



ADVANCING OPPORTUNITY:

Parents' Solutions to Georgia's Child Care Challenges

*Recommendations for Policymakers, Employers,
and Higher Education*



GEEARS
GEORGIA EARLY EDUCATION
ALLIANCE FOR READY STUDENTS

**METRO
ATLANTA**
CHAMBER



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INTRODUCTION

In the Fall of 2018, GEEARS: Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students and the Metro Atlanta Chamber released *Opportunities Lost: How Child Care Challenges Affect Georgia's Workforce and Economy*. The report painted a sobering picture, detailing how **parents' challenges with child care led to significant disruptions to their workforce participation, with far-reaching effects for employers and Georgia's economy**. More than a quarter of surveyed parents of children under age five reported a significant disruption to their or a family member's employment (quitting, not taking, or greatly changing a job) in the past year as a result of child care challenges. Nearly one in five respondents reported missing more than a full week (6+ days) of work in the past 6 months as a result of such challenges. These short- and long-term disruptions lead to a conservative **\$1.75 billion** in losses in economic activity annually and an additional **\$105 million** in lost tax revenue.

The frequency of disruptions reported in the original survey—and the extent of their impact—were so significant that, in early 2019, we set out to better understand the **nature** of the challenges families reported experiencing as well as what **solutions** parents might propose through a series of qualitative focus groups. The report that follows is derived from focus groups of Georgia parents with children ages four or younger residing in the greater-Columbus and greater-Atlanta metropolitan areas.

Method

Two sessions were conducted in each region in January 2019, for a total of four groups and 48 participants. Participants were grouped by sex, with even groups of 12 participants in each session. Demographic characteristics varied by location. In general, participants in the Columbus groups were more likely to be Black, employed part-time, and slightly younger than their Atlanta counterparts. See Appendix for a full description of participant demographics.



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In order to qualify for these groups, respondents had to satisfy a pre-screener ensuring they were the parent, step-parent, or legal guardian of a child four-years-old or younger living in the same household. To ensure an adequate mix of parents based on publicly available data of this target universe, other criteria such as employment status, education level, marital status, race, and age were included in the pre-screener.

Recruitment was conducted via telephone interviews by a Georgia-based market research firm. This firm hosted the groups at their on-site facility in Atlanta and at an off-site location in Columbus. The groups were moderated by two survey research professionals (one for females and another for males), and a standardized moderator's guide was utilized for consistency in topics discussed.

These focus groups were designed to add context to the findings from our June 2018 statewide survey of Georgia parents with children ages four or younger by discussing at length topics such as, but not limited to, the **impact and nature of child care challenges** as well as **potential workforce, higher education, and public policy solutions**.

The report that follows is in two parts; the first includes parents' descriptions of the **nature** of the challenges they experience as working families, spanning issues related to child care itself (e.g., access and affordability) and the workplace (e.g., a lack of flexibility or family-friendly policies). The second outlines proposed **solutions** for **policymakers, employers, and higher education**.

CHILD CARE CHALLENGES

Our initial report underscored that a significant portion of Georgia parents with young children experience child care challenges but did not illuminate the extent and nature of those struggles. The focus groups afforded an opportunity to probe deeper and better understand the challenges families experience at the intersection of child care and career. As with the survey, many parents in the focus groups indicated they had to quit or significantly change jobs or turn down advancement opportunities as a result of child care challenges, citing both long- and short- term (e.g., having to miss a day of work or leave early) disruptions. Parents across all groups described **a range of challenges** that led to such disruptions, including general pressure to meet the demands of both career and child rearing, a lack of affordable and accessible child care options, and limited flexibility in the workplace.



“I know it hurts my family”

Many parents described challenges in attempting to balance the demands of work and caring for a young child. A number of parents described the difficulty of **maintaining a traditional, full-time schedule**. For example, as an Atlanta father stated, “My wife is a registered nurse, but she chose to go part-time instead of full-time because it would have just been too much with regard to the baby and child care.” Others described **turning down advancement opportunities**, particularly those that required longer hours or travel that might not have been compatible with available child care options. As one Atlanta father stated, “I had to turn down a project...that would keep me away from the house too long or keep me overnight. I have turned down a couple [of opportunities].” Similarly, another Atlanta participant shared, “I was offered a job in a different state and I couldn’t take it...I would have to commute back and forth and [my wife] has to go to work...there was no way she was going to be able to do that.” Some parents, such as this Atlanta mother, described challenges **searching for work**: “The idea was to put him in [child care] so I could go do my job search, but it just didn’t work out.” Finally, others described leaving the workforce altogether, such as the Columbus father who stated, “I stay at home with her and I don’t put myself in the workforce. And I have a fairly good resume and background. I know it hurts my family.”

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A Lack of Affordable Child Care

Parents in each focus group explicitly referenced **the challenge of affording child care**, making statements such as “It [child care]’s all of your money. All of it.” (Columbus mother); “It’s such a huge financial impact.” (Atlanta father); and “There is a major problem with daycare in the United States. Daycare is too expensive for the average person.” (Columbus father). Child care is often so expensive that parents may leave the workforce or make other significant changes to their employment situation as a result. As one Atlanta mother explained, “I realized my paycheck was being eaten up by the cost of daycare, and I told my husband it doesn’t make sense for me to work. I was like, it doesn’t make sense. I’ll just stay home.” Often the costs associated with child care are far greater than families realize until *after* they’ve welcomed a child. As one Atlanta father reflected, “I didn’t think about it prior. It’s because I never thought it would cost nearly as much money as it costs to take care of a child – to send them to daycare.”

“Daycare is too expensive for the average person.”

“I realized my paycheck was being eaten up by the cost of daycare.”



Participants across all focus groups reported putting off having more children as a result of the cost of care. As one Columbus mother shared, “The cost [of child care]. Definitely. After I had [my first child] and knew how great it was, I waited quite a while. I would have had another one right away, but I know there is no way I could afford having another one.” While some parents were familiar with supports that may alleviate the financial burden of child care, such as the state’s child care subsidy program, they also reported limited access to such programs. Not surprisingly, parents nearly universally cited “more affordable child care” as a solution to the child care challenges they reported as being widespread. For example, one Atlanta mother said, “I feel like every resident should be able to have child care covered. Parents shouldn’t be scrambling trying to figure out, ‘How am I going to pay for this?’”

A Lack of Accessible Child Care

While cost was an obvious concern among focus group participants, parents reported other barriers to accessing child care, including **long waitlists, limited hours or geographic proximity, few programs that met their families' specific needs, and concerns about safety or quality**. Many parents described challenges finding child care programs with openings (e.g., “They do a lottery where you sign up...and you have no idea if you’re going to get picked or not.” – Atlanta mother) and that were geographically accessible (e.g., “If it takes you 20, 30 minutes to get to work, you don’t want a daycare way across town, and now it can turn into a two-hour morning because you have to go way up here to drop the kids off and then come back to the opposite end of the town.” – Columbus mother). Furthermore, some parents’ work schedules may not align with traditional hours of child care providers. In fact, when asked to identify the single most important issue facing her family, one Atlanta participant replied, “extended child care hours for those who work later hours.” Other parents echoed these concerns. As one Columbus mother described, “A lot of daycares close at 6:30 p.m. Where I work, we’re open until 8:00 p.m.” An Atlanta mother explained that she was unable to secure child care while she worked the third shift. A related challenge cited by parents is a lack of back-up care in the event of a sick child or schedule change. One parent in Columbus described such a scenario: “Last week, I had to call into work because my son was sick. I don’t have anybody...I can’t take him to daycare [when he’s sick], so I had to call out of work. Not only do I have to use my PTO, but I also get what’s called an ‘occurrence’ at work because I wasn’t there, and I can only have [a certain] amount of occurrences before I get fired.”

Some parents, most notably those in the Columbus groups, expressed their dissatisfaction with the **quality of available child care options**. The Columbus men in particular stated explicit concerns about safety. For example, one participant described his frustration with prior child care arrangements: “My thing was safety. Anything else can be taken care of. Whether it’s financial, whatever the case may be, but if I don’t feel like my daughter is safe, then that’s it.” Another Columbus parent reported having to quit her externship because she couldn’t find a provider with whom she was comfortable to care for her infant. A related concern expressed among some parents, most notably the Atlanta women, was the challenge of securing child care arrangements that were appropriate for their children with special needs. As one Columbus mother shared, “We both had to quit our jobs and take the kids out of daycare because [our daughter] got a liver disease. We had to stay with her because [of] all of the medications and nobody wanted to watch her or deal with it.”



