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What's Next for Literacy Education in Georgia? An Interview with Dr. Caitlin Dooley, Deputy Superintendent, Georgia Department of Education

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What's Next for Literacy Education in Georgia?

An Interview with Dr. Caitlin Dooley, Deputy Superintendent, Georgia Department of Education

Shannon Tovey Howrey

Kennesaw State University

Tovey: Caitlin, thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview for the *Georgia Journal of Literacy*. Our editorial board has participated in brainstorming questions and topics that we believe will help our journal to become more relevant and focused in the scholarly work that may inform literacy education policy and practice in Georgia.

Dooley: Hi Shannon. Thanks so much for asking for input. We have such a strong state, and our students are showing tremendous strength academically. And at the same time, so much is changing in education as we adapt to a digital society, address the state's high poverty level, and we learn more from research about learning. The scholars in our state can help us all better serve Georgia's children.

Tovey: First, what do you see as top areas of scholarly research right now in Georgia? For example, what specific research is needed regarding high school striving readers and what specific research might be needed regarding multilingual learners regarding English reading and literacy skills?

Dooley: Some of the questions I get most often from educators around the state involve the following:

1. I have middle/high school students who are still struggling to read. I can get them the skills through remediation programs, but these programs are not very interesting and have problems of their own. The remediation programs sometimes even make the students not want to read once they learn how. I need help getting older students interested and excited about reading and writing without giving them materials and activities for younger kids. What can I use?
2. Our school population just changed, seemingly overnight (or over a summer). We now have more English learners, low-income families, etc. than we have ever had before. What do we do to make sure our teachers provide high-quality instruction?
3. My school is very rural—we have one stoplight and a Piggly Wiggly and lots of fields. What can I do if my students are coming from families that are suffering from poverty? I know it's affecting the students' learning. Where do I even begin?
4. The elementary school that my child goes to is a new "Community School." What does

that mean? Will it help with literacy?

5. We know that over 60% of students in Georgia’s public schools are growing up in impoverished communities. What does this mean for literacy learning? How can we ensure high quality instruction AND all of the other supports for learning are in place?
6. Dyslexia. Can I “diagnose” it? What’s the role of the general classroom teacher in ensuring that students get the services they need? Who else needs to be involved (think SST)?
7. How should writing be taught in Kindergarten and first grade?

I get these questions regularly. These are excellent opportunities for “research-practitioner partnerships”. Some questions can be answered with extant literature. Others would require a deeper look at local context and implementation.

Tovey: You have stated concerns that rural areas carry challenges for literacy that go beyond the school system, including women and infant health issues and other challenges that affect brain development. How might we, as research professionals and literacy advocates, address these challenges in our research or through other efforts?

Dooley: According to Kids Count, Georgia suffers from one of the highest poverty rate among children. We see this in our public schools where over 60% are “economically disadvantaged” (Ga Dept. of Ed., 2019). This is not to suggest that poverty dictates education outcomes; in fact, Georgia was recently ranked 13th in the nation for K12 academic achievement by Ed Week’s

Quality Counts. This is evidence that children, their families, and their educators are striving to overcome the effects of poverty *in spite of* regressive policies and practices that limit children and families’ access to health care, housing, food, internet service, libraries, and texts.

Tovey: What can research and literacy professionals do?

1. Too often, issues related to poverty are constructed as “partisan issues”; but they aren’t. There are advocates for children in all political parties. Enter the conversation respectful of differences and try to find where convergences exist. Respect is key. Listen. Voices for Children is non-partisan and has some helpful resources.
2. Make the evidence clear and share the data. These data are available on GeorgiaInsights.com.
3. Consider statistical models that can shed light on the systems relating literacy to the effects of poverty such as structural pathway analyses, structural equations, HLM, and other research methods. We need to map the logic between seemingly disparate entities. This not only helps shed light on the connections, but we may also discover new ways to innovatively move in on the effects of poverty in ways that benefit literacy learning.
4. Tell the success stories. We have many Georgia citizens who have grown up in poverty and have “made it” with literacy learning. Tell their stories. Pay attention to the change-makers in their lives who made learning possible. Those stories will inspire others.

