

VIEWS FROM THE SCHOOLHOUSE

2025

GEORGIA EDUCATOR WORKFORCE INSIGHTS



SCHOOL

RETIREMENT
PLAN

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Executive Summary

Nearly three-quarters of responding Georgia teachers find teaching fulfilling, yet 66% of them report professional burnout, according to a recent member survey conducted by the Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE). These findings reflect the range of experiences, both positive and negative, that educators have throughout their careers. Understanding educators' professional experiences is critical. Georgia does not have enough teachers.¹ More than one-quarter of teacher survey participants report that teacher shortages are a major problem in their schools. Georgia needs more people to pursue careers in education and to retain more of those who do. The PAGE survey sheds light on several factors that enhance and detract from the appeal of the education profession across each stage of educators' careers, from recruitment through retention to retirement.

Recruitment

Approximately 69% of teachers took on student loan debt when earning their certification and initial education degrees and report an average loan amount of \$34,476. Teachers report the top strategies to attract more individuals into teaching are increasing salaries, reducing the cost of becoming a certified teacher, and funding induction and mentoring programs for new teachers.



69% of teachers took on student loans to pay for their initial degrees

Retention

Thirty-two percent of teachers report that teacher and staff attrition is a major problem at their schools, and 27% indicate teacher hiring shortages are similarly a major challenge at their schools. Educators' top strategies for improving retention are increasing salaries, reducing class size, and protecting teacher planning time.



32% of teachers report staff attrition is a major problem at their schools

Retirement

More than 40% of teachers with 20 or more years of experience would consider delaying retirement if they received salary step increases, which the state does not provide after 21 years. Nearly half would like to participate in return-to-work (RtW), a law that allows retired teachers to return to the classroom in limited high-needs subject areas, though many educators are not able due to eligibility requirements.



More than 40% of teachers would delay retirement if they received additional salary step increases

Summary of Recommendations

Solving Georgia's teacher shortage challenge requires a comprehensive approach that incorporates strategies to address multiple contributing factors. Policymakers can reduce the shortage by implementing the following strategies.

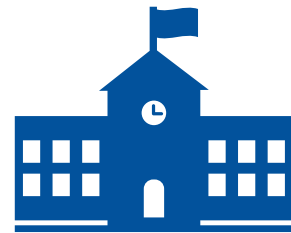
- 1 Reduce the financial cost of becoming a teacher by restoring previously-provided state financial aid programs for educators and offering need-based stipends to student teachers.**
- 2 Increase state funding for substitutes to help ensure teacher planning time is protected.**
- 3 Extend and refine the return-to-work (RtW) law to maximize its impact on the teacher shortage.**
- 4 Provide state-funded step increases on the state salary schedule for certified teachers with more than 21 years of service.**
- 5 Include elementary schools in student mental health grants, which are currently provided to middle and high schools, to boost resources available to address student behavior and mental health.**

Methodology

The PAGE 2025 workforce survey was conducted online in May 2025. In total, 3,408 educators from 177 school districts as well as state charter schools, state schools, and a private school participated in the survey. Approximately 70% of survey participants are classroom teachers. The remaining respondents serve students in a variety of school and district roles and are collectively referred to as “educators.” The phrase “all educators” is used to refer to all respondents to the survey, including teachers and all other roles.



