



Georgia Department of Education  
205 Jesse Hill Jr Dr SE  
Atlanta, GA 30334

May 19, 2021

Dear Superintendent Woods:

The undersigned civil rights and education advocacy organizations in Georgia write to provide public input for the Georgia Department of Education's (GaDOE) use of funds provided through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARP). This joint letter was authored by steering committee members for Fund Georgia's Future, a new coalition created to fight for a just education system with full and fair funding, but is cosigned by additional groups working for and with Georgians who care about our state's public education system.

The ARP represents a significant investment in our nation's children, and we welcome an opportunity to speak to its best use in the GaDOE. Meaningful public feedback should be a cornerstone of the allocation of these federal dollars at the state agency and local school districts. Fund Georgia's Future and the undersigned organizations believe that fair use of these funds requires a commitment to inclusivity. Toward that end, please consider an initial request:

1. **Extend the timeline for public comment and make outreach to those most impacted by the pandemic a priority.** The GaDOE emailed a press release two weeks before the end of the public comment period. We ask that you offer additional time for this process, along with an outreach strategy to garner input from communities across the state that have been hardest hit by the pandemic. This could include but is not limited to: prioritization on the GaDOE homepage, targeted print ads to reach those without internet access, phone/text banks and community listening sessions—particularly in rural communities.

The pandemic did not create most of the problems we have seen inside education. The state's history of excluding and/or oppressing children and families by race, national origin, language, disability, income, etc. has consequences that can be seen in the school today from test scores to discipline rates. With this history in mind and the recognition that bias can be and is built into institutional practice, it is pivotal that the GaDOE hold school districts accountable for their own public input processes around these federal dollars. Because fair use of these funds requires an acknowledgment and commitment to addressing the history of marginalization in education, we ask the GaDOE to:

- 2. Provide guidance and expectations for school districts to garner feedback from their local communities, prioritizing populations that have been traditionally underserved by the local school.** This request could take several different shapes, from providing a dashboard of how much federal funding each school district receives and where it has been spent, to offering best practices for how the funds should be used, to hiring staff at the GaDOE to offer support to districts on how to reach out to communities that might distrust the school board due to legitimate concerns on whether they will be heard. Transparency and outreach will help give stakeholders a chance to advocate at their local school at a time when many are ready to reimagine schooling in the future.

The growing gap between resources available for high-quality education in Metro Atlanta and rural Georgia compounds these equity issues. School leaders in rural counties that might have wanted to provide instruction online were met with the reality that many of their families would not have access to broadband internet. A 2020 analysis of broadband availability in Georgia found that, on average, 39 percent of the households in districts with fewer than 2,000 students did not have access to broadband. There were 51 such rural districts in our state last school year.<sup>1</sup> This digital divide does not even consider the fact that for many lower-income families the cost of broadband internet makes it a luxury they can ill afford. Since a vaccine for elementary school children is not expected in time for the next school year, the lack of access to high-speed internet will continue to be a pressing issue for many school districts in the coming school year. While this issue will require a robust response from more than the state agency, there are opportunities to help rural schools financially so that they can dedicate resources to closing the digital divide. Because fair use of these funds requires an acknowledgment and commitment to addressing the history of marginalization for rural communities, we ask the GaDOE to:

- 3. Fully fund the state's sparsity grant for rural schools and provide targeted grants to districts to increase broadband access in rural communities and households with limited economic resources.** The state has a sparsity grant specifically for rural, larger enrollment-zone districts, and it is being funded at a quarter of the total.<sup>2</sup> A relatively small (\$22 million in FY 2021) investment could have a large impact on those schools that already deal with fixed costs that take a larger portion of their budgets. Further, targeted grants to increase broadband access could be a crucial first step to recognizing and addressing the need to expand broadband internet across the state.

