

Views from the Schoolhouse: Insights from Georgia Educators on the Education Profession and Supporting Students

Educators across Georgia describe mounting pressure points on the educator pipeline in a new survey conducted by the Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE). Many of these pressures existed before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and have worsened since its onset. These pressures heighten strains on the educator workforce and negatively affect students' experiences. The nearly 4,600 educators who participated in the survey also signal the value of and need for educator input in critical educational decisions at the state and local levels. Key findings from the 2022 PAGE legislative survey include:

- About 93 percent of participating teachers report their school districts have difficulty recruiting substitutes, which negatively affects students including missed or delayed instruction, increased behavioral problems, and diminished student engagement.
- Over 90 percent of school and central office administrators indicate their districts are facing a shortage of bus drivers, which also has adverse effects on students including increased frequency of late arrivals to school, more behavioral problems on buses, and reduced or eliminated field trips.
- Nearly 75 percent of teachers who graduated from college in 2005 or later carry student loan debt, and over 41 percent of these teachers owe more than \$40,000.
- Over 20 percent of new teachers do not have a mentor to support them during their first years of teaching.
- Three-quarters of responding educators believe curriculum should be determined at the local level. Nearly all believe school-level educators should have a role in these decisions.
- More than 65 percent of all responding educators report that they did not have input into their districts' plans to use federal American Rescue Plan funds to address pandemic-related needs.
- Over half of all teachers would not recommend a career in education.

These findings point to difficult challenges, but there are solutions that policymakers can pursue in collaboration with educational leaders across the state and the educators who serve students every day in public schools throughout Georgia.

Methodology

PAGE designed the online survey and emailed a link to all members on Oct. 27, 2021. The survey remained open until Nov. 17, 2021. In total, 4,583 educators from 176 of Georgia's school districts participated, along with educators who serve in state schools and state charter commission schools. The survey covers issues raised by members and that emerged in state and national policy discussions. Some findings are outlined in this report while others are shared with policymakers through different engagement strategies.

Survey Findings

Findings from the survey fall into three broad categories: pressure points in the educator pipeline, valuing educator voices, and sustaining the profession.

Pipeline Pressure Points: Staff Shortages

Schools require more than teachers to support students effectively. Caring adults must serve in a variety of roles, including substitute teachers and bus drivers. When there are not enough of these critical workers, the consequences affect both students and other educators.

Approximately 93 percent of teachers say that their districts are having difficulty recruiting substitutes. This affects student learning in multiple ways according to teachers, paraprofessionals, school counselors, school administrators, and media specialists—the educators who work with students in schools every day. Most of these educators flag multiple concerns about the impact the substitute shortage has on students including:

“Parapros are being pulled from classrooms and supporting students to sub in classes. They aren’t paid enough, and students and teachers are losing needed support.”

Elementary Teacher

“As a specialist teacher, I am constantly pulled to sub in other classes. This causes learning loss for the students that I serve.”

Elementary Teacher

- Missed or delayed instruction: 67.4 percent
- Increased behavioral problems: 65.5 percent
- Loss of student engagement: 64.7 percent
- Instruction from substitutes without content or pedagogical knowledge: 62.5 percent

The substitute shortage also adds to educators’ workload and diminishes the school environment. Extra responsibilities placed on educators when colleagues are absent and lack substitutes include:

- Diminished school climate: 53.3 percent
- Missed planning period to cover for absent colleagues: 52.1 percent
- Additional time providing support to substitutes: 46.3 percent
- Teaching combined classes: 37.6 percent
- Missed duty-free lunch to cover for absent colleagues: 29.7 percent

Over 90 percent of central office staff and school-level administrators report their districts are short bus drivers, as do 82 percent of teachers. This also undermines students’ school experiences. Effects on students cited by school-level educators include:

“High school students have a digital learning day one day per week to allow for buses from the closed school to fill in gaps across the district.”

Middle School Teacher

“Some students have missed school due to the bus never coming to their house, and the family not having a way to get them to school.”

