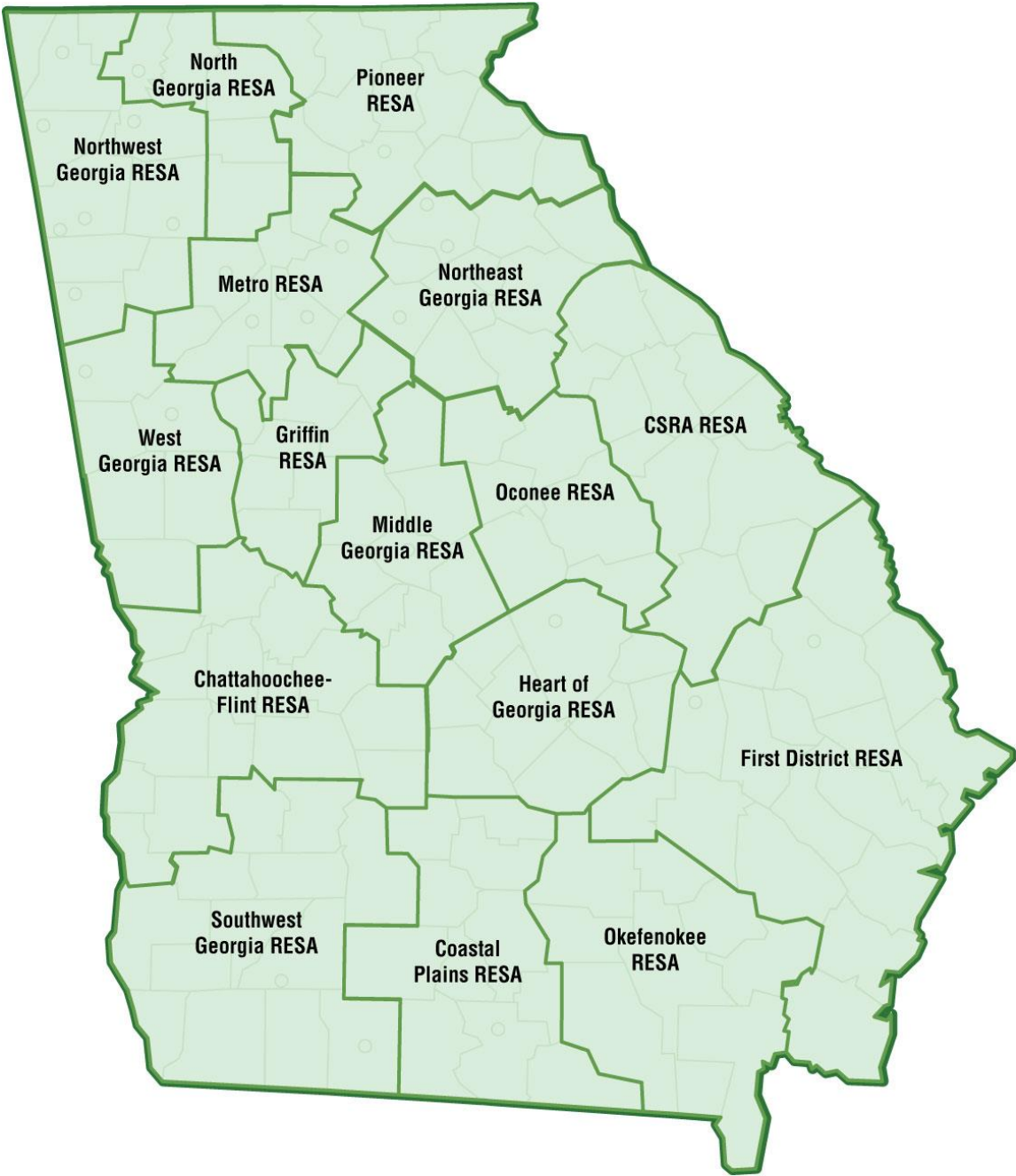


Final Report on the

2019 RESA LISTENING TOUR



A Map of Georgia's Regional Educational Service Agencies (RESAs)



INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF THE TOUR

In April 2019, Governor Brian Kemp, State School Superintendent Richard Woods, and staff from the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) and the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) embarked on a tour of all 16 Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA) districts in Georgia. The goal was to listen to the experts on the ground by getting direct input and feedback from school district leadership in every region of the state. What follows is a comprehensive overview of the feedback shared at these listening sessions.

NEXT STEPS

With the information received from participants at all 16 stops on the Listening Tour, Governor Kemp, GOSA, and GaDOE will work to craft meaningful legislation and initiatives that will continue to improve education in Georgia, set our students on a path to success, and remove burdens from our local systems and classroom teachers.

