



Uncharted Instruction: Georgia Educators Adapting to COVID-19 School Closures

The COVID-19 virus has disrupted the lives of Georgia students, teachers and families. On March 16, 2020, Gov. Brian Kemp issued an executive order temporarily closing all schools and postsecondary institutions in the state, one of many steps state leaders have taken to stem the rapid spread of the virus. Kemp subsequently closed schools for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year to protect the health of Georgians. With scant notice and often little preparation, Georgia's Pre-K-12 educators pivoted quickly to provide instruction and support to students and parents in almost every community through remote learning experiences. PAGE developed a survey to capture and understand the experiences of Georgia educators during the initial days of the school closure. Responses from over 15,000 educators across the state make clear they are striving to maintain contact with their students and continue nurturing their academic growth. Educators are doing so in difficult circumstances that challenge them and the students and families they serve.

The PAGE team continues to review and analyze the extensive information educators shared through the survey. Initial findings fall into two broad categories: remote learning and how educators are responding to the changes spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic. Highlights in each area include:

Remote Learning:

- Is a complex process that requires new skills of educators and expanded resources
- Can foster inequities
- Engages students unevenly
- Relies on high levels of parent engagement

Educators' Responses Reveal:

- Deep commitment to students
- Strain of current circumstances
- Concerns about safety and job security

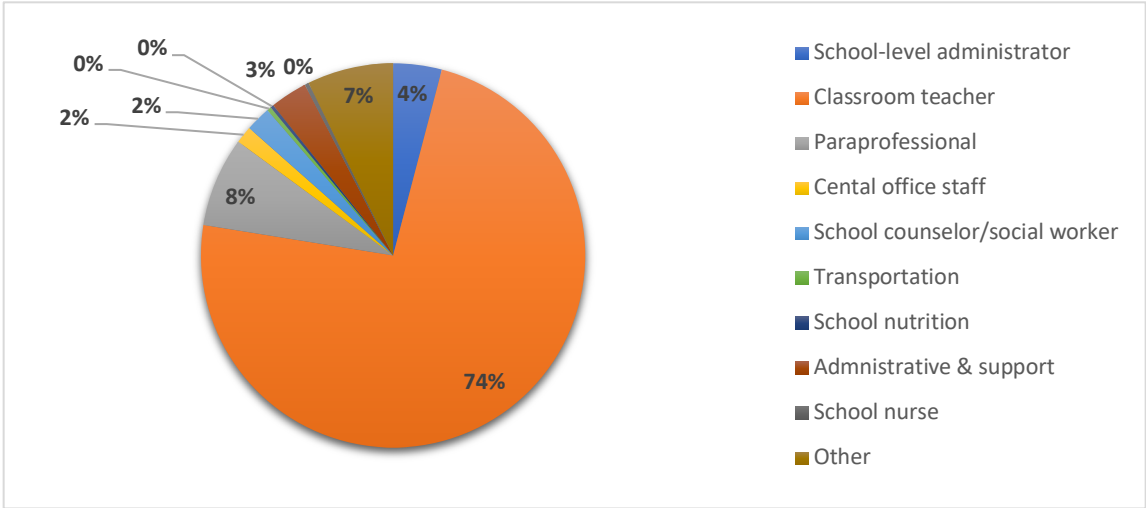
This report examines each of these areas, providing more detail from survey responses as well as educators' written comments.

Survey Background

PAGE sent the survey to its more than 97,000 members via email on Friday, March 20. The survey was open through Friday, March 27. During this period, school closures were temporary. After the survey closed, Gov. Kemp announced schools will remain closed for the 2019-2020 school year.

In total, 15,321 educators who work in 177 of Georgia’s 180 school districts participated in the survey. Classroom teachers comprise three-quarters of respondents.

