

# The Importance of Literacy

BY BEN YOUNG

**A**s summer begins, consider all the books you may read – whether by the pool, at home or on vacation – and remember how lucky you are to be able to read them.

In Georgia, recent data shows some 36% of elementary students reading below grade level. In Metro Atlanta, just 41% of students in third grade – the year in which experts believe literacy should be established in order to graduate later – are proficient in reading.

The poverty rate for high school dropouts in Georgia is triple that of adults who graduate. We have nearly 800,000 adults with low literacy skills, and there is a 72% chance their children are also at the lowest reading level.

Georgia's late first lady Sandra Deal led an ambitious effort to tackle the issue, through the Sandra Dunagan Deal Center for Early Language and Literacy, housed at Georgia College, to move the needle on Georgia childhood literacy. Established in 2017, the Deal Center awarded more than \$225,000 to community coalitions across the state and granted a total of \$350,000 to seven Georgia colleges in 2024.

Both the Deal Center and the Get Georgia Reading campaign support the 2025 Community Coalition Grant Initiative, which funds projects that support the development of Georgia's children younger than 6. Grants awarded can reach a total of as much as \$150,000, with individual amounts ranging from \$10,000 to \$24,000 for early literacy projects. In addition, the center provides University System of Georgia institutions up to \$50,000 to establish research into practices that will help children get on the path to third-grade reading proficiency.

In keeping with its 2023 Georgia Early Literacy Act, the state allocated \$10 million in federal funds to hire

60 literacy coaches for the 2024-2025 school year. In addition to establishing regional coaches, the Georgia Department of Education planned to use federal funding to place school-level coaches in the lowest performing 5% of elementary schools. The 2025 state budget continued that support by providing funds for 116 regional literacy coaches.

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Two events this summer aim to bring the state's teachers up to speed on how new literacy requirements affect the curriculum. The 2025 Governor's Summit on Early Language and Literacy takes place July 8-9 at Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville. The Deal Center's Georgia LitLink takes place June 16-18 at Gas South Convention Center in Duluth and is hosted by GaDOE and Rollins Center for Language and Literacy, a program of the Atlanta Speech School.

The Georgia Reads Campaign, which includes partnerships between the Georgia Council on Literacy (created by SB211), the Share the Magic Campaign and Georgia Municipal Association's Georgia City Solutions, awarded \$25,000 to 10 community partnerships in February and recognized them as Georgia Reads Communities, for making significant literacy improvements. Many were cities that had initiated the Mayor's Reading Club, which Georgia City Solutions started in 2022. Mayors who partici-

pate read books (sometimes centered on civic engagement) to children to keep them engaged in reading. This is especially important over the summer, when studies have shown students who don't read can lose some ground on their academic progress. Beginning with a handful of mayors, the program has grown to more than 50 mayors participating across the state. Madison Mayor Fred Perriman – who finishes his term as GMA president at the end of this month – makes it a point to read to third graders at least once a month at their school.

The Georgia Reads Campaign also created READBowl, where elementary, middle school and high school teams with the highest average reading minutes win state recognition, a visit to the Capitol and a trophy. Share the Magic CEO Malcolm Mitchell, a Valdosta native and New England Patriots Super Bowl champion, pumped up the crowd at the awards ceremony in February.

In March, the Trump administration issued a directive cutting funding for public libraries, which in Georgia could mean \$5 million less for key infrastructure for summer reading campaigns, not to mention workforce training, senior resources, services for the blind and more, particularly for communities without a high school.

I don't have room to list all the local initiatives helping the literacy effort, but it is inspiring to see so much work in Georgia to help kids improve their reading skills. During the pandemic, learning levels diminished nationwide, underscoring the importance of public resources such as libraries and schools, and how we can fall behind without them. Now our children are in danger of losing the ground they've gained since 2022. If we are to remain competitive as a state and as a country, knowledge is imperative. ■