Limited Flexibility for Working Parents

In addition to challenges securing affordable and quality child care, a lack of family-friendly workplace practices were among focus group participants' primary concerns. Many parents described **leaving or quitting a job as a result of limited flexibility or an absence of policies that were supportive of working parents**. Parents across focus groups described a general lack of understanding among employers. For example, one Columbus mother stated, "My issue is with my job. I need more flexibility. If I'm sick, I have to actually go to work because I've used all my time for [my son]. Some more protections with that would be great." Other parents shared similar challenges navigating caring for children who were sick or had special needs. One Atlanta mother shared, "That's how I lost my last job. My lateness and leaving because my son kept acting out." Some parents described specific threats or repercussions resulting from such challenges. For example, an Atlanta mother whose daughter was born prematurely explained, "I constantly was having to go to the hospital and the doctor's, and it came to the point where they started taking me off the schedule or they started doing things behind my back to try to push me out." Another Atlanta parent described a scenario in which she was sick during and after her pregnancy: "Even though I had medical releases, I was overlooked for promotion and was penalized...I was almost fired." One woman described winning a wrongful termination lawsuit related to her pregnancy, and several others shared they felt they were discriminated against as a result of having children.

Perhaps as a result of limited flexibility in the workplace, some parents reported looking to less traditional employment opportunities, including the "gig economy." In fact, more than half of the women in the Atlanta focus group reported having worked for alternative economy employers, such as Uber or Amazon Flex, naming flexible hours as a primary advantage. Across focus groups, participants consistently identified the value of flexibility and family-friendly practices for working parents. In fact, many of the Columbus men indicated they would be willing to take a lower-paying job if the company had family-friendly policies in place. Among those parents whose employers offered some degree of flexibility—most common in the group of Atlanta men (e.g., "Everybody is like, 'Yes, dude, just go take care of what you have to take care of.'")—there was acknowledgment of its value in allowing parents to address potential challenges. As one Atlanta mother asserted, "I'm pretty lucky. Most of my jobs, the supervisors I get understand...but not everyone is as lucky as I am." Finally, parents across focus groups, such as this Columbus mother, articulated the value of family-friendly practices for the *employer* as well as the *employee*: "When your employees are happy, that builds a good relationship, so you're going to stay – you will work harder and you will stay on for somebody you trust and you think that they would take care of you when you need it."



POLICYMAKERS

“There is no better way to invest in the long-term health and future of this state than in our young kids. Creating environments for them to thrive, both with family and their larger communities, is critical to building a foundation for them to succeed as they grow and become productive members of society.”

-Atlanta Father, focus group participant

Because child care challenges affect both young children and their parents or caregivers, **policy-based solutions to such challenges can have a two-generation impact.** As one male focus group participant from Atlanta stated, “I believe any financial assistance would have a positive impact on both the parent and children. Daycare provides great benefits of socialization for the child and allows the parent to contribute his or her skillset to the workforce. Or that time could be used for re-training or school to fill needs that exist in the current workforce.”

By simultaneously supporting the child and parent, two-generation approaches have a multiplier effect that **promotes the educational success and economic stability of the whole family.** For young children, this is particularly critical, since caring, responsive relationships between a parent and a young child lay the foundation for subsequent learning and development. Focus group participants recognized the importance of such strategies yet expressed nearly unequivocal agreement that elected officials—particularly state and local government leaders—need to be doing more to support Georgia’s youngest children and their parents. The section that follows outlines potential policy solutions—generated and vetted by parents themselves—that could ameliorate child care challenges, bolstering parents and caregivers, the state’s workforce, as well as Georgia’s youngest learners.

Focus group participants expressed nearly unequivocal agreement that elected officials—particularly state and local government leaders—need to be doing more to support Georgia’s youngest children and their parents.

ROBUST POLICIES THAT SUPPORT FAMILIES

Parents of young children make hundreds of decisions each day to ensure their children are safe, happy, and healthy. However, parents, particularly those with very young children, often struggle to balance the demands of raising children and earning an income, which affects the child, family, community, and economy.



Child Care Affordability

Parents across focus groups uniformly conveyed that the cost of child care was high and, for those with children in child care, described a range of sacrifices made in order to afford it. **Families across income levels struggle to afford child care, with the cost of child care for an infant or toddler in Georgia exceeding the cost of annual tuition at an in-state public college or university.**¹ The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends that child care constitute no more than 7% of a family's budget.² However, poor families on average spend approximately four times the share of their income on child care compared to their higher-income counterparts.³ Although frustrated with the cost of care, focus group participants recognized the importance of early learning and expressed support for better access to affordable child care. As one Atlanta mother asserted, "Child care should not be a privilege; it should be available for every child."

Expand Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS)

Georgia's child care subsidy program, **Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS)**, was generally perceived favorably by focus group participants. CAPS helps some low-income working families afford child care through scholarships and is primarily federally funded through the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). The state meets the required match and has made modest, targeted investments in recent years, adding \$5.5 million in 2017 and \$500,000 in 2019 to the state budget.

However, there was widespread agreement among focus group participants that too few families receive CAPS and that income eligibility is too strict. Initial family eligibility for CAPS is set at or below 50% of the state median income based on family size. Due to limited funding, however, the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) is only enrolling new families eligible for an identified priority group, such as children with disabilities, children in DFCS custody, or children from very low-income families (which was lowered from 100% of the Federal Poverty Level to 50% in July 2019).⁴

Parents universally agreed that expanding CAPS would be beneficial to working families. A recent report from the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) estimated that only 14.8% of income-eligible, working families are served by CAPS in Georgia.⁵ One Columbus mother suggested, "Expand the limit and the qualifications on the money – that could actually help the working family." Speaking to the income qualifications specifically, one Atlanta mother said, "There is a gap where you make too much to qualify [for CAPS], but it's still not enough to live."

In addition to meeting income eligibility, parents and caregivers must participate in 24 hours per week of approved activities, such as work or education. However, participation in a four-year degree program is not considered an approved activity under current policy (see *Higher Education* section).



Strengthen Georgia's Pre-K

Parents were generally aware and supportive of Georgia's Pre-K, the lottery-funded, "universal" (i.e., not need-based) pre-kindergarten program for 4-year-olds. Georgia utilizes a mixed delivery system, with classrooms in both private child care centers and public schools. In 2018-19, Georgia's Pre-K served 80,493 children, representing approximately 60% of Georgia's 4-year-olds.⁶

Funding cuts to Georgia's Pre-K in 2011 resulted in a shorter school year and increased class sizes. Although the number of school days has since been restored to the full 180-day calendar and funding for Pre-K is higher than it has been in the past, **class size** remains at 22 students, which does not meet the recommendation of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).⁷ In addition, although many communities have enough Pre-K slots to meet demand, there were 4,630 children on the waitlist at the end of the 2018-19 school year.⁸

Several parents in Atlanta and Columbus had experience putting their child on a **waitlist** and expressed frustration that the program is not available to everyone. One parent said that all taxpayers should have access to the program and suggested eliminating waitlists. **Georgia should capitalize on the opportunity to strengthen an already strong, popular program.**

Recognize the Importance of Infant-Toddler Care

Parents overwhelmingly shared the belief that **education starts at birth** and expressed desire for a program similar to Georgia's Pre-K for younger children. One Atlanta mother said, "I would like to experience my tax dollars being used to broaden the Georgia Lottery Pre-K program to include children from birth to 4-years-old. Every child has the right to fair education and a brighter future." In fact, research shows that high-quality infant-toddler care is crucial for a child's healthy development, with our brains growing faster between the ages of 0 and 3 than at any later point in our lives.

Despite this, **infant-toddler care is more expensive** to provide than care for older children, primarily due to lower student-staff ratios. In addition, centers that serve infants and toddlers generally receive less public funding, with a national survey showing that approximately half of centers serving preschoolers report receiving public funding in comparison to only 15 percent of centers that serve infants and toddlers.⁹

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"If we're going to revamp the education system, then we need to look at it as a lifelong process and not from pre-K on."

Due to the increased cost, many licensed child care centers do not serve infants and toddlers, making it even more difficult for parents to find care. Georgia should consider ways to support infant-toddler care, particularly for low-income families, by **increasing public funding and incentivizing providers to serve infants and toddlers**. As one Atlanta mother asserted, "If we're going to look at education and revamp the education system, then we need to look at it as a lifelong process and not from pre-K on."

