Landscape Analysis: College Access Supports in Metro Atlanta Schools & Districts

Learn4Life
Metro Atlanta Regional Education Partnership

ACHIEVE ATLANTA

Landscape Analysis: College Access Supports in Metro Atlanta Schools & Districts

Numerous promising practices shine regionally; important gaps require additional attention

Executive Summary

This report offers a regional landscape analysis of college access supports across eight Metro Atlanta school districts: Atlanta Public Schools, Clayton County Public Schools, Cobb County School District, City Schools of Decatur, DeKalb County School District, Fulton County Schools, Gwinnett County Public Schools, and Marietta City Schools.

The analysis draws from a combination of structured interviews with district leaders, survey responses from nonprofit college access service providers, and district strategic plans. These sources offer a broad view of the policy priorities, operational practices, and partnership dynamics shaping the postsecondary access landscape in the region.

All eight districts identify college & career readiness as a strategic goal, often visualized as a "Portrait of a Graduate," and with a growing focus on broadening the definition of postsecondary success (i.e., "Enrollment, Enlistment, Employment, & Entrepreneurship" (4 E's) becoming increasingly common targets). In alignment with these strategic goals, most districts are implementing initiatives such as dual enrollment access, financial aid advising, and career preparation pathways.

Most districts leverage partnerships with nonprofit organizations and higher education institutions to expand key services such as college advising, FAFSA assistance, and mentoring, particularly for first-generation and low-income students. Survey and interview data show variation in support depth across schools, with family engagement, college persistence, and data coordination emerging as key areas of need. Nonprofit partners highlighted several actionable ways to deepen collaboration with schools and strengthen postsecondary support systems.

While the evidence shows a strong commitment to postsecondary success region-wide, there are gaps that need addressing to more fully realize a vision of postsecondary success for all. Expanding formalized partnerships, systemizing data usage, and exploring college persistence supports could present opportunities to improve postsecondary outcomes for more students.

A student's experience at "Metro Atlanta High School"

A vision of what's possible when the region's strongest practices come together

If you're a student at Metro Atlanta High School, college and career planning starts early and never feels like an afterthought. Back in middle school, you were already exploring your interests and strengths and starting to picture what's possible for your future.

By ninth grade, you've met with trained advisors to start creating a path aligned with your individual goals—whether that's college, military, the workforce, or entrepreneurship. You check in frequently over the years, reviewing the data and adjusting as needed.

Your school offers dual enrollment, district-funded SAT/ACT preparation and testing, and college visits coordinated with nonprofit partners. You love walking down the "hall of fame" to see where all your friends are headed after graduation.

Your family receives hands-on FAFSA support (in multiple languages!), and you know just where to turn for mentoring, application guidance, and scholarship navigation.

You're a little nervous about life after graduation, but your school and their partners have already started thinking about how they can continue supporting you even after you leave. You're hopeful they'll figure out a way!

This experience isn't imagined; it just isn't universal. It gives us a glimpse of a "best of the best" combination of the bright spots that are already popping up in pockets across the region. It helps us answer the question, *"What would it look like for ALL students in our region to have access to the best things we are each offering? What can we learn from each other, and how can we get consistent?"*

These opportunities are especially important for students who have historically faced greater barriers to college access and completion—including many first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students. Ensuring that all students receive the support needed to succeed after high school is critical to expanding opportunity and building a stronger regional talent pipeline.

Introduction & Background

Postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion are fundamental to establishing a skilled and educated workforce and a thriving local economy. According to Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Work Force (2024), 85% of good jobs will go to workers with some form of postsecondary education by 2031. A bachelor's degree increases lifetime earning potential by two and a half times compared to high school alone.

Each year, close to 40,000 seniors graduate from Metro Atlanta public high schools. Of those, only 69% enroll in college within a year after graduating from high school, and only 26% earn a credential within five years (L4L 2024).

Expanding access to postsecondary education is a key lever for increasing economic mobility, reducing inequality, and preparing students for the demands of a changing workforce. In Metro Atlanta, where student populations are increasingly diverse and the regional economy requires a highly skilled labor force, increasing and supporting smooth transitions from high school to postsecondary education has become a common priority among school systems, nonprofits, and philanthropic partners across the region.

This landscape analysis was developed to better understand the current ecosystem of college access supports in the region. The analysis seeks to answer the following guiding questions:

- What strategies and supports are districts currently using to prepare students for life after high school?
- How are nonprofit and higher education partners contributing to these efforts?
- Where do gaps persist, and what opportunities exist to strengthen the system?

To develop this analysis, Learn4Life and Achieve Atlanta partnered to conduct structured interviews with leaders from each of the eight districts, survey nonprofit organizations providing college access services in the region, and review districts' strategic plans and websites.

Learn4Life (L4L), the Metro Atlanta Regional Education Partnership, is made up of school districts, communities, businesses, and nonprofits. Driven by the belief that all children deserve the opportunity to reach their potential, L4L uses data to identify best practices at key milestones in a student's education. They then work with their partners to scale these solutions, addressing academic achievement and workforce readiness for Metro Atlanta students.

Achieve Atlanta delivers hands-on help to students as they chart their paths to college, so that more students can access, afford, and earn postsecondary credentials. AATL provides strategic, operational, and financial support, as well as a district-wide college advising program that serves all juniors and seniors. To increase the number of students graduating from college, they provide a need-based scholarship and partner with postsecondary institutions and college success experts to offer direct support and coaching services to students.

The scope of the study includes eight public school districts that together educate the nearly 600,000 students of the Metro Atlanta region: Atlanta Public Schools, Clayton County Public Schools, Cobb County School District, City Schools of Decatur, DeKalb County School District, Fulton County Schools, Gwinnett County Public Schools, and Marietta City Schools. These districts vary in size, governance structure, and demographics, but all share a commitment to improving postsecondary outcomes.

