



## **STATE SUPERINTENDENT'S RACE: Responses to PAGE from Alisha Thomas Searcy**

### **1. What strategies do you propose to help students recover from lost learning time due to COVID -19?**

We know that the research says high dose tutoring is the most effective way to help students recover from lost learning time. I think this effort must begin with assessing students to understand where they are and where the gaps are. Then there must be an individualized plan that focuses on the needs of that particular student. I support this measure as well as mental health resources for both students and teachers to address those needs and help remove barriers to teaching and learning.

### **2. What is the role of the Georgia Department of Education in enhancing school safety?**

As State School Superintendent my first priority is school safety. As a parent it is my biggest concern. I believe the role of the DOE is to get a clear understanding of the needs of local communities and work to provide support based on those specific needs. This includes security personnel, facilities, and mental health. Second the DOE can create a clearinghouse of resources from the state and federal level that will aid districts and schools in accessing grants, training and best practice. DOE can create a guide for schools in ways to protect schools related to personnel, facilities, and mental health. The DOE can play a significant role in providing districts with guidance and support to enact best practices, and leverage resources they need specific to their district.

### **3. What changes should be made to Georgia's school accountability system?**

We need to first utilize an assessment that gives us information we can use. Whether it is data to determine where gaps are for students or additional support is needed for teachers, it must be given in a timely manner, long before the school year ends. I would like to see assessments such as the MAP used where we can benchmark a student's progress throughout the year and provide supports along the way.

We need assessments to tell us how a student, school, district and how the state are performing. Not for punitive purposes, but for support purposes and to reward both growth and proficiency. We also need an accountability system that measures more than test scores. I would like to see us hold schools and districts accountable for measures such as teacher retention, mental health and other non-academic services provided, career pathway options available, as well as soft skills for students. Our goal should be to develop leaders, critical thinkers, problem solvers and world citizens. Once we are clear of the purpose of public education (as it has changed over the decades), we should then create an accountability system based on those measures. Currently we

are led by test scores, which don't tell us most of what we need to know about schools working for students, educators and parents.

When I was a superintendent, I found myself being frustrated by focusing so heavily on test scores. The system I led achieved the test scores we needed, but I would have preferred to focus more efforts on developing social and soft skills in students, giving teachers more freedom to teach content and build relationships with students, and engaging more with the community. We put an immense amount of work to support teachers that enabled us to take our retention rate from 25% to 75%. However, that was not measured in a way that acknowledged our commitment to respecting and honoring teachers.

#### **4. What changes should be made to Georgia's teacher and principal evaluation system?**

I co-sponsored the law that created TKES and LKES. The intent was to be able to provide meaningful feedback to teachers and leaders and again focus on the right things in teaching and learning. When I became a superintendent and was responsible for conducting principal evaluations for the principals I managed, I realized that the legislative intent did not meet the tool that was developed. I found myself just checking boxes and being more focused on the compliance of completing it than providing feedback to improve practice.

I would reduce the number of required observations. I would also like to incorporate actual teacher feedback in the leader evaluation. This would include looking at more than school climate. This would incorporate teacher input on leadership, communication, management and support provided for teachers. I would also incorporate teacher retention as a measure.

I believe most of the indicators are the right ones in terms of the levers to support teachers and leaders. I believe we need to take a look at the tools, engage teachers and principals to make revisions. Now that the tools have been in use, I am in favor of stepping back and determine whether we can make it more relevant to what's happening in classrooms today. This must happen at the same time that we should reconsider our accountability tools so that the two are aligned.

#### **5. Teacher Burnout in Georgia, a recent report from the Georgia Department of Education, highlighted challenges that have made it more difficult to attract and retain teachers, an issue PAGE members have repeatedly raised. How can the state attract more individuals to the teaching profession and encourage them to stay?**

I believe the best tool to attract new teachers is to retain the teachers we currently have and finally take action on the things PAGE and individual teachers have been saying for more than a decade. I don't think we can attract new teachers if current teachers are frustrated and feel unheard. As Superintendent, addressing teacher burnout is my top priority after school safety. This issue has lingered for more than a decade with no real leadership from state superintendents. Here are some things I will do when elected.

- 1. Create the Office of the Teacher Advocate.** In this office the full-time staff will solely focus on addressing teacher burnout, listening to teachers, creating partnerships with community and business organizations to provide resources to teachers, and will ensure teachers are involved in EVERY policy making process of the DOE. This speaks to my commitment to teachers and ongoing dedication to retaining and then attracting teachers to Georgia schools.

