

DUBLIN-LAURENS COUNTY WORKFORCE STRATEGY

2021

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Carl Vinson
Institute of Government
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

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INTRODUCTION

Economic development plays a key role in shaping the future of Dublin and Laurens County. While economic development success involves numerous elements, one key factor is the availability of a skilled workforce. According to survey data from *Area Development Magazine*, the availability of a skilled workforce has consistently ranked as a top factor for site selection and expansion decisions. Existing employers and companies considering Dublin and Laurens County need access to a pipeline of qualified workers with a variety of technical skills and employability skills. For this reason, the Dublin–Laurens County Development Authority launched the Dublin–Laurens County Workforce Strategy process in late 2019. This process was designed to ensure that the Dublin community has an available and skilled workforce to support existing industry as well as additional employment growth that is expected to continue in the years to come. The success of this workforce development initiative is critical to supporting future economic progress in Dublin, Laurens County, and the surrounding region.

The community workforce strategy was led by an inclusive steering committee composed of leaders and stakeholders from Dublin and Laurens County educational institutions, community organizations, and business and industry. The steering committee was asked to consider existing resources, labor market data, and community input to help identify gaps between the current workforce and business and industry needs and to develop solutions to close these gaps and move the whole community forward. For the purposes of this report, “Dublin” is used to refer to Dublin, Laurens County, and the larger community.

PROCESS

The Dublin–Laurens County Development Authority chose to undertake a community workforce development needs assessment and strategy development process with the University of Georgia’s Carl Vinson Institute of Government starting in late 2019. The process began with a large community meeting, the selection of a diverse steering committee, and an initial steering committee meeting. Due to COVID-19, the project was put on hold for the spring and summer of 2020, but resumed in the fall of 2020 with three additional steering committee meetings held virtually in September, October, and November as well as a community visit by the Institute of Government team in October. The visit included trips to local employers and educational partners. The Institute of Government also conducted a variety of interviews and listening sessions in person and virtually to ensure first-hand feedback was gathered from local human resources directors and K-12 and postsecondary educators and students.

The four steering committee meetings focused on (1) getting the steering committee oriented to the process and identifying existing community assets; (2) sharing labor market data and hearing from local employers about their workforce needs; (3) learning about local educational assets and assessing the strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and risks of workforce development efforts in the community; and (4) analyzing all of the inputs to develop a community vision, priority areas, and potential action items. The Institute of Government team facilitated the conversation, provided data analysis and best practice research, and assisted the group in developing the final plan. The figure below details the major steps involved in developing the Dublin–Laurens County Workforce Strategy.



STEERING COMMITTEE

Brad Ansel

Perry Ellis

Lynn Ashcraft

Department of Community Affairs

Sam Beall

Bank of Dudley

Stacy Brantley

Morris Bank

Jeff Bruton

Fairview Park Hospital

Eric Cannada

Heart of Georgia College
& Career Academy

Vic Cooper

Wild Bore Machine

Ben Deubel

Saint Gobain

Marcia Dixon

State of Georgia Workforce Board

Anthony Edwards

Polymer Logistics/Tosca

Pat Ford

HeatSinc

Clifford Garnto

Laurens County Board of Education

Randy Gay

Heart of Georgia College
& Career Academy

Erica Harden

Oconee Fall Line Technical College

Rick Hudson

YKK AP

Lance Jones

City of Dublin

Lori Martel

West Fraser

Brandon McAllister

West Fraser

Elizabeth McLean

Georgia Department of
Economic Development

Dr. Stephen Morse

Middle Georgia State University

Bill Renfer

Best Buy

Friedrich Renoth

Erdrich USA

Bryan Rogers

Laurens County Commissioners

Tanya Rogers

West Rock

James Sasser

GovStrive

Priscilla Smith

Georgia Military College

Mark Stenger

Flexsteel Industries

Jay Studstill

Georgia Power

Heath Taylor

Dublin–Laurens County
Chamber of Commerce

Georgia Vahoua

Best Buy

David Whitmer

VA Medical Center Dublin

Dr. Fred Williams

Dublin City Schools



VALUES

To ensure all stakeholders were on the same page, the steering committee developed the following list of values to uphold as they worked toward developing the workforce strategy:



Respect



Collaborative communication



Commitment



Open-minded



Inclusive



Accountability



Realistic but strategic



Integrity and honesty

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

The steering committee conducted an environmental scan to analyze the community's strengths, opportunities moving forward, aspirations for the future, and risks or barriers to achieving their workforce goals. Below is a summary of the group's analysis.