Elementary Teacher

- Increased frequency of late arrival at school: 64.4 percent
- Increased time on bus ride home from school: 63.1 percent
- No/limited social distancing on buses to reduce risk of COVID-19 transmission: 53.2 percent
- Increased behavioral problems on buses: 49.9 percent
- Reduced/eliminated field trips: 41.2 percent
- Impact on school sports and other extracurricular activities such as reduced trips/games: 23 percent

In surveys conducted in 2020, PAGE members described multiple concerns about student learning and mental and physical health.¹ Educators’ concerns stemmed from repeated disruptions in instruction and reliance on virtual and hybrid teaching, and stretched across grade levels, student groups, and geographic regions. Substitute and bus driver shortages extend these disruptions, generating new challenges for students striving to recover the learning time lost since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

One contributor to these shortages is the limited amount of state funds directed to them. The state’s formula for funding public schools, the Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula, provides \$150 to cover the cost of a substitute for five days per year, or \$30 per day, an amount that has not changed since the 1980s. This amount is well below what districts paid substitutes before the pandemic, squeezing their budgets, particularly

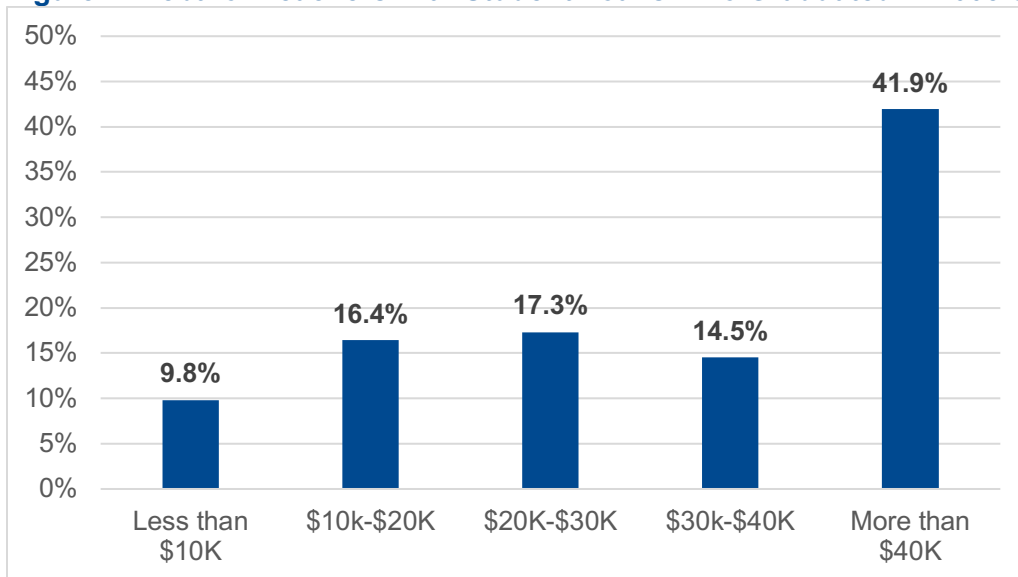
in rural communities.² Faced with escalating need for substitutes due to the pandemic, [many districts increased wages](#), widening the gap between what they spend to cover substitutes and the state’s contribution. If the state allocation for substitutes had kept pace with inflation since 1985, districts would receive about \$400 per teacher, or \$80 per day, to help cover this cost.

There is a similar gap between districts’ expenditures to bus students to and from school safely and the state’s contribution to that cost. In Fiscal Year 2021, the state covered about 19 percentⁱ of districts’ student transportation costs, a level far below the 50 percent it covered three decades ago.³ This is not a new challenge. A [study committee](#) convened by the Georgia State Senate in 2000 documented the escalating costs of student transportation and difficulty of finding, training and keeping bus drivers. These challenges have not abated, and the pandemic has worsened them.

Pipeline Pressure Points: Student Loan Debt

More than 63 percent of all responding teachers incurred student loan debt while earning their bachelor’s degrees. Among those who graduated in 2005 or later, nearly 75 percent took on student loan debt. For many of the teachers with loans, the debt load is significant.

