



## **STATE SUPERINTENDENT'S RACE: Responses to PAGE from Supt. Richard Woods**

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

From an instructional viewpoint, one of our most precious resources is time. We know our students lost learning time due to disruptions caused by the pandemic.

I've been a strong advocate of using federal relief funds to lower class sizes and expand before/after school learning programming. Partnering with the Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network, we provided millions in BOOST grants to strengthen what afterschool providers can do for our students across the state – this year, we'll be adding over 317,000 hours to the school day in extended learning opportunities. Our Georgia Virtual School has provided tens of thousands of free seats for school districts to support the remediation/acceleration of student learning. We've also worked with Graduation Alliance to reengage families, mentor students, and ensure that at-risk students are on a path to graduate.

Since the onset of the pandemic, we've continued to be aggressive at the state level: hiring a team of Academic Recovery Specialists to support instruction in schools and classrooms across the state, rapidly expanding and scaling up quality instructional resources that are developed by Georgia teachers to support Georgia teachers, and rolling out instructional tools that leverage technology, curate resources, and allow teachers to customize lessons with high-quality, vetted content.

Recent test scores showed the resilience of our students and perseverance of our educators, despite cynics who expected our state test scores to freefall. While there are academic gaps to be addressed, students, educators, and schools are tirelessly working to address them; we must continue to extend support and grace. As I have since the beginning of the pandemic, I will continue to do my part to ensure that support and grace continues.

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

Though tragic events often serve as stark reminders of why we must continue to prioritize the safety of our students and staff, our work is – and has always been – a daily commitment.

School safety isn't adopting a quick fix or chasing fads -- it's rolling up our sleeves and working with local leaders.

It takes a comprehensive approach to keep our students and staff safe. By increasing school resource officers and mental health resources, working to ensure facilities are secure, fostering strong relationships between students and educators, and constantly coordinating resources and supports across state agencies and non-profits, we can make our schools safer.

Partnering with other state agencies like GEMA/Homeland Security, we're scaling up resources and training to keep our students and staff safe. We recently launched the Georgia Center for School Safety to curate supports, tools, and best practices. We're also providing on-the-ground support to conduct threat assessments and develop effective school safety plans and procedures.

The safety of students and staff will continue to remain a top priority under my watch.

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

Our students are more than a test score -- and so are our schools.

The current letter grade or 100-point rankings only oversimplify our schools' worth, instead of providing families with a fair or full picture of our local schools. My opponent actually voted in support of legislation that established the 100-point scale and codified many accountability pieces like CCRPI (College & Career Ready Performance Index), TKES, and LKES into Georgia law.

I have a proven track record on fighting for a responsible approach to accountability. During the development of our state's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan, when the former governor wanted nearly 100% of Georgia's accountability calculation to be based on high-stakes test scores, I fought back and kept that detrimental change from taking place.

I fought at every turn to keep the weight of high-stakes testing and accountability from adding even more pressure on our students, school leaders, and educators; while they experienced the pressures of the pandemic, they could focus on keeping learning going.

I suspended high-stakes testing and our accountability systems at the onset of the pandemic. I've been a fierce advocate for Georgia's students, educators, and schools on a national level – pushing back against high-stakes testing and hyper-accountability. In contrast, my opponent recently held a fundraiser with the architect of many of the reforms I've fought against during my tenure in office, Arne Duncan.

If honored with another term in office, I will continue to fight for an appropriate approach to accountability, working to replace the 100-point/letter grade score with a public dashboard that showcases the challenges, identifies the opportunities, and highlights the successes of every school – connecting parents and community stakeholders with the real information they want to know about their local schools.

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

I am proud to have partnered with PAGE to bring about much needed changes to the original TKES and LKES bill – eliminating SLOs (Student Learning Objectives), lowering the weight of high-stakes testing, and reducing the number of observations, while my opponent brags about authoring the original damaging legislation.

Despite measurable improvements, the current evaluation system still demoralizes teachers and doesn't professionalize them. We must move away from a ‘gotcha’ tool to one that truly treats teachers as professionals.

We need a system that supports teachers throughout their careers -- from beginning teacher to teacher leader. We need a system with built-in mentoring and induction supports for those starting in the profession, as well as greater flexibility, autonomy, and leadership opportunities for those who continue to grow in the teaching profession.

This month, the Georgia Department of Education will be launching a teacher evaluation pilot with the focus on transforming our current model. Once we identify the supports we want leaders to provide to teachers and we define a strong profile for teacher leadership, we can develop a leader evaluation pilot that folds in essential pieces while streamlining the overall requirements of the system.

#### **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?**

As the only candidate in this race with classroom teaching experience, I understand firsthand the pressures being placed on our teachers, and I understand the calling and the teaching craft.

One of my first actions in office was to commission a survey of teachers across Georgia. Over half of the teaching workforce participated resulting in the ‘Teacher Dropout Crisis’ report. This crucial action became a catalyst for change – reducing the number of high-stakes tests, eliminating SLOs, lowering the number of classroom observations, and lowering the weight of test scores in the teacher evaluation system.

Most recently, we built on that work by pulling together a Teacher Burnout Task Force, chaired by the Georgia Teacher of the Year. Not only was this task force made up of the top ten teacher finalists, but it had representation from the state’s teacher organizations, including PAGE. The report laid out a comprehensive approach to tackling teacher burnout.