CHILD CARE AFFORDABILITY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase state investment in CAPS by \$20 million, which would allow for more than 3,000 new infants and toddlers to receive a CAPS scholarship.
- Expand the income limit for CAPS to 85% of the state median income.
- Strengthen Georgia's Pre-K by:
 - Decreasing the maximum class size from 22 to 20, which was the maximum prior to funding cuts in 2011.
 - Decreasing the size of the waitlist.
 - Supporting school districts and communities in enrolling at-risk children whose parents may be unaware of the program.
- Continue Georgia's history of supporting education—from early childhood through postsecondary education (e.g., Georgia Lottery)—by using additional revenue sources as they become available (e.g., gambling) to support education, specifically for young children.

Access to High-Quality Child Care

Many focus group participants expressed that they lacked access to child care that met their needs. “Access” is **broadly defined** and may include issues related to the quality of care, a lack of open slots, geographic barriers, and the availability of back-up care, extended hours, and programs for children with special needs. Many parents expressed that they had to make sacrifices with their child care arrangements due to lack of access, such as choosing a lower quality center or relying on family, friends, or neighbors (a.k.a. kith and kin care).

Support and Strengthen Quality

Some parents, particularly those in Columbus, expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of available child care, citing issues including safety concerns and unqualified staff. Several participants expressed frustration that quality is seemingly only available to those that can afford it, with one Columbus mother saying, “I shouldn’t have to worry about my child’s well-being because I can’t afford quality care.”

Quality Rated is Georgia’s voluntary quality rating and improvement system for child care programs designed to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality of a child care program. The three-star rating system awards programs a rating based on specific standards. All programs that participate are committed to improving the quality of their program by going above and beyond Georgia’s licensing standards.

“I shouldn’t have to worry about my child’s well-being because I can’t afford quality care.”

Parents aware of *Quality Rated* generally expressed that it was a helpful, unbiased source of information. Administered by DECAL, *Quality Rated* helps parents and families find high-quality child care through a free, online tool so they can make the most informed choice for their child. At a community and state level, *Quality Rated* creates a shared understanding of quality learning and a commitment to achieving it.

Of the 4,660 eligible, licensed child care programs in Georgia, 3,483 are participating in *Quality Rated*; of those, 1,971 have received their star rating (as of November 2019).¹⁰ By December 31, 2020, all eligible child care providers that participate in CAPS must have received a star rating. As more programs become rated, more families, including some of the state's most vulnerable children, will have access to high-quality early learning. It is critical for policymakers to support both providers' participation in *Quality Rated* as well as families' awareness of the program.

Bolster the Child Care Workforce

Early care and education professionals **make significantly less than their counterparts** in similar professions. Focus group participants generally recognized this challenge and supported pay increases for teachers. One Columbus father said, "My only concern is [that] these people are underpaid and overworked, so [my child is] not going to get the proper care. Not just [my child], but all of the kids."

For example, despite recent increases, the starting salary for a Georgia Pre-K teacher with a master's degree and Georgia teaching certificate is only \$43,343/year in comparison to \$53,410/year, the average salary for Kindergarten teachers in Georgia.¹¹ **Outside of Georgia's Pre-K and Head Start, a federally funded program, early care and education providers are paid significantly less**, with lead teachers at child care centers in Georgia earning an average of \$10.14/hour and assistant teachers earning \$8.85/hour.¹² This is particularly true for infant and toddler teachers, who make less on average than teachers who serve children ages three to five.¹³

Research shows a significant factor in an early childhood teacher's decision to leave the profession is low pay. **High turnover rates** have been linked to lower program quality and shown to negatively affect a child's social and emotional development as well as relationships between teachers, children, and parents.¹⁴



Ultimately, Georgia's youngest children benefit from higher quality care when early childhood teachers continue their professional development, gain additional education or credentials, and stay longer in their jobs.

To retain and better support early childhood teachers, DECAL developed **DECAL Scholars**, which provides a range of scholarships, grants, educational counseling, financial help, and rewards to qualifying early childhood teachers. Many of the *DECAL Scholars* programs target high-needs populations (e.g., infant-toddler care) and incentivize quality care through *Quality Rated*.¹⁵ Ultimately, Georgia's youngest children benefit from higher quality care when early childhood teachers continue their professional development, gain additional education or credentials, and stay longer in their jobs.

CHILD CARE QUALITY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue to support the increased implementation of *Quality Rated*, particularly for child care providers accepting CAPS, and support non-participating providers in starting the process.
- Ensure that parents and community leaders are aware of *Quality Rated* and utilize the free, online tool when searching for child care.
- Strengthen the capacity of the early learning workforce through ongoing professional development and skill building, particularly in high-need areas (e.g., trauma-informed care).
- Increase pay and financial incentives, such as those offered through *DECAL Scholars*, for early childhood professionals, particularly for those serving infants and toddlers or employed at a child care center that accepts CAPS.

Tax Benefits for Families with Young Children

Since parents with young children are often younger themselves and at an earlier stage in their careers, it is not surprising that they earn less on average than parents of older children. A growing body of research shows how income supplements, such as tax benefits, are particularly beneficial for young children and their families by providing parents with more resources to support healthy development and decrease parental stress.¹⁶ Income supplements help **lift more young children out of poverty**, which decreases their exposure to toxic stress, increases academic achievement, and improves occupational attainment.¹⁷ In fact, research shows that “family economic conditions during early childhood have more effect on children’s skills and achievements than family income during adolescence.”¹⁸

Focus group participants were generally familiar with existing tax benefits, such as the Child Tax Credit and federal Earned Income Tax Credit. Parents who were able to take advantage of tax benefits—particularly those in the Atlanta groups—were supportive of increasing their value, citing their **ability to offset child care costs**. However, several parents expressed concern about not being able to take advantage of such benefits due to limited tax liability. In addition, some Columbus participants conveyed that these types of support may not be helpful when provided at the end of the year after child care expenses have already been incurred. Policymakers should consider finding innovative ways to ensure that tax benefits can be leveraged to better support all working families.



Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC)

The federal Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC) and similar state tax provisions can **help eligible families offset their out-of-pocket expenses for child and dependent care** by lowering the amount of taxes a family owes. CDCTC-eligible child care includes care for children under the age of 13, such as in a child care center or afterschool program, and must be necessary for a parent or caregiver to work, look for work, or, in some cases, go to school.

For the federal CDCTC, families can claim up to \$3,000 in child or dependent care expenses for one child/dependent and \$6,000 for two or more children/dependents per year. Depending on a family's income, the credit is worth between 20 and 35 percent of these expenses, decreasing as income rises. Unlike the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit, the federal CDCTC is **non-refundable**, which means that families that do not make enough to owe federal income taxes cannot receive the credit.

Beyond the federal CDCTC, Georgia and 27 other states have child and dependent care tax benefits, which are often based on the federal credit.¹⁹ In Georgia, the current Child and Dependent Care Expense Credit is 30% of the federal CDCTC a family has received, with a maximum value of \$315 for one child/dependent and \$630 for two or more children/dependents.²⁰ However, Georgia's Child and Dependent Care Expense Credit is non-refundable in comparison to 12 states that offer refundable credits, which means that the credit does not help low-income individuals who often need the most assistance affording child care.

Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)

The federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and similar state tax provisions **reward work and reduce poverty by decreasing taxes for low- and moderate-income individuals**. The EITC is primarily targeted toward working individuals raising children, with the average federal EITC for a family with children being \$3,191 in 2017 in comparison to \$298 for a family without children. Based on income, marital status, and number of children, the amount of the federal EITC "rises with earned income until it reaches a maximum level and then begins to phase out at higher income levels" of about \$41,100 to \$56,000.²¹

As a **refundable** tax credit, the federal EITC is critical in supplementing the wages of low- and moderate-income families and lifting families and children out of poverty. An estimated 1.1 million Georgians received the federal EITC credit in 2014. The EITC and Child Tax Credit lifted an average of 400,000 Georgians, including 223,000 children, out of poverty annually between 2011-13.²² Research shows that income from the EITC and Child Tax Credit supports families with young children **by improving maternal and infant health, improving school performance, and increasing college enrollment**.²³

Georgia is one of 21 states that does not have a state EITC,²⁴ despite recent efforts.²⁵ Most of the 29 states with a state EITC base it on a percentage of the federal credit.

Child Tax Credit (CTC)

The federal Child Tax Credit (CTC) and similar state provisions **help offset the cost of raising a child**. The federal CTC is worth up to \$2,000 per child annually and is partially refundable for low- and moderate-income working families. The amount of the federal CTC increases with a family's earnings starting at \$2,500.²⁶ Six states, not including Georgia, offer a state CTC. For example, North Carolina's Credit for Children offers a non-refundable set amount of \$100 per child under the age of 17 annually.²⁷

Innovative Tax Benefits to Support Families and Young Children

Beyond typical tax credits, many states have explored innovative tax benefits to increase access to and improve the quality of child care. For example, **the Louisiana School Readiness Tax Credits** is a unique package of five separate tax credits meant to incentivize quality care through Louisiana's version of *Quality Rated* (see sidebar). In Georgia, the Early Childhood Education Subcommittee of former Governor Nathan Deal's Education Reform Commission recommended implementing three similar tax credits for parents, staff, and the business community in 2015.²⁸ The state could explore other innovative tax benefits to increase access to high-quality child care, such as a pre-tax child care savings or scholarship account that would allow parents and relatives to save for child care.

