

2024 CARES IMPACT STUDY

YEAR-THREE REPORT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PREPARED BY THE

Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education



CARES IMPACT STUDY, YEAR-THREE REPORT: PANDEMIC CHALLENGES PERSIST

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Going into the 2024-2025 school year, Georgia's students continue to experience pandemic-related academic and mental health challenges. However, the federal funding designed to help students and schools recover from these impacts expired in September 2024, and most school districts are now struggling to provide supplemental support strategies at the depth and scale that they did during the last four school years.

School districts and state commission charter schools — also referred to as local education agencies or LEAs—used the federal relief funds to provide evidence-based academic interventions to students and improve core instructional practices. They added much-needed mental health staff and programs. LEAs took steps to stabilize the educator workforce and kept schools operating despite the repeated disruptions of the pandemic. Some LEAs have found ways to sustain selected intervention strategies that boosted student learning and wellbeing, but many cannot. These are the top takeaways from interviews with and a statewide survey of LEA leaders conducted by the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (Georgia Partnership) in summer 2024.


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 used the \$5.9 billion they received in federal pandemic relief funds. The relief funds are referred to as CARES¹ or Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds. The funds expired on September 30, 2024. This report outlines how LEAs used ESSER funds during the four-year grant period (2019-2020 to 2023-2024 school years). The report also describes the investments LEA leaders believe had the greatest impact on students as well as the ESSER-funded activities that LEAs can sustain and those they cannot. The Georgia Partnership released three earlier reports, which provide more detailed information about how LEAs implemented intervention and instructional improvement strategies, the challenges educators encountered, and emerging promising practices they identified.

1 CARES refers to the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, which was the first of three pandemic relief aid packages passed by Congress.



Top findings from the 2024 survey and interviews include:

1. Students continue to have pandemic-related academic and mental health needs according to 83% of LEA leaders. These needs are greatest among students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and those experiencing homelessness
2. LEAs deployed multiple concurrent strategies to improve core instruction and accelerate student learning. Most LEAs used afterschool and summer learning programs, high-dosage tutoring, and personalized instruction to accelerate learning.
3. Increasing instructional staff was the most effective academic intervention strategy identified most frequently by LEAs. The most common positions cited were certified teachers and instructional coaches.
4. Fewer than half—43%—of LEAs can sustain the academic intervention strategies most effective for their students. Nearly one third of leaders reported being unsure if the selected strategies could be sustained, and 25% had determined they could not.
5. The most common strategy to address students' mental health needs across LEAs was increasing the number of school-based mental health professionals. Respondents identified this practice as the most effective way to address students' behavioral health challenges.
6. Half of responding LEAs can sustain their most effective mental health strategies. About one third of leaders (32%) are unsure, while 18% determined they could not.
7. Approximately 86% of LEAs provided financial incentives to certified educators, but many still experienced recruitment and retention challenges, which they anticipate will worsen.
8. ESSER funds enabled LEAs to continue operating schools and provide critical interventions to students. How they did so was influenced by their specific needs and financial circumstances as well as inflation and rising healthcare costs.
9. Across the 2019-2020 to 2023-2024 school years, responding LEAs estimate spending the largest amount of ESSER funds on:
 - i. Adding certified staff
 - ii. IT and technology infrastructure
 - iii. Recruitment and retention supplements
 - iv. Continuity of services
 - v. Facility renovation & equipment



State policymakers can help restore the learning and mental health support strategies LEAs relied on to meet students' needs since the pandemic by taking the following steps:

- 1. Boost funding for school mental health staff.** Increase state funding for school counselors, social workers, and psychologists to align with recommended best practice levels.
- 2. Close state funding gaps.** Within the Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula for K-12 schools, index funding for technology, instructional materials, and substitute teachers to inflation.
- 3. Add a funding weight to the QBE formula that recognizes the higher cost of teaching students from low-income backgrounds.** Adding a poverty weight would enable some LEAs to sustain or restore academic and student support strategies targeting students living in poverty.
- 4. Revise school staffing models.** Conduct a school staffing study to determine additional staff, such as instructional coaches and mental health clinicians, needed to meet student academic and mental health needs, and revise the QBE formula to include identified positions.
- 5. Fund a state research consortium to evaluate LEA and state reform initiatives.** A research consortium would enable state and district leaders to better identify specific strategies to improve student outcomes and their costs.
- 6. Develop and fund a comprehensive plan to strengthen the educator pipeline.** A working group of state education agency experts should develop and lawmakers should fund the implementation of a comprehensive plan to improve recruitment and retention in the educator workforce.