STRENGTHS

Partnerships and working together as a community around workforce development and other community development efforts

Many great existing community workforce resources, especially in education

Dublin is a unique size, has a great location, and has a hometown feel with a diverse population

OPPORTUNITIES

Address the workforce needs required for future growth in Dublin and the surrounding region

Continue to work to enhance quality of life and sense of place

More involvement from businesses in community workforce efforts

ASPIRATIONS

Build a network that connects all resources

Attract a skilled workforce from outside Dublin

Begin workforce development efforts earlier with elementary and middle school students

Provide more opportunities for students to learn skills and explore careers in high school

RISKS/ BARRIERS

Stakeholder mindset (including working in silos, status quo mentality, and turf issues)

Youth continuing to leave the area after high school graduation

Not all community-based organizations and employers are participating in existing school workforce development initiatives





EMPLOYER FEEDBACK

Throughout the process, a variety of employers were consulted through listening sessions, one-on-one interviews, industry tours, and presentations at steering committee meetings. Input was gathered from over 25 local employers from a wide variety of industries including health care, manufacturing, hospitality, and government. While the feedback varied some based-on industry, some overarching issues discussed during this process influenced the strategy development.

Awareness of Opportunities One of the most common issues that nearly all employers shared was that local students and job seekers were not aware of the opportunities that exist in Dublin and Laurens County. There are a number of growing industries in the community that have jobs at a variety of levels from entry level to upper management and from technical to professional. Finding a way to share this information is important to help local employers fill their workforce gaps.

Pre-employment Barriers Businesses mentioned a number of pre-employment barriers that applicants were facing while seeking a job. These barriers ranged from simple things like not having a valid driver license, bank account, or email address to larger things like appropriate digital literacy skills to complete an online application or passing a pre-employment screening (e.g., criminal background, substance abuse). Employers across the board felt it was important to address these barriers and ensure that candidates are well prepared and equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to apply for a job.

Core Employability Skills A number of employers in Dublin and Laurens County shared that even if they could find candidates who were aware of their opportunities and were able to successfully get through the pre-employment process, many still struggled from a lack of core employability skills. This is particularly frustrating when a company is looking for entry-level candidates with the basics that they can train for all technical and job-specific skills on site. Most employers were aware of some soft skills training going on in the schools or other community organizations, but would like to see more emphasis on things like communication, interpersonal skills, financial management, safety training, and general work ethic.



KEY THEMES

The following key themes emerged during stakeholder conversations, data analysis, and steering committee discussions throughout the process. These themes played a critical role in shaping the community's workforce strategy.

Existing Resources Dublin has a variety of strong existing resources. The community boasts an abundance of educational institutions, a diverse industry base, and caring organizations that already serve the community. By focusing on existing assets, the community can work to close the workforce gaps identified throughout the process without investing substantial resources to create new organizations or start from scratch.

Additional Collaboration While many organizations have found their niche in Dublin, these groups and programs can be aligned and enhanced to reduce potential redundancy and increase their community impact. Partnerships already exist throughout Dublin and the surrounding area, but increasing collaboration and thinking about workforce development in a systematic way across the whole community can go a long way.

Unique Community Many stakeholder interviewees and listening group participants mentioned that Dublin is a unique community. It is the hub for a larger region of rural counties but still maintains its small-town feel and caring community. It has a wide industry base that draws people from the larger area and even internationally. Marketing Dublin's assets is important to increase both internal and external awareness of the many things the community has to offer.

Local Opportunities Dublin is home to a variety of employers that have a national and international presence. Many of these companies take great pride in their employees and provide training and advancement options, yet they still struggle to fill openings because local job seekers are not aware of the opportunities. It is important to share the diverse industries and skill sets that exist in the local economy in order for students to see the full range of career opportunities available to them in Dublin after they finish their education.