With deep appreciation to all participants in the 2019 Listening Tour, and the 16 RESAs who graciously hosted the listening sessions.

Chattahoochee-Flint RESA	Richard McCorkle	Director	www.chattflint.org
Coastal Plains RESA	Harold Chambers	Director	www.cpresa.org
CSRA RESA	Gene Sullivan	Director	www.csraresa.org
First District RESA	Richard Smith	Director	www.fдреса.org
Griffin RESA	Stephanie Gordy	Director	www.griffinresa.net
Heart of Georgia RESA	Steve Miletto	Director	www.hgresa.org
Metro RESA	Leigh Ann Putman	Director	www.mresa.org
Middle Georgia RESA	Juli Alligood	Director	www.mgresa.us
North Georgia RESA	Sam DePaul	Director	www.ngresa.org
Northeast Georgia RESA	Keith Everson	Director	www.negaresa.org
Northwest Georgia RESA	Dexter Mills	Director	www.nwgaresa.com
Oconee RESA	Hayward Cordy	Director	www.oconeeresas.org
Okefenokee RESA	Greg Jacobs	Director	www.okresa.org
Pioneer RESA	Justin Old	Director	www.pioneerresa.org
Southwest RESA	Tim Helms, Sr.	Director	www.swresa.org
West Georgia RESA	Rachel Spates	Director	www.garesa.org

***Individuals listed were Directors during the 2019 Listening Tour**

ISSUE: PUTTING STUDENTS FIRST & LETTING TEACHERS TEACH

High-Stakes Testing

Educational leaders are concerned about the time dedicated to high-stakes testing, the impact of those tests on students, and the degree to which curriculum and classroom behavior are being driven by assessments. One leader shared that it's difficult to recruit third-grade teachers in their district because Georgia Milestones testing begins at that grade level. Attendees were supportive of bringing standardized testing requirements down to the federal minimum, and expressed serious concerns about adding high-stakes assessments in grades one and two.

Student Mental Health

School systems expressed a need for continued support and resources to support students' mental health needs, including funding for dedicated personnel. Mental health counselors are needed earlier than high school, at the elementary and middle-school levels, several attendees said.

Paths to Graduation

School and district leaders requested that the state explore the possibility of offering various pathways to the high school diploma, and asked whether it would be possible to offer different diploma options to students.

Special Needs

Leaders in attendance expressed concerns with the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) and asked that the state examine the graduation requirements for students with special needs. Attendees were also concerned about the burdens of paperwork and process that set up barriers as teachers try to meet the needs of their students.

Early Learning

Educational leaders want to see more alignment birth-12, and efforts to incentivize teacher quality at the pre-K level. There is also a need to allow capital outlay for pre-K classrooms, some leaders said.

What's Working: Attendees expressed appreciation to Governor Kemp and the General Assembly for the funding provided to double mental health services in high schools and funding safety measures at each Georgia school.

“ This is the number-one thing that is harming students and teachers. First and second-year teachers who are leaving after this year -- they tell me it's primarily because of testing. ”

—attendee, Northeast Georgia RESA listening session

ISSUE: STRENGTHENING THE TEACHER PIPELINE

Teacher Preparation Programs, edTPA, & Certification Roadblocks

Teacher recruitment issues start early, many attendees shared, and the teacher certification process -- including the edTPA assessment -- is expensive and overly complex. Colleges of education should prepare all new teachers to identify reading problems and provide help when needed; they also need to provide more attention to classroom management.

Protecting TRS

Educational leaders strongly emphasized the importance of the Teachers Retirement System of Georgia (TRS) as their number-one tool for recruiting new teachers.

Teacher & Leader Evaluations

Concerns about tying educator evaluations to students' scores on high-stakes assessments persist, and several attendees reminded state leaders that teachers have little control over many of the factors that may impact an individual student's performance on these assessments.

Paperwork & Red Tape

Excessive paperwork is a roadblock for teachers -- and for teacher retention -- attendees said, specifically in the area of special education. Efforts to streamline and reduce the "red tape" burden would be welcomed.

Evaluating the Teaching Profession

Attendees recommended expanding the existing Educator Signing Day initiative, and making sure the message is clear from the state level -- Governor Kemp, GaDOE, GOSA, and the legislature -- that teachers are valued in Georgia.

Filling Positions in High-Need Fields

Leaders in several districts reported issues recruiting teachers in high-demand fields such as special education, world languages, math, science, and support services.

