, and the appointed superintendent can appropriate local district funds and facilities for the schools it takes over. No additional state funding or staffing is addressed.

***In Louisiana, the Recovery School District, at its peak, had a staff of over 500 and a budget of nearly \$400 million.***

***State funding for the Opportunity School District has not been appropriated.***

***However, the appointed superintendent can appropriate local district funds and facilities for schools under its control.***

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The foundations of successful school turnaround are not secret, but they are also not easy.

In our conversations with Georgia parents, advocates and education professionals, we found significant support for evidence-based and locally-led approaches to school improvement.

The research on school turnaround offers several distinct and critical messages. First of all, there should be a focus on strategies that directly address the quality of teaching and the atmosphere inside the school. External governance change will not, in and of itself, change student outcomes.

Second, reform should identify the specific challenges and needs of educators, students and their families, and address these challenges directly. Whether it's improved professional development, stable leadership, wraparound supports or other specific programs addressing community needs,

each school is likely to offer a unique set of strengths and weaknesses. Blanket, one-size-fits-all reform is destined to fail.

Finally, effective school reform isn't done to communities, parents, students, educators and administrators. It is done with them. Top-down mandates, school takeovers, external corporate operators—these strategies have not proven successful in building high quality public education in Georgia, or anywhere else. It is the teachers, the school leaders, the students and parents who must carry out and push forward any improvement strategies. It is these same, local individuals who will be asked to support their public schools with their tax dollars. If they are not personally invested in change, change will fail.

The proposed Opportunity School District is likely to work against decades of lessons learned about effective school improvement. It would:

- Isolate and penalize schools, instead of engaging whole communities in their transformation;
- Base interventions solely on low test scores, instead of acknowledging challenges and building on existing strengths;
- Assert that the “solution” to struggling schools comes from centralized control, rather than engaging and trusting communities—and empowering them to build reform from within;
- Hand over public schools to private, corporate managers despite the lack of evidence that private management improves educational outcomes, and
- Continue to under-resource schools, as if we can educate our children on the cheap.

All of these assumptions, embedded in the proposed Opportunity School district, take Georgia schools in the wrong direction.

What Georgia needs is not an un-proven state takeover district, but a commitment to build and strengthen locally-governed schools that operate under the watchful eye of local communities

rather than an office of the State. As Clarke County Schools Superintendent Phil Lanoue recently put it, Georgia needs “a governance model based on democracy.”<sup>34</sup>

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform and the Southern Education Foundation recommend that the State of Georgia engage in a bottom-up process of building school success community-by-community, with both public investment and shoulder-to-the-grindstone grassroots initiative to determine the individual strengths and weaknesses of each struggling school and how both local and state resources can be rallied to help.

In our view, the creation of a new, state-run school district is not an “opportunity.” But these next twelve months, as the education debate takes the forefront in anticipation of the Constitutional Amendment referendum in November 2016, are. Georgia’s money would be better spent asking the taxpayers, the educators, the parents and the students to imagine successful schools and share in the development of improvement plans that meet their needs—and then to resource those schools accordingly.

The task for Georgia’s elected leadership is not to dictate, nor to under-resource real educational change, but to guide a visioning process and then to invest in what works, to create the schools that all our children deserve.

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