

# 2023 CARES IMPACT STUDY

YEAR-TWO REPORT

PREPARED BY

The Georgia Partnership for  
Excellence in Education



Georgia Partnership  
FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION



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# 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.






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

## INTRODUCTION

Georgia's school districts and state-commission charter schools are using federal pandemic-relief funds to improve the core instruction they deliver to students every day. School systems are also continuing the strategies they implemented over the past two years to accelerate student learning and address unmet mental health and other non-academic needs. District investments in expanding, retaining, and building the knowledge and skills of the educator workforce are integral to these efforts. 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) in summer 2023.



The interviews and survey are part of the CARES Impact Study, a multi-year exploration by the Georgia Partnership of how districts and state charter schools—also referred to as Local Education Agencies or LEAs—are using the \$5.9 billion they received in federal pandemic relief funds. The relief funds are referred to as CARES or Elementary and Secondary School Emergency (ESSER) funds. This report follows the [Baseline Report](#), released in January 2022, and the [Year-One Report](#), released in November 2022. These reports describe the shift in LEAs' use of relief funds from crisis management in the first 18 months of the pandemic, which focused on providing instruction safely, to recovery mode, developing a mix of strategies to help students who were behind academically or struggling with mental health or other issues.

While continuing to focus on improving instruction and accelerating learning over the 2022-2023 school year, some LEAs scaled back or ended particular programs or activities. With their work progressing, leaders identified promising practices they believe are having a positive impact on students. They also described strategies that have fallen short of their goals. As they did in previous years, most LEAs encountered



difficulty recruiting and retaining staff as well as burnout among educators, which affected recovery strategies at times. Looking ahead, leaders believe students' pandemic-related needs will not end when the funds expire in September 2024. This raises urgent questions about preventing the reduction or elimination of initiatives that are valued by students and educators. Drawing primarily on data collected in 2023, specific interview and survey findings include:

1. Between the 2019-2020 and 2022-2023 school years, LEAs spent the largest amounts of ESSER funds on:
  - i. Adding certified staff
  - ii. Certified staff recruitment/retention incentives
  - iii. IT and technology infrastructure
  - iv. Facility renovation & equipment
  - v. Instructional resources (non-technology)
2. During the 2023-2024 school year, LEAs plan to spend the largest amounts on:
  - i. Adding certified staff
  - ii. Instructional resources (non-technology)
  - iii. IT and Technology infrastructure
  - iv. Professional development
  - v. Facility renovation & equipment
3. LEAs have used ESSER funds to improve core instruction through multiple, often overlapping, strategies.
  - i. More than 93% of participating LEAs invested relief funds to improve literacy instruction, and 86% have used them to improve math instruction. Funded activities include the purchase of new instructional materials, the delivery of professional development, and the hiring of academic interventionists and instructional coaches
  - ii. About 85% of LEAs hired additional instructional staff, including certified teachers, academic interventionists, and paraprofessionals.

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4. LEAs relied on summer programs, tutoring, and academic interventionists to accelerate learning for low-performing students.
    - Approximately 67% of LEAs operated summer learning programs with relief funds in 2023, down from about 85% in 2022 and 2021.
    - About 47% reported plans to offer tutoring during the 2023-2024 school year, a decline from earlier years when approximately 63% did so.
    - Two-thirds of LEAs added academic interventionists to provide instructional interventions to low-performing students.
  5. Expanding mental health and wellness staff is the most common action LEAs have taken to address students' non-academic needs.
    - More than 72% of LEAs have used ESSER funds to hire additional counselors, behavioral specialists, social workers, mental health clinicians, and other mental health staff.
    - LEAs have also provided professional development and adopted curriculum to raise awareness of and respond to mental health needs.
  6. LEAs describe persistent challenges across all levels of the educator workforce.
    - Three-quarters of LEAs report difficulty recruiting certified teachers with positions in special education, math, science, English language arts, and elementary education the most difficult to fill.
    - Nearly 70% of LEAs struggle to recruit non-instructional staff, particularly bus drivers, custodians, paraprofessionals, and nutrition staff.
  7. The promising practices cited most frequently by LEAs are:
    - Academic: Improving literacy instruction, academic interventionists, and tutoring.
    - Non-academic: Increasing staff to address mental health and wellness needs.
  8. LEAs' ability to sustain their most promising practices after ESSER funding expires varies.
    - About 36% of LEAs anticipate they will be able to sustain their most promising practices to address students' academic needs, and 38% expect to sustain non-academic promising practices.
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- Forty-five percent of LEAs are unsure if they will be able to sustain promising practices in either area, and the remaining LEAs will not be able to sustain them.
9. Students' academic and non-academic needs, which, for many, existed before and were worsened by the pandemic, will outlast ESSER funding.
- Eighty-three percent of leaders believe students' higher needs will persist after ESSER funds expire.
  - Students most likely to continue to have higher needs are low-income students, students with disabilities, and those who are experiencing homelessness.

District leaders interviewed by the Georgia Partnership were focused on meeting students' needs, whether those needs are caused by the pandemic or other external challenges. ESSER funds have been a tool for doing so, enabling them to undertake or expand initiatives that would not have been possible without the funds. Education leaders, policymakers, and community stakeholders should take action to mitigate negative effects from the expiration of ESSER funds and ensure students, particularly low-income students and those with disabilities or who are experiencing homelessness, continue to receive needed supports.

## GEORGIA PARTNERSHIP'S CARES IMPACT STUDY

The Georgia Partnership launched the CARES Impact Study in 2021 to understand how LEAs are using federal ESSER funds to accelerate student learning and improve their wellbeing, identify challenges that LEA leaders encounter, and capture promising practices emerging from their efforts. Funded by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) with state ESSER funding, the study is a multi-year initiative that draws on interviews with LEA leaders and other stakeholders and experts. The study also relies on an annual survey of LEAs. Findings from the 2021 and 2022 surveys as well as the first series of interviews, conducted in 2022, are available in the [CARES Impact Study Baseline Report](#) and [Year-One Report](#).

LEAs were surveyed for this report in June 2023. GaDOE distributed the survey to all LEAs, including 180 school districts, 44 state charter schools, and state-operated LEAs—



State Schools, the Department of Juvenile Justice, and the Department of Corrections. In total 92 school districts, 13 state commission charter schools, and the Departments of Juvenile Justice and Corrections participated in the survey. These LEAs enroll approximately 60% of full-time equivalent students in Georgia's public schools.

Interviews with leaders from nine LEAs as well as GaDOE staff and external experts were conducted between May and August 2023. These LEA leaders also participated in interviews in 2022. The Partnership selected a diverse group of LEAs based on multiple factors including enrollment, student demographics, location, and per-pupil ESSER funding amounts. The Partnership supplemented survey and interview data by reviewing materials from GaDOE, the U.S. Department of Education, and other relevant sources including academic journals, reports and briefs from education policy organizations, and media reports.

## ESSER FUNDING OVERVIEW

Congress passed three pieces of legislation that provide federal pandemic relief funding for states:

- Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security or CARES Act, approved March 2020.
- Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriation Act or CRRSA, approved December 2020.
- American Rescue Plan Act or ARP, approved March 2021.