The goal of this report is to provide visibility into current college access strategies and challenges across the region, offering a common foundation for learning, collaborative problem-solving, and the potential scaling of effective practices.

Methodology

This landscape analysis combined qualitative and document-based research to understand the state of college access supports across Metro Atlanta. Conducted between February and April 2025, the study included the following components:

Research: The project team reviewed strategic plans and other publicly available materials from each district to identify stated goals, strategic priorities, and current initiatives targeting postsecondary success.

Interviews: Leaders from eight Metro Atlanta districts participated in structured interviews to discuss their postsecondary priorities and initiatives. Interviewees included deputy superintendents, college and career directors, counseling leaders, and other senior staff with knowledge of postsecondary access strategies and partnerships. These conversations provided critical context for understanding local priorities, internal coordination, and perceived barriers to postsecondary success.

Surveys: A survey was distributed to 38 nonprofit organizations providing college access services in Metro Atlanta. 18 respondents representing 15 unique organizations completed the survey, providing insight into services offered, perceived gaps, and the nature of their collaboration with school districts.

Sources

- District strategic plans and public-facing artifacts (i.e., board minutes, budgets, press releases, etc.)
- Structured interview notes with district leaders
- Survey responses from 15 college access nonprofits
- Contextual knowledge from the Achieve Atlanta and Learn4Life teams, based on their partnerships and work in the field

Indicators

In reviewing the data, the project team focused on the following indicators to analyze the postsecondary success priorities and initiatives present in each district:

Leadership Indicators:

- What do the district's stated mission, vision, and goals reflect about the district leaders' priority on college access and affordability?
- Are there clear district-level and school-level leaders championing college access and affordability?

College-Going Culture Indicators:

- At what grade level do college and career readiness activities begin?
- What is the availability and enrollment of high-rigor courses at each district (i.e., AP, IB, honors, dual-enrollment)?
- Is college advising provided, and is it built into the school day schedule?
- What college success programming does the district offer (i.e., Apply to College Day, Career Fairs, etc.)?

Data proficiency indicators:

- What formal and informal data tools is the district using to inform postsecondary readiness and success, and what data points are they tracking?
- Is data used for progress monitoring, strategic planning, and/or policy decisions?
- How is data shared (internally and externally)?

Partnership indicators:

- Does the district have partnerships with colleges & universities?
- Does the district have partnerships with nonprofit college access organizations?
- Does the district have partnerships with the local community and local businesses that specifically support postsecondary outcomes?

Funding sustainability indicators:

- How has the district allocated funds for postsecondary priorities?
- Is there evidence of long-term financial planning for postsecondary success initiatives?
- Does the district receive funding support from foundations, nonprofits, or other partners to support postsecondary access initiatives?

These indicators not only guided this study, but could also be leveraged as a self-check tool for any district leader interested in examining their own district's postsecondary practices to identify and address gaps.

Limitations

While this analysis offers a rich snapshot of college access support across the region, several limitations should be noted:

- The analysis relies in part on self-reported data from district leaders and nonprofit providers, which may reflect individual perspectives or experiences rather than system-wide practices.
- Since this report synthesizes evidence gathered at the district level, it may not fully reflect the variations across individual schools. Differences in school-level leadership, resources, programming, and college-going culture can lead to distinct experiences that are not always visible through district-level data or interviews.
- Survey responses were limited to organizations who opted in and may not represent the full scope of providers operating in the region.
- The report does not include perspectives from students or families directly, nor does it assess the quantitative outcomes (e.g., college enrollment or completion rates) associated with specific supports or strategies.
- While students will pursue and succeed on a variety of paths after graduation, this report focuses on factors that contribute specifically to postsecondary enrollment and completion.

Despite these limitations, the findings reflect consistent themes across sources and offer a valuable foundation for shared understanding and ongoing improvement efforts.

Findings & Themes

Throughout this study, the evidence showed that districts across Metro Atlanta are making meaningful progress toward strengthening students' pathways to college and career. District leaders are demonstrating strong commitment, college-going cultures are becoming more deeply embedded, and data systems and partnerships are expanding. At the same time, important opportunities remain to deepen leadership at the school level, build on early college and career exploration efforts, strengthen strategic data use, and coordinate partnerships for greater impact.

The following five themes elevate both the momentum underway and the important opportunities to accelerate progress toward greater postsecondary success for all students.

1. Leadership

Strength: Leadership buy-in and commitment to postsecondary success are clear and firm regionally.
Opportunity: Specify and strengthen school-level leadership for postsecondary outcomes.

Metro Atlanta leaders demonstrate strong region-wide commitment to postsecondary access and success, often embedding these priorities into strategic plans and dedicating resources such as college advisors, counselors, and college readiness initiatives (e.g., Frameworks like the 4 E's, Portrait of a Graduate, and College and Career Readiness were well represented regionally).

While these efforts signal strong district-level leadership support, the extent to which school-level leaders (principals and assistant principals) are expected to lead for postsecondary outcomes was less evident in this study's findings. Based on evidence gathered, leadership expectations for metrics such as FAFSA completion, college application rates, dual enrollment participation, and college matriculation are often positioned within counseling departments rather than framed as whole-school leadership priorities.

National research and practice highlight the critical role of principals and school leadership teams in achieving postsecondary access and success goals (Geesa & McDonald, 2020). Where school leaders own and drive postsecondary work as part of overall academic and school improvement efforts, student outcomes improve more significantly.

High-Leverage Action Step:
Define and formalize school-level leadership expectations for postsecondary outcomes, ensuring that principals and assistant principals are accountable for college access and success metrics alongside academic and behavioral indicators.

Promising Practices:
Strategic planning: In both Cobb and Fulton, each school develops a Strategic Action Plan aligned to district priorities. To build on that strong foundation, these school-level strategic action plans could include specific steps pertaining to district-wide postsecondary success goals.