SPOTLIGHT

Louisiana School Readiness Tax Credits

Implemented in 2008, the Louisiana School Readiness Tax Credits represent a comprehensive approach to improving quality by providing incentives for child care programs and staff, families using child care, and the business community to support increased quality in early childhood classrooms. In many cases, the tax credits are refundable and can be used alongside other benefits, such as Louisiana's CDCTC (called the Louisiana Child Care Credit). These tax credits have been shown to be particularly valuable in Louisiana by benefitting not only parents, but also the quality of child care programs. During the first four years of implementation, the School Readiness Tax Credits had already notably increased the quality of child care in Louisiana by nearly doubling the number of eligible child care programs participating in Louisiana's version of *Quality Rated*, increasing by nearly six times the number of staff or directors with higher level credentials, and increasing the enrollment of Louisiana's children participating in child care subsidy programs or foster care services in centers with higher quality ratings.²⁹

FAMILY TAX BENEFITS RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Improve Georgia's CDCTC by:**
 - Increasing the percentage of the federal credit used to calculate the state credit.
 - Making it refundable to benefit low-income families with little to no state income tax liability.
- **Encourage eligible individuals, particularly young parents (of which only 35 percent in Georgia claimed EITC in 2017),³⁰ to take advantage of the federal EITC.**
- **Explore a state EITC that supports low-income working Georgians and their families.**

Paid Family Leave

Paid family leave—spanning sick, parental, and medical leave—has widespread, bipartisan support, which was universally echoed in responses from focus group participants.³¹ One Atlanta father said, “Paid maternity and paternity leave is needed and it provides many benefits to families and the community. Being able to spend time with your kids helps create bonds [for] a lifetime. It helps engage parents to be active participants in their kids’ lives. And the peace of mind creates more engaged, happy workers when they return to the workforce.”

Paid **sick**, **family**, and **medical** leave allows individuals to take time off to care for their child, another family member, or themselves for short- or long-term disruptions. Paid **parental** leave provides birth, adoptive, and foster parents time off to welcome and bond with a new child without sacrificing their economic security. Paid parental leave has been shown to provide benefits to employers, families, and children, including decreasing infant mortality, improving a newborn’s health and well-being, increasing the likelihood that new parents will return to work, and decreasing turnover costs.³² Despite widespread support for parental leave, nearly one in four women return to work within two weeks of giving birth.³³

The United States is **one of only two countries** in the world that do not have a national **paid** leave policy to allow mothers to recover after childbirth and spend time caring for and bonding with their newborn (the other country being Papua New Guinea).³⁴ Passed in 1993, the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) is the current federal law requiring employers with 50 or more employees to provide up to 12 weeks of **unpaid** leave to eligible employees. However, only an estimated 40% of Georgians are eligible for and can afford to take unpaid leave under FMLA.³⁵

More leaders are recognizing the benefits of paid family leave. In the absence of federal legislation, an increasing number of states (eight as of July 2019) are passing laws requiring some sort of paid family leave.³⁶ A number of bills related to paid family leave have been introduced by Democrats and Republicans in Congress, and the House held its first-ever hearing on creating a national paid family leave policy in May 2019.

In addition, many states have begun to **set an example** for the private sector to follow by offering paid leave for state employees. For example, in May 2019, North Carolina’s Governor signed an executive order providing up to eight weeks of paid parental leave to eligible state employees and, in September 2019, North Carolina’s Judicial Branch followed suit.³⁷ In March 2017, Missouri’s Governor signed an executive order providing up to six weeks of paid parental leave to eligible employees in his office and state agencies led by his appointees.³⁸ Since then, five of six statewide elected officials have done the same, making nearly every state agency employee in Missouri eligible for paid parental leave.³⁹

“Paid maternity and paternity leave... helps engage parents to be active participants in their kids’ lives. And the peace of mind creates more engaged, happy workers when they return to the workforce.”



Despite widespread support for parental leave, nearly one in four women return to work within two weeks of giving birth.



In July 2019, Georgia House Speaker David Ralston announced a new paid family leave policy that will allow employees of the **Georgia House of Representatives** of any gender to take three weeks of paid leave when welcoming a new child into their family through birth, adoption, or foster care.⁴⁰ This represents a critical step forward for working families in Georgia and **provides a model for others to emulate**. In addition, six municipalities in Georgia offer paid family leave to their employees as of September 2019 (Atlanta, Clarkston, Marietta, Warner Robins, Fort Valley, and Bibb County).⁴¹ The state can build on this momentum if leaders in both the private and public sectors explore paid leave policies that support hard-working Georgia families. For more on how businesses play a role in increasing access to paid family leave, see the *Employers* section.

PAID FAMILY LEAVE POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Provide eight weeks of paid family leave to eligible state, city, and/or county employees, thereby setting an example for the private sector to follow suit.

SYSTEM COORDINATION AND LEADERSHIP TO MAXIMIZE RESOURCES AND SUPPORT CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The challenges that families face are **often interconnected**, affecting both children and parents. Coordination among government agencies can facilitate the ability of programs and communities to simultaneously serve young children and their families in a myriad of ways, including helping ensure the continuity of services, allowing problems to be addressed in a timely manner, avoiding duplicated services and supports, and providing more streamlined resources.

In Georgia, several agencies administer the programs that serve Georgia's young children, including DECAL, Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH), Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS), Georgia Department of Community Health (DCH), and Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE). Although there is overlap, several other state agencies provide social services and supports to parents, including the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG), University System of Georgia (USG), and Georgia Department of Economic Development (GDEcD). **Since these agencies often serve the same families, many opportunities for connections and linkages exist.**

Coordination also creates opportunities for **innovative solutions** that maximize resources and increase the effectiveness of programs (see *Spotlight*). By braiding and blending federal, state, and local funding, Georgia can better serve more families. For example, an income-eligible child attending Georgia's lottery-funded Pre-K program can receive a CAPS scholarship (a primarily federal program) for afterschool care. In addition, by linking and utilizing data on programs that serve Georgia's youngest children and their families across state agencies, the state can make data-driven decisions, measure intended outcomes, and increase collaboration across programmatic activities.

Finally, state agencies and government can **take the lead on implementing family-friendly workplace policies and benefits for their own employees**, setting an example for other sectors to follow suit (e.g., paid parental leave in Missouri). Beyond paid leave, family-friendly policies and benefits might include flex time, referral services for child care and other resources, and other innovative ways to support employees with young children.

SYSTEM COORDINATION AND LEADERSHIP RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase data sharing, coordination, and analysis to better understand how different programs and factors affect short- and long-term child outcomes.
- Coordinate and streamline policies, programs, and funding across state agencies to provide more young children and families with the services they need to thrive.
- Leverage funding from philanthropic and private sectors in coordination with government-funded programs.
- Take the lead in implementing family-friendly policies for state employees to serve as a model for other sectors to follow suit.



SPOTLIGHT

Two-Gen Georgia: A Cross-Agency Partnership

Two-Gen Georgia, a project of DECAL, USG, TCSG, and GDEcD, supports low-income families and their children through two-generation approaches to education and economic stability. *Two-Gen Georgia* has a special focus on student parents who have children eligible to participate in CAPS. Started in 2016, *Two-Gen Georgia* utilizes a variety of collaborative approaches to support low-income student parents and their children, including:

- Increasing cross-agency coordination and collaboration between the CAPS program and the workforce and postsecondary education systems
- Providing professional learning opportunities on two-generation strategies to state agency leadership, partners, and frontline staff
- Piloting new and expanding existing two-generation strategies in targeted areas of the state with existing cross-systems collaboration

Two-Gen Georgia has created a regular, ongoing partnership among state agencies that serve Georgia's young children and their parents and solidified a commitment from all partners to integrate two-generation approaches in their work. Regarding *Two-Gen Georgia*, Governor Brian Kemp remarked,

“I commend our state’s higher education, workforce, and early learning agencies for working together to partner with communities across Georgia on these two-generation strategies.”



EMPLOYERS

Both public and private investments are needed to support families with young children, and parents across focus groups had much to share regarding how employers might help them **address child care challenges** and **better balance the demands of work and child rearing**. One mother from Atlanta called for “more jobs that accommodate those with small kids.” When describing the impact of family-friendly workplace policies, one Columbus mother explained, “It speaks volumes when the people who take care of you also take care of your family.”

