

Closer Look with Rose Scott

Interview with Michael Waller, Georgia Appleseed

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This is a lightly edited transcript for clarity and readability. Timestamps are included only when speakers change or approximately every 60–90 seconds.

[00:00] **Rose Scott:** And Closer Look continues from WABE in Atlanta. I'm Rose Scott.

This year, Georgia set a record high graduation rate—87.2%, up nearly two percentage points from last year. But students who didn't graduate face long-term impacts on their personal and financial well-being—and that economic impact extends to taxpayers as well.

A new study published this year looks at all of this, plus the driving factors that might lead a student to drop out. Let's welcome in the Executive Director of Georgia Appleseed, Michael Waller. His nonprofit conducted the study. Welcome.

[00:50] **Michael Waller:** Thank you—glad to be here.

Scott: Let's back up for folks who may not be familiar with your organization. Tell them a little bit more about what you all do.

Waller: We're a nonprofit, nonpartisan public interest law center founded in 2005. Our mission is to keep kids in school and on a path to success. We provide legal services and representation, lead law and policy reforms, and work with courts, schools, and communities. A lot of our work involves helping caregivers and parents advocate for their kids—what we call growing the community of advocates.

[02:00] **Scott:** Because we're in this moment of deep funding cuts—and as President Trump moves to dismantle the Department of Education—I imagine that's concerning for your organization.

Waller: It is. The most important thing for us is focusing on the well-being of children, especially those in Georgia's public schools. Cuts have a big potential impact—not only on what schools can provide, but also on what we call school climate—the culture and feeling of the school. That climate has a huge influence on whether kids succeed in school and later in life.

[03:00] **Scott:** Some say states can pick up what the federal government used to do. Do you believe that's realistic?

Waller: That's going to depend on choices our state makes. If the federal government changes its role, the state will have to adapt. I'm hopeful Georgia will step up—but ultimately, that depends on the decisions we make at the ballot box.

Scott: The shutdown has also affected the Department of Education's special education division—those who worked with students of color and students with disabilities. That's a major blow.

Waller: It is. Many students face challenges they didn't create—poverty, discrimination, disabilities. And systems sometimes have unintended impacts that affect some groups more than others. That's why we see disparities in discipline, absenteeism, and graduation rates. Some groups of kids simply face greater barriers.

[05:00] **Scott:** Georgia's graduation rate is now 87.2%. That's promising.

Waller: It is—and it's something to celebrate. But we also have to ensure the quality of education stays high. There's something very powerful about staying in school and graduating. Research shows that graduates not only earn about \$500,000 more over their lifetime—they also live 8 to 10 years longer.

[06:00] **Scott:** Let's talk about your report—how did you collect your data?

Waller: The study was a partnership with Dr. Dan Pashuti and Shah Zaman at Georgia State University's Department of Sociology. We analyzed Georgia-specific data on graduation rates, dropouts, and their economic impact. We wanted to show both the human and financial costs—because money talks. If I can tell a lawmaker, "Here's how you can save Georgia \$1.8 billion a year," that gets attention.

Scott: So, 21,000 students didn't graduate in 2022. How does that translate to \$1.7 billion?

Waller: We calculated that each non-graduate earns roughly \$500,000 to \$600,000 less over their lifetime. Multiply that by 21,000 and the lost income alone exceeds \$10 billion. On top of that are the public costs—lower tax revenues, higher healthcare and social service costs. It all adds up fast.

[10:00] **Scott:** What factors lead students to drop out?

Waller: It usually comes down to school disengagement. Many students leave because they feel disconnected or unsupported. Some need to work to support their families. Others get pushed out through suspensions or expulsions. In Georgia, about 130,000 students are suspended each year. Each suspension reduces a child's chance of graduating by about 12%. So discipline is a major driver—and that's why Georgia Appleseed focuses so heavily on improving school discipline policies.

[11:30] **Scott:** Did you find any particular demographic patterns?

Waller: Yes—Black boys, children with disabilities, and kids in poverty are suspended at higher rates. That doesn't mean those kids are the problem—it points to inequities and bias in the system. Poverty, in particular, is a major driver. If you overlay poverty data, you'll see that the conditions many kids face directly affect their outcomes.

[14:00] **Scott:** We've covered stories of students expelled under unfair circumstances—sometimes defending themselves. What happens in those cases?

Waller: We see those cases all the time. They're heartbreaking. When an advocate—whether a lawyer or a trained adult—gets involved, the outcomes improve dramatically. Our research shows that advocacy can reduce the number of days a student is out of school by an average of 83 days per case.

[16:00] **Scott:** Let's talk policy. What are you recommending to lawmakers?

Waller: Georgia has already made major progress. Since 2010, through reforms like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and stronger school climate programs, over 400,000 fewer students have been suspended. That's a huge success story. But that progress is fragile. We're starting to see a return to zero-tolerance policies. We're urging lawmakers to keep investing in positive school climate, review discipline data, and ensure objective oversight in discipline decisions.

[19:00] **Scott:** And what about big districts like Atlanta, Gwinnett, or DeKalb—are they seeing success too?

Waller: Yes. Districts like APS have reduced suspension rates significantly, but results vary by school. That's why local engagement is essential—parents and community members need to stay informed and advocate for what works.

Scott: Some schools are merging or closing, which affects communities. What else do they need to sustain success?

Waller: Schools need wraparound supports—mental health services, counselors, behavioral health programs. Graduating students is the smartest investment we can make as a state, but we also need to ensure they graduate with skills and confidence.

[21:00] **Scott:** Who sets that tone—the superintendent, the board, or the community?

Waller: Everyone. It takes a shared commitment—from educators, parents, and policymakers—to create the environment where every student can thrive.

Scott: I think that's a good place to end. Michael Waller is Executive Director of Georgia Appleseed. Michael, thanks so much for joining us.

Waller: Thanks, Rose. Happy to be here.

Scott: We'll link to the full study on our website so listeners can explore it further.