Survey Participants Represent Educators Serving in All Roles¹



Remote Learning

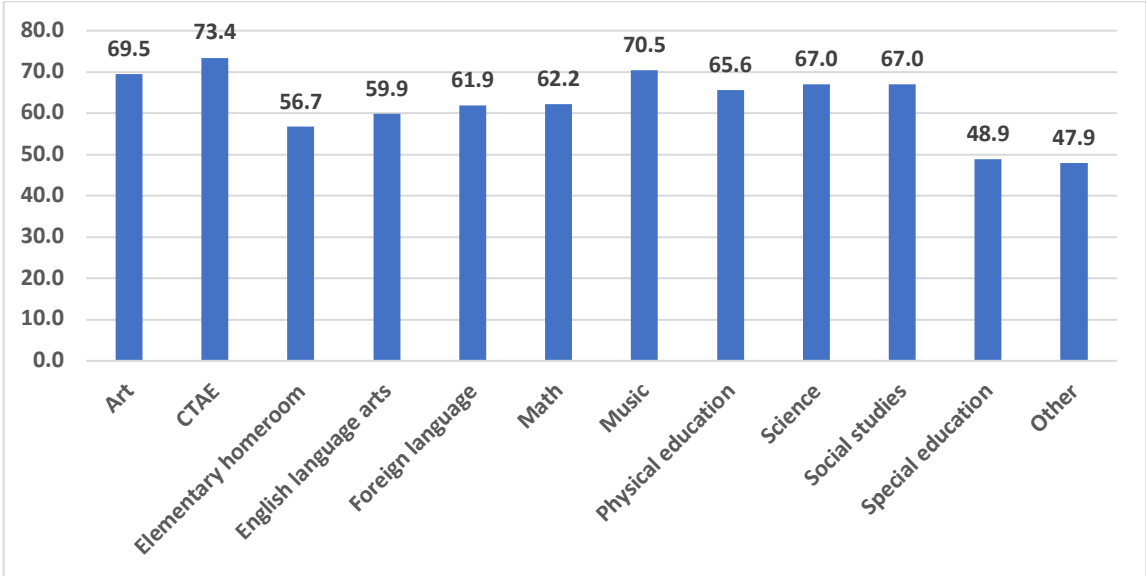
Over 93 percent of educators report that their districts have shifted to online instruction. Adapting to this instructional format has been uneven for educators and for students. Some educators report a smooth transition to this instructional format while many others have run into bumps. Feedback from Georgia educators provides insight into how remote learning is being implemented under the current circumstances.

Remote learning is a complex process that requires new skills of educators and expanded resources. Feedback from educators indicates that online instruction requires technical knowledge about and access to digital tools to generate instructional content as well as to support students’ use of tools. It also requires pedagogical knowledge about effective online instruction. Some educators gained this knowledge prior to the closure with several explaining that their districts or schools had taken previous steps to integrate technology into instruction. Many educators have limited knowledge about and experience in providing online instruction and are scrambling to acquire it. One indicator of this gap is the portion of teachers who report that converting lessons to online formats is their greatest challenge in shifting to online instruction: 22 percent. Many others also noted this challenge in their written comments.

Educator Perspective: “It takes time to convert to online lessons, time to learn new digital technologies, time to type responses to student/parent/coworker questions that would have been more expedient in person... And time is the one commodity we didn't/don't have. But we are making it work. Also, in an in-person, real-time classroom, the dialogue that enables teaching and learning is more controlled.”

When asked about needed support, the majority of teachers across all grade levels and subject areas identified lists of high-quality online resources as the assistance they need most. This was followed by webinars or other web-based professional learning, and access to experts who can provide assistance.

Percent of Teachers Seeking High-Quality Online Resources



In written comments, several teachers noted that school or district leaders disseminated lists of online resources; however, they did not have time in the current circumstances to review the resources, determine which align well with their content and instructional strategies, and learn to use them effectively.

Educator Perspective: “The vast array of online sources provides too steep of a hill to climb to find good material. There is plenty out there, but I am so busy doing the day to day, I can't easily hunt down what is good.”