Most federal relief funds for LEAs flow through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief or ESSER Funds, which was created by the CARES Act. ESSER I refers to funds allocated under the CARES Act, ESSER II denotes CRRSA funds, and ESSER III refers to ARP funds.

Under each act, state education agencies—in Georgia, the Georgia Department of Education—receive 10% of ESSER funds and 90% goes to LEAs. Each act sets a deadline for state agencies and LEAs to spend the funds. Each round had a one-year automatic carryover period beyond the original deadline. LEAs submit plans outlining their strategies to support students and detailed budgets for each ESSER grant to GaDOE, which reviews and approves them. GaDOE distributes ESSER funds on a reimbursement basis.

**Table 1: LEA Allocations & Spending to Date<sup>1</sup>**

	Deadline for Expenditure (Includes carryover period)	LEA Allocation	Percent Spent as of 10/31/2023
ESSER I/CARES	September 30, 2022	\$ 411,452,867	95.6
ESSER II/CRRSA	September 30, 2023	\$ 1,702,883,356	81.3
ESSER III/ ARP	September 30, 2024	\$ 3,827,188,522	62.9
<b>Total</b>		<b>\$ 5,941,524,745</b>	<b>71.12</b>

Following federal guidance, GaDOE calculated each LEAs' allocation of ESSER funds based on the proportion of federal Title I, Part A funds each received in Fiscal Year 2020. The Title I, Part A program provides funds to LEAs to meet the additional needs of low-income children. LEAs with larger proportions of low-income students received higher per-student amounts than school systems with smaller percentages of low-income students. Per student allocations ranged from more than \$10,000 for LEAs with the largest proportions of low-income students to less than \$1,000 for those with the smallest percentage.

**Table 2: Distribution of Per FTE Student ESSER Funding**

Total ESSER Funding per FTE	# of Districts
Above \$10,000	7
\$9,000 to \$9,999	5
\$8,000 to \$8,999	7
\$7,000 to \$7,999	10
\$6,000 to \$6,999	19
\$5,000 to \$5,999	20
\$4,000 to \$4,999	26
\$3,000 to \$3,999	32
\$2,000 to \$2,999	33
\$1,000 to \$1,999	16
Less than \$1,000	5

<sup>1</sup> Percent spent includes only CARES Act Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund Grant-LEA, ESSER II-CRRSA Act-LEA, and ESSER III-ARP-LEA funds. It does not include other ESSER funds LEAs may have received such as LEA bonuses. Data retrieved from Georgia Insights, ESSER Funding Transparency <https://georgiainsights.gadoe.org/Dashboards/Pages/ESSER-Funding-Transparency.aspx>

The [Baseline Report](#) provides detailed information about the structure of the ESSER program. LEAs have considerable flexibility to use ESSER funds to address students' pandemic-related needs as well as to maintain instructional and support services schools provide to students.


## INVESTMENT SNAPSHOT: TOP AREAS OF ESSER USE

LEAs ranked additional certified staff and financial incentives for certified staff as the areas in which they spent the largest amounts of ESSER funds between the 2019-2020 and 2022-2023 school years. Investments in technology were the third highest spending category during those years.

Heading into the 2023-2024 school year, LEAs had less funding to tap with the expiration of ESSER I and ESSER II funds by the end of September 2022 and 2023 respectively, but their top spending category remained the same: additional certified staff. Purchasing non-technology instructional resources is second followed by technology infrastructure.

Table 3: Top Five Areas of Largest Investment of ESSER Funds

2019-2020 through 2022-2023	2023-2024
Additional certified staff	Additional certified staff
Certified staff recruitment/retention incentives	Instructional resources (non-technology)
Technology infrastructure	Technology infrastructure
Facility renovation & equipment	Professional development
Instructional resources (non-technology)	Facility renovation & equipment



Investments in certified staff across these years reflect the importance of having a sufficient number of effective educators in schools. They are also an ongoing and significant expense.

## INVESTMENTS IN STUDENT LEARNING AND WELLBEING

LEA are continuing to deploy the strategies to improve student learning and wellbeing they outlined in their ESSER plans for GaDOE and launched over the last two years. The tight timeline to spend the funds makes it difficult to make substantial changes to these strategies, though LEAs can adjust their strategies and accompanying budgets with approval from GaDOE. For many LEAs, strengthening core instruction provided to all students is the foundation of their recovery efforts. LEAs are supplementing this with initiatives to accelerate learning among low-performing students. They are removing barriers to learning by addressing mental health and other non-academic needs.

### *Strengthening Core Instruction*

In interviews, LEA leaders emphasized ensuring teachers consistently use effective instructional strategies to deliver grade-level content to all students. Doing so reduces the number of students who fall behind and diminishes the gap between students not yet at grade level and those who are. Some leaders began these efforts before the pandemic, which became more urgent in its wake. For others, the pandemic revealed instructional gaps they are now tackling.


Many LEAs are concentrating on improving core instructional practices in literacy and math. More than 93% of survey respondents invested ESSER funds in improving literacy instruction, and nearly 86% directed ESSER funds to improving math instruction. Purchasing new instructional materials and delivering professional development to instructional staff were the most frequent uses of these funds.



**Table 4: ESSER Investments in Literacy and Math Instruction**

Literacy		Math	
Purchase new literacy curriculum/ instructional materials	76%	Professional development for teachers	66%
Professional development for teachers	73%	Purchase new math curriculum/ instructional materials	63%
Hire academic interventionist	61%	Hire academic interventionist	51%
Purchase new reading assessments	50%	Purchase new math assessments	43%
Hire teachers to reduce class size for reading	43%	Hire teachers to reduce class size for math	29%
Hire literacy coaches	39%	Hire math coaches	28%
Hire paraprofessionals to support literacy instruction	31%	Hire paraprofessionals to support math instruction	19%
Professional development for paraprofessionals	30%	Professional development for paraprofessionals	18%

Efforts to improve literacy are having an impact. Fulton, Dougherty, and Seminole County Schools are among the LEAs focused on improving student reading. Their approaches include providing professional development—each chose Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling or LETRS training, which has been used by other states



and districts to improve reading—and deployment of literacy coaches, who help teachers incorporate and sustain the new literacy instructional practices. All three districts have seen gains in student reading scores. In Fulton, third grade reading scores for every student subgroup, including low-income and minority students, surpassed pre-pandemic levels. These early gains are the first step in an ongoing process of ensuring their students become strong readers.

