

Georgia spotlight schools: High-poverty schools that are raising the bar

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is widely acknowledged that students from low-income backgrounds often face **significant barriers** to accessing high-quality education. Nonetheless, this report aims to showcase that strong academic achievement is attainable even within Georgia's highest poverty schools.

We identify 34 high-poverty schools that achieved proficiency rates of at least 50% in math and/or ELA on the 2024 Georgia Milestones Assessment. Through surveys and interviews with their principals, we examined the strategies driving their success and identified three common themes:

1. **Data-Driven Decision-Making:** Spotlight schools leverage both academic and non-academic data to inform instruction, monitor student progress, and set goals. Principals encourage data literacy by ensuring educators have the time, knowledge, and resources to analyze and operationalize student data.

2. **Collaborative leadership and capacity building:** School leaders cultivate collaborative school cultures where educators have opportunities to share expertise, express concerns, and inform decision-making. Professional development, professional learning communities, and coaching build educator capacity.

3. **Small group instruction:** Schools provide all students with access to grade-level content while creating additional small-group intervention blocks for remediation or acceleration.

The success of these schools reflects a coordinated commitment to excellence at every level of governance. States set the stage by incentivizing evidence-based strategies through policy and funding, while districts provide the necessary support and resources. However, it is ultimately principals who bring these strategies to life, and this research underscores that strong local leadership is an essential driver of meaningful improvements in student outcomes.



West Manor Elementary

INTRODUCTION

Although the ties between poverty and academic outcomes are strong, they are not unbreakable. The 34 “spotlight schools” featured in this report demonstrate that high academic achievement is possible in Georgia’s highest-poverty schools. Through a combination of strong leadership, strategic data use, and evidence-based practices, these schools are proving that students can excel regardless of socioeconomic background.

This report highlights key strategies that have driven success in these schools, focusing on data-driven decision-making, collaborative leadership, and small-group instruction.

Importantly, the success of these schools is not the result of school-level efforts alone, but rather a collaboration between state, district, and school leaders. Typically, the state has leverage to create and incentivize evidence-based policies, the district provides aligned resources and technical assistance, and the school is responsible for implementing those policies with fidelity.

For example, Georgia’s new statewide literacy initiatives and accompanying professional development are a vital yet overdue step to improving outcomes. However, Georgia must continue to build a policy infrastructure with financial supports to incentivize other evidence-based practices – including high impact tutoring, data-driven instruction, and professional coaching.

These policies, however, can easily fall short without strong leaders to implement them. Many principals claim to follow evidence-based practices like the four highlighted in this report, but few actually implement them with fidelity to produce the sort of growth that is desperately needed in their schools. **Each of the principals we interviewed had a clear vision for their schools; set high expectations for their teachers, students, and families; and remained committed to doing what is best for students, even when challenging for adults.** The importance of local leadership comes full circle, as there must be a state and national commitment to improving the principal pipeline, strengthening principal preparation programs, and facilitating knowledge transfer among school leaders.

IDENTIFYING AND ASSESSING SPOTLIGHT SCHOOLS

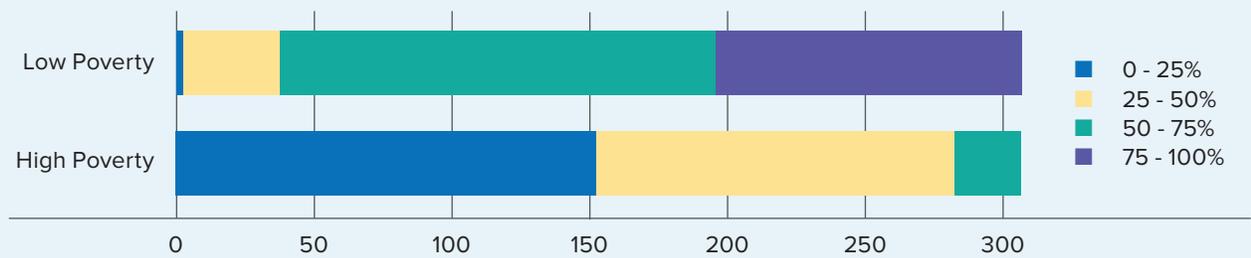
To identify and understand successful schools in low-income communities, we investigated the relationship between poverty rates and academic achievement – highlighting schools that defy the narrative that income dictates student success.¹

We define academic proficiency as the percent of students that met or exceeded expectations on the 2024 [Georgia Milestones Assessment](#). The correlation between school poverty rates² and academic proficiency is strong³: Between 50-69% of the variance in student achievement can be attributed to school poverty, while the remaining 31-50% is influenced by other factors. Simply put, while poverty is a strong predictor of student outcomes, other elements – such as the quality of a school and its educators – also play a crucial role.