Young Adults Young adults are the future of the Dublin and Laurens County's workforce. Connecting them with the community and the regional labor market early is vital to keep them from choosing to go elsewhere to seek additional opportunities. Information gathered throughout this process suggested that training youth with entry-level skills, helping them understand opportunities to go straight to work or leave and come back, and investing in their future are important for the long-term vitality of Dublin, Laurens County, and the larger region.

VISION

Dublin and Laurens County will have a responsive and well-prepared workforce that can enable diverse industry growth in the community through alignment of resources, strong collaboration between education and industry, and strategic investment in innovative programs.

PRIORITY AREAS

The steering committee developed three priority areas to help move the community toward the vision and close the gaps that currently exist in Dublin and Laurens County's workforce. Based on the data, community feedback, and the group's focus, the three areas that rose to the top were a strong foundation, seamless transition, and connectivity and marketing. Under each of these priorities, the group agreed upon short- and long-term action items during the fourth steering committee meeting. Short-term items can be accomplished in the next year, and long-term items are likely to take between one and three years to accomplish.



STRONG FOUNDATION



SEAMLESS TRANSITION



**INCREASED CONNECTIVITY
AND MARKETING**





PRIORITY 1

STRONG FOUNDATION

Workforce development requires a long-term focus. Effective workforce development strategies span early education, K-12, and postsecondary education. Ensuring that workforce-related skills are taught early and enforced every step of the way is important for both student success and community workforce success. While local schools already have some of these lessons in the existing curriculum, the steering committee felt that it was important to find additional ways to emphasize a strong foundation in employability skills and increase awareness of local career opportunities.

SHORT-TERM ACTION ITEMS

Establish a teacher externship program that allows teachers from all levels and subjects of the local educational institutions to experience some time at a local employer. The program should also help teachers learn how to apply their externship experience to their subject through lesson integration, guest lecturers, or other means.

Increase utilization of the YouScience tool in Dublin City Schools and Laurens County Schools. YouScience is a free, statewide aptitude and interest assessment that school districts have access to through the Georgia Department of Education. While some students are already taking the assessment, ensuring that all students are taking it and as early as possible can help students figure out potential paths after graduation. Additionally, the community and business partners should explore ways to support the utilization of YouScience results through mentoring and targeted outreach. Results should also be shared with students and families in a meaningful way that can help to influence course selection and career development decisions.

LONG-TERM ACTION ITEMS

Review existing work-ethic programming in local educational institutions to ensure that the necessary employability skills are being taught to all students. Local employers must be a central part of this assessment.

Build out a content library for teachers, counselors, and others to use when talking about local industries. This virtual library could include videos such as virtual industry tours, interviews with employers, soft skills lessons, and more.

Create a mentoring program to connect students with current or retired industry representatives to help them learn valuable workforce skills (K-8) and help them create a realistic plan for what they want to do after graduation (9-12). Potentially explore how this mentoring program could support YouScience implementation efforts.





PRIORITY 2

SEAMLESS TRANSITION

The transition from education to the workforce or vice versa can be difficult to navigate. To mitigate these challenges and ensure a seamless transition, the community must clearly articulate the necessary skills and pathways to succeed in a particular field as well as provide resources for youth or adults looking for new opportunities.

SHORT-TERM ACTION ITEMS

Develop a focused list of common skills needed for entry-level employment at major regional employers. Listening sessions and interviews conducted during the strategy development process revealed that while the community features a wide variety of industries with varying needs, many core skills cross industry and company boundaries. This list of skills can be used by local educational institutions and other training providers to ensure that entry-level job seekers are ready to go to work.

Launch a “Career Ready” transition program pilot that focuses on ways to connect students who are unsure of their next step after high school or those looking for a leg up as they go straight into the local workforce. The short program (4–6 weeks) will be centered on the common skills list described above as well as several basic credentials (OSHA 10-hour, forklift, CPR, etc.). Local employers should play a key role in developing and supporting this program. For example, they can help to craft the curriculum, participate in the course as guest speakers, assist with mock interviews, and offer students who complete the course an opportunity to interview for entry-level employment.

LONG-TERM ACTION ITEMS

Review existing alignment efforts and agreements between secondary and postsecondary partners and local employers and their needs. Alignment between these partners is important to ensure transitions are efficient, are easy to navigate, and produce the skilled workforce that the community labor market needs. Alignment efforts will ensure that pathways and programs help connect students to postsecondary education and employment opportunities in Dublin and Laurens County.

