

# CHANGING THE ODDS

the race for results in atlanta



## THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

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# INTRODUCTION

**Atlanta is the birthplace of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and the American civil rights movement and home to some of the country's most prestigious historically black colleges and universities.**

The city is a magnet for professionals, particularly people of color. It also has a rich legacy of black and white civic and community leaders working tirelessly to stand apart from other southern cities when it came to the racial tension and unrest that marked the 1960s, positioning Atlanta as the “city too busy to hate.”<sup>1</sup> Then-Mayor Ivan Allen was the only major southern leader to publicly endorse national civil rights legislation, and Maynard Jackson, the city's first African-American mayor, established groundbreaking affirmative action policies and kept Atlanta's international airport on the south side, bringing thousands of jobs to that part of the city to balance business expansion to the north.

Today, metro Atlanta serves as the headquarters for nearly 30 Fortune 1000 companies that collectively generated almost \$360 billion in revenues in 2014 alone, contributing to a booming economy that is among the largest in the country.<sup>2</sup> But while the city has much to celebrate, its proud history and thriving economy mask deep and enduring challenges that make it one of the most difficult places in the nation for children in low-income families to climb out of poverty.<sup>3</sup> This is even truer for the city's children of color, whose families are more likely

to struggle to make ends meet and reside in neighborhoods contending with blight, limited resources and few opportunities to realize their dreams for a better life.

Race has undeniably shaped the city's landscape, giving rise to two very different Atlantas that underscore the fact that the place where children grow up affects their opportunities in life. This report examines the city through its 25 neighborhood planning units (NPU)s<sup>4</sup> — the resident advisory councils that make zoning and other planning recommendations — to explore how race and community of residence erect persistent barriers that keep kids from reaching their potential. They also keep the city from fully harnessing its economic power: Metro Atlanta's economy stands to gain an additional \$78.6 million annually by promoting racial equity, according to a recent study.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of community is evident throughout metro Atlanta, but especially in the city. While the city has become somewhat more diverse in recent years, it remains divided, literally and figuratively. The east-west Interstate 20 separates wealthier, majority-white communities in the north from poorer, majority-black ones in the south.<sup>6</sup>

African Americans represent at least 80 percent of the population in 12 of the 17 NPUs located along or below I-20, while more than 60 percent of the six northern NPUs' populations are white.<sup>7</sup> NPUs in northern Atlanta have the highest enrollment in early education programs and the highest-performing elementary schools, most of the city's high-income workers and better access to the growing job market on the north side and in the northern suburbs. By contrast, most of Atlanta's low-income workers live in the southern NPUs, and few have access to reliable transportation that would allow them to tap into regional employment opportunities that lie beyond the reach of public transit.<sup>8</sup>

Even as metro Atlanta's economy thrives, the city recently ranked first for income inequality,<sup>9</sup> and one in four of its residents lives in poverty.<sup>10</sup> In addition, low- and moderate-income workers and families have limited housing options.<sup>11</sup> To advance the local economy and ensure all children have the chance to participate in and contribute to it, Atlanta must address the barriers to opportunity that face many in the city and region.

## Examining Barriers to Opportunity at the Local Level

For more than a decade, the Annie E. Casey Foundation has worked with a broad range of partners to increase educational and economic opportunities for children and families in several southwest Atlanta neighborhoods, with the goal of ensuring all kids, regardless of race, ethnicity or community of residence, have the chance to realize their full potential.<sup>12</sup> Yet race remains a major predictor of a child's trajectory in life — a reality reinforced by nearly every measure of child and family well-being highlighted in this report.

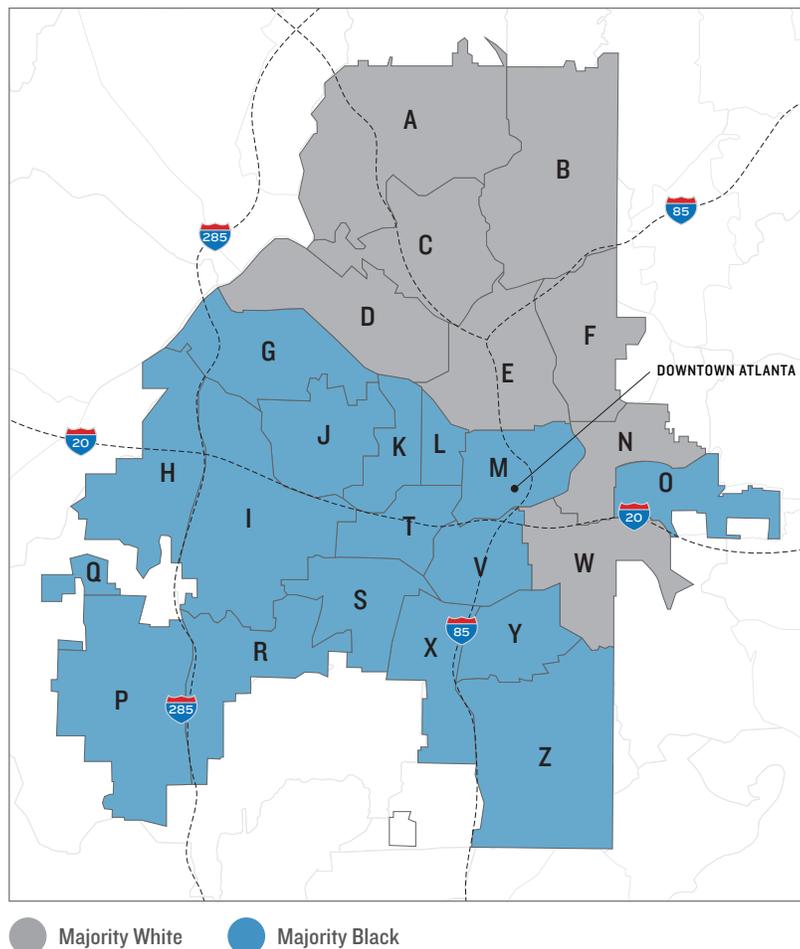
In 2014, the Casey Foundation released *Race for Results: Building a Path to Opportunity for All Children*, which revealed that children of color across the nation have a steeper hill to climb when it comes to meeting key milestones on the path to a successful adulthood.<sup>13</sup> We now explore how this steeper climb plays out on the local level, in Atlanta, where the Foundation has made a long-term commitment to improving the lives of children and families, as well as the places where they live. We hope to build on the longtime work of others who have sought to remove the obstacles that

too many kids and families in the region have encountered for decades.<sup>14</sup>

This report focuses on three key areas that support or thwart children’s healthy growth and development: (1) the community where they grow up; (2) their school experiences; and (3) their family’s access to economic opportunities. It seeks to identify how public policies and practices in each area maintain barriers to success for children and families, particularly those of color, and offers recommendations for addressing these obstacles so that all children can thrive.

