



House of Representatives Rural Development Council

Highlights-Meeting One

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The Honorable Trey Rhodes
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The Honorable Lynn Smith
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2019

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Meeting One Highlights – Jasper

August 20, 2019 – Education

The House Rural Development Council (RDC), first organized in 2017, was reauthorized by House Resolution 214 during the 2019 Legislative Session of the Georgia General Assembly. HR 214 recognizes the great economic strides seen in the state of Georgia, including job growth that resulted in the state being named the best in the nation for business during the previous six years; however, much of rural Georgia has not shared in the state's overall economic success. With population loss, health care deficiencies, a lack of employment opportunities, and diminished educational opportunities, the resolution calls on the RDC to continue an intensive study to identify potential policies and concepts to enhance opportunities for the entire state, but particularly rural Georgia. The RDC, co-chaired by Representative Rick Jasperse and Representative Sam Watson, will file a report with findings and recommendations before the council sunsets on December 31, 2020.

The first meeting opened with a welcome from Chairman Jasperse at the Appalachian Campus of the Chattahoochee Technical College in Jasper, followed by Chairman Watson thanking the former Co-chairmen Terry England and Jay Powell for their work guiding the RDC the previous two years.

Dr. Ron Newcomb, the president of Chattahoochee Technical College, then greeted the council, informing the members that the college has eight campuses with over 10,000 credit students, making it the largest technical college in the state. The school has a proven record of closing the skills gap, and offers 73 course sections at the Appalachian Campus, up from 49 in 2017, in addition to five complete online programs. Dr. Newcomb also brought attention to the perception problem that technical colleges have as being viewed as a second choice for too many students. In addition to high schools seeing the advantage of technical schools, the college is now using videos and ads to increase exposure. Dr. Newcomb also stated the college is expanding offerings to include non-traditional times and courses as well as additional short-term certificate programs as more non-traditional students enroll during a high-employment economy. Moreover, he explained the importance of dual enrollment, which leads to higher retention rates. Lastly, Dr. Newcomb advised the council that balancing enrollment-dominant budget decisions with other needs is very important, as success is not just about driving up enrollment.

The next speaker, Dr. David Bridges, the acting director of the Center of Rural Prosperity and Innovation, brought attention to the three reasons younger generations are leaving rural Georgia and others are not returning: quality of education, lack of health care access, and a perceived lack

of opportunity. Health care and education, according to Dr. Bridges, are essential to the community and are intrinsically linked to the way people do business. As far as education goes, Dr. Bridges told the council that the focus should be on the people and experiencing life needs, not about the buildings, books, curriculum, or test scores. Those things, he said, are more of a hindrance than a help. A workforce cannot be built on curriculum or massive online-education, but by productivity, hands-on experience, and a willingness to do the work. Dr. Bridges discussed a couple of programs the center has implemented, including a three-year pilot program with Colquitt Regional Medical Center that takes high school students to the hospital to learn math practically in the context of healthcare. The program was incredibly successful; with post-testing showing that many of the students learned more in the six-week program than they learned during the previous year in a traditional setting. The center plans to expand the program into Miller County and with Archbold Medical Center in Thomasville. If the replication is successful, they plan to take the program statewide.

Georgia Grown

One of the biggest challenges faced by the Georgia Grown program is educating consumers about the state's agricultural products, so Jack Spruill, the division director of the Georgia Department of Agriculture's Marketing Division and Georgia Grown brought three experts from the department to speak to the council: Matthew Glinski, Misty Friedman, and Sarah Cook.

Matthew Glinski said Georgia Grown is tasked with helping farmers sell more products, including produce, livestock, and many more. Georgia Grown also helps improve the well-being of Georgians by increasing the consumption of locally-grown produce, in addition to ensuring an environmentally-sound growing environment. The most important aspect of Georgia Grown, a program that has been in place for about eight years, is the link it provides between rural and urban Georgians by showing consumers where their food is produced. The first phase of the program was to ensure that agricultural producers in the state are aware of the program and the logo. This has been extremely successful; however, there is still a way to go to ensure retailers use the logo. In addition to retailer advertising of Georgia Grown products, the department is promoting state grown products through advertisements, videos, and partnerships with companies like Subway.

