

Recommended State Investment to Address Georgia Student Needs



Reduce Chronic Absenteeism

Fund school social workers at a ratio of one social worker per 1,856 students and expand mental health support grants to elementary schools.



Strengthen the Educator Workforce

A) Reauthorize Return to Work via [HB 372](#) and/or [SB 150](#) to sustain its impact; B) Revise the end date of the Teacher Tax Credit to December 31, 2030, incorporate special education, math, reading, writing, and English language arts in the definition of high-need subject areas, and allow school districts to determine their high-need subject areas; C) Provide need-based stipends to students who are enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate teacher education program approved by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission and are participating in student teaching as required by their teacher education program.



Partner to Support 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.



Reduce Chronic Absenteeism

Nearly 20% of Georgia students were chronically absent in 2025, which is an improvement over recent years but is far higher than pre-pandemic levels. The causes are complex and include mental health issues, poverty-related barriers such as lack of transportation, food insecurity and housing instability, health issues, and disengagement from school. Solving the chronic absenteeism crisis requires collective action by schools, parents, community organizations, and state agencies. School social workers have a critical role by providing direct support to students and families and helping coordinate assistance from other organizations.

The state funds one social worker for every 2,475 students, much higher than the recommended level of one for every 250 students. School social workers are stretched thin trying to meet the array of student needs connected to absenteeism as well as other issues students and families experience.

State lawmakers invested in expanding student supports in Fiscal Year 2026: funding a minimum of one-full time social worker for every district and providing \$20,000 student mental health grants to middle and high schools. Elementary students would also benefit from the mental health grants, which could be used for strategies to reduce absenteeism. In 2025, 20% of kindergarteners, 17% of first graders, 15% of second graders, and 14% of third graders were chronically absent, making it more difficult for these students to become proficient readers by the end of third grade.



Recommendation: Fund school social workers at a ratio of one social worker per 1,856 students and expand mental health support grants to elementary schools.



Strengthen the Educator Workforce

Georgia faces challenges across its educator pipeline, including persistent shortages of special education, math, and science teachers and emerging shortages of reading and English language arts teachers. The cost of becoming a teacher is high. Georgia must attract more individuals to education and increase the number who stay in the field.

Lawmakers have taken valuable steps to address these challenges. Championed by Governor Brian P. Kemp, the General Assembly approved multiple pay raises for certified educators. Lawmakers also passed two laws to help fill hard-to-staff positions: Return to Work, [HB 385](#), which enables districts to hire retired teachers in high-need subject areas, and the Teacher Tax Credit, [HB 32](#), which provides a \$3,000 tax credit to teachers in high-need subjects areas in 100 rural or low-performing schools. Regional Education Service Agencies determine high-need subject areas for both initiatives.

A review by the Georgia Department of Audits found that, in the absence of Return to Work, districts would hire inexperienced or uncertified individuals or leave positions unfilled, driving up class sizes.

Both laws sunset in 2026 without legislative action to extend them. In addition, some districts cannot fully use Return to Work or the Teacher Tax Credit because their high need areas do not match their RESAs’ high need areas. HB 372 and SB 150 address these issues for Return to Work. Legislation has not been proposed to address them for the Teacher Tax Credit.

Becoming a certified teacher is expensive. Nearly 70% of Georgia teachers took on student loan debt while earning their degrees and certification. Managing the cost of student teaching—essentially a full-time but unpaid job—can be particularly difficult for teacher candidates. Georgia once provided service-cancellable loans to students in educator preparation programs:



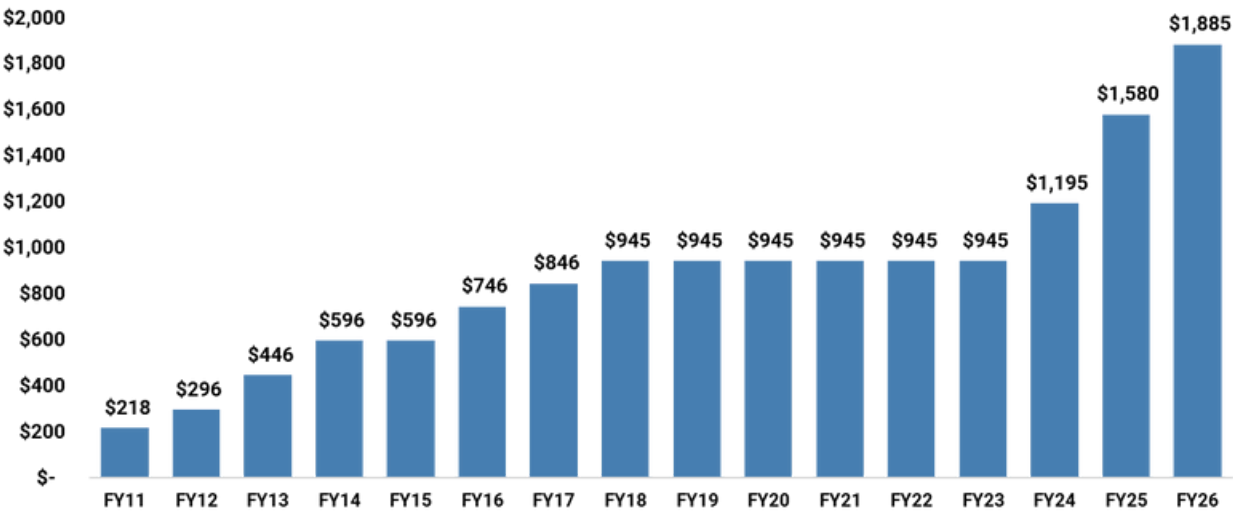
Recommendation: A) Reauthorize Return to Work via [HB 372](#) and/or [SB 150](#) to sustain its impact; B) Revise the end date on the Teacher Tax Credit to December 31, 2030, incorporate special education, math, reading, writing, and English language arts in the definition of high-need subject areas, and allow school districts to determine their high-need subject areas; C) Provide need-based stipends to students who are enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate teacher education program approved by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission and are participating in student teaching as required by their teacher education program.

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 rose to \$1,885 on July 1, 2025. The annual cost of SHBP coverage for each non-certified staff member is now \$22,620.

SHBP Per-Member Per-Month Cost Increase (FY 2011 – FY 2026)



These increases squeeze districts’ budgets and may lead districts to cut spending in areas related to teaching and learning particularly in a time of growing financial uncertainty.



Recommendation: Renew the partnership between local districts and the state for health care for 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.