

# State of Education in Metro Atlanta Annual Report 2021



**Learn4Life**

Metro Atlanta Regional Education Partnership

# Introduction

The lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on our students will be with us long after this virus is under control.

This moment requires a heightened level of creativity, hard work, and careful implementation from our entire community to accelerate student learning. By convening leaders to learn from each other, often through the language of data, our students will receive the types of interventions and supports they need to overcome lost instructional time and an array of traumas both seen and unseen.

True to its mission, Learn4Life is supporting this growth by uplifting and scaling strategies that work. The early literacy network has identified bright spots that have proven to re-engage students in learning (ArtsNOW) and support their social-emotional wellbeing (SEE-KS). L4L is working to scale the science of reading (Cox Campus) and ensure all children have access to free glasses (Vision To Learn). The math network is working to integrate real-world STEM education into more

classrooms, and the postsecondary network is focused on improving student navigation of the complex financial aid process. Taken together, these cradle to career strategies complement the heroic efforts of our educators while broadening the circle of support for all our schools.

While reliable data is limited during this time of transition back to in-person instruction, this report details our region's progress along key indicators, the learning loss from COVID-19 school closures, and some bright spots L4L's networks have identified which hold promise for a stronger return to learning.

Thanks to everyone, no matter your role, for working toward a more equitable and prosperous community for all students in metro Atlanta.

We look forward to your continued partnership.

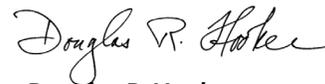
## Learn4Life Executive Committee Members



**Ann W. Cramer**  
Consultant,  
Coxe Curry & Associates



**Frank Fernandez**  
President & CEO,  
Community Foundation  
for Greater Atlanta



**Douglas R. Hooker**  
Executive Director,  
Atlanta Regional Commission



**Katie Kirkpatrick**  
President & CEO,  
Metro Atlanta Chamber



**Milton J. Little**  
President & CEO,  
United Way of Greater Atlanta



**Ken Zeff, Ed.D.**  
Executive Director,  
Learn4Life



# Understanding the Metro Atlanta Region

Atlanta metro is growing quickly, and our demographics are changing. An increasing number of our students experience the adverse impacts of growing up in poverty. They come from diverse backgrounds and are more likely than before to speak different languages at home. To achieve improved results, we must focus relentlessly on strategies that have proven to be successful. This requires an educational framework marked by an emphasis on equity, data-driven decision making and strategic collaboration.

The metro area includes the school districts of:

- Atlanta Public Schools
- Clayton County Public Schools
- Cobb County School District
- City Schools of Decatur
- DeKalb County School District
- Fulton County Schools
- Gwinnett County Public Schools
- Marietta City Schools

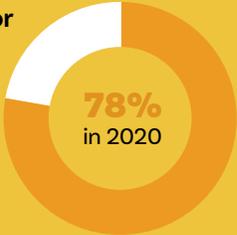


**Total enrollment**

2020  
**604,063**

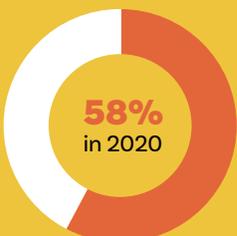
2010-2011  
**569,159**

**Students of Color**



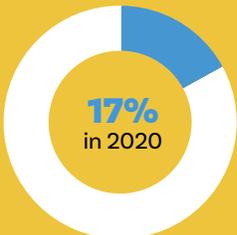
Change in Eight Years, 2012-2020  
**53,000+**

**Low-Income**



Change in Eight Years, 2012-2020  
**18,000+**

**English Learners**



Change in Eight Years, 2012-2020  
**54,000+**

Source: The Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA), 2010-2011 & 2017-2018, Enrollment by Subgroup Programs; Georgia Department of Education, FTE Enrollment by Grade Level(PK-12). Aggregated full-time equivalency (FTE) enrollment counts for school systems.