Figure 1: Debt for Teachers with Student Loans Who Graduated in 2005 or Later



Student loan debt is particularly burdensome for Black teachers. More than 88 percent of all responding Black teachers incurred student loan debt while earning their bachelor’s degrees. Among those who finished their degrees in 2005 or later, more than nine in 10 took on student loan debt. Nearly 65 percent of these teachers carry \$40,000 or more in student loan debt.

About seven in 10 teachers who earned their bachelor’s degrees in Georgia since 2005 received the HOPE Scholarship. Nearly 64 percent of these teachers also needed student loans to cover the cost of their degrees. Approximately 32 percent of teachers who relied on both the HOPE Scholarship and student loans owe \$40,000 or more.

Financial Aid for Teachers

Georgia previously offered two programs to help students earn a degree in education and enter the state’s educator workforce: the Promise Scholarship and the Teacher Scholarship. Both were established in the 1990s and provided forgivable loans to undergraduate and graduate students studying to be teachers. Funded through lottery revenue with a modest price tag of \$11.2 million in Fiscal Year 2010, the programs were eliminated in FY 2011.

ⁱⁱ State funding for pupil transportation in Fiscal Year 2021 includes a one-time allocation of \$40.1 million for bus replacement. Excluding these funds, state funding covered approximately 14.8 percent of districts’ transportation costs.

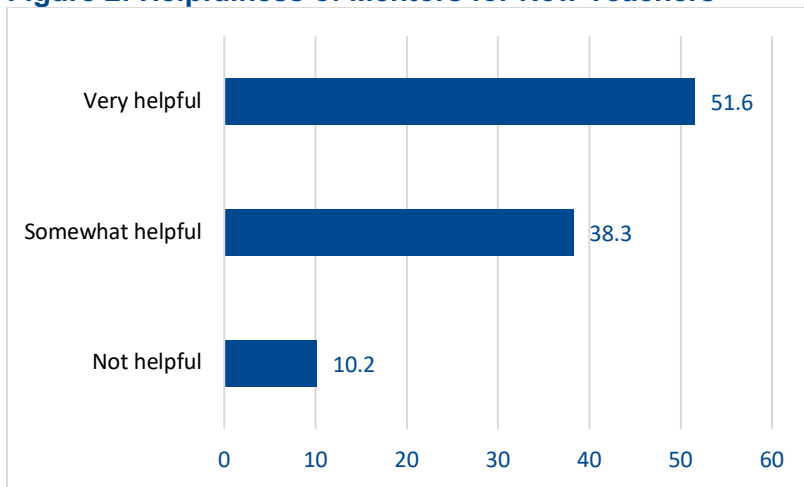
The scope of teachers' student loan debt heightens the need to provide them with a competitive salary. According to a recent [analysis](#) from the Southern Regional Education Board, the average gross salary for a first-year teacher in Georgia in 2020 was \$38,509, but net pay averaged \$27,330.⁴ Paying off student loan debt at this salary level is challenging.

Pressure on the Pipeline: Support for New Teachers

Many new teachers in Georgia receive robust support to help them master the complexities of teaching, but some do not. Twenty-two percent of responding teachers in their first three years report they do not have a mentor. These new teachers could be at greater risk of leaving the profession than their peers who do have mentors.

The usefulness of mentor support varied among the new teachers who had one.

Figure 2: Helpfulness of Mentors for New Teachers



About 70 percent of new teachers say that their districts provide other types of support for new teachers, 18 percent report their districts do not provide other supports, and 12 percent are unsure. Support activities include:

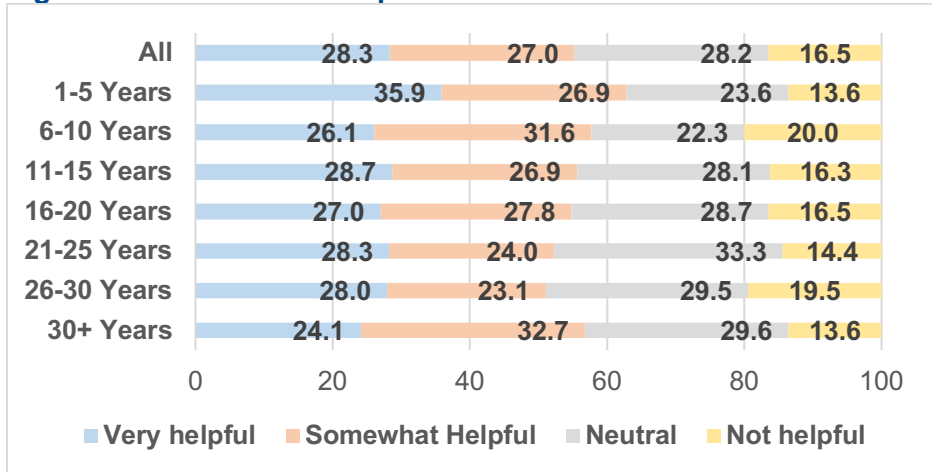
- Professional learning specifically for new teachers: 75.9 percent
- Regular meetings with other new teachers: 64.7 percent
- Easy access to principals or other instructional leaders who provide support: 63.8 percent

High-quality mentoring and induction programs reduce new teacher attrition, which is very costly for districts, and improve student learning.⁵

Pressure on the Pipeline: Inconsistent Supervisor Feedback

Nearly 92 percent of all responding educators and 97 percent of teachers report that they have had or will have an observation during the 2021-2022 school year. The usefulness of the feedback teachers receive from their supervisors varies across experience levels. Teachers with five or fewer years of experience are more likely to find supervisor feedback very helpful than those with more experience.

Figure 3: Usefulness of Supervisor Feedback for Teachers



Many teachers at all experience levels regard supervisor feedback as neutral or unhelpful. This is a missed opportunity for supervisors and teachers to engage in productive and collaborative dialogue about instructional practices.

Valuing Educator Voices: Setting Curriculum

With expertise developed by working with students every day and extensive training, educators bring deep insight to discussions about educational practice and policy and strategies to serve students well. They want their expertise to be utilized.

Approximately 75 percent of all responding educators believe the curriculum taught in public schools should be set by local school districts, not the state or federal governments. This portion is consistent or higher across educators’ different roles.

Over 90 percent of all responding educators also believe that school-level educators—classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, principals, counselors and others who work with students every day—should participate in curriculum decisions. Among teachers, the proportion is 99 percent.

Valuing Educator Voices: Informing Spending Decisions

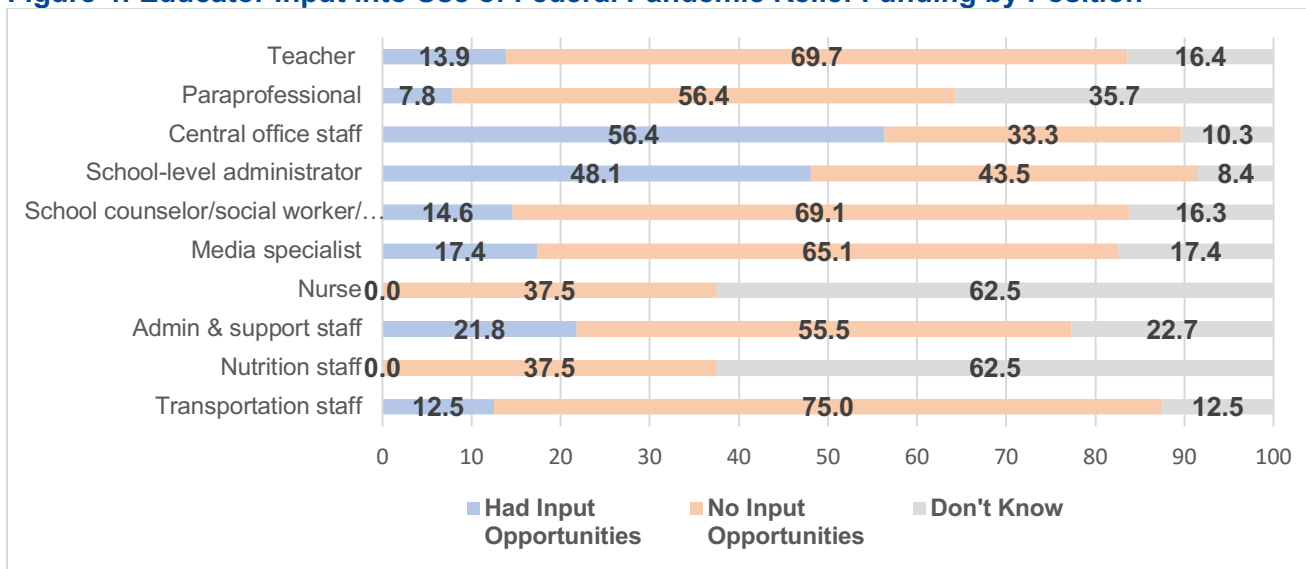
Congress approved significant federal funding for school districts to help them cover the high costs imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The largest federal pandemic relief package, the American Rescue Plan Act, requires districts to regularly solicit input into plans to use the funds from educators and other local stakeholders. Responding educators report having little information about these funds and how they are being used.