Deepening teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators' expertise through high quality professional development is a critical component of improving core instruction and accelerating learning. ESSER funds enabled LEAs to enhance and expand professional development in literacy and other areas, including the following:

- Increase the quality of professional development: 73%
- Increase the number of staff participating in professional development: 61%
- Expand professional development to new focus areas: 57%
- Increase the type of positions participating in professional development: 37%

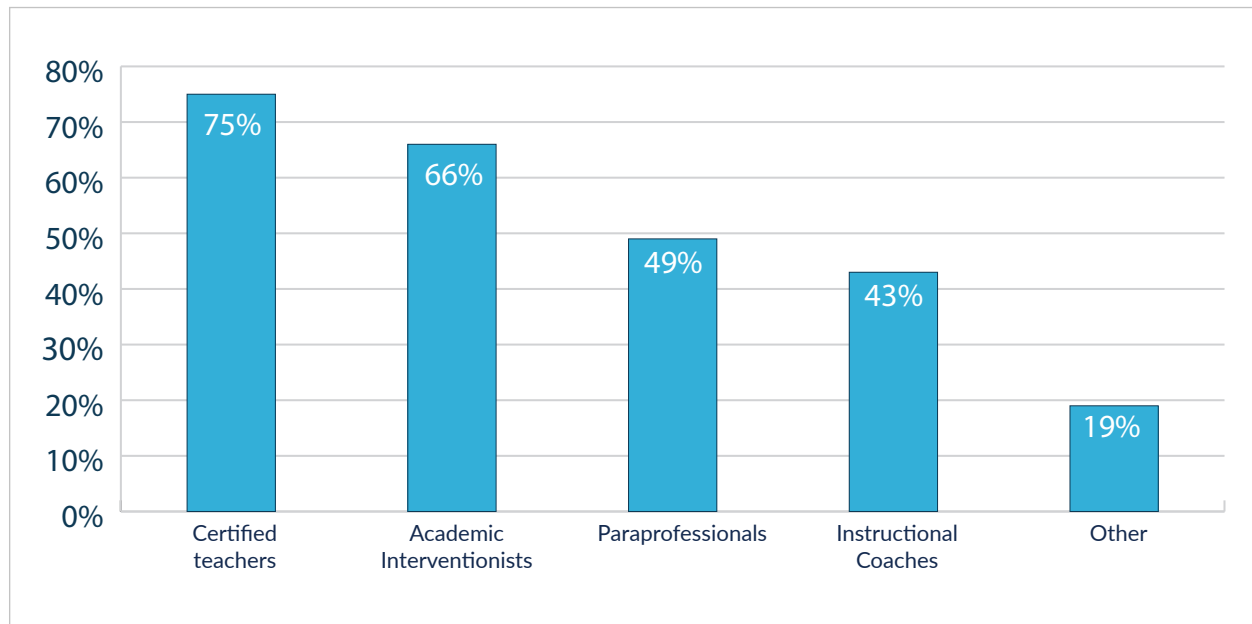
Interviewees echoed these survey responses. Several said ESSER funds enabled them to offer higher quality professional development to more staff members than would have been possible otherwise. Training more people at the same time helps ensure staff have a shared understanding of the new practices and increases the likelihood that they be adopted and used with fidelity. This hastened the progress these LEAs made.

Increasing instructional staff is often part of LEAs' approaches to improving core instruction as well as providing academic interventions to students. About 85% of LEAs used ESSER funds to add instructional staff, most often additional teachers and academic interventionists.

“The professional learning that we’ve been able to afford and do, I mean, we won’t ever see that again.”

**-RURAL DISTRICT  
LEADER**

**Table 5: Percent of LEAs Hiring Additional Instructional Staff by Position**



LEAs added other positions including Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), special education, and dual enrollment coordinators as well as GED and resource teachers.

### **Rebooting Professional Learning Communities in Newton County Schools**

Newton County Schools reset how educators work together in professional learning communities (PLCs) to improve core instruction and provide more effective interventions to struggling students. With training and support from expert consultants, the district and each school formed guiding coalitions. The coalitions focus solely on teaching and learning and related problems of practice linked to teaching and learning. At both levels, members research and develop proposals to address issues and problems and collectively decide the appropriate response. The district coalition concentrates on systemwide issues, and school coalitions focus on their own issues as well as tailoring system practices to the needs of their own students. The coalitions create structure to leverage educators' knowledge and, as important, they create teacher ownership of the work, a step beyond teacher buy-in.


According to interviewees, improving core instruction includes:

- Aligning state standards and LEA curriculum
- Identifying and honing the delivery of “power” standards that contain essential concepts, which are the foundation of other standards
- Establishing an instructional design framework that incorporates teacher voice and expertise
- Ensuring all teachers understand and can demonstrate evidence-based instructional practices
- Securing and using high quality instructional materials
- Monitoring student progress and educator practice, quickly identifying gaps, and providing real-time, differentiated support to improve learning and practice

“Our most promising strategies for improving core instruction are focusing on Tier 1 instruction of priority standards, ensuring alignment to GaDOE curriculum maps, adoption of an aligned math curriculum, and our school improvement planning process.”

**-POLK COUNTY  
SCHOOL DISTRICT**

Several LEA leaders emphasized the importance of building systems to help teachers consistently provide effective instruction within and across grade levels and schools. They cautioned against adding programs that focus on one element of instructional practice but are not integrated into a comprehensive improvement plan or aligned with improvement goals. Pike County provides one example. Leaders there have put in place a 13-step instructional process, which includes how teachers design units of learning, deliver the units, and design, calibrate, and score student work. This work is undertaken by teachers within professional learning communities (PLCs), which use an appreciative inquiry process to examine problems of practice. The PLCs are supported by principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches who also conduct instructional rounds to monitor implementation and provide support to teachers. This differs from the use of discrete programs that are added onto existing work but are not embedded into a school or LEAs’ systems. Discrete programs may yield short-term gains, but, on their own, do not change core practices and frequently are not sustained.



Several LEA leaders flagged the need to ensure the lowest performing students receive grade-level instruction. These students need instructional interventions to master content their peers have already learned, but they also need to learn the grade-level content their peers are currently gaining. In some settings, these students received interventions, but did not consistently get grade-level instruction. In others, these students received grade-level content, but ensuring they mastered it was viewed as the responsibility of intervention teachers, not grade-level teachers. To effectively ensure delivery of interventions and grade-level instruction, LEAs are using different strategies to address this gap:


- Ensuring interventions are not provided at times that conflict with delivery of grade-level content
- Having intervention teachers push into classrooms to collaborate with classroom teachers to deliver grade-level content
- Creating a process for teams of teachers to collaboratively plan and deliver grade-level content and interventions

### ***Accelerating Learning***

The frequent disruptions that began in March 2020 and continued through much of the 2021-2022 school year reduced learning time for many students and widened achievement gaps that existed before the pandemic between historically marginalized students and their peers. In tandem with their efforts to improve core instruction, LEAs are providing additional supports to these students to accelerate learning and reach grade level benchmarks. Three strategies most LEAs have used are summer learning programs, tutoring, and academic interventionists.

### **Summer Learning Programs**

About two-thirds of LEAs participating in the survey operated summer learning programs in 2023. This is a lower percentage than in 2022 and 2021 when 85% of LEAs surveyed ran summer programs. One interviewee said his LEA, which received a lower per-student amount of ESSER funds, did not offer a summer program in 2023 as it had in 2021



and 2022 because its ESSER funds were depleted. This is likely a factor in other LEAs' decisions not to offer summer programs.

Effective teachers and transportation are the most critical components of effective summer programs according to the LEAs surveyed.

**Table 6: Most Important Components of Effective Summer Learning Programs Identified by LEA Leaders**


Component	Percent of LEAs
Highly effective certified teachers	88%
Transportation	80%
Curriculum aligned with school year standards	65%
Small class sizes	62%
A minimum of 3 hours of daily academic instruction/inclusion of enrichment activities (tie)	44%

Several interviewees highlighted the importance of including enrichment activities in summer programs. Many of their students have very limited opportunities to participate in learning experiences outside of school, such as attending art or science camps, exploring cultural institutions in their communities or other areas of the state, or visiting work sites in different sectors and postsecondary institutions. Activities such as these broaden background knowledge and encourage exploration of new subject areas. LEAs incorporated enrichment activities in summer programs in different ways, including partnering with local nonprofits to provide enrichment

“We offer enrichment in the form of 80 plus summer inspiration camps. We are offering extended learning to complete standard mastery for those who did not master all of the standards during the year and credit recovery for some students. We provide nursing, counseling, feeding and transportation at no cost to our families.