Students sit down at the largest restaurant in the state each time they go to a school cafeteria. Misty Friedman spoke to the RDC about the Feed My School Program. What began as a pilot in three schools in 2012 with the goal of identifying and overcoming barriers to the sale of Georgia Grown products to schools is now available to every school in the state. Some of the early barriers to using Georgia produce in schools included menu planning and identifying sources of locally-grown products. To mitigate those issues, Georgia Grown provided meal plans with video instructions and nutritional analysis, in addition to hosting five annual Source Shows, in which over half of school systems participated. The program also created a website,

www.feedmyschool.org, to serve as a clearinghouse for all farm-to-school information. Ms. Friedman also mentioned some existing barriers, including: distribution, the need for additional school staff to handle and prepare produce, and Individual Quick Frozen (IQF) products. IQF fruits and vegetables are a staple of school nutrition programs and more Georgia Grown products could go into schools if the state had more IQF facilities. There is only one IQF facility in Georgia, which processes blueberries in Alma. Ms. Friedman also gave the council some basic statistics on purchasing: an average school system spends about \$200,000 on Georgia Grown products; and Clayton, Cobb, Richmond, Dougherty, and Fulton were the highest spending counties, averaging over \$2 million in 2019.

Sarah Cook spoke about the state's domestic marketing program, in which the department and producers go to trade shows across the United States. To participate, companies must be located within Georgia, or if they manufacture their product outside of the state, the products must be made of 100 percent Georgia ingredients. These products will receive exposure at 13 trade shows this year, which have a potential of 410,000 attendees. While the state is best known for its peaches, Ms. Cook said the program also shows the state is proud of its blueberries, beef, and chicken and grows everything from apples to zucchini. The program's success comes from the producers, with participation at America's Mart in July 2019 used as a test case. Twenty-seven people, all Georgia Grown members, participated and generated more than 1,000 leads and wrote over \$320,000 in sales over that five-day period.

Speaker of the House David Ralston then addressed the council, reminding members of the charge he gave them two years ago to help businesses grow jobs in rural Georgia. Speaker Ralston spoke about the council's accomplishments for developing solutions to age-old problems that have been discussed in the state for decades. He reminded the council that it is the state's trustees, akin to the original trustees of the colony, who had the motto: "*Not for self, but for others.*" Lastly, Speaker Ralston explained to the members that their work has been noticed and they have momentum, but they should not grow complacent because storm clouds may gather.

Career, Technical, And Agricultural Education

Dr. Barbara Wall, the state director of Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (CTAE) at the Department of Education, emphasized the importance of connecting business with education to ensure student success in the workplace. Dr. Wall emphasized the importance of working with groups on all levels, local, state, and national, to ensure that curriculum is developed based on industry needs. Georgia business and industry leaders have said that workforce preparedness should be part of the K-12 mission. The leaders also said that pipeline development should start early, in middle school; workforce opportunities should also be provided while students are in school.

Rick Goble, the assistant principal for Pickens High School, told the council that the two biggest concerns he hears from businesses are about the skills gap, the lack of skilled workers, and the lack of workers with soft skills. Most jobs require some type of postsecondary education, which does not necessarily mean a four-year degree. Many of these jobs are middle-skill jobs, which require more than a high school education, but less than a four-year degree. According to 2015 statistics, Mr. Goble said there is a middle-skills gap in the state, with approximately 54 percent of jobs requiring middle-skills, but only 44 percent of the workforce are qualified. Mr. Goble agreed with Dr. Newcomb, that one of the biggest problems is the perception that everyone needs to earn a four-year degree; not enough students are taking the technical education route to the workforce. Moreover, awareness needs to be raised through workforce development partnerships.

