

District and School Prioritized Innovations to Increase Student Achievement Under Georgia’s Flexibility Policy



In 2007, the Georgia Department of Education instituted a policy that allows districts to enter into performance contracts that grant waivers from state education rules, provisions, and guidelines. In exchange, districts and schools must meet academic performance targets.¹ The goal of the policy is to encourage districts to use resources in new ways by implementing innovative practices designed to increase student achievement.

Between 2008/09 and 2016/17, almost all of Georgia’s school districts (178 out of 180) entered into performance contracts with the state. Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Southeast conducted two studies to examine which academic, financial, and human resources innovations district and school leaders prioritized after entering performance contracts.² The studies also analyzed how student achievement changed in districts and schools after the start of districts’ performance contracts.



District and school leaders were asked to identify innovative practices that were their first, second, and third priorities to implement across three waiver areas—academic programs, human resources, and finances—after the start of their district’s performance contract.

Academic innovations

Top three identified by district leaders



College and career academies



Dual enrollment



Alternative education programs

Top three identified by school leaders



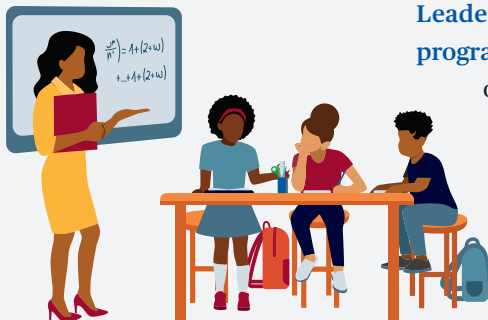
Use of data to identify the need for early intervention



Formative assessments used to guide instruction



Personalized instruction



Leaders in schools with larger proportions of students eligible for the national school lunch program, Black students, and English learner students reported prioritizing innovations related to online and/or blended curricula more frequently than leaders in schools with smaller proportions of these students.

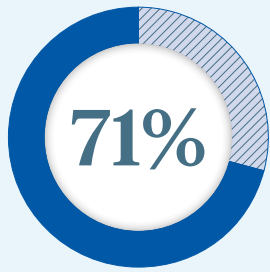
Elementary and middle school leaders reported prioritizing innovations related to use of data, formative assessments, and personalized learning.

High school leaders reported prioritizing programs focused on graduation and college and career readiness.

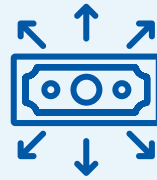
¹ Districts could request waivers of class size and reporting requirements, teacher certification requirements, salary schedule requirements, and direct classroom expenditure control (noninstructional and instructional categorical allotments).

² Austin, M., Williams, R., & Conway-Turner, J. (2021). *School changes in student achievement and local practice under Georgia’s district and school flexibility policy* (REL 2022-125). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=5686>

Williams, R., Rudo, Z., & Austin, M. (2020). *District changes in student achievement and local practice under Georgia’s district and school flexibility policy* (REL 2021-051). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=4629>



of district leaders reported prioritizing innovations related to teacher certification flexibility.



Both district and school leaders prioritized innovations related to the same top two financial categories: Instructional spending and state, local, and federal funds in support of school improvement.

The majority of innovations prioritized by districts and schools did not require a waiver.

District leaders most frequently identified needing a waiver to implement the following innovations:



Academic:

- Credit requirements and availability
- Enrichment or other specialty classes



Human resources:

- Certification requirements
- Staff-to-student ratio in the classroom
- Differentiated salary systems

Changes in student achievement

Changes in student achievement after the start of districts' performance contracts varied from large decreases to large increases at both the district and school levels.

Both studies found little evidence of significant positive or negative changes in student achievement across districts and schools after the start of districts' performance contracts.

The average changes in school achievement were positive but small for grades 3-8 English language arts and math.



Implications and recommendations for the Georgia Department of Education

- **There was minimal evidence of relationships between district characteristics or innovations and changes in achievement at the district level after districts adopted a performance contract.** State leaders should consider conducting follow-up analyses to identify the extent to which adoption of performance contracts is associated with longer term changes in achievement. If the results of follow-up analyses show a relationship between achievement and certain innovations, the state could pursue a more rigorous study testing the impacts of those innovations.
- **District and school leaders should more systematically collect implementation data on innovative practices.** Beyond the survey responses this study collected, little information is available about which innovative practices leaders prioritized, how implementation of those practices has progressed, and whether practices are implemented with fidelity. Collecting this information would enable districts and schools to better determine what works in their local context.
- **There were relationships between some school characteristics and changes in achievement at the school level after districts adopted a performance contract.** Schools with higher proportions of Black students and students who were eligible for the national school lunch program had changes in achievement that were less positive than schools with lower proportions of these students. Schools with higher prior student achievement had changes in achievement that were more positive than schools with lower prior student achievement. State education leaders may want to examine the reasons for these differences, such as whether these differences are associated with different prioritized innovations.
- **Many of the innovations school and district leaders reported prioritizing did not require a waiver to implement.** This finding raises questions about whether schools and districts are making full use of their freedom to innovate. State education leaders may want to consider developing technical assistance or informational supports that encourage schools and districts to implement innovative policies or practices that more fully take advantage of the flexibilities provided in their performance contracts.