

# 2023 CARES IMPACT STUDY



YEAR-TWO REPORT  
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PREPARED BY

The Georgia Partnership for  
Excellence in Education



# CARES IMPACT STUDY, YEAR TWO REPORT: FROM RECOVERY TO RENEWAL


## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Georgia's school districts and state commission charter schools are investing federal pandemic relief funds in improving core instruction, designing and delivering interventions to accelerate learning for students who are behind, and addressing students' unmet mental health and wellbeing needs. Their efforts in these areas are complex, and each is a significant undertaking. Facing higher needs among students in the pandemic's wake and a tight timeline to spend the funds, districts and state charter schools—also known as local education agencies or LEAs—are pursuing these efforts concurrently. Their progress has moved along at different paces, but LEA leaders point to promising practices that are having positive effects on their students. The Year Two Report highlights key takeaways from interviews and a statewide survey of district and charter school leaders conducted by the Georgia Partnership in Excellence in Education (Georgia Partnership) as part of the CARES Impact Study, a multi-year initiative funded by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE).

Now, with less than one year before relief funds expire, LEA leaders face difficult choices about if and how they will be able to sustain the practices and staff the relief funds support that they rely on to serve students well. Their choices are made more urgent by student needs that will persist beyond the funding deadline and growing financial pressures in other areas that constrain their ability to cover the loss of federal relief funds. State policymakers can take strategic action to mitigate the negative impact of the impending loss of pandemic relief funds.

### *Recommendations for State Action*

- 1. Close existing state funding gaps.** State funding for student transportation, substitutes, and paraprofessionals falls far short of LEAs' actual expenditures. Nor does the state's funding formula for public schools, the Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula, include an adjustment for inflation. Increasing state funding for these items and adding an inflation adjustment would help enable LEAs to redirect local funds to and maintain ESSER-funded positions and practices.

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2. **Add a funding weight for low-income students.** Georgia is one of six states that does not provide additional funding for low-income students. Incorporating a funding weight into the QBE formula would help LEAs sustain some of the practices and staff they have added with relief funds to better meet the additional needs these students often bring to the classroom.
  3. **Boost funding for mental health and wellness staff.** To mitigate the immediate impact of the expiration of pandemic relief funds, that state should lower the funding ratio for social workers and psychologists to one per 1,000 students in the Fiscal Year 2025 budget, instead of the current ratio of one per 2,475 students. The state should further develop a multi-year plan to align state funding for these positions with recommended ratios of one social worker per 250 students as recommended by the School Social Work Association of America and one psychologist per 500 students as recommended by the National Association of School Psychologists.
  4. **Review and revise school staffing models.** LEAs rely on multiple staff members, including academic interventionists, instructional coaches, behavioral specialists, and mental health clinicians, which are not incorporated into the nearly 40-year-old QBE formula. It is recommended that lawmakers conduct a comprehensive study to determine the additional positions schools require to serve students effectively and revise the QBE formula to include the identified positions and fund them at the appropriate ratios.
  5. **Establish and fund a state research consortium to measure the effectiveness of LEA and state initiatives to improve student outcomes.** LEAs have pursued strategies to improve student outcomes, which vary in design, implementation, and impact. To better understand what works, how it works, and what it costs, policymakers should establish a research consortium that pairs researchers with practitioners to examine key problems of practice.
  6. **Develop and fund a comprehensive plan to strengthen the educator pipeline.** An effective, stable, and valued educator workforce, including leadership, is essential to sustaining effective practices. A comprehensive and funded approach to strengthen the educator pipeline is needed.



## ***Background***


Georgia's LEAs received a total of \$5.9 billion in federal pandemic relief funds under three legislative acts approved by Congress. Collectively, these funds are known as Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds or CARES funds. Funds allocated through the first two acts expired in September 2022 and September 2023. The final and largest portion of these funds—\$3.8 billion—became available in July 2021 and expires September 30, 2024. The Georgia Partnership launched the CARES Impact Study in fall 2021 to understand how LEAs are using the funds, identify challenges LEAs encounter and emerging promising practices they deploy, and capture contextual concerns that influence their use of the funds. In 2023, the Georgia Partnership interviewed leaders from a diverse group of districts and conducted a survey of districts and state charter schools. In total, 107 LEAs participated in the survey.

## ***Investing ESSER Funds to Improve Student Outcomes***

While the design and implementation of specific strategies varies considerably, LEAs have used relief funds to improve core instruction, accelerate learning, and remove barriers to learning.

***Improving Core Instruction.*** More than 93% of participating LEAs invested in improving literacy instruction, and nearly 86% used relief funds to improve math instruction. Specific steps include purchasing new curriculum and instructional materials, professional development for educators, adding academic interventionists, and purchasing new assessments. Across these efforts, LEA leaders emphasize the importance of ensuring teachers consistently use effective instructional strategies to deliver grade-level content to all students. Leaders described strengthening the instructional design and delivery processes they use to support educators.