# The Impact of the Pandemic and the Promise of Federal Resources

The lasting impact of COVID-19 will affect our children’s learning, especially those who need extra support to stay on grade level. The 2020-21 school year challenged students in ways we are still uncovering.

**Learning loss has several causes**

- Reduced instructional minutes
- Strained student engagement
- Economic stress
- Food insecurity
- Fear of sickness
- Limited mental health support
- Parent insight – 80% of public school parents think their children’s education and emotional development is not going well



**The impact is that inequity has grown**

- 10% gap** in students of color who have access to a device
- 10% gap** in students of color who have access to Wi-Fi
- 20% gap** in students of color who have access to in-person instruction
- 11% loss** in kindergarten students statewide, which will disproportionately impact students from under resourced households
- 13% drop** in postsecondary enrollment nationwide, especially for first-generation students

**Through the once-in-a-generation investment in public education, our school systems have the unique opportunity to accelerate student learning.**

**American Rescue Plan funding by district**

Atlanta Public Schools .....	\$202M
Clayton County Public Schools .....	\$171M
Cobb County School District .....	\$161M
City Schools of Decatur .....	\$2M
DeKalb County School District .....	\$313M
Fulton County Schools .....	\$170M
Gwinnett County Public Schools .....	\$28M
Marietta City Schools .....	\$16M
	<b>\$1.32B</b>

*Examples of how those funds are being deployed:*

<b>Increased access to high dosage tutoring</b>	<b>Additional summer school opportunities</b>
<b>Enhanced mental health supports</b>	<b>Increased investments in wraparound services</b>

**The role of L4L is to identify what is working and help take those strategies to scale. We want to lift up district investments that are scaling bright spots in metro Atlanta.**

# Key Indicators for Collective Impact in the Metro Atlanta Region

The Learn4Life Leadership Council identified [these six key indicators](#) to continuously measure our students' progress along the cradle-to-career continuum. A common understanding of this data gives our partners the opportunity to measure gains and to support bright spot strategies that are providing uncommon results in each indicator.

## 2021 Data: A Note of Caution

L4L is committed to sharing educational data which provides objective performance on our region's progress. However, last year's instruction and testing administration have a number of challenges that complicate any analysis of the indicator results reported on this page.

1

**Instruction varied** – Virtual, hybrid, and in-person instruction options varied greatly across districts, as did parents' choices for their children. The educational experiences across these options differed, too, as educators and families scrambled to accommodate new ways of schooling.

2

**Key subgroups were underserved** – Instructional opportunities and testing participation do not break evenly across all demographics. Disparities that existed for our Black, Latinx, low-income, special education, and English learner students before the pandemic have only been exacerbated in the last two years.

3

**Testing participation was inconsistent** – Milestone testing participation rates were wide-ranging, with subjects, grade levels, and schools ranging from 1% - 100%. We have to analyze this year's data through this understanding, and not place too much value on the aggregated number.

### Kindergarten Readiness

*Because there is not yet a common measure for Kindergarten readiness in Georgia, L4L tracks the availability of quality-rated early childhood education seats.*

**35%** in 2019  
22% in 2017

### 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency

**40%** in 2021  
40% in 2015

### 8th Grade Math Proficiency

**31%** in 2021  
41% in 2016

### High School Graduation Rate

**83%** in 2021  
78% in 2015

### Postsecondary Enrollment

**68%** in 2018  
75% in 2015

### Postsecondary Completion

**29%** in 2019  
31% in 2015

Sources 1-7 can be found [here](#).

# How We Work

Learn4Life assembles Change Action Networks that focus on improving specific outcomes and key metric indicators. These networks work together to leverage existing resources within our local communities to engage in collective action around a very specific outcome. These teams use data to communicate progress and hold each other accountable, direct action in specific areas of need, and highlight areas of achievement on a wide, metropolitan scale.