Innovative Approaches

Systems are partnering with higher education, recruiting out of state, and utilizing Charter/SWSS flexibility to recruit teachers -- but this is difficult for small, rural districts. The majority of education leader attendees supported changes to allow districts to utilize retired educators full-time. Several leaders are tapping high school juniors and seniors who are interested in teaching, providing guidance for their completion of paraprofessional classes (dual enrollment) and districts are then paying for the remaining two years of education preparation for these students to teach in their districts.

What's Working: Attendees in every location expressed appreciation for the \$3,000 pay raise provided this legislative session, and said it will help them in their efforts to recruit and retain teachers.

“ This certification issue has got to be solved. We make it too hard to become a teacher. ”

—attendee, West Georgia RESA listening session

ISSUE: SCHOOL SAFETY & CLIMATE

Mental Health

Attendees at multiple sessions underscored the need for student mental health services, and expressed strong concerns that this is an issue schools do not have adequate resources to address.

School Counselors

Several systems said they have trouble finding certified school counselors. For those counselors who are in place, responsibilities have multiplied exponentially, attendees said — counselors are being asked to serve as “testing coordinator, guidance counselor, quasi-administrators in addition to mental health counseling.”

Wraparound Services

Educational leaders are supportive of wraparound services, and expressed a need to continue involving outside partners and agencies. There are concerns with building wraparound programs in rural areas, where those outside services don't always exist.

Building Security

Several attendees shared about the difficulty of retrofitting older buildings for security, and expressed the need to put preventative measures in place to support school safety.

What's Working: Leaders appreciated the shift to a more comprehensive approach to school safety concerns, along with the \$69 million provided by Governor Kemp and the General Assembly to shore up school security.

“ We are no longer just teaching math, social studies, and reading -- we are now raising children. I'm still doing it, because I feel called to do it, but this is challenging! We need as much support of mental health solutions as possible. ”

—attendee, Northwest Georgia RESA listening session

“ Access to mental health services is especially important to us. I feel the mental health issues are, many times, the source of our security issues. ”

—attendee, CSRA RESA listening session

ISSUE: FUNDING PUBLIC EDUCATION

Quality Basic Education (QBE)

Education leaders expressed a desire to see the Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula modernized and revised to address rising costs in areas such as transportation and mental health/wraparound services. Most leaders support the existing structure, but feel it needs to account for poverty and should be modernized to account for other areas of expenditure.

Transportation Costs

The cost of pupil transportation is a major concern, and was brought up in nearly every conversation about funding. There is a need to address transportation funding in the funding formula, many attendees said.

Dual Enrollment

Governor Kemp told attendees he wanted to hear their ideas to improve the sustainability of the dual enrollment program. Most expressed support for the program and the academic outcomes it produces, but were open to addressing issues with course alignment and articulation.

Public Funds

At every session, attendees stressed the need to fully support public schools. If public funding is used for private school choices, there should be the same accountability as that placed on public schools.

What's Working: Many attendees expressed gratitude that the QBE formula was fully funded for the second year in a row, and appreciated this prioritization of funding for public education.

“ Through QBE we get \$784,000 for transportation -- but it costs \$3 million. ... For those schools that don't have a healthy tax base or funds, then those students are going without. ”

—attendee, Oconee RESA listening session

ISSUE: RESPONSIBLE & ALIGNED ACCOUNTABILITY

College & Career-Ready Performance Index (CCRPI)

School and district leaders in attendance expressed serious concerns about the CCRPI and felt the scores were largely correlated to the school's socioeconomic status. They requested an accountability measure that better captures the efforts of a school and paints a full and fair picture of its progress.

A-F School Grades

The majority of attendees specifically requested the removal of the A-F grades assigned to schools, based on the CCRPI score, on GOSA's school grades site.

Weight of Test Scores

While several attendees expressed that the redesigned CCRPI was an improvement, most

still feel the system relies too heavily on standardized test scores.

Financial Efficiency Star Rating

Attendees were concerned about the Financial Efficiency Star Rating, which they said penalizes small districts and those serving challenging student populations. The rating assumes all schools are serving the same populations of students -- and that's not the case, they said. The rating is also at odds with the rationale behind federal funding allocations, which holds that the greater the need of your student population, the more federal funds you receive.

“ We need to look at the A, B, C model. [Under the current accountability model], we have 89 ways to fail. We need to look at this and come up with a way to portray what is going on in schools -- accurately. ”

—attendee, Pioneer RESA listening session

ISSUE: RENEWING RURAL GEORGIA

Limited Resources, High-Need Populations

Rural schools are dealing with a shrinking tax base and high-need student populations, and the QBE formula isn't necessarily equipped to bridge that gap, leaders of rural school districts shared.

