



# G-CASE COMMENTS

*An Affiliate of the Georgia Association of Educational Leaders*

## President's Corner



As you know the Georgia General Assembly's Legislative Session is well under way and Governor Kemp has recommended a \$2000 base salary schedule increase for all certified teachers and employees effective September 1, 2023. He has also recommended a \$2000 cost of living adjustment for all full-time, benefit-eligible state employees effective July 1, 2023. Additionally, on Day 8 of the 40 Day Legislative Session, our State Legislators and Governor Kemp expressed an interest in trying to assist local educational agencies produce policy solutions regarding the shortage of paraprofessionals in which a grant program was introduced that is intended to help paraprofessionals achieve teacher certification. PAGE created an [issue brief](#) about the importance of paraprofessionals and they recommend increasing paraprofessionals salaries in the Quality Basic Education (QBE) funding formula to help paraprofessionals to become certified teachers. This is an AMAZING idea to grow our own teachers by supporting and promoting our hard-working paraprofessionals into new teachers. Train, encourage, and fund. Great minds and hearts are a terrible thing to waste. I support the paraprofessional to teacher pipeline. Let's hope this becomes a reality.

*Dr. Cassandra Holifield*

## Notes from the Executive Director

I know you are so proud to be a member of G-CASE! I have been a member for thirty-seven years (!) and realize the value this professional organization brings to our special education leaders across Georgia. G-CASE is relevant, G-CASE is needed, and G-CASE is vital to providing professional learning to our members.



And..we deliver! The G-CASE Special Education Administrator Development Academy (ADA) has met all year as our Master Teachers learn how to navigate the administrative world of special education. Our Coordinators have been trained well in FTE, managing people, behavior, and perfect IEPs at their CSI Drive-In Workshop in January. Classroom teachers and administrators spent a full day "modernizing their behavior/mental health toolkits" at a Drive-In Conference in October. During Fall Conference in Savannah, G-CASE members could access 56 Breakout Sessions specific to their needs. G-CASE members have also been active on the SBOE and GaDOE Dyslexia Task Forces and participated in the Georgia Dyslexia Collaborative's two-day conference at the Oconee County Civic Center on February 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>.

More Professional Learning is coming! The Spring Legal Forum held at The Classic Center in Athens (March 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>) will provide three days of intensive information from state and national presenters to help us establish and maintain best practices for our systems. Back by popular demand, Julie Weatherly will present LEarn and LEad: LEA Representative Leadership Training on April 24<sup>th</sup> in Houston County...And then a new cohort for the Administrator Development Academy begins in June! I know you are proud to be a member of G-CASE!

*Sarah Burbach*

# **2023 G-CASE SPRING LEGAL FORUM**

Over four hundred G-CASE members will be attending the **2023 G-CASE Spring Legal Conference** at The Classic Center in Athens March 6<sup>th</sup> -8<sup>th</sup>! The conference will feature state and nationally-known attorneys from *Pereira, Kirby, Kinsinger & Nguyen* (Phil Hartley); *RISE Solutions* (Julie Weatherly); *Parker Poe* (Beth Morris, Reagan Sauls, and MaryGrace Kittrell); *Georgia Department of Education* (Jamila Pollard); and *Jones Cork* (Sydney Solomon and Canon Hill), as well as updates from our own Wina Low from the Department of Education and Dr. Jimmy Stokes and Buddy Costley from GAEL. We will learn, laugh, discover, and leave with a better understanding of legal best practices.

The conference begins on Monday, March 6<sup>th</sup> at 1:00 P.M. in the Athena Ballrooms and will conclude at Noon on Wednesday, March 8<sup>th</sup>. Two breakfasts, lunch, and snacks are included in the registration cost. Register today on the GAEL website under “Events.” It’s going to be so good!

**2023 G-CASE Spring Legal Forum**  
**The Classic Center**  
**Athens, Georgia**  
**March 6-March 8, 2023**

**Conference Registration**



# 2023 G-CASE SPRING LEGAL FORUM AT A GLACE

## Sunday, March 5, 2023

6:30 PM—8:30 PM	Past-Presidents' Dinner	George's Low Country Table
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## Monday, March 6, 2023

8:30 AM—2:00 PM	Registration	Athena Main Lobby
9:00 AM—12:00 PM	SELDA	Athena G and H
9:00 AM—12:00 PM	GLRS Directors	Athena J
9:15 AM—10:00 AM	G-CASE Advisory Board	Athena I
10:15 AM—11:30 AM	G-CASE Advisory and Executive Boards	Athena I
9:00 AM—1:00 PM	GO-IEP Stakeholders Meeting	Parthenon 1
1:00 PM—3:15 PM	G-CASE General Session	Athena A-F
3:15 PM—3:45 PM	Refreshment Break	Athena Pre-Function Area
3:45 PM—5:00 PM	GaDOE Update	Athena A-F

## Tuesday, March 7, 2023

7:30 AM—12:00 PM	Registration	Athena Main Lobby
7:45 AM—8:30 AM	Breakfast Buffet	Grand Hall
7:45 AM—8:30 AM	Breakfast Meeting for GNETS Directors	Parthenon 1
8:30 AM—10:15 AM	G-CASE General Session	Athena A-F
10:15 AM—11:00 AM	Beverage Break/ADA Showcase	Olympia 1 and 2
11:00 AM—12:00 PM	G-CASE General Session	Athena A-F
12:00 PM—1:00 PM	Lunch	Grand Hall
1:00 PM—2:15 PM	G-CASE General Session	Athena A-F
2:15 PM—2:45 PM	Refreshment Break	Athena Pre-Function Area
2:45 PM—5:00 PM	G-CASE General Session	Athena A-F