Character Education/Soft Skills

Dr. Eric Thomas, the state's chief turnaround officer, said that the goal of character education is to close gaps in students both academically and non-academically. "I think we all can appreciate that great schools impact students, students impact families, and obviously families impact communities and the economic vibrancy in those communities." He noted that some of these low-performing schools have probably been low-performing schools for decades, therefore, seeing schools' grades increasing from F's to D's or C's is a win. Specifically dealing with character education, Dr. Thomas said employers point out they need employees who will show up on time, can interact with colleagues in a positive manner, and are trustworthy. If these soft skills are in place, they can teach the potential employees how to do the actual job. Dr. Thomas said that the Chief Turnaround Office has the opportunity to act as an innovation incubator for school systems, to test programs and gather data on which programs work the best.

Arch Smith, the state's 4-H leader, said that students who participate in the 4-H program are more likely to be better students. Employers value several soft skills, including: social skills; communication skills; high-order thinking; self-control; and a positive self-concept. 4-H's Project Achievement gives young people a feeling of increased confidence while speaking publicly and in preparation for the workforce. The participants choose a project, research the topic, develop a portfolio, and prepare a presentation. The 4-H program has the opportunity to reach even more Georgia youth who can benefit from the leadership and character education that 4-H offers; however, the problem is the insufficient staff to expand the programs. The solution, Mr. Smith showed, is to fund more staff to focus on local volunteer mobilization, which will greatly expand program capacity.

Applied knowledge, workplace skills, and effective relationships are soft skills, according to Billy Hughes with the Georgia FFA. Agricultural education is able to provide soft skill education by applying reading, writing, and math to practical workplace situations, such as surveying and electrical wiring. The basis of agricultural education, developed 102 years ago, is three-fold and

involves a classroom/laboratory setting, Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAE), and FFA. The classroom setting provides the applied knowledge; SAE gives students a place to develop their workplace skills; and FFA participation help build effective relationship skills.

The THINC College and Career Academy developed a soft skills rubric after local business leaders in Troup County came together in 2010 out of concern that local students were graduating from high school without certain standards, particularly the ability to pass a drug test and show up on time to work. Aidan Blackwell said the rubric was developed to enhance attendance, respect, attitude, initiative, cooperation, teamwork, among other skills. Soft skills are worth 30 percent of a student's final grade in each class, but teachers have the autonomy about what counts as soft skills. An example Mr. Blackwell gave is cellphone usage rules differ by class, with some teachers not caring when a cellphone is being used and another deducting points from a student's grade for cellphone usage. This demonstrates to the students that each workplace is different. The greatest challenge is the lack of teachers' connection to the rubric because several teachers were not employed when the rubric was created. Regardless, the rubric is part of the culture at the academy.

Local Superintendent Panel

The council then heard from a panel of three local superintendents who discussed primary education needs: Dr. Carlton Wilson, Pickens County Schools; Dr. Shanna Downs, Gilmer County Schools; and Dr. Damon Gibbs, Dawson County Schools.

Dr. Wilson told the council that he would like to see more students enrolled in Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (CTAE) programs earn industry certifications. While the diplomas are nice, he would like students to be able to take an electrician's exam when they finish the program or come to a technical school halfway through a program so they are workforce ready. Wilson also said that the focus on standardized tests has caused schools to stop teaching soft skill classes because they do not have funding or time. Lastly, Dr. Wilson told the RDC that broadband has not been helping in their communities yet. Georgia has the third largest rural school population in the United States and there is a digital divide in rural areas and those that are low-income, as compared to more urbanized and affluent areas. Low-income students' test scores increase by 30 percent if they have internet capability at home.

Attracting industry is an important portion of the education discussion, Dr. Downs told the council, with her community in Gilmer County working tirelessly on that front. The perception of strong local schools is an important factor in attracting industry. Georgia is required by federal law to develop a single, statewide accountability system for public schools that includes information on school performance. The College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) is the system Georgia created to provide an objective measure of schools. Calculations change every year to improve accuracy, but 80 percent of the score is based on the Georgia Milestones

Assessment System. CCRPI is making local schools look weaker compared to other states' schools, which is creating a barrier to bringing in industry. There were three systems out of 180 that received an A grade in CCRPI, with 21 districts receiving a B grade. According to Dr. Downs, this means that out of 180 systems only 24 looked appealing to industry.

