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Georgia School Boards Association



GSSA
Georgia School Superintendents Association



PAGE
Professional Association
of Georgia Educators

Recommended State Investment to Address Georgia Student Needs

The Georgia Association of Education Leaders (GAEL), Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA), Georgia School Superintendents Association (GSSA), and the Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE) deeply appreciate recent state investments in Georgia’s public schools championed by Gov. Brian P. Kemp and supported by the General Assembly. These investments strengthen Georgia public education and include fully funding the Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula, educator pay raises, new funding for school safety, and increased funding for school bus replacement and operating costs as well as health insurance for certified educators. Building on this foundation, we request four priorities be addressed in the 2025 legislative session to improve services for Georgia students and their families.



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 school districts and the state to provide health insurance for non-certified staff by funding 25% of the per member per month (PMPM) cost of the SHBP for non-certified staff for all districts and up to 50% of PMPM 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 and reading teachers to support implementation of [HB 538](#), the Georgia Early Literacy Act, and one for district-identified high-need areas.

State investment in these priorities will enhance the partnership between the state and local districts, balancing the financial commitment of each and enhancing service delivery to Georgia students.

Georgia’s children and youth have significant mental health needs. One in four children ages three to 17 in the state have a diagnosed mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral problem.¹ In 2023, 24,297 students across the state attempted suicide, and 44,330 reported harming themselves.²

Addressing students’ mental health challenges effectively in schools is often difficult. Georgia funds school mental health professionals at ratios well above recommended 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	1:250	1:2,475³
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 acted to improve the school psychologist ratio by approving [HB 283](#), which reduced the ratio to one school psychologist for every 2,420 students. Though the new ratio was to be implemented in Fiscal Year 2016, no action has been taken.

The school counselor ratio does not fully account for the multiple roles counselors fill. In addition to providing mental health support, counselors guide students to choose courses, facilitate career exploration, manage dual enrollment requirements, and help develop post-high school plans. Under the existing ration, it is difficult for counselors to effectively fill both their mental health and guidance roles.


All school mental health professionals have a vital role in identifying and intervening with students at risk for harming themselves or others. Ensuring every school has sufficient numbers of these professionals is essential.

Despite their limited number, mental health professionals in schools may be the only resource for some students and families who need mental health treatment and wellbeing assistance.

Across Georgia counties:

- 90 have no licensed psychologist
- 53 have no licensed social worker
- 45 have neither a licensed psychologist nor a licensed social worker ⁴

This shortage of mental health professionals heightens the urgency to ensure schools have sufficient counselors, social workers, and psychologists to meet students’ needs.



Recommendation: Improve student access to mental health professionals by 1) funding a minimum of one full-time school social worker for all districts;⁵ 2) funding school psychologists at a ratio of 1:2,420 as required under HB 283 (2013);⁶ and 3) lowering the school counselor ratio to 1:400.⁷

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. 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

3. Under the recommendation, districts with fewer than 2,475 FTEs 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.

4. 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

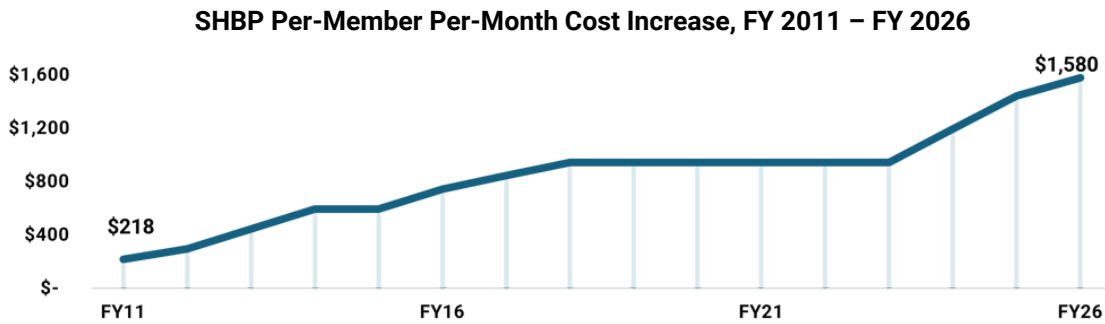
5. In FY 2025, 65 districts earn less than one full-time social worker under the QBE. In total, these 65 districts earn 33.22 social workers. To bring each of these districts up to one full-time social worker, the state would fund approximately 32 additional social workers.