We are serving well over 1,000 K-8 students, about 50% of the student body, this summer, and are providing some jobs to our high school students by letting them be camp counselors with our certified staff.”

**-PUTNAM COUNTY SCHOOLS**



activities, extending CTAE activities into summer programs for middle school students, and providing weekly field trips.

Some LEAs reported difficulty recruiting teachers to work in their summer programs, particularly their most effective teachers. Several also struggled to find enough bus drivers. Student participation was an additional challenge for some LEAs. Some students and parents were not interested in summer programs, including students identified as most in need of additional instruction and support.

According to survey responses, the proportion of LEAs meeting their summer program objectives was:

- All: 13%
- Most: 69%
- Some: 18%

Interviewees also described mixed results. One reported positive effects of their LEA's K-8 summer program, which ran six weeks and offered both academic and enrichment learning opportunities. Program leaders and teachers continued to adjust instructional activities based on students' specific needs throughout the program, and weekly field trips were used as an incentive to maintain participation. Another LEA leader said the summer program in their LEA fell short of its academic goals, but he considered the program valuable because it created a positive relationship between students and schools and provided low-income students with experiences they otherwise would not have had. A third interviewee said elementary students in the summer program offered in their LEA had not mastered standards as hoped. However, the LEA's high school summer programs succeeded in helping students recover credits and get back on track for graduation.

ESSER funds enabled 25% of survey respondents to offer summer learning programs, which they had not done before. The funds also allowed LEAs with existing summer programs to expand and enhance them.

**Table 7: ESSER-Funded Summer Program Enhancements Component**

Component	Percent of LEAs
Increase the number of participating students	83%
Expand the types of activities offered	71%
Provide transportation	49%
Expand the number of weeks of the summer program	39%
Provide meals/expand the number of hours of daily operation (tie)	24%

### **Tutoring**


About 63% of survey respondents indicated that their LEAs provided tutoring in 2020-2021, 2021-2022, or 2022-2023 school years. Fewer planned to do so in the 2023-2024 school year: 47%.

According to survey participants, the most critical components of effective tutoring programs are ensuring that tutoring content match students' specific needs and their progress is monitored.

**Table 8: Most Important Components of Effective Tutoring Programs Identified by LEA Leaders**

Component	Percent of LEAs
Aligning tutoring session content with curriculum & individual student learning needs	85%
Data collection & analysis to track student progress	70%
Using certified teachers as tutors	67%
Capacity of district & school administrators to coordinate content & logistics of tutoring	62%
Communication & collaboration between tutors & classroom teachers	58%





According to survey responses, the proportion of LEAs meeting their tutoring objectives was:

- All: 14%
- Most: 62%
- Some: 21%
- Few: 3%

Multiple LEAs cited their tutoring programs as their most promising strategy to accelerate student learning. Other LEAs encountered problems in their tutoring programs, most often difficulty recruiting teachers to participate in tutoring before or after school and on weekends. Recruiting and maintaining the participation of students in out-of-school time tutoring programs was similarly hard for many LEAs.

Several LEAs that tutor during the school day reported difficulty scheduling the tutoring sessions in survey responses. An interviewee whose district provides tutoring during school hours explained some of the logistical challenges, including ensuring tutoring does not replace grade-level instruction. Tutoring sessions also need to be frequent enough for the student to make progress but not so often that he or she becomes overwhelmed and disengages. Many students who are farthest behind need tutoring in multiple subjects, further complicating scheduling challenges. He cautioned against “over-interventation” these students, which can also lead to disengagement. In addition, students need to be matched with the right tutor, one who “has a deep toolbox” of interventions and can apply the appropriate ones. Despite these challenges, students who received tutoring during school hours in this LEA made learning gains that outpaced improvements, which were limited, for those in before- or after-school tutoring programs. This LEA continues to work on resolving logistical challenges of school-day tutoring so that more schools can implement it.

ESSER funds enabled 38% of survey respondents to launch tutoring programs and allowed LEAs with existing tutoring programs to expand and enhance them.

Table 9: ESSER-Funded Tutoring Program Enhancements Component

Component	Percent of LEAs
Increase the number of participating students	85%
Provide transportation for tutoring outside normal school hours	35%
Hire external tutors	25%
Provide training for tutors	15%

### Academic Interventionists

Two-thirds of LEAs added academic interventionists to provide additional one-on-one or small group instruction to low-performing students. Many identified the work of interventionists as their LEAs' most promising practice to improve student learning. Interviewees noted the importance of ensuring educators in this role have deep knowledge about different intervention strategies and can tailor them to the specific needs of individual students. This often requires providing high quality training.

### *Removing Barriers to Learning*

Leaders repeatedly described increased mental health needs and behavioral challenges among students that result from the pandemic. For many students, these are also tied to persistent difficulties that come with poverty or other external issues that shape what children bring to the classroom, which the pandemic worsened. If unresolved, these challenges make it very difficult for students to engage in learning activities. Solving these challenges has fallen on

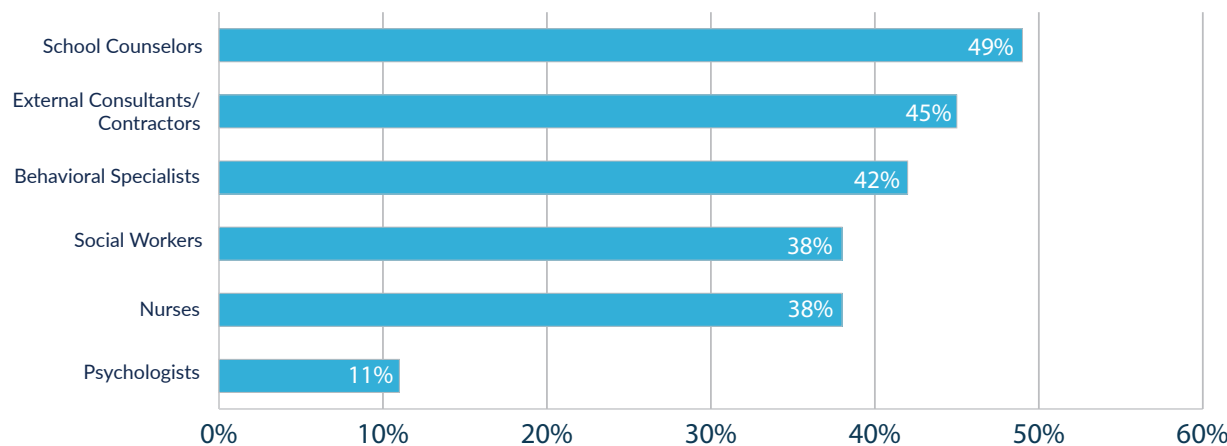
"Foundations of safety come before learning can take place. And if you don't feel physically safe, mentally safe, socially safe as a student, either because of your own mental health needs or because of the behaviors of others, then you don't have an environment where people can learn. And teachers feel the same way."

