



***Richard Woods, Georgia's School Superintendent***

*"Educating Georgia's Future"*

Dear Mr. Botel:

On behalf of the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), I'd like to express my appreciation for a productive phone call with the U.S. Department of Education (US ED)'s state support team and other key staff members. As you stated during the call, this stage is part of the overall US ED approval process and has been part of the process for every state. The call was a great opportunity to discuss US ED's feedback in detail and we were pleased to learn that a majority of that feedback could be addressed simply by adding additional clarification and information to Georgia's State ESSA Plan.

As we expressed during the call, there are three points in US ED's feedback that raised concerns for our team. We are concerned that agreeing to these changes, as proposed, would disproportionately and negatively impact small, rural schools; dilute Georgia's efforts to incentivize schools for pushing all students from one performance band to the next; and remove recognition for schools that go above and beyond in moving the needle for historically underperforming subgroups (students with disabilities, students who are English-language learners, and students who are economically disadvantaged).

These areas of concern are as follows:

**Criteria for adjusting academic achievement indicator if 95 percent of students do not participate in state assessments.** As you know, ESSA includes a requirement that 95 percent of a school's students participate in state assessments, and requires states to make adjustments for accountability purposes if the 95 percent requirement is not met. Georgia has serious concerns about implementing the process outlined in statute, which asks states to adjust the denominator of the academic achievement indicator if 95 percent of students do not participate in state assessments.

In Georgia, academic achievement is based on students who were enrolled in a school for at least 65 percent of the school year (Full Academic Year, or FAY, students). This ensures that the achievement rate reflects the group of students who had a sufficient opportunity to experience instruction in the school. The *participation rate*, which Georgia is proposing to use when adjusting for the 95 percent requirement, is based on all students who were continuously enrolled during the testing window. This ensures that schools are held accountable for assessing at least 95 percent of ALL students. Implementing the process recommended by US ED would only hold schools accountable for testing at least 95 percent of *FAY students* – rather than holding them accountable for assessing at least 95 percent of all students. It would lead to a serious unintended consequence: a group of students *present during the testing window* whom schools would not be held accountable for testing.

Again, Georgia is proposing to hold schools accountable for testing 95 percent of ALL students. Because the population of students for the academic achievement indicator and the population for the participation rate are not the same (as described above), it is not possible to switch denominators (i.e. use 95 percent of the expected tested population instead of the FAY population) as that would not yield the results intended by law. Therefore, we proposed to multiply the achievement rate by the participation rate divided by 95 percent. The benefit of this adjustment is 1) we hold schools accountable for testing all students, not just those who were enrolled for 65 percent of the school year and 2) it solves the operational issues while still implementing a process that adheres to the intent of the law, which is to treat students who did not participate as not proficient for the purposes of accountability.

US ED also suggested that a minimum N size of 15, rather than a minimum N size of 40 as proposed by GaDOE, is necessary when adjusting achievement rates due to insufficient participation rates. With a minimum N of 15, a single student not participating would result in an adjustment. This would disproportionately impact smaller subgroups and rural schools. Participation rates will still be reported with a minimum N size of 15; however, a minimum N size of 40 will be required to adjust achievement rates in order to increase equity among subgroups and geographic locales.

**Weighted achievement indicator.** Georgia is proposing an achievement index for the academic achievement indicator in which Beginning Learners earn 0 points, Developing Learners earn 0.5 point, Proficient Learners earn 1 point, and Distinguished Learners earn 1.5 points. Using this approach incentivizes moving all students to the next achievement level and provides better information on the performance of students than a traditional “percent proficient.” Additionally, the 1.5 points for a Distinguished Learner does not overcompensate for students who are not yet proficient, as Georgia has two levels below proficiency – Beginning and Developing Learners earn 0 and 0.5 points, respectively. This approach is consistent with other state plans Secretary DeVos has already approved: North Dakota will award -1 point for Novice, 0.5 points for Partially Proficient, 1 point for Proficient, and 2 points for Advanced, while Louisiana will award 0 points for Unsatisfactory or Approaching Basic, 70 points for Basic, 100 points for Mastery, and 150 points for Advanced.

**Weighted closing gaps indicator.** We are encouraged that, after discussing this with your team, US ED is having further discussion regarding this feedback. Georgia’s plan proposes awarding 1.5 points within the Closing Gaps metric when Economically Disadvantaged students (ED), English Learners (EL) or Students With Disabilities (SWD) meet a 6 percent improvement target. This will incentivize accelerated levels of growth among these traditionally underperforming subgroups and help to close achievement gaps. If the 1.5-point opportunity was available for all subgroups, as requested by US ED, we believe it would *increase* achievement gaps. Schools could focus on higher levels of improvement among traditionally high-performing groups, while not prioritizing improvement among traditionally underperforming groups. Additionally, it is important to clarify that all subgroups are included in the Closing Gaps metric for the 3 percent target; however, only these three subgroups (ED, EL, and SWD) can earn the 1.5 points for meeting a higher, 6 percent target.

GaDOE will work diligently to provide the clarifying information requested during the call as additional language in our plan, and we are reviewing US ED guidance, federal statute, and the language of approved state ESSA plans in reference to the above three topics.

We appreciate US ED's review of our state's plan and the limited number and scope of changes requested – a testament to the hard work of, and deep discussions among, Georgia students, parents, educators, school leaders, business and industry, nonprofits, and policymakers.

We have consistently heard from parents, educators, and other stakeholders that they appreciated Georgia's open and transparent state plan development process and the conversations it sparked. We deeply appreciated the feedback, insight, and opinions of these thousands of stakeholders and will continue to consult them as we move forward.

Though not a perfect piece of federal legislation, ESSA does provide Georgia with the opportunity to meet the higher expectations expressed by Georgians who are requesting more from their education system – asking for a system that delivers increased outcomes *and* expands opportunities for our nearly 1.8 million students, focuses on the needs of the whole child, and reflects and refines lessons learned from previous education reforms.

Again, we appreciate the feedback from US ED and look forward to continuing the process.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Richard Woods". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned to the left of the typed name.

Richard Woods  
State School Superintendent, Georgia