Articulate common career pathways in the local economy that include multiple entry and exit points for the workforce and education. These common pathways should be for a select number of in-demand regional occupations or industries. The career pathway detail would show the required education and skills for entry-level positions and advancement opportunities in the occupation or industry. Once the career pathways are fully designed, they should be widely shared within the community and by various educational partners.

Explore a summer internship program to showcase local employment opportunities. This program would primarily focus on students planning to continue their education outside the region. The goal would be to connect these students with local employers who may be interested in hiring them upon completion of a higher degree. This program would focus on retaining talent in Dublin and Laurens County.

Consider an upskilling/ reskilling program for adults in the community who are looking to advance in their current role (i.e., leadership or supervisory roles) or transition to a different occupation or industry but wish to stay within the community. This could potentially utilize portions of the Career Ready program developed earlier in this priority.





PRIORITY 3

INCREASED CONNECTIVITY AND MARKETING

While the first two priority areas mainly focus on filling gaps and developing potential new programs, the steering committee also sought to connect and market resources that already exist in the community. The majority of the action items in this priority can be executed with little to no financial investment, requiring only coordination and some human capital.

SHORT-TERM ACTION ITEMS

Establish a network for plan implementation and ongoing communication between local stakeholders. This network should be managed by a point person who can call meetings, bring partners together for deeper discussion, and be the face of workforce development in Dublin–Laurens County.

Start a social media campaign (#WorkforceWednesday) to get the word out about existing workforce resources, partnerships, investment, success stories, and the like that already exist in the community. While all organizations could contribute, one main organization would regularly manage the highlights to ensure maximum coverage and alignment with the overall strategy.

LONG-TERM ACTION ITEMS

Explore opportunities for students to be involved in community workforce marketing efforts through postsecondary marketing programs, secondary Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (CTAE) marketing classes, and relevant career and technical student organizations (CTSOs). Peer-to-peer marketing can be a powerful way to share student stories and potentially convince students to stay in Dublin.

Expand existing workforce development efforts as well as new efforts that emerge from this plan to include surrounding communities that are closely connected to Dublin economically. Regional work typically benefits both the hub community and the surrounding ones.



ADDITIONAL FACTORS TO SUPPORT WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Workforce development is closely connected to other aspects of a community. While these are not traditional workforce development focus areas, they are closely linked and progress will require partnerships and targeted investment. The steering committee identified several elements that play critical roles in supporting or enabling workforce development success. Specifically, they identified opportunities and needs related to wages, workforce housing, internet access, and quality of life. While these are outside the scope of the workforce development strategy, the Dublin–Laurens County Development Authority will continue to work with and support its business, government, and community partners in these areas.

WAGES AND BENEFITS

Total rewards (wages + benefits) play an important role in attracting and retaining qualified workers. As the labor market continues to evolve, employers have to adjust their total rewards structures to meet their talent needs. One way to assist with this is to collect and share community-wide data on wages and benefits through a wage study.

INTERNET ACCESS

One major limitation to workforce development efforts in Dublin and Laurens County is the lack of reliable and fast internet access in all parts of the community. The steering committee would like to see an assessment of internet providers done in order to figure out the best and most affordable way to connect residents in the community and surrounding areas to virtual resources and opportunities.

WORKFORCE HOUSING

Whether recruiting professionals from outside the region or enticing young adults to stay in the community after graduation, accessible and affordable housing is an important factor. People who are new to the community or starting a new career may not be looking to or able to commit to purchasing a house, so having rental options at a variety of sizes and price points can be a valuable asset for the community. The steering committee supports development of additional multifamily housing options, which can help support economic growth in Dublin and Laurens County.

QUALITY OF LIFE

Just as housing can make or break talent retention and recruitment efforts in a community, so can quality of life. Different demographic groups look for specific features, but generally people want to feel like they are a part of a proud, safe, and thriving community. Efforts to revitalize downtown Dublin and bring in local small businesses and restaurants have already proven successful. Continuing these efforts and others that focus on placemaking and increasing quality of life in the larger community will help support workforce development efforts.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Over the past year, leaders in Dublin and Laurens County have taken an active role in charting a workforce development strategy for their community. This diverse and committed group has analyzed workforce data, engaged with key local employers, and assessed the current talent development landscape to develop the first Dublin–Laurens County Workforce Strategy. A variety of business, community, education, and government partners worked together to develop a community-wide strategy for advancing workforce development efforts in Dublin and Laurens County. The strategy provides a clear road map for strengthening the talent development process by building a strong foundation for our future workforce, ensuring a seamless transition from education into a career, and enhancing connectivity and marketing efforts.