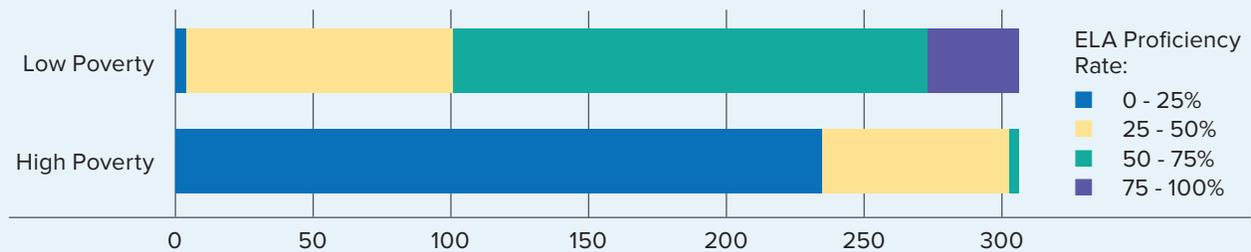
For example, for the quartile of schools with the lowest poverty rates, proficiency rates range from 13% to 100% in math and from 15% to 99% in ELA. Meanwhile, for the quartile of schools with the highest poverty rates, proficiency rates range from 1% to 81% in math and from 1% to 56% in ELA.

1. This brief does not investigate growth, as Georgia’s recent changes in both state standards and cut scores make it difficult to accurately compare data over the past two years.
2. Defined by the percent of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch
3. 4th grade: $r = -0.83$ for ELA and $r = -0.75$ for math
8th grade: $r = -0.77$ for ELA and $r = -0.71$ for math

Comparing 4th Grade Math Proficiency Rates in Low and High Poverty Schools



Comparing 4th Grade ELA Proficiency Rates in Low and High Poverty Schools



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In sum, we identified a list of 34 high-poverty elementary and middle schools that had proficiency rates of at least 50% in math and/or ELA according to the 2024 Georgia Milestones assessment—focusing on 4th and 8th grade results. We define high-poverty schools as those where the number of students receiving free or reduced price lunch is above 85%.

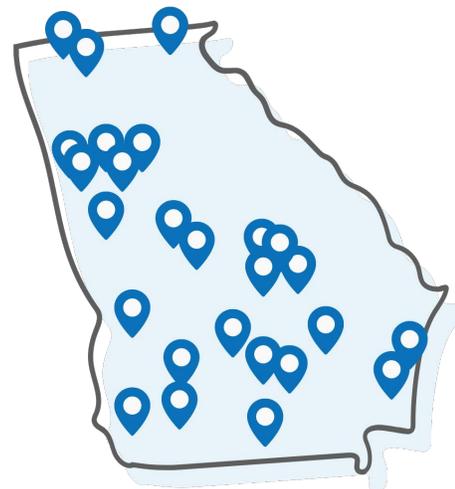
These schools represent a diverse variety of demographics, size, and geography across 29 different districts (See [Appendix A](#))—indicating that local leadership and other school-level factors make a huge difference in academic outcomes.

Of these 34 spotlight schools:

- 29 schools were identified for math
- 1 school was identified for ELA
- 4 schools were identified for both math and ELA

Clearly, most spotlight schools were identified for math achievement rather than ELA. This trend reflects broader patterns across the state and the [country](#), as 45.5% of Georgia’s 4th graders are proficient in math compared to just 35.2% in ELA. [Research](#) shows that math proficiency is more directly tied to classroom instruction, while [early literacy](#) is subject to more influence from out-of-school factors, making gains harder to achieve without comprehensive, long-term interventions. While reaching 50% proficiency is a remarkable

achievement – especially given the particular challenges that high-poverty schools must overcome – there is far more work to be done. Moving the needle for low-performing schools is vital, and supporting low-performing schools in improving from 5% proficiency to 50% proficiency would improve the lives of thousands of Georgia families. At the same time, wealthier schools are reaching upwards of 90% proficiency. We must work across schools and systems to ensure that high-poverty schools have the resources, support, and instructional tools necessary to reach those same levels of excellence.