3,408 Educators



177 Districts

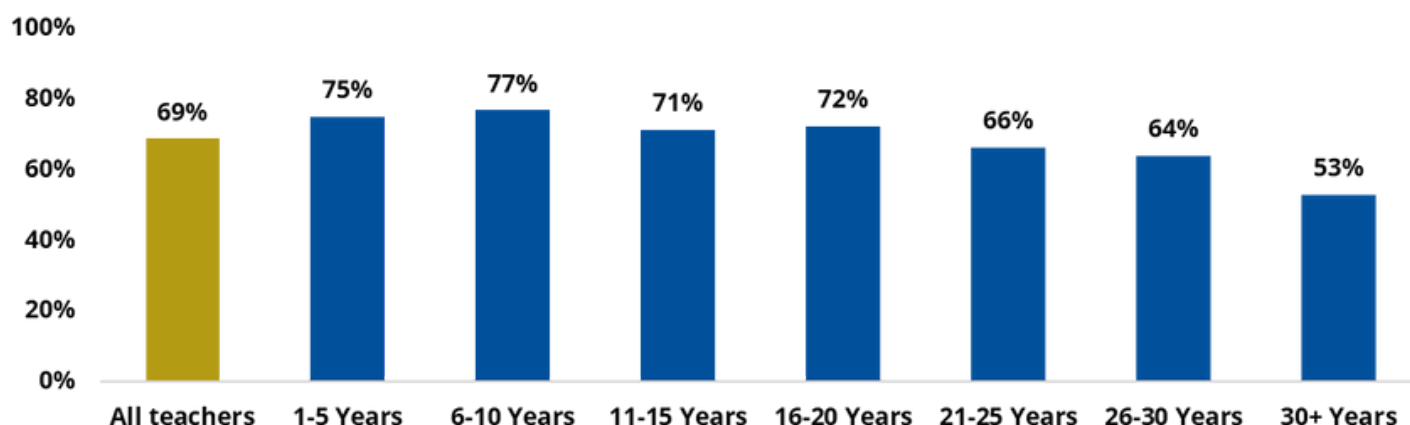
Recruitment

Recruiting more people into education is an essential element of solving Georgia's teacher shortage challenge. Although there has been improvement in the number of program completers in recent years, fewer people are graduating from teacher preparation programs now than a decade ago. In the 2022-2023 academic year, 4,221 individuals completed a teacher preparation program in Georgia, a nearly 24% drop from 5,556 completers in 2013-2014.²

Student Loan Debt

One obstacle to entering the profession is the cost of becoming a teacher.³ Many teacher candidates manage the cost of teacher preparation programs by taking on student loan debt. About 69% of participating teachers used student loans to earn their certification and initial education degree, though the level of those reporting loan debt varies by years of experience. Teachers who entered the profession during the past 20 years are more likely to have taken out student loans than are those who completed initial teacher training earlier.

Figure 1: By Experience Level, Percent of Teachers Who Incurred Student Debt



The average amount of student loan debt teachers report is \$34,476. Covering this debt can be difficult, especially for new teachers, for whom the state starting salary is \$43,592.

Receiving the HOPE scholarship does not prevent teachers from borrowing student loans. Approximately 67% of teachers who earned a bachelor's degree in education in Georgia and received the HOPE scholarship incurred student loan debt.

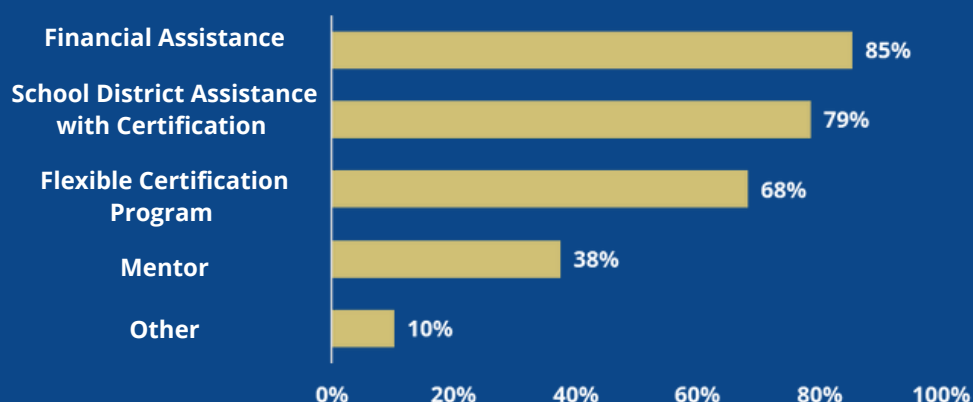
Recruitment Highlight: Paraprofessionals

Georgia's paraprofessional workforce provides a valuable reservoir of potential teachers. They have instructional and classroom management experience, are connected to their communities, and understand the opportunities and challenges of the teaching profession. Paraprofessionals who become teachers also tend to have high retention rates.⁴

Nearly 49% of participating paraprofessionals said they would consider becoming a certified teacher. They identified multiple supports that would help them gain certification.

Beyond a lack of interest in becoming a teacher, the the top two reasons paraprofessionals cite for not becoming certified are cost and lack of time.

