



Voices from Georgia Schools: Georgia Educators on Supporting Public Education During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed new demands on Georgia's public schools while they cope with a \$1 billion cut in state funding. With no guidebook for best practices to operate during a pandemic, Georgia educators have created and continue to adapt new strategies to foster student learning and protect student safety and mental and physical health. A new survey of nearly 6,300 educators from across the state conducted by the Professional Association of Georgia Educators underscores immediate student and educator needs. Insights shared by educators indicate that policymakers should reevaluate school assessment and accountability policy as well as strategic support for the professionals who work with Georgia's students every day in public schools. Key PAGE survey findings include:

- Eighty-seven percent of respondents say the school shutdown had a negative effect on student learning including learning losses in reading and math.
- More than 75 percent of educators report higher social-emotional needs among students, including increased depression, anxiety and social isolation.
- Forty-seven percent of teachers are currently providing both in-person and virtual instruction.
- Less than 18 percent of all educators believe Georgia Milestones provides them information to improve instruction.
- Educators believe it is more important for parents to get information about their schools' class size, teacher qualifications, teacher retention and access to art, music, physical education and foreign languages classes than standardized test scores.
- About 14 percent of educators with 20 or fewer years of experience say they will likely leave the profession in the next five years, and 29 percent report they will likely depart within 10 years. Salary and school leadership are the most often-cited causes of attrition among these educators.

Though deeply challenging, current circumstances provide an opportunity for policymakers and educators to build on the policies and practices they have already implemented to support public schools. New student-centered and educator-informed policies can mitigate the harm caused by the pandemic and, equally important, address longer standing barriers to student success.

Teachers in Georgia earn 25 percent less than professionals in other fields with similar education levels.

Southern Regional Education Board

Methodology

PAGE developed the online survey and emailed a link to all members on Monday, Nov. 9. The survey was open until Wednesday, Dec. 2. Members received several reminder emails while the survey was open. In total, 6,293 educators from 171 of Georgia's 180 school districts participated in the survey.

Survey Findings

Survey findings fall into two broad categories: effects of the pandemic and fostering student-focused policies. Educators point to strategies to address both of these issues and renew practices within public education.

Pandemic Effects: Academic

The vast majority of Georgia educators—87 percent—reported that the school shutdown in the spring had a negative effect on student learning. Half of all teachers and nearly 62 percent of school counselors and social workers indicated the harm was significant.

Difficulties in reading were a particular concern raised by nearly 900 educators in their written responses. Over 500 educators wrote about troubling gaps and challenges that students face in math.

While most educators report the shutdown negatively affected their students, a small portion of students did better with online instruction according to their teachers. Teachers of color are more likely to report seeing positive effects on their students academically.

We're seeing HUGE gaps in reading. Kindergarten & 1st grade students missed crucial phonics instruction during school closure. This has placed many students below grade level in reading.
Elementary Teacher

My students are missing prior skills that they were supposed to gain last spring which makes it difficult to build on top of them. Math builds as the years progress.
High School Teacher

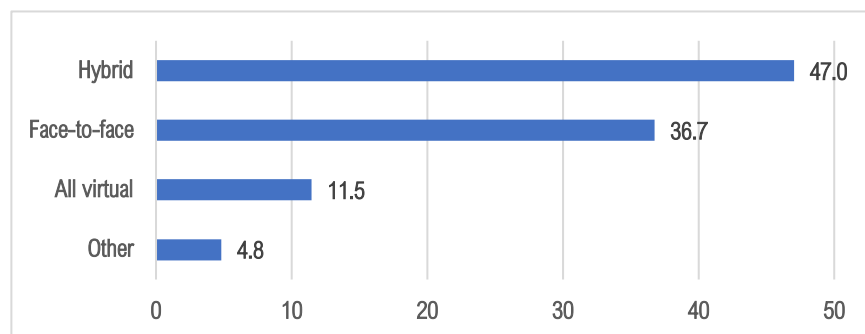
We noticed a marked decrease in reading Lexile and math fluency for all students, but our at-risk population was hit the hardest.
Middle School Leader

Students who do not have broadband or devices to support virtual learning fared poorly during the shutdown. In addition to learning loss, about two-thirds of teachers and school leaders report that students lost interest in schoolwork. Increased student absences were noted by at least half of educators. Teachers of color are more likely to report an increase in student absences than their peers. Lack of broadband and devices resulted in many educators losing contact with students and some students dropping out.