## THE WORK OF CHANGE ACTION NETWORKS



### STEP 1: Convene

Bring together representation from everyone who is invested in these outcomes.



### STEP 2: Understand Local Context

Learn about the success and challenges of our region's 600,000 K-12 students and postsecondary students.



### STEP 3: Review Data

Outcome and leading indicator data disaggregated by subgroups and correlated with other factors.



### STEP 4: Analyze Factors

Review the research on successful strategies, and narrow down to the factors this network can affect and those that will yield strong outcomes.



### STEP 5: Identify Bright Spots

Within each factor, there already exist bright spots in our region—practices, strategies, or organizations that are doing 'what works' to get strong results. We find these strategies with the purpose of scaling them so more students receive their benefits.



*Look for Bright Spots throughout this report!*



### STEP 6: Develop Action Plans

Once networks identify bright spots, they build, implement, and monitor scaling plans.

# Factor Analysis

L4L's Change Action Networks review the research factors that are most predictive of student success in each indicator. Selected factors must meet two criteria: strong evidence of improving student outcomes, and something the network can influence. Each of L4L's networks has conducted factor analyses as detailed below. These factors then allow us to identify Bright Spots that are working to support students in each area.

	<b>Strategies that impact student success</b> <i>Change Action Network focus areas highlighted</i>
 <p><b>Early Literacy</b> Research from the Get Georgia Reading Campaign identified 11 factors that indicate a student's ability to read proficiently by the end of 3rd grade. L4L's Change Action Network identified successful strategies that address three of those factors. During the pandemic, the network conducted a second round of factor analysis and added 'student engagement' and 'children's mental health' as critical factors.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Children's Mental Health</b></li> <li><b>Early Childhood Education</b></li> <li><b>Physical Health</b></li> <li><b>Student Engagement</b></li> <li><b>Teacher Preparation</b></li> <li>Adult Literacy</li> <li>Attendance</li> <li>Birth Outcomes</li> <li>Language Development</li> <li>School &amp; Classroom Climate</li> <li>Social-emotional Competence</li> <li>Summer Learning Loss</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Eighth Grade Math</b> L4L's middle school math partners have selected three key factors to focus their work: school culture, interventions for struggling students and teacher effectiveness - all while maintaining the critical lens of racial expectations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Interventions for Struggling Learners</b></li> <li><b>School Culture</b></li> <li><b>Racial Expectations</b></li> <li><b>Teacher Effectiveness</b></li> <li>Academic Preparation</li> <li>Access to Appropriate Technology</li> <li>Access to Rigorous Courses</li> <li>Gender Expectations</li> <li>Language and Literacy Skills</li> <li>Math Anxiety</li> <li>Relevant Curriculum</li> <li>Use of Assessment Data</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Postsecondary Success</b> L4L's Change Action Network focuses on improving postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion. The network prioritized academic preparation, college-going culture, and financial preparation, and has identified Bright Spots that support young people in these areas.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Academic Preparation</b></li> <li><b>College-going Culture</b></li> <li><b>Financial Support</b></li> <li>Social Skills and Family Support</li> <li>College Entrance Exams</li> <li>Social and Academic Norms</li> <li>College Applications</li> <li>College Enrollment</li> <li>Appropriate Coursework</li> <li>College Orientation</li> <li>Career Exposure</li> <li>Exposure to College</li> <li>Good Fit and Match</li> <li>Academic Support</li> </ul>

# Early Literacy

Early literacy is critical in laying the foundation for a life of self-determination and economic mobility. Children who have not developed reading skills by the end of 3rd grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school. This network is working to scale five Bright Spots that are showing how it's possible to ensure all children can read.



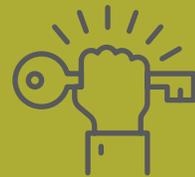
## **ArtsNOW Learning**

ArtsNOW is a national non-profit that offers customized solutions to improve teacher efficacy and student results through authentic arts integration.

