

# Making Education Everyone's Business

## Metro Atlanta Chamber: A Study of Successful Education Advocacy

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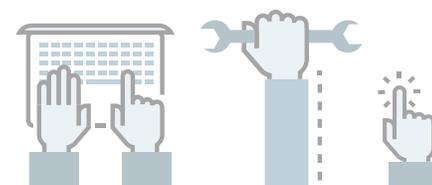
### Introduction

Launched in 1859 as the Mercantile Association,<sup>1</sup> the Metro Atlanta Chamber (MAC) has a long history as the voice of the business community and as a force for policy change in the 29-county region. MAC has worked to drive economic development and has promoted the region as an attractive place for millennial talent.

MAC is a large chamber, boasting nearly 1,000 member companies, 57 staff members, and a \$16 million annual operating budget. It represents businesses, colleges and universities, and nonprofits across the region, working to position metro Atlanta "as a top-tier global region."<sup>2</sup> Its work is organized into three strategic pillars:<sup>3</sup>

- **Grow:** Recruit new companies, retain existing companies, and help existing companies continue to grow throughout the region
- **Advocate:** Advance policies that enable the region to attract a talented workforce, foster a high quality of life, lift those in need, and move the region forward
- **Promote:** Market the Atlanta brand to attract new businesses and top-notch talent

MAC's public policy work (part of its Advocate pillar) focuses on a wide number of issues, including but not limited to education. And it has been successful. MAC actively advocated on behalf of six education bills in each of the 2018 and 2019 legislative sessions. In both sessions, four of the six were ultimately enacted.<sup>4</sup>



*This is one of three case studies that accompany the report, Making Education Everyone's Business: Three Studies of Successful Education Advocacy. Case studies of the other two organizations, Colorado Succeeds and the Washington Roundtable, can be found on our website.*

## How has MAC achieved its success?

MAC's work in the Atlanta region spans dozens of focus areas, from transportation to sports to entrepreneurship. Despite its broad focus, the chamber has kept education as a core element of its work. It has done so through a combination of strategies:

### 1 MAC has defined a clear value proposition to its members and partners.

MAC covers a broad array of issues. As a result, the crux of its value proposition is that it drives a broad vision for the development of the region. Businesses join MAC because they believe in its vision and trust MAC's long history of successful advocacy. However, unlike many business organizations, MAC doesn't provide much in the way of committees to join or hands-on experiences or opportunities to see their work in education policy (or any other issue area) on the ground. And that's intentional. MAC's chief policy officer, Katie Kirkpatrick, explains: "We pared down and got rid of most of our working groups and committees. If there's a time-sensitive issue or some sort of crisis, we'll convene a time-limited task force of investors to help us engage on that issue ... but we've found that people value the way the chamber operates. They have trust and faith in us and in our track record of work, and that's why they keep investing."<sup>5</sup>

MAC's value proposition today reflects its ability to adapt to an evolving local context — in particular the large companies such as Mercedes Benz USA, Starbucks, and Pandora that have moved into or grown their footprints in the region. For example, for more than 150 years, MAC was simply the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. Its membership mirrored that of many other local chambers of commerce, comprising local businesses ranging from large community anchor businesses to small mom-and-pop shops. In 1990, in response to the region's rapid growth and the evolving needs of large companies, the Atlanta Chamber rebranded itself as the Metro Atlanta Chamber. It responded to the burgeoning regional economy by shifting its own focus from the city of Atlanta proper to the prosperity and growth of the metro Atlanta region.<sup>6</sup> In addition, when MAC's current president and CEO, Hala Moddelmog, came on board six years ago, she led the chamber through another important shift. Instead of focusing on networking events and seminars, which duplicated the work of other organizations, MAC focused instead on programming and initiatives — all aligned under the Grow, Advocate, and Promote strategic pillars.<sup>7</sup>

MAC understood that companies of all sizes and within a variety of industries rely on state policies and local talent to grow. They also realized that larger companies, which were not as interested in a personal benefit or direct return on investment, were able and willing to invest in advancing the metro Atlanta region. MAC's broader regional focus and shift away from networking events and seminars offered a compelling value proposition.

In addition, MAC differentiates its value proposition to its members by providing two tiers of membership. Dues for the first tier, known as investors, begin at \$2,500 annually. This membership tier provides companies with a listing in the online directory, access to community events, professional development and social engagements, leadership events, and small group connection opportunities.<sup>8</sup> Companies looking for greater engagement, such as opportunities to serve on leadership councils, access to meetings with key business and community leaders, and invitations to special events, can join MAC's board of advisors. Investments begin at \$10,000 annually for members of the board of advisors. Currently, MAC has approximately 400 investors and 200 members of the board of advisors. MAC also has a board of directors, comprising approximately 180 companies. MAC's leadership team appoints members to the board of directors (as opposed to companies opting in the way they do for the two membership tiers), which includes a suggested investment specific to each company.<sup>9</sup> The board of directors has more direct involvement in setting the priorities of the chamber.

