

Recommended State Investment to Address Georgia Student Needs



Student Mental Health & School Safety

Fund a minimum of one full-time school social worker for all districts, reduce the school psychologist to student ratio to 1:2,420 as outlined in [HB 283](#) from the 2013 session, and reduce the school counselor to student ratio to 1:400.



State Health Benefit Plan for Non-Certified Staff

Renew the partnership between local districts and the state to provide health insurance for non-certified staff by funding 25% of the per-member per-month cost of the SHBP for non-certified staff for all districts and up to 50% of these costs for low-wealth districts.



Professional Development

Restore professional development funding to 1.5% of the base teacher salary and conduct a review of professional development needs and costs.



Teacher Shortages

Remove the end date of June 30, 2026, on HB 385, "Return to Work," and add two high-need educator designations, one for elementary or reading teachers to support the implementation of HB 538, the Georgia Early Literacy Act, and one for district-identified high-need areas.

Student Mental Health and School Safety

One in four Georgia children ages three to 17 have a diagnosed mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral problem¹. Addressing students' mental health challenges effectively in schools is often difficult. Georgia funds mental health professionals for schools at ratios above best practice standards.

School Mental Health Professional Funding Ratios

	Georgia's Funding Ratios	Recommended Best Practice Funding Ratios	Requested Funding Ratios
School Counselors	1:450	1:250	1:400
School Social Workers	1: 2,475	1:500	1:2,475²
School Psychologists	1: 2,475	1:500	1:2,420

Under these ratios, 65 districts do not receive enough state funding to cover one full-time school social worker or one full-time school psychologist.

In 2013, lawmakers took a step to improve the school psychologist ratio by approving [HB 283](#), which reduced it to one school psychologist for every 2,420 students. The new ratio was to be implemented in Fiscal Year 2016, but no action has been taken.

The school counselor ratio does not fully account for counselors' very different roles: guidance counselor and mental health counselor. Both are necessary yet difficult for one person to fill. All school-based mental health professionals have a vital role in keeping students safe.



Recommendation: Improve student access to mental health professionals by 1) funding a minimum of one full-time school social worker for all districts; 2) funding school psychologists at a ratio of 1:2,420 as required by HB 283 (2013); and 3) lowering the school counselor ratio to 1:400.



State Health Benefit Plan for Non-Certified Staff

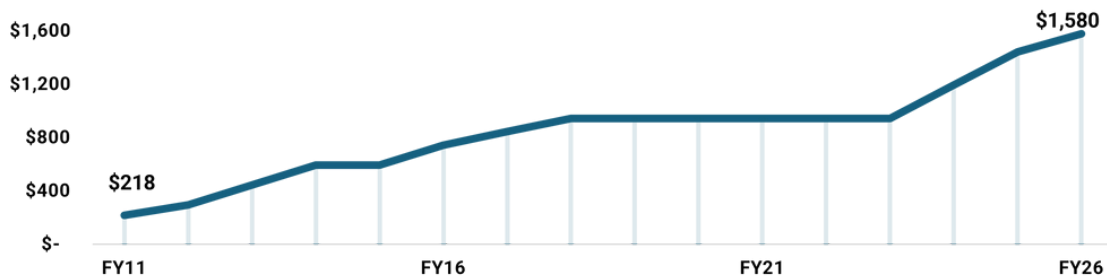
For many years, school districts and the state partnered to cover the cost of the State Health Benefit Plan (SHBP) for non-certified district staff. The partnership ended in 2012 when the state eliminated its contribution to the SHBP for these staff members.

The per-member per-month cost of the SHBP for non-certified staff has escalated since 2011 and will rise to \$1,580 on January 1, 2025. The annual cost of SHBP coverage for each non-certified staff member will be \$18,960 in FY 2026.

1. Voices for Georgia's Children. (2024, January). All About Kids: Factsheets about Georgia's Children. Retrieved from: https://www.georgiavoices.org/_files/ugd/024d26_96c8927f2ebd43fca56282c06036f547.pdf

2. Under the recommendation, districts with fewer than 2,475 FTEs students would receive funding for one full-time social worker. The ratio for school social workers would remain 1:2,475 for all districts with more than 2,475 students.

SHBP Per-Member Per-Month Cost Increase, FY 2011 – FY 2026



These increases squeeze districts' budgets, and the anticipated hike in the per-member per-month cost for non-certified staff to \$1,760 will worsen the strain. This may lead districts to cut spending in areas related to teaching and learning.



Recommendation: Renew the partnership between local districts and the state for health care non-certified staff by funding 25% of SHBP costs for non-certified staff for all districts and up to 50% of these costs for low-wealth districts. Low-wealth districts are defined as districts whose average per student property tax revenue is less than the statewide average per student tax revenue.

Professional Development

Ensuring educators deepen their knowledge and skills is critical to student learning. Providing high quality professional development is particularly important now as educators reform literacy instruction so all students become proficient readers, the goal of HB 538, the Georgia Early Literacy Act. Teachers and school leaders need training and support to effectively implement all components of the act.

State funding for professional development is limited. Under the QBE formula, professional development funding is calculated as a percentage—currently 0.9%—of the state base teacher salary. The percentage was 1.5% until FY 2003 when the General Assembly reduced it to 1%. Lawmakers lowered it to the existing level in FY 2014.

These reductions constrained growth for professional development funding. One example is funding for kindergarten teachers. If the percentage had remained at 1.5%, about \$48 would be allocated per FTE student for each of these teachers in FY 2025. Instead, they are allocated \$25.31.



Recommendation: Restore professional development funding to 1.5% of the base teacher salary and conduct a comprehensive review of professional development needs to ensure the state's formula reflects the cost of high-quality training for educators.

Teacher Shortages

Many districts cope with persistent teacher shortages, which often results in teachers leading classes outside their content area or teachers with provisional licenses who lack training in instruction and classroom management. Lawmakers sought to alleviate this problem by passing [HB 385](#) in 2022. The bill enables districts and state charter schools to hire teachers who have been retired for at least one year for full-time positions in content areas identified by Regional Education Service Agencies (RESAs) as a top-three high need area.

Districts and state charter schools placed 242 veteran teachers in hard-to-fill positions in FY 2022, which rose to 382 teachers in FY 2023. Teachers do not retire early to seek employment under HB 385 according to data from the Teachers Retirement System. Districts will lose this critical tool on June 30, 2026, when this policy is set to expire.

Some districts cannot fully use HB 385 because their high-need areas do not align with their RESAs' high need areas. The most common high-need areas identified by RESAs were math, special education, and science, yet districts also faced teacher shortages in English Language Arts (ELA), elementary education, and social studies³. Under HB 385, districts cannot place skilled veteran teachers in vacant positions in these or other hard-to-fill areas.



Recommendation: Remove the June 30, 2026, end date from HB 385, and add two high-need educator designations, one for elementary and reading teachers to support implementation of HB 538, the Georgia Early Literacy Act, and one for a district-identified high-need area.