## Wednesday, March 8, 2023

7:30 AM—9:00 AM	Breakfast	Athena Lobby
9:00 AM—12:00 PM	G-CASE General Session	Athena A-F

**SPECIAL EDUCATION  
ADMINISTRATOR DEVELOPMENT ACADEMY (ADA)  
Seeking Applications for 2023-2024**

*"Participating as part of this year's G-CASE ADA cohort has been one of the best experiences of my professional career. The knowledge I have gained, the relationships I have formed, and the insights I have gained have opened doors for me that may not have been possible without the enrichment this program has provided. I highly recommend ADA to anyone who wishes to refine practices, build relationships, and make a greater impact on families of students with disabilities."*

(2023 ADA Participant Courtney Thomas, Morgan County Schools)

It's time to begin the application process for the **2023-2024 Special Education Administrator Development Academy!** The Academy was created to ensure that school districts in Georgia are equipped with highly-trained teachers prepared to assume leadership roles in special education administration...and what a success it has been! So much of a success that National CASE selected Georgia-CASE to present all aspects of the Academy as one of their Breakout Sessions in Salt Lake City in November!

Instructors are state and nationally-known professionals **in the field of special education.** The curriculum is based upon the *Administrator of Special Education Advanced Leadership Standards* set forth by the National Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE) and includes:

- Vision, Mission, & Direction Setting
- Policy Implementation, Legal & Ethical Practice of Special Education Programs and Services
  - Organizational Leadership & Management for Special Education
- Program Oversight, Improvement, & Instructional Leadership for Special Education
- Human and Fiscal Resource Management for Special Education Programs & Services
  - Collaboration & Communication with Special Education Stakeholders
  - Equity & Cultural Responsiveness



# **SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION DEVELOPMENT ACADEMY (ADA)**

**June 27, 2023 to March 6, 2024**

## **Selection is competitive!**

The ideal candidate for the **Special Education Administrator Development Academy** is a proven teacher leader with five or more years of experience as a special education teacher who is identified by his/her principal, special education director, and/or superintendent and aspires to move into an administrative position within the field of special education. The next group for the Special Education Administrator Development Academy will consist of up to forty (40) special education teachers who are proven teacher leaders, are endorsed by their principal, special education director, and/or superintendent, and who aspire to move into an administrative position within the field of special education. Members of this group will be selected through a rigorous application process. Interested parties may self-nominate or be nominated by a school or district administrator. Each applicant will complete an application packet to be submitted along with a personal narrative and letters of support from their Special Education Director and Principal.

## **SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION DEVELOPMENT ACADEMY (ADA) DATES:**

June 27-28, 2023

September 20, 2023

November 15-17, 2023 (G-CASE Fall Conference in Savannah)

January 24, 2024

March 4-6, 2024 (G-CASE Spring Legal Forum in Athens)