Challenges continue in the current school year. Approximately 73 percent of educators report that their schools use a hybrid instructional model, which combines face-to-face and virtual instruction. Nearly 16 percent indicate their schools use face-to-face only instruction while close to six percent say their schools are fully virtual. The remainder are using other approaches.

Teachers' instructional responsibilities vary. Some are providing only face-to-face instruction, some only virtual, and almost half are doing both.

Teachers' Instructional Responsibilities, 2020-2021 School Year



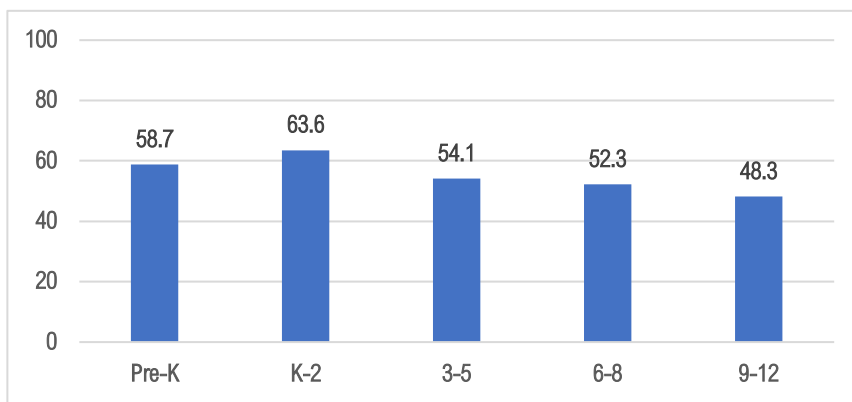
In written responses, teachers described the difficulty of teaching in both face-to-face and virtual formats. One stated, “We are currently teaching both in-class and remote students at the same time. I feel like I can’t focus on either group. I wish we could put all the remote kids in classes together and all the in-class students in other classes together, so we didn’t constantly feel torn.”

The top three solutions educators identified to address the harm caused by the shutdown, mitigate ongoing challenges, and respond to persistent disparities are:

- Smaller class sizes
- Personalized learning
- Wraparound services

Approximately 57 percent of Georgia teachers ranked smaller class sizes as the top strategy to meet students' academic needs, and about 42 percent of building leaders agreed. Small class sizes are particularly important for educators who work with Georgia's youngest students.

Percent of Educators Ranking Smaller Class Sizes as Top Academic Student Support Strategy