***Accelerating Learning.*** LEAs used two common strategies to accelerate learning for students struggling academically: summer programs and tutoring programs. Two-thirds of participating LEAs offered summer programs in 2023, and about 63% of LEAs reported



operating tutoring programs in the 2020-2021, 2021-2022, or 2022-2023 school years. Adding academic interventionists was used by 66% of LEAs to accelerate learning among students who were behind.


***Removing Barriers to Learning.*** LEA leaders repeatedly described facing higher levels of student mental health needs and behavioral challenges than they did prior to the pandemic. These needs are often worse among students struggling with poverty and other external issues. Interviewees stressed that students' basic needs and mental health concerns must be addressed before they can fully engage in learning. More than 72% of participating LEAs added mental health professionals, including counselors, behavioral specialists and other experts, or retained external providers to address student mental health and wellbeing needs.

### ***The Educator Workforce***

Educators are essential to LEAs' efforts to improve student outcomes. LEAs made strategic investments in the educator workforce with their ESSER funds while also navigating challenges that made it difficult to attract and keep effective educators.

***More Educators Serving Students.*** Ensuring there are enough professionals in schools to effectively meet students' academic and non-academic needs is central to LEAs' efforts to improve student outcomes. About 85% of participating LEAs added instructional staff, including certified teachers, academic interventionists, paraprofessionals, and instructional coaches. The cost of adding certified staff is the area in which LEAs report investing the largest portion of their ESSER funds.

***Educator Workforce Challenges.*** Three-quarters of participating LEAs report difficulty recruiting teachers. Interviewees cite multiple causes of the shortage including competition with neighboring districts, and a greater willingness among younger educators to move. Teacher burnout, while subsiding since its pandemic height, remains a concern for LEA leaders. These issues have rippled out in different ways. Several LEAs report hiring candidates with less experience and fewer skills than they would have selected in previous years; these employees then require greater support. Teacher



absenteeism is up according to several interviewees, and LEAs report difficulty recruiting teachers to participate in afterschool tutoring and summer programs.

### ***Uncertain Future for Promising Practices***

LEAs implemented multiple strategies to address student needs and identified those they regard as most promising for improving student learning and wellbeing. As they look ahead to the expiration of ESSER funds, most are unsure if they will be able to sustain them or report they will not. Over a third anticipate they will be able to maintain their most promising practices.

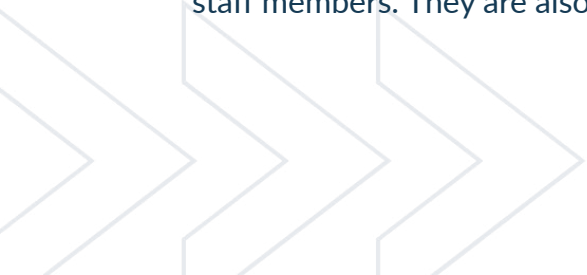
The most frequently cited practices leaders regard as most promising for improving student learning are, in rank order:


- Improving literacy instruction, particularly professional development and literacy coaches
- Academic interventionists
- Tutoring
- Summer programs
- Small class size/small group instruction
- Improving math instruction

Expanding mental health and wellness staff was the most frequently identified promising practice to improve student wellbeing.

### ***Shrinking Resources & Persistent Student Needs***

LEAs' uncertainty about sustaining promising practices reflects growing financial pressures. In addition to the looming loss of ESSER funds, LEAs face a significant increase in the cost of health insurance for non-certified staff. Once fully implemented, LEAs will pay about \$450 million more annually to provide health insurance for these staff members. They are also coping with escalating costs in other areas, such as diesel





fuel, and higher wages for bus drivers, paraprofessionals, administrative staff and other employees to compete with other sectors.

At the same time, declining enrollment, which leads to a corresponding decrease in state funding, is squeezing many districts. Sixty-eight of Georgia's 159 counties decreased population between 2010 and 2020, and the school-age population in rural counties is expected to continue to shrink.

The loss of relief funds will hit LEAs serving the highest proportion of low-income students the hardest. These LEAs received the largest per-student amount of ESSER funds. This leaves them with the largest budget gap to fill.

Though these financial pressures create uncertainty about what ESSER-funded practices and positions can be sustained, most LEAs are clear their students will continue to have pandemic-related academic and non-academic needs beyond the expiration of ESSER funds. Approximately 83% of responding LEAs anticipate that students will continue to experience greater learning challenges and mental health issues after the funds expire. These heightened needs stretch across student groups including low-income students and students with disabilities, experiencing homelessness, in foster care, or learning English.