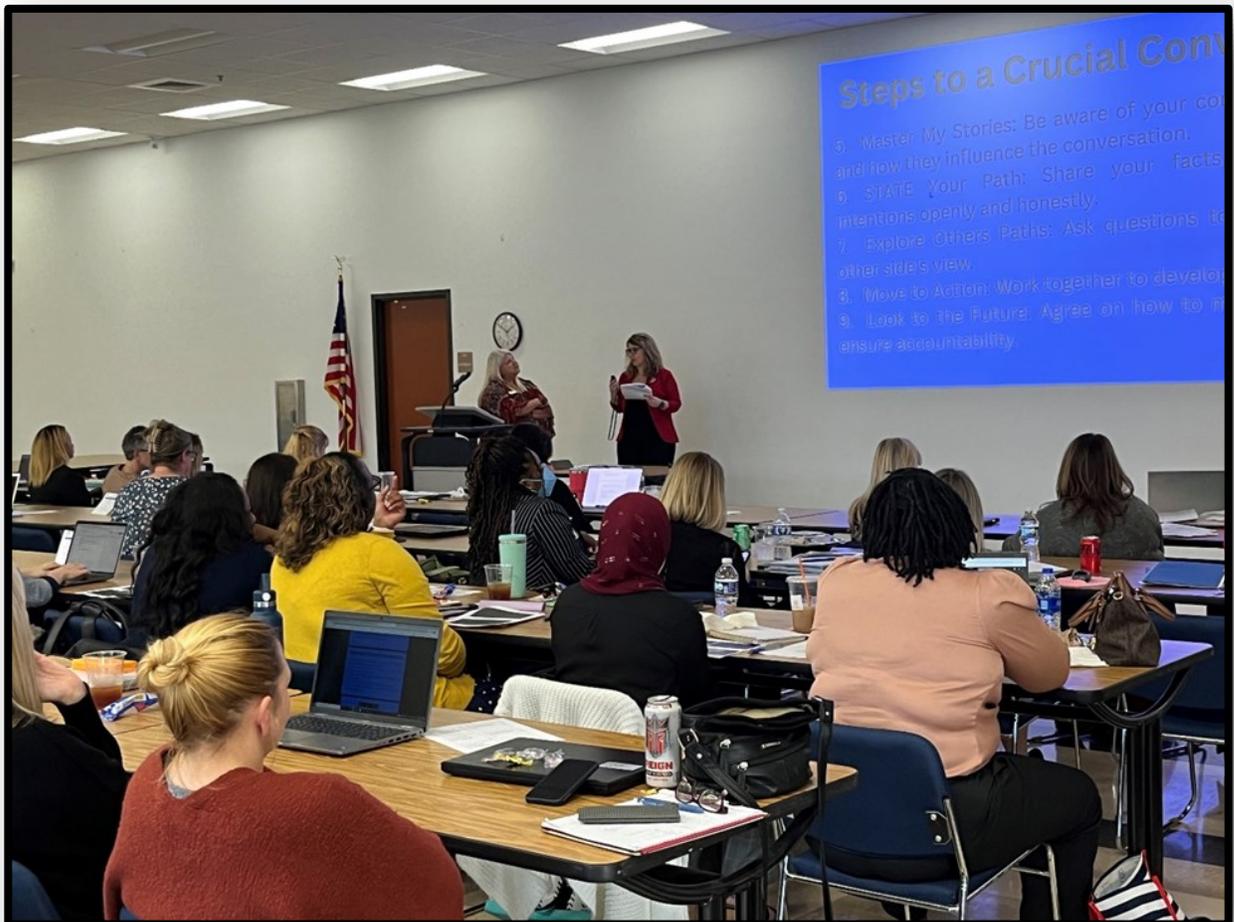
**2023-2024 ADA Information**

**2023-2024 Application**



## G-CASE Coordinator Skills Institute (CSI)

The second annual Coordinator Skills Institute (CSI) was held on January 19<sup>th</sup> in Perry, Georgia to an eager crowd of eighty special educators. Led by a team of strong G-CASE member administrators, the group covered GNETS, Functional Behavioral Assessments, Behavior Intervention Plans, FTE, Maximizing Earnings, Managing People, and The Perfect IEP – all topics about which the coordinators themselves told us they wanted to learn!



*Dr. Cindy Felkins and Amanda Amerson share “Managing People: How to Talk to Parents and Administrators about Students with Behavior/Mental Health Issues”*

## **G-CASE BOASTS S A LARGE PRESENCE AT THE 2023 WINTER GAEL CONFERENCE**

“*Livestrong Leadstrong*” was the theme of the January 2023 Winter GAEL Conference held in Athens. A crowd of over seven hundred educational leaders from across the state, led by G-CASE Immediate Past-President and now GAEL President, Dr. Zabrina Cannaday, honed their leadership skills through the presentations of Michael Kobito (Georgia’s 2023 Teacher of the Year), Jimmy Casas (*Recalibrate!*), Danielle Rosa (Georgia Public Safety Training Center), Dr. Robin Hines (GSHA), Matt Arthur (GaPSC), Tim Elmore (*8 Paradoxes of Great Leadership*), State School Superintendent Richard Woods, Dr. Buster Evans (TRS), Dr. Leslie Hazle Bussey (*Stop Setting Yourself on Fire to Keep Others Warm*), and Phil Hartley (Pereira, Kirby, Kinsinger, and Nguyen, LLP). Thirty-nine Breakout Sessions provided innovations and best practices in Leadership Thriving, Not Surviving; School Safety; Leading Teacher Efficacy; and the “Sandra Deal Legacy” Strand for Literacy in Georgia. What a conference!

G-CASE is very proud to be an affiliate of GAEL, and encourages all members to join GAEL. Our special education leaders benefit tremendously from the GAEL conferences, lobbying, and professional learning. We need to learn about ALL things “education” in Georgia, because all things “education” certainly impact ALL things *Special Education!*

Visit the GAEL website to learn more about becoming a member, and plan to attend the 50<sup>th</sup> Annual Summer GAEL Conference at Jekyll Island (presided over by G-CASE’s Dr. Zabrina Cannady!) July 9-12, 2023. See you there!



## **G-CASE Members Lead and Participate in the Georgia Dyslexia Collaborative's Two-Day Conference**

The Georgia Dyslexia Collaborative hosted a two-day conference: *Preparing for the Dyslexia Law* for over 270 educators representing general and special education administrators, teachers, interventionists, school psychologists, SLPs, MTSS coordinators, and counselors who came together at the Oconee County Civic Center in Watkinsville, Georgia to prepare for and learn best practices for implementing the new Dyslexia law in their systems.

Led by G-CASE member, former SSTAGE President, and nationally-known consultant and presenter John O'Connor, along with guest speakers Dr. Jennifer Lindstrom, Statewide Dyslexia Coordinator with the Georgia DOE (Day 1), Dr. Donna Ryan, Retired Superintendent from Clinch County (Day 1), and Dr. MaryKay Berry, Director of Student Services and Allison Funk, Director of Elementary Education, White County Schools, (Day 2), the group learned *24 Big Ideas to Meet the Needs of Students with Dyslexia* and how to work with their teams to develop strategic steps to improve Tier 1 reading instruction and how to eventually build effective tiers of interventions for students with dyslexia. A highlight of the conference was a visit from State Board of Education member Helen Rice, who is working to promote Structured Literacy across the state.

G-CASE is one of the founding organizations of the Georgia Dyslexia Collaborative, whose working goal is for all 200+ active Dyslexia Collaborative members to develop, refine, and share comprehensive knowledge regarding effective Tier 1 reading instruction, the identification and services to students who are at risk for dyslexia, and the requirements in State Law and DBOE rules regarding students identified with characteristics of dyslexia.

