

Georgia educators believe reducing class size, improving literacy instruction, and adding academic interventionists are the best strategies to increase student achievement.

This is one of the top insights they shared in the 2023 member survey conducted by the Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE). Each year, PAGE surveys its members on policy issues that lawmakers have turned their attention to or are key concerns for educators that policymakers can address in the upcoming legislative session. More than 4,400 educators participated in the survey.

Survey topics include:

- Teachers' perspective on recently enacted literacy reforms
- Effective strategies to address student mental health concerns, improve school safety and pupil transportation
- Proposed legislation regarding materials deemed harmful in school libraries and teaching gender concepts
- Educators' intent to leave or remain in the field

Educators' feedback highlights their commitment to student success as well as persistent and emerging gaps in student services.

Key Survey Findings

Meeting Student Learning Needs

- Educators' top-ranked strategies to improve student learning are:
 - Reducing class size
 - Investing in improving literacy
 - Adding academic interventionists
- Approximately 44% of K-3 teachers have significant concerns about the changes in literacy instruction outlined in [HB 538](#). Their top concerns are:
 - Completing a training program in the science of reading by July 2025
 - Providing individual reading intervention plans for students who are struggling to read

Addressing Student Wellbeing Needs

- More than three-quarters of all educators report higher levels of student mental health needs than before the pandemic.
- About 25% of educators feel unprepared to meet higher student mental health needs.
- Most educators do not believe their schools have an adequate number of counselors, social workers or psychologists.

Enhancing School Operations: School Safety & Student Transportation

- Approximately 74% of all educators say their school safety plans are strong.
- Educators' top strategies to improve school safety are:
 - Additional mental health professionals
 - Comprehensive threat assessment for each school and a follow up improvement plan
 - Training to de-escalate students conflicts before violence is threatened or occurs
- More than 86% of educators report their school districts face a shortage of bus drivers. Negative effects on students include:
 - Increased behavioral problems
 - Increased late arrivals
 - Longer bus rides home

Supporting Educators

- 82% percent of new teachers have mentors, and 78% report receiving other types of support.
- Approximately 41% of teachers lose their planning period more than once a week, which can interfere with instructional quality.
- Increasing pay for paraprofessionals—current annual state funding for paraprofessional salary is \$16,548—is the best strategy to improve recruitment and retention for these educators.

Perspectives on Parental Support & Legislative Proposals

- Teachers report mixed levels of parental support:
 - 48% report very strong/strong support
 - 18% report neutral support
 - 34% report weak/very weak support
- More than 60% of educators oppose proposed legislation to apply criminal penalties to media specialists and other K-12 staff for providing materials deemed harmful to students.
- More than 60% of educators do not support proposed legislation that would require local boards of education to adopt policies regarding teaching gender concepts.

Educators' Future

- About 22% of educators with 20 or fewer years of experience say it is unlikely or very unlikely they will remain in the field for another five years.
- The top reasons educators may leave are burnout, student behavior, and salary.
- Only 22% of teachers would recommend a career in education. Nearly 56% of teachers would not, and 22% are neutral on the issue.
- Top reasons educators would stay in the field are satisfaction from helping students, retirement benefits, and other benefits/supportive colleagues and work environment.

Summary of Recommendations

Policymakers can address student learning and mental health needs with targeted investments in the reforms in literacy instruction required under legislation approved in the 2023 legislative session. They also have an opportunity to address persistent funding gaps, including student transportation and school safety. Strategies to resolve both include:

1. Enhance school safety by incorporating funding as an annual supplemental grant to the state K-12 school funding formula.
2. Develop and fund a multi-year plan to increase state funding for student transportation to cover 50% of districts' transportation costs.
3. Provide every K-5 school and pre-kindergarten classroom with a three-year flexible grant to improve literacy instruction and support the implementation of [HB 538](#).
4. Develop and fund a multi-year plan to increase funding for school counselors, social workers, and psychologists to the recommended best practice ratios.
5. Ensure all teachers have adequate planning time to prepare and deliver high quality instruction to students.

Methodology

PAGE conducts an online survey of all members annually. The 2023 survey, designed by PAGE, was distributed to members in fall of 2023. In total, 4,407 educators from 175 of Georgia's 180 school districts as well as educators working in state schools and state commission charter schools participated in the survey. Approximately 70% of respondents are classroom teachers, and the remainder serve students in a variety of school and district roles.



