ACHIEVE ATLANTA

Sustained Impact

Achieve Atlanta's Scholarship and Services Continue to Increase College Persistence and Completion

Highlights from an Independent Evaluation Report

NOVEMBER 2026



Introduction

An independent evaluation of the Achieve Atlanta Scholarship and supporting services found that Achieve Atlanta Scholars continue to persist in and complete college at much higher rates than similar peers who did not receive the scholarship and services.

This stronger persistence begins during the spring semester of a student's first year and continues through degree completion. These effects are most concentrated among students with mid-range high school GPAs, many of whom are not eligible for Georgia's merit-based HOPE and Zell Miller Scholarships. The COVID-19 pandemic coincided with an overall drop in college persistence rates, but Achieve Atlanta students continued to outpace similar peers.

Achieve Atlanta (AATL) is a nonprofit organization committed to helping Atlanta become a city where race and income no longer predict postsecondary success and upward mobility. To accomplish this vision, it helps students access, afford, and earn postsecondary credentials. Since its founding in 2015, Achieve Atlanta has served more than 8,786 Scholars, 93% of whom are Black or Latinx and all of whom experience low income. As of fall 2026, nearly 2,500 Achieve Atlanta Scholars had earned postsecondary credentials.



8,786
Achieve Atlanta Scholars since its founding in 2015



93%
of Scholars are Black or Latinx

This study follows the same methodology as a 2022 Georgia State University paper, following the original study's cohorts through six years after high school graduation and adding three more cohorts of high school graduates. Taken together, this re-evaluation further validates the positive impact of Achieve Atlanta's model. In addition, it emphasizes Achieve Atlanta's commitment to program evaluation that strengthens how it serves Scholars and informs the postsecondary success field.

How Achieve Atlanta Supports Students

Achieve Atlanta catalyzes results-driven, cross-sector collaboration by bringing together a coalition of partners with a shared vision for postsecondary degree completion—including two school districts, 11 colleges and universities, numerous nonprofit and community organizations, and, most importantly, students and families.[1]

While students are in high school, that support includes ensuring all juniors can take the SAT during the school day at no cost, and that all seniors have quality college advising that helps them navigate financial aid and college applications. Achieve Atlanta provides a need-based scholarship of $5,000 per year for qualifying Atlanta Public Schools (APS) students pursuing a bachelor's degree and $1,500 per year for those pursuing an associate or technical degree. To become an Achieve Atlanta Scholar, students must complete a brief application, graduate with a high school GPA of 75 or higher, be considered low-income after completing the FAFSA, and be enrolled in APS for their final two years of high school.

Once they are in college, Achieve Atlanta assigns each scholarship recipient a coach, either through one of its 11 partner colleges/universities or three nonprofit coaching providers. It also hires paid college ambassadors—peer leaders identified at each of its partner campuses—to help new Achieve Atlanta Scholars adjust to campus, meet other Scholars, and connect with campus support resources. In addition, Scholars can apply for an emergency grant of up to $500 one time per year to help them remain enrolled during unexpected financial challenges.

2,425

Scholars have earned a degree or credential over its 10-year history

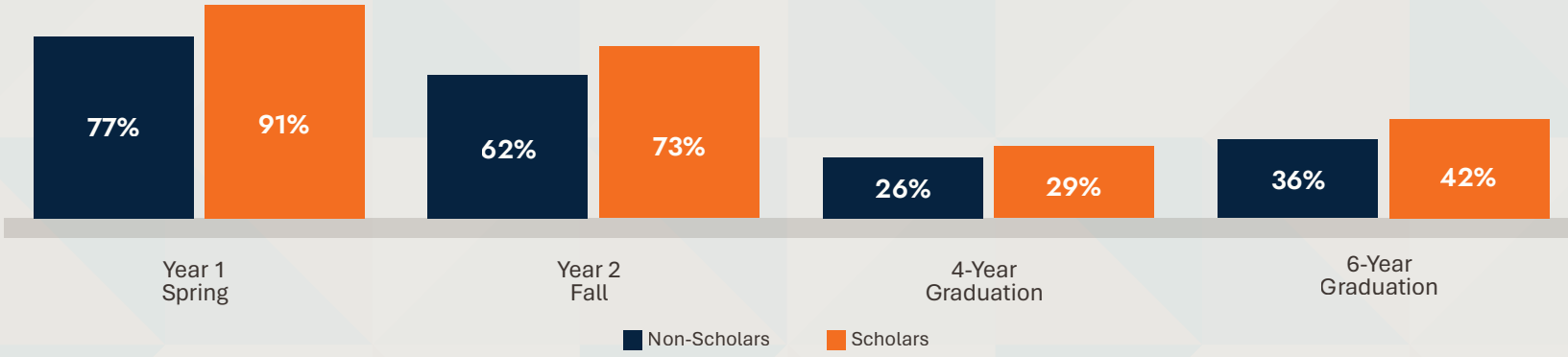


Achieve Atlanta Scholars Persist and Complete College at Higher Rates

Independent researchers in Georgia State University's Georgia Policy Labs (GPL) examined the following question, which they first studied in 2022: Does the Achieve Atlanta Scholarship and complementary support impact college persistence and completion? The answer remains yes.