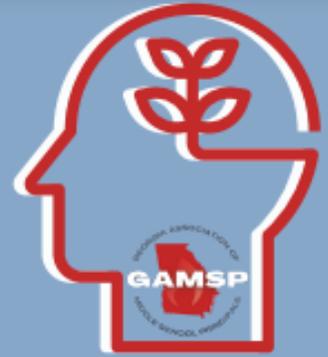


*Presenters Dr. Donna Ryan, Retired Superintendent, Clinch County; Helen Rice, BOE Member; and John O'Connor, Georgia Dyslexia Collaborative Co-Chair*



2023 GAESP/GAMSP Spring Drive-In

# Supporting Educator Wellness



**ATTENTION  
G-CASE Members!  
This conference is for ALL  
educators!**

## Conference Information

**Date:**

March 2, 2023

**Location:**

Middle Georgia State University  
Robert F. Hatcher, Sr. Conference Center  
100 University Parkway, Macon, Georgia 31206

**Time:**

7:45 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

**Conference Registration Fee: \$150**

**Target Audience:**

School leaders, instructional coaches, counselors, and other support staff (All levels-Elementary, Middle, High School), District Office Personnel, College and University Professionals

**Speakers:**

**Tracey Smith**, Principal & Co-Author of Ridiculously Amazing Schools

**Jessica Stormer**, Executive Director of Student Services

**Mr. Fred Latschar**, Director of Student Employee Mental Health and Wellness

**Kim Mitchell**, School Counseling Program Specialist

**Wanda Williams**, Director of Psychological Services and Section 504

**Jeff Rader**, Licensed Clinical Social Worker

**Shauntice Wheeler**, Georgia Department of Education

**Angela Rogers**, Wellness Specialist

**Chron Hester**, Director of Counseling and Advisement

**Dr. Jolie Hardin**, Assistant Executive Director of GAESP

**Sponsor:**

Angela Guy, Wellness Specialist  
Telehealth for Schools

## Schedule Overview:

7:45 am-8:30 am: Sign-in/breakfast

8:35 am-9:20 am: Opening Session

9:30 am-10:45 am: Breakout Session 1

11:00 am-12:15 pm: Breakout Session 2

12:15 pm-1:15 pm: Lunch Break

1:30 pm-2:45 pm: Breakout Session 3

2:45 pm-3:00 pm: Wrap-up and Networking

### Participants will select 3 breakout sessions from the list below:

- Creating a Sense of Belonging for ALL Staff Members: Inclusion, Respect, Affection, Cooperation
- Guiding Leaders, Instructional Coaches, Counselors, and Other School Staff in Providing Targeted Support During the Six Phases of the School Year
- Signs of Compassion Fatigue and How to Respond
- Power Struggle with Students: Who's Winning? Supporting SPED and Gen Ed
- Teachers Who Have Volatile Students That Impact Their Wellness and Mental Health
- Mindfulness: A Powerful Practice You Can Take Anywhere
- Dealing with Adult Anxiety/Wellness: How to Leverage Insurance/Resources
- Understanding ACES and Strategies for Promoting a Connected and Resilient School Climate

**The Need:** More so now than ever, educators are voicing a need for more intentional focus on adult mental health and wellness. On March 2, 2023, psychologists, mental health professionals (counselors and therapists), school and district level leaders, and social workers are joining forces to engage participants in a professional development opportunity to gain critical insight to improve staff wellness.

[Register for Supporting Educator Wellness](#)



G-CASE recognizes the continuing, urgent need to train others as more and more school principals, their administrative designees, special education coordinators, and others serve as LEA Representatives at IEP Meetings. Join Julie J. Weatherly, Esq. and Dr. Timothy Havard for a G-CASE Drive-In Workshop focusing not only on the legal aspects of FAPE and IEP meeting process concerns but also on the process of leading IEP meetings in a way that makes them efficient, organized, and legally compliant.

According to their website, this jam-packed **one-day program** provides legal and practical information and resources to support IEP meeting process leadership skills and knowledge, resulting in better meetings and increased conflict prevention and management. Registration will open in mid-March and will be limited to sixty (60) people due to the nature of the training. G-CASE will let members know the day Registration opens.

# **LEArn & LEAd**

**A G-CASE One-Day Drive-In Workshop**

**LEA Representative Leadership Training:  
IEP Meeting Process Leadership & Legal Compliance**

**Julie Weatherly and Dr. Timothy Havard**

**Monday, April 24, 2023**

**Houston County Annex Auditorium**

**Perry, GA**

## **DR. TRIS GILLAND HONORED BY G-CASE WITH THE GAEL 2023 JIMMY STOKES SERVICE AWARD**

Dr. Tris Gilland was G-CASE's recipient of the 2023 Jimmy Stokes Service Award, given at the 2023 Winter GAEL Conference in January. Tris is the Director of Compliance for Fulton County Schools and a BCBA. She previously worked as Director in Carroll County, an Autism Specialist in Douglas County and a special education teacher in Douglas and Heard Counties, teaching students with Autism, multiple and severe disabilities, and students with behavior needs. She is the proud Immediate Past-President of G-CASE and is currently serving as sub-committee chair for the GAEL Bylaws Committee. She has served on the national CASE Board of Directors as well as the GAEL Board. Her professional interests revolve around dispute resolution, special education litigation, legislation, and all things related; behavior, Autism, and G-CASE!



*Dr. Tris Gilland — Recipient of the  
GAEL 2023 Jimmy Stokes Service  
Award*



*G-CASE President Dr. Cassandra Holifield;  
Dr. Tris Gilland; Dr. Jimmy Stokes; and GAEL  
President Dr. Zabrina Cannady*

## **PAGE DAY ON CAPITOL HILL**

Each year G-CASE members join other GAEL affiliates, PAGE members, and representatives from the Georgia Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (GACTE) for **PAGE Day on Capitol Hill**. This year's event will be held on February 21<sup>st</sup>.