4,407 Educators



175 Districts

Overview of Findings

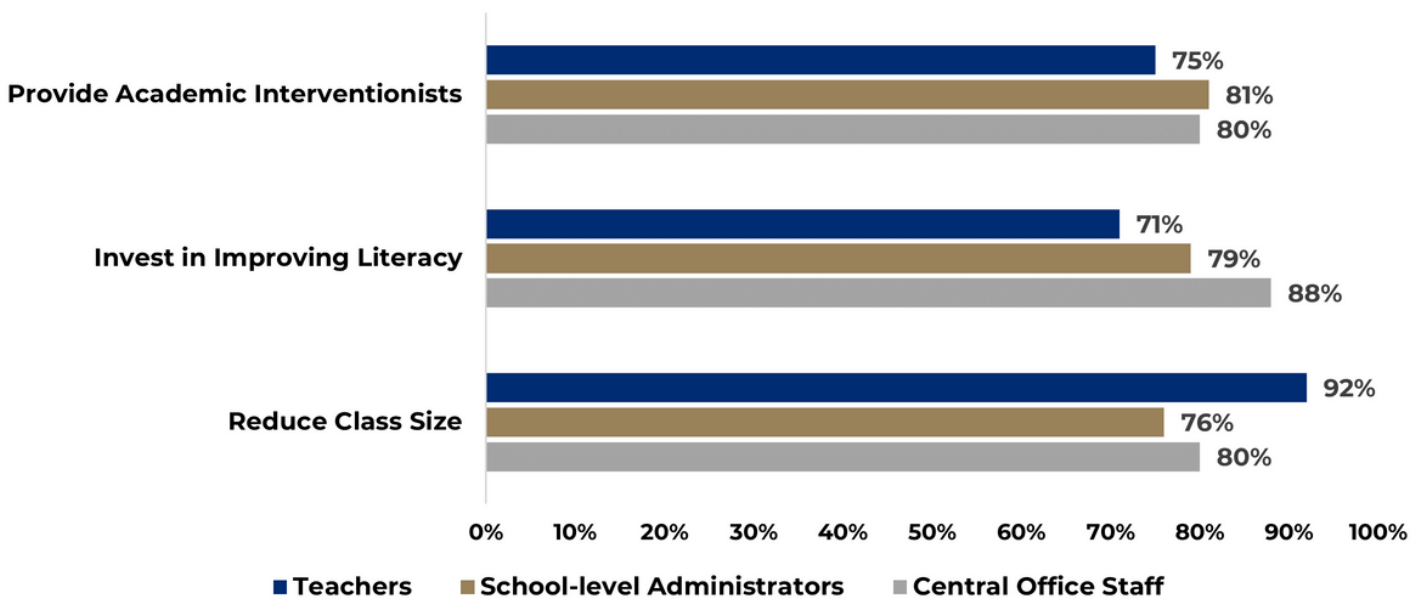
Meeting Student Learning Needs

Educators are committed to student academic success and identified strategies they believe are most effective in improving student learning. They also shared feedback on new requirements to improve literacy instruction passed by the General Assembly in 2023.

Top Strategies to Improve Learning

The pandemic disrupted learning for students across the state, negatively affecting academic achievement for many students. These disruptions worsened the learning gaps that many students face, particularly those who are economically disadvantaged. Educators top-ranked strategies to improve student learning are reducing class size, investing in improving literacy, and providing academic interventionists. These strategies were consistent across teachers with different levels of experience and of different racial backgrounds. They were also the strategies identified most frequently by educators serving in other roles.

Figure 1: Percent of Educators Ranking Strategies as Top Three to Improve Student Learning



School counselors, social workers, and psychologists had a similar perspective though they ranked adding counselors and other mental health second, following class size reduction.

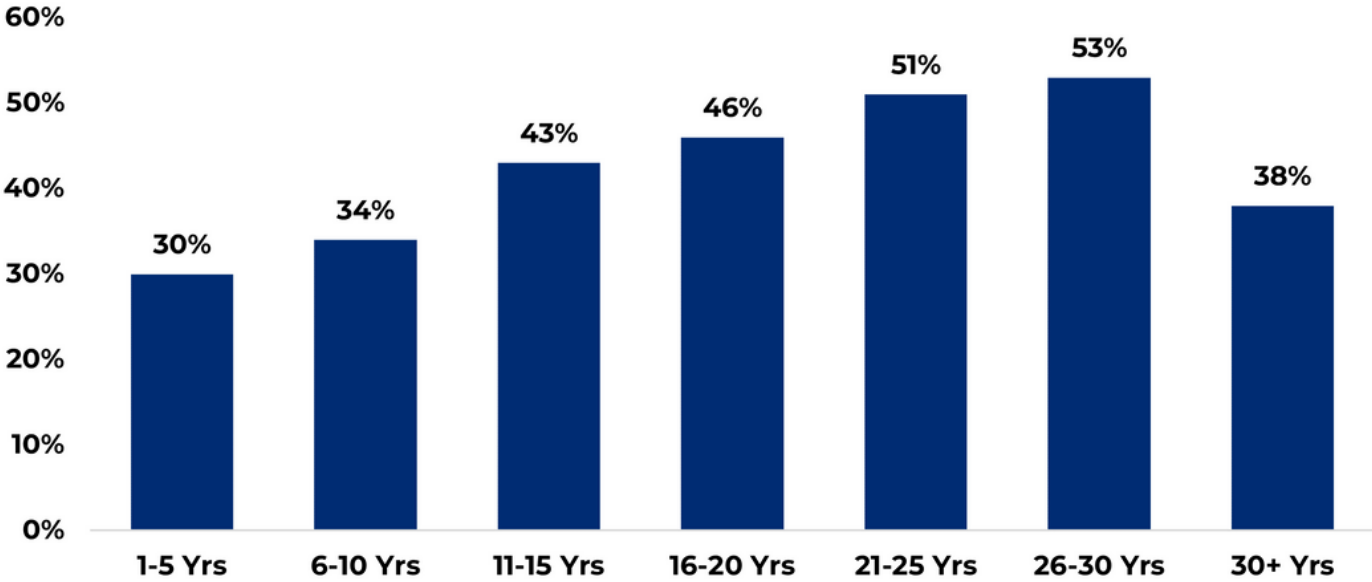
Strengthening Literacy Instruction

Lawmakers approved a new approach to teaching reading and writing during the 2023 legislative session, which was outlined in [HB 538](#). The bill requires specific action by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) and school districts. For districts, these requirements include:

- Provide training to K-3 teachers in the science of reading as well as on-site support including demonstrated lessons and prompt feedback for improving instruction by July 1, 2025
- Administer a universal reading screener three times a year to every student in K-3, beginning in August 2024
- Implement reading intervention plans for all K-3 students who exhibit a significant deficiency in reading based results of the universal screener, and provide the intervention until the student is no longer identified as no longer having a significant reading deficiency
- Notify in writing parents of students with a significant reading deficiency of the services that the student will receive and progress to grade-level reading

While the majority of K-3 teachers—56%—do not have significant concerns about the requirements of [HB 538](#), 44% of these teachers do. Excepting teachers with 30 or more years of experience, more experienced teachers expressed greater concern than those with fewer years in the classroom.

Figure 2: Percent of K-3 Teachers with HB 538 Concerns



Across all K-3 teachers, the concerns cited most often are completing a training program in the science of reading by July 1, 2025, and implementing intervention plans for each student performing significantly below grade level.

Addressing Student Wellbeing Needs

Educators are equally committed to responding to student mental health and developmental needs. These needs have grown in the wake of the pandemic, and educators are struggling to fully address them. Educators are also striving to create a positive school environment, which entails keeping students safe and ensuring schools are able to consistently and quickly transport students to and from school.