6. In FY 2025, the state is funding 705.17 school psychologists. If the ratio was lowered to 1:2,420, the state would fund approximately 721 psychologists, or about 16 additional psychologists.


7. In FY 2025, the state is funding approximately 3,878.79 school counselors through the QBE formula. If the ratio was lowered to 1:400, the estimated number of counselors funded via the QBE would be 4,364 or 485 more counselors.

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 including bus drivers, paraprofessionals, nutrition staff, and other employees essential to school operations. The partnership ended in 2012 when the state eliminated its contribution to the SHBP for these staff members.

The PMPM 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, an amount exceeding the salary of some non-certified staff.⁸



A district with 100 non-certified staff spent an estimated \$261,840 in FY 2011 for SHBP coverage for these employees, an amount climbing to \$1,896,000 in FY 2026. These increases squeeze districts’ budgets, and the anticipated hike in the PMPM 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 by funding 25% of SHBP costs for non-certified staff for all districts and up to 50% of these costs for low-wealth districts. In alignment with equalization grants, low-wealth districts are defined as districts in which 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 throughout their careers is critical to student learning. Providing high quality professional development is particularly important now as educators across the state work to reform literacy instruction and help all students become proficient readers, the goal of the Georgia Early Literacy Act. Even with valuable new resources, including Cox Campus training in structured literacy, teachers and school leaders need training and support to effectively implement all components of HB 538.

Another priority group for professional development is school leaders. There has been significant turnover among school leaders, and it is critical that new leaders as well as those in the leadership pipeline receive high quality training and mentoring support. Effective school leaders are linked to higher student achievement and teacher retention.

State funding for professional development is limited in Georgia. Under the QBE formula, professional development funding is calculated as a percentage—currently 0.9%—of the state base teacher salary. The percentage had been 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 for each of these teachers in FY 2025. Instead, they are allocated \$28.73.

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

⁸ For example, the state allocates \$17,641.07 per kindergarten paraprofessional for salary in FY 2025. It does not fund paraprofessionals for other grade levels.

Many school districts across the state are challenged by persistent teacher shortages. Too often this results in teachers leading classes outside their field of expertise.

Percent of Courses Taught by Out-of-Field Educator, 2021-2022⁹

	Math	Science	ELA	Social Studies
Elementary	5.5%	6.2%	5.0%	5.3%
Middle	12.3%	16.3%	16.1%	12.1%
High	17.1%	19.2%	16.4%	17.2%

Teachers with provisional licenses who lack training in effective instruction and classroom management are another consequence of the shortage. 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.

Because of HB 385, districts and state charter schools placed 242 veteran teachers in hard-to-fill positions in FY 2022, and the number of retired teachers returning to work rose to 382 in FY 2023. Teachers do not retire early to seek employment under HB 385, according to data from the Teachers Retirement System. Unless the legislature addresses the program's sunset date during the 2025 session, districts will lose this critical tool on June 30, 2026, when this policy expires.

Some districts cannot fully utilize 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 studies.¹⁰ Districts cannot hire skilled veteran teachers to fill vacant positions in elementary education, ELA, or reading—critical to meeting the state's goal of reading proficiency for all students—unless their RESA has identified them as a RESA-wide top-three need. Districts face the same challenge for CTAE, ESOL, social studies or any other shortage area unique to their community.



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.

9. Flamini, M., & Wang, S. (2024). 2022 Georgia K-12 Teacher and Leader Workforce Report. Governor's Office of Student Achievement. Retrieved from: <https://gosa.georgia.gov/georgia-k-12-teacher-and-leader-workforce-report>

10. U.S. Department of Education. Teacher Shortage Area Report, Georgia, 2023-2024. Retrieved from: <https://tsa.ed.gov/#/reports>