



Op-ed by Superintendent Woods: Renewed commitment to literacy and K-5 foundational skills

MEDIA CONTACT: Matt Cardoza, GaDOE Communications Office, (404) 651- 7358, mcardoza@gadoe.org

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It's true there are no silver bullets in education – no single change that will set every student on the path toward success. What's needed, instead, is a holistic approach. We must focus on the whole child, on *each* child, and all the interlocking elements necessary to equip them with the skills they need.

One of the most essential changes we can make on behalf of Georgia's students is renewing our commitment to literacy and K-5 foundational skills. The ability to read on grade level by third grade, along with proficiency in math by fifth grade, is the first crucial step toward future academic attainment. We have to get it right in the early grades if students are going to achieve later on.

Governor Nathan Deal and First Lady Sandra Deal have, [through their advocacy](#), laid a firm foundation for an increased focus on literacy. Partnerships with the [Get Georgia Reading Campaign](#) and [Georgia Public Library Service](#) are game-changers in this regard as well. For the first time, a network exists that is expanding the capacity of Georgia's education system and allowing educators and communities alike to explore new methods of increasing literacy.

At the Georgia Department of Education, we're working each day to leverage these resources to the very best of our ability and the maximum benefit of Georgia's students. We're working closely with our [Regional Education Service Agencies \(RESAs\)](#) to help train and equip school districts with the tools necessary to make improvements in the classroom. Our [Striving Readers grant](#) provides funding to schools to ensure all children – birth to 12th grade – are able to read on grade level and communicate effectively with others.

Efforts funded by this grant have shown strong results, and we plan to apply for grant funds through the [LEARN Act](#) to expand and strengthen our efforts in this area.

Through our [agency strategic plan](#), we're setting a course to raise and develop viable academic standards and increase the percentage of K-5 students with a strong knowledge of foundational skills and concepts.

Early efforts have focused on providing tangible tools for students, teachers, and parents – from [free teacher resources](#) to [daily text reminders](#) for parents of four- and five-year-olds. During the summer of 2016, we donated [more than 100,000 books](#) to students across the state, and students read another 200,000 books through [free access](#) on their digital devices.

Our efforts are moving the needle in the right direction. We've seen increases in the number of 4- or 5-star rated schools for climate, the number of third graders reading at or above grade level, the number of schools increasing their rating on the state's readiness index, and the number of schools implementing [Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports \(PBIS\)](#) with fidelity.

Still, more is needed to place students on the right path toward reading proficiency. We're currently working on a statewide literacy plan, through which we'll:

- Leverage data across agencies to match needs to local assets
- Utilize school literacy planning templates and support materials to augment school improvement plans
- Design and adopt a reliable, valid early screener to identify students in need of additional supports
- Design and adopt a reliable, valid diagnostic measure for literacy (this would be used for formative assessment, not accountability)
- Produce updated professional learning focused on literacy across all content areas
- Create virtual field trips to support students' comprehension and background knowledge

It's also crucial to have an accurate measurement of students' grasp of foundational skills. Senate Bill 364 helps us make progress in this direction: it eliminates eight high-stakes tests and places a greater emphasis on literacy and numeracy. The bill supports formative assessments for literacy and numeracy in grades 1 and 2, which gives us the opportunity to show how assessments can be given and used in a *diagnostic* way that truly informs instruction, rather than a high-stakes, limited-return testing model.

In the short term, we're developing tools and supports to help districts use the literacy and numeracy assessments they're already administering to ensure their students are on a path to proficiency in reading and math.

In the long term, we're working to change the culture of testing by creating interactive activities that gauge students' literacy and numeracy skills throughout the year, instead of a high-stakes, primarily multiple-choice assessment that takes place at the end of a grade or course. This shift will show that we can engage students and remove the high-stakes, high-pressure culture of testing while delivering more timely and useful data to teachers and parents.

Fortunately, we are joined in this work by a host of partners who care deeply about Georgia's children and their ability to live, learn, and lead in the future.

I [join with the State Board of Education to reaffirm our commitment to literacy and K-5 foundational skills](#). I ask Georgia's districts and local schools - who are doing incredible work on this front already - to join us in this pledge and make K-5 foundational skills a primary focus of the curriculum. Together, we can give students the skills they need to move confidently into the future.

Richard Woods, a 22-year public school educator and former small business owner, is Georgia's School Superintendent.