- 4 This figure defines high-poverty schools as those in the fourth quartile of poverty, meaning at least 92.7% of students qualify for FRPL. Low-poverty schools are in the first quartile of poverty, meaning less than 55.7% of students qualify for FRPL.

BLUEPRINT FOR SUCCESS

To understand the policies and programs that might have driven these strong academic outcomes, we surveyed (See Appendix B) and interviewed the principals of each spotlight school. We identified the following themes and levers for success.

Data-Driven Decision-Making

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Above all, data was the most consistent theme among surveys and interviews. At Atkinson County Middle School, Principal Holmes reports that:

Data guides our system for effective instruction—the process of assessing (seeing what did and did not work), planning (identifying what students should know and determining what will happen if they do not know the information), monitoring (identifying strengths and gaps) and implementing (providing effective instruction).”



Buchanan Elementary

Principals leveraged both academic and non-academic data to drive all of their decisions in supporting both students and educators, and the role of data is heavily intertwined with the other themes outlined in this report:

CORE PRINCIPLE	ROLE OF DATA
Cultivate student and family agency within a culture of high expectations	Hold student-led data conferences with families to encourage students to set data-driven goals as well as empower families to monitor progress and support learning at home
Foster a culture of collaborative leadership , where coaches and PLCs encourage idea-sharing, consistency, and continuous improvement	Center data in PLCs – encouraging educators to monitor progress on interim and formative assessments in order to drive instructional decisions
Provide targeted professional development to build educator capacity	Investigate school, grade, and classroom-level data to shape priorities for professional development
Provide scaffolded supports through small-group instruction , particularly for students who are falling behind	Leverage benchmark data to identify specific skills where students are struggling, inform strategic grouping, and provide targeted instruction during intervention blocks

Monitoring Academic Success

Each principal reported using a blend of summative data, interim assessments, and more frequent formative assessments to better support students.

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At Robert Shaw Theme School, Principal Williams describes that:

We exhibit a strong, data-driven culture to monitor and improve student outcomes. Teachers consistently use student performance data to analyze the effectiveness of instructional practices, form differentiated groups, set instructional goals for students, and monitor student growth over time. This also helps us keep parents informed. The data from multiple data sources is also used to support students through intervention or acceleration.”

Several schools conduct interim assessments throughout the year, such as STAR or MAP, to inform scheduling, small groups, and personalized supports. For example, at West Manor Elementary:

“We start with a MAP assessment, which is our universal screener... We use that data to identify where students are, what they need, and what we’re gonna do. And then within our Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), we look at their formatives to identify how students are growing and what’s working for them. Some students may work better with a personalized program, and other students may need more small group instruction.”



Union County Elementary

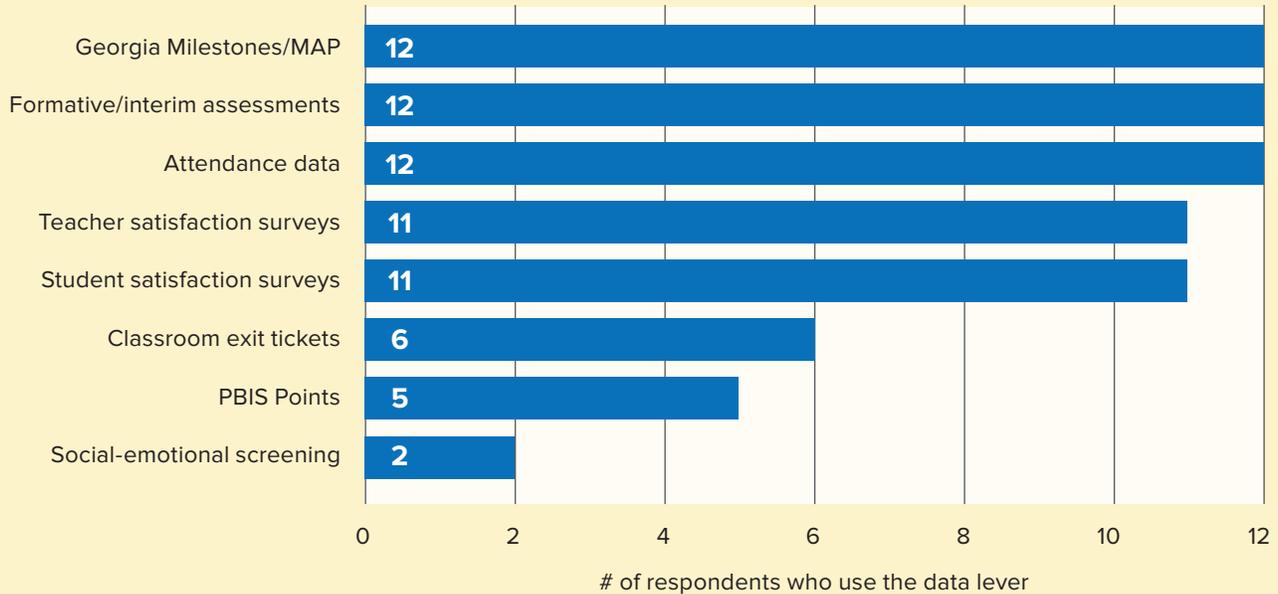
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At Union County Elementary, Principal Bavero has regular data cycles to monitor growth and inform their multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS):

