

Gov. Nathan Deal Addresses Education Leadership Institute Annual Conference

Thank you, Superintendent Woods. It's a pleasure to be before this crowd again, as it always is when I get to speak to educators. There have been some out there who, not liking some of my policies, have suggested that I don't much care for those in the field of education. Well, they couldn't be further from the truth. I am not only the son of teachers, I am the husband of one as well.

That's how much I love educators – I wanted to spend my life with one always by my side. And that's how good of a lawyer I was too – I was able to talk her into agreeing to it.

So, indeed, I consider it a privilege anytime I address a group of educators, especially in the early weeks of a new school year, as we are now. I'm sure your respective faculties are excited about this new beginning as well. Although I once heard that a math teacher's favorite sum is summer vacation, I'm sure they're happy to be back as well.

Before I go too much further in my remarks, I'd like to take a few moments to talk about one of this event's major sponsors – the Georgia National Guard. Many of you are no doubt familiar with the Youth Challenge Academy programs that they offer and the powerful impact they have on those students who have difficulty in completing traditional high school. It is a cost-free program open to all Georgia residents, and it has graduated almost 14,000 students since its inception in 1993.

I am told that it is the only program of its kind that provides graduates with a personal mentor for one year after graduation to help with the transition into adulthood, and that one of its key purposes is to empower participants to embrace responsibility, achievement and positive behavior. A multi-year study by the nonpartisan education and social policy think tank MDRC found that the program's participants achieve impressive results in educational attainment and employability. Specifically, GED or high school diploma attainment for participants increased by 29 percent and college attendance increased by 86 percent.

Currently, there are two Youth Challenge Academy [YCA] campuses in Georgia, but a third will be opening in Milledgeville this October, with the first class reporting on October 16th.

On top of this good news, Georgia was selected along with two other states to pilot a Jobs Challenge program where we partner with Savannah Technical College to assist YCA graduates in becoming certified in a trade of their choice, including such in-demand jobs as welding, automotive mechanics, culinary arts, and nursing assistance. I am happy to report that the first Job Challenge class in Georgia graduated at target and was the only one of the three programs nationwide to do so.

Georgia's YCAs have been so successful that our National Guard YCA leadership have been asked to serve as national subject matter experts for the Job Challenge program, the YCA effectiveness Metrics and the YCA Admission Criteria working groups.

The Youth Challenge Academy programs in Georgia will soon have an even greater impact as it expands the high school diploma program by 35 percent in partnership with the Georgia Achievement Charter High School.

I think the men and women of the Georgia National Guard deserve a round of applause not only for the selfless work they do to serve and protect us in times of need, but also for the educational work they're doing in the lives of these young men and women.

They are giving students who come from difficult backgrounds new opportunities to change the courses of their lives for the better. As we meet today in the early weeks of a new school year and reflect on that new beginning that each first day of class brings for both educators and students alike, I'd like for us to discuss ways in which we can have a similar impact on those educational metrics that remain stubbornly fixed or stagnant.

Our graduation rate, for instance. Although it has increased steadily over the past five years by 11 percent, it is still only 78.8 percent as of the close of last school year. Our literacy rate is similar in that, although it has increased over the past several years, only about a third of students can read at or above grade level by the end of third grade.

Our competency grades in English and Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies are also in need of attention. As of the 2015-2016 school year, an average of only about 39 percent of Georgia's 3rd through 8th graders were

considered “proficient” or “distinguished learners” in English and Language Arts, meaning the majority of our students that fell between those important gateway years were just “beginning” or “developing learners.” In mathematics, less than 40 percent of 3rd through 8th graders were proficient or above, less than 37 percent in science, and only a little over a third in social studies. In every subject category, the majority of our students are considered less than proficient.

Those are issues that require solutions, not blame.