Achieve Atlanta's scholarship and support significantly increase students' persistence through college. **Students who receive the scholarship and support are 14 percentage points more likely to persist to their second semester in college than their peers who are similar academically and demographically but did not receive the Achieve Atlanta Scholarship.** This initial impact decreases in size as students progress through college, but it still yields a **six-year graduation rate that is six percentage points higher** than similar peers (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Beginning 2nd semester, Achieve Atlanta Scholars continue to persist well above similar Non-Scholar APS graduates who enroll in college. Though this difference decreases in size over time, it still yields higher graduation rates.



Achieve Atlanta's Impact Remains Largest for Students With Mid-Range High School GPAs

The initial evaluation four years ago found that these effects were largest among students with high school GPAs between 80 and 90, representing two-thirds of Achieve Atlanta Scholars. Many of these students' GPAs are not high enough to qualify for Georgia's merit-based HOPE or Zell Miller Scholarships.[2]

This follow-up study reaffirmed that finding by demonstrating that year two persistence rates for Scholars with mid-range GPAs were 15 percentage points higher than those of similar peers, including cohorts both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 2). In addition, the six-year graduation rate for Scholars with mid-range GPAs was 10 percentage points higher than those of similar peers (Figure 3).

While gains are less pronounced for students with GPAs lower than 80 and above 90, the Achieve Atlanta Scholarship still made college more affordable for these students, as a prior Georgia Policy Labs report found. These results also provide policymakers with strong validation of the recently created Georgia DREAMS Scholarship as an important need-based complement to the state's merit-based HOPE Scholarship.

Figure 2: The year two persistence of students with mid-range GPA were 15 percentage points higher than similar peers without the Achieve Atlanta Scholarship and support.

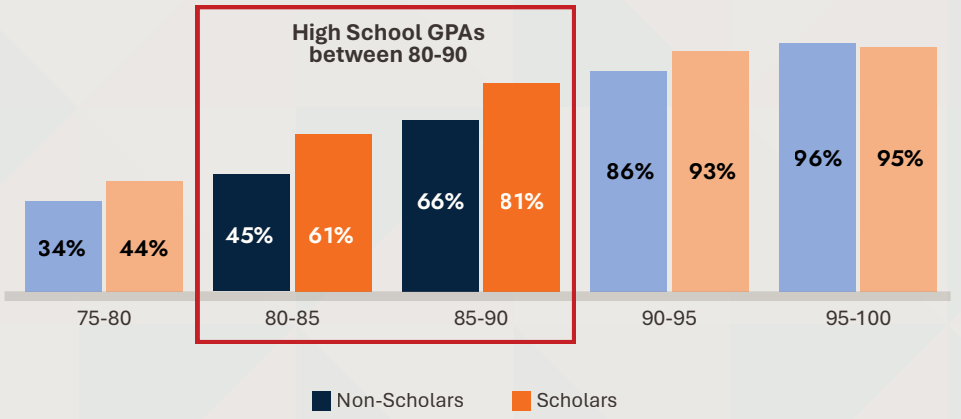
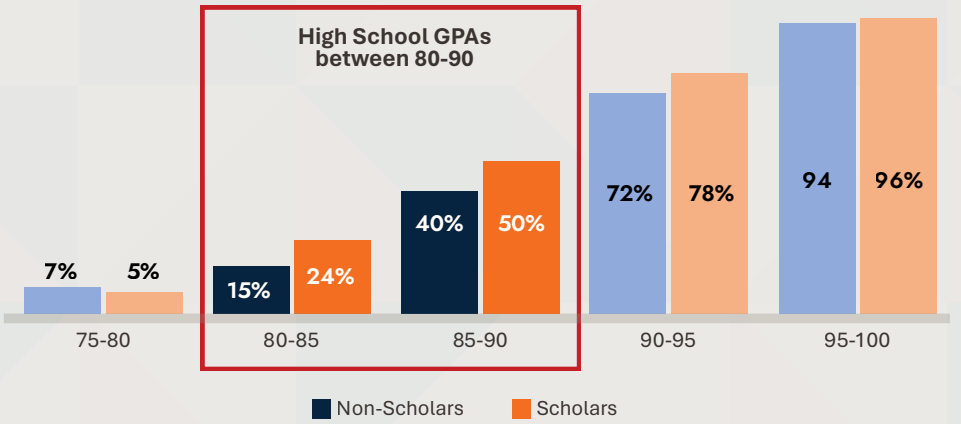