School-level leadership: In APS, each school designates an assistant principal to convene a college access team of school-based staff and partners that tracks progress toward FAFSA and college application targets and makes data-informed adjustments throughout the year.

2. College-Going Culture

Strength: Districts reported positive perception of college-going culture regionally and expressed firm commitment to continue strengthening it (though further research is needed at the school level).
Opportunity: Build upon current momentum created by Georgia's BRIDGE Law by more fully integrating college readiness into middle grades career exploration programming

Districts in the region have made efforts to cultivate strong college-going cultures, as evidenced by dual enrollment access, FAFSA completion events, college fairs, and structured advising support. Districts are also making early strides in expanding career exploration at the middle school level, often driven by compliance with Georgia's BRIDGE Law. This foundational work offers a strong platform to more intentionally integrate college readiness activities– such as academic planning, college options awareness, and financial aid basics– earlier in students' educational journeys.

Additionally, while programming to support college-going culture was evident, it varied from district to district and from school to school within districts. Maintaining consistent quality and access opportunities across schools will be critical to fostering inclusive college-going cultures.

High-Leverage Action Steps:
1) Build on a strength: layer college exploration elements into existing BRIDGE Law-required career activities at the middle school level.

2) Develop targeted strategies to close access gaps to rigorous coursework, advising, and postsecondary preparation supports, ensuring high-need schools have ample access to the rigor required to prepare for college.

Promising Practices:
Celebrating Postsecondary Choices: Marietta City Schools celebrates students' postsecondary plans through its "Senior Wall of Honor," where seniors self-report their enrollment, enlistment, or employment plans after graduation, promoting a culture of aspiration and recognition for all students.

District-Funded SAT/ACT Access: Multiple districts, including Atlanta, Clayton, DeKalb, Fulton, and Marietta, fund and promote SAT and/or ACT testing during the school day for students, reducing financial and logistical barriers to college access.

3. Data Proficiency

Strength: Districts are increasingly leveraging postsecondary data systems to monitor key college and career readiness indicators.
Opportunity: Move beyond data collection to strengthen data-driven decision-making, targeted interventions, and longitudinal tracking of postsecondary outcomes.

Data tools like Naviance, National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), and GA Futures were mentioned frequently in district interviews. In pockets, districts are tracking FAFSA completion, college applications, enrollment trends, and dual enrollment participation. Internal dashboards and school-based data teams are becoming more common, reflecting growing attention to postsecondary data.

Evidence gathered showed regional variability in the degree to which data is systematically used to target supports, inform school improvement planning, and coordinate external partner alignment. While the region is data-rich, strategic use and application of data could further the region's postsecondary success outcomes. Additionally, tracking and using college *persistence* data (rather than just enrollment data) emerged as a key area for further growth.

High-Leverage Action Steps:
1) Develop specific systems and routines for postsecondary data discussion and action cycles to guide strategic interventions, continuous improvement, and resource allocation.

2) Formalize longitudinal tracking systems that link K-12 experiences to postsecondary outcomes, ensuring data informs long-term student success strategies.

Promising Practices:
Data-Driven Strategic Plan: Both DeKalb and City Schools of Decatur have adopted strategic plans that move beyond data collection to focus on measurable outcomes tied to postsecondary success. DeKalb's 2024–2029 plan includes goals aligned to its *Graduate Profile* and outlines a formal review process—led by the Executive Director of Student Advancement—that monitors key indicators such as FAFSA completion, dual enrollment participation, and postsecondary enrollment. Similarly, Decatur's *Student Success in All Areas Accelerator*

establishes KPIs for career and college preparedness, helping the district track progress and guide school-level action.

Data in Action: Fulton used data to successfully advocate for a reduction in counselor caseloads and will continue monitoring the effectiveness of the investment using their already robust data systems.
Monitoring College Transitions: Gwinnett conducts annual summer melt reports to track which graduates follow through on college enrollment—helping the district identify trends, target outreach, and ensure students don't fall off track after high school.

Centralized Counselor Support Systems: Cobb County School District uses CTLS, an internal platform that houses both academic and postsecondary data while also serving as a centralized hub of resources for all counselors. The system supports consistent access to financial aid tools and postsecondary planning materials across the district's 18 high schools, helping streamline support and ensure students receive timely, aligned guidance.

4. Partnerships

Strength: Districts have built rich ecosystems of nonprofit, higher education, and community partnerships to support postsecondary access and success.
Opportunity: Strengthen coordination and strategic alignment among partners to maximize collective impact and reduce duplication of services.

The study surfaced a plethora of partnerships between districts and colleges and universities, nonprofit college access organizations, scholarship providers, and local businesses. These partnerships provide critical support such as FAFSA completion assistance, dual enrollment opportunities, mentoring programs, and financial literacy education.

However, evidence also showed that partnership coordination is often school-based or ad hoc, rather than strategically integrated across the district. As a result, services can sometimes be duplicated, underleveraged, or unevenly distributed. Districts have an opportunity to deepen impact by formalizing partnership strategies to align external supports with district-wide goals for postsecondary access and success—ensuring that services are tailored to student needs, not just offered broadly to the same groups.

High-Leverage Action Step:
Develop and implement districtwide partnership frameworks and databases that align external partner services to postsecondary goals, articulate clear communication protocols, and establish shared accountability for outcomes.

Promising Practice:
Through the College Bound FAFSA Initiative– jointly implemented by The Scholarship Academy (TSA), Learn4Life (L4L), and United Way of Greater Atlanta– 1137 participating students from 10 schools in metro Atlanta achieved a 74% FAFSA completion rate in 2024, significantly outperforming the national average of 47%. This collaborative model demonstrates the power of cross-sector partnerships in removing barriers and advancing postsecondary access.