We have data meetings about every eight weeks to determine whether the interventions we’re providing are working, if they need to continue, and if students need to be bumped up or down a tier.”

Additionally, half of the survey respondents reported using exit tickets, and others implemented weekly or biweekly assessments to provide more regular feedback on how students are doing. For example, at Buchanan Elementary, they “have a spiral review format that [they] use to drive instruction,” where students have a “short and frequent evaluation to serve as a quick pulse check about exactly what they’ve gone over that week.” From there, educators investigate the data during PLCs to determine what needs to be re-taught, what should be taught differently, and what students have already mastered.

What sorts of data do you use to drive decision-making?



Leveraging Non-Academic Data

In addition to academic data, several schools reported using non-academic data to drive decision-making – including to inform school improvement plans, improve school climate, and shape family engagement.

For example, **92% of survey respondents reported using both teacher and student satisfaction surveys.** At Pleasant Grove Elementary, parent satisfaction surveys inform school culture goals in their school improvement plan, and they have shaped multicultural activities, multilingual library initiatives, and at-home literacy interventions. Additionally, schools look at attendance data, discipline data, and counseling referrals to improve school climate. For example, at West Haralson Elementary, their “school-wide PBIS Team meets monthly to monitor major and minor behavior referrals and strategically identify kids that need extra support.”

Developing Data Literacy

Principals serve as leaders in building the infrastructure and buy-in for data-driven school climates. For example, both Pleasant Grove Elementary and Buchanan Elementary have “data boards” or “color-coded data rooms” that serve as “visual representations” for how students are progressing towards mastery of the state standards. **Principals are integral to creating these systems – not only designing how they should operate, but also modeling data literacy, guiding teachers in how to interpret the information, and ensuring that data translates into targeted instructional decisions.**



West Manor Elementary

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According to Principal Williams at Robert Shaw Theme School:

The biggest thing is building a trusting culture amongst your teachers – a community where they know how to analyze the data and how to use the data to actually inform instruction and to create lessons that support student growth and achievement. This is done through ongoing collaboration.”

Professional development is a vital part of building this community. Eleven of the 12 survey respondents reported that data and assessments were a very or extremely important topic for professional development, and the only exception was a principal who explained that their school has prioritized data-driven practices for so long that ongoing training is no longer a top priority.

At the same time as principals promote data literacy among their teachers, they also empower students and families to understand the data as well. At East-side Elementary School, Principal Wright reports:

“School-wide use of individual data talks with students has been implemented after each Benchmark [assessment] to increase student ownership of their learning. Students now talk about their growth from one benchmark to the next...Parent trainings are held to understand their child’s benchmark scores and how to support growth at home.”

These practices not only help students take an active role in their own learning – understanding where they stand and what it will take to reach proficiency – but also strengthen parents’ ability to support learning at home and advocate for their child’s academic growth.