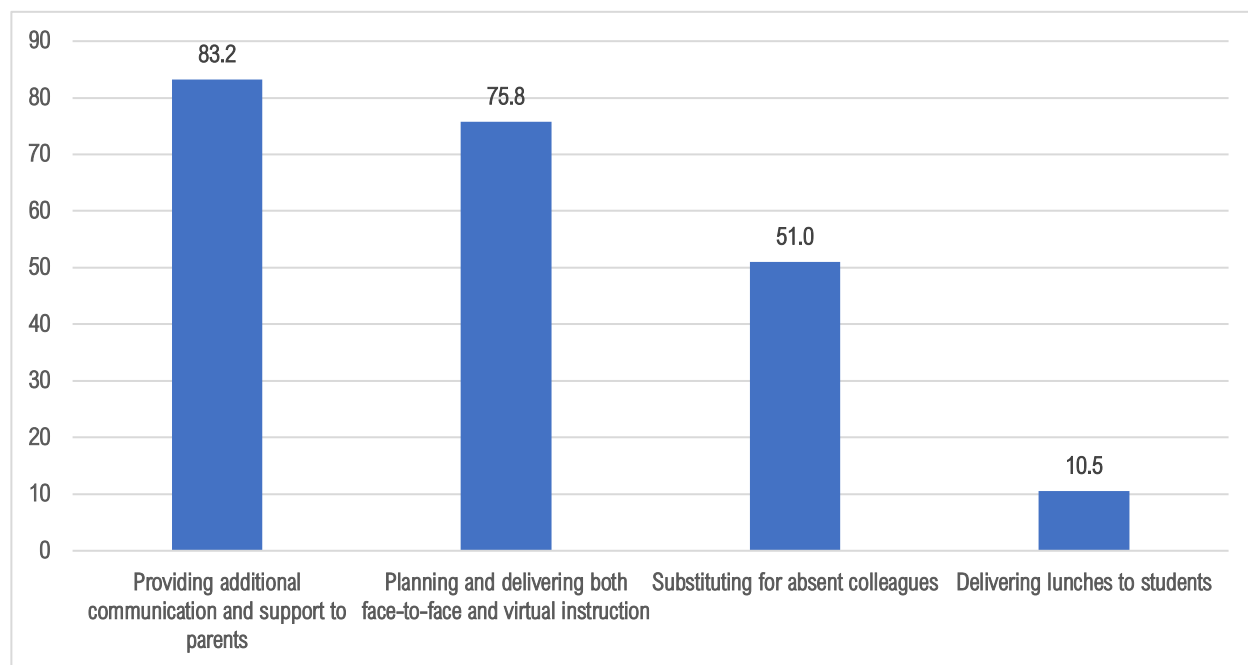
Increased personalized learning—including flexible pacing, project-based and experiential learning, apprenticeships and other strategies that build instruction around students' needs and interests—was the second strategy most frequently cited by educators. District and school leaders showed the greatest levels of interest in pursuing this strategy. Educators also identified wraparound services to address student physical and mental health as a key strategy to improve student learning. These three strategies reflect educators' commitment to support individual student needs and goals. Increased personalized learning and wraparound services are made more possible when educators work with smaller groups of students and can form closer relationships with them.

A quarter of Black teachers, who are more likely to work in high-poverty schools than their peers, flagged extra learning time as their top student support strategy. They favor high-quality summer or weekend programs or providing a recovery year for students who are struggling academically.

When asked about the assistance educators need to best meet student academic needs, teachers, school counselors, and school leaders again cited smaller class sizes. Uninterrupted planning time was also a top need. More than 75 percent of teachers ranked it the first or second most important support they need. As one teacher noted, "Give us time to work uninterrupted... We need the time to plan, not just "sling" it together."

Protecting planning time is especially urgent. Teachers have taken on new responsibilities in multiple areas to help students and families manage learning in current circumstances.

Percent of Teachers Reporting Additional Responsibilities



Pandemic Effects: Social-Emotional Well-Being

Student social-emotional needs are higher this year, according to more than three-quarters of educators. Over half of central office staff, as well as school counselors and social workers, report that the increase in social-emotional needs is significant, as do about 40 percent of school leaders. Educators described an array of student needs including:

- Loneliness and depression
- Social isolation and decreased abilities to interact with peers and others
- Fear of contracting the virus themselves
- Worry about loved ones contracting the virus or grief due to death of loved one
- Loss of routine and ongoing uncertainties due to the pandemic
- Anxiety about parent job loss and financial pressures
- Stress to make up learning losses and master new content
- Food insecurity and other basic needs

Fear—more of my students struggle with fear of the unknown, COVID, or changes in routine
Elementary School Teacher

Most of my students have little or no food to eat on the weekends or after lunch.
Elementary School Teacher

While we are not a Title I school, many of my students are still facing significant social-emotional struggles from the economic uncertainty created by the pandemic. Addressing students' needs and supporting them during these difficult times is our most urgent need.
High School Teacher