### A City Divided

In Atlanta, the east-west I-20 separates wealthier, majority-white communities in the north from poorer, majority-black communities in the south. African Americans represent at least 80 percent of the population in 12 of the 17 NPU’s located along or below I-20.



SOURCE: Neighborhood Nexus analysis of 2010 U.S. Census Bureau data.

### PLACING ATLANTA IN A REGIONAL CONTEXT

While this report focuses on the city of Atlanta, we cannot ignore the impact the surrounding region has on city residents. Mirroring national trends, the metropolitan region<sup>15</sup> has become increasingly diverse in recent decades. The 1980s brought refugees from Asia, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Europe, and Atlanta’s booming economy has attracted large numbers of immigrants from Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East and Africa. In the past decade alone, the region’s population has grown by 1 million, making it one of the fastest-growing in the United States. Increases in populations of color are responsible for 90 percent of that growth.<sup>16</sup>

Yet soaring racial and ethnic diversity have not translated into racially and ethnically diverse neighborhoods. Most white residents live in the region’s outer counties and the city’s north side, while black residents are mostly clustered to the south. Asians and Pacific Islanders primarily live in the northeastern counties, with some pockets in other areas, while Latinos most heavily reside in the metro area’s northeastern and northwestern counties.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast to this multicultural panorama, the city landscape is largely black and white: The two groups represent nearly 90 percent of the population.<sup>18</sup> Given this context and the limited availability of data for smaller racial and ethnic groups, this report primarily focuses on the city’s black and white residents, including statistics for other groups where possible.

# COMMUNITY

Children's success is strongly tied to their family's stability and well-being, which, in turn, is affected by where they live.<sup>19</sup> Children living in high-poverty areas — like many of the neighborhoods on Atlanta's south side — frequently lack access to critical resources such as high-performing schools, quality medical care and safe outdoor spaces.

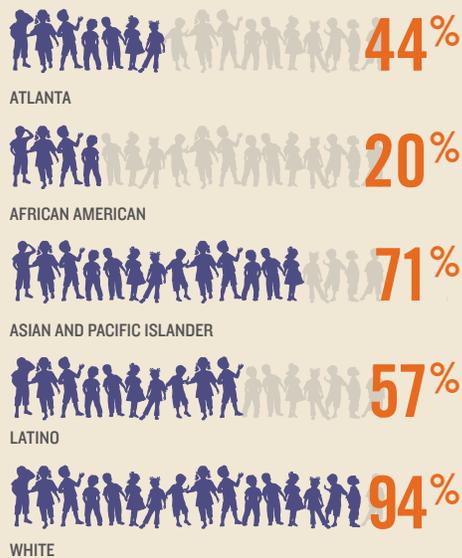
Regardless of income, families living in high-poverty communities are more likely to have limited healthy food options and pay more for housing than those living in more affluent areas.<sup>20</sup> These challenges often trap children in a cycle of poverty.

In Atlanta, the relationship between place and race is glaring. Ninety-four percent of white children live in low-poverty communities, compared to 20 percent of black children and 57 percent of Latino children. The neighborhood planning units underscore this reality, with most high-poverty areas concentrated in the predominantly black NPUs located along or below I-20. Only five of the 17 NPUs along or south of I-20 are considered low-poverty areas, where the poverty rate is less than 20 percent, and in four of the south-side NPUs, more than 40 percent of residents live below the federal poverty line, or \$23,624 for a family of four.<sup>21</sup>

throughout the last century set the stage for many of the challenges that pervade a number of Atlanta neighborhoods today. During the wave of urban renewal programs in the mid-20th century, the city used federal funds to demolish homes in lower-income communities to allow for new interstate highways, a civic center and what is now Turner Field. This weakened the fabric of the majority-black neighborhoods that bore the brunt of the demolition and left the tens of thousands who were displaced — also mostly black — with few housing options because of segregation policies and delays in housing development in those communities.<sup>22</sup>

Demolition continued in the 1990s and 2000s, as the city used the federal HOPE VI program to redevelop public housing complexes. Although the mixed-income developments that replaced them brought more economic diversity to some high-poverty neighborhoods, they had fewer affordable units for lower-income families. Even with these new developments, poverty remains concentrated on the city's south side, and most relocated families ended up in low-income neighborhoods contending

## CHILDREN WHO LIVE IN LOW-POVERTY AREAS (POVERTY < 20%)



SOURCE: Neighborhood Nexus analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2008-2012 American Community Survey.

### Factors Shaping Atlanta's Community Landscape

*A history of segregation and recent redevelopment.* Racially segregated public housing, zoning ordinances and other public- and private-sector practices

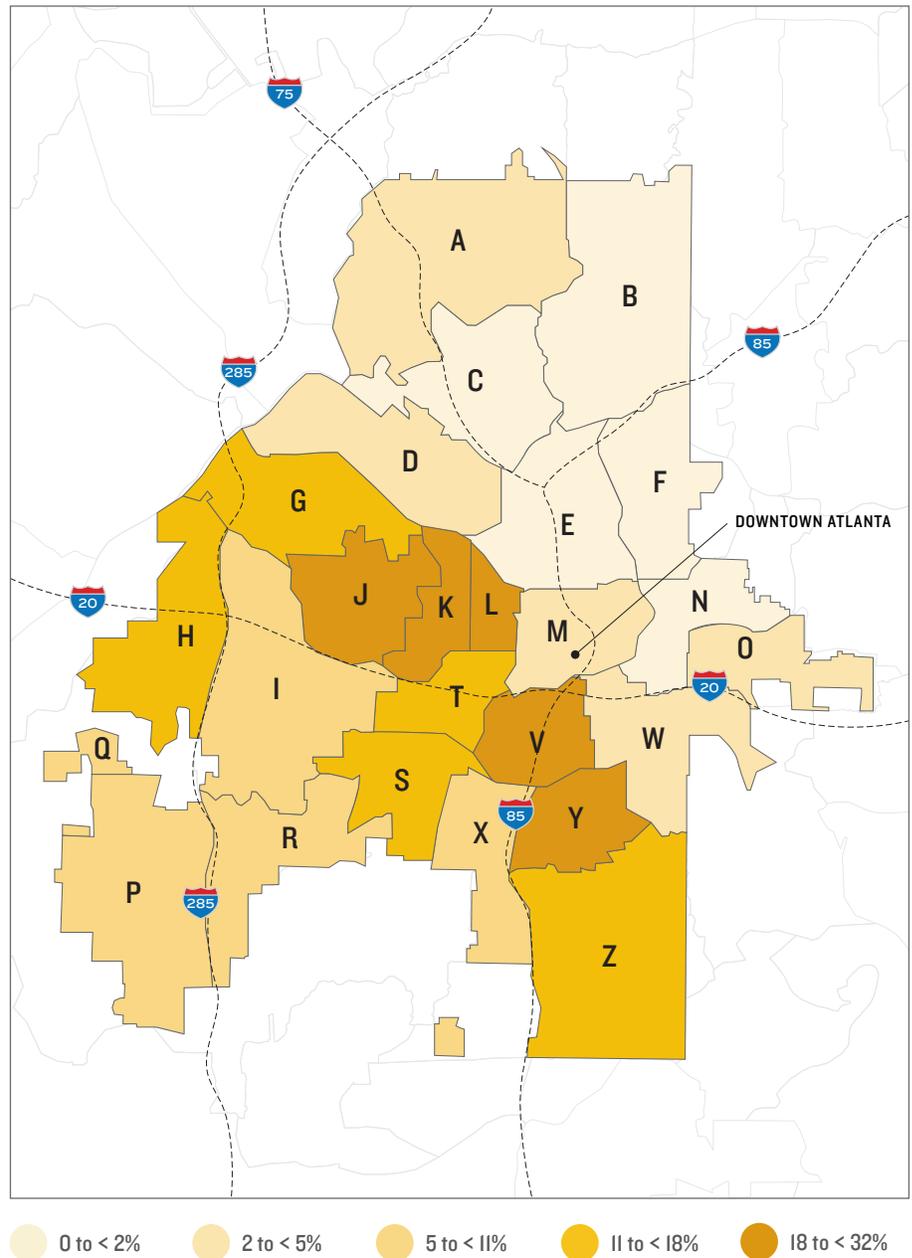
with challenges such as high foreclosure rates and violent crime.<sup>23</sup>