Since the report, we’ve launched an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for all K-12 educators and support staff – this includes free legal, financial, counseling, and work/life resources and supports. This service not only covers educators but also immediate family members. In addition, this month we’ll be

launching a teacher evaluation pilot to transform the current system from a ‘gotcha’ tool to one that supports teachers throughout their careers.

If honored with another term in office, I will continue to tackle the actions laid out in the report and continue to protect TRS and health benefits, work to raise teacher pay, and push to extend step increases on the state salary scale throughout a teacher’s career. I will continue to do my part to ensure that teachers are treated as professionals.

I have a proven track record of supporting teachers --from eliminating the edTPA requirement and lowering the cost of certification, reducing the number of high-stakes tests, reforming the evaluation tool, and providing classroom supplies grants to making the Georgia Teacher of the Year an ex-officio member of the State Board of Education and building strong partnerships with state teacher organizations like PAGE. This track record is why I am the only candidate endorsed by Georgia educators.

When I first took on an administrative position, I vowed to never forget what it was like to be a classroom teacher. It’s a commitment I continue to carry with me each and every day.

**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?**

As a former school leader, I understand how important it is to have access to resources, support from the district, and autonomy to do the job. The strongest pipeline to school leadership is from our classrooms. If we do not have good teacher retention, then our principal and assistant principal recruitment efforts will fail.

Part of our vision for the teacher evaluation pilot is to develop and define professional progressions from beginning teacher to teacher leader. Those progressions are currently nonexistent and create huge gaps in cultivating strong instructional leaders to support our schools.

Another reform that would strengthen the leadership pipeline is to allow teachers to earn and receive compensated for leadership degrees. Currently, teachers do not earn any compensation for obtaining a leadership degree. This leads to a lack of qualified people to fill leadership positions. We must change this practice.

We must identify, streamline, and eliminate redundant or unnecessary paperwork and reporting requirements at the state and district level to allow school leaders more time to be the instructional leaders of their buildings and support their teachers and support staff. We must also continue to give them the flexibility to allocate resources centered on their unique needs.

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

One of the greatest opportunities we have is to take time during the school year to talk about the shared experience we all went through with the pandemic. We have an opportunity to go beyond the politics of the pandemic and talk about our personal experiences.

It's very typical for students to go to educators to share their challenges and stories. Though educators are always there with encouragement and support, there is often a disconnect between what the student is experiencing and what the educator is experiencing or has experienced.

With the pandemic, educator and students alike dealt with sickness, the loss of loved ones, disrupted learning, the stresses of having to be education and public health experts, etc. Those connections can be effectively leveraged to have meaningful conversations.

Mental health is a very challenging issue because it can be a term that is nebulous and a catch-all for so many issues and challenges. It's essential that it be unpacked, not only with school leaders and educators, but also with students, parents, families, and community members -- in transparent and appropriate ways.

Positive relationships between our teachers and their students is the most effective mental health program in a school. Educators need to be equipped to recognize mental health signs and signals, but cannot be expected to be mental health experts – not only does that jeopardize their own mental health (by adding additional responsibilities to their already overloaded plates), but untrained and inexperienced individuals can often do more harm than good. More importantly, programs will not succeed if parents and families aren't active participants in the process.

At the state-level, we are partnering with other state agencies whose mission is centered on this work and who are the necessary experts to coordinate services and supports. We are providing awareness training to educators and support staff as well as supporting programs like APEX in schools. Recently passed legislation supports greater parity of mental health services and will create greater cohesion at the state level.

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

Before my tenure, the Georgia Department of Education was an agency focused on command, control, and compliance. It was an entity that believed it supported institutions, not people. As someone in the district, I felt it and when I was first elected to lead the agency, I saw it firsthand.

Since my first days in office, I have been laser-focused on transforming the Georgia Department of Education into a culture of “service and support” with a mission anchored in supporting our students and educators. I do not believe in a top-down, “we-know-best” approach. Just like our students, all of our schools and educators are unique. The Georgia Department of Education has a meet-them-where-they-are

mindset that provides coaching, guidance, resources, and supports to help schools tackle the challenges they are facing – we strive to lift up the great work that is occurring in classrooms across Georgia.

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, I believe those in the field saw a Department of Education that stepped up and stepped in during a chaotic and challenging situation. Though there was no playbook or easy fix, the Department’s commitment to “compassion over compliance” became an adopted mantra and model not only across Georgia, but the nation.

If honored with another term in office, you will continue to see a Department of Education that is more streamlined, service oriented, student focused, and classroom centered.

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

In the height of the pandemic, we released our ‘Roadmap to Reimagining K-12 Education’ document (see: [gadoe.org/reimaginek12](https://gadoe.org/reimaginek12)) – a detailed vision for education in Georgia. As we’ve emerged from the pandemic, you will continue to see our agency organize our efforts around the ten (10) themes of our vision, making real progress in support of our students and educators.

From modernizing the K-12 funding formula and establishing multiple pathways for students to graduate to further reducing the emphasis on high-stakes testing and lifting up our schools and education support professionals, I have laid out a clear and comprehensive vision for the next four (4) years. Not only have I articulated a path to continue to move Georgia education forward, but I have a proven track record of getting it done.

Georgia educators know me. They know my record of substance over soundbites, results over rhetoric, and steadfast commitment over fads. They know I understand them as educators and I know them because I’ve been in their shoes -- and I keep that at the heart of all we do at the Georgia Department of Education.