**-URBAN DISTRICT LEADER**

schools and school districts either on their own or through partnerships they build with external organizations.

More than 72% of LEAs added staff to address students’ mental health and other non-academic needs. Of these LEAs, almost half added school counselors, and nearly that many rely on external contractors or consultants to provide support services to students including counseling.

**Figure 1: Percentage of LEAs Adding Student Support Staff**



Other staff hired by LEAs to support students’ non-academic needs include mental health counselors and therapists, parent liaisons, and personnel to coordinate various support staff and programs. Interviewees consider these additional staff critical for students’ academic success. When these professionals are not in schools, the responsibility for addressing students’ mental health and wellness concerns falls on teachers, principals, and other educators who lack expertise in these areas and detracts from their focus on instruction.

## A New Approach to Supporting Students and Staff in Henry County Schools

Faced with rising mental health needs among students and staff and lacking a coordinated strategy to address them, Henry County Schools used ESSER funds to create a new position: mental health and wellness facilitator.

Each school has a facilitator whose responsibilities includes:


- Provide a first line of support to students and staff experiencing a mental health need or other challenge that affects learning
- Create a school mental health and wellness plan and design a mental health and wellness room for staff and student use
- Identify students and staff who need additional support and connect them to mental health clinicians, social workers, or other appropriate professionals
- Help staff and students recover from disruptive incidents in school
- Train staff in de-escalation techniques and informed care.

The district's objectives include preventing incidents due to conflict and self-harm, improving student and staff attendance, preserving learning time by resolving conflict and restoring a positive classroom environment after an incident, and creating a safety net for students and staff. Though a case study analysis of the facilitators' impact is not yet complete, the district has already seen a reduction in students engaging in self-harm or missing 11 or more days of school. In addition, more than 80% of students involved in a disruptive incident return to their classrooms after participating in a discussion with their peers guided by the facilitator. Previously the students would not have returned to the classroom and would have missed instruction.

Interviewees describe student mental health and wellbeing as an area that has been consistently understaffed. The state funds one school counselor per 450 students, one social worker per 2,475 students, and one psychologist per 2,475 students. These are significantly above the recommended ratios of one school counselor per 250<sup>2</sup> students, one school social worker per 250<sup>3</sup> students, and one school psychologist per 500

2 American School Counselor Association. (nd). School Counselor Roles & Ratios. Retrieved from <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/About-School-Counseling/School-Counselor-Roles-Ratios>

3 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)



students.<sup>4</sup> Under the state's current ratios, 65 school districts do not receive enough state funding for one social worker and one psychologist in Fiscal Year 2024.

Despite the limited number of mental health professionals in schools, LEAs may be the only source of professional assistance for students with mental health, behavioral, or other non-academic needs in many communities across Georgia.

- 78 counties do not have a licensed psychologist<sup>5</sup>
- 53 counties do not have a licensed social worker<sup>6</sup>
- 45 counties do not have a licensed psychologist or social worker<sup>7</sup>
- 65 counties do not have a pediatrician<sup>8</sup>

## INVESTING IN CORE OPERATIONS & FACILITIES

LEAs are using ESSER funds to keep schools operating, including expenditures on staff, instructional tools, transportation, and utilities. Approximately 63% of participating LEAs used ESSER funds for continuity of services in the 2022-2023 school year. Among these LEAs, the most frequent uses of ESSER funds were:

- Instructional software and resources—70%
- Financial incentives to retain personnel—56%
- IT and technology infrastructure—54%
- Salary costs to offset the need to furlough staff or reduce salaries: 34%
- Transportation fuel costs: 32%

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4 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>

5 Voices for Georgia's Children. (2023). All About Kids: Factsheets on Georgia's Children. Retrieved from <https://georgiavoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2023-Factbook.pdf>

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Georgia Board of Health Care Workforce. (2022). Georgia Counties without Primary Care/Core Practitioners.



About 69% of responding LEAs have used or plan to use ESSER funds to renovate facilities or purchase equipment and fixtures to improve health and safety for students and staff. In interviews, several district leaders reported challenges using ESSER funds for renovations, including the limited timeline for spending the funds as well as complying with the Davis-Bacon Act, a federal law requiring contractors that undertake construction or renovations projects to pay employees or sub-contractors the prevailing wage for that geographic area.

## ADDRESSING EDUCATOR WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

The importance of a strong educator workforce was a recurring theme in survey results and interviews. A workforce with high levels of knowledge and skills and sufficient numbers is essential to deliver effective instruction and address students' non-academic needs. The pandemic worsened existing cracks across the education workforce pipeline. Workforce challenges risk undermining LEAs' efforts to improve core instruction and accelerate learning.

### *Teachers*

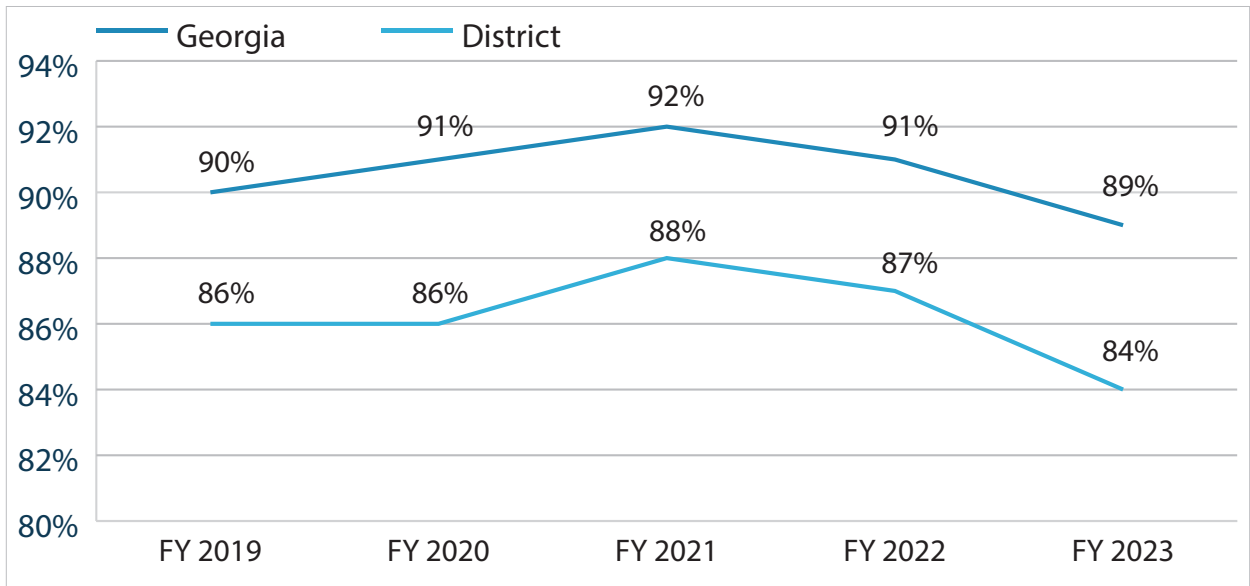
Three-quarters of LEAs that participated in the survey report difficulty recruiting teachers. The portion of these LEAs that ranked the following subjects as top three areas of need are:

- Special education: 69%
- Math: 68%
- Science: 43%
- English language arts: 28%
- Elementary education: 20%

Multiple factors contribute to the teacher shortage, including attrition. Some teachers move to another district or another state, and some leave the profession. In the first full year of the pandemic—the 2020-2021 school year—the percentage of teachers who stayed in their district increased from 86% to 88%. In the 2022-2023 school year, the

percentage had slipped to 84% statewide. In some districts, it fell to 75% or lower.