*The cost of housing and declining home values.* Many south and central Atlanta families spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing, placing them in financially precarious positions as they struggle to cover other expenses such as food, clothing and child care.<sup>24</sup> Most of the households in 11 of the 17 NPUs along or south of I-20 find themselves in this predicament. In NPU-L, just west of downtown, this is true for more than 70 percent of households. In the six northern majority-white NPUs, by contrast, less than 40 percent of households spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing.<sup>25</sup>

The dramatic drop in metro Atlanta home values caused by the Great Recession has further undermined family and neighborhood stability — particularly for African-American residents, who saw a disproportionate decrease in the value of their homes.<sup>26</sup> Since the recession, home values in northern Atlanta neighborhoods have largely rebounded, matching national trends. The same has not held true on the city's south side, where many home mortgages exceed property values. These losses create a domino effect, as they turn what is normally considered an asset — homeownership — into a liability.<sup>27</sup>

With a majority of households in south Atlanta struggling to make ends meet and neighborhood stability weakened by the housing market crash, the ability of black families to build assets and wealth has been largely compromised.

Vacant Housing in Atlanta by Neighborhood Planning Unit, 2010



SOURCE: Neighborhood Nexus analysis of 2010 U.S. Census Bureau data.

# EDUCATION

The equation is simple: The more education you have, the more you earn — and the more likely you are to be able to get and keep a job that pays enough to support a family.<sup>28</sup> In Atlanta, however, there is a notable difference in the quality of educational opportunities to which children have access, starting from their earliest years and continuing through high school.

*Early childhood education.* Research underscores the importance of the early years in a child's life in laying a solid foundation for success in school and beyond: Children in high-quality early education programs are more likely to graduate from high school.<sup>29</sup> Such programs have an even greater influence on the growth and development of children in low-income families.<sup>30</sup>

Yet preschool enrollment is uneven across Atlanta, with lower enrollment on the south side, where more black children and kids in low-income families live.<sup>31</sup> For example, more than 80 percent of 3- and 4-year-old children in majority-white NPU-A and NPU-N are enrolled in an early education program, compared with only about 25 percent of children in majority-black NPU-J.

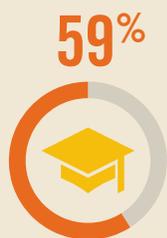
The reasons for these differences in enrollment are unclear and require additional research. The statewide Georgia Pre-K program covers the cost of prekindergarten for 4-year-olds in public schools and private child care centers, but its open-enrollment process and voluntary nature can

limit the available slots for children in communities where demand is high and affordable alternatives are few or nonexistent. In addition, almost half of the city's Georgia Pre-K programs do not accept the public subsidies that help low-income families pay for child care for younger children not yet eligible for Georgia Pre-K, which could force them to pursue other avenues for their care or thwart their employment opportunities.<sup>32</sup> A lack of access to quality child care might also contribute to these differences; one study found that two-thirds of Georgia's infants and toddlers are in child care centers of "unacceptably low quality."<sup>33</sup>

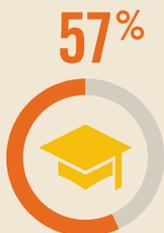
*Reading proficiency.* An early mastery of reading is critical to a child's academic success, providing a solid base for learning more complex concepts in higher grades.<sup>34</sup> Fourth-graders who struggle with reading are four times more likely to drop out.<sup>35</sup>

Among Atlanta Public Schools<sup>36</sup> students, the percentage of white third-graders (88 percent) who exceeded the state's reading standards — a stronger measure of proficiency — was more

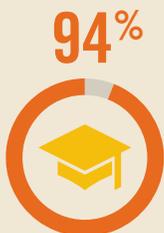
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS GRADUATING ON TIME:  
ATLANTA PUBLIC SCHOOLS, 2014