This emphasis on data-driven instruction aligns with research that consistently underscores the power of data use in education. For example, one study on urban schools found that there are significant links between teacher and principal data use and student achievement in math and reading in elementary and middle school. School-level supports for data use – including data infrastructure, adequate time to review and discuss data, and professional development – are also linked to higher achievement in these grades and subjects.

However, such consistent and systematized uses of data are not the norm. In a 2020 poll from the Data Quality Campaign, only 31% of teachers strongly

agreed that they had access to the student data they needed, and 46% of teachers said they did not receive trainings or resources about how to assess student learning and progress. In contrast, 92% of the spotlight principals who completed our survey indicated that data and assessment strategies were a very or extremely important topic for professional development.

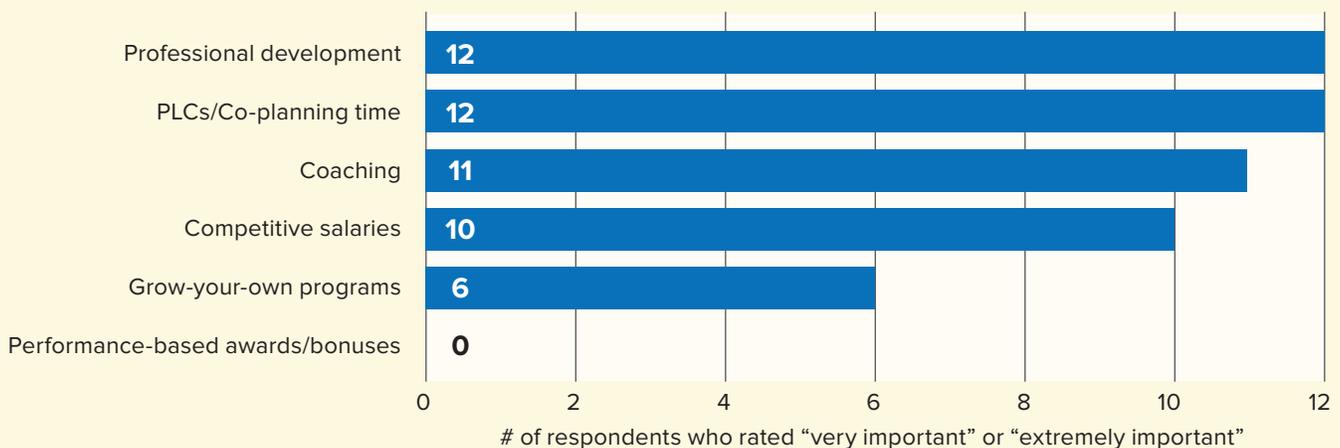
Collaborative Leadership and Capacity Building

Several Spotlight School principals emphasized the importance of a collaborative school climate, where they refrain from making top-down decisions and instead focus on collecting and operationalizing feedback from educators and families.

Principal Lawrence of West Manor Elementary explains that “autonomy in the classroom and teacher voice” are vital to educator success, satisfaction, and retention. Similarly, at Valley Point Elementary, Principal Sewell describes herself not as an administrator who “comes in and drops a hammer” with what she wants to do, but instead she focuses on “collaboration conversations” where she works with her instructional coach to “listen to the voices of [their] people and understand each group’s needs, concerns, and praises.” Principals work diligently to incorporate teacher voice while also maintaining a commitment to evidence-based practices.

The importance of collaboration is reflected in other research, which finds that involving teachers in key decisions cultivates a more inclusive and productive work environment that directly benefits student learning – improving student achievement in both math and reading.

How important were each of the following in your efforts to attract, retain, and support high quality educators?



Professional Development

Collaborative leadership structures require that principals build capacity among their educators, and professional development serves as the first lever. All twelve survey respondents ranked professional development as very or extremely important to supporting educator success, and instructional strategies and curriculum implementation were among the most popular topics. Several principals reported experiencing positive supports from their state and districts to provide professional learning opportunities and make sense of new state standards, including through the Georgia Learning Academy and Regional Education Service Agencies (RESAs).



Buchanan Elementary

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At Hogansville Elementary, Principal Beall has her teachers participating in LETRS training, a popular professional learning program for the science of reading:

Having as many teachers as we've been able to take through a very structured professional learning on early literacy has been really impactful.”