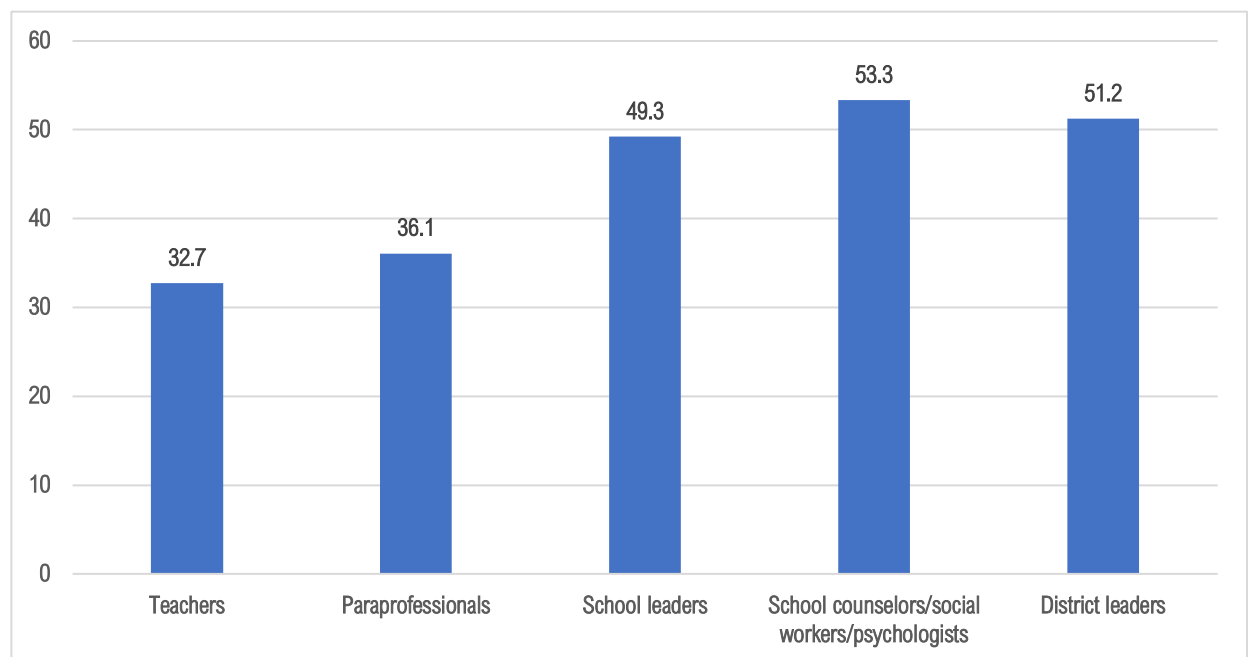
The strategies to better meet students social-emotional needs that educators identify most frequently are:

- Reduced time on administrative tasks
- More school counselors
- More school social workers and school psychologists

Educators want more time to interact directly with students and respond to their needs. More than half of teachers cite reducing the time they spend on administrative tasks as the most important assistance they need to best meet students’ social-emotional concerns. This is also identified as a critical strategy by a significant portion of educators who serve students in other roles. Reducing time spent on administrative tasks is particularly important this year given the additional responsibilities educators have assumed to assist students and families during the pandemic.

Educators want more school counselors, social workers and psychologists working alongside them to support students’ social-emotional needs. This finding aligns with earlier feedback from educators on past PAGE surveys. For several years, PAGE members have raised concerns about student mental health and advocated for increased funding to expand the number of these professionals serving Georgia’s students. The pandemic heightens the urgency of addressing this need.

Percent of Educators Ranking Additional Counselors/Social Workers/Psychologists as Top Student Social-Emotional Support Strategy