Remote learning can foster inequities. While over 93 percent of educators report their districts are providing online instruction, many of their students are not able to access it. Over a third of educators report that lack of student access to online tools and programs is the greatest barrier they face with online instruction. In their written descriptions of challenges with online instruction, nearly 1,000 educators flag lack of student access as a barrier.

Poverty appears to be one cause of this gap. Teachers in districts with the highest student poverty rates report the lowest levels of access to online learning while those in districts with the lowest student poverty rates indicate the highest.

Teachers’ Estimate of Portion of Their Students with Reliable Access to Online Instruction²

	Districts in highest poverty quintile	Districts in second-highest poverty quintile	Districts in middle poverty quintile	Districts in second-lowest poverty quintile	Districts in lowest poverty quintile
0 to 20 percent	16.2	11.4	9.6	5.1	2.3
20 to 40 percent	17.9	17.7	17.9	12.3	5.0
40 to 60 percent	23.0	23.8	24.4	24.0	11.9
60 to 80 percent	20.3	20.4	22.8	27.9	22.6
80 to 100 percent	13.1	18.0	16.9	23.8	51.9
Do not know	9.5	8.7	8.6	7.0	6.3

Educator Perspective: “I certainly need more training but due to our ‘rural’ majority, many kids don’t have reliable service to participate in Zoom, Skype, etc. Most are using a ‘hotspot’ but they are sharing it with siblings and parents trying to work from home.”

Other students who frequently experience barriers to online instruction are those in rural communities, special education students, English language learners and younger students. Often these students do not have access to online instruction or available resources do not meet their needs.

Special education teachers and teachers in pre-K through second grade highlighted their concerns about online instruction in written responses. Some special education students need intensive support including one-on-one instruction. They may also need specific tools such as touch screen devices, eye-gazing boards or manipulatives, which are hand-held items that help them understand new concepts and practice skills. This type of instruction does not adapt easily to online teaching, and parents do not have the expert knowledge and skills of these teachers. Teachers in early grades share many of these concerns. Online tools are often not suitable for young children or require ongoing guidance from parents.

Special education teachers also express concerns about adhering to documentation and reporting requirements required by the Individualized Education Plans that guide instruction for their students. It is often difficult to comply with these requirements when teachers cannot interact directly with or carefully observe students. Several teachers proposed temporarily waiving these requirements during the COVID-19-triggered closure.

Educators indicate that they are supplying students who do not have online access with paper packets of instructional materials. Some note that packets do not resolve all access problems:

Students whose families do not have transportation cannot pick up materials at schools, nor can they easily submit completed packets to teachers for review.

Educator Perspective: "Students' access to internet is a challenge but the real challenge is that I teach students with severe and profound disabilities. Students with disabilities require concrete learning. It's a challenge to teach using the internet. The students don't all understand what the pictures mean/represent."

Remote learning engages students unevenly. A number of educators noted that some students are not participating in online work or are doing so sporadically for various reasons. Some teachers explained that students are taking care of siblings while parents work, are working themselves, may have to share electronic devices with siblings or navigate other barriers. Other educators described students as not viewing work as important or considering the closure a vacation particularly because it is unclear how and for what students will be held accountable.

Educator Perspective: "We don't know why so many students are not participating. We are working to determine whether families don't feel they have to or if it is a lack of resources or understanding."

"At least some of our middle-school students are having to care for younger siblings and trying to help them with schoolwork, prepare meals while their parents are at work, etc. We're worried about the stress on those students. Also, many students are disengaged from the online learning - they have Internet access, but simply don't want to do anything. Teachers and administrators keep making contact so that students do the online work (which is simple and minimal)."

Remote learning relies on high levels of parent engagement. Many educators expressed a need for greater parent involvement in monitoring and supporting students' online work. However, they frequently recognized the hurdles that hinder parents' ability to do so. Parents:

- Are working so may have limited time or lack knowledge to assist students
- Are unfamiliar with and often confused by the multiple communication tools and educational platforms, which can vary across districts and even schools
- Have limited English speaking skills

Educator Perspective: "Students and parents are overwhelmed and are having a hard time getting the work completed. Parents are at different academic levels and stress levels, so students aren't getting equal access to the curriculum. Especially students who are low income or have a disability."

