

Georgia eyes literacy reform, with Macon in the fight. Here's how

By Myracle Lewis

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CC Educational Training Services director of professional learning Consuella L. Carter takes notes from the keynote speaker during the Governor's Summit on Early Language and Literacy on Tuesday, July 8, 2025, inside of the Magnolia Ballroom at Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville, Georgia. The opening address given by Dr. Paige C. Pullen focused on the science of literacy. Katie Tucker/The Telegraph



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About three-quarters of Georgia's third and fourth graders are not reading on grade level, according to experts in the state, something that education leaders sought to find ways to fix in a summit this week.

Educators, policymakers, researchers and community advocates united in Milledgeville this week for the [2025 Sandra Dunagan Deal Center for Early Language and Literacy Summit](#) with a shared goal: to ensure every Georgia child can read proficiently by third grade.

Held July 8–9 at Georgia College & State University, the two-day conference highlighted encouraging literacy trends in Georgia and focused on new statewide initiatives and policies introduced over the past year, while also addressing persistent gaps that remain.

As the state's most vulnerable population grapples with persistent reading challenges, the Deal Center said early childhood reading achievement is a pressing issue.

"More than 70% of Georgia third and fourth graders are not reading on grade level, and we know that impacts long-term outcomes into adulthood — their ability to get a job, health literacy, even rates of incarceration relate directly to low literacy rates," said Lindee Morgan, executive director for the Deal Center.

The center provides professional development programming and grant funding for individuals who work with children from birth through age 8.

"The earlier we start infusing those building blocks of reading into children's lives, even prenatally, the better off they're going to be," Morgan said.

Georgia students' 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, scores aligned with the national average, the Georgia Department of Education said.

"Georgia students continue to recover from the pandemic. Multiple data points indicate we are moving in the right direction, but more work is needed," State School Superintendent Richard Woods said in a January [statement](#).

Georgia Milestones 2024 scores showed that 62% of third graders in the state are not reading proficiently, and over half of the state's eighth graders are also not reading proficiently, according to the [Georgia Council on Literacy](#).



Keynote speaker Dr. Paige C. Pullen of Pullen Education Strategies (left) gives a presentation at the Governor's Summit on Early Language and Literacy on Tuesday, July 8, 2025, inside of the Magnolia Ballroom at Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville, Georgia. The Deal Center hosted the annual summit for educators, researchers and policymakers to highlight current research related to literacy development. Katie Tucker/The Telegraph

One of the summit's attendees was Arianne Weldon, executive director of the Get Georgia Reading campaign and a governing board member of the Deal Center. The campaign was launched in 2013 to intensify efforts to improve third-grade reading proficiency, which serves as a critical predictor of student success, Weldon said.

"Childhood literacy is really a national issue right now," she said. "I'm so proud that we have the Deal Center because of the need to embed research-based approaches into practice for Georgia's youth."

Weldon said various factors that directly impact third-grade literacy outcomes — including access to quality child care, health-related barriers, overall family literacy and low school attendance — have led many states, including Georgia, to pass sweeping [literacy reforms](#).

"The rate for chronic absenteeism has doubled compared to rates prior to the pandemic, and it's not coming down very quickly," Weldon said. "The (Get Georgia Reading) campaign has a broad range of partners who realize that literacy is very important and work together to improve it."

Morgan said the summit is also valuable for teachers because it offers training that helps them put the science of reading into practice, especially when there's often a delay between learning the methods and using them effectively in classrooms.

She added that the summit is especially important now in a digital-based world where screen time isn't minimized for youth.

"We have this issue of kids not reading well, but in tandem to that, we have increasing usage of technology and screen-based interaction for children, including the use of (artificial intelligence) which I think further increases their vulnerability to establish strong reading skills," Morgan said.