That’s why I worked with the General Assembly to allocate a total of \$8.9 billion in state funds for K-12 education in the FY 2017 budget. That includes:

- \$300 million in additional funds for salary increases for educators. If you didn’t receive that raise, I encourage you both to ask your school board why that was the case and to let my office know so that we can be aware of that failure to pass along funds meant for you.
- Over \$5 million for salary increases for school lunchroom workers, school bus drivers, school nurses, career, technical, and agricultural education program teachers, and Regional Education Service Agencies (RESAs),
- Over half a million dollars to assist what are classified as low wealth school systems,
- \$750,000 to expand the REACH Georgia Scholarship program to additional school systems and to pilot a program for youth in foster care,
- \$29.4 million for growth in the Move on When Ready dual enrollment program,

- \$2.5 million for audio-video technology and film equipment grants, and
- \$2.8 million to support information technology applications utilized by local school systems.
 - Incidentally, over \$100 million has been devoted to Connections for Classrooms and educational digital resources through the budgets from FY 2014 to this current budget.
- The FY 2017 budget also includes more than enough funds to account for this year's enrollment growth.
- And on top of all those figures, we've added hundreds of millions of dollars in bond packages, including:
 - Over \$225 million in bonds for construction, renovation, and equipment for local school systems and the Georgia Academy for the Blind,
 - \$14.3 million in bonds for buses for local school systems,
 - \$8 million in bonds for vocational equipment for local school systems, and
 - \$4.9 million in bonds for construction and equipment at the FFA/FCCLA centers in Covington and Fort Valley.

You know, it's funny that we often get accused of cutting spending on education, when in actuality we've increased it every year that I've been in office. In fact, my administration has spent more of the state budget on education than any administration in the past 50 years since Governor Carl Sanders was in office. When our revenues dropped during the Great Recession, we adjusted all state spending downward to account for that decline except for education, which accounts for over 50 percent of our yearly

budgets. While every other department or state entity saw a decrease in funding, we not only held the line on education, we increased the money we've devoted to it every year. Yet we're still accused of having made austerity cuts. Now, you don't have to be a math teacher to know that doesn't add up.

It reminds me of when I was a congressman in Washington where I was accustomed to hearing that we had cut certain expenditures. When I'd go to see just what those so-called "austerity" cuts were, I was very surprised to learn that in D.C., you can spend more than you did last year on something and still be accused of cutting. Unfortunately, when it comes to education, many people in Georgia have adopted the D.C. definition of austerity and maligned my office with it, all while we've spent more and more.

But as I said at this very same venue last year, the underlying issues facing our classrooms today – the challenges that often lead to academic failure – cannot be solved by simply throwing more state dollars at the issue. And we know that money alone does not result in improved student performance because over the forty-year period between 1970 and 2010, education spending nationally increased 185 percent in the United States while performance on our national exams remained the same.

And that, friends, is why I created the Education Reform Commission – to bring together the brightest stakeholders from all perspectives to study, more comprehensively than we ever have before, the reasons for educational stagnation. As part of their recommendations, I asked that they examine ways in which we

can transform how we fund our schools so that districts can be empowered to tackle effectively the challenges of the 21st century. We cannot do that with a funding formula designed for another, bygone era. You may be interested to know that under the new formula the Commission proposed, every school system will receive at least the same amount of funding as they currently do, if not more. To put it bluntly, there will be no losers under this formula.

To ensure that we are doing this right, my office not only moved back the deadline for this commission's recommendations so that they could be fairly examined by all those affected, but we also created the Teacher Advisory Committee this year to make sure that the concerns of those who report to you are accounted for. This committee is comprised of 90 educators throughout the state who have experience from kindergarten through high school and across a wide range of subject areas, including the STEM fields, fine arts and special and gifted education.

In short, I am not like the young student who, failing to earn good marks in school, went up to the teacher one day and said, "I don't want to scare you, but my Daddy says if I don't get better grades, somebody is going to get a spanking."

I'm not here to blame teachers. I'm here to say the status quo is obviously not working, it hasn't worked for quite some time, and it will not be tolerated any longer. These are issues we need to address together, and we have to do it now.

Because what we're talking about when we discuss education is not just classrooms and lesson plans... we're talking about the very future of this state, and even more directly the future of those individual lives you see walking your school hallways each day.