Options & Opportunities

Leaders of rural school districts want to expand the opportunities available to their students, but resource gaps -- from funding to the ability to recruit teachers in high-demand subject areas -- make it difficult to offer certain courses.

Transportation Costs

The mismatch between QBE allotments and the funding required to transport students is particularly acute in rural areas where there is literally more ground to cover -- one superintendent pointed out there are 200 miles of dirt roads in their district.

“ Transportation is more of a cost for rural districts. We traveled more than a million miles last year. ”

—attendee, Oconee RESA listening session

ISSUE: COLLABORATION & CONSISTENCY

Agencies Working Together

Many attendees were appreciative that GaDOE and GOSA are now working together, and expressed a desire for this to continue.

Streamlining Services

As the two agencies come together and collaborate more effectively, many attendees also raised concerns about duplicative mandates, and the “dual accountability system” that has arisen with the separation of the CCRPI and the federal report card. Districts and schools want one accountability system -- not multiple, concurrent systems. Attendees also supported a shift in responsibility for Strategic Waiver School Systems (SWSS) to GaDOE.

Consistent Direction

Multiple educational leaders in attendance expressed concern about the state “moving the goalposts” and changing the direction of its educational reform efforts multiple times throughout the years.

“ We are so happy to see how closely DOE and GOSA are working together. It’s hard to tell our teachers to work together when our two leader organizations don’t. ”

—attendee, Griffin RESA listening session

“ Could districts be supported by aligned accountability? I don’t mind being held accountable, but the more we can get on the same page at the state level, the better. ”

—attendee, Northeast Georgia RESA listening session

STATEWIDE EDUCATION LISTENING TOUR SCHEDULE

Monday, April 22

9:30am-11:30am: Pioneer RESA (Cleveland, White Co.)
1342 Highway 254- Cleveland, GA 30528
2:30pm-4:30pm: Northwest Georgia RESA (Rome, Floyd Co.)
3167 Cedartown Hwy SE- Rome, GA 30161

Thursday, April 25

9:30am-11:30am: Metro RESA (Smyrna, Cobb Co.)
3180 Atlanta Road SE- Smyrna, GA 30080
2:30pm- 4:30pm: North Georgia RESA (Ellijay, Gilmer Co.)
4731 Old Highway 5 S- Ellijay, GA 30540

Tuesday, April 30

9:00am- 11:00am: Griffin RESA (Griffin, Spalding Co.)
440 Tilney Avenue - Griffin, GA 30233
2:00pm-4:00pm: West Georgia RESA (Grantville, Coweta Co.)
99 Brown School Drive- Grantville, GA 30220

Thursday, May 2

9:00am-11:00am: Central Savannah RESA (Dearing, McDuffie Co.)
4683 Augusta Highway SE- Dearing, GA 30808
2:00pm- 4:00pm: Northeast Georgia RESA (Winterville, Clarke Co.)
375 Winter Street- Winterville, GA 30683

Tuesday, May 7

9:00am-11:00am: Oconee RESA (Tennille, Washington Co.)
206 S Main Street- Tennille, GA 31089
2:00-4:00pm: Middle Georgia RESA (Warner Robins, Houston Co.)
80 Cohen Walker Drive, Suite 228- Warner Robins, GA 31088

Friday, May 10

9:00am-11:00am: Southwest Georgia RESA (Camilla, Mitchell Co.)
570 Martin Luther King, Jr. Road- Camilla, GA 31730
2:00pm-4:00pm: Chattahoochee-Flint RESA (Ellaville, Schley Co.)
121 East College Street- Ellaville, GA 31806

Tuesday, May 21

9:00am-11:00am: First District RESA (Brooklet, Bulloch Co.)
201 Lee Street- Brooklet, GA 30415
2:00pm-4:00pm: Heart of Georgia RESA (Dublin, Laurens Co.)
717 Smith Street- Dublin, GA 31021

Thursday, May 30

9:00am-11:00am: Okefenokee RESA (Waycross, Ware Co.)
1450 N Augusta Ave.- Waycross, GA 31503
2:00pm-4:00pm: Coastal Plains RESA (Lenox, Cook Co.)
245 Robinson Street- Lenox, GA 31637

OUR THANKS

We wish to acknowledge the educational leaders, teachers and students who attended these sessions and deepened our understanding of barriers to teaching *and learning and ways to improve the state's public education system.*