



Paraprofessionals: Supporting Essential Members of Georgia’s Educator Workforce

Paraprofessionals are critical members of school instructional teams according to a survey of educators recently conducted by the Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE). More than 14,000 paraprofessionals across Georgia work collaboratively with teachers and other staff members to deliver instruction, behavioral support, special education services, and other assistance to students.¹ Attracting and retaining effective paraprofessionals is even more important in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic as districts rely on these staff members to provide extra help to struggling students. Yet, recruiting and keeping paraprofessionals is a challenge for districts. Paraprofessionals are also a resource to tap to increase entry into the teaching profession. Paraprofessionals identified preliminary action steps policymakers can take to improve recruitment and retention in the paraprofessional workforce and boost the teacher pipeline.

1. Increase paraprofessional salary in the Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula.
2. Provide support for paraprofessionals to become certified teachers.

Investing in these areas will make valuable progress in reducing the number of skilled paraprofessionals who leave the classroom, shrinking the high cost of turnover in their ranks. It will also help address teacher shortage areas including in high need such as special education and rural districts.

Survey Background

Each fall PAGE surveys its members to gather their insights into issues related to teaching and learning as well as the education workforce. In 2022, 5,641 educators who work in 172 school districts as well as state schools and state commission charter schools participated in the survey. Approximately 67% of participants are classroom teachers, and the remainder work in an array of roles including paraprofessionals, school counselors, and school and district leaders.

Paraprofessional Role

Paraprofessionals work with students in all grade levels with the largest portion of survey respondents working in kindergarten through second grade. Paraprofessionals’ distribution across grade levels includes:

- Pre-kindergarten: 12%
- Grades K-2: 31%
- Grades 3-5: 17%
- Grades 6-8: 19%
- Grades 9-12: 12%

¹ Washburn-Moses, L., Chun, E., & Kaldenberg, E. (2013). Paraprofessional roles in an adolescent reading program: Lessons learned, *American Secondary Education*, (41)3, 34-49.

Some paraprofessionals also serve students in multiple grade levels. In addition, more than 38% of responding paraprofessionals work with special education students, the highest portion in a subject area. Many work with students in multiple subject areas. Paraprofessionals are essential to meeting student needs. More than 92% of teachers say having a stable paraprofessional workforce is very important or important for students' academic success and their wellbeing. This number increases to 94% among special education teachers.

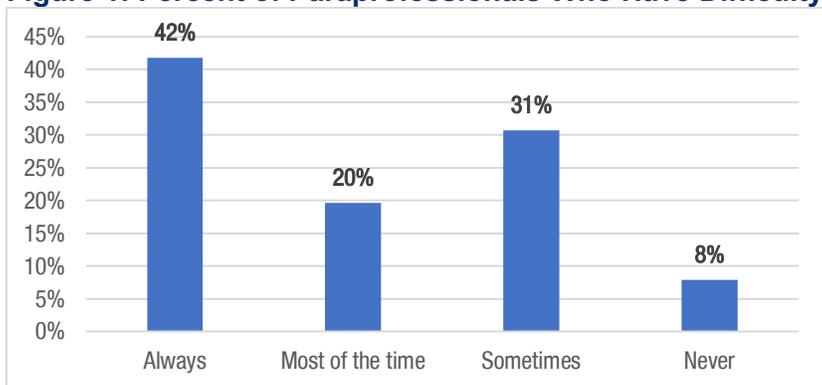
Paraprofessionals work one-on-one with students, in small groups, or whole-class settings to deliver instruction, and they are often tasked with implementing behavioral interventions under the guidance of teachers. They also provide services to special education students, which may include academic, behavioral, or physical assistance and often all three.

In the wake of the pandemic, districts are relying on paraprofessionals to provide academic interventions, including tutoring, and staff summer and after school programs to accelerate learning. These staff members are vital to successful implementation of pandemic-recovery initiatives.

Paraprofessional Workforce Challenges

Attracting and retaining skilled paraprofessionals is a challenge for school districts.² A significant factor is low salary for paraprofessionals. Starting salaries for paraprofessionals without experience is often below \$20,000, and even those with 20 years of experience can earn less than \$30,000. Most paraprofessionals who participated in the PAGE survey reported difficulty covering their living expenses.

Figure 1: Percent of Paraprofessionals Who Have Difficulty Covering Living Expenses



Many paraprofessionals described the financial pressures they face to make ends meet including:

- “Raise the pay of your paraprofessionals, and they will stay longer. Right now I can go to fast food and make more money with less hours and stress. My teenagers in high school make more than I do.”
- “I work in the after school program and have a part-time job at a funeral home.”
- “I need to get a second job but, due to my son and husband’s health, I can’t.”

More than 67% of participating paraprofessionals said salary is the first or second reason they would leave their job. Inadequate pay makes it harder for districts to hire skilled paraprofessionals. One special education teacher described the impact of low paraprofessional pay on her students: “Paras make \$8-\$10 an hour. It is not a livable wage and needs to be changed. I still do not have a para in my self-contained special education classroom because of the pay. Five different people turned down the job because of the pay.”

“Let paras do the job they were hired to do instead of constantly using them to cover classes. Let them feel valued, not non-essential.”