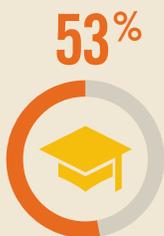
ATLANTA PUBLIC SCHOOLS



AFRICAN AMERICAN



ASIAN AND  
PACIFIC ISLANDER



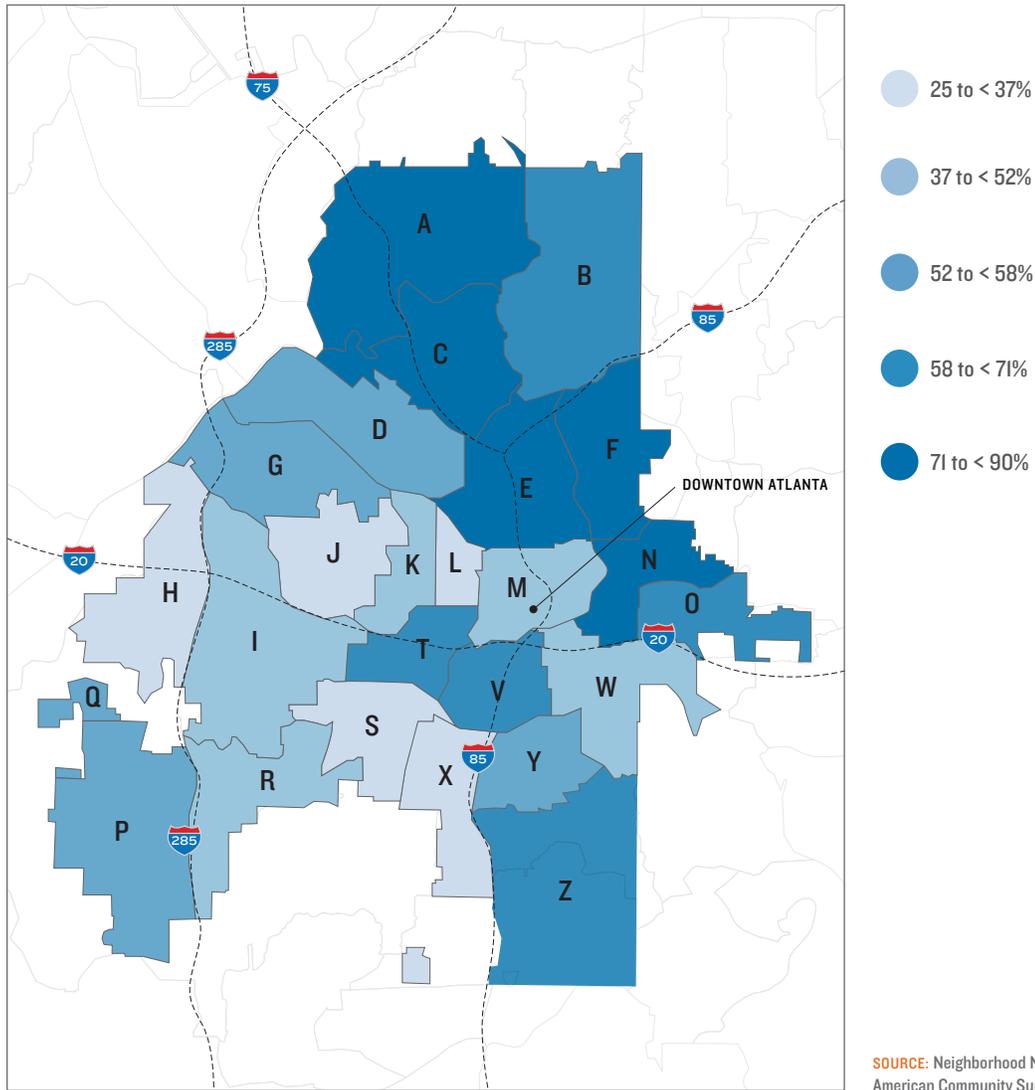
LATINO



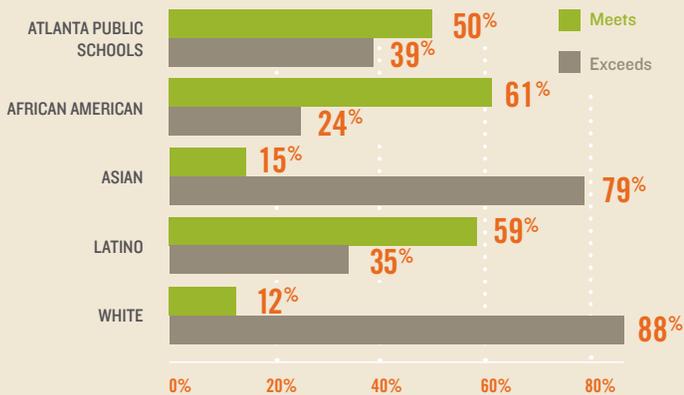
WHITE

SOURCE: Atlanta Public Schools analysis of 2013–2014 school year data.

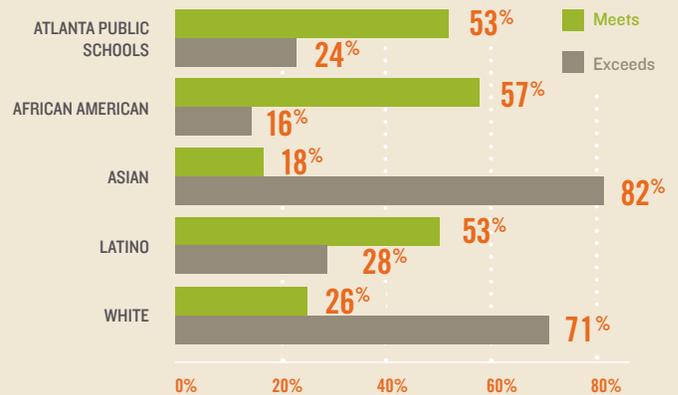
Percentage of Children in Nursery School or Preschool, 2009-2013



THIRD-GRADERS WHO MEET OR EXCEED STANDARDS FOR READING, 2014



EIGHTH-GRADERS WHO MEET OR EXCEED STANDARDS FOR MATH, 2014



SOURCE: Governor's Office of Student Achievement, K-12 Public Schools Report Card data for the 2013-2014 school year.

Improving the graduation rate for students of color and the city as a whole would give a significant boost to the local economy in the form of more jobs, income and tax revenues.

than three times that of their black peers (24 percent) and more than twice that of Latinos (35 percent). By contrast, 79 percent of Asian students exceeded the standards.

*High school graduation.* Far too few children in Atlanta are graduating from high school, a requirement even for most low-wage jobs.<sup>37</sup> Although the graduation rate for Atlanta Public Schools has risen to almost 60 percent in recent years, it still lags behind the state and nearly all large U.S. school districts.<sup>38</sup>

A closer examination of this bleak picture, however, reveals an even starker reality for students of color. The 2014 graduation rate for white and Asian students was 84 percent and 94 percent, respectively, compared with 57 percent for black students and 53 percent for Latinos.<sup>39</sup> Black and Latino students are more than three times more likely to drop out of school.<sup>40</sup> Comparisons between Atlanta students and their peers across the state further illuminate the distinct barriers facing African-American children: While the school district's white students graduate at a higher rate than their counterparts across the state, its African-American students lag behind their peers outside the city.

Beyond increasing opportunities for the students themselves, improving the graduation rate for students of color — and, therefore, the city as a whole — would give a significant boost to the local economy in the form of more jobs, income and tax revenues.<sup>41</sup>

### Factors Shaping Atlanta's Educational Landscape

*A history of discrimination.* Segregated school systems were based on the legal notion of “separate but equal.” The school systems established for white and

black children in Atlanta and elsewhere, however, were far from equal. Atlanta did not open a high school for black students until 1924, more than 50 years after opening high schools for white students and after many other southern cities had already done so.<sup>42</sup> Per-pupil expenditures in mid-century were nearly three times higher for white students.<sup>43</sup> These funding differences increased in the 1960s, as the school board refused to reallocate resources to majority-black schools to account for the demographic shifts caused by more than 60,000 white students leaving the district.<sup>44</sup> This uneven investment had a measurable effect on student learning. A 1968 study, for example, found that black fourth-graders lagged one year behind their white peers, while black eighth-graders lagged four years behind.<sup>45</sup>