"In addition to not all students having internet access, a challenge has been ability of parents to facilitate online assignments for elementary students, particularly parents who are still working or have multiple students sharing one device. There is also the matter of students who don't live in supportive environments at home."

Educators' Responses

Educators have adapted quickly to their evolving context and continue to provide support and instruction to students. Functioning in this new environment has not been easy for many educators, and they described current pressures and future issues. Their survey responses reveal how Georgia educators are experiencing the current circumstances.

Georgia educators are deeply committed to students. Though their range of knowledge about and experience using online instruction varied considerably, educators embraced this approach. In only a few days, educators developed and rolled out instructional plans and tools for students. They jumped into trainings to enhance their skills and become technology guides for parents. Over a quarter of educators have purchased items to support remote instruction with their own money. They are emailing, texting and calling students and parents to check in and monitor progress. For many educators, supporting student and parent use of online instruction extends their workday past their “normal” workday.

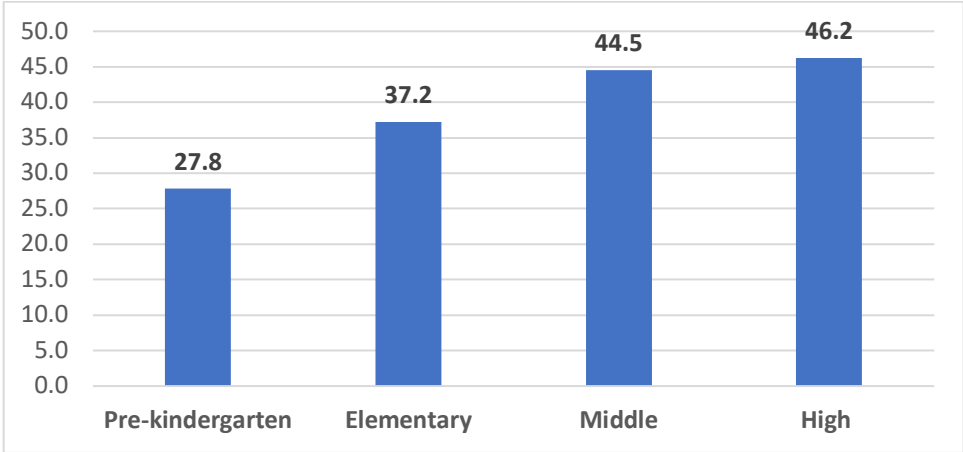
Educator Perspective: “As a teacher, I'm working more than normal because even though we have ‘office hours,’ some of my parents are still working during the day and aren't able to help their child until they get home, which means I'm getting calls and texts at all hours of the day. I understand that I can enforce the boundaries, but as a caring teacher I'm not going to turn any parent away that is begging for help.”

Educators' efforts to support students go beyond academics. All districts represented in the survey provide food to students to replace the meals they would have received in school.³ In addition, many are continuing to provide other services including assistance from school counselors and social workers. In some districts, school nurses are also available by phone or email.

Educator Perspective: “We have provided devices to take home and a flyer about free internet from Comcast, free lunch and breakfast to all children 18 years and younger regardless of the school system they are in, counseling services and materials are provided through the feeding program happening each day through bus routes, special education services are tailored individually and some ESS teachers have been doing well checks with students and families to be sure they are okay.”

When asked about the non-academic needs of students and their families in coping with the effects of the COVID-19 virus, educators lifted up multiple issues of concern. The top issue cited is food insecurity. Approximately 36 percent of all respondents identified it as a priority while 41 percent of teachers did so. While a concern for all teachers, those working with older students cited food insecurity more frequently than teachers in early grades.

Food Insecurity Cited by Teachers as Priority Need



Child care was identified as a top need by 20 percent of all respondents and 22 percent of those who are teachers.