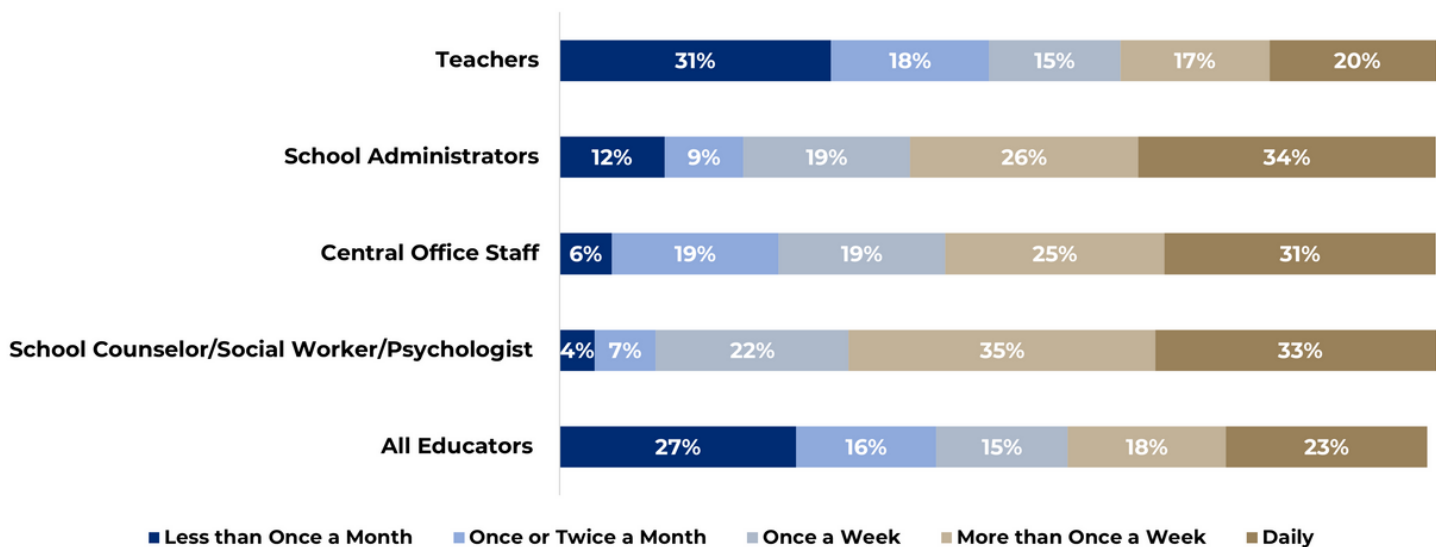
Rising Student Mental Health Needs

The majority of educators report that students' mental health needs are higher or much higher than before the pandemic. The percentage of educators indicating increased mental health needs are:

- Teachers: 75%
- School administrators: 84%
- Central office staff: 84%
- School counselors/social workers/psychologists: 93%
- All educators: 76%

One marker of climbing student mental health needs are significant disciplinary incidents that interrupt or prevent instruction. While many teachers experience a disciplinary incident no more than twice a month, about 17% percent are confronted with them at least twice a week and 20% face them every day. The number is even higher for educators who serve an entire school building or multiple schools.

Figure 3: Percent of Educators Reporting Significant Disciplinary Incident



Managing student mental health needs is difficult, and about one-quarter of teachers, school-level administrators, and central office staff feel unprepared to respond to these needs effectively. About half feel somewhat prepared, and the remainder—about 25%—feel prepared or very prepared. More than half of school counselors, social workers, and psychologists feel prepared or very prepared, one-third feel somewhat prepared, and 10% indicate they are not prepared.

Compounding the difficulty of meeting student mental health needs, there are not enough mental health support staff in most schools according to educators.

Figure 4: Percent of Educators Reporting Adequate Mental Health Support Staff

	Adequate Number of School Counselors			Adequate Number of Social Workers			Adequate Number of Psychologist		
	Yes	No	Do Not Know	Yes	No	Do Not Know	Yes	No	Do Not Know
Teachers	25%	60%	15%	11%	55%	35%	10%	60%	30%
School Administrators	32%	66%	2%	26%	66%	8%	20%	72%	9%
School Counselor/ Social Worker/ Psychologist	27%	63%	10%	14%	78%	8%	22%	62%	16%
Central Office Staff	19%	64%	17%	22%	61%	17%	24%	61%	15%
All Educators	26%	58%	16%	12%	55%	33%	12%	58%	30%

Reflecting these staffing gaps, the strategies identified by most educators as their top solutions to students' higher mental health needs are:

- Additional school counselors
- Additional behavioral specialists
- Access to mental health clinicians on site or via telehealth or community partners

Teachers, particularly new teachers and Black teachers, also want training and tools to identify students in need as well as training to respond effectively to those needs. New teachers and Black teachers are more likely to work in Title 1 schools, which serve low-income students. These students often have greater needs.