By engaging on a broad range of issues, MAC has been able to define a broad vision for the metro Atlanta region that resonates with many businesses. It has been able to evolve its value proposition in response to the changing context. And, by offering members a variety of entry points into the organization, it has differentiated its value proposition to maximize the breadth of its network.

## **2 MAC has developed a clear and focused agenda that accounts for the region's short- and long-term needs.**

MAC's vision is deeply tied to the unique needs of the metro Atlanta region and the needs of the state as a whole. Its education priorities are focused on ensuring that metro Atlanta has a highly educated and skilled workforce in order to ensure a strong pipeline of workers for the region's growing industries and economy.

These priorities are driven by some key data on the region's current state and future projections. Metro Atlanta is one of the fastest growing regions in the U.S., with a population of roughly 6 million. It's projected to grow to 8 million by 2040.<sup>10</sup> In 2018 alone, there were more than 60,000 new jobs created in the region.<sup>11</sup> But too many of metro Atlanta's students are unprepared to take advantage of these new opportunities. Fully 60% of the top-demanded jobs in Georgia require a postsecondary degree.<sup>12</sup> Yet just 27% of the graduating class of 2012 had earned a postsecondary credential by 2017.<sup>13</sup>

MAC's education agenda seeks to address these gaps and ensure the region produces a well-educated workforce. MAC has five current education priorities:

- **Develop a globally competitive workforce** that aligns talent with demand and prepares Georgia's students for postsecondary education, from accessibility to completion.
- **Strengthen education pathways leading to employment** by increasing coordination of resources and alignment of curriculum between K-12 and higher education systems.

- **Prepare educators and educational leadership** to maintain and bolster effective instruction and to strengthen Georgia's education systems.
- **Encourage innovation** in instruction and curriculum by supporting the promotion of STEAM and career and technical education in both K-12 and postsecondary education.
- **Boost early learning** by expanding access and affordability of quality-rated child care and Georgia Pre-K (Georgia's free public preschool program).

Within these broad priorities, MAC supports the development and advocates on behalf of specific legislation aligned to regional needs. For example, the region has a rapidly growing need for skilled workers in the computer sciences field. Jobs such as software developers or computer systems analysts represented nearly one-third of the total number of job postings for the top 15 occupations in Georgia between 2007 and 2015.<sup>14</sup> However, access to computer science training is limited; less than 50% of Georgia's high schools offer courses in computer science.<sup>15</sup> In 2014, MAC's education team recognized this gap and began looking for a way to engage around STEAM and computer science policy issues.

Then in 2017, Amazon launched a search for its second North American headquarters.<sup>16</sup> MAC was part of the team, led by the Georgia Department of Economic Development, that developed metro Atlanta's application. While Atlanta didn't win the bid, the application process, which required an accounting of students' access to courses like computer science, further drove home the need for Georgia's policymakers to focus their attention on STEAM and computer science-related policies.

Through careful coalition-building and partnership with key organizations like Code.org and Project Lead the Way, MAC led the effort to improve access to computer science throughout the region. In 2019, the Georgia legislature enacted Senate Bill 108, which requires all school districts to make computer science available to middle school and high school students. The bill requires every school district to offer a computer science course in at least one high school and an exploratory computer science class in all middle schools by fall 2022. By 2024, all high schools are required to offer computer science. The bill provides dedicated funding for professional development to ensure computer science teachers are trained to teach computer science.<sup>17</sup>

The legislation that MAC supports includes immediate or short-term wins such as this computer science bill. But Kirkpatrick takes a long view of their work in order to guard against getting distracted by the newest idea or program. She explains, "It's a daily struggle to stay focused. Lots of people want us to take on different things. I try to instill and encourage [my education staff] to think about their work as, we're working on turning the Titanic. We're not here to put a new tire on the car. Those guardrails allow us to say to someone, 'We agree that an issue is important, but we haven't finished our work on high-quality early education,' or whatever the issue might be. We think about all our policy work in that way. We've seen some progress and important wins along the way, but we're not done."

### 3 MAC has a clearly defined education policy agenda, coupled with dedicated education staff, to ensure education remains a priority within the organization.