Figure 2: Teacher Retention Rate




Source: Georgia Department of Education, Educator Pipeline Dashboard, Teacher Retention Trend

Several LEA leaders described competing with neighboring districts to attract teachers, which contributes to local attrition as teachers seek better pay, preferred teaching assignments, or more supportive work environments. They also spoke about seeing a greater willingness or interest in changing districts among younger teachers than in earlier generations.

“Every time you turn over a teacher, you go back to zero. So we need to retain and keep our teachers so that you don’t have to keep reinventing the wheel year after year after year.”

**-URBAN DISTRICT LEADER**

The attractiveness of other sectors that pay more, have more manageable work hours, and are not subject to the same levels of scrutiny and criticism was highlighted by one interviewee as a reason some educators leave, and potential educators chose different career paths. Three also raised concerns about political issues in the classroom, which distracted from instruction.



Teacher attrition has negative effects, which ripple out in multiple ways.<sup>9</sup> It can lead to hiring teachers with less skill and knowledge, which several interviewees did, a step that, in turn, required them to provide more training and support to those teachers. High turnover also interferes with efforts to improve instruction and collaboration among teachers, and increases LEAs' costs as they have to spend more to recruit and train new teachers.<sup>10</sup>

Several interviewees shared concerns about teachers' mental health and wellbeing, which can contribute to turnover. While improved since the pandemic's most challenging months, many teachers continue to struggle with exhaustion and burnout. LEA leaders cite burnout as a reason they had trouble recruiting teachers for summer and afterschool programs and have higher absentee rates among teachers than before the pandemic. Two leaders said they have a small number of teachers missing an extensive number of days, which had not occurred before the pandemic.

Despite these persistent challenges, interviewees report recruiting and keeping teachers as they entered the 2023-2024 school year was not quite as difficult as in 2022. LEAs have taken multiple steps to boost recruitment and retention, including:


- Hosting and attending job fairs, using online recruitment programs, and recruiting candidates from abroad.
- Using surveys and other tools to gather information from staff to identify and resolve concerns and increase staff input into decisions.
- Implementing or strengthening new teacher induction programs as well as mentoring initiatives.
- Increasing planning time
- Providing employee assistance programs that connect staff to counselors and other support services.
- Providing financial support to earn endorsements or graduate degrees
- Assisting paraprofessionals to complete degrees and/or gain certification.

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9 Carver-Thomas, D. & Darling-Hammond, L. (2019). The trouble with teacher turnover: How teacher attrition affects students and schools. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* (27)36, 1-32.

10 Ibid.





Some LEAs—36%—indicated they will provide financial incentives to certified teachers in the 2023-2024 school year, which is down from 49% in the 2022-2023 school year. Among those doing so, 87% are providing retention supplements and 32% are providing recruitment bonuses. Similarly, 32% are paying for or offering reimbursements to teachers for gaining endorsements in additional areas, and 21% are offering tuition reimbursement.

### **A Comprehensive Approach to Attracting and Supporting Teachers in Dougherty County**

The Dougherty County School System is building a multi-faceted approach to boost its teacher workforce.

Components include:

- Teacher induction program, which includes mentors, regular sessions for new teachers in grade bands, and assistance from instructional specialists.
- Teacher intern program through which selected students in their last year of the teacher preparation programs at Albany State and Georgia Southwestern State Universities are hired as teacher of record while doing their student teaching. Students are supported by a master teacher and earn a salary, offsetting the cost of their degree.
- Grow-Your-Own program in partnership with Mercer University through which non-certified employees with a bachelor's degree can earn a master's in teaching at no cost.

The district is designing an initiative to bring students in teacher preparation programs to the county to work in its summer program. This offers them an opportunity to develop a relationship with district staff, gain experience, and participate in district professional development.

### **Leaders**

Concerns about the principal workforce were cited by several interviewees, including the difficulty of successfully managing the extensive array of responsibilities principals now hold and the shrinking pool of educators interested in becoming principals. The challenges of the position may contribute to attrition among principals. Between the 2019-2020 and 2022-2023 school years, 39% of Georgia's schools had one principal

change, and, in an additional 8% of schools, principals changed two or more times.<sup>11</sup> Principal attrition typically has negative effects on student learning and teacher retention.<sup>12</sup>

There has also been turnover among Georgia's superintendents, which can disrupt improvement efforts. Between July 2019 and August 2023, 70 districts changed superintendents at least once.<sup>13</sup> The length of a superintendent's tenure in a district is connected to student learning, with longer tenures linked to higher achievement.<sup>14</sup>

Using a portion of its ESSER funds, the GaDOE awarded a \$3 million, three-year grant to the Georgia Association of Educational Leaders (GAEL) to provide executive coaching to principals, superintendents, and others in leadership roles in districts.<sup>15</sup> Both new and veteran leaders will be eligible. The initiative draws on the coaching model used in the business sector, in which the education leader and the coach form a partnership of equals. Through a process of

"Our administrative ranks are put in an almost impossible situation even at a high school. If you look at a school that has a principal and maybe four APs for 2,000 students, that's not enough to manage the mental health needs of those students on top of instruction and community support and all those other aspects of what we do. We're outmanned. Completely."

**-URBAN DISTRICT LEADER**

"We talk about school improvement all the time, and schools are never going to improve if you have principals turnover every three years, superintendents leave every four years. Improvement's impossible without sustainability of leadership."

**-RURAL DISTRICT LEADER**


11 Georgia Department of Education. Personal Communication

12 Bartanen, B., Grissom, J.A., & Rogers, L.K. (2019). The impacts of principals turnover. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 41(3), 350-374.

13 Georgia Partnership analysis of data provided by the Georgia Department of Education and the Georgia School Superintendents Association.

14 Simpson, J. (2013). Superintendent tenure and student achievement. AASA Journal of Scholarship & Practice (9)4

15 Costley, R., personal communication, October 16, 2023



dialogue and reflection, the coach helps the education leader identify areas for growth and develop resources and strategies to reach his or her goals. GAEL will also provide technical assistance to LEAs that would like to establish their own executive coaching program. GAEL anticipates launching the program in fall 2024. The program's aim is to improve participants' leadership skills and keep more of them on the job with the goal of boosting student outcomes. The Georgia School Superintendents Association (GSSA) is participating in GAEL's leadership initiative, which enabled it to expand its Early Coaching Program for new superintendents and its Senior Executive Leadership Program for veteran superintendents. By providing individualized coaching support, these programs aim to help participants improve student achievement, strengthen system practice, and foster community development.