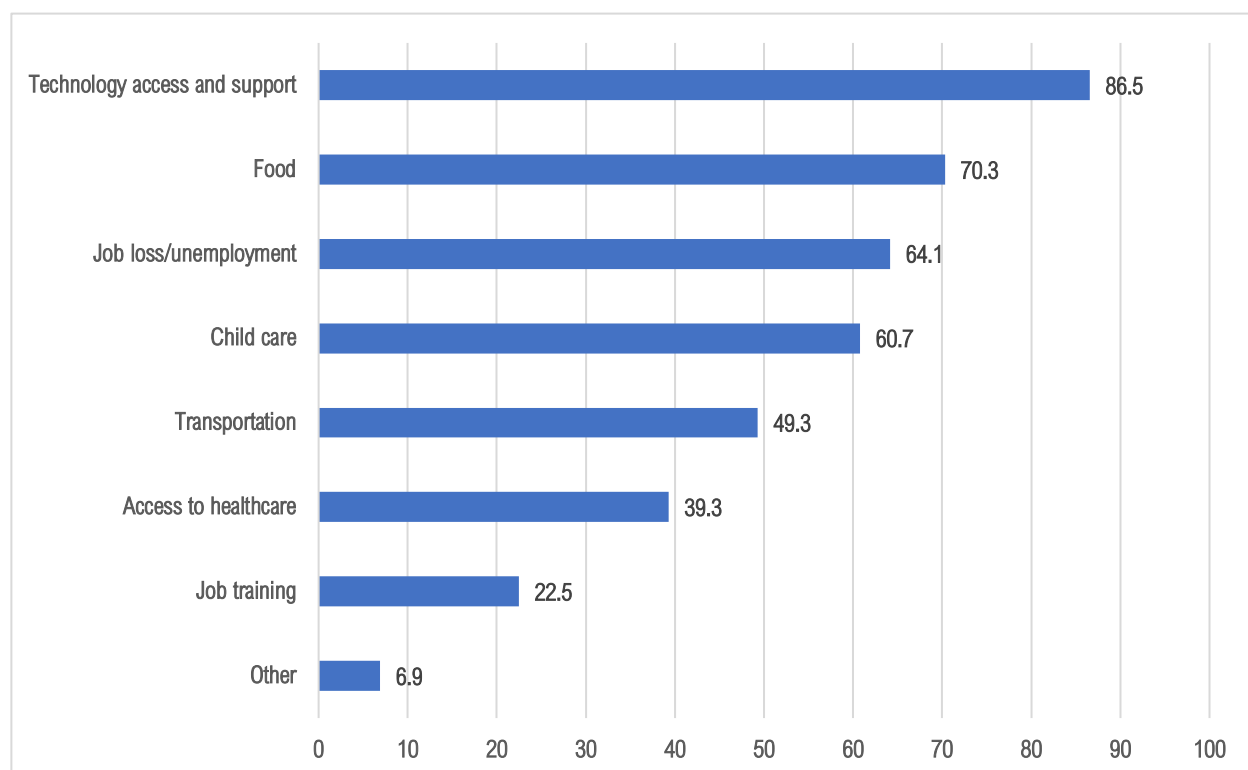


Over half of teachers say that bringing more of these critical professionals into schools is the second most important strategy to address students’ social-emotional needs. It follows only a reduction in time-consuming administrative tasks.

Pandemic Effects: Family Needs

Educators reported families need assistance in multiple areas to cope with the effects of the pandemic and persistent challenges of poverty.

Percent of Educators Reporting Need for Family Aid



District and school leaders, as well as school counselors and social workers, report even higher levels of need across these areas. Over 80 percent of district leaders and nearly that many school leaders, counselors and social workers indicate families need help due to job loss. They also see greater need for food, healthcare, transportation and childcare. Aiding districts and community organizations in establishing partnerships to provide wraparound services would be a significant step forward in meeting family needs.

Student-Focused Policies: Instruction

Educators favor personalized instruction to better adapt to and meet each student's needs. This includes robust support for multiple pathways to attaining a high school diploma. More than seven in 10 educators favor making this change from the current approach, which offers one pathway for all students. An even higher portion of high school educators—80 percent—believe there should be multiple pathways. Less than a quarter of educators hold that the current approach is responsive to students' academic needs.