Dr. Gibbs reiterated the need for adequate broadband. Fiber is in each of the schools within his school district and Wi-Fi has been placed on the school buses to allow students to work on their rides home; however, many students do not have the ability to do technology-based homework because broadband access has not expanded to their homes. Dr. Gibbs' greatest concern is the mental health of the students. Dawson County had five student suicides in the past five years; Lumpkin County had four. The counselors in the schools are guidance counselors, but students need mental health counselors. Systems need state funding to put a mental health counselor in every high school cluster in Georgia. "If a student came to school with a broken arm, we would do whatever was necessary to have the break repaired and to care for the child, but children are coming into our schools emotionally broken and we don't have the tools necessary to provide that same level of care. We can and we should do better."

Georgia Department of Economic Development Deputy Commissioner Amy Carter, Rural Georgia Initiatives Division, reiterated to the council that rural Georgia is seeing a brain drain. The workforce is lacking because children grow up, leave for college, and never return. The hardest person to convince to move to rural Georgia is someone who did not grow up there. Ms. Carter added that one of the keys to rural communities retaining their workforce is showing people what their communities have so that they come back. For example, the Newton County economic developer was trying to promote advanced manufacturing to the school system. To ensure the administrators and educators understood what advanced manufacturing is, he transported them to the Kia plant to see firsthand.

Angela Palm, the director of policy and legislative services at the Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA), said a taskforce was put together identify ways for GSBA to: support rural districts' efforts to meet challenges and take advantage of opportunities; develop an ongoing discussion with state legislators and key decision-makers for public education policy; and identify educational challenges that need to be addressed through cross-sector collaboration. The taskforce identified challenges specific to South Georgia and to North Georgia, which include poverty, economic development, teacher recruitment and retention, transportation, health care, and funding.

August 21, 2019

During the start of the second day of testimony in Jasper, the council heard from four speakers on a school-based health center panel: Veda Johnson, of the Georgia School-Based Health

Alliance; Duane Kavka, of the Georgia Primary Care Association; Steven Miracle, of the Georgia Mountains Health; and Sherrie Williams, of the Global Partnership for Telehealth.

A school-based health center (SBHC) is essentially a doctor's office in school, which helps remove barriers, such as transportation or cost. Community support, a sustainability model, ability to demonstrate the value of an SBHC, and loyalty to a model that works are needed to bring SBHCs to scale. The goal of the Georgia School-Based Health Alliance is to expand SBHCs into counties that have no pediatricians or providers. Of the 48 SBHCs, over half are in rural areas. Veda Johnson testified that SBHCs lead to improved health outcomes for students, especially those with chronic illnesses such as asthma. Some of the SBHCs even serve parents and teachers, with the SBHCs in Dade County open to the entire community.

Duane Kavka told the council that the Georgia Primary Care Association represents all federally-qualified health centers (FQHCs) in the state. Approximately 70 percent of the patients seen by FQHCs are uninsured or are on Medicaid. The overall goal of FQHCs is to provide community support and promote growth across the state, which includes a focus on school-based clinics, of which approximately 32 of the 48 clinics are FQHCs. Federal funding for school-based health systems has not been provided since 2011. Regardless, Mr. Kavka is encouraged that current federal budget discussions do involve funding for school-based systems and hopes funding does become available so that expansion may continue in Georgia.

Georgia Mountains Health is a FQHC in north Georgia that provides primary health services in five communities, in addition to providing a children's dental health program and a behavioral health program. Steven Miracle explained that the school clinics, like the one in Chatsworth, allow parents who are paid hourly to save precious time and money by allowing the SBHC to treat the child during the school day without the parent having to miss work. Additionally, the school system and teacher are happy because the students typically can get back in the classroom faster and not miss valuable instruction time.

