



GEEARS

GEORGIA EARLY EDUCATION
ALLIANCE FOR READY STUDENTS

ANNUAL REPORT

22
23



WHO WE ARE

GEEARS works to inspire and provide leadership for a statewide movement on quality early learning and healthy development for all children ages birth through five. Established in 2010, GEEARS helps business, civic and government leaders maximize the economic return on the state's investments in early care and learning.



OUR MISSION

To support high-quality early learning and healthy development for Georgia's youngest children, from birth to five, by championing policies, promoting innovative and evidence-based practices, and building public will.

OUR VISION

All Georgia students will enter kindergarten prepared to succeed and, on a path to read-to-learn by third grade.



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REFLECTIONS FROM MINDY



Dear Friends,

My job at GEEARS has a perk that I cherish—occasionally, I get to go to a child care center and play with little learners. I nod along as a child explains that his big, green block is actually a dinosaur and sometimes, I’m gifted a Lego to add to the top of a tower. The kids and I always end up on the floor, reading a story.

This is a good way to remind myself that, in the field of early childhood care, education, and wellness, work and play aren’t distinct from one another. Play is, in fact, crucial to a young child’s development. Play helps children develop social emotional skills and that explosive brain growth of the early years? It’s always positively impacted by the joy and stimulation of play.

When I look at GEEARS’ productive year, I see our staff advocating, researching, rallying, connecting, helping—leading. You’ll see the stories of our collective efforts in the following pages. Suffice to say here, our projects in 2022-2023 took a tremendous amount of hard work, relationship-building, and collaboration with partners, funders, policymakers, and fellow advocates. So, it may seem like we’ve been doing all the serious stuff and leaving the play to the pros—the little ones.

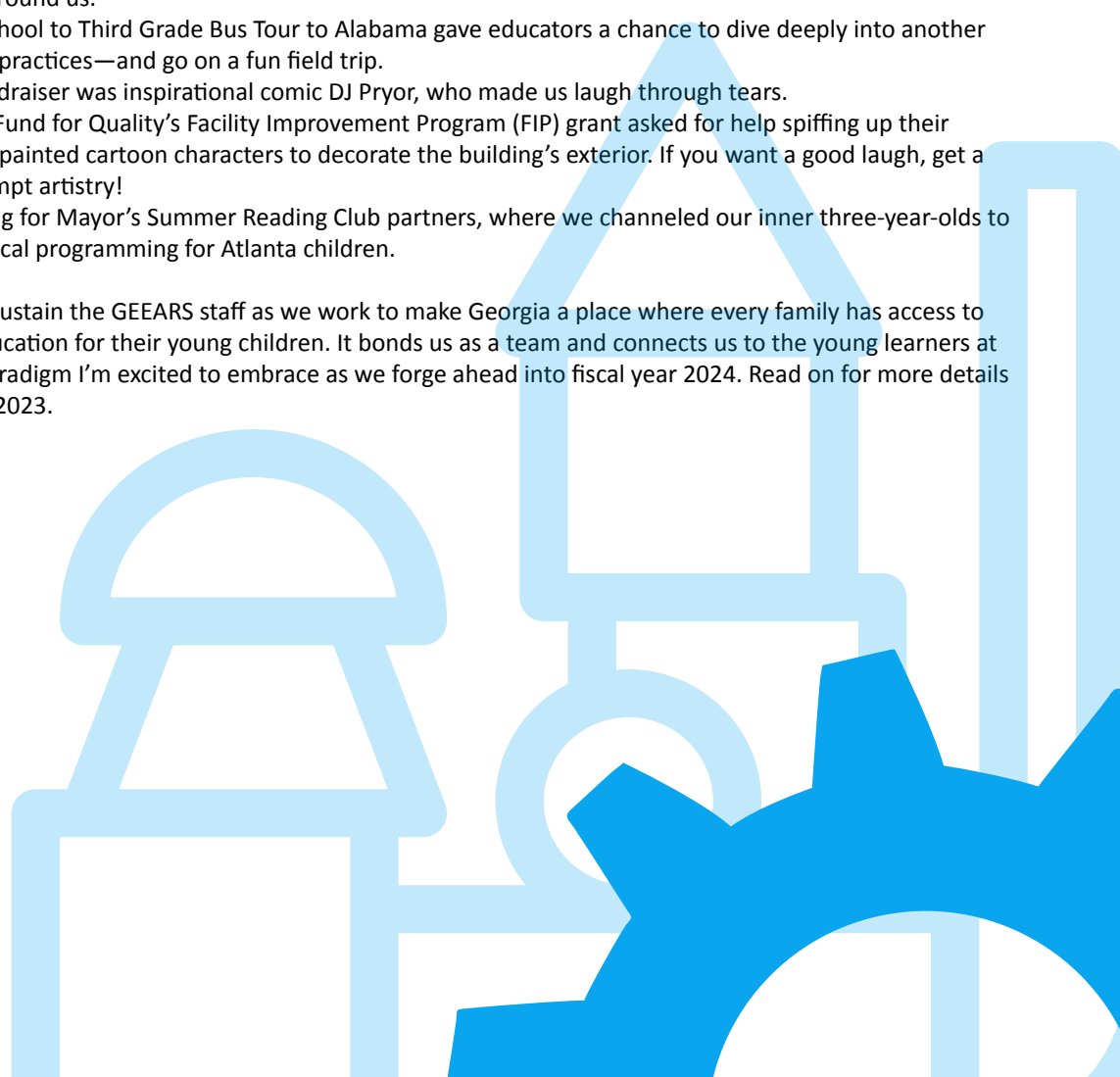
But when I look at GEEARS’ 2022-2023 fiscal year from a different perspective, I realize that playful joy *has* been built into our work. Consider that...