### ***Non-Instructional Staff***

About 69% of LEAs participating in the survey report difficulty recruiting non-teaching staff. The portion of these LEAs that ranked the following positions as top three areas of need are:

- Bus driver: 70%
- Custodian: 50%
- Paraprofessional: 45%
- Nutrition staff: 43%
- Psychologist: 20%

These staff members are critical to schools' daily operations, and shortages in these areas can disrupt daily activities in schools. More than 31% of survey respondents indicate that they will use financial incentives in the 2023-2024 school year to boost recruitment and retention among these employees. Nearly 91% of these LEAs are providing retention supplements, 27% are offering recruitment bonuses, and 18% are providing tuition reimbursement.

## SPENDING CONSIDERATIONS

While leaders did not report significant changes to their approaches to supporting students, many adjusted spending plans due to external financial pressures. More than 46% of LEAs are reallocating ESSER funds in response to inflation-driven cost increases. Survey participants described purchasing fewer services and materials than planned or eliminating them due to inflation. Some reported shifting ESSER funds to continuity of services to support increases in operational costs including food, fuel, and instructional materials. Rising costs also prompted several districts to revise facility renovations or other capital expenditures or not move forward with them.

Lawmakers approved a 67% increase in the employer's share of the monthly cost for health insurance for LEA employees in the 2023 legislative session. This adds \$635 to the cost of health insurance for each participating employee every month, or \$7,620 annually. The state is covering the increase for certified staff, and LEAs must cover the increase for non-certified staff, which will be phased in over two years beginning in January 2024. More than 30% of LEAs participating in the survey anticipate that the increase could change how they deploy ESSER funds. Changes LEAs are considering to manage the insurance increase include:

- Using ESSER funds for continuity of service expenditures to cover SHBP increase
- Reducing the number of staff covered by ESSER funds
- Decreasing spending of ESSER funds in other areas including instruction, equipment or supplies, professional development
- Ending ESSER-funded positions early

## PROMISING PRACTICES

LEAs have implemented multiple strategies to help students rebound from the pandemic's harmful effects. Leaders were asked to identify the practices they consider the most promising for improving student learning. The ones cited most frequently by survey participants are rank ordered as:

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

Many LEAs identified two or more of these practices, often describing them as elements of a comprehensive approach to improving core instruction and accelerating learning. Interviewees' descriptions made clear that LEAs differ in how they design and implement these practices.

Interviewees had many of the same responses, but several also cited expansions of their Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (CTAE) programs, including Bibb County Schools. The district has expanded existing career pathways and added new ones in its CTAE program, including agriculture, cybersecurity, sports medicine and phlebotomy, culinary arts, and fire safety. Students participate in hands-on learning experiences, connect to fields they are interested in, and broaden their vision of their own futures—changing their mindset about what is possible. Enrollment is climbing in CTAE courses—as well as in dual enrollment, as students can earn a certificate from a technical college in several CTAE pathways.

The majority of LEAs reported that increasing mental health and behavioral staff is the most promising approach to improving student wellbeing. Many have added these positions to their staff, while some have developed partnerships with external providers or are contracting with licensed professionals to provide counseling to students. A few brought on district-level coordinators to support school-based mental health staff. Some have been able to establish school-based health clinics to address both mental and physical health needs.

"We are starting a School Based Health Clinic to serve our students and staff in a county with no other health care options."

**-TWIGGS COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Several LEAs cited training teachers in addressing students’ behavioral and mental health needs as a promising approach, while a few LEAs focused on ensuring that staff consistently uses existing programs and tiered intervention strategies.

Nearly 88% of participating LEAs indicated they are using ESSER funds to pay for their most promising strategies to address students’ academic needs, and 72% are relying on ESSER funds to cover their most promising practices to support student mental health and wellbeing.

LEAs vary in their expectations of sustaining their promising practices. While more than one-third of LEAs indicated that they will be able to sustain these practices, the remainder cannot or are uncertain about their ability to do so.

**Figure 12: Percent of LEAs that Expect to Sustain Promising Practices**


	Academic Promising Practice			Mental Health & Wellbeing Promising Practice		
	Yes	No	Unsure	Yes	No	Unsure
All LEAs	36%	19%	45%	38%	17%	45%
Rural LEAs	35%	17%	48%	41%	39%	20%
Urban LEAs	34%	42%	24%	37%	13%	50%

In addition to their most promising practices, there are likely other strategies LEAs have implemented that benefit students’ academic success or their wellbeing. LEAs must determine which of these they will sustain, modify, or eliminate after ESSER funds expire on September 30, 2024.

Interviewees have grappled with the challenge of sustaining ESSER-funded practices since the funds became available.

“What happens when that funding is gone, and our kids need that extra support and a counselor may or may not be able to provide the intensive support that we are finding our students need?”

**URBAN DISTRICT LEADER**



As most LEAs did, all added staff, an ongoing and significant expense and the area of largest ESSER investment across LEAs. Interviewees aimed to limit new hires to positions essential to effectively implement the actions they believed their students needed to recover from the pandemic. Several anticipate they will be able to cover the additional positions with local funds, while others continue to explore how many of these positions they can maintain, if any. Several are seeking grant or other funding sources or pursuing partnerships with other organizations that could help cover some costs.

Other ESSER-funded activities that interviewees anticipate they will scale back or eliminate include professional development, summer programs, and tutoring.


## **PERSISTENT STUDENT NEEDS**

Though uncertain about their capacity to sustain their most promising practices, most LEAs are clear their students will continue to have pandemic-related academic and non-academic needs beyond the ESSER deadline.

Approximately 83% of responding LEAs anticipate that students will continue to experience higher academic and mental health issues after ESSER funds expire. Nearly 14% are unsure if students' needs will remain higher, and only three percent do not expect students' higher needs will continue.

Continued needs are not isolated to one or two groups of students. Nearly half of responding LEAs indicate that students in every identified sub-group will continue to experience heightened academic and mental health needs. The proportion of LEAs that indicated continuing needs for student sub-groups are:

- Low-income students: 93%
- Students with disabilities: 85%
- Students experiencing homelessness: 74%
- Students in foster care: 69%
- Students learning English: 69%
- Racial and ethnic minorities: 65%
- Migrant students: 54%



One LEA highlighted the particular needs of students in military families who experience disruption with frequent moves and greater mental health needs due to their parents' deployment. Several respondents also wrote that all of their students will continue to have higher needs after ESSER funds expire.

Data from other sources affirm leaders' concerns. While improving, student achievement as measured by Georgia Milestones has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. Student absenteeism is also a source of concern. Several LEA leaders said absenteeism is higher than before the pandemic, and students and parents have been less responsive to outreach efforts in than pre-pandemic years. The number of students chronically absent—missing 10% or more of school days—has risen from 14% in the 2018-2019 school year to nearly 27% in the 2021-2022 school year.<sup>16</sup>

## **EMERGING ISSUES: HIGHER NEEDS AND SHRINKING RESOURCES**

As they look ahead to the 2024-2025 school year, school districts and state charters confront multiple pressures. Students' needs remain high so they must continue to provide a wider array of academic and non-academic supports than before the pandemic. Yet, their financial capacity to do so is diminishing. The ESSER funds that enabled them to add teachers to provide small group instruction, academic interventionists to deliver personalized, one-on-one instruction to students farthest behind, mental health clinicians to help students work through anxiety, grief, or other conditions, and educators providing support in other ways expire in less than one year.