Meanwhile, Buchanan Elementary had six visits from the Benchmark Advance coaches as well as a coach through RESA, and several of their teachers participated in LETRS training as well.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

In addition to professional development opportunities targeted towards the entire school, all twelve survey respondents reported that professional learning communities (PLCs) were very or extremely important to supporting their educators. PLCs are found to be highly effective in creating structured opportunities for continued teacher collaboration, data-driven decision-making, and shared accountability for student success. These spaces serve as weekly co-planning times for classroom teachers, special education teachers, gifted, and ESOL teachers to collaborate with coaches and administrators. PLC time is used to monitor data, dive into new standards, share effective strategies, and plan reteaches and interventions.

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At Valley Point Elementary, Principal Sewell shares that:

Lead teachers meet regularly with their grade level teams to discuss new standards, units, lesson plans, assessments, and instructional slideshows. This collaborative approach ensures that all team members contribute ideas and strategies, fostering consistent instruction across each grade level.”

Principal Lawrence elaborates on how teachers use their PLCs at West Manor Elementary:

“Teachers share ideas that have worked in the past and discuss possible misconceptions of the upcoming lesson with the coach and their peers. A mini lesson is presented during a portion of the PLC called the ‘Teach back.’ This allows for real-time feedback from their peers and Instructional coach. Additionally, during the data portion of the PLC, we begin the conversation of acceleration for some students and re-teaching plans for students that did not master the standard.”



West Haralson Elementary

Instructional Coaches

Eleven of the 12 survey respondents also rated coaches as very or extremely important to supporting educators. **These coaches serve as a vital bridge between administrators and teachers – building trust among educators to collaborate and improve rather than judge or punish while still prioritizing the vision and evidence-based practices of their principals.**

According to Principal Ford, her coaches “have an open relationship with new teachers so that they can go to her anytime that they feel like they need more support.”

After collaborating in PLCs and setting clear expectations for what lessons are supposed to look like, coaches come into the classroom to provide real-time feedback – whether it be suggesting minor adjustments or jumping right into model teaching. These sessions are followed by communication afterwards about what went well and how to adjust for the next lesson.



West Haralson Elementary

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The success of this approach was reflected in real results at West Manor Elementary. According to Principal Lawrence:

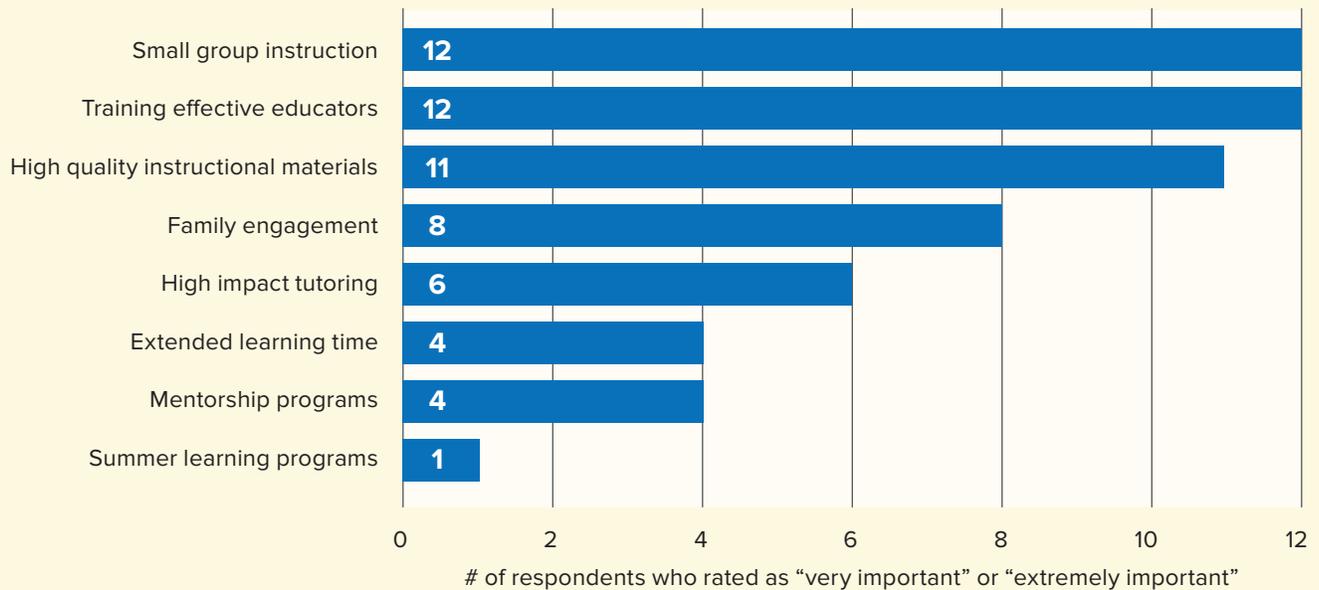
The data let us know that the real-time coaching was better than PD after school... After we started real-time coaching, we saw growth with our formative assessments and then our write score and MAP data.”