Activities begin at 8:00 A.M. in the Empire Room located on the 20<sup>th</sup> Floor of Twin Towers West. A luncheon is included, which begins at 12:00 P.M. Organized activities will conclude at approximately 2:00 P.M.. Attendees are welcome to stay at the Capitol and attend committee meetings, if scheduled, or meet with lawmakers.

We hope to have a big crowd representing public education! Please consider coming to Atlanta, meeting with your local legislators, and bringing a friend. We would like to continue to have G-CASE well-represented at this important event!



# GaDOE State Advisory Panel

*(by Greg McElwee)*

Greetings G-CASE Members!

As Co-Chairs of the Legislative Committee for the G-CASE Executive Board, Sean Cooper and I are proud to represent G-CASE on the State Advisory Panel. Our first meeting was held in Macon on September 14, 2022. I have attached some information below from the DOE website about the rationale and function of the State Advisory Panel. Currently, we have approximately sixty members, with representatives from state agencies, teachers, parents, and private agencies. The State Advisory Panel meets regularly with DOE staff to discuss issues related to services for students with disabilities in the State of Georgia. It has been a wonderful experience working with this group of dedicated individuals for the improvement and understanding of how to maximize positive outcomes for students. I encourage you to review the information below and visit the DOE website to learn more about our State Advisory Panel.

## **The State Advisory Panel**

The State Advisory Panel for Special Education (SAP) advises the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) Divisions for Special Education Services and Supports on the provision of special education and related services for students with disabilities. The SAP is comprised of parents, persons with disabilities, educators and administrators as well as representatives from public and private agencies. This diverse group of stakeholders assists the Divisions in addressing a variety of special education issues and topics.

The SAP advises the Divisions on the unmet needs related to the education of children with disabilities within the State and provides feedback on any rules or regulations proposed by the State regarding special education. The SAP is a critical partner in the development of Georgia's State Performance Plan (SPP) and Annual Performance Report (APR). The Panel also advises the Divisions on the improvement activities that need to be developed and implemented in order to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Each year, members review data on the improvement activities included in the SPP and APR and make suggestions for updates to the activities and targets.

The SAP advises the GaDOE in developing corrective action plans to address findings identified in federal monitoring reports under IDEA and advises the GaDOE in developing and implementing policies relating to the coordination of services for children with disabilities. The Panel participates in the Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process by recommending target areas for upcoming focused monitoring activities.

If you wish to contact members of the State Advisory Panel in your region of the state or would like to learn more about the Panel, you may contact:

Patricia Grayson, SAP Chair

Email: [pattispeice@comcast.net](mailto:pattispeice@comcast.net)

Jennifer Irvin, SAP Co-Chair

Email: [jennifer.irvin@gdc.ga.gov](mailto:jennifer.irvin@gdc.ga.gov)

## **Application for Membership**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that all states have special education advisory panels to include representation from stakeholders concerned about providing improved educational opportunities to children with disabilities. The goal in Georgia is to have an active State Advisory Panel with broad representation from across the state to advise the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) regarding the State Performance Plan, State Systemic Improvement Plan, State Personnel Development Grant, Georgia Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process, IDEA Regulations, and other initiatives designed to improve outcomes for all children with disabilities in Georgia's schools.

## GREETINGS FROM THE GEORGIA CEC PRESIDENT

Happy New Year! Ga CEC has had a busy academic year focusing on our strategic goals as follows:

**Goal:** We will increase our membership by 5% by May 2023. To increase our membership, we hosted booths at GCASE and GATE conferences. We will have a booth at the Georgia Southern SCEC/Ga Council for Learning Disabilities conference on 2/24. We have encouraged student teachers and their university and clinical supervisors to sign up for the free 6-month membership. We are also proud to announce we will reimburse new chapters up to \$500 for their startup fees. Despite our efforts, our membership has decreased by 1½% since August. As a result, the membership committee, with the assistance of the governing board, will focus on retaining current members.

**Objective:** We will add 1 new student chapter. Piedmont and Fort Valley State university advisors have joined our governing board and are recruiting students to lead their chapters.

**Goal:** We will increase communication and collaboration with all current members by offering support and resources at least twice a month on the Ga CEC Community Board by May 2023. We have met the communication goal since October.

**Objective:** The number of participants using the community board will increase to 5% of our membership. While 703 members have access, only 4 executive board members used it. To view and communicate on our community board, log into your CEC account and click CECCommunity at the top of the page.

### SAVE THE DATES

3/2/23 Ga/FL CEC Social 5-7 pm in Kentucky

6/10/23 All Member Meeting - virtual with hybrid TBD.

1st or 2nd Week of June 2024 - We are planning an IDEAS-like conference at Epworth. We will share the details as they emerge on the GA CECCommunity board and our social media accounts.

If you want to help us reach our goals, please complete CEC's Volunteer Square form. Elections for treasurer and vice president will be held this spring. Thank you for all you do for students with disabilities in Georgia!