5. Funding Sustainability

Strength: Districts are making targeted investments in postsecondary access initiatives and leveraging philanthropic and nonprofit partnerships to expand supports.
Opportunity: Develop long-term sustainability plans that blend public, private, and philanthropic funding to ensure postsecondary initiatives are maintained and scaled over time.

Investments in initiatives such as FAFSA completion support, advising platforms like Naviance, dual enrollment expansion, and district-funded SAT/ACT testing demonstrate districts' financial commitment to postsecondary success. Philanthropic partners, foundations, and nonprofit organizations also play a critical role in providing scholarships, persistence supports, and grant-funded programming.

One area of this study where evidence was limited was around long-term financial sustainability planning for postsecondary initiatives. An area for growth might be developing clear long-term sustainability plans specifically tied to postsecondary access and success initiatives. While many districts are actively leveraging both internal and external resources, the opportunity remains to formalize multi-year funding strategies that integrate district budgets with philanthropic and private sector support. This approach would help ensure that critical initiatives are not only sustained but also expanded to reach more students over time.

High-Leverage Action Step:
Develop comprehensive, multi-year sustainability plans that blend district, philanthropic, and private sector funding to support core postsecondary success initiatives.

Promising Practice:
Clayton County leaders articulated a nuanced and relatable challenge many districts face. While their district benefits from the support of external partners such as the Clayton County Public Schools Foundation, Communities in Schools, 5 Strong Scholarship Foundation, and multiple philanthropic grants, they also acknowledged the need for more cross-departmental coordination of those resources. The challenge isn't necessarily the availability of resources, but rather the complexity of aligning and deploying them effectively across departments. This kind of candid reflection marks a critical first step toward systemic change and lays a strong foundation for building a more integrated, future-focused funding approach.

Summary
These themes reflect both the significant momentum underway across Metro Atlanta districts and the opportunities to further strengthen postsecondary preparation and support systems. Districts have demonstrated deep commitment to equipping students for postsecondary success and implementing promising practices across leadership, culture-building, data use, partnerships, and resource investment. By intentionally addressing the opportunities identified– particularly around school-level leadership, early college and career exposure, data-driven interventions, partnership coordination, and funding sustainability– the region can accelerate progress toward positive postsecondary outcomes for all students.

Synthesis: Strengths, Needs, & Actions

Based on the findings and themes above, districts and partners across Metro Atlanta are demonstrating promising practices, but disparities in college access and completion point to gaps in available supports and call for more targeted, coordinated action. The following summary highlights what the region is doing well, where challenges remain, and what districts, higher education institutions, and nonprofits can do– individually and collectively– to better support students on their path to postsecondary success.

Regional Strengths and Assets

Metro Atlanta's college access ecosystem is built on a solid foundation of committed leadership, growing data capacity, and strong partnerships. Shared regional strengths include:

- **Strategic Direction**: Most districts have embedded postsecondary readiness into strategic plans through initiatives like "Portrait of a Graduate" and the "4 E's" (Enrollment, Enlistment, Employment, Entrepreneurship). Several have cabinet-level champions advancing this work.
- **College-Going Culture**: FAFSA events, Apply to College Days, senior celebrations, and district-funded SAT/ACT access are widespread, and college advising (whether staff- or partner-led) is a growing focus.
- **Use of Data Tools**: Platforms like Naviance, National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), and SCOIR are used to track FAFSA completion, college applications, enrollment, and—where capacity allows—persistence.
- **Robust Partnership Ecosystems**: Nonprofits and higher education institutions are critical partners across the region, providing advising, financial aid guidance, and career exposure to thousands of students.
- **Targeted Investments**: Districts are funding college access initiatives through both internal budgets and external grants, with investments in platforms, advisor staffing, and readiness programming.

Persistent Needs Across the Region

Gaps in Metro Atlanta's college access ecosystem require attention on accountability, data use, coordination, and sustainability planning. Prevalent regional challenges include:

- **School-level leadership & accountability** for postsecondary outcomes (such as FAFSA completion, dual enrollment participation, or college enrollment) may be an area of need, based on limited evidence found.
- **Strategic use of postsecondary data** to drive planning, target supports, or coordinate cross-departmental efforts may be an area of need, based on limited examples surfaced in this study.
- **Formalized coordination systems** for aligning and managing nonprofit and higher education partnerships may be an area of need, as most partnerships described were school-based or operated without formal district-level frameworks.
- **Support for key postsecondary transitions**, including summer advising, matriculation assistance, and persistence interventions, may be an area of need, given limited evidence of systematic programming in this area.
- **Long-term sustainability planning for postsecondary initiatives**— particularly around funding strategies that integrate public, private, and philanthropic sources— was less evidenced and may represent a systems-level gap.

Recommended Actions

To accelerate progress and deepen impact, the following action steps are recommended across sectors:

For K–12 Districts

- **Embed postsecondary metrics into school accountability systems** (e.g., FAFSA, dual enrollment, college application rates) to ensure that principals and school leaders are actively engaged alongside counselors in driving postsecondary outcomes.
- **Establish formal routines for using postsecondary data** in planning and improvement cycles to empower district and school teams to monitor progress, identify gaps, and target resources in data-driven action cycles.
- **Develop districtwide partnership frameworks** to coordinate nonprofit and higher-education partners, so as to avoid duplication, improve alignment with district priorities, and ensure that support is distributed across schools.
- **Expand postsecondary transition supports,** including summer advising and college persistence efforts to help more students successfully enroll and stay in college, particularly those most at risk of summer melt or early departure.
- **Create long-range sustainability plans** that integrate district funds with philanthropic and private sector resources to maintain and scale effective postsecondary initiatives.