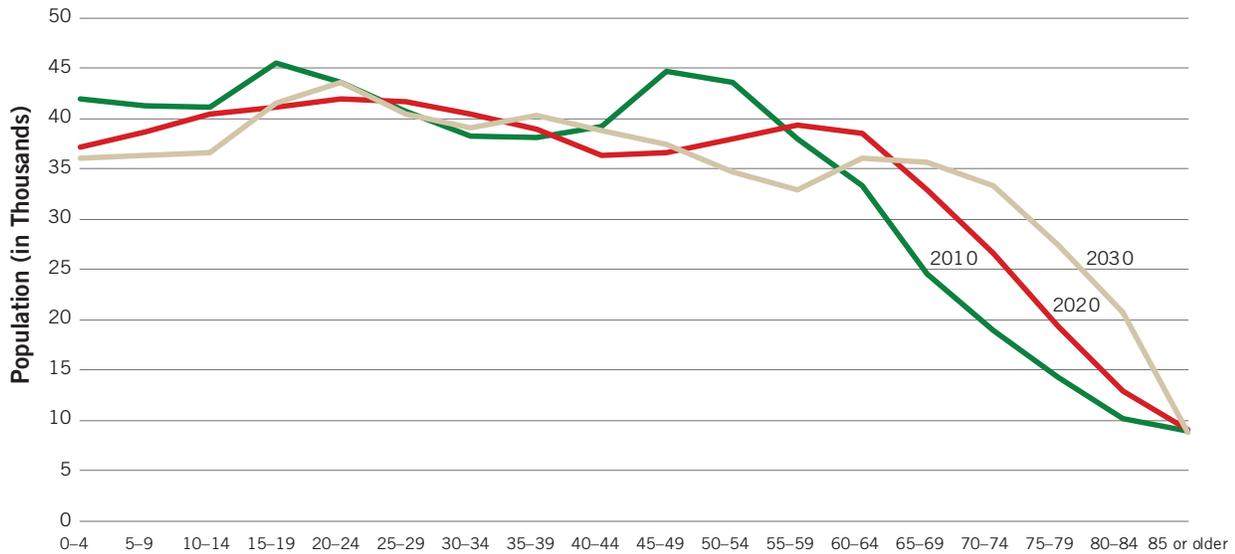
The successful implementation of the workforce development strategy will require sustained commitment from a variety of partners—business, education, government, nonprofits, and community—to make substantive progress. The Dublin–Laurens County Development Authority Board of Directors and staff are committed to leading and supporting workforce development efforts for the community, but the success of the initiative will require all partners to be at the table. This workforce strategy identified both quick wins that can be accomplished in the next six to 12 months and action items that will take a larger investment of time and resources. While workforce development progress is a long-term proposition, the successful implementation of this plan will enhance economic development competitiveness, support community growth, and change the lives of students, families, and workers in the community.

It is important to begin implementation work quickly after the process concludes to ensure that the energy that has been built up around workforce efforts in the community is sustained. The most immediate next steps for this strategy are to identify a workforce project manager and begin having regularly scheduled working group meetings for each of the priority areas. These two steps will help spur implementation and foster accountability for achieving the strategy’s action items. These working groups should include steering committee members and others in the community with an interest in the topic. Once group members are identified, they should begin work on one or two short-term items that can be easily accomplished in 2021. Starting with quick and easy wins can also help maintain the energy and commitment to the Dublin–Laurens County Workforce Strategy for the coming years.



DATA APPENDIX

Population projection by age, Dublin–Laurens County area, 2010–2030



Source: Governor’s Office of Planning and Budget.