Respectfully,

Dr. Karin Fisher  
GaCEC President  
kfisher@georgiasouthern.edu



From Luann Purcell,  
Unit Resource Advisor, Council for Exceptional Children



Georgia CEC has a long and rich history! CEC is finishing up its year of celebrating its 100th anniversary. Disney World is finishing up its 50th anniversary. Georgia CEC is just 5 years shy of celebrating its 70th anniversary. At a meeting of over 400 professionals from around the state and with some of the most distinguished leaders in the US in the area of special education at Rock Eagle State 4H Camp in October 1955. The experts recommended and the attendees agreed to move forward, they needed to become an affiliate of the International CEC. The group formed the Georgia Council for Exceptional Children. At the time, the requirement to become a State or Provincial affiliate was to have at least 3 local chapters. The Atlanta Chapter of the Council for Exceptional Children was established in the 1930s. The process began and by 1958 with 8 regional chapters, GCEC received its charter and was a recognized Federation in the International Council for Exceptional Children with a membership of 330! There is a "History of Georgia Federation Council for Exceptional Children," written by Georgia CEC leaders in 1978 with these amazing accomplishments captured to retain our rich past.

Did you know this year, the CEC Convention will be just one state away in Louisville, KY? Each year at the CEC Convention & Expo, thousands of special education professionals from around the world come together to learn, share, grow, and connect. With hundreds of sessions on just about every topic in the field, the CEC Convention & Expo is THE professional development event for special educators to find research, tips, and strategies you can apply to supporting students with disabilities and/or gifts and talents. Interested in learning more? Check out the session information [here!](#)

Did you know CEC does a [Justification Kit](#) just to help you get support from your district/school to attend? I still remember the first CEC conference I attended, which forever changed my professional life! And except for 2 years since 1977, I haven't missed one since! I hope you have registered and will join us for a GA CEC Happy Hour with the Florida chapter. Hope to see you there!

# Professional Learning Communities and the Classroom Communication Project/Bartow

Over the past decade the Bartow County Exceptional Education Department has collaborated with Dynamic Therapy to enhance communication skills for students with disabilities. Under the direction of Tania Amerson, BCSS Director of Special Education, Dynamic Therapy and a group of exceptional lead teachers and therapists, embarked on a mission to enhance communication skills in the students served in special education classrooms. For students who are non-speaking, minimally verbal, or ineffective communicators, this means helping teachers and therapists hone their skills in augmentative and alternative communication. Over the years we've refined this process, from 3 hour long after school meetings, to a more integrated approach with resources, video trainings, professional learning communities and communication focused classrooms. This year, the collaborative team of Bartow County and DTA Schools has launched a research based, systematic method for teaching communication and AAC skills to students by supporting and training the educational teams.

## The focus on communication...

Communication is arguably the MOST important skill we teach our students. Without a means to effectively communicate, students have...

- limited access to comprehensive communication and language development
- limited access to independence
- limited development of social regulation and relationships
- limited access to academic instruction

The Council for Exceptional Children Standards, in 2012 expressed clear expectations regarding special education teacher competencies in AAC. We know that speech language pathologists are trained and focused on communication, but special education teachers are an equally critical on-going support for communication learning, with specifically identified competencies (Da Fonte and Boesch 2106; Soto, 1997). In order to help our students become independent life-long learners, we have to assist the teachers and therapists who teach them.

Da Fonte and Boesch (2106) tell us "the teaching demands for the use of AAC are increasing as more students with complex communication needs are entering the school systems." Bartow County Schools' communication project is focused on supporting teachers with this challenge.

## Why professional learning communities...

Implementing augmentative and alternative communication is a task in which most special education teachers and speech language pathologists have minimal formal training. "Teamwork and collaborative practices" is one of the four areas of AAC competence identified in Da Fonte and Boesch's research. Professional learning communities provide a perfect environment for professional development. These communities of educators value inquiry and collaboration as they work to make systemic and lasting change in teacher expectations and student achievement in developing independent autonomous communication. Teams meet to support each other and learn from each other each week.



## How does it work?

We approach communication support for students with a “wrap around AAC” service delivery. Our approach consists of these activities:

- Initial training of all staff to “Find the Why” of communication in the classroom
- Meeting with team leaders to identify potential topics for professional learning community meetings.
- On-going professional learning community meetings, guided by lead teachers every week, with short video trainings, handouts and guided questions provided by the DTA Schools Training website. Staff earn certificates to document their efforts.
- Initial classroom visits by DTA Schools team to orient to the students, staff and classroom environment. These consultations help teachers self-select the resources, techniques and other topics they want to target over the coming year.
- Short monthly remote meetings with volunteer “focus classroom” teachers provide the self-identified resources, implementation tools for communication (AAC) supports and identification of students with more specific communication needs



## Outcomes reported by teachers...

In a recent survey of the special education teachers in Bartow County, we heard about Lisa Padilla’s preschoolers gaining independence as they learn to communicate throughout their school and classroom. The students have teachers who model and teach the use of communication boards, symbols and iPad based AAC devices. Trick-or-treating was a fun and successful activity this year, with all of the little ones engaging with other teachers and their peers using their new AAC tools!

Rae King, special education teacher at Kingston Elementary tells us about her frustrated student, unable to ask for a favorite item. Ms. King quickly prompted him to use his communication board, modeled how to touch symbols and say “more,” then helped him with his toy. Her student calmed and used his speech to say “more,” touch a symbol and successfully relax and enjoy successful communication.

Jessica Gardner, special education teacher at Taylorsville Elementary tells us of her young student. “I have a student who was not responding at all and when he was initially evaluated for a device showed no signs of being ready. By (teachers) continuing to model with other students and his low tech AAC, he is now making requests, and more with his Core Flipbook. He has recently been recommended for a communication device of his own, and is successfully using the trial device in the classroom to indicate the need to toilet, and gain access to water or snacks and specific toys.

We are looking forward to continuing this work and helping all students become autonomous, independent communicators!