Having established itself as business leader, Georgia is primed to build on its legacy of being “the #1 state to do business”⁴² by marshaling public and private resources to become **a top state in which to raise a family**. Employees with young children identified a range of strategies that would help the state realize this potential, including the implementation of specific family-friendly practices in the workplace as well as the championing of policies that support families and young children across Georgia—the state’s future workforce.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY PRACTICES TO BOLSTER EMPLOYEES AND KEEP BUSINESSES STRONG

Employers that implement two-generation strategies—those that consider the needs of parents *and* their children—can help families build strong foundations for academic and career success, while also supporting the sustainability and resiliency of their bottom line. Parents participating in the focus groups shared the universal belief that family-friendly policies benefited themselves **and their employers**. One Columbus father said, “When you have a happy employee, you’re making money for the company. You can offer something to the employee because you know they’re going to give something back.” Research supports this notion, with companies that implement family-friendly policies experiencing increased productivity, reduced turnover, improved morale, and decreased workplace absences.⁴³

As workplace culture and demands change, a family-friendly workplace is critical in recruiting and retaining employees. Such practices provide a competitive advantage in attracting qualified, skilled candidates and reducing employee-initiated turnover by investing in talent. Following economic growth after the last recession and a drop in unemployment rates, businesses have increasingly struggled to attract and retain qualified employees.⁴⁴



Focus group participants overwhelmingly stated that family-friendly policies, such as benefit options and flexibility, were a consideration in choosing their current place of employment. In fact, many stated that they would take a lower paying job in exchange for access to additional family-friendly benefits and policies, most notably employer-sponsored child care.

Parents expressed support for employers offering a range of benefits as opposed to a one-size-fits-all approach. Employers can ensure that family-friendly policies and benefit options are effectively communicated to all employees, including throughout the hiring and retention process. Support from company leadership is vital in helping employees be aware and take advantage of specific benefits without feeling that utilizing these benefits will hurt their career or advancement opportunities. Employers should regularly survey and measure employee satisfaction with new and existing benefit options to ensure that benefit plans meet the needs of their employees.

The section that follows outlines a menu of options, from referrals to employer-sponsored or on-site child care, to fit the employer's capacity and needs. Not all options will work for every employer, but there is something for every employer. Small changes can shift overall company culture and garner support for larger changes in benefit options in the future. At a minimum, these recommendations can serve as conversation-starters for human resource professionals, business owners, CEOs, and even employees as they explore ways to create a more family-friendly workplace.

Hourly wage, part-time, and low-wage workers are significantly less likely to have access to family-friendly benefits, even within the same company.⁴⁵ As a vital part of the workforce, employers should consider ways to include part-time, hourly, and low-wage workers in existing and new policies (e.g., prorating the number of hours of sick leave provided to full-time employees).⁴⁶

Supports for Young Children

Provide Child Care Services and/or Supports

Ensuring young children have access to high-quality child care while their parents are at work is essential to reducing barriers to employment and increasing labor force participation, particularly for low-income families. Yet many parents struggle to access such high-quality care. Employers can help by implementing a range of supports, including on-site child care programs, subsidizing the cost of child care for their employees, offering child care referral services, and providing access to emergency or back-up care.

Focus group participants overwhelmingly expressed support for **on-site or near-site child care**, but only two—one father in Atlanta and another in Columbus—reported access to this benefit. The Atlanta father expressed that free, on-site child care is the primary reason he and his wife (who works at the same company) choose to remain with their current employer. Many parents expressed that on-site child care services would decrease the number of days they take off work. A national 2016 survey of more than 3,000 parents with access to employer-sponsored care supports this notion, underscoring that the service is “indeed a significant factor in employee recruitment, retention, and productivity.”⁴⁷



Employers not able to provide on-site or near-site child care for their employees on their own can partner with nearby companies to **share the expenses and management of an off-site service** for their combined employees. Employers can also arrange to **directly subsidize** the cost of child care for employees at nearby child care programs. Additionally, employers can help employees find nearby child care that meets their needs through **Georgia's Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) System**. For those unable to accommodate a referral system, employers can promote *Quality Rated*, the state's free online tool that helps parents find high-quality child care (e.g., posters in the break room).

Beyond regular care, employers should consider ways to **provide back-up care** for unforeseen circumstances, such as changed working hours or a sick child. For example, employers can contract with a nearby child care provider to offer back-up care to employees or offset the cost of back-up care through scholarships and stipends, particularly for employees unable to work from home.

There are **unique tax benefits** to providing child care services for employees. Expenses incurred by an employer to provide child care services to their employees can be classified as a business-related expense under the federal tax code (i.e., it is deductible), and the federal Employer Child Care Tax Credit allows employers to claim a tax credit of up to 25% of eligible facility expenditures (including contracted services through a third party), plus 10% of CCR&R expenditures, up to a maximum of \$150,000/year.⁴⁸ Georgia has a similar state tax provision allowing eligible employers that provide child care services to employees to claim a tax credit of up to 75% of the employer's direct costs. Eligible Georgia employers that purchase property to operate child care services for their employees may also claim a tax credit for 100% of the value of the property at a rate of 10%/year over ten years. The Georgia state tax credits may not exceed 50% of the employer's state income tax liability for that year.⁴⁹

Offer Dependent Care Assistance Plans

Another benefit employers may provide to their employees to help offset the cost of child care is a Dependent Care Assistance Plan (DCAP), a Flexible Spending Account (FSA) for child care. Focus group participants were generally aware of this benefit, with many of the Atlanta fathers describing access to the benefit as particularly useful.

Through a DCAP, employees elect to have a portion of their pre-tax salary—up to \$5,000 annually—set aside for child care expenses. This can save the employee an estimated 20-40% on their child care expenses depending on their income tax bracket. This is a popular option for employers as **there is no liability to the employer**. This benefit is offered by 41% of employers in the United States according to the National Compensation Survey.⁵⁰



Supports for Parents and Caregivers

Implement Comprehensive Family and Medical Leave Policies

Despite widespread public support, an overwhelming number of parents lack access to paid family leave, which was reflected in the focus groups. Paid family leave may include sick, family, and medical leave as well as parental leave for welcoming a new child – all of which are critical in supporting the parents' continued participation in the workforce.

For **parental leave** specifically, focus group participants expressed frustration over the lack of access to this benefit, with one Columbus mother saying, “You force people to quit when you don’t have a choice. What are you going to do?” Others described patching together paid, partially paid (typically based on a percentage of an employee’s salary), and unpaid leave, short/long-term disability, and sick/vacation days of one or more parents to take care of a new child.

Focus group participants were generally aware of the basic components of the Family and Medical Leave Act, the federal law that mandates up to 12 weeks of **unpaid** leave for eligible employees. However, there was some confusion over which companies are exempt from the law (those with less than 50 employees). Both the public (see *Policymakers* section) and private sectors can play a vital role in creating family-friendly paid leave policies for their employees.

Early relationships with a caregiver or parent are critical for a young child’s developing brain. Developing responsive and caring early relationships between a child and a parent requires the consistency and time provided by a comprehensive paid parental leave policy. Research shows that paid parental leave policies also help employers by **increasing the likelihood parents return to work, reducing turnover, and improving morale**.⁵¹ However, only an estimated 17% of U.S. workers have access to paid family leave through their employer.⁵²

When creating parental leave policies, employers should consider what has been shown to be most beneficial to both employers and their employees. **Paid** parental leave is critical, as many cannot afford to take unpaid leave during a time when they are likely to incur additional costs.⁵³ This is particularly true for hourly wage employees, who are less likely to have access to paid parental leave and less likely to be able to afford unpaid leave. Not surprisingly, **hourly wage workers are more likely to drop out of the labor force after giving birth**.⁵⁴



Only an estimated 17% of U.S. workers have access to paid family leave through their employer.





Employers can **ensure that the duration of their parental leave policies offers enough time for parents to bond with and care for a newborn or newly adopted child and to care for their own serious health conditions**, including pregnancy and childbirth recovery. One Columbus mother said, “It should be more than six weeks because six weeks is not enough time for your baby and for you to get back to normal.” Major medical associations, including the American Public Health Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Congress of Obstetrics and Gynecology, recommend *at least* six (ACOG) to 12 (APHA and AAP) weeks of paid parental leave following the birth of a child.⁵⁵ In fact, most child care providers do not serve children younger than six-weeks-old, and many will not accept children until 12 weeks or later.