**“The professional development provided by ArtsNOW helps every teacher with Arts Integration, new or veteran. ArtsNOW provides high quality, differentiated professional development which ensures that every teacher is successful, thus students are successful.”**

- *Kenyatta Frederick, Principal, Powder Springs Elementary*

**100%** of educators are more comfortable implementing arts integrated lessons with ArtsNOW support



## **SEE-KS**

Social Emotional Engagement - Knowledge and Skills is a professional learning approach that provides freely accessible tools for measuring and enhancing learner engagement within academic instruction, and utilizes an appreciative inquiry framework for educators to mentor one another to sustain the work.

**“By building the capacity of schools to foster social emotional engagement throughout classroom lessons, the SEE-KS program enhances learner engagement using strong implementation science to ensure teams can collaborate to improve instruction and sustain these practices in future years.”**

- *Leigh Ann Putman, Ed.D., Executive Director, Metropolitan Regional Educational Service Agency*

**18,000+** students reached through SEE-KS in metro Atlanta



## **Reach Out & Read Georgia**

Beginning at the newborn visit, when families bring their child for a well-child visit, a ROR-trained medical provider discusses the importance of reading aloud together, shares practical tips to promote early literacy, and offers each child a new book for their home library. ROR serves more than 59,000 children across 59 sites in the Metro Atlanta area.



## **Vision to Learn**

Vision To Learn helps students in underserved communities succeed in school and life by providing vision screenings, eye exams, and eye glasses, free of charge. They bring a mobile vision clinic right to schools and community organizations to help solve educational achievement and healthcare access gaps among kids in Title I schools.



## The Science of Reading

Our brains are wired for communication and language, but not for reading. Reading must be explicitly and systematically taught if children are to become deep readers. Since the National Reading Panel commissioned by the U.S. Congress in the late 1990s, the “science of reading” – a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically-based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing – has been an area of focus for many educators and school districts. L4L’s Bright Spot, Cox Campus, breaks down the science of teaching reading into practical applications through their free, internationally-accredited online courses and resources.

### Examples of School District Implementation

School districts across metro Atlanta are integrating and deepening the practices and principles of the science of reading into their instructional priorities. In Cobb County School District, leaders are integrating the Cox Campus into their professional learning systems. This will ensure educators have the knowledge, skills and agency to teach every child how to read, and be on a path to a life of self-determination.

Across Marietta, the “[Literacy and Justice for All](#)” collaboration with the United Way for Greater Atlanta, Kennesaw State University, Quality Care for Children, the Cobb Collaborative, and L4L is building a literacy movement. Through this, Marietta’s birth-5 early childcare centers and educators from Marietta City Schools’ seven elementary schools are partnering with the Rollins Center for Language & Literacy’s Cox Campus to provide coursework and coaching in language and literacy best practices.



### Cox Campus

 Cox Campus turns to science to learn what actions adults can take to form a child’s brain, giving them an early start towards reading. The science of reading is grounded in language-rich and healthy environments, positive experiences, and explicit and systematic reading instruction. Recognizing that every child has the right to literacy, the Cox Campus offers free, online courses for teachers, families, school leaders, and healthcare workers in the science of reading – so every child can learn to read.

189,000+

members are engaged in professional development and a community of practice at [CoxCampus.org](#)



**The science of reading tells us children need explicit and systematic instruction. Learning to read cannot be left to chance or guesswork.**

### Learning to read includes:

#### Language comprehension

- Background knowledge
- Vocabulary knowledge
- Language structures
- Verbal reasoning
- Literacy knowledge

#### Word recognition

- Phonological awareness
- Decoding (and spelling)
- Sight recognition

95%

of children can learn to read (excluding those with severe disabilities)



**“In Marietta, we’re committed to ensuring all children learn to read. We’re starting with infants and early childhood education centers, so that children entering Kindergarten have a strong literacy foundation.”**

– Dr. Grant Rivera, Superintendent, Marietta City Schools

# Eighth Grade Math Proficiency

Mastery of 8th grade pre-algebra predicts success in 9th grade algebra, which is the gatekeeper to high school graduation, college readiness and postsecondary completion.