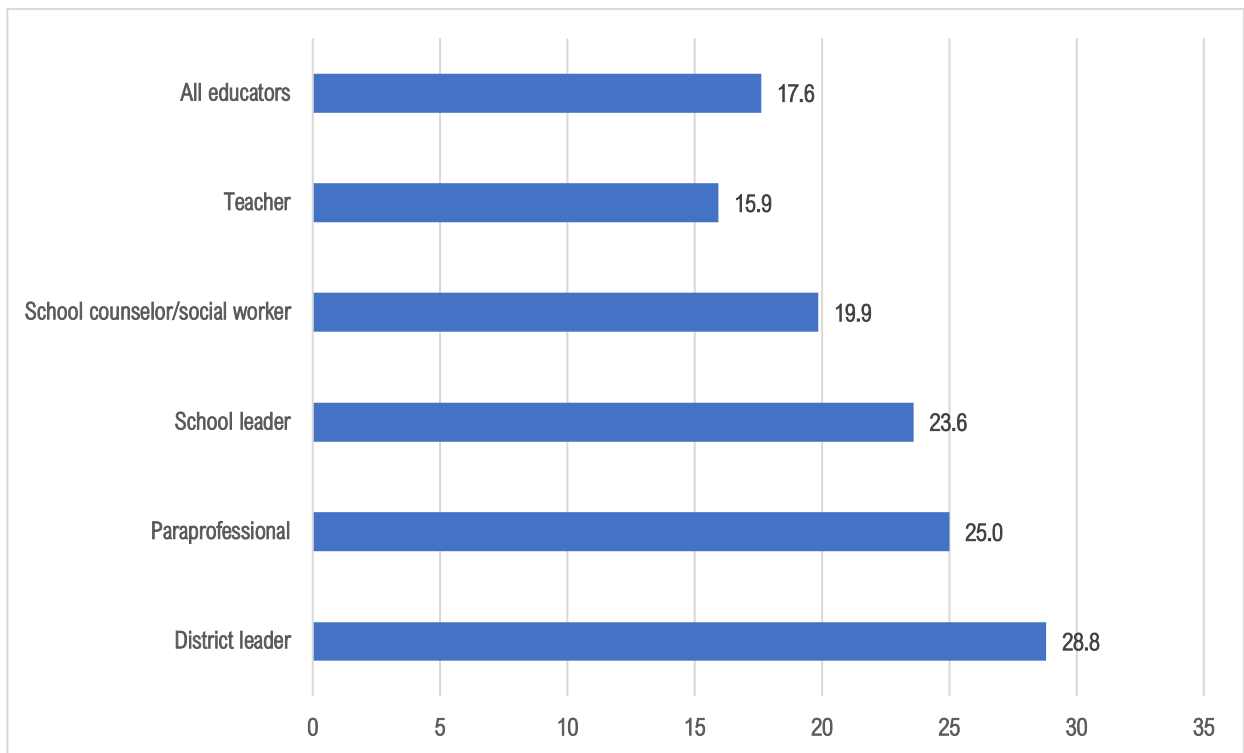
Most educators believe the pandemic will change instruction permanently. Nearly three-quarters of educators expect that weather emergencies or other similar disruptions that previously closed school buildings will no longer stop instruction. Other anticipated changes could influence instruction more directly. About 57 percent of teachers and over 70 percent of school and district leaders believe parents will want more flexibility and choices in the future. One path to increased options is providing more online courses, which approximately 62 percent of teachers anticipate, as do even greater numbers of school district

leaders. Over two-thirds of educators believe use of adaptive technologies in tutoring and instruction will grow. Approximately 42 percent of all educators and more than half of district leaders expect greater flexibility in the pace of instruction with more students progressing at their own pace.

Student-Focused Policies: Assessment

The state’s standardized assessments, Georgia Milestones, falls short if its purpose is to provide educators with information to improve student learning. Less than 18 percent of survey respondents believe the Milestones assessments help educators improve student learning.

Percent of Educators Who Believe Georgia Milestones Helps Improve Student Learning



The majority of educators identify measures of students’ critical thinking and problem-solving skills as the top approach to understand student learning and progress. The second most frequently cited measure is student grades. Educators also rank graduation/promotion rate and student surveys as better indicators of student learning than standardized tests.

Most educators support a Georgia Department of Education proposal to significantly revise state testing. Under the proposal, which would require a change in federal and state laws, students would be tested in third, fifth and eighth grades as well as once in high school. Formative tests would be used in other grade levels to better assist teachers in designing student-focused instructional strategies.

Student-Focused Policies: Accountability

Standardized test scores are the foundation of the state’s current accountability system, which includes annual school and district report cards. These report cards provide parents, community members, and other stakeholders with information about schools in their community.

Educators do not believe they give parents the most important information about their schools. They point instead to factors that help parents understand what is happening in classrooms: class size, teacher qualifications, teacher retention rate, and student access to art, music, physical education, and foreign language classes.