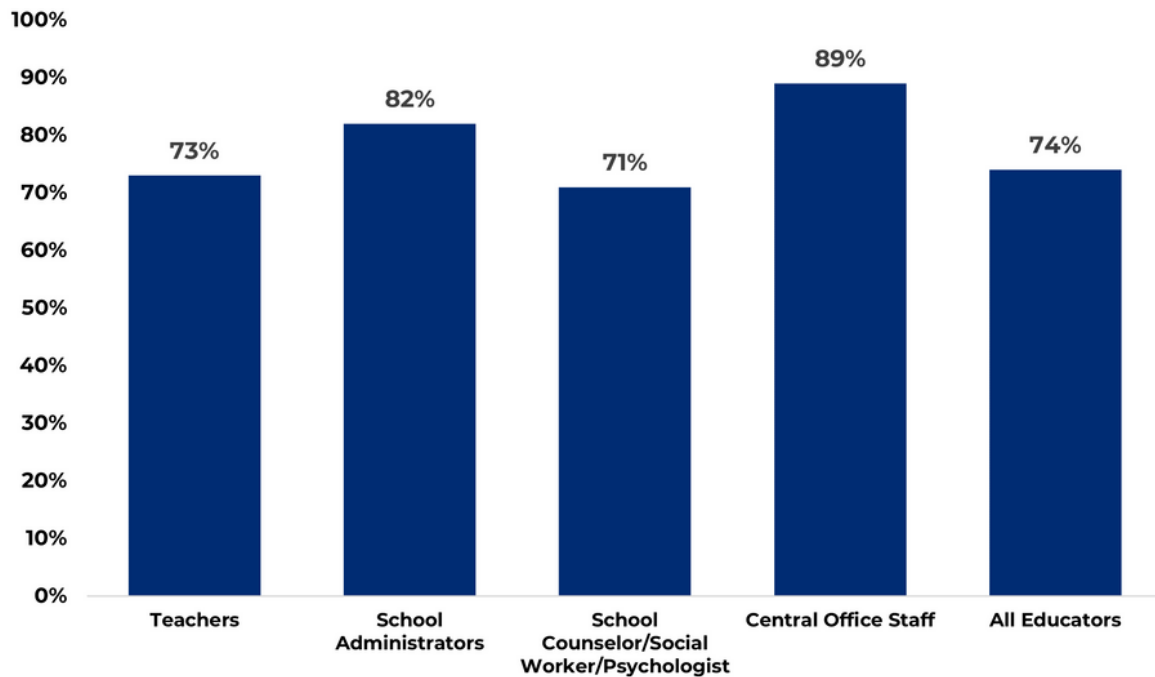
Enhancing School Operations: School Safety & Student Transportation

School Safety

Keeping students safe and transporting them to and from schools efficiently are two of the core functions educators carry out daily. District leaders have implemented procedures, tools, and training that are a strong safety foundation. Most educators believe their schools or districts have strong safety plans in place, though there are differences across positions. Teachers and mental health support staff are less likely than administrators and central office staff to say their school plans are strong.



Figure 5: Percent of Educators Reporting Strong School Safety Plan



While most educators consider their school safety plans strong, they also believe there are additional steps that can be taken to enhance safety. Their top ranked strategies affirm the close relationship between student mental health and a safe school environment. The top strategy across educator groups is adding mental health professionals.

Figure 6: Educators' Top-Ranked Strategies to Improve School Safety

	First	Second	Third
Teachers	Additional mental health professionals	Comprehensive threat assessment for each school & follow-up improvement plan	Training to de-escalate student conflicts before violence is threatened or occurs
School Administrator	Additional mental health professionals	Training to de-escalate student conflicts before violence is threatened or occurs	Additional School Resource Officers
School Counselor/Social Worker/Psychologist	Additional mental health professionals	Training to de-escalate student conflicts before violence is threatened or occurs	Training to identify students at risk for self-harm or harming others
Central Office Staff	Additional mental health professionals	Training to de-escalate student conflicts before violence is threatened or occurs	Comprehensive threat assessment for each school & follow-up improvement plan
All educators	Additional mental health professionals	Comprehensive threat assessment for each school & follow-up improvement plan	Training to de-escalate student conflicts before violence is threatened or occurs

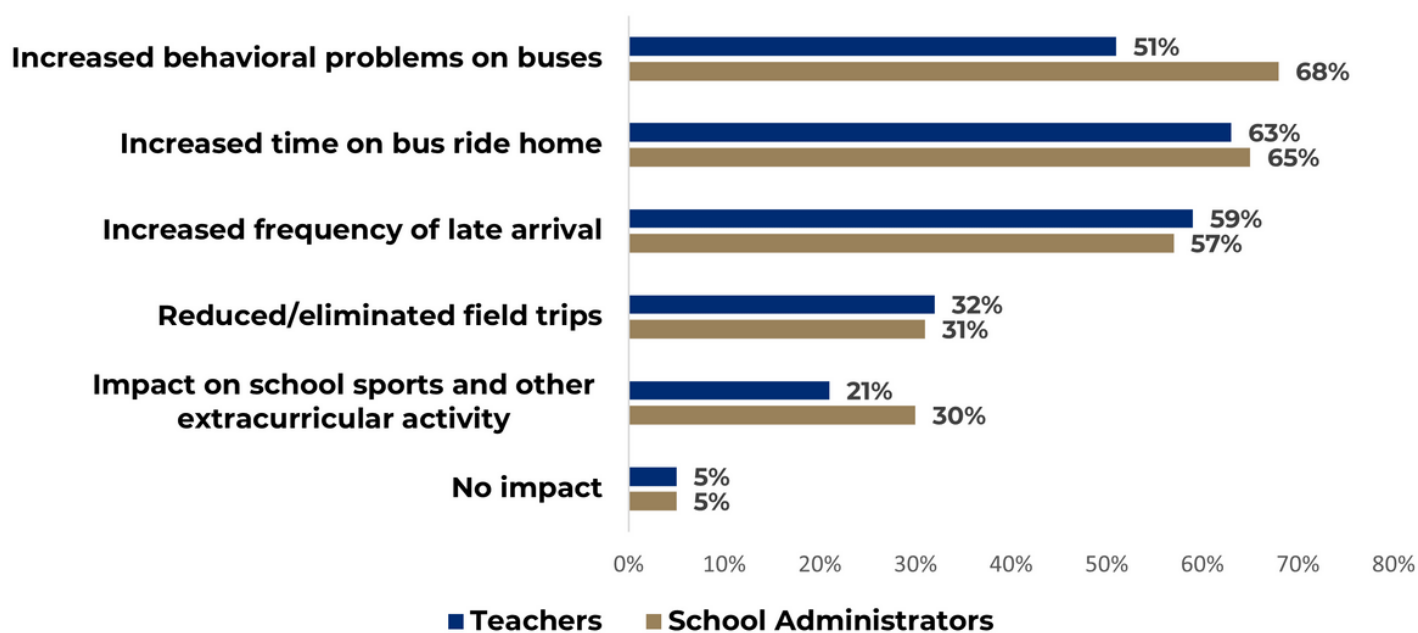
Student Transportation

For many students, the school day begins and ends on a school bus. Widespread bus driver shortages make getting students to and from school in a timely manner much harder and often has a negative impact on students. The percentage of educators reporting bus driver shortages in their districts are:

- Teachers: 86%
- School administrators: 90%
- School counselor, social worker, psychologist: 88%
- Central office staff: 90%
- All educators: 86%

The shortage affects students' school experience in multiple ways:

Figure 7: Effects of Bus Driver Shortage



Educators described how the bus driver shortage undermines the effective functioning of school and impacts students every day.