Those little people in pigtails and tennis shoes will one day – and quicker than any of us can believe – become adults with adult-sized problems. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2015 alone, those with a bachelor's degree or higher earned 68 percent more than their peers who had only a high school diploma. If that's not enough to convince us how crucial quality education is, maybe a look in our prisons is. As I've said many times, roughly 70 percent of those currently housed in a Georgia corrections facility do not have a high school diploma. Most of them can't even read at an adult level.

If you truly want what's best for those young lives you and your staffs are responsible for during the school week, then we've got to address these deficiencies and do so as expeditiously as possible. We can't afford to wait, and those eager minds shouldn't have to.

According to a recent study of state education systems across 17 key metrics, Georgia ranked 35th out of all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Now, we're certainly not at the back of the pack, which is good, but we can and must do better. That reminds me of a story about a teacher who said to a student, "Didn't I tell you to stand at the end of the line?" And the student responded, "I tried, but there was somebody already there!"

Well as I say, we're not at the back of the line, but I want us to be at the front of it, regardless of who's already there.

To do that effectively, we've got to do something about our failing schools. And this brings me to a subject that tends to make educators a little restless, so brace yourselves.

You've no doubt heard much about the Opportunity School District measure that will be on the ballot this November. There was an article in the AJC just this week from Ty Tagami about school board reactions concerning the OSD proposal. The discerning reader will note that those school systems with the most failing schools tend to be the ones who oppose it. I would counter that if they spent half as much time addressing the problems in their systems as they do railing and working against OSD, it wouldn't be necessary.

I'm reminded of what Dr. Geoffrey Canada said in a talk he gave about failing schools in 2013. For those of you who don't know, he is the charismatic president and former CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone in New York, a non-profit that, among other things, runs three charter schools which have not only raised test scores for its students compared to the surrounding area, but has also, according to a Harvard study, "effectively reversed 'the black-white achievement gap in mathematics... and reduced it in English Language Arts'".

He said about his experience in presenting innovation in education, and I quote, "if you come up with a plan to change things, people consider you radical... they will say the worst

things about you... but the science is clear.” “We can’t stifle innovation. We have to innovate. People in our business get mad about innovation, they get angry if you do something different, if you try something new.”

Well, there are those in Georgia who are now calling me a radical and much worse because I’m daring to say we can do better and refusing to accept chronic failure as an inevitability. They will curse my name because they say they can’t see how doing something different will give us different results. Don’t let them ensnare you with that kind of myopic thinking and lethargy of bitterness.

All we ask is that a school earn a 60 or above on our College and Career Ready Performance Index. A 60... That’s a pretty low floor, don’t you think? And yet there are schools out there that haven’t received close to a 60 in over a decade. Those who experience that failure firsthand and want to look for excuses outside of the school make me think of the student who said to his teacher, “I don’t think I deserved a zero on this test!” To which the teacher replied, “I agree, but that’s the lowest mark I could give you!”

We would never allow our children to eat in a restaurant that scores anywhere near a 60 on their yearly ratings – which would be closed down, anyway – so why do we think it’s ok to send them to schools that do? Right now, 127 schools across our state are scoring below a 60. These schools span the demographic divides. Some of them are urban... some are rural... some are predominantly minority-attended schools and others are not. So

this isn't just a problem for one group of people or subset of our population. It's not confined to any one location or community. It's a problem for all of us.

And no matter your particular feelings on what we ought to do, I think we can all agree that what we're currently doing isn't working for the 67,924 children who attend those schools – whose graduation rate, I might add, is an abysmal 55.7 percent. Far too often in education discussions, it's adults talking about adults, not the children we're supposed to be serving.

Let's start talking about the children. Let's make sure that our schools serve their best interests and change them when they don't. Let's end a status quo that does not produce results, despite ever-greater sums of money. Let's listen to the numbers – which have no agenda – instead of to the advocacy groups and resentful partisans who do. Let's put our children first, not the adults who stand to lose from making our system better. Let's explore, together, new opportunities to move the needle on gauges that haven't changed in years.

Every new school day presents a new opportunity for student and teacher alike. Let's seize this opportunity to make our schools better, our children's future brighter, and our long-term economic success as a state more secure. Let's begin today... together...