About 61 percent of school-level administrators and central office staff know how much federal pandemic relief funding their districts have been allocated, but few other educators do. The proportion of educators who know how much their districts received is:

- Teachers: 14.6 percent
- Paraprofessionals: 6.3 percent
- School counselor/social worker/psychologist: 20.2 percent
- Media specialist: 15.3 percent
- Transportation staff: 0 percent
- Nutrition staff: 0 percent
- Administrative and support staff: 24.5 percent

Educators indicate that they have had few opportunities to provide input into their districts' plans to use federal pandemic relief funds.

Figure 4: Educator Input into Use of Federal Pandemic Relief Funding by Position



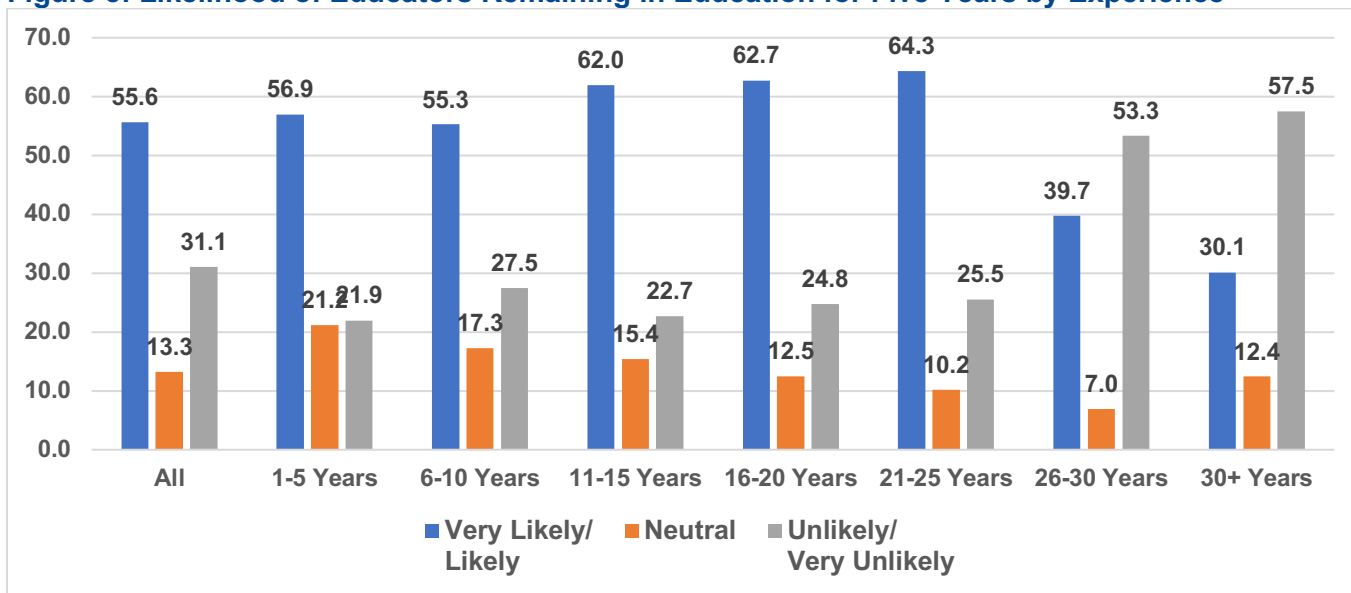
These data suggest that districts should provide more opportunities for educator input or communicate more effectively about input opportunities they already have in place.