- *"[The shortage has] an impact on scheduling school timeframe. Students should not have to arrive at school at 6:45 a.m."*
- *"Students missing out on instructional learning during 1st period."*
- *"Safety of student on the bus and frequent driver changes, which causes concern of younger students being released to approved adults."*
- *"Additional safety concerns with middle school students often sitting 3 to a seat. Less ability for drivers to monitor behavior with excessive numbers. Increased behavior concerns due to increased numbers of students at stops."*

The shortage also interferes with teachers' time to prepare lessons, grade student work, meet with colleagues and participate in other activities needed to provide effective instruction. They repeatedly described losing planning time at the end of the school day because they must supervise students assigned to bus drivers' second routes and while waiting for drivers to run their first routes.

Supporting Educators

The educator workforce faces increasing strains with fewer people entering preparation programs, particularly in high-demand areas including special education, math, and science, and many who enter the field choosing to leave it. Ensuring educators have needed support and tools to succeed in the classroom and in schools is vital to attracting more strong candidates to the field and encouraging those already in it to stay.

Assisting New Teachers

The transition from student teacher to teacher of record running one's own classroom is profound. Novice teachers need support, and most new teachers get assistance. 82% of teachers in their first to third years reported having a mentor. Most also indicated that their mentors were helpful:

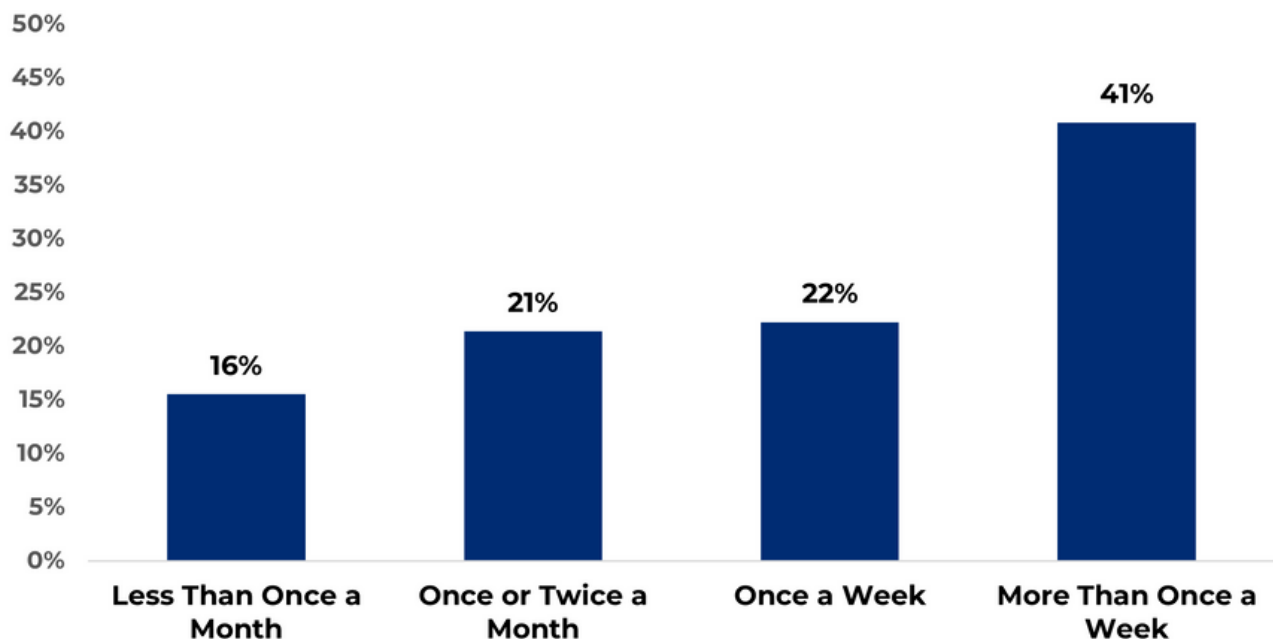
- Very helpful: 60%
- Somewhat helpful: 33%
- Not helpful: 7%

Nearly 78% of new teachers were provided other types of support: 69% met regularly with other new teachers; 81% participated in professional learning designed for new teachers; and, 65% had a principal, coach or other instructional leader they could easily access for help. Almost all of the new teachers—96%—found these other types of support very helpful or somewhat helpful.

Providing Adequate Planning Time

Having a daily planning period is vital to providing effective instruction. Teachers need time to develop, reflect on, and revise lesson plans, review and provide feedback on student work, prepare instructional materials, review student data and other elements of teaching.¹ Approximately 89% of teachers report having a planning period. However, many teachers indicate they regularly lose that time.

Figure 8: Percent of Teachers Losing Planning Period



Participating in a required meeting, such as meetings related to Individualized Education Plans, Response to Intervention, Professional Learning Communities, was cited by 88% of teachers as the first or second reason they had to forego their planning period. This was closely followed by participation in required professional development. Teachers also often lose their planning period to cover classes for colleagues and supervise students at lunch or other activities. Other reasons for losing planning periods reported by teachers include:

- Meetings or other communication with parents
- Reviewing content and providing other instructional assistance to students
- Testing students for special education, gifted, or other programs
- Serving on administrative or other committees
- Supporting student clubs and other activities

Many of the activities that take up teachers' planning periods are valuable and necessary. They are also activities districts can require teachers to undertake during their planning periods under state law. However, the importance of these activities does not diminish the equal importance of ensuring teachers have adequate individual planning time.

Investing in Paraprofessionals

Paraprofessionals are widely viewed as essential members of schools' instructional teams. Approximately 79% of all educators believe having a stable paraprofessional workforce is very important, and an additional 14% believe it is important.

