

Want to Curb School Violence?  
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***The Atlanta Journal-Constitution has been covering many stories on school safety, from legislative committees, which have orders to bring the General Assembly any necessary legislation, to school walkouts. The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education, a 25-year-old Atlanta nonprofit, focuses on issues around student achievement and success. Two of its officers write about addressing school violence in a holistic way.***

The spate of this year's deadly school shootings, from suburban Parkland, Florida, to rural Marshall County, Kentucky, and the urban landscapes of Chicago and Baltimore, is a heartbreaking reminder that schools are struggling to be what they once were: safe spaces where young people can freely learn and grow.

While it's tempting to view school violence in the context of the gun-control debate, at its core, this issue is about more than politically charged topics like gun rights. It's also about the growing need for schools to support the overall well-being of their students.

A recent report, *Accelerating the Pace: The Future of Education in the American South*, released by the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education and six other Southeastern advocacy organizations in the Columbia Group, spotlights this issue. It provides an overview of the

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perspectives of students, parents, educators and others across the South on how to improve schools and learning. Each group offers some valuable guidance on the issue for us as policymakers, business leaders, and parents.

In Kentucky, for example, student representatives from the Student Voice Team, a statewide leadership group for teens invested in improving education there, had sobering reflections on their educational experiences.

Many described having to overcome the low expectations of adults in their schools, families, and communities. Others expressed frustration about what they saw as adults' general disconnect from the real issues students face. This was the reality of Amanda Wahlstedt, a courageous young woman from rural Knox County, Kentucky who now attends Wellesley College. She recalled how her schools were ill-equipped to handle common issues such as food insecurity or, in her case, domestic abuse. There was often a cultural and socioeconomic disconnect between her and her middle-class teachers. Amanda said, "I just couldn't trust the community around me to let me feel like I was in a safe place (in school)."

Other students pointed to policies like "tracking," which groups students by perceived academic ability, and inadequate resources for counselors and special education services, as core problems in their schools.

While the report brings to light many challenges in the South, it also offers recommendations for strengthening academic -- and nonacademic -- support for today's students, including:

- More rigorous, meaningful classes. Beyond concerns about low expectations, students and parents want stronger career-training programs and experiences such as community projects and interaction with businesses and nonprofit organizations;
- Greater help with family and emotional health issues. Students are different from those in generations past. They use technology constantly, are from more diverse backgrounds, and a majority now come from low-income households. In Georgia, about 62 percent of our school-age children are from low-income households. Providing appropriate support can be the difference between success and failure for them.
- Better school climates, fairer discipline. Georgia and many other states are beginning to use results of student surveys on their learning environments in school accountability efforts. With growing disparities in school discipline rates, educators need stronger support in adopting research-based strategies to intervene before problems arise.

Even more promising are several models of progress for schools, districts, and our state to follow.

Marietta High School, for example, is home to the Graduate Marietta Student Success Center. The Center, which is an extension of the high school, is a hub for students needing services including physical and mental health care, counseling and support groups, tutoring and college-preparation workshops, a food pantry and clothes closet, and a social worker and even a parole officer.

The Center's array of services is in response to extensive surveys of what the students said they needed. In addition to after-school tutoring and help with college applications, students requested access services such as suicide-prevention support groups, opioid addiction services for themselves or relatives, help with finding their parents jobs, and health care referrals. Since its founding in 2016, the Center's success has inspired other schools across Georgia to design their own student-support centers.

Even non-school-based organizations like Georgia Appleseed have begun to provide training and support for schools trying to improve student-discipline strategies. In Kentucky, Partners for Education based at Berea College is providing support staff, additional teachers, and summer programs for many students in some of the nation's poorest counties.

These represent the types of successes we believe state leaders should be building on and investing in. Expanding access to preventative measures to address student challenges is a smart strategy to reduce problems such as crime, homelessness, and poor health, and is an effective strategy for creating safer schools, stronger communities, and improved life outcomes for students and their families.

There is more work to be done to ensure all students, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, have access to quality support services that can improve their academic outcomes. The blueprint for success, however, has never been clearer. Students, educators, policymakers, and business leaders must champion research-based practices and commit to ensuring they take root in our schools, school districts, and communities.

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