For Institutes of Higher Education

- **Contribute to regional understanding of college persistence and support systems** to help the broader ecosystem understand how students experience and navigate college: share institutional practices, common barriers to persistence, and promising approaches to student support.
- **Establish direct data feedback loops with K–12 partners** to provide districts with timely, student-level data on enrollment and persistence that can inform advising, resource allocation, and program design at the high school level.
- **Strengthen K–12 pipelines** through expanded dual enrollment, summer bridge, and campus exposure programs to increase early access, readiness, and comfort with college environments, especially for underrepresented student groups.
- **Support summer melt reduction** by partnering with districts and nonprofits on joint transition programming to decrease students losing momentum between high school graduation and college enrollment.

For College-Access Nonprofits

- **Participate in shared planning, data tracking, and communication routines with districts** to align nonprofit efforts to district goals, reduce duplication, and stay in touch with school-level conditions.
- **Support student follow-through in the college decision and application process** to close the gap between awareness and action. Continue helping students understand, apply to, and commit to realistic and affordable postsecondary options.
- **Extend services, where possible, to offer a longer continuum of support,** from earlier preparation through postsecondary persistence, helping build student readiness before 11th grade and sustain support into and through college.
- **Continue deepening family engagement and whole-student readiness efforts** to ensure students are supported academically, emotionally, and logistically, with families equipped to participate in the college-going journey.

Conclusion and Next Steps

This landscape analysis highlights the significant strengths Metro Atlanta districts and nonprofit organizations demonstrate in expanding postsecondary access and success, as well as the key opportunities that remain. District leaders, nonprofit partners, and community organizations have built strong foundations for improving college and career outcomes, demonstrating clear commitment, creativity, and collaboration.

At the same time, the findings point to critical next steps for deepening impact: strengthening school-level leadership for postsecondary success, expanding early college and career exploration efforts, building data systems that drive continuous improvement, coordinating partnerships more strategically, and formalizing long-term plans for financially sustaining postsecondary success efforts.

While this work aims to improve regional outcomes overall, it is especially critical for students who have traditionally been underserved by postsecondary systems. Postsecondary strategies that intentionally support first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students will be essential to meeting regional goals and ensuring that progress reaches all communities.

Districts are increasingly embracing "4 E's" models (Enrollment, Enlistment, Employment, Entrepreneurship) to define postsecondary success, reflecting a growing recognition that success isn't "one size fits all." While these expanded definitions promote flexibility and inclusion, it's important to also maintain strong college-going cultures, given that college degrees remain a key pathway to economic mobility.

Though this study focused on the K-12 sector, more research is needed into the higher education sector to fully understand the continuum of supports available as students transition from high school to college. In a region with a high school graduation rate of 84%, a postsecondary enrollment rate of 69%, and a postsecondary completion rate of 26%, further analysis is needed on support systems and contributing factors at the postsecondary level, as well as further insight into the coordination and communications between local K-12 and higher education systems.

Continued progress will require not only sustaining current efforts, but also aligning across systems, closing access gaps, and ensuring that every student— regardless of background— has the support needed to successfully transition to college, career, and beyond. By working together across districts, nonprofit organizations, higher education partners, funders, and the broader community, Metro Atlanta is well-positioned to lead the way toward successful postsecondary outcomes for the next generation.

Appendix

High-level Overview:
The Current College Access Landscape in Metro Atlanta

For an at-a-glance summary, here is a high-level overview of some of the key efforts and initiatives each of the 8 Metro Atlanta districts is making in service of college access and increasing postsecondary success:

Atlanta Public Schools (APS)
APS has embedded college access into its strategic plan and partners with Achieve Atlanta to convene key district and nonprofit stakeholders and coordinate supports, set annual targets for FAFSA completion and college applications, and make data-informed adjustments throughout the year. It also funds initiatives like SAT/ACT School Day.

Clayton County Public Schools
Clayton has implemented a "4 E's" framework (Enrolled, Enlisted, Employed, Entrepreneurship) emphasizing postsecondary readiness, expanded access to PSAT/SAT/ACT, invested in Naviance and NSC for data tracking, and built partnerships with local colleges and organizations to strengthen pathways.

Cobb County School District
Cobb provides support through district-led counselor collaboration, investment in Naviance and career exploration tools, and active partnerships with local colleges and businesses to create a robust postsecondary preparation ecosystem.

City Schools of Decatur
Decatur takes a whole-person approach to college readiness, beginning with career exposure in elementary school and continuing through dual enrollment and advising support via tools like Naviance. A dedicated CTE Director and Dual Enrollment Liaison have anchored this work for nearly two decades, with strong ties to Georgia Piedmont Technical College and Georgia State University helping sustain student access and partnership alignment.

DeKalb County School District
DeKalb integrates postsecondary readiness district-wide with a clear strategic focus, FAFSA and application tracking through Naviance, and grant-funded initiatives like GRASP that bolster advising and career pathway development.

Fulton County Schools
Fulton emphasizes early exposure to postsecondary pathways, district-funded PSAT/SAT/ACT access, FAFSA completion monitoring, and partnerships with colleges to enhance access for all students. They take a strong data-driven approach, emphasizing turning data into action.

Gwinnett County Public Schools
Gwinnett has a comprehensive K-12 postsecondary readiness framework, provides early career exploration, tracks FAFSA and college outcomes through robust data systems, and maintains partnerships to support career and college transitions.

Marietta City Schools
Marietta prioritizes personalized advising with two full-time college advisors, utilizes tools like SCOIR and YouScience for planning, celebrates all postsecondary paths through initiatives like the "Senior Wall of Honor," and supports FAFSA completion through dedicated specialists.