Despite their importance, paraprofessionals earn low wages. For the 2023-2024 school year, the state provides \$16,548 per paraprofessional working in kindergarten classrooms. It does not fund paraprofessionals in other grade levels. Even with salary supplements provided by local school districts, this low salary level makes attracting and keeping skilled paraprofessionals difficult. More than 84% of paraprofessionals and 75% of all educators believe the most effective strategy to improve recruitment and retention is improving salary. Educators' comments affirm this:

- *"I'm a 16+ parapro with the same school system earning \$22,000 gross a year while being expected to earn PLU credits on my own time during the first 10 years that I was a parapro. We have been used to cover classes for teachers when subs were not available as well as perform lunch, morning, and bus duties. The wages are not livable."*
- *"Receiving a livable wage is of utmost importance. A lot of paras are working additional jobs to support themselves. The amount of job duties they provide for the school does not equal the amount of pay they receive."*
- *"I believe low pay makes the [paraprofessional] job undesirable, so skilled professionals do not want to do the job. This also means that paras are not held accountable by anyone for their behavior in the classroom since no one would want the job if they quit."*

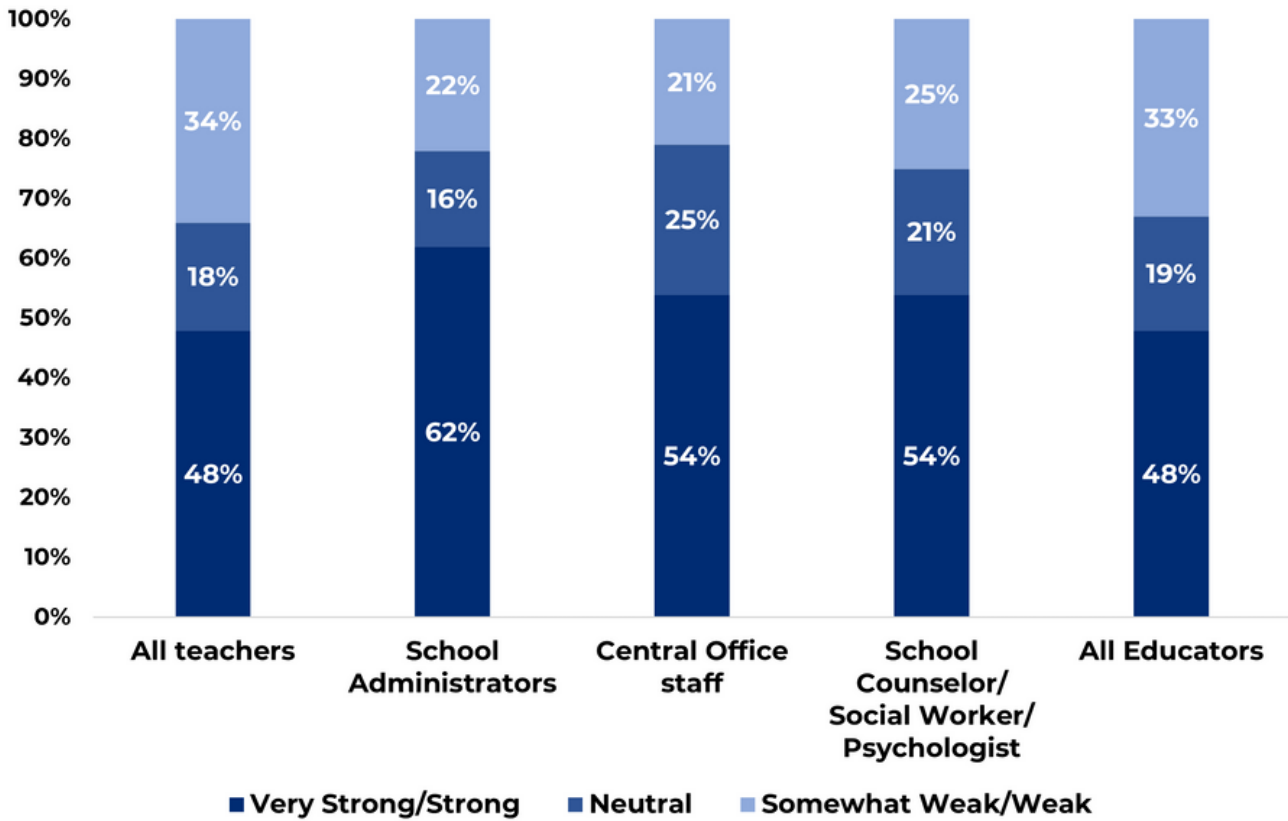
Perspective on Parental Support & Legislative Proposals

Parents and lawmakers are both critical stakeholders in public education. Educators value positive relationships with both groups. Many educators are also parents and see issues through both lenses. Often educators, parents, and lawmakers share common perspectives on issues, but there are times when their perspectives differ.

Parental Support

Educators' perspectives on the support their schools receive from parents is mixed. While many educators report receiving strong or very strong parental support, over a third of teachers indicate that parental support is weak or very weak.