MAC's annual operating budget of \$16 million is almost entirely dues-funded (approximately \$1 million comes from foundations). Of that \$16 million annual budget, approximately 80%, or \$12.8 million, is dedicated to its three priority areas (grow, advocate, promote). The remaining 20% covers operational costs such as office space or fundraising efforts. While the exact allocation of that \$12.8 million across the three priorities varies from year to year, it tends to be fairly evenly split. Leadership within each priority area has the autonomy to decide how its budget is allocated.

MAC's public policy team is responsible for the Advocate pillar of the chamber's strategic plan. The team, which consists of 10 staff members total, focuses on four main buckets of work:

- **Educated workforce:** Pre-K, K-12, postsecondary, and workforce development issues
- **Business climate:** Regulatory, tax, and social policies that affect the brand of the region and the state
- **Infrastructure:** All things related to the built environment, such as transportation, water supply, 5G access, and cybersecurity
- **Natural resources and the environment:** Policies that impact the sustainability and resource stewardship of energy, water, air, and land

Kirkpatrick explains that she “budgets first for human capital. Then from a programmatic perspective, I think about it in terms of lift. What’s necessary to get the work done? Some things are easier while others are more resource-intensive. So I need to allocate the resources differently.”<sup>18</sup> In general, however, Kirkpatrick estimates that about 25% of the team’s time is spent on priorities related to an educated workforce and 45% is spent on a combination of business climate and infrastructure priorities. The natural resources bucket is quite small, so the majority of the remaining 30% of the policy team’s budget goes to advocacy. “We have a sizable budget for contract lobbyists,” explains Kirkpatrick. “We have to generate policy, of course, but we also have to be effective in advocating for change.”<sup>19</sup>

Whenever education is one of any organization’s competing priorities, it can be deprioritized in relation to other prominent issues. However, MAC has consistently focused on education and ensured that at least one staff member is dedicated to the issue. In fact, MAC has expanded its education focus to cover the full spectrum from birth through college and career over the past five years. It now has two full-time education policy staff members, one who focuses on birth through age 5 and K-12 and another individual who focuses on college and career connections.

Both education staff members sit on MAC’s public policy team and together advocate on behalf of policies that support the development of an educated workforce throughout the metro Atlanta region.

#### **4 MAC is strategic in its use of partnerships and coalitions to expand the impact of its education policy team.**

While MAC's education team includes only two staff members, the organization's long history and strong reputation in the region allow those staff members to create strong connections with other organizations working on similar issues. These relationships and networks enable MAC to expand its reach and ensure they can achieve their goals.

In the policy arena, for example, MAC partners with the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (GPEE) to develop sound policy and manage diverse coalitions around policy and legislative priorities. In the science and technology arena, MAC has consistently worked with a number of partners to advocate for legislative change. The coalition that helped pass the 2019 computer science legislation described above consisted of a broad set of partners, including College Board, Code.org, GPEE, ExcelinEd, GeorgiaCAN, Project Lead the Way, and the Technology Association of Georgia's Education Division. Many of these organizations have a natural alignment around STEAM and computer science issues; they've also worked together on a number of education advocacy efforts in the past, making for a relatively straightforward collaboration.

Another example of how MAC uses partnerships to broaden the impact of its small education team is illustrated through the Learn4Life initiative. Several superintendents in the metro region came to the chamber asking for assistance to improve collaboration and better coordinate educational opportunities and outcomes across the region. Working with superintendents and other partners, MAC identified Strive Partnership as the appropriate mechanism. Then MAC, Atlanta Regional Commission, Community Foundation of Greater Atlanta, and United Way of Greater Atlanta came together to launch Learn4Life. The initiative focuses on eight school districts in the metro Atlanta region, which combined educate 33% of the student population in the state. It convenes partners into action teams that focus on improving specific outcomes across six key metric indicators. MAC's education policy director, Tim Cairl, sits on Learn4Life's core team for policy.

MAC has been able to build coalitions with local partners because it has cultivated credibility regarding statewide business and education issues and strong relationships with other education advocacy organizations. MAC represents major employers and is viewed as a knowledgeable voice of the business community. It has also successfully demonstrated that it understands the broader state context and wants to drive the state's education system forward.

## Conclusion

With staff members dedicated to the work of education, strong partnerships and collaborations with other regional organizations, and a clear agenda tightly aligned to the current and future needs of the region, MAC has ensured that education remains a core component of its larger mission. And as the region continues to grow and develop, MAC's focus on education will help ensure that an educated workforce – and all of the pre-K through postsecondary policy needs that fall into that priority – remains a core component of driving regional prosperity.

## Endnotes

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