

# 2024 Legislative Priorities

## Support Georgia's Literacy Initiative: Educator Professional Learning, Planning Time, & Class Size

HB 538, the Georgia Early Literacy Act, reflects a promising commitment to improving student literacy. The initiative requires K-3 educators to complete professional development on the science of reading. Lawmakers should build upon this commitment by expanding the FY 2024 budget to fund literacy initiatives.

*By undertaking the following, the General Assembly can further ensure the effectiveness of literacy requirements:*

### Prioritize Educator Planning Time

Lack of planning time contributes to teacher turnover<sup>1</sup> and impedes teachers' ability to serve students.<sup>2</sup> The Georgia General Assembly made progress on teacher planning time with the passage of HB 340 in 2023, but planning time requirements remain waivable by school districts. For a variety of reasons, school districts often struggle to protect teacher planning time. The legislature should examine the effects of waiving planning time requirements to ensure waivers do not negatively impact student achievement.

### Bolster Substitute Funding

Schools encounter challenges identifying substitute teachers and often resort to alternative methods of covering classes.<sup>3</sup> PAGE surveys indicate the third most common reason teachers lose planning time is when covering for an absent colleague. As teachers engage in new professional development requirements, legislators should consider bolstering funding for substitute teachers to ensure proper classroom coverage. Under QBE, school districts annually earn \$150 per teacher to cover the cost of a substitute for eight days, which amounts to \$18.75 per day. This amount has not changed since 1985.<sup>4</sup>

### Lower Class Sizes

PAGE members highlight large class sizes as detrimental to student learning. Smaller class sizes in primary grades are linked to improved achievement, particularly among low-income and minority students.<sup>5</sup> HB 538 requires the administration of K-3 literacy screeners three times each school year. The legislature should consider funding lower class sizes. It should also closely monitor the academic progress of districts which raise class size caps to ensure class sizes are low enough to ensure educators can connect with and successfully serve students.

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<sup>1</sup>Provasnik, S. & Dorfman, S. (2005) *Mobility in the teacher workforce (NCES 2005-114)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/2005114.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>McGoey, K.E., Rispoli, K.M., Venesky, L. G., Schaffner, K.F., McGuirk, L., & Marshall, S. (2014) *A preliminary investigation into teacher perceptions of the barriers to behavior intervention implementation*, *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, (30)4, 375-390

<sup>3</sup>NCES School Pulse Panel <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/spp/results.asp>

<sup>4</sup>Georgia School Boards Association. (2020). *Rural Task Force 2020 Rural Report*. Lawrenceville, GA. <https://gsba.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/GSBA-Funding-rtf20.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>Krasnoff, B. (2015) *What the research says about class size, professional development, and recruitment, induction, and retention of highly qualified teachers: A compendium of evidence on Title II, Part A, program-funded strategies*. Portland, OR: Northwest Comprehension Center. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED558138.pdf>

## Improve Safety, Discipline & Mental Health in Schools

Educators report that student discipline continues to hamper success in Georgia classrooms. Many educators surveyed by PAGE report dealing with disruptive student discipline issues at least once a month. In addition, PAGE educators say students require more mental health supports now than before the COVID-19 pandemic. Georgia educator assertions are echoed in national findings.<sup>6</sup> Educators are also struggling with mental health issues. PAGE survey respondents identified burnout as the top reason motivating educators to leave the profession. The second most cited reason was student behavior. Failing to address mental health and school behavioral issues endangers the educator workforce, student success<sup>7</sup>, and school safety.<sup>8</sup>

*The state can promote student and educator mental health by:*

### Annual School Safety Budget Allocation

While Georgia has made strides in protecting students and educators in schools through periodic funding in the form of school safety grants, there is no budget line item to make safety a consistent priority. Legislators should incorporate an annual allocation in the state budget, beginning in FY 2024.

### Increase State Funding for School Counselors, Social Workers, & Psychologists

School counselors are funded at a ratio of 1 counselor for 450 students, which is nearly double the 1 to 250 ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association.<sup>9</sup> The state funds one school social worker and one school psychologist for every 2,475 students, far exceeding the recommended ratios of 1 to 250 students for social workers<sup>10</sup> and 1 to 500 for psychologists.<sup>11</sup>

### Ensure Educator Well-being

Protecting planning time and duty-free lunches, increasing state funding for substitute teachers, and providing mental health supports – including expanded counseling options – will all significantly contribute to the improved well-being of Georgia educators.

## Increase Transportation Funding

State funding to transport students to and from school safely has not kept pace with district transportation costs. State dollars cover only about 15 percent of these costs, down from approximately 50 percent in the 1990s. This shift adds significant costs to local school budgets and limits the amount of local dollars that can be directed to the classroom.

PAGE members commonly report that the bus driver shortage has contributed to lost class time due to late arrival, increased misbehavior on buses, and loss of educator planning time. Lawmakers examined student transportation funding in 2000 and 2012 and laid out recommendations to increase the state's contribution, which have not been implemented.

*Guided by these recommendations, legislators should consider an incremental funding plan to:*

### Develop and Enact a Pupil Transportation Plan

Lawmakers should enact a 10-year plan, beginning with the FY 2025 budget, to bring state pupil transportation funding to a partnership level of 50 percent. The plan would provide the largest percentage increase in FY 2025, then smaller increases each year with the goal of sustaining partnership equilibrium by FY 2035.

***PAGE Legislative Priorities are created and approved by members every year. While the priorities reflect areas of PAGE advocacy focus during the legislative session for which they are generated, PAGE also strongly supports and continuously advocates for policies benefiting educators, students, and public education, including raising educator salaries***

<sup>6</sup>National Center for Education Statistics (2022, June 6) More than 80 Percent of U.S. Public Schools Report Pandemic Has Negatively Impacted Student Behavior and Socio-Emotional Development [Press Release] [https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press\\_releases/07\\_06\\_2022.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/07_06_2022.asp)

<sup>7</sup>National Association of School Psychologists. (2020). *Mental Health and Academic Achievement* [Research summary]. Bethesda, MD: Author

<sup>8</sup>Teasley, M. L. (2018). School shootings and the need for more school-based mental health services. *Children & Schools*, 40(3), 131-134.

<sup>9</sup>American School Counselor Association. (nd). *School Counselor Roles & Ratios*.

Retrieved from <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/About-School-Counseling/School-Counselor-Roles-Ratios>

<sup>10</sup>School Social Work Association of America. (nd). *School Social Workers Helping Students Succeed: Recommended School Social Worker to Student Ratios*. Retrieved from [https://www.sswaa.org/\\_files/ugd/426a18\\_4050422b3c41478f9ee0db83d1bc1f75.pdf](https://www.sswaa.org/_files/ugd/426a18_4050422b3c41478f9ee0db83d1bc1f75.pdf)

<sup>11</sup>National Association of School Psychologists (nd). *Federal Public Policy and Legislative Platform*. Retrieved from <https://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/policy-priorities/nasp-policy-platform>