L4L's math network has identified two strategies that are successful in raising 8th grade math outcomes, both through experiential STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) learning.



## STE(A)M Truck

STEAM Truck is an innovative educational nonprofit helping to eliminate educational disparities and grow Georgia's next generation of problem solvers through hands-on learning and the development of 21st Century skills.

**“STE(A)M Truck’s passion and dedication came through the computer screen and was so contagious that our students went home and showed their younger siblings what they learned and made... impacting whole families, not just the students in programming!”**

-Ciara Dunn, Program Coordinator, Clayton County Office of Youth Services

**78%**

% of students have improved applied STEM skills after engaging with STE(A)M Truck



## STEM/STEAM Certification

STEM/STEAM certification is the final step of a process in which schools meet rigorous science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics criteria set forth by the Georgia Department of Education. These schools use project or problem-based learning, have strong community partnerships, engage in cross-disciplinary instruction, and guide students in conducting investigative research. The L4L network has identified schools that are in the certification process and is building tools to help them achieve the GaDoE's criteria around business partnerships.

**“Integrating STEM instruction into schools can transform outcomes for students. When students have real-world, project-based experiences they are more engaged in learning and excited about STEM careers.”**

- Jordan Rose, Executive Co-director, Science ATL

**12%**

average increase in 8th grade math scores when middle schools become STEM certified



# Postsecondary Success

Postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion are fundamental to establishing a skilled and educated workforce and a thriving local economy. L4L continues to review current research and data to increase understanding of the factors that influence postsecondary success, and have collaborated with three Bright Spot organizations who facilitate postsecondary success in unique, yet equally important ways.

## Postsecondary Trends in Metro Atlanta

Learn4Life commissioned a study with Bellwether Education Partners to elevate the issue of postsecondary enrollment decline in the region since the start of the pandemic. Preliminary findings indicate that FAFSA completion rates in metro Atlanta declined by 4% between 2020 (58%) and 2021 (54%), which translated into 1,100 fewer FAFSA applications submitted. L4L will use these and other findings to further our understanding of the barriers students face with the postsecondary enrollment process, and to lift up strategies and initiatives that are yielding uncommon success. Our goal is to adapt and scale these solutions in order to improve postsecondary outcomes for students throughout the region.



### College Advising Corps

College Advising Corps (CAC) is a national, nonprofit, college-access organization that works to increase the number of qualified low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented students who enter and complete higher education.

**“The adviser at Carver Early College worked diligently with a student to obtain scholarships to help pay for school. By January 2021, her student collected scholarship offers and still had more acceptances on the way.”**

*- Dr. Raishell Adams, Program Director, Georgia State University College Advising Corps*

**+9%**

Above national FAFSA completion rate for CAC students in APS



### One Goal

OneGoal’s mission is to ensure all students have an equitable opportunity to pursue their highest postsecondary aspirations. They partner with schools in low-income communities to ensure postsecondary planning and preparation are integral components of the high school experience. Their three-year program starts as a class in students’ junior and senior years of high school and continues during the critical transitional period through their first year of college or other postsecondary path.