### References:

Da Fonte, M. A., & Boesch, M. C. (2016). Recommended augmentative and alternative communication competencies for special education teachers. *Journal of International Special Needs Education*, 19(2), 47-58.

McFadd ED, Hustad KC. Communication Modes and Functions in Children With Cerebral Palsy. *J Speech Lang Hear Res.* 2020 Jun 22;63(6):1776-1792. doi: 10.1044/2020\_JSLHR-19-00228. Epub 2020 May 27. PMID: 32459163; PMCID: PMC7839031.

Snow-Gerono, Jennifer L. “Professional Development in a Culture of Inquiry: PDS Teachers Identify the Benefits of Professional Learning Communities.” *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2005, pp. 241–256., <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2004.06.008>.

Soto, Gloria. “Special Education Teacher Attitudes toward AAC: Preliminary Survey.” *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1997, pp. 186–197., <https://doi.org/10.1080/07434619712331278008>.

# Reading Progress: Let's Keep it a Priority!

*Dr. Teri Pettyjohn*

The literature is replete with research that proves that a direct instruction approach works for most fragile readers. However, for it to be implemented in such a way that optimizes student outcomes, several key features must be in place. As a reading program specialist and coach for East GLRS, I enjoy the privilege of working in several small districts in our region. Public schools everywhere struggle in special education with frequent teacher and leader turnover, poor preparation, and limited resources and administrative support. Further, there are challenges with student truancy, transfers, and severe behavior. These all have a negative effect on learning and the list could go on and on. Yes, there are many factors that impact high quality reading instruction. But there is hope: with effective training, maximizing staff, coaching, and supervision, student progress in reading is practically guaranteed. □

## TRAINING

Initial training by an expert in the intervention is critical for a positive beginning. As special education leaders, we desire and seek sustainability (and rightfully so), but when it comes to initial training it is vital to go with the best. Professional trainers already know what components of the material will be difficult to understand or hard to accept. They have experience and examples of success from more than one setting and location that they can share to inform and inspire. They can handle the naysayers and don't take it personally when teachers resist or criticize them. They keep the focus on the material and continually reinforce the reasons and benefits to students for its use. They are a sound investment and worth the expense.

## MAXIMIZING STAFF

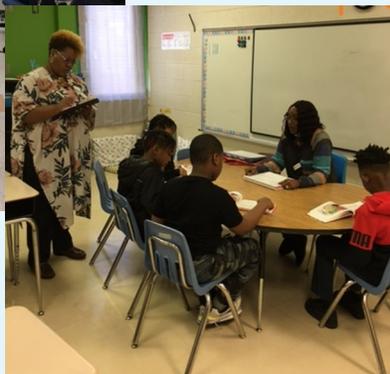
Trained paraprofessionals can be used to maximize the opportunity for more groups and can also ensure appropriate group size, scheduling variety, and special education supportive services. I have observed that generally paraprofessionals are more open and accepting of coaching and are more likely to follow the direct instruction model without altering it in any way. Paraprofessionals welcome the support, and they are comfortable with asking questions about the intervention or a student who is presenting a unique challenge. They 'own' their groups, typically enjoy the responsibility, and they develop close relationships with their assigned students. However, AN ISSUE can arise when the paraprofessionals are pulled to cover a general education or other classroom when teachers are out or have meetings. During this time the students do not receive their reading instruction. Not only is this likely in violation of their IEPs, but it can also be a significant issue and can seriously delay or stall student success. Every single minute is critical when supporting a student who is several grade levels behind in reading. **There needs to be a priority and a sense of urgency by everyone who is responsible for children learning to read.**

## COLLABORATION AND COACHING

Collaborating with and observing other staff members who are providing interventions is helpful and healthy for the school community. This is a good reminder that all the students in the school belong to all of us. The people in the building are the greatest resource there. When adults feel comfortable problem-solving with others then the challenges don't seem so insurmountable and there is less isolation and burnout.

Site based teachers and leaders with experience in the intervention, and monthly visits by regional or contracted coaches are both necessary to maintain a rigorous reading program. The freedom to connect to an expert in the intervention when questions or concerns arise between visits is reassuring to teachers and paraprofessionals who are new to the role.

At times, instructional coaches and site-based curriculum leaders are assigned other duties to alleviate the demands on administrative staff, and as years go by, they may become less effective in their coaching role. Supervision by district special education leaders prevents the regression that can easily occur when roles evolve in schools.



## **SUPERVISION, ACCOUNTABILITY, and FIDELITY**

The time and accountability investment given by special education directors/coordinators and school leaders directly impacts the fidelity and success of instruction, particularly in special education. It is especially critical to know what should be occurring in small group reading instruction so leaders may be well informed when they determine big picture issues like staff allocations and whole school scheduling. It is critical to use data, not teacher preference or emotion to determine group and intervention placement. The documentation of lessons provided, and the students' mastery of the material is essential when measuring progress, determining appropriate services, and ensuring that services are provided. Teacher/paraprofessional commitment in adhering to the fidelity of the direct instruction approach is vital. As special education leaders, we must 'inspect what we expect.' Once the staff experiences how well it works, instructors are proud of their students' success, and are more diligent in following the script as presented. They begin to welcome the coaching and they strive for continued improvement and excellence. It's exciting to watch the transformation!