Few educators fully understand how their districts are using federal pandemic relief funds. About 59 percent report they do not know how the funds are being used, 26 percent have some knowledge, and 14 percent indicate they do know.

Sustaining the Profession: Remaining in the Field

A strong public education system depends on educators who enter the field and stay in it, continue to develop their professional skills and knowledge, and help students thrive. Approximately 31 percent of all responding educators report that they are unlikely or highly unlikely to remain in education for another five years. More than 55 percent of educators indicate that they are highly likely or likely to remain in education for another five years, and about 13 percent are neutral. Educators' plans to stay in the field vary by experience level.

Figure 5: Likelihood of Educators Remaining in Education for Five Years by Experience



Educators' answers to the question about their future fluctuate from year to year, but the portion who indicate they do not anticipate remaining in education for another five years has trended up in recent years. The stress added by the pandemic is evident in the jump between 2020 and 2021 in the portion of educators who expect to leave the field in the next five years. Across experience levels, increases in the proportion of educators who say they are unlikely to remain in the field has climbed by 12 percentage points or more since 2018. A drop in educator retention rates in coming years would worsen the existing shortage of special education, math, science, and foreign language teachers as well as increase the difficulty many rural school districts have recruiting and retaining teachers.^{6 7}

Table 1: Portion of Educators Unlikely/Very Unlikely to Remain in Education for Five Years by Experience

	1-5 Years	6-10 Years	11-15 Years	16-20 Years
2021 Respondents	21.9	27.5	22.7	24.8
2020 Respondents	12.0	15.8	14.9	13.8
2019 Respondents	10.5	13.7	12.8	14.9
2018 Respondents	6.6	8.7	10.7	9.6
Increase 2018-2021	15.3	18.8	12.0	15.2

Respondents ranked the reasons why they may leave the profession. Veteran teachers—those with more than 20 years of experience—cite retirement as the leading reason they expect to leave the field with burnout listed as second. More than 56 percent of educators with 20 years or less experience identified burnout as the first or second reason they are unlikely to stay in education.

Table 2: Issues Ranked 1st or 2nd as Reasons to Leave by Educators with 20 Years or Fewer Years

	All	Teachers	School-Level Administrators	Paraprofessionals	School Counselors/ Social Workers/ Psychologists
Burnout/overwhelmed	56.5	61.1	59.5	21.8	60.8
Salary	37.5	33.2	38.5	65.0	46.0
Student behavior	31.4	33.0	34.2	31.2	20.4
School leadership	27.2	27.1	18.0	24.3	28.3
Retirement	14.2	10.1	22.5	19.0	17.0

Despite these challenges, there are multiple reasons educators are drawn to and stay in education, the first being their work with students. The top five reasons to stay in education named by teachers were:

1. Professional satisfaction from helping students
2. Retirement benefits
3. Other employment benefits (e.g., health insurance)
4. Supportive colleagues and positive work environment
5. Salary

Sustaining the Profession: Encouraging Others to Enter Education

Strong public education systems must also attract capable professionals who can serve students as teachers, counselors, bus drivers, media specialists, and all other positions required to operate schools effectively. A signal of the potential difficulty in recruiting good candidates is the relatively low percentage of educators who would recommend a career in education to others. Across all responding educators:

- Highly likely/likely to recommend a career: 24.8 percent
- Neither likely/unlikely: 24 percent
- Unlikely/highly unlikely: 51.2 percent

Higher proportions of teachers are unlikely to recommend education as a career across most experience levels.