Figure 9: Levels of Parental Support



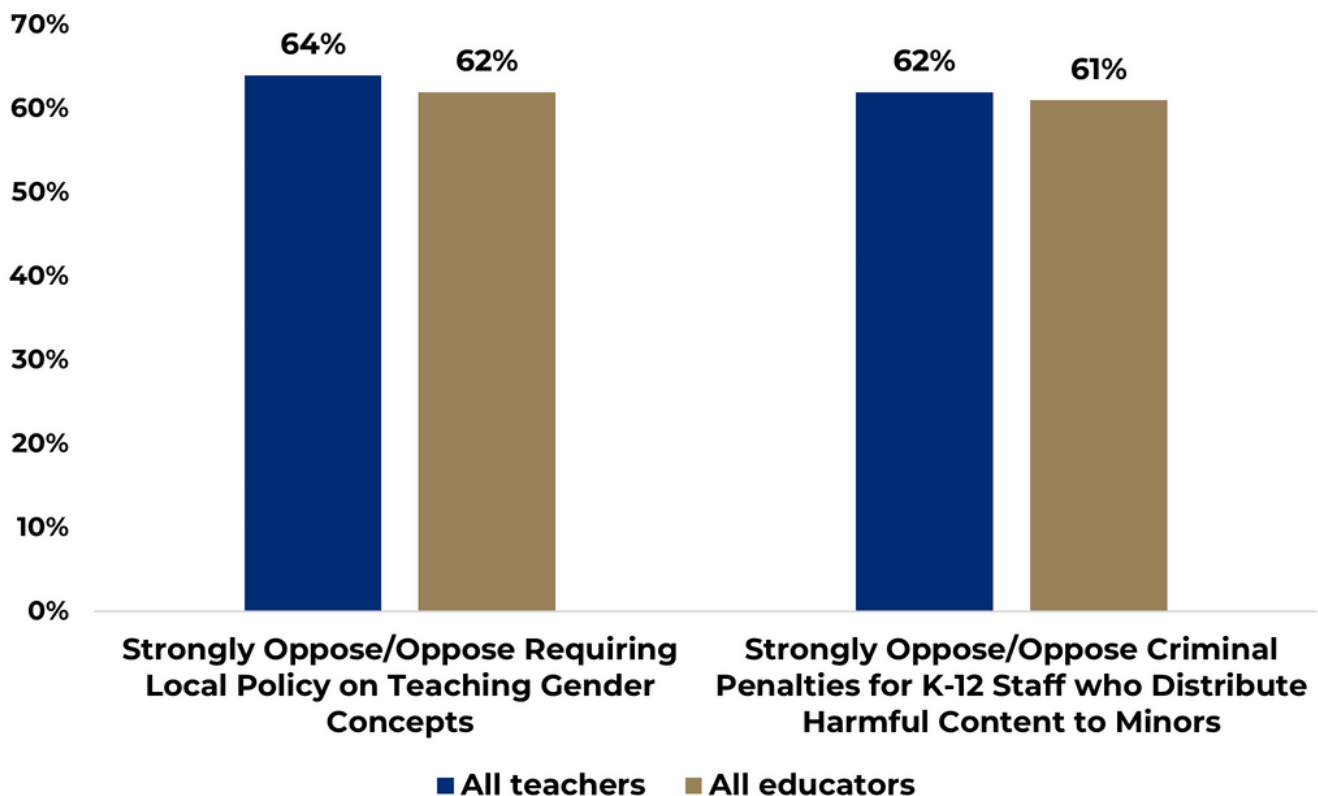
Educators' responses varied considerably when asked what they would like parents in their community to know about how their school or district addresses social issues:

- Focus on providing high quality instruction tied to state curriculum standards
- Want more parental involvement in their children's academic lives, both in and out of school
- Want parents to limit their children's access to social media and to support school restrictions on phones and social media.
- Believe controversial social issues should be discussed at home
- Believe their schools/districts handle social issues in a developmentally appropriate way
- Strive to address social emotional needs in ways that reflect their communities
- Want to create school environments that welcome all students
- Struggle with student behavior and discipline

Reflections on Proposed Legislation

In recent years, lawmakers have sought to shape how schools and districts address social issues. Lawmakers continued this approach with the introduction of two bills focused on social issues in 2023. The first, [SB 88](#), would require local boards of education to adopt policies about teaching gender concepts to students under 16. The second, [SB 154](#), would apply state criminal penalties to K-12 staff, including media specialists, who distribute books or content deemed to be harmful to minors. Educators' views on these differ, but most do not support either bill.

Figure 10: Percent of Teachers Opposed to Social Issues Bills



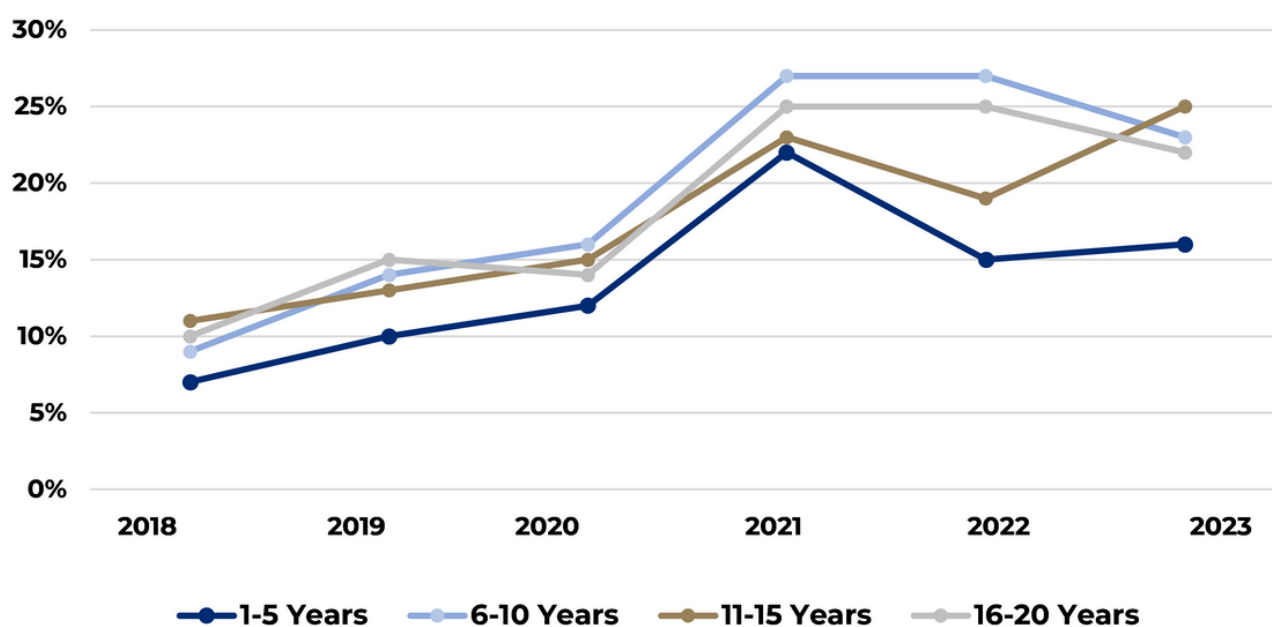
Educators offered a range of comments on the bills, reflecting the diversity of views within the educator workforce.