The nearly 3,900 educators who wrote responses to this question offered more insight into the challenges the pandemic may bring to students and their families. About 15 percent of these respondents said families would need assistance with all of the following issues:

- Activities (e.g. games, art materials, books, puzzles) for students while isolating at home
- Food insecurity
- Transportation
- Access to health care
- Mental health counseling
- Child care
- Access to employment services
- Legal aid assistance

Food insecurity and child care were flagged by many educators in their written responses as was employment services. Educators’ concern for their students and families runs deep.

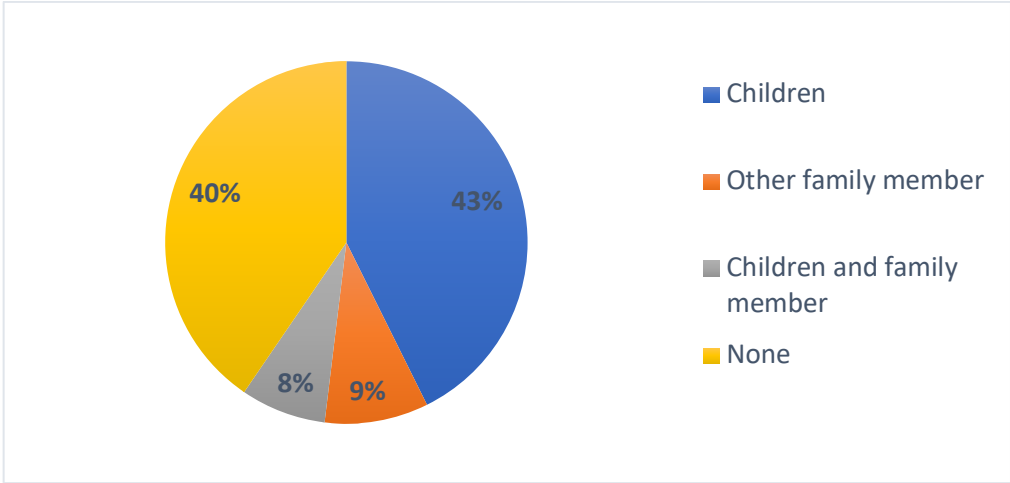
Educator Perspective: “Most of my students come from families of hard-working folks, many of whom work hourly and will not be getting paid. I worry about my families not having access to quality food, medicine, health services, and child care both during and after this COVID-19 pandemic.”

“Some of my students don't have access to healthcare. Right now some of my students don't have transportation to go anywhere and rely on the bus (for) food deliveries so transportation is an issue. They will all need help with employment when the crisis has subsided. A majority pay rent so they will need assistance with paying that rent. These are my concerns for my students.”

Georgia educators are strained by current circumstances. Though Georgia educators moved readily into remote learning, many have run into difficulties that generate stress. Unfamiliarity

with online instruction and barriers to its use by students are challenges already noted. An additional concern is caretaking responsibilities.

Educators’ Caretaking Responsibilities



Approximately 43 percent of respondents have children under 18, and an additional 8 percent are caring for children and another family member such as an elderly parent or grandparent. About nine percent care for a family member who is not a child. Attending to the needs of children and other family members needing care while attempting to plan for and provide instruction, contact students and parents, participate in staff meetings and training and more while working at home is stretching many educators.