Paraprofessional,
Urban District

² Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. (2022). CARES Impact Study Year One Report. Retrieved from <https://gpee.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/CARES-Impact-Study-Year-One-Report-Final.pdf>

Eighty percent of paraprofessionals in the PAGE survey said raising salary is the top strategy to improve recruitment and retention as did nearly 72% of teachers.

Another leading cause for paraprofessional attrition is burnout. One of the contributing factors in paraprofessional burnout is the frequency with which they are pulled from their regular classrooms to cover classes when teachers are absent, in meetings, or in training. This happens often as many districts face a substitute shortage. These persistent disruptions in the daily work of paraprofessionals affect students. According to one teacher, “[Paraprofessionals] have been hired to work in a position, yet come to work every day with the potential of being moved to cover classes where teachers are absent, out for meetings, etc. This then takes away from instruction in their classroom, leaving a small group without a teacher.” Some paraprofessionals report that they do not receive the same wages as substitutes, which are often higher than paraprofessional wages, when paraprofessionals serve in a substitute role. This generates frustration among paraprofessionals and can contribute to low morale.

Lack of planning time is another challenge. Paraprofessionals need time with their lead teachers to plan instruction and prepare materials. Too often they do not get this time.

An additional source of financial strain for some paraprofessionals is the exclusion of their years of experience from salary calculations. Districts often set a salary schedule for paraprofessionals, which bases their pay on experience. Some paraprofessionals report that, if they change districts, their new districts count only a portion or do not count their years of experience in prior districts.

Some paraprofessionals expressed interest in completing postsecondary degrees and gaining certification to teach but described financial barriers that create significant difficulty for in reaching this goal. One wrote, “I currently am working on my bachelor’s degree in education. I have an associate degree, which cost me \$20,000 out of pocket, and I still only bring home \$1,000 each month.”

The result of these financial and working condition challenges is often attrition—many paraprofessionals leave. This churn affects educators and students. It can halt or hinder the implementation of academic or behavioral intervention initiatives, and it places new burdens on teachers and other staff members to fill in for the paraprofessional who has left.³ It disrupts relationships paraprofessionals have with students and their families. It also adds to districts’ financial burdens as they must recruit, hire, and train new paraprofessionals.

Financial Context

The challenges in the paraprofessional workforce are connected to how these staff members are funded. The state’s K-12 funding formula, the Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula, funds paraprofessionals for kindergarten students. Districts must use local and federal funds, both of which vary, to cover paraprofessionals for all other students.

The QBE formula allocates \$15,738 per paraprofessional in kindergarten classes in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 budget.⁴ This amount is below the salary districts pay paraprofessionals, requiring districts to cover the gap with other funds.

A related issue is funding for substitutes. Districts receive \$150 to cover the cost of a substitute teacher for eight days—\$18.75 per day—for each teacher funded by the QBE formula. This amount has not been changed since the QBE formula was approved in 1985, and it is below what districts pay substitutes now. This contributes to the substitute shortage, which results in paraprofessionals as well as teachers covering classes for colleagues.

³ Ghere, G. & York-Barr, J. (2007). Paraprofessional turnover and retention in inclusive programs: Hidden costs and promising practices, *Remedial and Special Education* (28)1, 21-32.

⁴ The QBE formula funds one paraprofessional for every 18 kindergarten students.

Recommendations

There are two goals for the paraprofessional workforce: 1) improve recruitment and retention of qualified paraprofessionals, and 2) strengthen the pathway from paraprofessional to certified teacher. Achieving these goals requires a comprehensive approach that addresses funding challenges, enhances the working conditions of paraprofessionals, and creates more integrated supports for those who want to become certified teachers. Policymakers can take two important steps to building this comprehensive approach.

1. Increase paraprofessional salary in the QBE formula.

The QBE formula allocation per paraprofessional—\$15,738—per paraprofessional is one-third of the total base instructional salary for teachers in the QBE formula—\$47,214.66.⁵

Increasing the paraprofessional allotment from 33.33% to 40% of the total base instructional salary would boost the allotment to approximately \$18,886. For a paraprofessional working 8 hours per day on a 184-day calendar, this would be an estimated hourly rate of about \$12.83.

2. Provide support for paraprofessionals to become certified teachers.

Restore the Promise II Teacher Scholarship program, which provided financial support to paraprofessionals seeking to earn a bachelor's degree in education. The program provided a scholarship to help cover the cost of tuition and fees. Scholarship recipients agreed to teach in a Georgia public school for one year for each 30 semester credit hours for which they received scholarship funds. Eligibility for the Promise II Scholarship program was limited to paraprofessionals employed by districts in the 1999-2000 school year, and funding was eliminated in FY 2007.

Implementing a scholarship or service-cancellable loan program to help paraprofessionals complete their degrees and gain certification can help expand entry into the teacher pipeline and, as important, enhance teacher retention.⁶

⁵ The total base instructional salary is comprised the base salary for a certified teacher, retirement, Medicare, and sick leave for 8 days. See Georgia Department of Education, FY 2023 Weights for FTE Funding Formula for more information.

⁶ Smith, C. L. (2003). *Focus on an Untapped Classroom Resource: Helping Paraprofessionals Become Teachers*. Southern Regional Education Board. Retrieved from https://www.sreb.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/05s03_focus-paraprofessionals.pdf