

NOW IS THE TIME TO PRIORITIZE GEORGIA'S FUTURE. 2024 POLICY AGENDA



Georgia's families with young children have been struggling to access child care, health care, and basic necessities. With a **record surplus**,¹ now is the time to meet the needs of Georgia's families to support the future of our state.



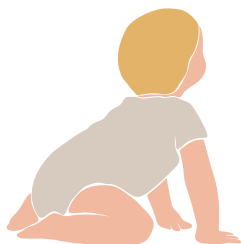
22% of children under 5 live in poverty²



More than 1 in 10 babies are born with low birthweight³



13% increase in infant mortality rate⁴



Georgia ranks in the bottom quartile for rate of uninsured children⁵



Only 6% of potentially income-eligible children are estimated to receive state child care subsidy⁶

Six things Georgia policymakers can do right now to support young children and those who care for them:

- 1 Improve access to quality child care
- 2 Strengthen Georgia's Pre-K
- 3 Ensure stable health coverage for children
- 4 Invest in maternal and child health
- 5 Support the financial well-being of families
- 6 Improve access to paid leave

Improve access to quality child care

Increase state funding for Georgia's Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) Program by at least \$20,000,000 to help maintain increased enrollment

Federal pandemic relief funding, which will end by September 2024, provided a critical lifeline for Georgia child care providers and allowed for several improvements to the CAPS program, including increasing enrollment by over 20,000 children.

By increasing state investment in CAPS, Georgia would go a long way in **addressing the affordability and availability of high-quality child care** for families with low incomes as well as strengthening the state's economy by allowing parents to participate in the workforce.

Support the child care workforce

There has long been a struggle to recruit and retain early childhood educators, but it has reached a **crisis level**. While comprehensive and sustained investment in early educator compensation is needed to support this critical workforce, the state can utilize existing mechanisms to bolster educators' economic security, such as by **prioritizing children of income-eligible early educators for CAPS Scholarships**.

In the fall of 2023, the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) announced a pilot program that provides child care funding for the children of some early childhood educators. This represents a first step towards promoting early childhood educators' economic security and the stability of the ECE workforce. Quite simply, professionals who work hard to provide quality care for others' children should not have to worry about accessing quality care for their own children.



Strengthen Georgia's Pre-K

GEEARS fully supports the House Working Group on Early Childhood Education's recommendations to strengthen Georgia's Pre-K and hopes to see them fully implemented.

Permanently reduce Pre-K class size to 18 students per class

Small class size and corresponding teacher-child ratios characterize the most effective programs. The smaller the class, the easier it is for a teacher to develop a good understanding of each child's interests, needs, and capabilities. Teachers overwhelmingly support reducing class size, with 69% of Pre-K teachers saying that **reducing class size would help teacher retention**.⁷



Use available Lottery dollars to increase Pre-K assistant teacher pay to \$25,741, the average K-12 paraprofessional pay, and ensure parity for any bonuses

The quality of instruction in early childhood classrooms **depends on committed, well-prepared teachers**. In order to ensure the health and well-being of Georgia's children, early childhood educators, including Pre-K assistant teachers, **are required to obtain education and/or credentials** that higher-paying jobs often do not require. **Only 63%** of Pre-K assistant teachers were retained in 2022, a sharp decrease from previous years. Many programs have had to delay openings because of problems recruiting and retaining staff.⁸

Increase start-up grants from \$8,000 to \$30,000 to mitigate the effects of inflation and support quality

Support capital funding associated with opening new or renovated Pre-K classrooms in public school systems and private Pre-K providers

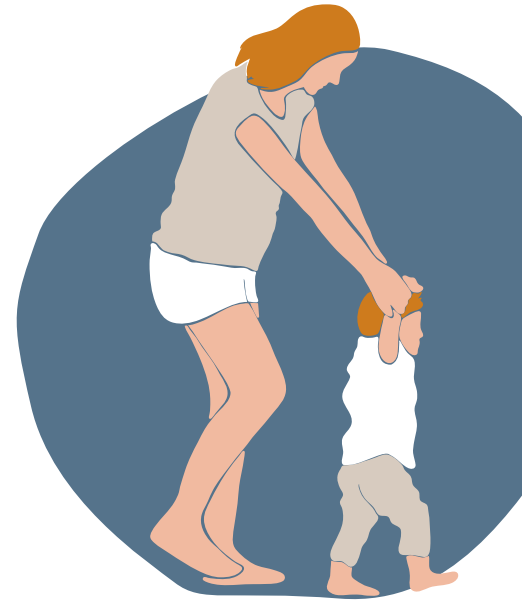
Ensure stable health coverage for young children and parents