The loss of ESSER funds will hit LEAs serving the highest proportion of low-income students the hardest. These students were behind their peers from middle- and upper-income families before the pandemic, and, for many of them, the gap has widened.<sup>17</sup> Because they serve high percentages of low-income students, these LEAs also received

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16 Attendance Works (nd). State Trend Chart 2017-2022. Retrieved from <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/15yNTUUNwHzhFjQRCYgY5o7KE5pGoVFtk/edit#gid=1137911798>

17 Sass, T, & Ali, S.M. (2022). Student Achievement Growth During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Retrieved from <https://gpl.gsu.edu/download/student-achievement-growth-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-spring-2022-update-report/?wpdmdl=2737&refresh=653bb996775491698412950>





the highest per-student amount of ESSER funding. This leaves them with the largest budget gap to fill to continue providing the ESSER-funded services they believe have the greatest benefit for students.

At the same time, LEAs face financial strains from other sources. Inflation has caused many districts to alter their ESSER spending plans, and it will continue to put pressure on their budgets. To cite one example, the average price of a gallon of diesel fuel was \$4.56 in September 2023, up from \$3.02 in September 2019, a 51% increase.<sup>18</sup> As wages have risen in many sectors, districts have had to increase salaries for paraprofessionals, bus drivers, administrative staff and other employees to remain competitive. Inflation will likely continue straining LEAs' budgets. The increase in health insurance costs, which will add about \$450 million to LEAs' budgets when fully implemented, exacerbates inflationary pressures.

Another cost factor squeezing many LEAs, particularly those in rural communities, is declining enrollment. Sixty-eight counties in Georgia lost population between 2010 and 2020, and the school-age population in rural counties is expected to continue to decline.<sup>19</sup> Declining enrollment will lead to a decline in state revenue, often in communities with many people living in poverty.

These financial challenges adds to longstanding ones, including gaps in state funding for student transportation and other areas.

### ***Recommendations for State Policymakers***

There are actions state policymakers can take to support the continued delivery of promising practices after ESSER funds expire in September 2024:

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18 U.S. Energy Administration. U.S. On-Highway Diesel Fuel Prices, Release date 10/23/2023. Retrieved from <http://www.eia.gov/oog/info/wohdp/diesel.asp>


19 Tanner, D. (2021, September 1). Rural Georgia in Focus [PowerPoint Slides]. Carl Vinson Institute of Government, University of Georgia. [https://www.house.ga.gov/Documents/CommitteeDocuments/2021/Rural\\_Development\\_Council/CVIOG%202020%20Census%20Data.pdf](https://www.house.ga.gov/Documents/CommitteeDocuments/2021/Rural_Development_Council/CVIOG%202020%20Census%20Data.pdf)

1. **Close existing state funding gaps.** As outlined in the [Year-One report](#), state funding for many education expenses does not reflect their true costs, including student transportation. In Fiscal Year 2023, the state covered about 12% of LEAs' transportation costs, with districts covering the remaining 88%—\$1.07 billion—with local funds. Paraprofessional salaries, and substitute pay are two other items where state funding falls far short of expenditures. Nor does the state's K-12 funding formula, the Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula, adjust education funding for inflation, or account for shifting costs of items, including technology and instructional materials, to LEAs over time. Increasing state funding for these items and adding an inflation adjustment would enable LEAS to redirect local funds to and help maintain ESSER-funded positions and practices.
2. **Add a funding weight for low-income students to the QBE formula.** Georgia is one of six states that does not provide additional funding for low-income students.<sup>20</sup> Incorporating a funding weight for low-income students into the QBE formula would help enable LEAs to sustain some of the practices and staff they have added with ESSER funds to better meet the greater academic and non-academic needs these students often bring to the classroom. It would also align Georgia's school funding approach with evidence-based funding policies. Consistently providing extra funding for low-income students leads to better academic outcomes and improved economic security in adulthood through higher wages and a reduced incidence of poverty.<sup>21</sup>
3. **Boost funding for mental health and wellness staff.** The additional mental health and wellness staff LEAs hired are critical to addressing students' non-academic needs and enable them to engage in the learning process. However, state funding ratios for school counselors, social workers, and psychologists are far higher than recommended best practice levels. Under current ratios, 65 school districts do not

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20 Education Commission of the States. (2021, October). 50 state comparison: K-12 and special education funding, funding for students from low-income backgrounds. <https://reports.ecs.org/comparisons/k-12-and-special-education-funding-06>

21 Jackson, C. K., Persico, C., & Johnson, R.D. (2015). The effects of school spending on educational and economic outcomes: Evidence from school finance reforms. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 20847. Retrieved from [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w20847/w20847.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w20847/w20847.pdf)



receive enough state funding for one social worker and one psychologist in Fiscal Year 2024. To mitigate the immediate impact of the ESSER deadline, the state should fund social workers and psychologists at a ratio of one per 1,000 students in the Fiscal Year 2025 budget. It should further develop a multi-year plan to bring state funding for these positions in line with the recommended ratios.

4. ***Review and revise school staffing models.*** LEAs have relied on multiple staff members to assist students, including academic interventionists, instructional coaches, behavioral specialists, and mental health clinicians. These critical positions are not included in the QBE formula, which is nearly 40-years-old. Policymakers should conduct a comprehensive study to determine the additional positions schools require to serve students effectively given their current needs and the higher levels of knowledge and skills they need to succeed in the 21st Century global economy. It is recommended that lawmakers revise the QBE formula to include the identified positions and fund them at the appropriate ratio.
5. ***Establish and fund a state research consortium to measure LEA and state initiatives to improve student outcomes.*** LEAs have pursued strategies to improve student learning and wellbeing that vary in design, implementation, and impact. To better understand what works, how it works, and what it costs, a research consortium should be established that pairs researchers with practitioners to examine key problems of practice. This would enable local education leaders to determine which strategies best meet their students' needs and develop plans to provide sustainable funding for them. It would also help state leaders determine the investments likely to have the greatest impact on students and provide the appropriate level of funding for them.
6. ***Develop and fund a comprehensive plan to strengthen the educator pipeline.*** Adequate funding is essential to sustaining effective practices. Effective and stable leadership is also necessary, as is a workforce that is similarly effective, stable, and valued. A comprehensive and funded approach to strengthen the educator pipeline, including leaders, is needed. GaDOE and many LEAs designed initiatives to address different pieces of this challenge, but funding and reach are often limited.



Pursuing these strategies would smooth LEAs' transition to operating without ESSER funds and lay a foundation for both state and local leaders to identify, implement, and sustain effective practices.

LEAs can also prepare for the transition. As they move into planning their Fiscal Year 2025 budgets, there are questions LEAs should consider, including:

- Which ESSER investments are getting students back on track?
- Is there a projected budget gap and, if so, how large is it?
- Are enrollment and staffing headed in the same direction?
- What other options are on the table?

State leaders can support LEAs in answering these questions and provide guidance in using remaining ESSER funds to foster long-term instructional improvements and more comprehensive support to meet students' non-academic needs.

The Georgia Partnership will continue learning about and from LEAs' efforts to address students' pandemic-related needs in the last year of ESSER funding. In addition to a Year Three Report, the Partnership will also develop three case studies that take a closer look at how LEAs are addressing student learning needs, student wellbeing, and strengthening the educator workforce. The Partnership will share findings with state and local education leaders and other stakeholders across Georgia to inform their decisions.



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