This aligns with evidence that coaching can significantly improve instruction quality and student outcomes. A [meta-analysis](#) concluded that the difference in effectiveness between teachers with and without instructional coaches was similar to the difference between novice teachers and those with five to ten years of experience.

Principal Lawrence was fortunate to receive some of the coaching services from the [Georgia Early Literacy Act](#), who helped to prepare his teachers for the Science of Reading initiatives. However, some schools are growing concerned about how to continue supporting these valuable coaches. For example, at West Haralson Elementary, Principal Causey hired her literacy coaches with the federally-funded L4GA grant. Now nearing the end of that grant, she says, “those funds have been steadily decreasing over the past few years. So our budgets are really being hit federally.”

Small Group Instruction

How important were each of the following interventions in helping your school generate such remarkable outcomes?



Several principals heavily emphasized the importance of protecting [tier-one grade-level instruction](#) while also providing small group instruction to target specific skills where students may need extra support.

At Hogansville Elementary, there used to be a differentiated teaching model where many students worked below grade level. They found that in each subsequent grade level, the number of students receiving remediation roughly doubled "because we had kids that truly were not being exposed to grade level content, ever, because they weren't moving through whatever that level was that they were tested on." Now, Principal Beall has shifted to a push-in model, where "all of our students work on grade level all the time, and the thing that is differentiated for them are the scaffolds that are in place, whether that be support personnel or vocabulary or different strategies to access the text or writing."

While protecting grade-level instruction, 100% of survey respondents also reported that small group instruction was very or extremely important to driving strong student outcomes. Most schools made this happen by scheduling both a protected grade-level instruction block as well as an intervention block for students to receive targeted support. Some schools, like Hogansville Elementary, have additional opportunities for extended learning time, where students can access tutoring sessions before or after school.

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At West Haralson Elementary, Principal Causey shares:

Every teacher has to teach grade-level content or they're not going to be successful on the state test. But then they do a really good job in their small-group time of addressing the needs of the students or any deficits they might have. All of them have to get grade-level standards. And then during that small group time is when they either accelerate or remediate.”



Hogansville Elementary



West Haralson Elementary

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Similarly, West Manor Elementary has daily 30-minute intervention blocks – two ELA, two math, and one science block each week. Principal Lawrence shares:

During that time, it's all hands on deck. I use the media specialist, who was a former teacher, the counselor, paraprofessionals, even the PE teacher so that we could create small groups within the classrooms. During that 30 minutes, we break the students up by their ability level within the class.” The teacher is able to “rotate around and work with small groups” while other educators conduct interventions or supervise virtual programming, like iReady.

Importantly, educators leverage the data and feedback from their PLCs to strategically group students and target particular skills.

This approach aligns with extensive research, including a 2024 [systematic review](#) which found that small group instruction boosts academic achievement, increases student engagement, and provides targeted support for struggling learners. Similarly, a [RAND study](#) found statistically significant gains in math and reading for students who participated in small group instruction, particularly for those who started behind grade level.