Figure 2: Supports for Paraprofessionals to Become Certified Teachers



Educator Strategies to Improve Recruitment

The strategies most frequently identified by educators to improve recruitment are:

- 1. Increase salaries**
- 2. Reduce the cost of becoming a certified teacher**
- 3. Fund induction and mentoring programs for new teachers**

In written feedback about recruitment strategies, educators highlight the need to reduce student behavior problems, which they say deter those considering the teaching profession. They also emphasize the need for greater support from school leaders in addressing student behavior, increased accountability and support from parents, and reduced educator workload as impactful ways to increase the appeal of education. They recommend salary increases, particularly for veteran teachers who do not receive a step increase, as well as helping educators cover the cost of advanced degrees. Earning an advanced degree is the primary mechanism educators can utilize to enhance their professional practice and increase their incomes, but these gains are often undermined by additional student debt.

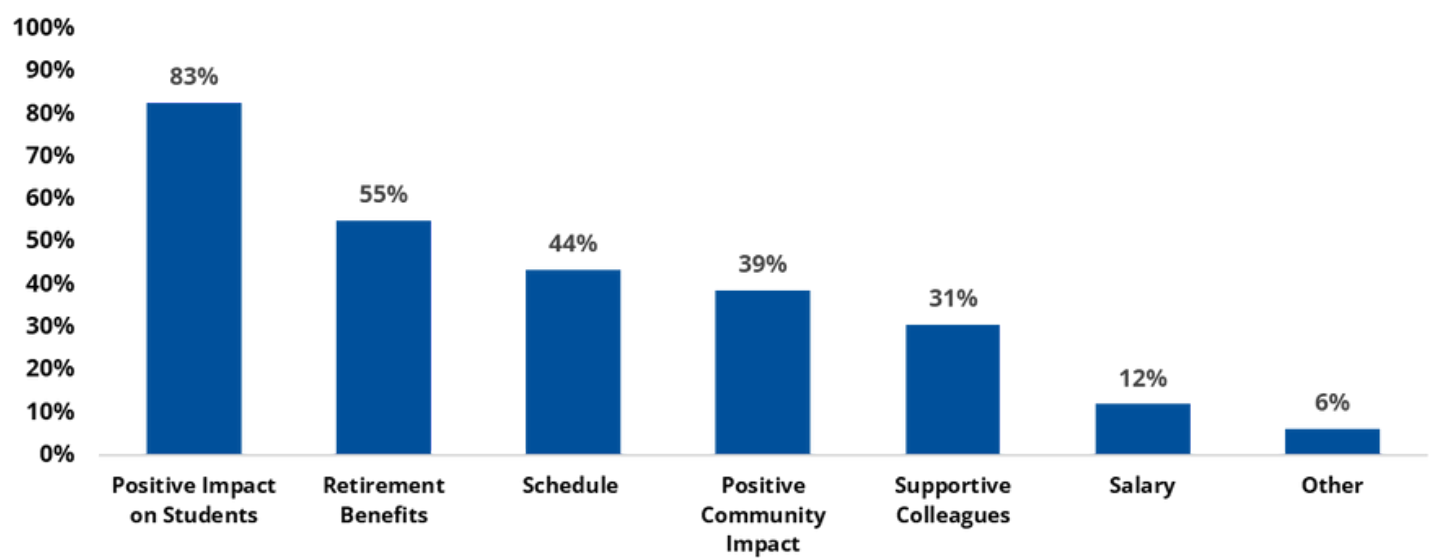
Retention

Georgia’s statewide teacher retention rate was 90% in 2024.⁵ Retaining more of the educators who leave is also essential to solving the state’s teacher shortage. Educators value the impact they have on students, but many educators find their work difficult. Some educators change districts, often looking for a better work environment. Factors that can affect educators’ decisions to stay or leave their district or the profession include school leadership and collegial support, financial circumstances, and workload.

Educators’ View of Their Profession

Most teachers (74%) and educators (76%) find their jobs fulfilling. More than 80% of educators cite having a positive impact on students as a benefit of working in education, far more than any other factor. Retirement benefits were also noted by a majority of educators, but only 12% view their salary as a benefit of choosing a career in education.

Figure 3: Educator-Identified Benefits of Working in Education Profession



Educators affirmed the importance of having an impact on students in written survey comments. They describe education as a field with opportunities for continued learning and growth and a field which reflects their values and goals. Educators also highlighted the school year schedule and health insurance as benefits of the profession.

