

Georgia's poor kids may be falling further behind, new data shows

As a group, Georgia's poor students may be falling further behind their wealthier peers academically, according to a new yardstick intended to help measure school performance.

For the first time, the public got a look last week at student "growth" data that shows how much students at each school learned in a year, whether or not they passed state tests. The new measurement was introduced partly to counter long-held concerns by educators and parents from high-poverty schools who said the state's grading system unfairly labeled them as "failing."

But an Atlanta Journal-Constitution analysis shows that not only are low-income students less likely to pass exams but, based on this first year's data, they're progressing more slowly than wealthier classmates.

The [data](#), which is based on student performance on state tests, has major implications for students, schools and teachers.

The results shine a light on public schools where academic progress lags, giving parents a clearer picture of school performance. The new growth measure will also be used as part of some teachers' job evaluations.

Georgia has not publicly released growth results for teachers, but the school-level data suggests teachers of low-income students could be more likely to get poor evaluations, influencing decisions about hiring, firing, certification and — for some — pay. That could make it even harder to recruit teachers into high-need schools.

"I suspect that what we are doing is we're getting better and better at measuring the effects of poverty and socioeconomics on student learning," said Tim Callahan, a spokesman for the Professional Association of Georgia Educators, which has reservations about key aspects of the new teacher evaluation system.

At most metro Atlanta districts, poor students tended to have lower growth results than more affluent students. In Atlanta Public Schools, for example, the growth result in math for elementary and middle school students from low-income families was 12 points below more affluent students. In Cobb County, the gap between low-income and more affluent students in reading was 7 points. However, in some schools statewide, students saw similar growth levels regardless of their economic status.

Atlanta schools' chief accountability and information officer Bill Caritj said the district has been using the growth data, along with other information, to identify high-poverty schools where students are learning and find out why. Then the district plans to help other schools copy what's working.

"We know that if we do the right things we can get those kids to improve," he said.

Under the federal No Child Left Behind law, Georgia graded schools almost entirely on whether students passed state tests. Schools with a lot of poor students did not do well under that system. Teachers from such schools, in Georgia and across the country, said their schools were unfairly punished by the pass/fail system. In 2012, Georgia got permission from the federal government to include some measure of students' academic growth in school ratings.

This new information is best used to analyze the performance of individual schools and districts, said Dana Rickman, policy and research director of the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. “Then you have to look at why those kids aren’t learning as much as their peers in other schools,” she said.

As it introduces this growth information, the Georgia Department of Education is pushing districts to make sure the right teachers are in front of students. A new teacher and principal evaluation system that bases half of job performance ratings on student academic growth and half on observations by administrators is a major focus this year. But the Department of Education can’t force districts to assign their “best” teachers to low-income students.

“Education in Georgia is a very local thing,” Department of Education spokesman Matt Cardoza said. “Classroom rosters are not something DOE has any authority over.”

The growth data, which is based on comparing test scores from the 2012-13 school year with prior years’, shows disparities in other areas too. Statewide, black students tended to show less growth than white students. And students with disabilities tended to show less growth than students without.

Atlanta parent Shawna Hayes-Tavares said the growth data showed that some educators’ claims about poor students learning enough each year, even if they failed state tests, are not always true. “These were the things we were trying to believe,” she said. “It’s very interesting to hear that it is not happening.”

Hayes-Tavares said the Atlanta school district should fix disparities in school resources, pointing to a recent district report showing, among other things, that poor Atlanta students, on average, had [less experienced teachers](#).

Tina Williams, a mother in DeKalb County, was surprised to learn that some growth rates at the school her son attended last year were relatively low despite high passage rates on the Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests. Ninety eight percent of the fifth-graders at the DeKalb Elementary School of the Arts passed the reading exam. Yet they registered growth in the 43rd percentile.

The school has high poverty, but it’s also a magnet school that draws ambitious parents. Williams wondered whether the children had been pushed to read at home and were coming to school with fully formed skills, or whether the teachers were simply inefficient.

“My son, we do things at home, so I kind of pat myself on the back for his CRCT scores,” she said. “I don’t leave it up to the school.”

Williams was unsure of the wisdom of judging teachers on growth. Yet she said teacher performance should be measured. “Every school has their own situation when it comes to supplies or parents,” she said, “but people do need to be held accountable.”

Georgia is one of about 40 states using students’ academic growth as a factor in rating schools, and it is one of about 20 states using it as a major factor in evaluating teachers. It’s part of a major push nationally spurred by Race to the Top, one of the Obama Administration’s key education initiatives.

The Georgia Department of Education is responsible for calculating the growth measures. The model Georgia uses does not directly take into account school or student characteristics like poverty, race or disability. Instead, it compares growth among students starting at the same level.

“Georgia, like many other states, elected not to include student characteristics as controls in the model because we do not want to set up differentiated expectations for various groups of students,”

department spokesman Matt Cardoza explained in an email. He said the agency noted the relationship between growth and poverty. The issue now is how to address it, he said.

Gwinnett County schools spokesman Jorge Quintana said other ways of measuring growth contradict Georgia's results for some schools, including those with many students eligible for federally subsidized free or reduced-price meals, one measure of poverty.

"It depends on the formula that is used," he said. "We've seen other studies here in the district that show schools where we have a high level of free and reduced enrollment do perform really highly."

In Gwinnett, where one of Georgia's top-ranked schools, the Gwinnett School of Mathematics, Science and Technology, got a middling growth result in a key area of math, officials are still trying to decide how to use the data.

Jonathan Patterson, the district's associate superintendent responsible for testing, advised caution. He said he's not confident enough in the numbers yet to make any big changes based on them.

"One year's worth of data provides us a great context to start a conversation, but we don't want to make too significant a decision based on one year's results," Patterson said. "It's not perfect. However, it does add value for our schools and our system."

Staff writer Jeff Ernsthause contributed to this article.

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Find out the "growth" result for students in your school on our searchable database on AJC.com. Plus, watch AJC reporter and data specialist Jeff Ernsthause's video explanation of "student growth percentiles."

Measuring student learning

The educator- and school-level growth measure is based on a "student growth percentile," a statistical measure of progress determined by comparing a student's standardized test scores from one year with those of students who started out with similar scores in the past. The better a student performs relative to his or her academic peers, the higher his or her growth percentile.