

2025 POLICY AGENDA

NOW IS THE TIME TO PRIORITIZE GEORGIA'S FUTURE.

Georgia's families with young children struggle to afford child care, health care, and basic necessities. With a **record budget surplus,¹** Georgia can better meet the needs of our families and support the future of our state.



18% of children birth-five live in poverty²



Nearly 1 in 3 children live in unaffordable housing³



Infant mortality rate has increased by 13%⁴



Georgia ranks in the bottom quartile for rate of uninsured children⁵



Only 5% of 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

GEEARS commends the Senate Study Committee on Access to Affordable Childcare's on its recommendations to address challenges facing Georgia's families and child care providers. In conjunction with additional general state funds for child care, we specifically support establishing new state funding streams, such as a child care trust fund similar to New Mexico's or Louisiana's models, to...

Increase access to Georgia's Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) Program

CAPS provides scholarships to help some working families with low incomes afford child care. Pandemic relief funding, which ended in September 2024, provided a critical lifeline for Georgia child care providers and allowed for several improvements to the CAPS program, including increasing enrollment.

In 2025, a significant investment in CAPS is the best way to address our state's child care challenges. Funding should prioritize **restoring access** to 2023 levels (74,000 children served), in part by increasing initial income eligibility (currently the lowest in the country). At the same time, state leaders should maintain increased **reimbursement rates** to ensure child care providers can participate in CAPS.

Add the child care workforce as a priority group for CAPS

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**.

Support capital funding for child care providers

High-quality early learning environments support healthy child development. Georgia child care providers have indicated that they lack funding for repairs, renovations, and expansion of their facilities, impacting families' ability to access care, particularly in rural areas. To support providers' capital needs, Georgia could consider creating a forgivable loan program similar to other states in which the loan amount is forgiven after five years of providing child care.

Strengthen Georgia's Pre-K

GEEARS applauds the Georgia General Assembly's historic 2024 investment of nearly \$100 million in Georgia's Lottery-Funded Pre-K, nearly the full amount requested by the House Working Group on Early Childhood Education. We ask that state legislators ensure the continued implementation of the Working Group's recommendations (e.g., continuing to increase the number of classes to decrease class size over the next three years). In addition, we urge state leaders to...

Implement a pilot program for three-year-olds as a part of Georgia's Lottery-Funded Pre-K program

Georgia serves approximately 55% of the state's four-year-olds through its Pre-K Program. Many states, including Kansas, Arkansas, and Nebraska, serve a significant number of *three-year-olds* through their state-funded pre-programs. This additional year of high-quality preschool sets up students for success in Kindergarten and beyond and can help alleviate the challenges many families face in affording early care and learning. While many of our state's 127,000 three-year-olds are missing out on high-quality early education, usable, unrestricted reserves have surged to \$1.4 billion over the last decade. A "3K" pilot program could prioritize communities most in need (e.g., areas with low third-grade reading proficiency) through a mixed delivery model in both public school and private child care settings.



Ensure stable health coverage for young children and parents

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

The first years of life represent a period of rapid physical and cognitive 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 three.

Recommended by the Georgia Comprehensive Health Coverage Commission (CHCC), **this change would improve the quality of care for the nearly 50% of Georgia's children whose births are covered by Medicaid.**⁷



Invest in maternal and child health

Support the Georgia Department of Health's Maternal Child Health programs by...

- increasing the reimbursement rate for *Babies Can't Wait* (BCW) Service Coordinators and Special Instructors by 50%, ensuring parity across the BCW provider network, with a total investment of \$4.2 million⁸
- allowing Medicaid reimbursement for the Georgia Home Visiting Program, which connects caregivers with trained professionals to support early family development

Early intervention promotes developmentally appropriate skills, increasing the likelihood of success in the K-12 system and fostering long-term self-sufficiency.

Support early childhood mental health services by...

- ensuring young children and their families are appropriately included in mental health legislation
- 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.

More than 70% of Georgia voters support using a portion of the state's budget surplus for early childhood education and health programs.⁹



Support the financial well-being of families

Enact a refundable state Child Tax Credit (CTC) to help offset the increasing costs of raising a family

A growing number of states, including Utah, Oklahoma, and New Mexico, have introduced bipartisan legislation to enact or expand child tax credits, which bolster the economic security of families. Georgia policymakers can employ a CTC to help families make ends meet now and enable children to thrive into the future.

Help families with young children afford diapers and other basic needs, such as by eliminating the state sales tax on diapers.

One in two families struggle to afford diapers,¹⁰ which keep 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.



8 in 10 Georgia families with young children struggled to afford a basic need, such as food, housing, or diapers, in the past year.¹¹

Improve access to paid family leave

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

In 2024, a bill that expands paid parental leave for state and K-12 public school employees from three to six weeks was enacted into law.

There are several opportunities to improve this policy to better support government employees. These include 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.



References: (1) State Accounting Office of Georgia. "2024 Report of Georgia Revenues and Reserves." <https://sao.georgia.gov/swar/grr> (2) American Community Survey, 2022. (3) % Children in households with a high housing cost burden (households are considered cost burdened when they spend more than 30% of their income on rent, mortgage, and other housing needs) KidsCount, 2022. (4) Ely, D. & Driscoll, A. "Infant Mortality in the United States: Provisional Data From the 2022 Period Linked Birth/Infant Death File." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr033.pdf> (5) Georgetown Center for Children and Families. "Children's Healthcare Report Card: Georgia," 2024: <https://kidshealthcarereport.ccf.georgetown.edu/states/georgia/> (6) Administration for Children & Families (numerator); American Community Survey Public Use Microdata (denominator), 2021. (7) Kaiser Family Foundation. "KFF State Health Facts: Births financed by Medicaid, 2022: <https://bit.ly/40M8cYP> (8) Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students. Investing in the Professionals who Support Young Children with Disabilities. <https://gears.org/wp-content/uploads/Babies-Cant-Wait-One-Pager.pdf> (9) Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students. 2022 Georgia Likely Voter Poll: <https://gears.org/research/polling/> (10) National Diaper Bank Network. "The NDBN Diaper Check 2023: Diaper Insecurity among U.S. Children and Families," 2023. (11) Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students. New Poll Finds Georgia's Families Are Struggling <https://gears.org/research/polling/> (12) Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students. 2022 Georgia Likely Voter Poll: <https://gears.org/research/polling/>