Enact multi-year continuous Medicaid eligibility for children from birth through age five

The first years of life represent a period of rapid growth. Early identification of developmental delays during this period is critical for remediating potential concerns, and regular visits to the pediatrician support children's lifelong health.

To support the **continuity of preventive care** (e.g., well-child visits, immunizations, disability screenings) **and sick care in the critical early years**, while also decreasing the administrative burden for the state, policymakers should consider eliminating Medicaid renewals for children from birth through age five.

This will improve the quality of care for the nearly 50% of Georgia's children whose births are covered by Medicaid.⁹



Invest in maternal and child health

Support early childhood mental health services by:

- ensuring young children and their families are appropriately included in mental health legislation
- implementing the **Behavioral Health Reform and Innovation Commission's 2022 recommendations¹⁰**
- bolstering efforts to build the early childhood mental health workforce and increase access to developmentally appropriate mental health services

Healthy social-emotional growth in infants and toddlers provides an essential foundation for early learning, school readiness, and long-term success.

Support the Georgia Department of Public Health's Maternal Child Health Programs by:

- investing in reimbursement rate increases for the **Babies Can't Wait** workforce, which can include physical therapists, speech therapists, occupational therapists, special instructors, and service coordinators
- allowing Medicaid reimbursement for the **Georgia Home Visiting Program**. Evidence-based home visiting connects caregivers with a trained professional who supports them during the early stages of raising a family.

Early intervention cultivates developmentally appropriate skills, contributing to the likelihood that children will succeed in the K-12 system and attain self-sufficiency as an adult.

Four in five Georgia families with young children report having had difficulty affording at least one key necessity for their family, such as food or housing, in the last year.¹¹

More than 70% of Georgia voters support using a portion of the state's budget surplus for early childhood education and health programs.¹²

Support the financial well-being of families

Eliminate the state sales tax on diapers

One in two families struggle to afford this basic need,¹³ which keeps babies clean and healthy. Furthermore, young children cannot attend child care programs without diapers.

Invest in TANF income support for families

TANF can ease financial stress and **lift children out of poverty** by helping families afford basic necessities. Policymakers can drastically improve TANF by increasing: monthly eligibility limits; the maximum TANF allotment; the lifetime benefit limit; and the asset limit (from \$1,000 to \$5,000). Currently, families must make less than minimum wage to meet both the eligibility limits and work requirements.

Ensure families with young children can access safe, stable, and affordable housing

Children under five are at the greatest risk of eviction,¹⁴ which can lead to instability during crucial years of development and carry long-term behavioral and health implications. Policymakers should prioritize young children and their families in receiving rental assistance and promote policies that ensure family health and safety and limit housing disruptions.

Enact a state child tax credit

In recent years, many states, including Oklahoma, North Carolina, and West Virginia, have introduced bipartisan legislation to enact or expand child tax credits, which **bolster the economic security of families** with low and middle incomes. Policymakers can employ a CTC to help families make ends meet now and help children thrive into the future.



Improve access to paid family leave

Expand paid parental leave for state and university employees, as well as public school teachers

In 2021, a bill that provides three weeks of paid parental leave to state and K-12 public school employees, overwhelmingly passed the Georgia legislature and was enacted into law.

Although a great first step, there are several opportunities to improve this policy to better support government employees. This includes increasing the number of weeks offered and providing funding to support local school districts' implementation of the policy, as several other states (e.g., Tennessee) have done.

Adequate paid parental leave is essential to allow families to welcome a new child into their home--and **four in five Georgia voters support paid parental leave**.¹⁵



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