While every survey respondent reported that small group instruction is very or extremely important to their success, only half of the respondents placed the same value on high-impact tutoring (HIT). Although these small-group intervention blocks are a valuable way to provide both remediation and enrichment opportunities based on evolving student needs, [high-impact tutoring](#), (which provides more consistent support between the same groups of students and tutors) has stronger evidence of effectiveness, and Georgia’s lack of HIT policies represents a huge area of opportunity for the state to incentivize such an important evidence-based practice. HIT has been repeatedly identified as [the most effective intervention](#) for addressing learning loss, and it has been an integral component of the [incredible gains](#) seen in places like [Louisiana](#) and [Washington D.C.](#) on the [Nation’s Report Card](#).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Strengthen data literacy training.** Ensure that data is a central component of Georgia’s teacher and principal preparation programs. Require regional education service agencies (RESAs) to implement targeted data literacy training for educators and school leaders.
- 2. Expand funding for instructional coaches.** Establish a dedicated funding stream for instructional coaches to ensure schools can sustain these vital roles beyond temporary grants.
- 3. Legislate high-impact tutoring (HIT) for struggling students.** Pass legislation to provide sustained funding for high-impact tutoring targeted at students performing below proficiency.
- 4. Enhance principal preparation and support.** Invest in comprehensive principal preparation programs that provide robust training on data literacy and instructional leadership – including how to analyze and operationalize data to drive decisions, implement evidence-based instructional strategies, and build a collaborative school culture. Expand principal mentorship programs and regional PLC collaborations to ensure leaders have access to continuous learning and peer support.

CONCLUSION

Although the ties between poverty and academic outcomes are strong, they are by no means unbreakable. The 34 “spotlight schools” featured in this report illustrate the potential for academic growth and excellence within Georgia’s highest poverty schools. We examined the strategies and initiatives that have driven success and identified the following three themes:

- **Data-driven decision making**
- **Collaborative leadership and capacity building**
- **Small group instruction**

Strong school-level leadership was also an absolutely vital component of success. Each of the principals we interviewed had a strategic vision for their schools; set high expectations for their staff, students, and families; and maintained an unwavering commitment to academic success through evidence-based and data-driven practices.

The success stories from these spotlight schools illustrate that there are common practices and school-level decisions that can drive strong student outcomes, even in challenging circumstances. By scaling the policies and practices highlighted in this report, schools across Georgia can ensure that all students, regardless of their background or neighborhood, have access to an excellent education.

APPENDIX A: FULL TABLE OF SPOTLIGHT SCHOOLS

APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONS

Likert-Scale Questions

Questions asked respondents to rank choices on a 5-point scale from “not at all important” to “very important”

1. Despite facing the unique challenges of a high-poverty school navigating pandemic-era learning, your school was able to generate impressive growth and/or proficiency rates on the annual summative assessment. How important were each of the following interventions in helping your school generate such remarkable outcomes?
 - a. Summer learning programs
 - b. High impact tutoring
 - c. Mentorship programs
 - d. Family engagement
 - e. Extended school days/years
 - f. Small-group instruction
 - g. High-quality instructional materials
 - h. Training effective educators
2. How important were each of the following in your efforts to attract, retain, and support high-quality educators?
 - a. Competitive salaries
 - b. Grow-your-own programs
 - c. Professional development
 - d. Coaching
 - e. Performance-based awards and bonuses
 - f. Professional learning communities (PLCs)/ Co-planning time
3. How important were each of the following professional development topics or approaches in boosting educator effectiveness?
 - a. Classroom management techniques
 - b. Instructional strategies
 - c. Data & assessment practices
 - d. Curriculum implementation
 - e. Technology
 - f. Culturally responsive teaching
 - g. Social-emotional learning
 - h. Peer observation

4. To what extent did you implement the following programs and policies to reduce chronic absenteeism?
 - a. Early warning systems
 - b. School-based attendance teams
 - c. Family engagement
 - d. School climate improvement
 - e. Classroom celebrations/rewards
 - f. Punitive truancy measures
5. To what extent did you implement the following programs and policies to support whole-child development and well-being?
 - a. Social-emotional learning (SEL)
 - b. School counseling and mental health services
 - c. Partnerships with community-based organizations to provide services such as healthcare, counseling, housing, or financial assistance
 - d. Restorative justice or conflict resolution
 - e. Positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS)

Multiple Choice Question

6. What sorts of data do you use to drive decision making? Select all that apply.
 - a. Classroom exit tickets
 - b. Formative/interim assessments
 - c. Georgia Milestones/MAP
 - d. Social-emotional screeners
 - e. PBIS points
 - f. Teacher satisfaction surveys
 - g. Student satisfaction surveys
 - h. Attendance data
 - i. Other

Short Answer Questions

7. What strategies or initiatives have you implemented that have driven positive student outcomes?
8. How do you use data to monitor and improve student outcomes?
9. How do you foster a positive and inclusive school culture that supports the wellbeing of students from low income backgrounds?
10. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?