Sherrie Williams discussed how to use technology to leverage services throughout the state. The Global Partnership for Telehealth is located in 140 schools and 32 school districts in Georgia. The general setup includes the school nurse administering the clinic, with telehealth visits essentially mimicking an in-person examination; therefore, the required medical equipment is all on site. The partnership does not require funding from the state. It typically costs around \$8,000 per school system to start a program, with an annual, reoccurring cost of about \$1,200. The \$8,000 start-up expense may be cost prohibitive for some small school systems so the partnership looks for innovative ways to find funding, such as working with the local health systems or clubs. Another barrier the partnership has found is that some school districts believe that it is a parent's responsibility to take care of a child's health, but Ms. Williams pointed out that sometimes parents do not have the means.

Mental Health

The Georgia Crisis and Access Line has been a major tool used to help those battling mental crisis. Judy Fitzgerald, commissioner of the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, told the RDC that few other states have their own crisis hotline, although federal hotlines do exist. Commissioner Fitzgerald said that a report on suicide statistics says intervention needs to be at the immediate “I’ve been thinking about hurting myself” moment. Adolescent crisis is a growing issue, so text conversations are now becoming commonplace as a means of intervention, and may even last longer than telephone calls. Additionally, texting allows the person accessing the crisis line to leave the conversation temporarily and come back without the risk factor of having a hang-up on the call. The Atlanta-based call center, which now has an app for smart phones, receives up to 1,000 calls a day from people who are calling for themselves, for family, or as professionals looking for guidance with their patients.

“This issue knows no government bounds” is the message Dr. Erica Sitkoff, the executive director for Voices for Georgia’s Children, brought to the RDC about children’s mental health. Dr. Sitkoff told the council that approximately 100,000 children reported they considered harming themselves during 2018 and that suicide is the second leading cause of death in children ages 10-17. To counteract some of these daunting issues, Dr. Sitkoff recommended the state remove barriers to PeachCare, which could help the approximate 200,000 children in Georgia without health insurance. She also recommended creating a school-based health hub, similar to the one housed within the University of South Carolina.

A Pickens County Schools’ social worker, Whitney Carnes, also spoke to the growing mental health issues that students are experiencing. She said there were 158 students who had suicide ideation issues that the school had to forward to more resources. She estimates that she sees five students a week with mental health issues. Ms. Carnes said there are not enough licensed clinical social workers in rural areas, so she recommends that an incentive program be created to pay for schooling in return for work in these communities. Kayla Kinser, another Pickens County Schools social worker, added if some of the issues seen in elementary school children can be prevented or stopped at an early age, some of the problems seen in adults in the criminal justice and mental health arenas may be mitigated.

Census Coordination and Rural Libraries

Department of Community Affairs (DCA) Deputy Commissioner Rusty Haygood spoke to the council about the state’s preparation for the 2020 Census. There is a great deal of misinformation about the uses of the Census, so Mr. Haygood clarified that data will not be released on an individual basis for 72 years. The 2020 Census will be completed online, by phone, by mail, or by the enumerator that will come to the door if someone refuses to answer the first five requests made by the Census Bureau. The census is important to the state and local communities because

there are 55 federal programs, such as Head Start and Medicaid, which have formula-driven funding, with census data making up a portion of the formula. Roughly \$23.8 billion came back to the state in FY 2016 through these programs, which equates to approximately \$2,300 per person in services. To prepare for the 2020 Census, the state has hired a marketing firm, established a social media presence, and is delivering presentations across the state.

Julie Walker, the state librarian with the Georgia Public Library Service, spoke about the libraries' work with the Department of Community Affairs to ensure a complete census count, in addition to how libraries can be part of the solution for rural Georgia. There are 407 public libraries throughout the state, with many providing additional services in small communities, such as a small business incubator in Milledgeville and small business and economic development workshops. Additionally, the Georgia Public Library Service works with the Department of Education to put a library card in the hands of each K-12 student. Ms. Walker told the council that the PINES library system has saved the state over \$790 million through its shared automated system, in comparison to the cost of each library having to purchase and maintain its own system. Walker concluded that the General Assembly budgeted approximately \$1 million to ensure there are enough public-access machines in the libraries for the census, while librarians are working with community-based counting groups to ensure people can get to the libraries to complete the census.