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<sup>1</sup> Owens, S. (2020). *Online instruction could leave rural schools, vulnerable students behind*. Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. <https://gbpi.org/online-instruction-could-leave-rural-schools-vulnerable-students-behind/>

<sup>2</sup> Owens, S. (2021). *State of education funding (2021)*. Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. [https://gbpi.org/state-education-2021/#\\_ednref10](https://gbpi.org/state-education-2021/#_ednref10)

There are certain student groups who have fared worse during the pandemic due to existing inequities. Black and Brown students continue to feel the effects of a state that has marginalized communities through slavery, Jim Crow, racial segregation and disproportionate discipline rates while their parents and guardians are subject to institutional and individual bias that keeps wages low, and workers unprotected. Unhoused (or “homeless”) students have been particularly vulnerable. School employees that might have a difficult time reaching out to students before COVID are faced with “chasms” in contact information.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, schools have consistently seen disparities in their ability to contact and engage students from other marginalized backgrounds, likely one reason underlying racial differences in school reopening attendance decisions.<sup>4</sup> The GaDOE should consider the effects on other student groups such as students with disabilities and English Learners who rely on smaller class sizes and face-to-face instruction as well. To promote an inclusive school reopening process for all Georgian students, we ask the GaDOE to:

4. **Hire additional specialists at the Georgia Department of Education to address the “loss” of marginalized students including but not limited to unhoused students, low-income families, students with disabilities, Black and Brown students and English Learners.** We would ask that the GaDOE use the broader, federal definition of students experiencing homelessness in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act so that all students dealing with housing insecurity are served. We also would ask that these specialists have the skills necessary to communicate with the diverse families found across Georgia. A specialist would allow for more detailed support for school districts that want to make sure to contact each of the children in their district and provide any necessary services. Through this work, the GaDOE should improve on data collection and presentation around the status of the state’s marginalized student populations.

Every single person has been affected by the pandemic, and the toll on our state is much higher than any one measure could summarize. Children of color have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 infection and death based on their percentage of the general population.<sup>5</sup> Students have lost family members; parents have lost jobs, and teachers have had to rethink years of pedagogical expertise while contemplating their own safety and the safety of

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<sup>3</sup> Sawchuck, S. & Samuels, C. A. (2020, April 10). *Where are they? Students go missing in shift to remote classes*. Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/where-are-they-students-go-missing-in-shift-to-remote-classes/2020/04>

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert, L. K. et al. (2020). *Racial and ethnic differences in parental attitudes and concerns about school reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic — United States, July 2020*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6949a2.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). *COVID-19 racial and ethnic health disparities*. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/racial-ethnic-disparities/disparities-deaths.html>



their pupils. The GaDOE has an opportunity to show the nation how to value the mental health of those in school.

5. **Create and distribute mental health and trauma supports for students and teachers with a focus on regions and populations that have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic.** The GaDOE can offer access to resources so that school leaders can address the mental health of the students, teachers and staff as they begin the next school year. Your department could show districts how to implement wellness screenings and initiate intentional connections between leaders and staff as well as between teachers and students.

On the issue of staffing specifically, there has been an undercurrent of fear that the pandemic will cause staff burnout and the loss of experienced educators. We would like to take this opportunity to thank your office as well as Governor Kemp's for using federal dollars by giving \$1,000 bonuses for state employees, and specifically for including non-certificated staff as a part of that stipend. Too often policymakers forget about the maintenance workers, bus drivers and monitors and cafeteria staff who hold up the workings of the school as an ecosystem unto itself. Additionally, as non-certificated workers are often paid much less than the other professions in the school, the bonus has a chance to have an outsized influence on the financial lives of these necessary school staff.

Once again, we appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback on the state agency's use of funds provided in the American Rescue Plan Act. We urge you to be mindful of the chance we have to reimagine schooling in Georgia where we center the voices of all students, families and communities; where schools have the resources they need and are not denied opportunities because of the wealth of the neighborhood, a student's race or ability; and where mental and emotional health are valued not as an investment in future production but rather as an output of the respect our state has for the individuals in our schools. Thank you.

Signed,



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