Figure 3: The six-year graduation rates of students with mid-range GPA were 10 percentage points higher than similar peers without the Achieve Atlanta Scholarship and support.



Achieve Atlanta's Impact Sustained through the COVID-19 Pandemic

Across the country, persistence rates decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic, and Achieve Atlanta Scholars were no exception. However, this research found that Achieve Atlanta's positive impact on persistence remained through the pandemic, even as overall persistence rates decreased. Also, the patterns across high school GPA levels in Figure 2 remained consistent for cohorts entering college before and after the pandemic. This demonstrates the importance of Achieve Atlanta's scholarship and supports to help students navigate unexpected challenges to degree completion.

Achieve Atlanta's Commitment to Increasing Degree Completion in Metro Atlanta

These findings continue to validate that Achieve Atlanta's scholarship, collaboration, and support have a positive impact on Atlanta students' college success. In part due to the initial evaluation's positive findings and the continued generous support of the Joseph B. Whitehead Foundation, Achieve Atlanta recently expanded beyond APS for the first time, adding six high schools in neighboring Fulton County Schools.

Still, too few Atlanta students are earning postsecondary credentials, and Achieve Atlanta is committed to further improving degree completion rates. Later this year, Achieve Atlanta will develop a five-year strategic plan to bolster its support for Achieve Atlanta Scholars, while also exploring expansion to serve more Metro Atlanta students.



About the Evaluation

The paper represents one aspect of a multi-faceted research-practice partnership with Georgia State University's Georgia Policy Labs (GPL). Alongside this paper, GPL evaluated Achieve Atlanta's impact on student financial wellness and is currently conducting research on Achieve Atlanta Scholars' career outcomes after college completion. The collaborative research between university researchers and Achieve Atlanta staff has informed Achieve Atlanta scholarship policy and expansion decisions, while also yielding multiple academic journal publications to inform the postsecondary access and success field.

This evaluation was conducted by Carycruz Bueno (Wesleyan University), Ibnat Hasan (Georgia State University), Za Eng Mawi (Texas State University), Lindsay Page (Brown University), and Jonathan Smith (Georgia State University), in affiliation with Georgia Policy Labs. They studied whether Achieve Atlanta's scholarship and support services impacted college enrollment, persistence, and completion from fall 2016 through fall 2023. To answer these questions, researchers used various statistical methods to measure impact using data from Atlanta Public Schools, Achieve Atlanta, and the National Student Clearinghouse. For persistence and completion results, they compared Achieve Atlanta Scholars to non-Achieve Atlanta Scholars who graduated from Atlanta Public Schools, enrolled in postsecondary education, and were academically and demographically similar. The data presented in Figures 1-3 were calculated by AATL and verified by Georgia State University using appendix tables for regression coefficients and control means for the variables of interest. Percentages have been rounded for presentation purposes. For an in-depth description of research methods and findings, view the full evaluation paper.

Achieve Atlanta created this summary, not the papers authors. The research was funded through the William T. Grant Foundation's Institutional Challenge Grant, which funded a research-practice partnership between Achieve Atlanta and Georgia State University's Georgia Policy Labs, housed within the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies. Achieve Atlanta provided the necessary data and feedback on the full paper. However, it did not have editorial control of its contents.



FOOTNOTES

[1] Achieve Atlanta expanded to its second school district, Fulton County Schools, in 2025. The study follows the 2016-2023 Achieve Atlanta Scholarship cohorts, so this study is limited to Atlanta Public Schools graduates.

[2] The study uses APS' weighted high school GPA because Achieve Atlanta uses that GPA to determine scholarship eligibility. This GPA includes all high school coursework on a 100-point scale, with weights for AP/IB and dual enrollment courses. The HOPE Scholarship GPA includes only core courses on a 4.0 scale, with no weights. Comparisons between the two scales are not straightforward, and researchers did not have access to HOPE GPA data. However, for the cohorts in this study, only 39% of all APS graduates were eligible for the HOPE scholarship.