

# Education & Workforce Speaker Series

Summer 2021



## Panel Summary: Literacy is Key

### Introduction

Literacy affects every aspect of a person's life. Those who are not functionally literate often have issues with education, health, and employment. Currently, 1 in 6 adult Georgians is not functionally literate, causing Georgians to lose 1.3 billion dollars annually, and leading to a vicious cycle in which these Georgians cannot pass down critical literacy skills to the next generation.

One of the critical indicators of future success is the 3rd-grade reading level. If a student is reading at the appropriate level by 3rd grade, [they are 25% more likely to graduate high school](#) than their below-level peers. Unfortunately, in Georgia, [nearly one-third of 4th-grade students](#) read below basic reading levels. Without crucial literacy skills, Georgians fall behind. Many organizations currently work to help address these issues. On June 16, 2021, Science for Georgia, Science is US, Technology Association of Georgia, Urban League of Greater Atlanta, Partners in Change, and Literacy for All held the first part in a four-part speaker series on Education and Workforce. This panel focused on literacy.

The panelists, representing thought leadership in literacy, spoke on the many ways we can help increase literacy in Georgia with evidence-based solutions. Their suggestions and resources for continued learning have been included in this summary in the hope that these recommendations can be carried forward. For a recording of this panel, please visit <https://bit.ly/GAEduWork21>.

### The Issues

The first panelist, [Juan-Carlos Aguilar](#), PhD, is the director of innovative programs and research at the Georgia Department of Education. His work through the Department of Education shows how vital literacy is to building skills in all facets of learning. Reading is critical for children to unlock learning in science, math, and language disciplines. Without reading, schooling is halted, and children cannot properly develop the essential skills of thinking used to synthesize information. Dr Aguilar urged us to consider literacy across disciplines and its crucial role in learning at every level of education.

[Stephanie Blank](#), the next panelist, has worked extensively to improve conditions for Georgian children. Ms. Blank is the founding chair of Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS) - a not-for-profit focusing statewide on children birth to age five. Building upon neurological and education studies of the past, she asserted that reading doesn't just begin on the first day of school; it is a commitment from birth. Cognitively, children start recognizing and processing data from birth. Studies show that infants can process basic information and differences between settings and that building upon these skills is key to learning. Parents and

caretakers must foster learning in children by exposing them to language often. Exposure to language at an early age aids children in creating the critical neural networks needed for literacy and numeracy, keys to early learning success. Ms. Blank believes that further emphasis needs to be placed on the first 5 years of development. As we learn more, the neurological aspects of learning and literacy need to continue to be studied and taught to students.

[Dawn Stastny](#), President of the Georgia Parents Teachers Association, further emphasized the importance of an early start at literacy. Children who enter school struggling with literacy continue to struggle throughout all of their education. As [research shows](#), families play a crucial part in developing literacy. Children from low-income, low-literacy, or low-involvement families open start at a disadvantage in reading. Communities must support equity in student reading through supporting diverse libraries and family reading programs. Children embrace books that show their lives and their experiences. By promoting diverse libraries, communities can reach disadvantaged students and foster a lifelong love of learning. In many communities, library and school reading programs lack the funding, access, and volunteers needed to support all students. Funding measures and support for local libraries and schools must continue to foster literacy for all.

As a Professor and Director of Georgia State University's Adult Literacy Research Center, [Daphne Greenberg](#), PhD highlighted the often-overlooked adult literacy issues in our country. In comparison to other similar countries, the United States has many more people performing in the lowest literacy levels, and in Georgia, performance is often worse than the national average. Adults with low literacy skills come from different backgrounds. And high school graduation status does not indicate literacy status. Adults with low literacy skills have difficulties in aspects of life where reading is required. Often, these issues of low literacy are intergenerational, as parents with low reading levels have difficulty helping their children with reading. Dr. Greenberg shared indicators of low-literacy such as those who don't complete forms, or who never respond to mailed-home written information. Adult education programs can help adults with their literacy skills. She emphasized the importance of considering literacy a social justice issue that requires funding for research and programs to help adults improve their skills.