Table 3: Likelihood of Teachers Recommending Education Career by Experience

	Very Likely/Likely	Neither Likely/Unlikely	Unlikely/Very Unlikely
1-5 Years	24.7	31.4	43.9
6-10 Years	20.5	22.2	57.3
11-15 Years	18.8	28.0	53.3
16-20 Years	20.8	20.3	58.9
21-25 Years	19.0	20.6	62.2
25-30 Years	18.6	19.2	62.2
30+ Years	20.5	23.6	55.9

Recommendations

Policymakers can collaborate with educators across the state to develop and implement strategic policies and actions that better support students and educators. 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. Minimize learning disruptions for students.
 - Address the substitute shortage by increasing allotments for substitutes to \$400 per teacher under the Quality Basic Education formula and adjust for inflation annually.
 - Resolve the school bus driver shortage and provide fiscal relief to school districts by updating the pupil transportation formula to reflect districts' expenditures, varied needs, and changes in cost.
 - Eliminate the \$383 million austerity cut in state funding for public schools in Fiscal Year 2021 to ensure districts can fund needed positions for classrooms and student supports.
2. Fortify the educator pipeline.
 - Renew the state's investment in forgivable student loans for educator candidates who serve in subject or geographic shortage areas.
 - Attract and retain high quality educators by fulfilling Gov. Brian Kemp's campaign pledge to raise educator salaries.
 - Encourage teachers to continue serving students in the classroom by maintaining robust legislative support for the Georgia Teachers Retirement System and recognize its potential to retain mid-career and late-career educators.

3. Collaborate with educators to design strategic solutions to common concerns.
 - Maintain current policy of curriculum decisions being set at the local level.
 - Convene a task force comprised of lawmakers, educators, researchers, and other subject-matter experts to undertake a careful review of the educator pipeline, identify critical gaps in policy and practice, and develop a statewide plan to address them. The task force should learn from and build on the work Georgia’s nine P-20 Collaboratives have undertaken to bolster the pipeline. The collaboratives bring districts, traditional and non-traditional teacher preparation programs, Regional Education Service Areas (RESAs) and other stakeholders together to tackle common challenges in the educator pipeline.

Georgia educators are flagging concerns about their profession and issues that can undermine their ability to serve students fully. These concerns are not new, and the coronavirus pandemic has increased their impact. State policymakers can respond most effectively by working in partnership with educators to strengthen public education across all of Georgia’s communities and enhance learning opportunities for every student.

¹ Suggs, C. (2020). *Voices from Georgia Schools: Georgia Educators on Supporting Public Education During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Professional Association of Georgia Educators.

https://www.pagelegislative.org/_files/ugd/b6505c_910d993e257f4b3da7c56b7e77ba2968.pdf

² Georgia School Boards Association. (2019). *GSBA Rural Task Force Recommendations*. <https://gsba.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2019-GSBA-RTF-Recommendations.pdf>

³ Georgia State Senate. (2000). *Final Report of the Senate Study Committee on School Transportation, Nutrition, and Support Personnel*. <https://www.senate.ga.gov/sro/Documents/StudyCommRpts/00SchoolTransNutRpt.pdf>

⁴ Southern Regional Education Board. (n.d.) *Teacher Compensation Dashboard*. <https://www.sreb.org/interactive/teacher-compensation-dashboard>

⁵ Ingersoll, R. & Strong, M. (2011). The impact of induction and mentoring programs for beginning teachers: A critical review of the research. *Review of Educational Research*, 81(2), 201-233.

⁶ U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.) *Teacher Shortage Areas, Georgia 2021-2022*. <https://tsa.ed.gov/#/reports>

⁷ Suggs, C. & Suggs, D.W. (2020). *GSBA Rural Task Force: Teacher Recruitment and Retention*. <https://gsba.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/GSBA-Recruitment-Retention-rtf20.pdf>