Many male focus participants felt strongly that parental leave **should be available for fathers** as well as mothers, with one Atlanta father stating that paternity leave stresses “the importance of both parents at an early age.” Paternity leave promotes parent-child bonding, improves child outcomes, and increases gender equity at home and in the workplace.⁵⁶ Beyond offering paid parental leave, companies can actively encourage women and men to take advantage of the full length of their parental leave **by addressing company culture and putting protections in place** to ensure that employees taking parental leave can return to the same or a similar position following their leave.⁵⁷

A **comprehensive** leave policy, one that extends beyond parental leave, affords important benefits to both employee and employer. **Paid family and medical leave** allows employees to take time off to address a long-term medical issue for themselves, their children, or another family member (e.g., an aging parent). Although up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave is required for eligible employees under the Family and Medical Leave Act, access to **paid** leave is often critical to ensure proper care and treatment for people with special needs or a long-term illness and their families.⁵⁶ One Atlanta mother described being taken off the work schedule and “pushed out” of her job due to dealing with the medical needs of her premature infant.

Paid sick leave to address short-term medical issues, such as an illness or injury, is also a critical support for employees and was widely supported by focus group participants.

SPOTLIGHT

A Family-Friendly Culture at Rubicon Global

In addition to unlimited paid time-off and a generous paid maternity and paternity leave benefit, Rubicon gives employees access to 24-hour, professional, fully screened child care providers to help them in establishing initial care for their children or assisting when regular care is unavailable.

“With one of our core values to be passionate, we are truly passionate about our employees, knowing that providing competitive benefits and work-life balance will foster a prosperous and inclusive culture.”

For example, many focus group participants described having to take unpaid time off for medical appointments for themselves or their children. Although Georgia law does not require companies to provide sick leave, an estimated 55.4% of private sector employees in Georgia have access to paid sick days.⁵⁹ This varies significantly based on company size, occupation, and income. For example, 81% of restaurant workers nationally do not have access to any paid sick leave.⁶⁰ In addition, the National Compensation Survey found that only 31% of low-wage workers have access to paid sick leave.⁶¹ Not surprisingly, workers with access to paid sick leave are more likely to take time off for an illness or injury, seek medical care, recover from disability and illness more quickly, and utilize preventive health care services, **allowing them to fully return to the workplace sooner and preventing the spread of illness.**⁶² The Georgia Family Care Act of 2017 requires those businesses with 25 or more employees that offer sick leave to allow employees to use five days of earned sick leave for the care of immediate family members. However, without legislative action, the requirement will sunset on July 1st, 2020.⁶³

Only 31% of low-wage workers have access to paid sick leave. Not surprisingly, workers with access to paid sick leave are more likely to take time off for an illness or injury, seek medical care, recover from disability and illness more quickly, and utilize preventive health care services.

Support New and Expecting Parents

Beyond paid parental leave, many focus group participants, particularly mothers, echoed the need for additional flexibility for new and expecting parents. For example, **employers could allow employees to return to work in a part-time capacity when transitioning back to the workforce** after welcoming a new child. One Columbus mother had access to this type of benefit and stated, “At our job, they do have a transition period back so when you have a baby, when you do come back to work, the first two weeks you get to work half days to transition back onto your job and then you go back to whatever your normal hours were – I thought that was pretty cool.”

Employers should also consider **physical accommodations to meet the needs of new and expecting parents** and ensure equitable treatment. For example, necessary accommodations for new or expecting parents may include carrying a water bottle, sitting instead of standing, additional time for bathroom breaks, and restricting the weight a worker can lift. Workplace accommodations for parents who are breastfeeding—including flexible scheduling, a designated, clean, and private space for breastfeeding or expressing milk, and lactation support services (e.g., counseling, education)—should also be taken into consideration.

Enacted in 1978, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act is the primary federal law that prohibits discrimination based on pregnancy or pregnancy-related medical conditions in all aspects of employment, including hiring, promoting, and firing, at businesses with 15 or more employees. Several additional federal laws, including the Family and Medical Leave Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, may protect the rights of new and expecting parents in certain situations.⁶⁴



For example, the Affordable Care Act dictates that employers that fall under the Fair Labor Standards Act must provide employees with break time to pump and a private place to express milk that is not a bathroom. 27 states (not including Georgia) have additional state laws further requiring reasonable accommodations for at least some pregnant workers.⁶⁵

A small number of focus group participants described employment settings that were not conducive to a healthy pregnancy or recovery from child birth. For example, despite her former employer knowing of her medical needs, one Atlanta mother attributed being asked to pick up heavy materials during pregnancy or postpartum with leaving her job. Even with existing protections, pregnancy-related accommodations are often unmet and can lead to employment disruptions. Nearly 31,000 pregnancy discrimination claims were filed nationally during a five-year period between 2010-2015, with Georgia having the ninth highest share of claims relative to the number of women in the workforce.⁶⁶

Increase Flexibility

Flexibility might include flextime (allowing employees to customize hours within a certain range), working from home or telecommuting, temporary part-time work, and flexible scheduling. Focus group participants **overwhelmingly recognized the value of flexibility and wished more employers would offer more flexible work options and scheduling.** For example, one Columbus mother said, “I need more flexibility. If [my child] gets sick, I have to worry about [them]. If I’m sick, I have to actually go to work because I’ve used all my time [on my child]. Some more protections with that would be great.” Flexibility can also help increase parents’ engagement in their child’s education and well-being, such as attending school activities or volunteering at their child’s school or early learning center.⁶⁷

Many Atlanta men reported employers providing flextime and the option to work from home or telecommute. One Columbus mother expressed that **flexibility is the reason she stayed with her current organization,** despite being able to “be paid much more for what I do somewhere else.” Many focus group participants also felt that increased flexibility had benefits for the employer by increasing employee morale and productivity.

SPOTLIGHT

No One-Size-Fits-All at Gas South

Gas South is a leading natural gas marketer in the southeastern U.S. and has been recognized as a Top Workplace by the AJC since 2016. The company offers a variety of employee benefits including paid parental and partner leave, telecommuting, a \$15 minimum wage for Customer Care employees, a company-wide annual bonus, free financial counseling and a generous paid-time-off policy to support a healthy work-life-family balance.

“Great people deserve great benefits. Leadership at Gas South understands how important it is to invest in our employees and that’s why we’re committed to the health and well-being of our team members and their families.”

Kevin Greiner
CEO and President, Gas South

Gas South has taken a close look at how they can make sure the company’s success directly benefits the communities they serve. Gas South believes that communities are strongest when children are well and have opportunities to reach their full potential. This means helping families build strong foundations, helping to meet their basic needs and providing positive pathways for kids. That’s why Gas South is committed to giving 5% of their profits to help children in need.

One Atlanta mother said, “The days I work from home, I’m working nine hours instead of six...because I don’t have to go to work.” One Columbus mother underscored the importance of ensuring some sort of flexibility was available for part-time workers.

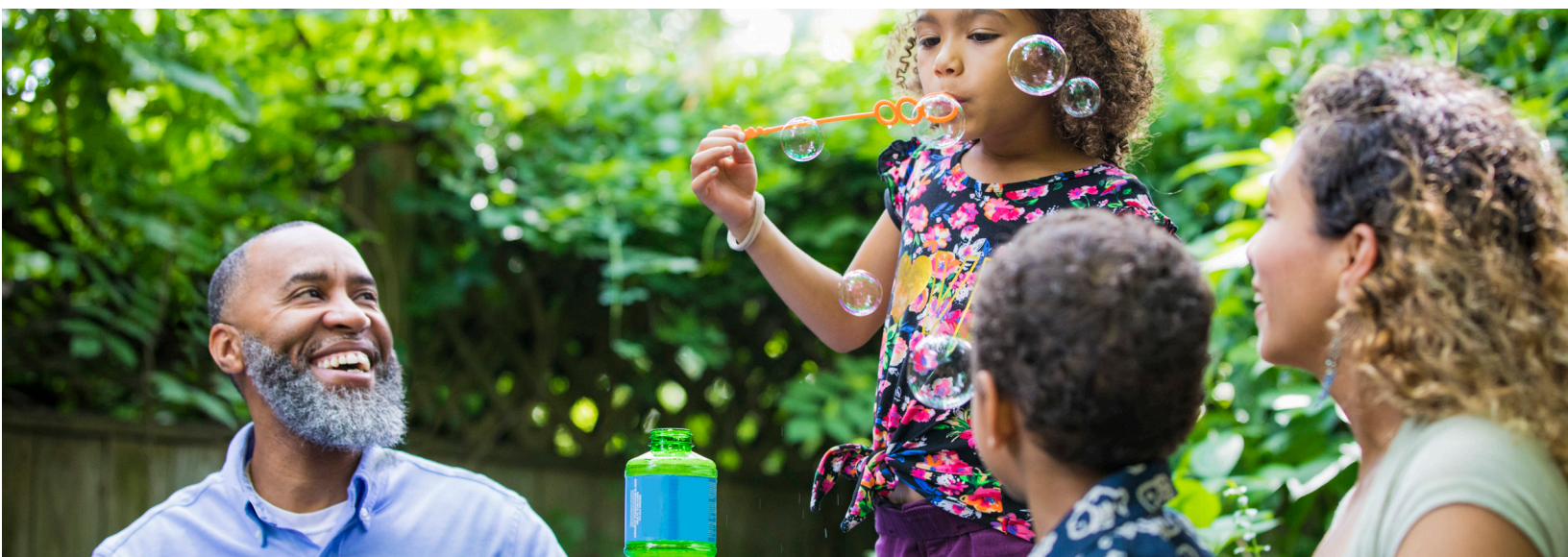
Giving employees some control over their scheduled work hours by providing flexible scheduling, not changing work hours without the employee’s consent, setting a minimum-hour guarantee, and/or giving employees advanced notice about schedule changes allows parents **to secure reliable child care, establish regular routines, and budget for expenses**. Hourly, low-wage, and part-time workers are less likely to have predictable and stable work schedules,⁶⁸ which can cause stress and undermine their ability to care for their children, so employers should consider what options may work best for such employees.