Next, here is an overview of the 15 college access organizations that responded to the survey, and how they provide support in the Metro Atlanta region:

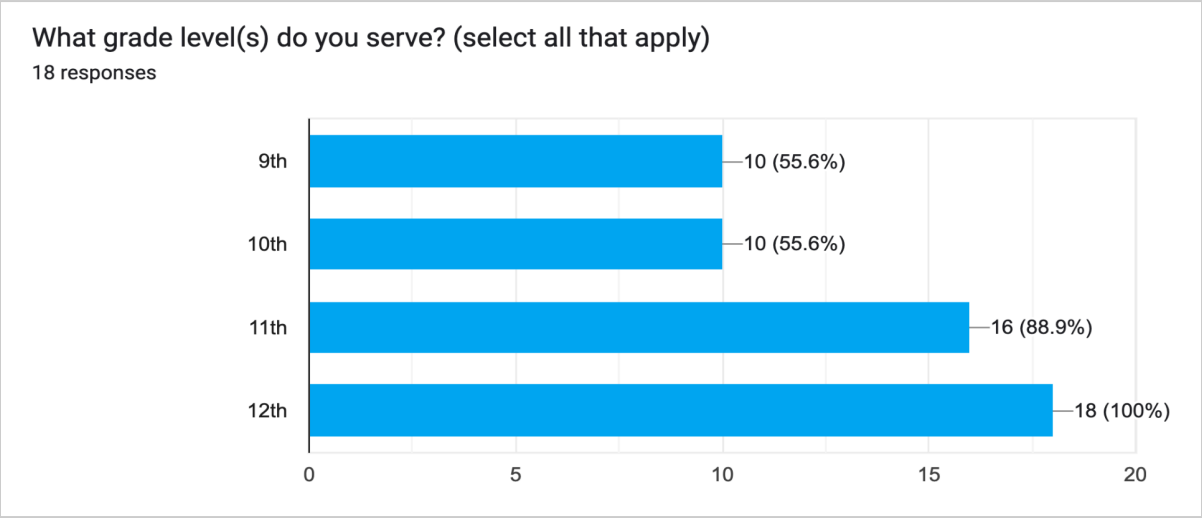
100 Black Men of DeKalb	Provides mentorship, academic support, and college readiness programming for Black youth to support postsecondary success.
21st Century Leaders	Prepares diverse high school students for college and careers through leadership development, career exploration, and networking opportunities.
5 Strong Scholarship Foundation	Connects high-achieving Black students with full-tuition scholarships at partnering HBCUs and provides leadership and college persistence coaching.
College Advising Corps (CAC)	Places recent college graduates as near-peer advisors in high schools to increase college enrollment among low-income, first-generation students.
College 1st Generation	Provides family-centered support to help first-generation students and their families understand and navigate the college application process.
College AIM	Offers individualized college advising, financial aid navigation, and coaching services to low-income and first-generation students across metro Atlanta.
Grady Health System (TELP Program)	Offers high school students aged 15–19 the opportunity to shadow hospital professionals and gain firsthand experience in healthcare careers.
Latin American Association	Provides Latino students and families with college readiness workshops, FAFSA assistance, and access to scholarship opportunities.
Leap Year	Offers a structured gap year combining college coursework, service learning, and career exploration to first-generation college-bound students.
Next Generation Men & Women	Connects high school students to college and career pathways through twice-weekly mentorship sessions and builds a supportive peer community.
Odyssey Atlanta	Delivers academic enrichment, leadership development, and college readiness programming to talented students from underserved communities.
OneGoal	Implements a three-year, teacher-led program supporting low-income students to successfully enroll in and persist through college.
Step Ahead Scholars	Provides personalized college advising, financial aid support, and college persistence coaching for underrepresented students.
The Scholarship Academy	Equips students with scholarship search skills, funding strategies, and financial literacy tools to support affordable college attendance.
United Way of Greater Atlanta	Funds youth success and college access initiatives, supports FAFSA completion efforts, and drives regional education partnerships.

Partnerships: Survey Insights

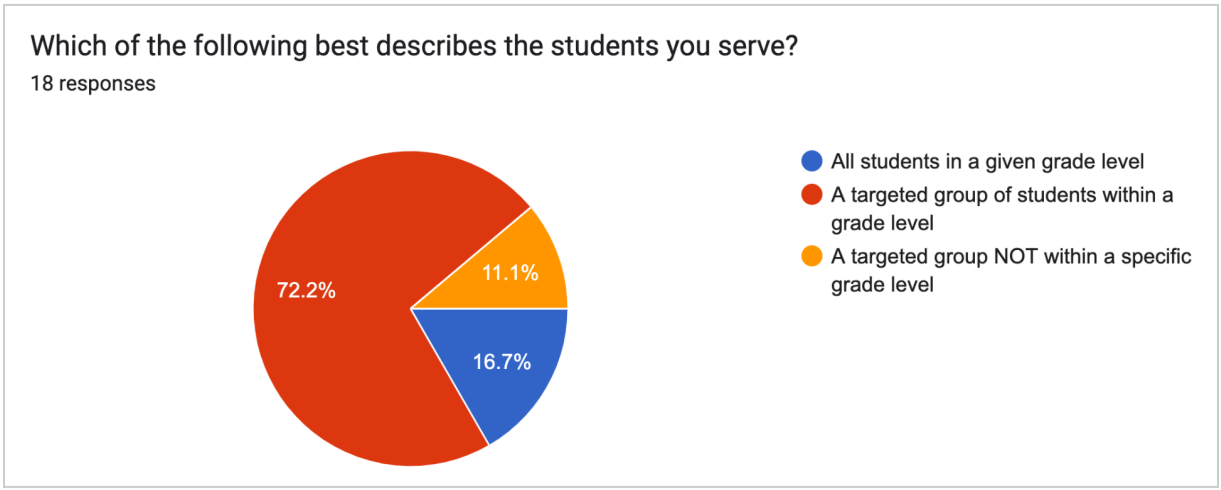
Eighteen individual respondents representing 15 unique organizations completed a survey on college access support services in Metro Atlanta. The following table represents partnerships between these nonprofit college access organizations and eight districts in the region, based on survey response data. (Note: The table indicates an organization's presence within a district, but it does not capture the number of schools served within that district.)