- *“I don’t believe this is something schools should be teaching or addressing. If a student needs this support, the parents or student should do this privately with the counselor.”*
- *“We learn and grow through tough conversations. Limiting these discussions will not help students navigate these important issues. The world is changing, and students should be properly educated so they can treat people with kindness and respect.”*
- *“I understand both sides of this, and I am very careful. However, I am scared that I might accidentally offend someone while teaching history, particularly U.S. history.”*
- *“I truly wish we would concentrate on literacy and numeracy so that students can actually read and interpret words and data for themselves. I have ninth graders who are illiterate in their home language and in English. I don’t have time to even consider conversations about sensitive topics.”*

Educators’ Future

Pressures on the educator workforce can fray their commitment to staying in the field. Approximately 22% of all educators with 20 or fewer years of experience indicate they are unlikely or very unlikely to remain in education for another five years. After climbing between 2018 and 2021, the percentage of educators unlikely to stay in the field has plateaued. However, the percentage of educators who think they will no longer be in education in five years remains much higher than in 2018.

Figure 11: Percent of Educators Unlikely/Very Unlikely to Remain in Education for Five Years by Experience Level



The percentage is the same for teachers: About 22% of participating teachers with 20 or fewer years of experience say it is unlikely they will stay in education for another five years.

Across all educators, the top three reasons to leave the field are:

- Burnout
- Student behavior
- Salary

This was consistent across most positions, though paraprofessionals cited salary as their top reason to leave instead of burnout, which they ranked third.

These challenges are a likely factor in the reluctance of educators to recommend a career in education. Approximately 56% of teachers and 51% of all educators are unlikely or very unlikely to encourage people to enter the field. Approximately 22% of teachers would recommend a career in education, and another 22% are neutral on the issue.

Despite these challenges, there are multiple reasons educators are attracted to the field and stay. The top three reasons teachers want to stay in the field are:

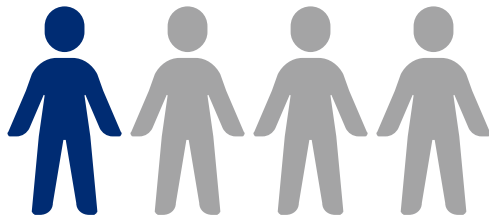
1. Professional satisfaction from helping students
2. Retirement benefits
3. Other employment benefits (e.g., health insurance)/Supportive colleagues and positive work environment (tie)

“I believe it is my calling, but the demands of the current educational system are not sustainable, and I’m looking for other ways to feel connected to arts education without staying in the public school classroom. “

High School Teacher
Rural District

“I love creating relationships with my students, and I feel that I am making an impact on their lives and helping to shape their futures. “

Middle School Teacher
Urban District



**Less than 1/4 of Teachers
would Recommend a
Career In Education**

Recommendations

Georgia educators identified challenges policymakers should address to better meet student needs and support a strong education workforce. Drawing on the feedback PAGE members provided in the survey, PAGE recommends education leaders and policymakers take the following action steps:

1 Enhance school safety by incorporating funding as an annual supplemental grant to the Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula.

While the state has made periodic investments to make schools safer, which have been a valuable resource, there is no line item in the budget to make this a consistent priority. Legislators should incorporate an annual allocation in the state budget beginning in FY 2025. Reflecting the diverse safety needs educators identified, districts should be allowed to use these funds flexibly.

2 Develop and implement a plan to return state funding for student transportation to the partnership level of 50%.

State funding to transport students safely has not kept pace with district transportation costs. The state contributed about 12 percent to districts' transportation costs in FY 2023, down from approximately 50 percent in the 1990s. Districts spent over \$1 billion on transportation that year while the state spent \$142 million. This gap adds significant costs to local budgets and limits the amount of local dollars that can be directed to the classroom. Legislators should develop and enact a multi-year plan to bring funding back to a partnership level, beginning with an increase in the FY 2025 budget.

3 Provide every K-5 school and pre-kindergarten classroom with a multi-year flexible grant to improve literacy instruction and support the implementation of HB 538.

Georgia lawmakers require a valuable series of action steps for districts to improve literacy instruction across the state. To ensure that the requirements of [HB 538](#) are fully implemented with fidelity and become embedded in the core instructional processes of every district, lawmakers should follow the proven path of Mississippi and fund these action steps. The funds should be flexible to allow districts to deploy them to meet their greatest needs, including literacy coaches, professional development, high quality instructional materials, or academic interventionists.

4 Develop and fund a multi-year plan to increase state funding for school counselors, social workers, and psychologists to the recommended best practice ratios

In the 2023 legislative session, lawmakers took a valuable step to improve mental health services for students by funding school counselors for special education and gifted students as required under [HB 283](#), which they passed in 2013. Given students' heightened mental health needs in the wake of the pandemic and the understaffing of school counselors, social workers, and psychologists, the General Assembly should develop and fund a multi-year plan to increase funding for each position to the recommended best-practice ratio. Currently school counselors are funded at a ratio of one counselor per 450 students, one social worker per 2,475 students, and one psychologist per 2,475 students. The recommended best practice is one counselor per 250 students,² one social worker per 250 students,³ and one psychologist per 500 students.⁴

5 Increase funding for substitutes to help ensure teachers have adequate planning time to prepare and deliver high quality instruction to students

Educators need time to design engaging and effective instructional plans, review and provide feedback on student work, analyze student data and more, yet they often lose planning time to covering classes for absent colleagues as districts struggle to attract and keep substitutes. The state provides \$150 to cover the cost of a substitute for eight days or \$18.75 per day. This amount has not changed since 1985 and is well below the amount districts must spend to attract substitutes. To reduce districts' reliance on teachers to cover classes and protect their planning time, the state should increase funding for substitutes.

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