Consider Other Holistic Ways to Support Working Parents

Finally, businesses can consider other **innovative** solutions to support their parent employees, such as creating a working parents’ support or affinity group that builds camaraderie and connects parents to resources. Other considerations might include the selection of insurance plans that make health care and other benefits more accessible to families with young children, including those with special health needs, or considering, as appropriate and safe, a “Babies at Work” initiative that enables new parents to bring an infant to the office as they transition back to the workplace following childbirth.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY PRACTICES RECOMMENDATIONS

- As appropriate for the nature and needs of the organization, implement strategies outlined above, including child care supports, leave policies, and increased flexibility.
- Communicate family-friendly policies and programs effectively to employees and others.
- Seek solutions together; work alongside employees and counterparts at other organizations to develop policies that support families.



COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP

Business leaders are respected voices in their communities and uniquely situated to support today's workforce *and* lay the groundwork for tomorrow's by **promoting family-friendly practices and championing public policy that supports young children**. Employers can set an example for their peers to follow by adopting innovative practices that support employees with young children. In addition, employers can look for opportunities to partner with other businesses and the broader community to increase access to critical family supports, such as child care. Whether through service-sharing, providing assistance to local child care providers, or collaborating with other organizations to pilot innovative solutions, **a community-minded approach with thoughtful leadership will lead to broader impact**.



Furthermore, as **powerful public messengers**, business leaders play an important role in championing and communicating policies that support children and families. For example, employers can share the value and economic impact of high-quality early childhood education with their peers and the broader community; form an early childhood business coalition; or advocate for federal, state, and local policies that improve child care access and affordability. In its report “Workforce of Today, Workforce of Tomorrow,” the U.S. Chamber of Commerce refers to advancing such policies as a “winning proposition” and a “**wise investment in America’s future—strengthening business today while building the workforce we’ll depend on tomorrow and for decades to come.**”⁶⁹

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Champion policies that support young children and families in Georgia by speaking with elected officials or supporting efforts led by organizations like GEEARS.**
- **Lead by example: adopt and model family-friendly practices and consider opportunities for innovation as well as collaboration with other business and community leaders.**

HIGHER EDUCATION

Child care challenges **can prove disruptive** not only to parents' participation in the workforce but **to their enrollment and participation in postsecondary and work training programs**, as well. Given the large percentage of positions requiring some type of postsecondary credential or certification, completion of such programs can lead to improved economic stability for families and spur broader economic development. This may be particularly true in Georgia, where a significant proportion of postsecondary students are also parents. In 2015-2016, **27% of students enrolled within the Technical College System of Georgia were females with dependents.**⁷⁰ Approaches that are two-generation in nature can simultaneously address the needs of student parents, by advancing their careers, and their young children, by promoting healthy development and family stability.

During the focus groups, a number of parents described challenges continuing or beginning postsecondary or work training programs due to child care challenges or time and financial constraints. For example, one Columbus mother explained, "I want to go back [to school], but I just don't have the time between working full-time and 24/7 parent[ing]." Parents identified a need for more family-friendly campuses and programs, with on-site child care and online classes among the most cited solutions.

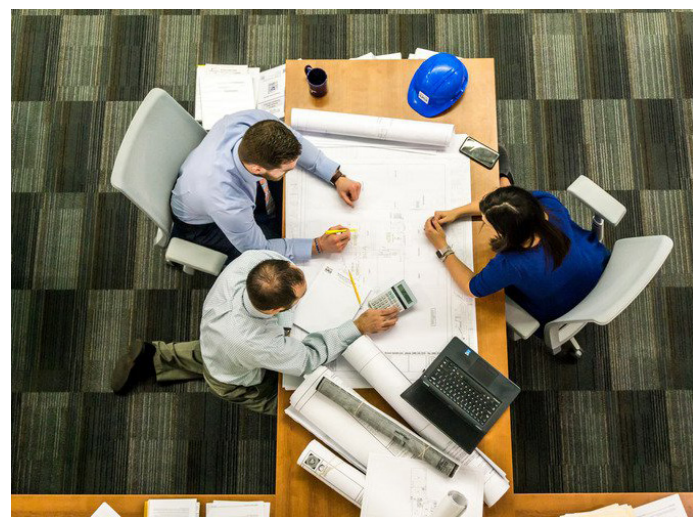
Both campus- and policy-level changes in postsecondary education can alleviate the specific challenges that student parents face. Such changes require buy-in and strategic direction **across levels of leadership**, including the University and Technical College Systems as well as across levels of student support within individual institutions (i.e., both leadership and administration as well as frontline advising, teaching, and enrollment staff).

"I want to go back [to school], but I just don't have the time between working full-time and 24/7 parent[ing]."

CAMPUS SOLUTIONS

Better Identify and Support Student Parents

To better support student parents, institutions of higher education must be able to accurately identify student parents and their needs. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a helpful tool for institutions of higher education to gauge how many and which students serve as a primary caregiver of a child. However, many institutions do not have additional data on the nature of these students and their dependents (e.g., age and number of dependent children, utilization of on- and off-campus services, etc.). These data are critical to assessing the academic, student services, and financial aid needs of student parents. Campuses should build on existing systems to better **collect and track data specific to student parents and their academic outcomes.**⁷¹



Beyond collecting better data on student parents, institutions should explore additional ways to seek input about their specific challenges and needs (e.g., hosting a focus group with student parents) and **foster parent voice in student and campus leadership**. This will allow schools to develop parent-powered solutions that address student parents' needs and barriers to achievement.

Student parents' needs may include some type of wraparound and/or academic support services. Institutions should work to ensure that student parents are **aware** of and can **access** wraparound and academic support services both on- and off-campus, such as training, tutoring, financial aid workshops, mental health supports, career services, work-study placements, and prenatal, pediatric, or primary health care. Access includes ensuring that these resources are available at times and locations that are convenient for student parents.

To ensure that student parents can afford college, institutions should examine and, as necessary, modify institution-specific financial aid policies (e.g., scholarships, grants) to accommodate and/or prioritize student parents. For example, most financial aid programs, particularly federal aid, require students to attend college full-time. For institution-specific financial aid, universities could consider expanding eligibility to include part-time student parents.⁷²

Create Family-Friendly Campuses

Institutions should consider developing and implementing policies and support systems that accommodate the needs of student parents and their families. For example, **flexible scheduling, online classes, or distance education** were commonly cited as helpful solutions by focus group participants. One Columbus mother stated, “[The university I attend has] a lot of later classes to try to accommodate the working adult, the family life... a lot of their options are now online as well.”

In addition, campuses can **create dedicated spaces and resources to support student parents and expecting parents**, including a nursing room, family housing, parenting classes, or peer support groups. Beyond formal campus policies and spaces, leadership at all levels of campus life can help foster a more family-friendly atmosphere. For example, one Atlanta mother said, “If [my professor] knew that there was something going on [with my child], she would allow me to do my classes remotely, so I would be videoing the class at home doing what I have to do.”

Beyond supporting existing student parents, campuses should **actively recruit student parents** by highlighting family-friendly practices and supports in their outreach to prospective students.



Provide Child Care Services

High-quality child care services help parents enroll and successfully complete postsecondary education.