- At 2023 Strolling Thunder, parents, caregivers, GEEARS staffers, and partners had substantive conversations with legislators while boisterous children ran circles around us.
- The Building Bridges from Preschool to Third Grade Bus Tour to Alabama gave educators a chance to dive deeply into another state’s preschool to third-grade practices—and go on a fun field trip.
- The headliner at our annual fundraiser was inspirational comic DJ Pryor, who made us laugh through tears.
- When a recipient of the PAACT Fund for Quality’s Facility Improvement Program (FIP) grant asked for help spiffing up their center, several GEEARS’ staffers painted cartoon characters to decorate the building’s exterior. If you want a good laugh, get a bunch of non-profiteers to attempt artistry!
- Best of all was our spring training for Mayor’s Summer Reading Club partners, where we channeled our inner three-year-olds to help the partners devise whimsical programming for Atlanta children.

We *all* need play. Lightness and joy sustain the GEEARS staff as we work to make Georgia a place where every family has access to high-quality, affordable care and education for their young children. It bonds us as a team and connects us to the young learners at the heart of our mission. This is a paradigm I’m excited to embrace as we forge ahead into fiscal year 2024. Read on for more details about GEEARS’ work—and play—in 2023.

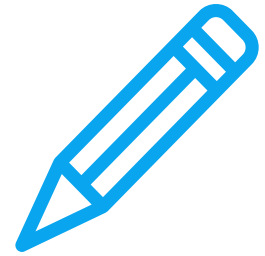
All my best,

Mindy





POLICY & ADVOCACY



STATE LEGISLATIVE SUCCESSES

GEEARS' advocacy during the 2023 legislative session resulted in many significant wins! Read on for our favorite highlights:

1. Speaker Jon Burns announced a House Working Group on Early Childhood Education, demonstrating Georgia leaders' further acknowledgment that the early years are important for future success.
2. The budget includes an additional \$2,000 for Pre-K lead and assistant teachers' salaries. (Total: \$20.65 million). The budget also contains \$1.7 million to support a home visiting pilot in Northeast and Southeast rural Georgia. This pilot integrates medical care into home visits, using community health workers.
3. [SB 61](#) removes an end date from the Family Care Act, which allows employees to use five days of earned sick leave for the care of immediate family members. Originally passed in 2017 with a three-year sunset provision, the bill was extended again by the Georgia legislature in 2020.
4. [HB 129](#) extends Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits to pregnant women who do not already have another child and gives incremental increases to women who give birth while on TANF.
5. [SB 106](#), the Healthy Babies Act, creates a three-year pilot program to provide Medicaid reimbursement for maternal and fetal heart-rate monitors.
6. [HB 538](#), the Georgia Early Literacy Act, requires the State Board of Education to approve high-quality literacy instructional materials and screeners as well as evidence-based literacy certification courses and training for K-3 teachers. The law requires child care teachers in licensed programs to receive training on developmentally appropriate, evidence-based literacy instruction.
7. [SB 211](#) will create the Georgia Council on Literacy to conduct comprehensive reviews of birth to postsecondary programs, the alignment of state support for such programs, and other issues related to improving the literacy outcomes of Georgia students.



FEDERAL SUCCESSES

In the final days of 2022, with bipartisan approval, Congress approved a \$1.7 trillion omnibus appropriations bill for Fiscal Year 2023. It was signed into law on December 29th. Within this legislation were many exciting—even historic—wins for working families with young children. For Georgians in particular, who are seeing their pandemic federal relief funds phase out, the funding provided by this bill is a critical help.

As the omnibus bill was patched together, the GEEARS community persistently answered the call of our action alerts with impassioned emails, phone calls, and in-person meetings. Our collective advocacy made a difference.

Some of the bill's key game-changers were:

- Funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG)—the primary federal grant program that provides child care support to working families considered low income—has increased by 30%. For Georgia, this amounts to an estimated \$76 million for the [Childcare and Parent Services \(CAPS\)](#) program.
- Funding increases for [Head Start and Early Head Start](#), preschool special education, and the [Infant-Toddler Court Program](#).
- The [Pregnant Workers Fairness Act](#), which protects pregnant and post-partum workers from job loss and discrimination, has become law.
- The [Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program \(MIECHV\)](#) has been reauthorized and is on a path to double its funding to \$800 million over the next five years.

This legislation doesn't fill the needs of every young Georgian, but it gives us a promising new foundation to build upon. We intend to leverage it for Georgia families moving forward.



GEORGIA STROLLING THUNDER

In February 2023, GEEARS orchestrated its sixth annual [Strolling Thunder](#), bringing more than 40 families and their young children to the Georgia Capitol to meet their legislators.

The presence of children who may have needed comfort or corraling sent a powerful message: For families to work, thrive, and contribute to Georgia's economy, they need to feel supported by Georgia's leaders.

Legislators also received letters written by Strolling Thunder participants, thanks to GEEARS-conducted advocacy training sessions that empowered families to share their stories and express their needs.



"Raising a child in today's world is a complex task. Despite . . . getting an education, serving my country, and working hard, I still find myself in a constant battle with financial stability. I want my daughter to have opportunities I didn't—a quality education. . . and the resources to pursue her dreams."

GEEARS ON CAPITOL HILL

National Strolling Thunder

In June 2023, GEEARS' Director of Research and Policy, Hanah Goldberg, was invited by ZERO TO THREE to attend National Strolling Thunder on Capitol Hill. Hanah accompanied Tanesha Smith, a Douglasville-based therapist and mom to 13-month-old Jaden.

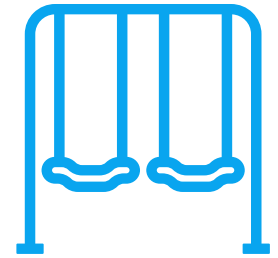
With sweet, smiling Jaden in tow, Smith met with Georgia Senators Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock, Representative Drew Ferguson (GA-03) and even had a meeting at the White House. She shared her story and advocated for extending the expanded child tax credit, paid leave, and other essentials for working parents.

Advocating with National Partners

In February 2023, Executive Director, Mindy Binderman, and Senior Early Childhood Education Manager, Jessica Woltjen, joined over 400 advocates from across the country at the NAEYC Public Policy Forum in Washington, D.C. Later in the summer, Mindy and Senior Health Policy Manager, Callan Wells, joined the Alliance for Early Success and fellow grantees on Capitol Hill to meet with several members of Georgia's Congressional Delegation. They discussed Medicaid's impending unwinding and the importance of increasing investments in child care.