5. Study systems. No one learns in a vacuum. Literacy is especially a social act. Therefore, study how literacy takes shape in the context of a family, a school, or a community. These systems studies help us understand how to navigate complexities.
6. Stop fighting with other literacy researchers. The literacy wars need to end—there’s no teacher worth his or her salt who thinks “oh, we should never teach phonics” or “oh, I would never focus on language development.” Arguments about the “Science of Reading” seems to polarize our literacy community; I prefer the term “evidence-based” because it requires us not only to look at extant research but also to investigate the efficacy of our practices. The *Every Student Succeeds Act* uses the language of “evidence” to drive these two objectives as well. Accept that we have many studies and lots of research and we need to move forward. Take the next step to make a difference by teaching someone to read and write and/or studying how others learn to read and write in local communities.

Tovey: How do you envision the dyslexia legislation recently passed affecting Georgia teacher preparation and the overall teaching of literacy in elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the state? What kinds of research might be needed?

Dooley: We need to do a better job as literacy professionals in understanding what makes someone have difficulty learning to read. According to the US Department of Education’s National Center for Education

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Statistics, about 80% of American adults (ages 16-65) can read and write sufficiently enough to complete tasks, paraphrase, compare and contrast, and make low-level inferences. While not sufficiently admirable for a nation as rich and promising as the U.S. is, this literacy rate far outpaces many countries. Yet, we are faced with a large segment of students in the US, about 20%, who never master literacy even at this basic level. That’s a lot of people! The National Institutes of Health estimates that 10% of the total population suffers from dyslexia. I think that we are starting to take this statistic seriously in Georgia. We would never be satisfied with an 80% “land” rate by Delta airlines; why should we be satisfied with an 80% reading rate?

In teacher education programs, we need to shore up understandings about reading difficulties, including dyslexia. We have experts right here in Georgia’s university system who can help. I suggest researchers study how we change our own work in light of these stats. What can we do better to prepare educators to serve *all* literacy learners.

Tovey: Is there anything else you would you like to add?

Dooley: Georgia’s state plan for the Every Student Succeeds Act is centered around the Whole Child. That policy statement helps us situate all that we do so that it benefits a child—we literally ask ourselves: how will this effect a child? Developing that focus—that “why”—is essential to Georgia’s continued improvement. In my own education at the University of Virginia, I learned to think about children’s physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and academic growth as inter-related. As I study the state-wide system, keeping the child at the center—knowing that any child is learning

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within this dynamic developmental trajectory—helps me situate literacy policies and practices.

Tovey: **Thank you so much for your time, Caitlin. You've given us information that**

will help to strengthen the partnership between GALA/the GJL and the Georgia Department of Education as we work toward the common goal of world-class literacy education in the state of Georgia.

About Dr. Dooley:

Caitlin McMunn Dooley, Ph.D., is Deputy Superintendent for Teaching and Learning at the Georgia Department of Education and a Professor of Education at Georgia State University. Her research investigates digital literacies, emergent comprehension, literacy instruction and testing in elementary grades, and teacher development. With over 50 publications, her research has been published in national and international refereed journals and chapters published by the Literacy Research Association, the International Reading Association, and the National Council of Teachers of English, among others. Dooley has led and evaluated funded research totaling more than \$250 million from the National Science Foundation, US Department of Education, US Department of Health and Human Services the US Corporation for National and Community Service, and various foundations. She served as co-Editor for the National Council of Teachers of English premier journal *Language Arts* (2011-2016). A former Fulbright Scholar, Dooley's awards include "2020 Jimmy Stokes Service Award" from the Georgia Association of Education Leaders; "2012 Spirit of Partnership Award" from the Professional Development School Network; "2008 Jerry Johns Promising Researcher Award" from the Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers; "2006 Outstanding Dissertation—Distinguished Finalist," from the International Reading Association, "2005 Outstanding Dissertation" from the Georgia Association of Teacher Educators, "1998 Eisenhower Teacher Leader" from the School University Research Network and William and Mary College. In addition to having taught preschool and elementary grades, Dooley has served as a consultant to the Texas Educational Agency Student Assessment Division, the national non-profit Children's Literacy Initiative, as well as several urban schools and districts. Dooley received her doctorate from the University of Texas at Austin and her undergraduate and master's degrees from the University of Virginia.