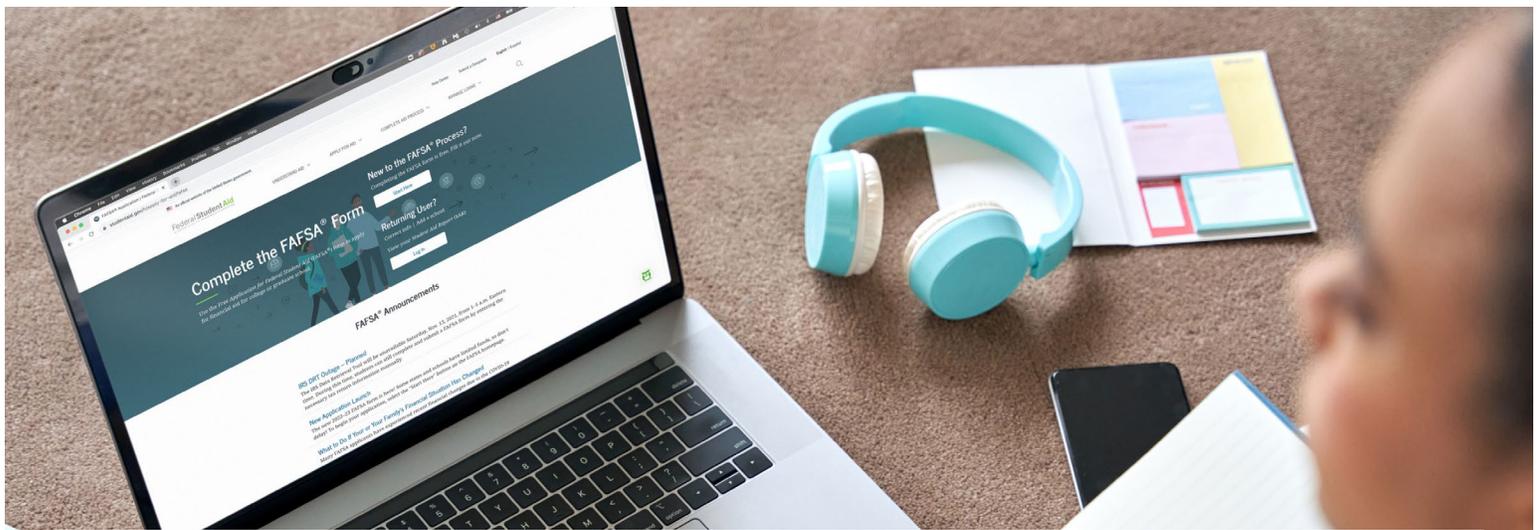
**“OneGoal removes barriers so students believe college is attainable. It changes the trajectory for students who would have graduated from high school but not had plans to pursue postsecondary education. OneGoal puts students in the driver’s seat when creating a plan for after high school.”**

*- Dr. Angela Moore, Assistant Principal, Benjamin E. Mays High School*

**84%**

of OneGoal High School graduates enroll in a postsecondary institution





## FAFSA

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a form that students and families must complete to secure their part of more than \$120 billion the government provides annually to pay for college (2-year, 4-year, or technical programs). FAFSA completion increase the likelihood of obtaining an affordable or event debt-free degree, and increases postsecondary enrollment, postsecondary persistence, and earning potential.

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded many of the concerns that already existed around FAFSA completion (i.e., lack of knowledge about what FAFSA is and how to apply among low-income and first-generation students, limited counselor capacity in Title I schools, competing school priorities, etc.), and has compelled many students to reconsider the viability of postsecondary education. As a result, fewer students are completing the FAFSA. To help mitigate these declines and increase postsecondary enrollment throughout metro Atlanta, Learn4Life has joined forces with [United Way's College Bound Initiative](#) and the [Scholarship Academy](#). Together, they are harnessing the power of collective impact to offer a comprehensive suite of supports to add capacity to school counseling teams and improve postsecondary success in the region: free FAFSA training for staff and community volunteers, in-person and virtual FAFSA completion events, one-to-one office hours, marketing materials, scholarship resources, and incentives for completion.



### Scholarship Academy

Scholarship Academy's mission is to help low-income students secure resources to pursue higher education opportunities without debt, and thus, create a healthier financial future. In addition to helping students complete the FAFSA, Scholarship Academy helps students build four/five-year financial aid plans by teaching them how to negotiate their financial aid package, manage their financial awards, and independently navigate the private scholarship market.