RESEARCH



HEAD START EDUCATORS SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES

Over the past year, GEEARS' research team has conducted focus groups with several early childhood education populations, ranging from Pre-K teachers to infant/toddler caregivers to family child care providers.

The groups were richly varied but we asked each of them much the same questions: *How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected your already struggling field?*

Our subjects' stories showed the human side of this sobering statistic: While most other professions have experienced a robust recovery in their labor markets, early educators have not been returning to work in similarly strong numbers. Teacher retention has also been a challenge. In fact, the child care field has lost 8.2% of its essential staff since February 2020.

The first of our focus group reports includes GEEARS' policy and practice recommendations based on the educators working with Head Start students every day. It's a moving, illuminating deep dive into these teachers' experiences and we hope it will serve as a roadmap for policymakers and other leaders to support this critical workforce. In the coming months, we look forward to publishing reports from the other teacher cohorts.

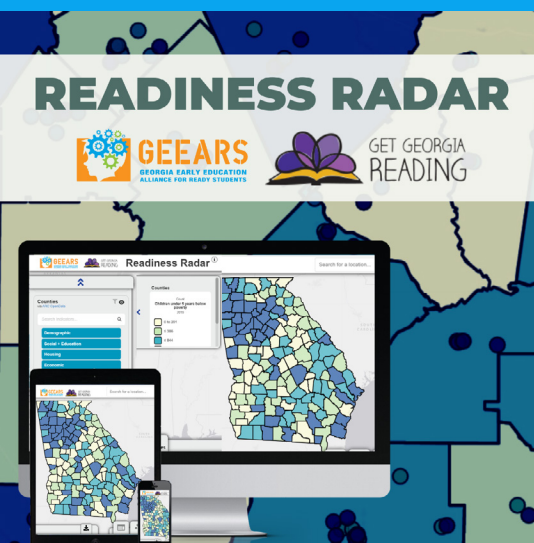
"It Feels Better When You Have Somebody in Your Corner:"

Head Start Teachers Share Insights on Recruitment, Retention, and Supporting the Workforce

OCTOBER 2022



RELAUNCHING THE READINESS RADAR



In March, GEEARS and our partner, Get Georgia Reading, launched a new and improved iteration of the decade-old early childhood data tool, [The Readiness Radar](#).

Truly a one-stop-shop, the new Readiness Radar pools data that once existed in several different places placing them together in a single online platform. It houses a range of education, health, housing, economic, and demographic data across neighborhood, county, and state levels, helping to answer questions related to family and child well-being across Georgia. The tool also uses maps, color codes, and shading to layer the data, showing the user trends, as well as concentrations or gaps in services.

The list of users who could benefit from this versatile tool is almost as long as its functions. It might include school system leaders and non-profit leaders or funders; policymakers at the local and state levels; child care providers and prospective child care providers who are interested in opening in an area of need; journalists, researchers, and higher education leaders; and the health community.

The new Readiness Radar is an expression of our commitment to helping our staff and partners access and understand data relevant to our respective missions to ensure Georgia's children enter kindergarten prepared for success and reading proficiently by the end of third grade.

GEEARS' POLL OF LIKELY VOTERS

GEEARS regularly surveys Georgia voters to better understand attitudes and opinions about early childhood issues. In September 2022, we conducted our latest [poll](#). The findings confirmed that most Georgians, no matter their party affiliation, care about young children, their families, and the professionals who educate and care for them.

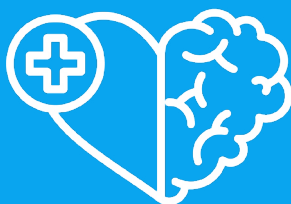
Here are some takeaways from the poll results:



Workforce

78% agree that expanding access to high-quality child care gives parents the opportunity to participate in the workforce, which is good for Georgia's economy.

80% support paid parental leave for birth or adoption.



Health

87% support improved access to mental health services for children and families. **68%** would let this value influence their vote.