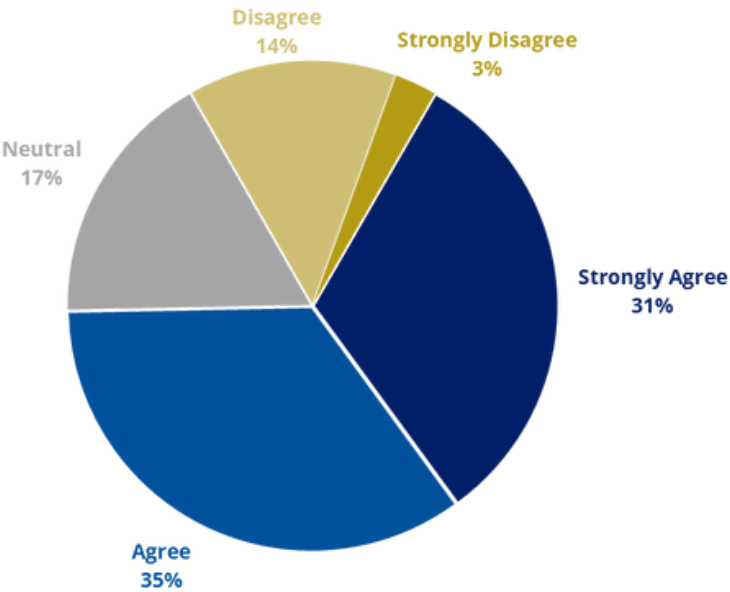
“Being a part of something that brings about positive change in society is one of the most fulfilling things one can experience.”

High School Teacher, Urban District

While teachers find their work rewarding, they also find it difficult. About 66% of teachers and 61% of all educators report feeling burned out at work, which can contribute to educator attrition.⁶

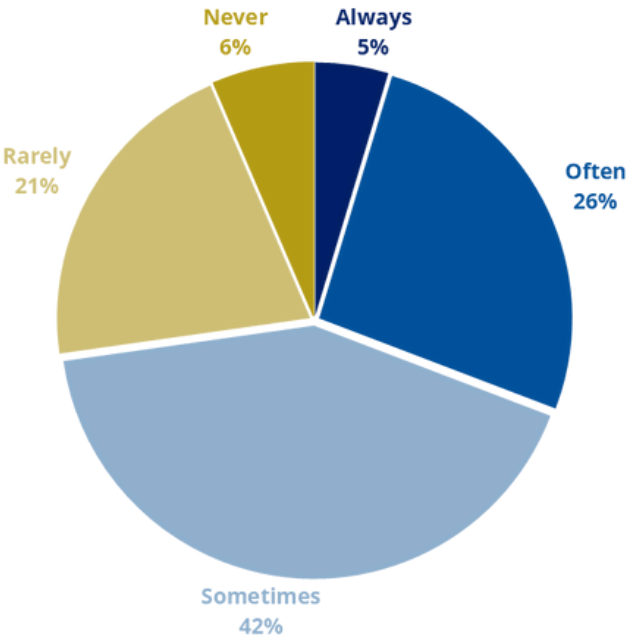
Twenty-five percent of teachers would recommend entering the profession, while about 48% are unlikely or very unlikely to do so. While still low, this is an improvement from 2024 PAGE survey results when 21% of teachers said they would recommend teaching as a profession, and 53% said they would not.

Figure 4: Percentage of Teachers Who Agree They Feel Burned Out



Workload

Figure 5: How Often Teachers Say Their Workload is Manageable



More than one-quarter of teachers (27%) say their workload is rarely or never manageable. Unmanageable workload contributes to teacher attrition.

Elementary school teachers are more likely than middle or high school teachers to indicate their workload is rarely or never manageable: 34% compared to 24% and 21% respectively.

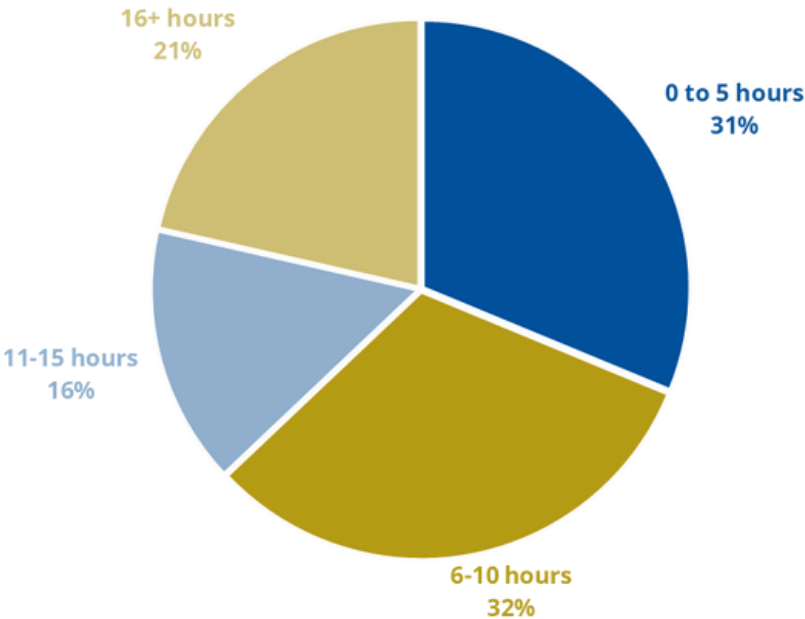
“We keep having things added to our workload, but nothing is ever taken away.”