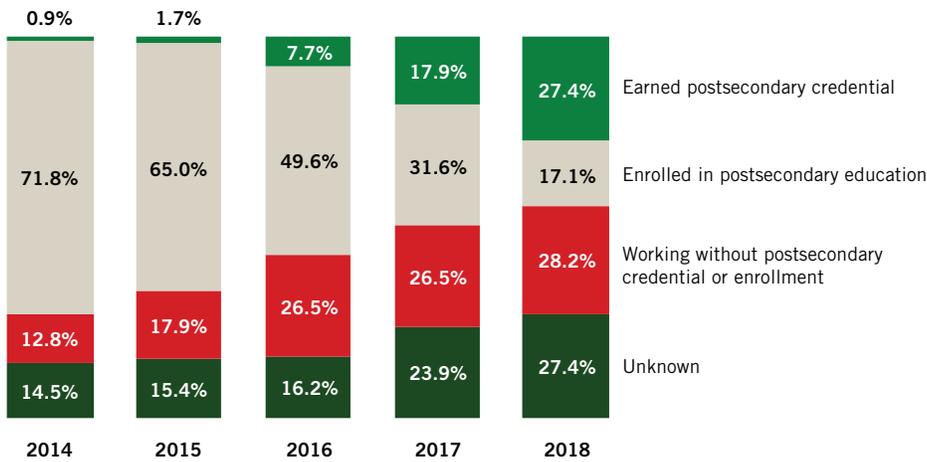
Educational attainment of the adult population in the Dublin-Laurens County area, 2014–2018

	Laurens County		Dublin-Laurens Area	
	Estimate	Percent	Estimate	Percent
Less than high school diploma	4,696	14.9%	60,550	15.0%
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	13,706	43.4%	142,278	35.3%
Some college, no degree	5,468	17.3%	84,658	21.0%
Associate's degree	2,812	8.9%	32,004	7.9%
Bachelor's degree	2,723	8.6%	49,354	12.2%
Graduate or professional degree	2,193	6.9%	34,146	8.5%
Population 25 years and over	31,598		402,990	

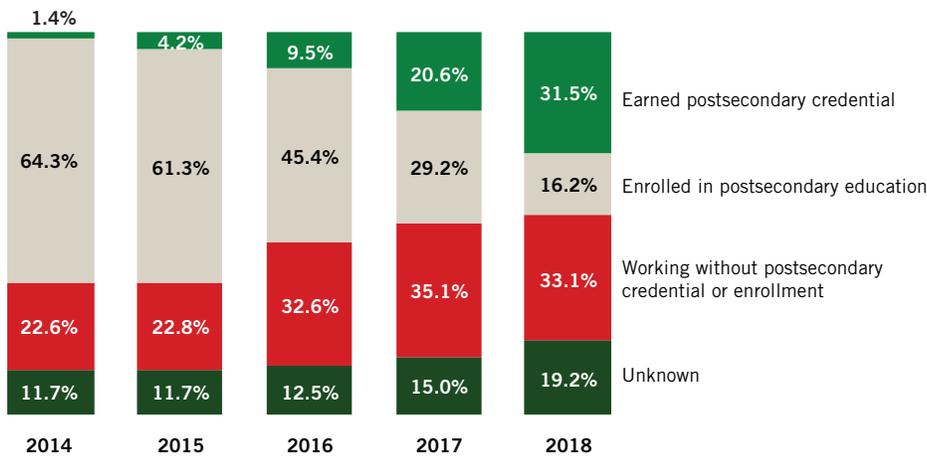
Source: US Census Bureau.

Note: Dublin-Laurens County area includes the following counties: Baldwin, Bleckley Dodge, Emanuel, Houston, Johnson, Jones, Laurens, Montgomery, Pulaski, Telfair, Toombs, Treutlen, Twiggs, Washington, Wheeler, Wilkinson.