Reading isn't only encouraged in education settings and at home; it needs to be promoted everywhere. For Dr. [Fredly Bataille](#) of Intown Pediatrics, reading is about supporting children at every level possible. His practice partners with Reach Out and Read, an organization dedicated to helping pediatricians to encourage families to read together. As early as the six-month wellness visit, Dr. Bataille's office makes sure parents know the importance of reading with and talking with their child, and that they go home with a book in hand for their child. [Studies show](#) that the earlier a child and parents have books in their hands, the earlier they begin reading together. As wellness visits continue at the 12 months, 2 years, and onward, children are gifted age-appropriate books to encourage their cognitive development and reading skills. Parents don't always have the time or resources to promote literacy on their own; young minds must be encouraged to read through support from the community. By ensuring access to books and emphasizing reading as a health priority, Dr. Bataille and his practice help fill in gaps that may prevent children from reading early in life.

[Amber Scott](#), the executive director at Leap-Year, takes a unique community-based approach to support literacy. Leap-Year utilizes a two-generation approach to literacy. Their program selects fellows, who are recent high-school graduates, often from low-income or first-generation backgrounds. During their year-long fellowship, fellows are provided with post-secondary training and also work with 2nd-grade students to encourage reading. Through this, Leap-Year supports both older graduates as they get ready for college, and younger students in the critical transition phases between learning how to read and learn from reading. Leap-Year's unique method of tackling literacy issues creates a culture of fun around reading. Students adore the personalized, friendly approach to learning and benefit from seeing students from similar backgrounds as themselves working with them. Ms. Scott stressed the need for fun in education. We must change the culture around reading for students to see themselves as avid life-long readers.

### **Proposed Actions to Take**

From the perspectives of the panelists, as well as current research in the field, below are a list of actionable ways to support reading today.

#### **1. [Support evidence-based reading programs](#)**

Recent reports show that the most common teaching methods used in schools to teach children to read. Science research in literacy has shown an early emphasis on both phonetics and comprehension is key to success. Kids need to learn how to sound out words as well as be exposed to words in context. New science based initiatives in [Mississippi](#) and [North Carolina](#) show great promise in increasing early literacy. Encourage your local school boards to put science first in reading by being present at community meetings discussing education standards. Try reaching out to administrative staff in your communities to see what policies currently exist in your area to encourage literacy. Make sure science has a voice!

#### **2. [Support literacy programs working in your community](#)**

Many organizations in Georgia work to combat literacy issues on every level. Reach out and Read, Leap Year, GEEARS, Reading is Fundamental, ProLiteracy, and many other great organizations work to help [fill in the gaps in literacy](#) by supporting individuals. You can support organizations through volunteering, donating, or simply promoting important programs to your community. [The National Literacy Directory](#) is a great place to search for what organizations are working in your area!

<https://sci4ga.com/knowledge-base/reading-resource-directory/>

#### **3. [Support diverse libraries](#)**

[Diversity in libraries](#) helps everyone to read. By donating books, volunteering time, encouraging unique perspectives, and supporting funding for libraries and media centers, we can help everyone become stronger readers.

**4. Support diverse readers**

Literacy isn't simply a schooling issue; it's a lifelong commitment. Children ages birth to 5 and post-high-school adults play a massive role in literacy as well. Ensuring that reading is encouraged at every step of life and creating cultures of fun around reading is vital to increasing literacy.

**5. Support funding for literacy and education**

Ultimately, all programs require funding to continue. We must encourage our lawmakers and local representatives to prioritize education and literacy in our budget! Whether we promote more funding for research, grants for support programs, or new education initiatives, contacting your representatives and school boards to advocate for funding can help all of us put literacy programs first.