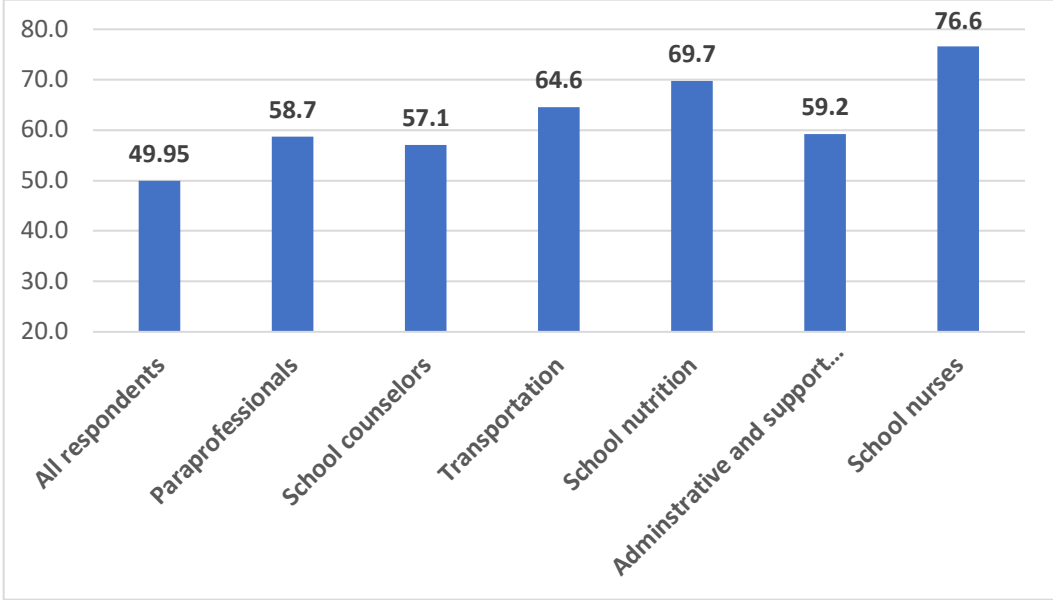
Educator Perspective: “I have all the sudden become a homeschooling mom to two children in different grade levels, the lunch lady, the custodian, and still a full-time teacher. I teach middle school, so I have 120 students that come from a very low-income socioeconomic background. I am working more than I ever have and staring at a computer screen all day. My own children? I’m having to run over to them to help them constantly. It does not seem to be feasible. I am proud of all the hard work put into place and being done, but I’m struggling.”

“I am personally having to juggle homeschooling my kindergarten daughter, take care of my almost two-year-old son, and still meet daily requirements of attempting to teach in this new format. My husband is in local law enforcement, and therefore, required to be on duty even during these times. Leaving me to carry the burden of all the above mentioned alone.”

Georgia educators hold concerns about safety and job security. As they look to the months ahead, Georgia educators identified two key concerns: When it will be safe to return to school and worry about the stability of their income and jobs.

Nearly half of all educators or a member of their immediate family are in a high-risk category for the COVID-19 virus. Some groups of educators have higher portions who are at risk.

Many Educators & Family Members are in High-Risk Categories for COVID-19 Virus



Many educators indicated they do not want to return to schools until it is safe to do so, and there are clear guidelines in place to indicate when students should not come to school due to illness.