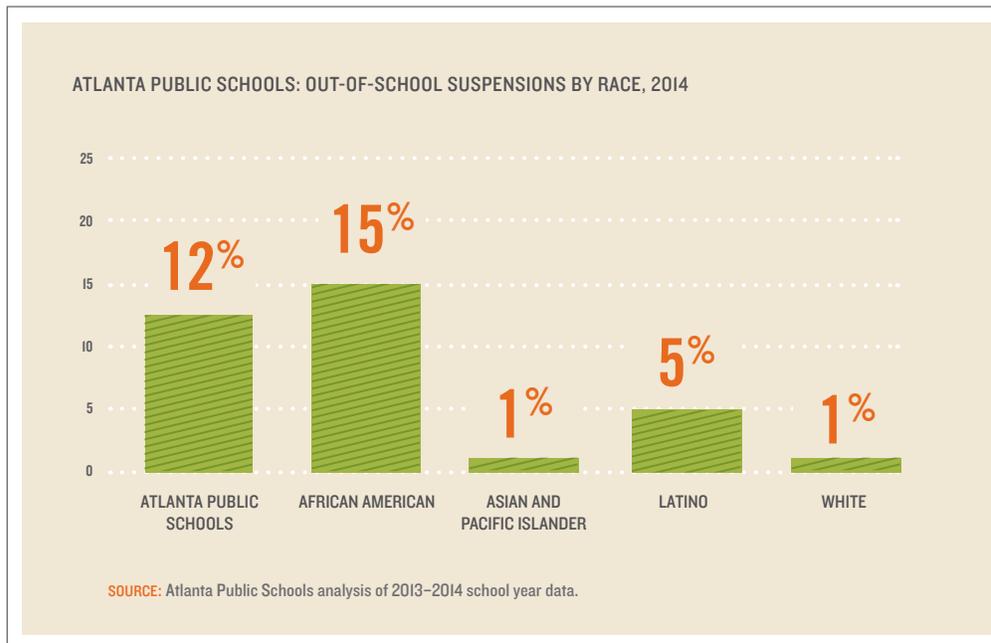
*Geography.* Student achievement patterns correspond with the city's north-south divide. Eleven of the district's 14 top-performing elementary schools in third-grade reading are in northern Atlanta. The three others are charter schools that draw students from across the city.<sup>46</sup>

*Student attendance.* To succeed in school, children must actually attend. Missing just six days of school in a year for any reason affects student achievement and is a stronger predictor of not graduating from high school than standardized test scores.<sup>47</sup> Housing instability and health conditions such as asthma, which lower-income families in particular tend to experience, often compromise student attendance.<sup>48</sup> Only half of the school system's black students missed fewer than six days in the 2013-2014 school year, compared with nearly 65 percent of their white peers. Black students also were nearly five times more likely to miss more than 15 days during the school year, well over the district's threshold for truancy.<sup>49</sup>



Disciplinary issues resulting in out-of-school suspensions contribute to these absences. In 2011, for example, African Americans represented 80 percent of district students but 94 percent of out-of-school suspensions and 97 percent of expulsions.<sup>50</sup> When examined by gender, the numbers are staggering. In 2014, the suspension rate for black male students (19 percent) was more than 13 times that of their white counterparts and more than twice the rate for their Latino peers. Though the rate among black female students was lower, at 11 percent, it far exceeds that for Latino and white female students (3 percent and 1 percent, respectively).<sup>51</sup>

Having access to quality learning experiences and opportunities from preschool through high school is an essential ingredient to student success — and one clearly missing for many young Atlantans of color, who struggle to reach key educational milestones. This ultimately jeopardizes their chances of graduating and for success beyond high school, particularly as they seek to enter the local workforce.



# ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

A job and steady source of income are essential to moving out of poverty. Without the basic skills or credentials required to compete in today's job market, many children in low-income families can end up struggling to make ends meet as adults.

While the unemployment rate in Atlanta is 13 percent, the rate for African Americans (22 percent) is more than three times higher than that of their white counterparts (6 percent) and more than twice the rate for Latinos (9 percent).<sup>52</sup> In short, although the majority of city residents are black, the majority of workers are white.

Employment alone, however, does not pave the way out of poverty, especially for children in Atlanta's low-income communities. Nearly 25 percent of Atlanta children born to parents at the bottom of the income ladder will remain there into adulthood, and less than half will make their way into the middle class.<sup>53</sup> Most of those kids will be children of color, as a look at median household income by racial and ethnic groups attests. Between 2009 and 2013, the city's white households earned a median income of nearly \$85,000, more than three times the median income for African Americans and almost twice that of Latinos. Although Asian and Pacific Islanders fare somewhat better, their median household income was almost \$30,000 less than that of white households.<sup>54</sup>

## Factors Shaping Atlanta's Economic Landscape

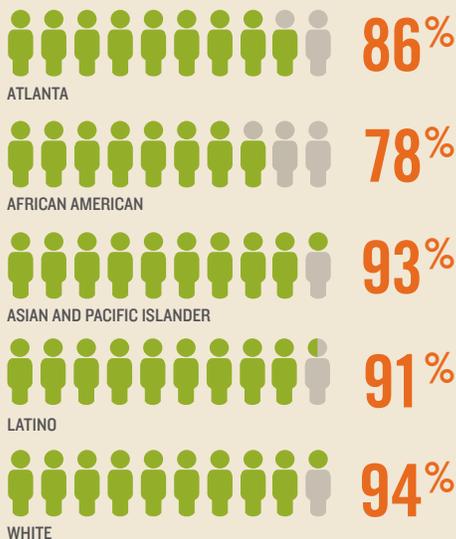
*Access to jobs.* Most jobs in metro Atlanta are concentrated in the north, particularly those in the higher-paying information, professional, scientific and technical fields. But many south-side households do not have the cars that would help them tap into those opportunities. In fact, many of the NPUs with fewer job opportunities are home to more families without a vehicle. In five NPUs south of I-20, more than 30 percent of households do not own a vehicle, compared to less than 12 percent in five northern NPUs (see map on p. 12).<sup>55</sup>

Without their own cars, residents on the south side rely heavily on public transportation. Half of Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) riders use the system to commute to work. But though MARTA has fairly dense coverage within city limits, making it accessible to many low-income workers, it has fewer stops in the northern metro areas where jobs are concentrated.<sup>56</sup> This severely limits employment options for workers from lower-income communities in south Atlanta, or requires them to

### MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME BY RACE



### EMPLOYMENT RATE, AGES 16-64



SOURCE: Neighborhood Nexus analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2009-2013 American Community Survey.

invest considerable time on public transportation to go where the jobs are — if the connections even exist. Workers who must drop off and pick up their kids from child care along the way must clear even more hurdles to get to work. A recent study found that commute time is one of the biggest predictors of moving up the economic ladder; the longer the average commute, the lesser the odds.<sup>57</sup>

City trends in job growth will likely only exacerbate the situation. The two NPUs that added more than 2,500 jobs in the two years following the recession — NPU-B and NPU-E — are in the northern and wealthier sections of Atlanta. Two of the three NPUs that lost more than 800 jobs during that period — NPU-S and NPU-X — are in the south, where there are more low-income residents.<sup>58</sup>