One Atlanta mother said that without “someone to watch your child... it’s hard for people to go back to school.”

On-campus child care was one of the most cited solutions among parents in the focus groups in addressing challenges to postsecondary attainment. For example, an Atlanta mother suggested that Georgia should “invest in schools that have child care facilities if you’re taking evening classes.” Research indicates that access to on-campus child care for student parents, particularly for single mothers, decreases the likelihood that they will take time off and increases graduation rates.⁷³

One Atlanta mother said that without “someone to watch your child...it’s hard for people to go back to school.”

On-campus child care varies widely by type, oversight (e.g., student affairs, human resources), and corporate status (some fall under the corporate status of the university, but most are independently incorporated). Some state systems of higher education provide support to multi-campus systems of child care, such as the State University of New York (SUNY) child care centers, which provide care to over 5,000 children at 48 campus locations.⁷⁴ On-site child care at campuses is in **high demand**; according to a national 2016 survey, the average waitlist at on-campus child care centers is 80 children long.⁷⁵ Despite this, an analysis of 2015 data by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research found that the prevalence of on-campus child care is decreasing nationwide. Georgia ranks 46th in the nation for providing on-campus child care at public two- and four-year degree institutions, with only 21% offering this support.⁷⁶



Financing for on-campus child care programs also varies and can include student fees, Georgia’s Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) program, direct institutional support, and earmarked student activity fees.⁷⁷ One relatively small, federal program, **Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS)**, provides dedicated funding to institutions of higher education to support the participation of low-income parents in postsecondary education by increasing access to child care. Campuses can also apply to operate Georgia’s lottery-funded Pre-K program and federal Head Start or Early Head Start programs.

On-campus child care programs typically prioritize serving students, faculty, and staff from the institution itself before opening enrollment to the broader community. To meet the needs of student parents, it is important that on-campus child care programs offer **drop-in care, part-time care, and extended hours (e.g., evening care)**. If on-site child care is not an option, campuses can create systems to refer student parents to nearby child care that meets their needs. Institutions of higher education can also provide scholarships or fee vouchers toward child care costs at on-campus or nearby child care programs (e.g., Purdue University).⁷⁸

Finally, beyond supporting student parents, family-friendly campuses and child care services can help **recruit and retain** high-quality faculty and staff. In addition, offering on-site wraparound services (e.g., child care, health care) to students provides an added benefit to schools by allowing students pursuing professions in those fields (e.g., early childhood education, health care) to gain hands-on experience and training, as well as placements for work-study students or interns.

POLICY SOLUTIONS

Expand CAPS Eligibility

Georgia's child care subsidy program, CAPS, funded through the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), helps some low-income working families afford child care by providing scholarships. Parents and caregivers must be income-eligible (see *Policymakers* section) and participate in 24 hours per week of allowable activities, such as work or education. Parents may combine work and education to meet the minimum activity requirement.

Georgia has come a long way in supporting student parents participating in CAPS. In 2018, the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) expanded allowable activities to include enrollment in associate degree programs. Prior to this, income-eligible parents attending two-year degree programs could not count coursework toward their activity requirement beyond their first year in the postsecondary program (i.e., students in their second year would have to work at least 24 hours per week to participate in CAPS). Currently, approved educational activities for parents participating in CAPS include enrollment in middle or high school and pursuing a GED, vocational training certificate, or associate degree. In addition, each credit hour towards a GED, vocational training certificate, or associate degree counts as two hours towards the 24 hours/week activity requirement. This accounts for the additional time student parents spend studying to be successful in completing their coursework.⁷⁹

Under current CAPS policy, **participation in a four-year degree program is not considered an approved activity.** Parents in all focus groups were surprised by this and expressed that individuals pursuing a four-year degree should be eligible for CAPS, regardless of whether they also meet the work requirements, to allow them to ultimately earn more, better support their children, and contribute to the economy.

"If you need to have help while you [attend] a four-year college, then once you're on your feet and you've achieved that goal, you're able to give back and help other people," stated an Atlanta mother. An Atlanta

father noted, "It's going to drive the economy. That's the end-all of getting a degree and making more money – spend it into the economy."

"If you need to have help while you [attend] a four-year college, then once you're on your feet and you've achieved that goal, you're able to give back and help other people."

A separate 2016 survey of CAPS participants in Georgia found that a large proportion reported having some college experience but no degree.⁸⁰ **Expanding CAPS eligibility could help increase college completion rates for student parents.**



Increase Cross-Agency Collaboration

Georgia's state agencies tasked with postsecondary education and workforce development should explore partnerships with Georgia's child-serving state agencies to better support working families. These partnerships are critical in helping the state find innovative, efficient solutions to support working families and thereby strengthen the state's economy. For example, through the *Two-Gen Georgia* initiative (see page 20), a leadership team of state agency heads and designees has sought to increase cross-agency coordination between the child care subsidy system and the workforce and postsecondary systems. Through coordinated professional development and training as well as community-level grants, this initiative has helped connect parents pursuing workforce training or postsecondary education with child care and family supports. Such cross-agency innovation and coordination **can lead to a more streamlined system of support for families and more efficient use of resources.**



HIGHER EDUCATION RECOMMENDATIONS

- Build upon existing data systems to better identify student parents and their needs in order to develop and implement solutions that support such students.
- Amend CAPS policy to allow participation in a four-year degree program to count toward the activity requirement for parents and caregivers.
- Create family-friendly campuses by offering classes and supports at hours and locations that meet the needs of student parents.
- Strengthen partnerships between the postsecondary and workforce systems and child-serving state agencies to foster the success of student parents *and* their families.

CONCLUSION

Georgia's current and future economy depends upon an educated, stable workforce.

The initial *Opportunities Lost* report underscored that the negative impact of child care challenges is felt by Georgia families, employers, higher education institutions, work training programs, and the state as a whole. In this follow-up report, the voices of Georgia families provide insights into the complex and diverse nature of child care challenges, while also presenting actionable, cross-sector solutions.

By adopting a two-generation approach—considering the workforce of today *and* tomorrow—Georgia's policymakers, employers, and institutions of higher education can move the needle for the state's families and bolster the economy. Leadership, commitment, and collaboration from all stakeholders will be necessary to **ensure that Georgia is a great place to raise a family and do business.**



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APPENDIX

Focus Group Participant Demographics

| SEX | MALE | FEMALE |
|-----------------------|------|--------|
| Total (N=48) | 24 | 24 |
| Metro Atlanta (N=24) | 12 | 12 |
| Metro Columbus (N=24) | 12 | 12 |

| RACE/ETHNICITY | WHITE | BLACK | ASIAN | MULTIRACIAL | HISPANIC-LATINO ORIGIN |
|------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------------|------------------------|
| Total (N=48) | 12 | 29 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| Atlanta Female (N=12) | 2 | 7 | 1 | - | 2 |
| Atlanta Male (N=12) | 7 | 3 | - | - | 2 |
| Columbus Female (N=12) | 1 | 9 | 1 | 1 | - |
| Columbus Male (N=12) | 2 | 10 | - | - | - |

| MARITAL STATUS | MARRIED | SINGLE | DIVORCED | SEPARATED |
|------------------------|---------|--------|----------|-----------|
| Total (N=48) | 27 | 19 | 1 | 1 |
| Atlanta Female (N=12) | 6 | 5 | - | 1 |
| Atlanta Male (N=12) | 8 | 4 | - | - |
| Columbus Female (N=12) | 9 | 3 | - | - |
| Columbus Male (N=12) | 4 | 7 | 1 | - |

| EMPLOYMENT STATUS | FULL-TIME | PART-TIME | STAY AT HOME PARENT | LOOKING FOR WORK | OTHER |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------|---------------------|------------------|-------|
| Total (N=48) | 29 | 5 | 3 | 9 | 2 |
| Atlanta Female (N=12) | 9 | - | 1 | 2 | - |
| Atlanta Male (N=12) | 10 | 1 | - | 1 | - |
| Columbus Female (N=12) | 5 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Columbus Male (N=12) | 5 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 1 |

| EDUCATION | <HS DIPLOMA | HS DIPLOMA | SOME COLLEGE | COLLEGE DEGREE | POST-GRADUATE |
|------------------------|-------------|------------|--------------|----------------|---------------|
| Total (N=48) | 1 | 5 | 20 | 17 | 5 |
| Atlanta Female (N=12) | - | - | 5 | 5 | 2 |
| Atlanta Male (N=12) | - | - | 3 | 8 | 1 |
| Columbus Female (N=12) | - | 3 | 6 | 2 | 1 |
| Columbus Male (N=12) | 1 | 2 | 6 | 2 | 1 |

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