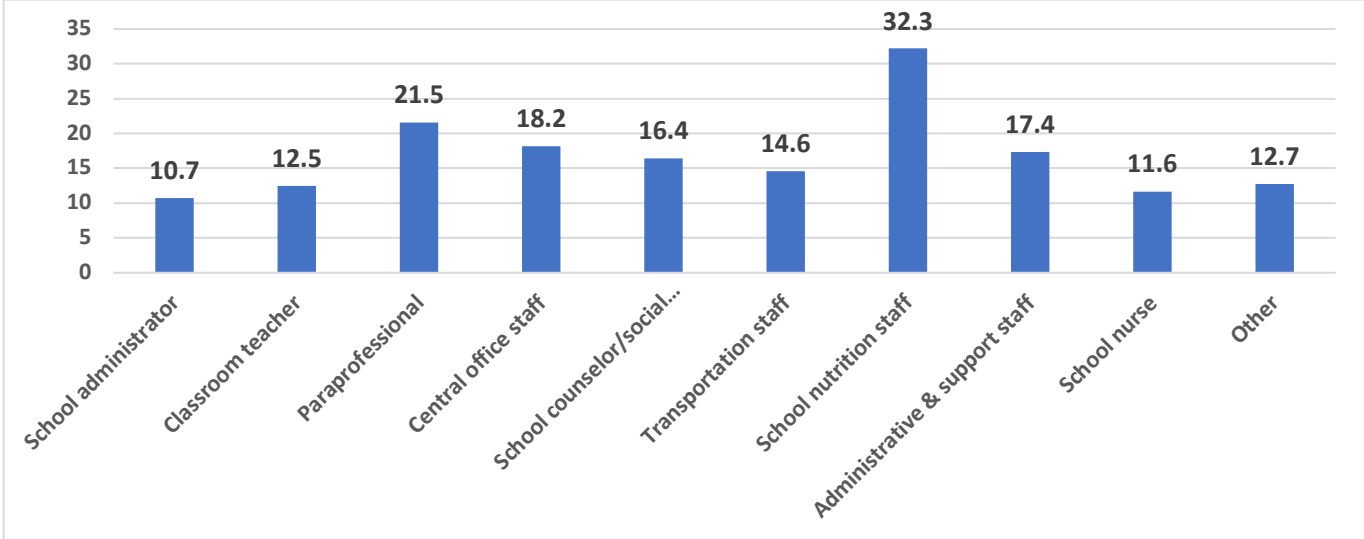
Educator Perspective: “When we return, there needs to be a way or a requirement that students who are ill stay home or the parents receive severe consequences. As a liver transplant recipient what one person may shirk off in a day or two can put me in the hospital or kill me. I don't like that they let kids who had high temperatures return back to school before we closed just because they said they were better. Masks and infection preventive devices should be available to us who are vulnerable.”

“The virus is a real threat & I live with someone who has a compromised immune system. I love the kids but I have my own kids & family to live for & consider first & I don't want to put them or myself in harm's way by potentially exposing them to the virus because of premature returns to daily living activities.”

To date, most educators have not experienced salary cuts as a result of the school closures. Nearly 96 percent of all respondents report that they continue to be paid their normal wages. However, the portion is lower for two groups of district employees. More than 23 percent of transportation staff and 13 percent of school nutrition workers said they are not being paid their normal salary.

While few educators have seen pay cuts, many expect their salaries will be reduced in the future due to the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Percent of Educators Anticipating Future Salary Cuts



Teachers also expressed concern about possible budget cuts that may lead to furloughs or reducing staff.

Educator Perspective: “I’m concerned about the availability of title funding considering the state that the economy is in. I worry about the amount of money the school will get in the future because of the economic crisis. I’m also concerned about the possibility of future furloughed days.”

“I am a music teacher. Though I’ve signed a contract for 2020-2021, I’m not confident the county will abide by it. I’m worried about the following year because the district may not be able to afford music & art due to the economy, which will have taken quite a hit.”

Conclusion

Georgia educators demonstrated creativity, stamina, and compassion in the immediate wake of the unexpected pivot to remote learning and the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Their early reflections on this experience point to strengths to celebrate and considerations to examine and address. One urgent consideration is ensuring that all students, regardless of location and wealth, can reliably access online learning. Other areas to review include professional learning for educators, a process to vet and disseminate high-quality online tools, and appropriate strategies and tools for students with additional needs and those in early grades.

The PAGE team continues to analyze the information shared by Georgia educators, and will maintain communication with educators as they adapt to the circumstances that unfold in the months ahead. This continued communication will enable the team to lift up educators’ questions and concerns with policymakers to inform their decisions.

¹ Transportation employees make up 0.36 percent of respondents, school nutrition 0.28 percent, and school nurses 0.35 percent.

² The measure of poverty used is the percentage of students who qualify for direct certification. Students identified as direct certification are those whose families receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, Temporary Aid to Needy Families benefits, are homeless, unaccompanied youth, in foster care or are migrants.

³ Educators in Early County report that the district suspended food service to students as the county is experiencing an outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. According to its website, Echols County Schools is partnering with local organizations to provide meals to students and, per its website, Chickamauga City Schools is collaborating with Walker County Schools to offer students' food.



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