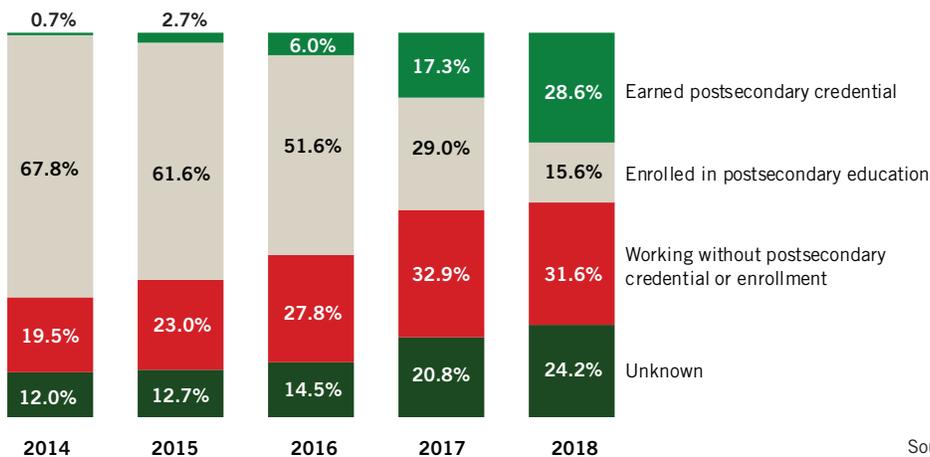
Progress from high school graduation, Dublin City high schools, class of 2013



Progress from high school graduation, Laurens County high schools, class of 2013

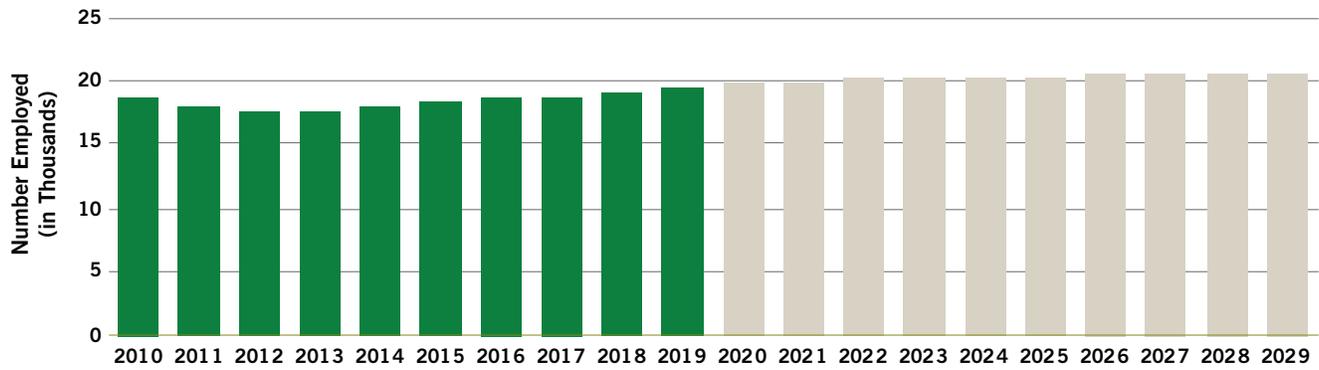


Progress from high school graduation, all Georgia high schools, class of 2013



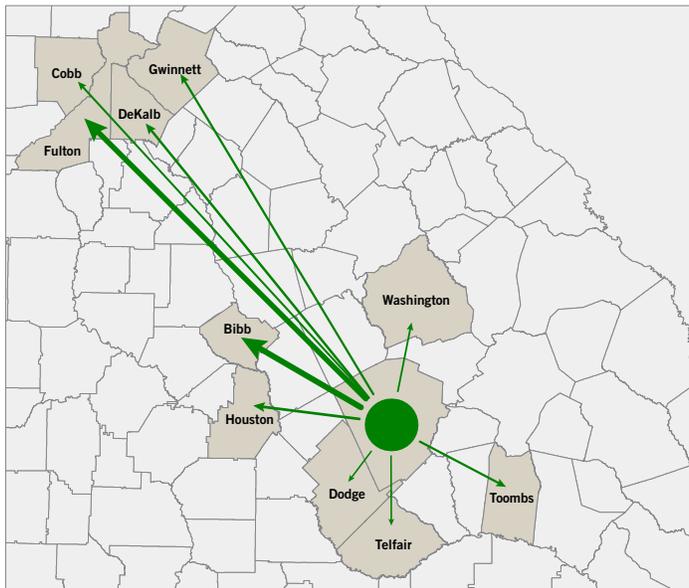
Source: Governor's Office of Student Achievement.