Elementary Teacher, Rural District

There is wide variation in the number of additional hours teachers work outside the normal school day.

While 31% of teachers work an extra five or fewer hours per week on average, 32% work between six and 10 extra hours per week, or about one to two additional hours per day. Many teachers spend even more hours working every week, regularly dedicating hours in the evenings or on weekends to work-related tasks.

Figure 6: Average Number of Extra Hours Teachers Work Per Week

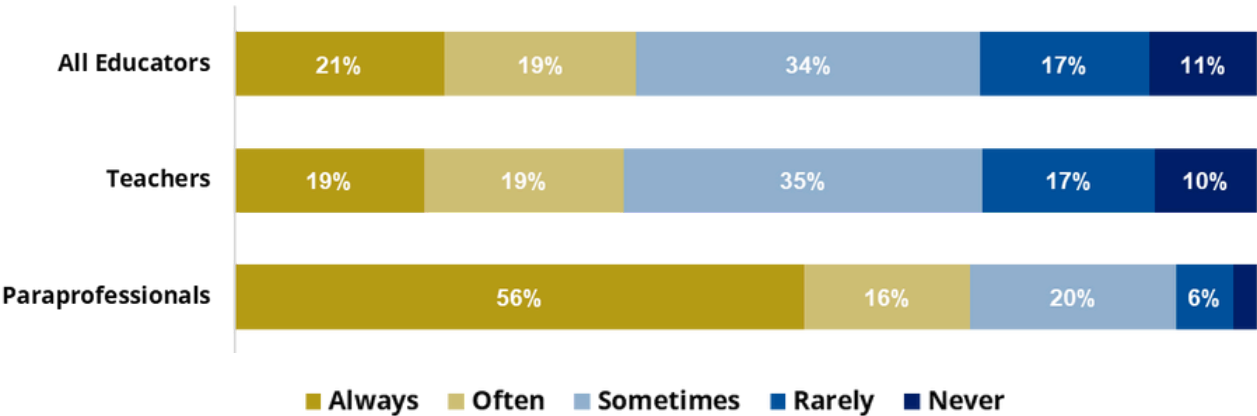


Financial Circumstances

Many educators are financially stable, but others struggle to cover basic living expenses and often take on additional work to make ends meet.

Approximately 19% of teachers, 21% of all educators, and more than half (56%) of paraprofessionals say they always have difficulty covering living expenses.