93% agree that children's social-emotional development during their early years affects later school success.



Education

88% support Georgia's free, lottery-funded voluntary Pre-K.

83% support increasing the salaries of qualified child care and preschool teachers to attract more individuals to this field.



LABB: LEADERSHIP ACADEMY FOR BETTER BRAINS

PRESCHOOL TO THIRD GRADE LEADERS FELLOWSHIP

The annual Preschool to Third Grade (or P-3) Leaders Fellowship brings together early learning program directors and elementary school administrators to facilitate a more aligned and seamless experience across the preschool to third grade continuum.

Our fourth fellowship class consisted of cohorts from Atlanta, Clayton County, and Gwinnett County. The rigorous year for the 19 fellows featured a speaker series, team projects, and a moving graduation ceremony.

Next year's cohorts will hail from Fayette, Clayton, and Gwinnett Counties. In Atlanta, we'll be piloting a P-3 certificate program through the National P-3 Center.



P-3 BUS TOUR: BUILDING BRIDGES FROM PRESCHOOL TO THIRD GRADE

Last fall, more than two dozen early childhood education professionals and GEEARS staffers embarked upon a two-day, P-3-focused journey-by-bus through Alabama. With emotional tours of two elementary schools, a dialogue with the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education, and several fun meals, our participants bonded as they explored unique, evidence-based P-3 principles to apply back home.



[Click here to check out the video recap.](#)

THE P-3 SUMMIT

GEEARS, Fulton County Schools' Early Childhood Department, and Atlanta Public Schools' Office of Early Learning partnered to host our first ever P-3 Leaders Summit! Educators, school administrators, and child care program directors came together for conference sessions, activities, interactive discussions, and networking. Topics included brain development, early literacy, and experiences of P-3 Leaders.



PAACT: PROMISE ALL ATLANTA CHILDREN THRIVE

Convened by GEEARS, [PAACT: Promise All Atlanta Children Thrive](#) is a city-wide alliance of public and private partners collaborating to improve learning, health, and well-being outcomes for Atlanta's youngest children and their families.

PAACT's Vision: That families in the City of Atlanta have what they need to ensure that all children starting at birth are healthy, learning and developing so that they enter school ready for success, thrive once in school, and are prepared to reach their full potential as residents of our city.



MISSION ACCOMPLISHED: PAACT AND THE CITY OF ATLANTA EXCEED GOAL OF \$20 MILLION FOR EARLY EDUCATION

In his 2023 State of the City address, Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens declared an ambitious promise kept—more than \$20 million raised to invest directly in the city's early childhood education system.

PAACT is proud to have partnered with the City of Atlanta to conceive of this vital investment and raise the funds from diverse entities that include 15 foundations, 14 corporations, and other private donors.



Photo: Itoro N. Umontuen/The Atlanta Voice





Public Awareness and Engagement

The Atlanta Early Education Ambassadors saw a 50% increase in their reach, helping members of the community register Pre-K and access Quality Rated child care.



Increase Quality and Access

- The PAACT scholarship powered by Quality Care for Children's BOOST, has served 195 families and 255 children.
- PAACT disbursed \$725,000 in grants for child care facility improvement projects.



System Alignment

The fourth Preschool to Third Grade Leaders Fellowship class was our first to consist of three cohorts from these metro areas: Atlanta, Clayton County, and Gwinnett County. 19 fellows graduated in the spring of 2023.



Health and Well-being

The first cohort of Smart and Secure Children, a 10-week parent leadership program, was conducted in collaboration with Morehouse School of Medicine.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD



"The Boost Scholarship program saved my life. My living situation with my child's father became toxic and Boost gave me the ability to have money to remove my children and I from that situation. I am forever grateful for this opportunity because without it, I wouldn't be in the healthy living situation I am in now. With the help of Boost, I was able to afford to put my children in a Quality Rated center I felt comfortable with and they are thriving because of it."

- Recipient of the BOOST Scholarship powered by PAACT



"I will use this information to strengthen my advocacy around education and educate other parents, educators, and community stakeholders about the benefits for children and families through early learning."