2. I will work with the legislature to raise the starting salary for teachers across the state to \$65k. Teachers should not have to work two jobs and I am committed to working with the state and local districts to identify the funds to do this.
3. I will address the high stakes testing issue and work to align our testing system with districts so that we aren't over testing and adding too much pressure to educators or students.
4. I will work with the legislature to enact three laws.
  1. One that requires teachers to have an uninterrupted planning time during the school day. It cannot be interrupted with staff or other meetings, so that teachers can focus on planning, preparation and collaboration.
  2. I will also work with the legislature to enact a law that gives teachers with children time off so they can attend parent teacher conferences or other school related activities for their own children.
  3. I will work with the legislature to identify funds for school districts to offer mental health days for teachers.
5. I will work with partners in the faith, business, and non-profit entities to create a marketing campaign to restore the level of respect and admiration for the field of education and educators.
6. I will create statewide celebrations and an award system for teachers to show appreciation constantly and consistently for teachers including an annual event to celebrate teachers across the state for great teaching, relationships with students, going the extra mile, and educational excellence.
7. As a former state legislator (the only candidate for this office to serve in the legislature in at least 20 years), I will stand up for teachers when I see bills being introduced that will instill fear or frustration in teachers and will serve as a champion for teachers both in the legislative process and the rule making process at the state board level. For too long, teachers have not had a champion serving in these roles.
8. Provide a training program for principals to teach best practices for leading and managing schools. We know that school leadership impacts teacher retention. I believe developing school leaders who create a supportive and positive environment for teachers will greatly impact teacher satisfaction as well.

I believe that these efforts will significantly address teacher burnout of current teachers as well as change the way we view education and educators. Once we do that and Georgia teachers can feel pride for their profession again, we will dramatically increase the number of teachers in our pipeline.

**6. Principals have a significant effect on teacher retention and, in turn, on student outcomes. How can the state recruit and support principals and assistant principals to improve their retention?**

I believe the DOE can play a greater role in recruiting and training potential school leaders. This includes recruiting a diverse pool of candidates that reflect the demographics of the state. I believe strongly in creating pipeline programs for educators who seek to lead schools as principals and superintendents. I would create and fund a program at the DOE that prepares leaders for these opportunities. I would also ensure they were exposed to the best practices in leadership and management in the country. We would also share best practices on the most effective ways to build relationships with teachers, students and parents as well as root them in practices that take responsibilities off the plates of teachers that don't advance teaching and learning.

**7. Students have greater mental health needs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. How can the state foster improved student mental health?**

Mental health of both students and educators is a priority for me. I believe districts and the state have the resources now to invest in mental health so that every school is served by a mental health professional. In addition, we need to look at rewriting the job descriptions for school counselors, social workers, and school psychologists so that they can provide direct service to students rather than focusing on other tasks unrelated to their jobs. We also need to reduce the student to counselor ratio to enable counselors to serve the social and emotional needs of students. I believe that we must normalize mental health in schools. This means acknowledging that a child's mental health comes even before academics. We need schools that can care for students and address the many needs that students have, many of them non-academic.

**8. How can the organizational capacity of the Georgia Department of Education be enhanced to support improved student success?**

We must move far away from the current approach of this department that is hands off, focuses on flexibility, and lacks vision. As a former superintendent, I know the many challenges that educators and leaders face trying to calculate how much funding they will draw down based on student FTE counts, managing the social ills children come to school with, and being the political football during elections seasons. With a shared vision, a focus on research based practices, and valuing equity, the DOE can serve as a guide to help districts implement best practices, provide ongoing supports for educators and leaders, share resources, and connect districts to one another to build relationships and scale the approaches that work. We must prioritize improving student success and invest our resources accordingly. For example, those areas that the DOE is responsible for such as creating standards and curriculum should align with the goal of improving student success. Currently, our Math standards even if taught with fidelity will take 22 years to teach. With a DOE that understands the gravity of this problem, we would pause and ensure that are standards are attainable and set both teachers and students up for success. Continuing to roll out "new standards" for the purpose of scoring political points only further impedes the goal of improving student success. Our Social Studies curriculum should embrace the diversity of the students who attend our schools rather than be subject to the whim of politics. Real leadership dictates that we protect public education, we trust educators to do their jobs, and we provide the resources districts need to be successful.

**9. Do you have additional education priorities that were not addressed in the preceding questions?**

Yes.

- Addressing the challenges in Special Education, how we can meet the needs of all students and ensure schools have the resources they need to do so.
- Working with rural districts to access broadband in every corner of the state
- Working with the legislature and stakeholders to finally revamp our funding formula
- Establishing a uniform research based practice in reading instruction that includes obtaining resources that districts can use, providing ongoing training to educators to effectively teach reading, work with our Schools of Education to align that priority, provide evaluation and timely feedback, and address the costs of obtaining a Reading endorsement so that it is more affordable and prioritized
- Creating the Office of Equity so that all students have the resources they deserve based on their individual need
- Partner with the faith and business communities to help foster relationships across the state with individual districts and schools

- Working with educators, parents, students, and stakeholders to re-imagine public education in Georgia. We must stop trying to deliver a telegram education to a TikTok generation.