**“Filing a FAFSA is the single most important thing students can do to get money for college. When the Scholarship Academy reached out offering to host FAFSA completion events, I immediately knew this would be a needed and successful collaboration.”** – Brandi Beavers, M.Ed., Postsecondary Transition Liaison, Region 2, DeKalb County School District

# Leadership Council

**Community** 

Mindy Binderman, Executive Director, GEEARS  
 Ann Cramer, Senior Consultant\*, Coxe Curry & Associates  
 Doug Hooker, Executive Director\*, Atlanta Regional Commission  
 Milton Little, President and CEO\*, United Way of Greater Atlanta  
 Santiago Marquez, CEO, Latin American Association  
 Keith Parker, President and CEO, Goodwill of North Georgia  
 Dr. Dana Rickman, President, Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education  
 Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum, President, Emerita, Spelman College

**Pre-K - 12 education** 

Dr. Morcease J. Beasley, Superintendent, Clayton County Public Schools  
 Dr. Maggie Fehrman, Superintendent, City Schools of Decatur  
 Dr. Lisa Herring, Superintendent, Atlanta Public Schools  
 Dr. Mike Looney, Superintendent, Fulton County Schools  
 Chris Ragsdale, Superintendent, Cobb County District  
 Dr. Grant Rivera, Superintendent, Marietta City Schools  
 Cheryl Watson-Harris, Superintendent, DeKalb County School District  
 Dr. Calvin Watts, Superintendent, Gwinnett County School District

**Higher education** 

Dr. Glen Cannon, President, Gwinnett Technical College  
 Dr. Timothy Renick, Executive Director, National Institute for Student Success, Georgia State University  
 Dr. David Thomas, President, Morehouse College

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 Dena Kimball, Executive Director, The Keneda Fund  
 Atiba Mbiwan, President, Zeist Foundation  
 Teresa Rivero, Senior Program Officer, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation  
 Dr. David D. Weitnauer, President, R. Howard Dobbs, Jr. Foundation

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Dr. Kamau Bobb, Director, STEM Education Strategy, Google and Director, Constellations Center for Equity in Computing, Georgia Tech  
 Raj Gazula, Head of Treasury Solutions, Truist  
 Kevin Greiner, President and CEO, Gas South  
 Katie Kirkpatrick, President and CEO\*, Metro Atlanta Chamber  
 Dennis Lockhart, Former President and CEO†, Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta  
 Sylvia Russell, Former President†, AT&T Georgia  
 David Scheible, Former President and CEO†, Graphic Packaging International  
 Peter Williams, Director of Business Strategy, BlackRock

\* Indicates Executive Committee members. The Executive Committee is made up of established nonprofit organizations with a shared commitment to strengthening our region.

† Indicates Executive Champions. Executive Champions are senior members of the metro Atlanta business community who bring their leadership and influence to support the Learn4Life vision.

# Support for Learn4Life



## Our 2020-2021 Supporters

Our supporters generously provide the resources we need to implement the Learn4Life model.

The Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation

AT&T Georgia

Atlanta Regional Commission

Betty and David Fitzgerald Foundation

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

BlackRock

Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta

Gas South

Georgia Power

Graphic Packaging International

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Metro Atlanta Chamber

R. Howard Dobbs Jr. Foundation, Inc.

State Farm

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The Tull Charitable Foundation

United Way of Greater Atlanta

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## How You Can Support Learn4Life

Join a Change Action Network:

[Early Literacy](#)

[8th Grade Math](#)

[Postsecondary Success](#)



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**“L4L brings us together to learn from each other and share what’s working. That spirit of collaboration is essential to accelerate student learning and overcome the challenges of this pandemic.”**

- Morcease Beasley, Ed.D., Superintendent, Clayton County Public Schools

Sources for this report can be found [here](#).