- Smart & Secure Children Program Participant



"It was inspiring to watch leaders from across sectors learn together and from each other over the course of this program. Delving into concepts from equity to developmentally-appropriate practice to accountability, leaders developed a deeper understanding of the birth-eight continuum in their own communities."

- P-3 Fellow



MAYOR'S SUMMER READING CLUB

2023 is year number 11 for the [Mayor's Summer Reading Club \(MSRC\)](#), the beloved program which brings free books and literary programming to thousands of young children and families all over Atlanta.

The MSRC is a collaboration between **several** partners:



Community Partners

85 camps, libraries, non-profits, child care centers, and other community hubs produced MSRC book-themed programming.



Alliance Theatre

The Alliance Theatre commissioned this year's picture book, *The Curious Cardinal*, and hosted storytelling training for MSRC's community partners.



Atlanta Speech School

Experts from the Atlanta Speech School also trained partners and created the reading guides for both MSRC book selections. This guide helps parents confidently navigate read-alouds with their child to maximize bonding and literacy skills.



PNC Bank

The MSRC is made possible with generous funding (and much cheerleading) from PNC Bank.

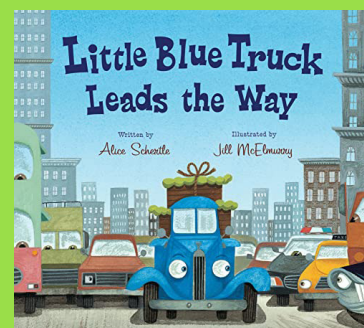
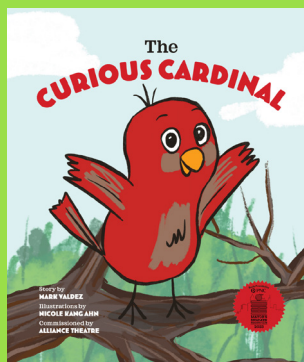


[Click here to check out the recap from 11Alive News.](#)

The Curious Cardinal, by Mark Valdez and Nicole Kang Ahnis is a story for ages three to five that follows a little bird's four seasons in Atlanta's Fernbank Forest.

Little Blue Truck Leads the Way, by Alice Schertle and Jill McElmurry is for ages zero to two. The board book depicts a countrified pickup truck exploring the big city.

The Mayor's Summer Reading Club staged a public kickoff celebration at the Alliance Theatre.



EVENTS

2022 CANDIDATE SUMMIT ON SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

In October 2022, GEEARS hosted the [2022 Candidate Summit on Supporting Children and Families](#) at Georgia Public Broadcasting (GPB). Attendees and livestream viewers heard from candidates for Governor, U.S. Senate, and State School Superintendent about health, child care, Pre-K, mental health, family supports, and more.

The Summit also included a brief address about the science of adversity and resilience from [Dr. Jack Shonkoff](#), pediatrician and Director of Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child. Finally, GEEARS used the forum to unveil the results of [2022 Poll of Likely Voters](#).

We've hosted summits like this, which focus exclusively on early childhood issues, for every governor's election since 2010. They are a valuable opportunity to discuss GEEARS' priorities with current and potential leaders.

STAND-UP FOR GEORGIA'S KIDS

At our February 16th fundraiser at The Buckhead Club, we were thrilled to give the spotlight and microphone to fathers.

The packed luncheon featured a speech by GEEARS' Early Childhood Champion award-winner, Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens, and a panel of experts: GEEARS' Pre-K Recruitment Specialist [Dawan Barfield](#), [Johnathon Hines](#), the first African- American male to be named Public School Pre-K Teacher of the Year for the State of Georgia in 2019-2020, moderator Kenneth Braswell, the CEO and Founder of [Fathers Incorporated](#), and comedian/viral video star DJ Pryor. As the event's headliner, Pryor used humor to urge other dads to engage constantly with their kids.

"The world is recognizing that there is a need for connection with our babies," he told our sold-out crowd. We were proud to provide this forum for an important (and joyful) conversation amongst the GEEARS' community.

Sponsors



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