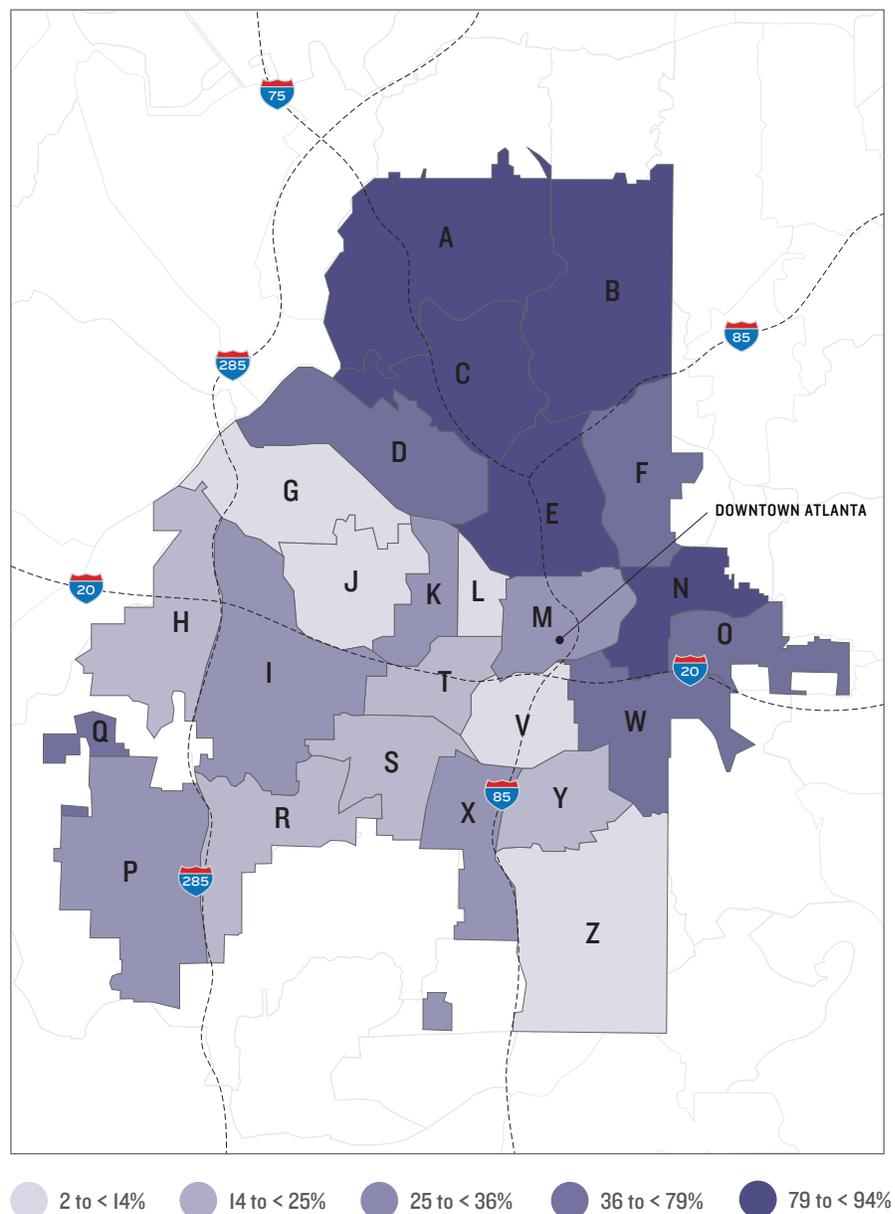
*A lack of education and skills.* Most well-paying jobs require some level of higher education.<sup>59</sup> Yet among Atlantans ages 25 and older, only about half of African Americans and Latinos have some college experience, postsecondary certification or training.<sup>60</sup>

*Barriers to employment.* Ninety-two percent of Atlanta’s prison population is black.<sup>61</sup> As these individuals are released, they are more likely to return to south-side neighborhoods. In 2014, for example, more than 200 formerly incarcerated individuals settled in NPU-M, whose neighborhoods include downtown Atlanta and the Old Fourth Ward, while fewer than 20 moved to the northern NPU-B. These individuals struggle to start a new life as their criminal records often keep them from even getting an interview. Even still, white job applicants *with* a criminal record are more likely to get a job interview than black applicants *without* one.<sup>62</sup>

Most parents have big dreams for their children and want to help them achieve their goals. They want to live in vibrant communities where their kids can play and grow, attend good schools and launch successful careers. But many city families face insurmountable hurdles — limited

education and job prospects, insufficient income to properly support their children’s growth and development — to making those dreams a reality. With few rungs on Atlanta’s economic ladder, moving out of poverty can be a steep, sometimes impossible climb for low-income families.

**Children Living in Families With Incomes at or Above 200% of Poverty, 2009-2013**



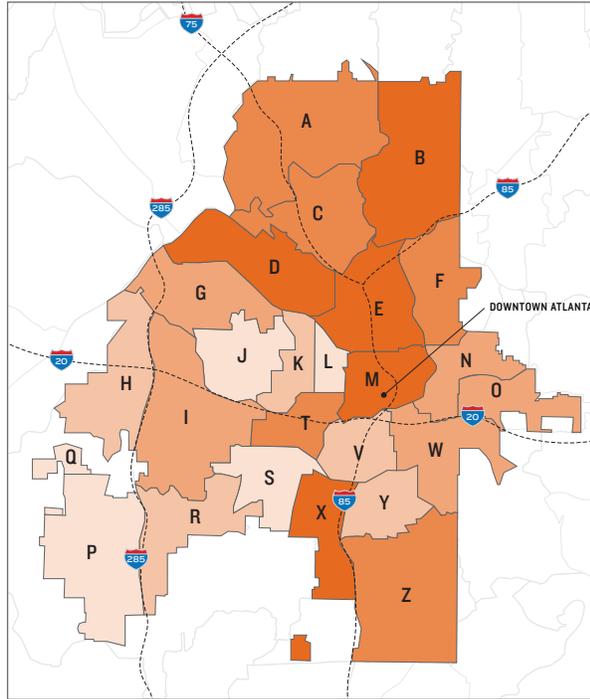
SOURCE: Neighborhood Nexus analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2009-2013 American Community Survey.

NOTE: Throughout this report, “low income” refers to families with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold, which was \$23,624 for a family of four in 2013. Thus a family of two adults and two children fell in the low-income category if their annual income was less than \$47,248. Families with that little income often struggle to cover the cost of basic needs and expenses.