	Atlanta	Clayton	Cobb	Decatur	DeKalb	Fulton	Gwinnett	Marietta
100 Black Men of Dekalb				⭘	⭘			
21st Century Leaders	⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘
5 Strong Scholarship Foundation	⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘	
College 1st Generation								
College Advising Corps (CAC)	⭘							
College AIM					⭘			
Grady TELP	⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘
Latin American Association	⭘				⭘		⭘	
Leap Year	⭘				⭘	⭘		
NextGen	⭘					⭘		
Odyssey Atlanta	⭘							
OneGoal	⭘			⭘	⭘	⭘		
Step Ahead Scholars	⭘				⭘	⭘	⭘	
The Scholarship Academy	⭘	⭘			⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘
United Way of Greater Atlanta	⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘	⭘
TOTAL	11	5	4	6	11	9	7	4

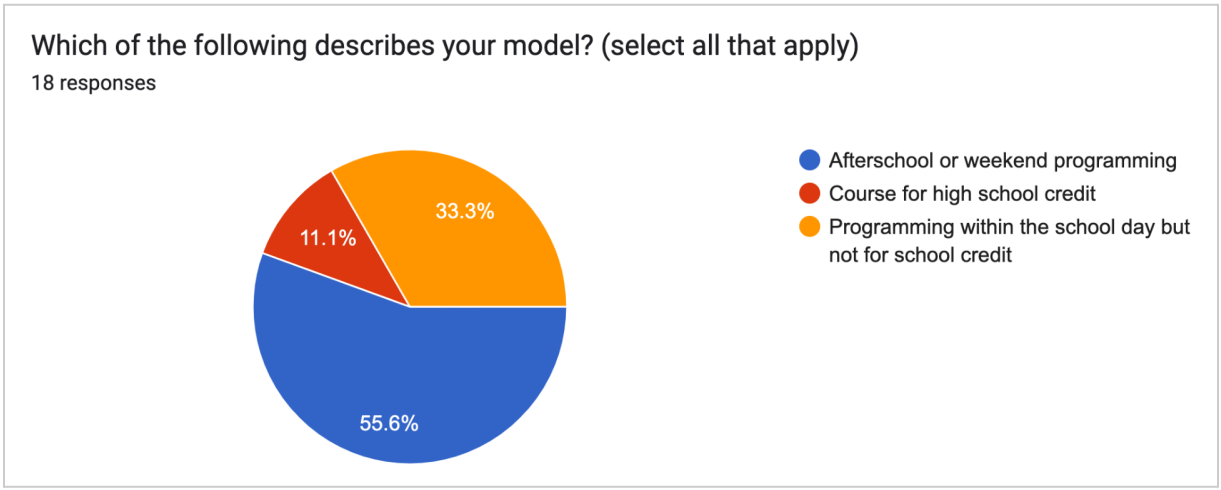
The survey showed support available across all grade levels in high school, with lighter support in 9th-10th, increasing to heavier support available in 12th:



Responses indicated that support is mostly **targeted** to specific student groups, such as those from low-income households, those who would be first-generation college students, or "the quiet middle" (mid-g.p.a. range).



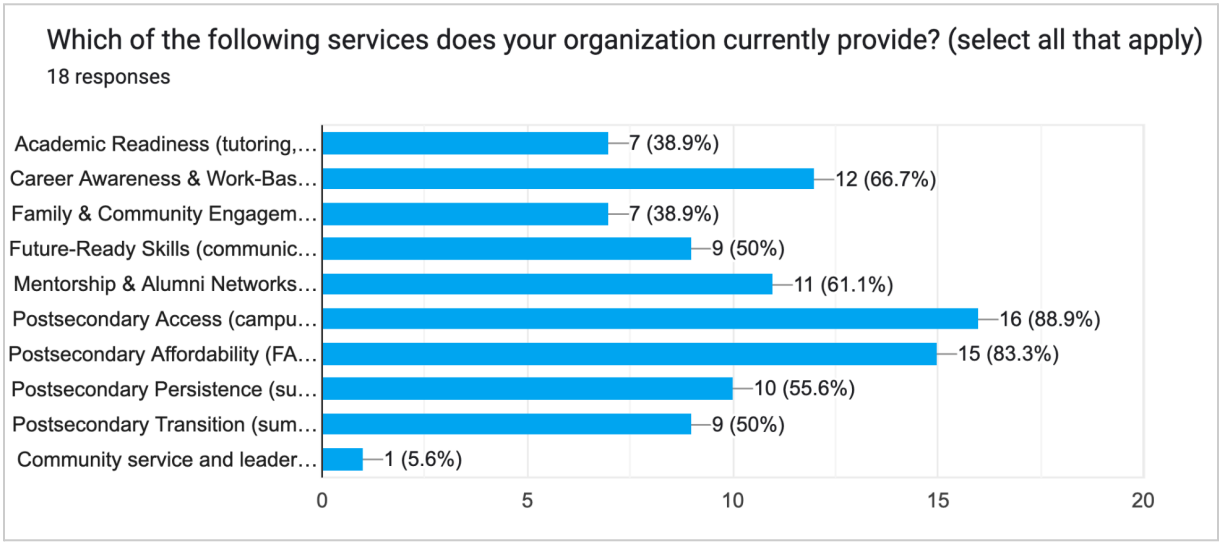
Most organizations that responded to the survey operate as after-school and weekend programming, whereas some operate within the school day or for credit:



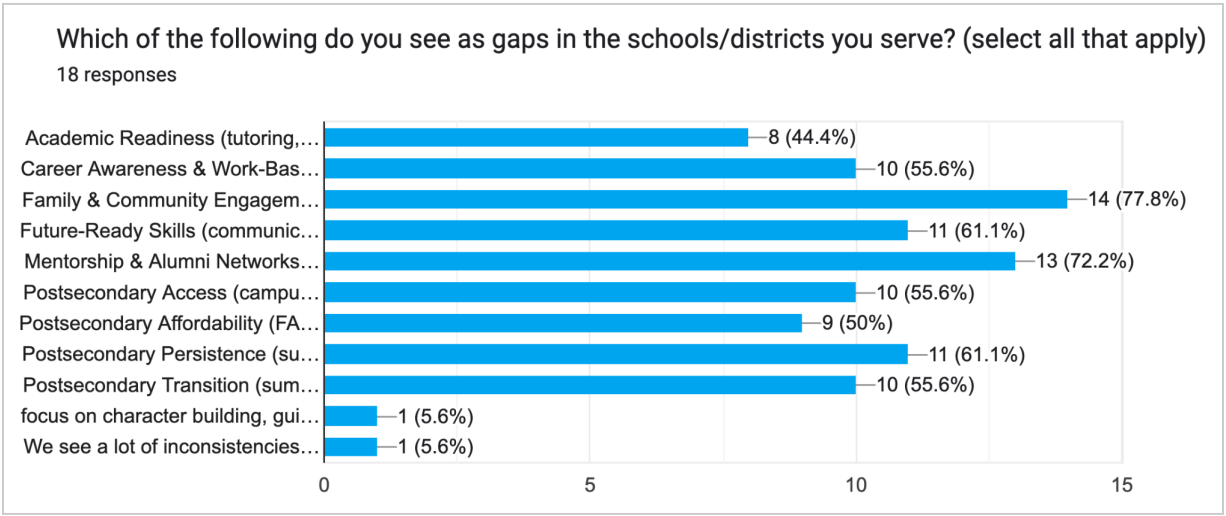
Survey respondents offer a range of services:

- Academic Readiness (tutoring, study skills, and/or college prep workshops)
- Career Awareness & Work-Based Learning (career guidance, internships, job shadowing, apprenticeships, entrepreneurship, and/or business skills)
- Family & Community Engagement (parent/guardian education and/or community-based support)
- Future-Ready Skills (communication, critical thinking, and/or self-management)
- Mentorship & Alumni Networks (mentorship, peer support, and/or alumni connections)
- Postsecondary Access (campus visits, college tours, advising, and/or application support)
- Postsecondary Affordability (FAFSA support, scholarships, and/or financial aid guidance)
- Postsecondary Persistence (supports to help students stay enrolled in college)
- Postsecondary Transition (summer advising, bridge programs, housing, orientation, matriculation)

Access and **affordability** emerged as the top two areas served:



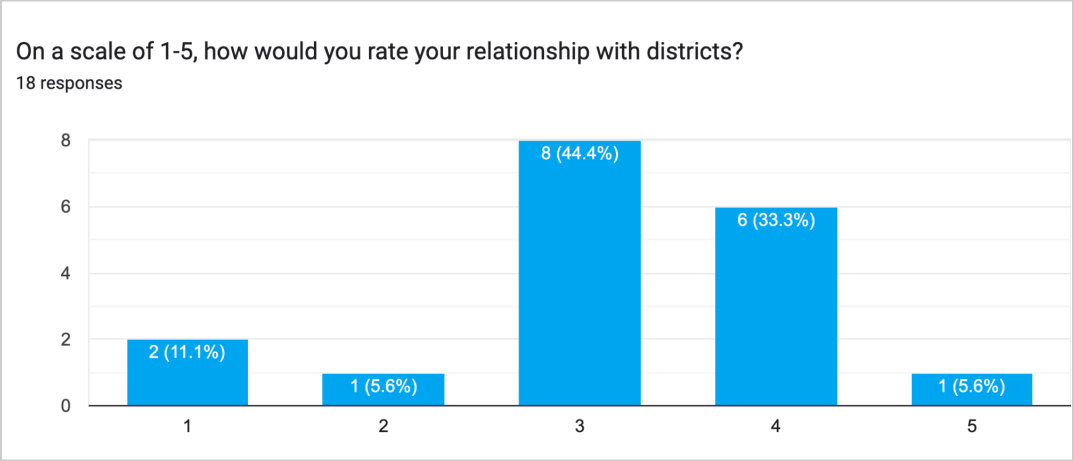
Survey respondents offered insight into the **gaps** they're able to see thanks to their unique vantage point as a district partner, with mentorship and family engagement emerging as top needs:



Survey respondents also provided additional detail regarding the key needs they identified and how their services aim to meet these needs:

- There is a gap between informing students of tools and resources and following up on their actual use of them; more follow-up is needed.
- While support for the college application process exists, it remains an area of need. Students have limited understanding of the process and need further support.
- Academic readiness and social-emotional readiness both show up as persistent needs.
- Family engagement is a prevalent area of need.
- Organizations respond by offering college advising, financial literacy, career readiness and exposure, and mentorship programs.
- Many nonprofits are also calling for more system-level collaboration and coordination to strengthen district-community partnerships.

When responding about their relationships with districts, the average score of **3.2 out of 5** across 18 survey respondents reflects generally neutral to slightly positive perceptions, with most ratings clustering around 3 & 4:



To elaborate on these scaled responses, college access organizations identified stronger communication, clearer accountability, better access to school staff, more even recognition of partners, and increased financial support as key ways to strengthen their relationships with districts.

Summary

Overall, the survey findings highlight the breadth of college access and affordability support available to students across metro Atlanta, as well as the areas where continued investment and stronger coordination could make a significant difference for better serving students. Though nonprofit partners are playing a critical role in addressing persistent gaps in postsecondary preparation, ongoing collaboration with districts will be essential to ensure that all students receive cohesive, effective support throughout their high school journey and beyond.

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(Note: General observations include promotion of SAT School Day, Georgia State Application Day, graduation celebrations (including a "half cap" ceremony for juniors), and the district's celebration of its highest graduation rate in a decade — all of which contribute to a visible college-going culture.)

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