Most Important School Information for Parents to Know as Identified by Educators

School leaders	Class size: 36.6%	Teacher qualifications: 25.0%	Teacher retention: 11.7%
Teachers	Class size: 45.4%	Teacher qualifications: 18.0%	Teacher retention: 14.2%
Paraprofessionals	Class size: 36.8%	Teacher qualifications: 28.2%	CCRPI score: 10.5%
District leaders	Teacher qualifications: 35.1%	Access to art, music, PE, & foreign language classes: 23.2%	Teacher retention: 15.8%
School counselors / social workers / psychologists	Class size: 30.6%	Teacher qualifications: 28.0%	CCRPI score: 9.32%

Student-Focused Policies: Educator Workforce

The foundation of student-focused public schools are educators. There are signs that this foundation needs reinforcement. Among educators with 20 or fewer years of experience, 14 percent say they are unlikely to remain in education for five more years and another 14 percent are neutral, indicating uncertainty about their professional path. Looking ahead 10 years, about 29 percent indicate they are likely to leave, and 17 percent are neutral. Salary and school leadership are the most frequently cited top reasons for leaving followed by student behavior. Nearly 46 percent of educators with 20 years or less say they would not recommend education as a career.

To date, the COVID-19 pandemic does not appear to have worsened educator attrition. Educators' answers over the last several years to the question of how likely they are to stay in the profession are fairly consistent. Policymakers should pursue strategies to reduce educator attrition and keep more in schools, supporting students.

These departures come on top of those expected among educators with more experience. Approximately 31 percent of educators with more than 20 years of experience indicate they are likely to leave the profession within five years, and about 71 percent say they will be gone within 10 years. Nearly six in 10 of these veteran educators plan to retire, but 12 percent report school leadership and 10 percent indicate salary are the reasons they will leave.

Attracting strong candidates to the field and helping them thrive professionally is essential to strengthening the foundation of public schools. Among the core factors that affect recruitment and retention, salary was identified by approximately 56 percent of educators as most important. Salary is particularly critical for Black educators with more than 70 percent naming it as the top retention concern.

Taken together, school leadership and school climate were flagged as most important by nearly 40 percent of educators. Thoughtful guidance and encouragement from school leaders, supportive colleagues, and a positive professional environment matter.

States and districts can deploy other strategies to encourage teachers to remain in the classroom. Over one-third of all educators ranked student loan repayment as the most important tool to improve retention. It is particularly important for teachers with 10 or fewer years of experience: more than 40 percent of these

educators named it the top retention strategy. Loan repayment is also a top strategy for teachers of color, who are more likely to teach in high-poverty schools and leave the profession.

Educators highlighted the need for more support for early career teachers. Approximately 22 percent ranked high-quality induction programs for new teachers as the most important retention strategy while another 18 percent tagged mentors for these teachers as the top strategy. Financial incentives to teach in geographic or subject shortage areas were prioritized by about 20 percent of educators.

Recommendations

Policymakers can address concerns Georgia educators raised in the survey and better support students so that they can thrive in all areas—academics and physical and mental health. PAGE recommends actions state and district leaders can take to sustain and strengthen public schools at a time of historic challenge. These recommendations reflect and expand on issues PAGE has prioritized for legislators in recent years.

1. Support student mental health
 - Fund school counselors for all students including special education and gifted students who currently are not allocated money for this purpose under the state’s K-12 funding formula.
 - Support the development of hubs in schools, which can coordinate and leverage community and state resources to meet students’ mental health, physical and developmental needs.
2. Invest in student academic success
 - Eliminate the \$1 billion austerity cut in school funding implemented in the Fiscal Year 2021 budget.
 - Do not divert state funds to private schools by expanding Georgia’s two private school voucher programs or creating a third one.
 - Add a poverty weight to the state’s K-12 funding formula, the Quality Basic Education formula, so that high-poverty schools can reduce class size and expand personalized instruction.
3. Make Georgia the No. 1 state to teach
 - Invest in high quality induction and mentoring programs for early career teachers.
 - Provide student loan reimbursements prioritizing educators in high-poverty schools or shortage areas.
 - Develop ongoing professional learning for emerging and experienced school leaders to better support school staff and their work
 - Attract and retain high quality educators by fulfilling Gov. Brian Kemp’s campaign pledge to raise educator salaries
4. Align assessment and accountability policies with student and parent needs.
 - Reduce state-mandated tests to minimum required under federal law.
 - Revise accountability metrics to include information more relevant to parents.

The coronavirus pandemic threatens the current well-being and future success of Georgia’s public school students. State and local leaders have an opportunity to mitigate the harms caused by the pandemic and further strengthen public education across all of Georgia’s communities. It is an opportunity they should seize.

– Prepared by PAGE Senior Policy Analyst Claire Suggs