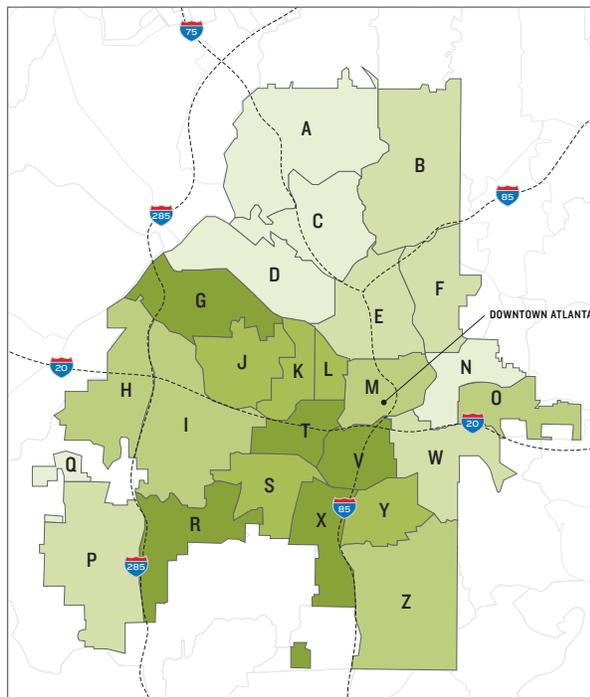
## Total Jobs by Neighborhood Planning Unit and Households Without a Car, 2008-2012

Most metro Atlanta jobs, particularly in the higher-paying information, professional, scientific and technical fields, are concentrated in the north, but many south-side households do not have the cars that would help them tap into those opportunities. Many of the NPUs with fewer job opportunities are home to more families without a vehicle. In five NPUs south of I-20, more than 30 percent of households do not own a vehicle, compared to less than 12 percent in five northern NPUs.

Total Jobs



Households Without a Car (Percentage)



SOURCE: Neighborhood Nexus analysis of the Atlanta Regional Commission's 2012 employment estimates and the U.S. Census Bureau's 2008-2012 American Community Survey.

### ADULTS AGES 25 AND OLDER WITH SOME COLLEGE

68%



ATLANTA

49%



AFRICAN AMERICAN

89%



ASIAN AND  
PACIFIC ISLANDER

54%



LATINO

91%

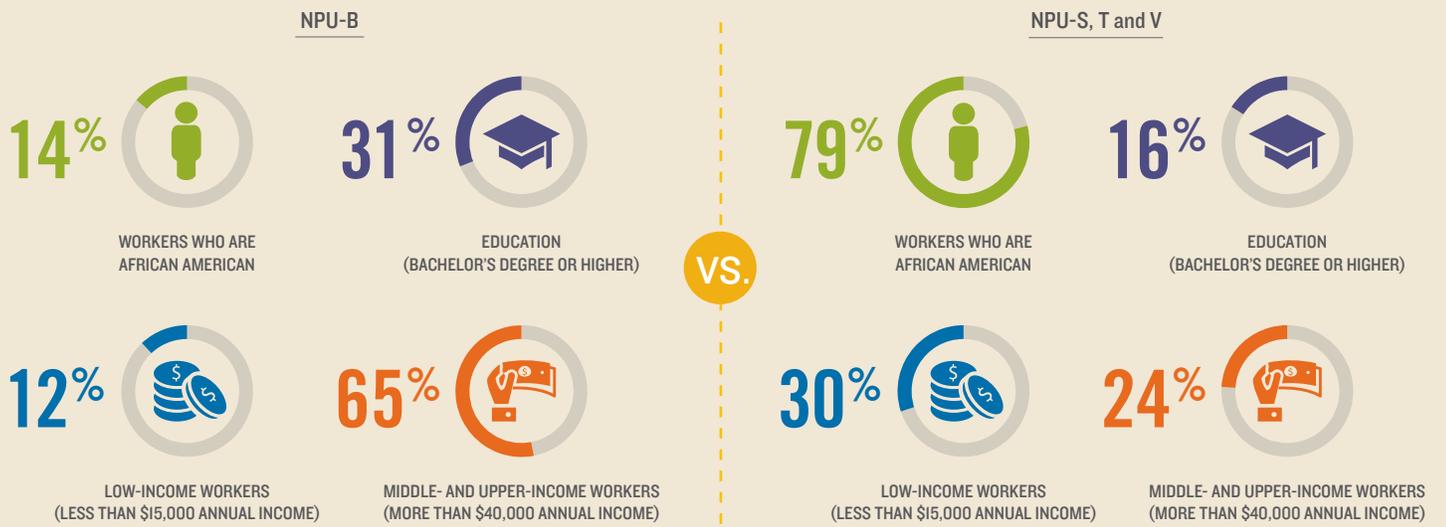


WHITE

SOURCE: Neighborhood Nexus analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2009-2013 American Community Survey.

A TALE OF TWO CITIES: COMPARING ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AMONG NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING UNITS

With 40,000 residents, the total population of three south-side NPUs (S, T and V) is similar to that of the northern NPU-B, but, as closer study of the workforce in both areas reveals, the similarities end there.



**SOURCE:** Neighborhood Nexus analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2009-2013 American Community Survey and 2011 Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics.

**NOTE:** Because the Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics data only include educational attainment information for about two-thirds of workers, the actual percentage of workers with at least a bachelor's degree is likely higher.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Too many of Atlanta’s children and families, especially those of color, encounter considerable challenges that impede their ability to achieve their full potential. In this section, we highlight several recommendations that could begin removing those barriers and build paths to opportunity for all children, families and communities.



Our hope is to contribute to a new dialogue and a citywide effort that enables public, private, nonprofit, philanthropic and community leaders to ensure Atlanta lives up to its rich legacy.

But first, a note on the importance of data. For a clear and accurate picture of how all Atlanta children and families are faring — and to properly inform city policies, programs and decision making — we must have publicly available data on child and family well-being that are disaggregated by race, ethnicity and neighborhood. Developing data on additional factors that affect well-being, such as neighborhood investment patterns and community assets, warrants further consideration to fully understand their impact on racial and ethnic groups. This fundamental need, which touches all of our suggestions here, calls for a thorough assessment of the collection of, and public access to, data that help illuminate what contributes to inequities.

## RECOMMENDATION I

**Increase investments in low-income communities to support their — and the city’s — economic growth.**

*Develop and preserve affordable and quality housing.* Having quality affordable housing is key to community stability, safety and health. To ensure such housing is available throughout Atlanta, city officials and the business and philanthropic communities should foster mixed-income communities near transit and job centers. Public resources should help prevent longtime residents from being priced out of their homes by using such tools as fair property tax policy and low-interest home rehabilitation loans and expanding homeowner education programs.

A housing trust fund similar to the one established for the Atlanta BeltLine, the 22-mile development project underway to replace underused rail beds encircling downtown with trails, parks and transit, could help ensure major development projects include affordable housing. Community land trusts that preserve the affordability of homes and inclusionary zoning policies that require incorporating affordable

homes into new projects could further encourage such development.

*Promote equitable development practices.* Community-based and citywide development can produce vibrant communities that benefit diverse racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups. When large-scale developments are planned in low-income communities, public and private employers could work with nonprofits focused on skill building to create local hiring strategies, and community benefits agreements could help make sure residents most affected can access project-related jobs.