Laurens County employment trend, 2010–2029

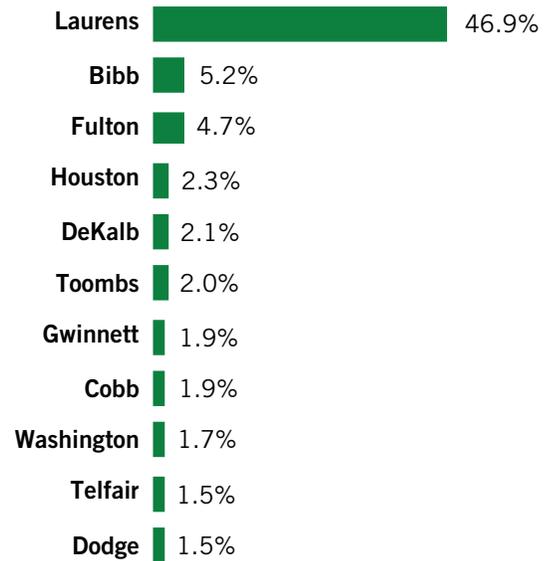


Source: EMSI.

Where Laurens County residents were employed, 2017



Top counties where Laurens County residents were employed, 2017



Source: US Census Bureau. LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics.

Laurens County industry profile, 2010–2019

NAICS	Description	2010 Jobs	2019 Jobs	2010–2019 Change	Percent Change	Avg. Earnings Per Job	2019 Location Quotient	2019 Establishments
11	Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	43	83	40	93%	\$47,597	0.46	13
21	Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	0	42	42	*	\$52,620	0.49	1
22	Utilities	74	90	16	22%	\$126,975	1.29	3
23	Construction	1,028	815	-213	-21%	\$54,702	0.85	85
31	Manufacturing	2,363	2,745	382	16%	\$60,618	1.70	48
42	Wholesale Trade	440	228	-212	-48%	\$53,726	0.31	42
44	Retail Trade	2,279	2,567	288	13%	\$30,280	1.29	213
48	Transportation and Warehousing	704	843	139	20%	\$45,976	1.20	28
51	Information	195	149	-46	-24%	\$50,294	0.42	12
52	Finance and Insurance	411	485	74	18%	\$64,648	0.60	51
53	Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	121	124	3	2%	\$37,276	0.42	35
54	Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	263	225	-38	-14%	\$51,603	0.19	59
55	Management of Companies and Enterprises	274	301	27	10%	\$59,511	1.00	6
56	Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services	593	1,036	443	75%	\$33,000	0.88	43
61	Educational Services	109	102	-7	-6%	\$30,931	0.21	6
62	Health Care and Social Assistance	2,610	2,619	9	0%	\$48,825	1.03	144
71	Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	92	109	17	18%	\$24,028	0.36	9
72	Accommodation and Food Services	1,549	1,865	316	20%	\$16,532	1.06	99
81	Other Services (except Public Administration)	553	542	-11	-2%	\$24,633	0.71	65
90	Government	5,048	4,451	-597	-12%	\$72,781	1.43	74
	Total	18,749	19,420	672	4%	\$49,328	–	1,035

Source: EMSI.

* Insufficient data.

Projected occupations with the highest job growth requiring some college or greater in Laurens County, 2018–2027

Occupation	2018 Jobs	2027 Jobs	2018–2027 Change	Percent Change	Avg. Hourly Earnings	Typical Entry Level Education	Annual Openings
Registered Nurses	334	381	47	14%	\$31.97	Bachelor's degree	24
Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers	364	399	35	10%	\$18.83	Postsecondary nondegree award	48
General and Operations Managers	303	333	30	10%	\$40.95	Bachelor's degree	31
Medical Assistants	69	95	26	38%	\$14.09	Postsecondary nondegree award	12
Business Operations Specialists, All Other	149	173	24	16%	\$27.73	Bachelor's degree	18
Physicians and Surgeons, All Other	83	97	14	17%	\$118.24	Doctoral or professional degree	4
Industrial Engineers	35	48	13	37%	\$37.36	Bachelor's degree	4
Management Analysts	33	46	13	39%	\$36.59	Bachelor's degree	5
Compliance Officers	112	124	12	11%	\$26.48	Bachelor's degree	12
Computer Occupations, All Other	58	68	10	17%	\$35.97	Bachelor's degree	6

Source: EMSI.

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