## **CELEBRATE!**

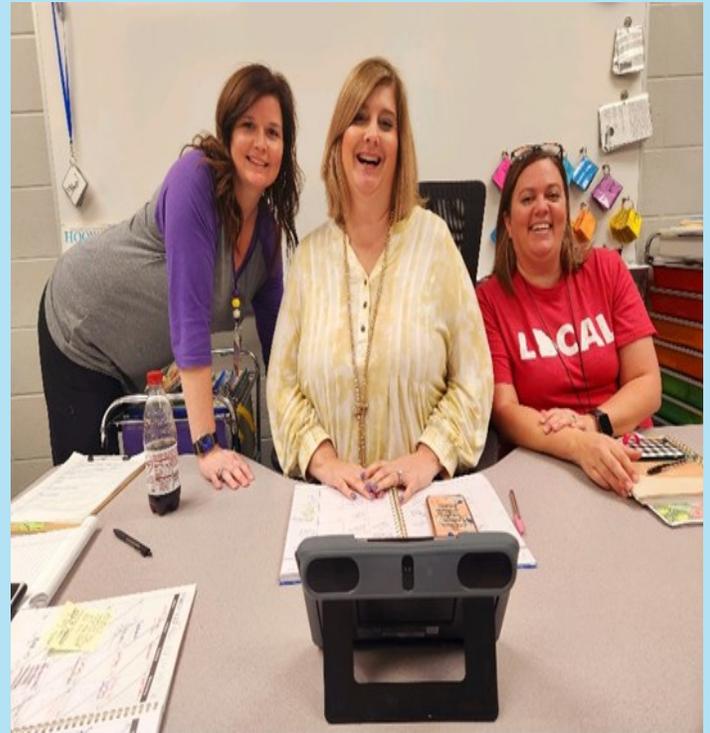
Make it a big deal when students complete a level or achieve a goal. Throw a party! Create a certificate. Do a breakfast and invite parents and school leaders. Praise students in front of others and display their progress proudly. Once students become readers, they have achieved the most important skill in their entire educational careers. All doors are opened, and opportunities abound for them to become lifelong successful learners and informed citizens. Finally, I have observed that strong and effective teachers and paraprofessionals who are delivering reading interventions understand the expectations and responsibility of teaching children to read. They are regularly monitored and supervised, and they are supported and coached when they struggle. Students benefit most when reading teachers and paraprofessionals receive site-based coaching that is partnered with regular walk-throughs by school leaders, as well as monthly walk-throughs by district level special education staff and external coaches who may be available through the local RESA, GLRS program specialists, and/or contracted experts. **So instead of saying why things are hard or can't be done 'here', let us acknowledge what works and seek to implement it *the best that we can every day!* Can I get an "Amen!"?**



## Bleckley Therapists Collaborate for Student Success

Research tells us that “8 of 10 most frequently reported reasons for device abandonment were related to partner training and support issues.” (Johnson, Inglebret, Jones, & Ray, 2006). For the success of the communicator, AAC needs to be incorporated into all areas of the day.

Pictured are two of Bleckley’s SLPs and OTA who understand this and are working to collaborate and plan to better support students and families in our district. These communication partners are necessary to ensure success for AAC communicators. Our therapists are pros at collaborating to maximize therapy time, to facilitate generalization and improve the treatment outcomes between disciplines for the students who need it. When cotreating, they look at overall levels of attention and engagement and whether or not students have a high sensory need. All collaboration plans are very individualized based on student need. For some students, cotreatment just makes sense! We are blessed with the BEST therapists in Bleckley!



L to R: Carmen Youngblood, SLP; Cori Abney, SLP; Chara Keel, OTA



## STAR MART

At Bleckley County Elementary School, Riley Troili and Scarlett Arnold have been immersed in planning relevant, fun and educational activities for students with disabilities for a long time. This time a lot of planning went into their very own classroom grocery store, STAR MART, which stands for Shopping To Actively Review Math And Reading Tasks. The students were so excited to participate in this fun and educational activity that it quickly became a daily staple. At first, students were concerned that their teachers were letting them shop without their parents, but they were quickly assured that the STAR MART is a kid friendly store! Students make choices from the teacher-created store flyer and design their own shopping lists. Then they shop to pick out their items independently. Progressing through the steps, students learn to calculate totals, count money and figure taxes. Look at these little

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The logo for GOALBOOK features the word "GOALBOOK" in white, uppercase letters on a blue rectangular background. A small red flag icon is positioned above the letter 'A'.

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The logo for THE Sensory ROOM features the words "THE Sensory ROOM" in a stylized font. "THE" is in blue, "Sensory" is in a large, bold, black script font, and "ROOM" is in blue. Below it, the text "By Sensory Room Solutions" is written in a smaller, black, sans-serif font.The logo for nwea features the word "nwea" in a bold, black, lowercase sans-serif font. To its right is the tagline "believe in what's possible" in a smaller, black, lowercase sans-serif font, with a horizontal bar below it that is divided into segments of yellow, orange, red, and purple.The logo for Classworks features the word "Classworks" in a teal, sans-serif font. The letter 'o' is replaced by a yellow sun icon with rays.The logo for chanceLight EDUCATION features the word "chanceLight" in a blue, sans-serif font, with "light" in a smaller font size. Below it, the word "EDUCATION" is written in a smaller, black, uppercase sans-serif font.The logo for ROBOKIND features the word "ROBOKIND" in a bold, sans-serif font. "ROBO" is in orange and "KIND" is in blue.The logo for Marker. features the word "Marker." in a large, blue, sans-serif font.The logo for Presence features a red circular icon with a white checkmark-like shape inside, followed by the word "Presence" in a bold, red, sans-serif font.The logo for eLuma features a green sunburst icon on the left and the word "eLuma" in a black, sans-serif font on the right.

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