*Build the capacity of low- to moderate-income entrepreneurs and enterprises in communities of color, and bolster the local economy by supporting businesses in low-income neighborhoods.* Many distressed communities experience blight and crime, but using public and private capital to support new businesses and microenterprises<sup>63</sup> can help expand the neighborhood asset base. Investments in training programs for microbusiness ownership can offer a path to financial stability for many low- to moderate-income families. The Neighborhood Development Center in St. Paul, Minn., for example, works to position budding entrepreneurs in low-income communities of color to invest in their neighborhood's revitalization. Since 1993, more than 500 of its graduates have launched businesses, sustaining 2,200 jobs and returning \$64 million to their communities in payroll, taxes and rent annually.<sup>64</sup>

Moreover, although universities and hospitals spend more than \$1 trillion nationally each year, little of that buying power is deliberately targeted toward building up their surroundings.<sup>65</sup> Atlanta is home to several major

universities and hospitals, community colleges and government agencies that could explore ways to redirect and increase business to low-income neighborhoods and minority- and women-owned businesses.

#### RECOMMENDATION 2

**Support strategies that prepare young children and youth for success in school and beyond.**

Improving Atlanta's high school graduation rate has implications beyond the potential of each graduate: The local economy would benefit, too. A higher graduation rate in metro Atlanta alone could result in nearly 2,000 jobs, \$271 million in increased annual earnings and \$25 million more in state and local tax revenues, according to one study.<sup>66</sup> But we must set the stage for children's academic success starting in their earliest years.

*Increase access to high-quality early child care and education.* The state of Georgia, in partnership with Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students, has launched a rating system for public and private early education programs that offers incentives for enrolling and adopting higher standards than those required for state licensing. Public and private leaders should provide ongoing and additional incentives to early education programs in Atlanta's low-income communities and neighborhoods with limited access to quality early education to help improve the care they provide.

Beyond improving access to quality early education, more programs should incorporate evidence-based strategies for preparing children to enter kindergarten ready to learn and to excel in their elementary years. The Get Georgia Reading Campaign, which aims to

**To advance the local economy and give all children the chance to contribute to it, Atlanta must address the barriers to opportunity for many in the city and region.**

Most parents have big dreams for their children, but many Atlanta families face insurmountable hurdles to making those dreams a reality.

ensure all state children are reading proficiently by the end of third grade, has identified key elements that keep kids developmentally on track in their early years and launched several pilot programs related to these essential elements in and around Atlanta. One program, for example, trains professionals who already interact regularly with families, including nurses, on ways to encourage parents to talk with their young children, thereby fostering early development.<sup>67</sup>

*Promote productive learning environments that support student attendance and achievement.* Schools can help improve attendance rates and increase student achievement.<sup>68</sup> Georgia’s new School Climate Star Rating evaluates the learning environment of all the state’s public schools and offers guidance to help educators make their schools safer and more engaging for all students, thereby increasing attendance. Atlanta Public Schools should continue to expand and deepen implementation of the evidence-based Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports<sup>69</sup> (PBIS) approach — which helps parents and staff foster a safe, supportive and positive learning environment — and use the School Climate Star Rating to measure progress and identify schools that need to adopt PBIS. Through private funding, the district has begun a pilot program with early learning centers to improve learning environments from infancy through third grade.

*Advance equity across the district.* Not all Atlanta schools offer the same quality of education. In fact, “substantial variations” exist across schools in terms of teacher quality, academic programming, classroom instruction, financial support from private sources and playgrounds.<sup>70</sup> Private, philanthropic and public leaders should work with

Atlanta Public Schools to help ensure its resources are spread equitably. Schools serving children who live in low-income communities must have the necessary tools — e.g., funding, health services, expert teachers and leadership — to support student achievement.

### RECOMMENDATION 3

**Pursue strategies to improve employment opportunities for local residents.**

*Foster alignment and the sharing of information among employers and job-training programs.* Strong partnerships across Atlanta’s business community, institutions of higher education and the workforce development field are essential to attract and retain new and innovative business ventures and create more concrete pathways to employment for low-income residents. To meet the needs of employers, people must have access to training programs that prepare them for family-supporting jobs. In a survey of 200 metro Atlanta organizations with employment or job-training programs, less than one-third reported working directly with an employer.<sup>71</sup> Metro Atlanta eXchange for Workforce Solutions, a forum for strengthening connections and practices among workforce development organizations, can help employment and training programs align their services with employers’ needs. It also can facilitate stronger links between employers, trade associations, chambers of commerce and state and local economic development entities to foster more coordinated, forward-looking strategies for regional growth.

*Support sector-specific training programs.* Equipping low-skilled workers to meet the needs of employers in particular industries benefits businesses and allows underemployed individuals to move

up the career ladder and better support their families. Atlanta CareerRise, for example, uses a nationally recognized job-readiness model that trains low-skilled workers for jobs in high-growth industries such as health care and information technology. The program has built solid relationships with employers in these sectors, and the White House has recognized its Atlanta Beltline Healthcare Partnership, which prepares people for careers in nursing, as one of 35 model “Programs That Work.”<sup>72</sup> Such sector-specific strategies should be expanded and employed in other emerging industries.

*Reduce barriers to employment.* The research is clear: Securing stable employment is the best indicator of whether a person with a criminal record will be arrested again.<sup>73</sup> Earlier this year, Gov. Nathan Deal “banned the box” on all state government employment applications, postponing questions about criminal history until an applicant is identified as one of the most qualified candidates. Applicants also must have the chance to explain their criminal history before denial, and only a relevant conviction can be used to disqualify a candidate. Similar policies have already demonstrated their power. A Philadelphia-based study found that hiring 100 formerly incarcerated people would reduce recidivism, leading to increased income tax contributions of \$1.9 million, an additional \$770,000 in sales tax revenue and \$2 million in annual savings.<sup>74</sup> Private-sector employers should take this approach in their own hiring practices, further expanding opportunities for individuals with criminal records.

In addition, expanding public transit systems and better integrating transportation and housing development

projects can help address the lack of affordable housing in the areas where well-paying jobs are concentrated. The Atlanta Transit Oriented Development Collaborative, a partnership of nonprofits and government agencies, is one of many groups working to remove barriers to and create incentives for equitable transit-oriented development in metro Atlanta, while increasing public awareness of its benefits. Garnering public support is key to the success of such efforts.



## CONCLUSION

Instead of relying on children to beat the odds, we must act now to change the odds so that all children in Atlanta have the chance to succeed. While many in the city and region have worked to that end for decades, we cannot deny that dynamics of race and place together continue to put needless barriers in the way of thousands of children. The combined efforts of the public, philanthropic and private sectors, including the business community, will be essential to removing those barriers.

The city's future rests on the shoulders of the more than 80,000 children who call it home. Their story will be Atlanta's story. How it unfolds depends on what we do today to craft a new and promising future for this generation and the ones to come.

Instead of relying on children to beat the odds, we must change the odds so that all children in Atlanta can succeed.

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