Figure 7: Percent of Educators Experiencing Difficulty Covering Living Expenses

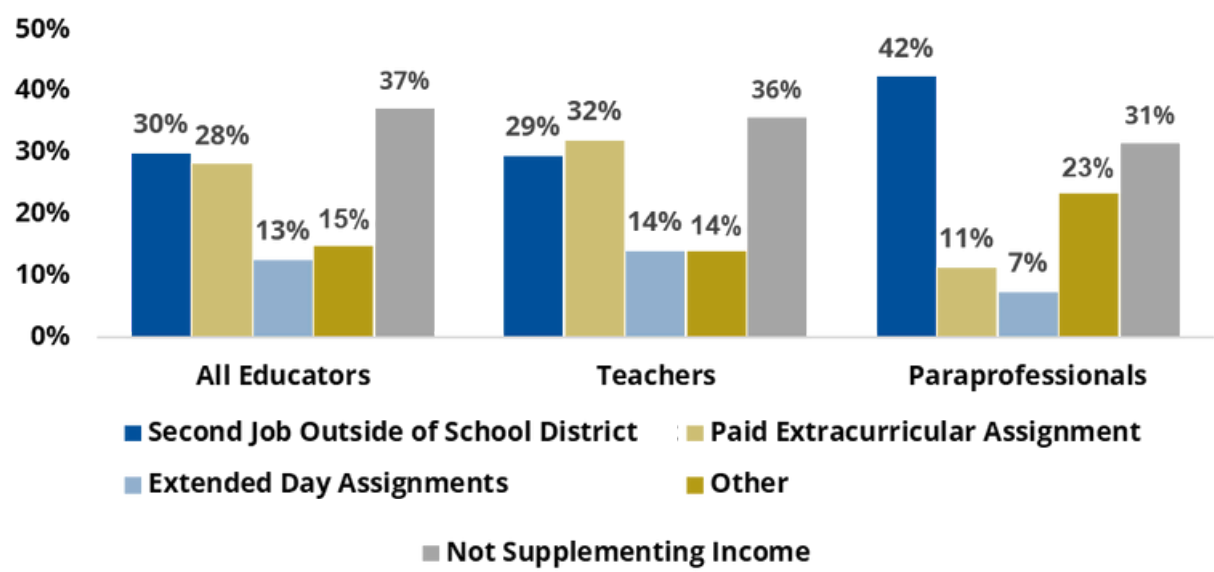


Along with district-funded local salary supplements, recent pay raises for certified teachers and other staff recommended by Gov. Brian P. Kemp and approved by lawmakers are valuable. The average teacher salary in Georgia is the highest in the Southeast. However, state raises follow a period from 2010 to 2017 in which there were no state pay raises. Recent raises make up much of the ground lost during these years, but inflation diminishes their impact.

Paraprofessional wages are low. The state funds paraprofessionals for kindergarten only and, in Fiscal Year 2026, provides \$17,795 per paraprofessional salary. Districts often supplement this amount, but paraprofessionals' salaries remain meager.

Many educators have second jobs, take on additional work in their districts, or supplement their income in other ways to make ends meet.

Figure 8: Percent of Educators Supplementing Their Income



Educator Mobility

Some educators change districts for the same reasons that can cause them to leave education.⁷

In the past five years, 21% of responding teachers and 19% of all educators changed school districts. Their most frequently cited reasons for doing so are:

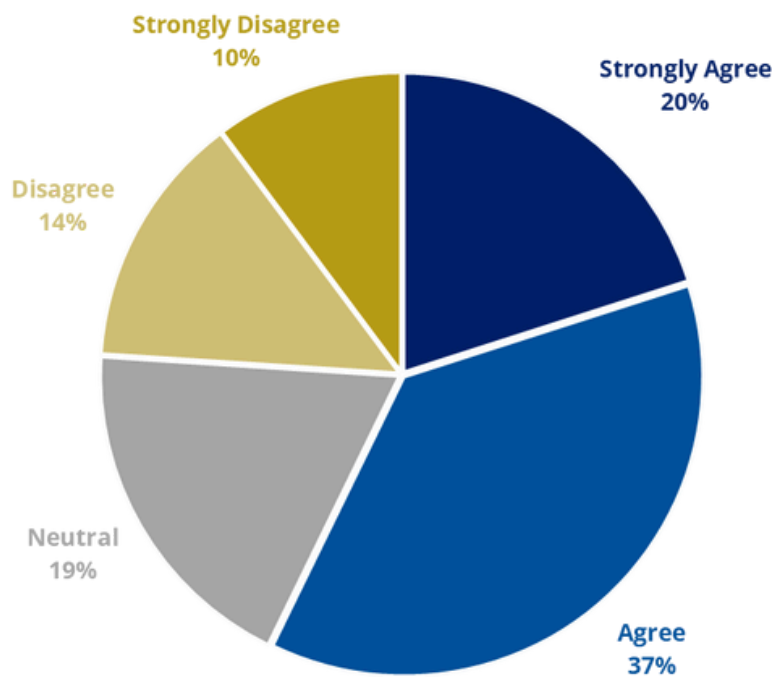
- Family considerations: 19%
- School leadership: 17%
- Higher salary: 14%

Other common reasons for switching school districts that educators describe in written feedback are moving from another state, securing or improving retirement benefits, and student behavior.

School Staffing

School administrators, particularly principals, have a pivotal role in creating a positive school environment and supporting teachers, which influences teachers’ decisions to stay at the school and in the profession.⁸ More than half of teachers report their school administrators support teachers and staff, though nearly a quarter indicate they do not.

Figure 9: Teacher Agreement that their School Administrators are Supportive

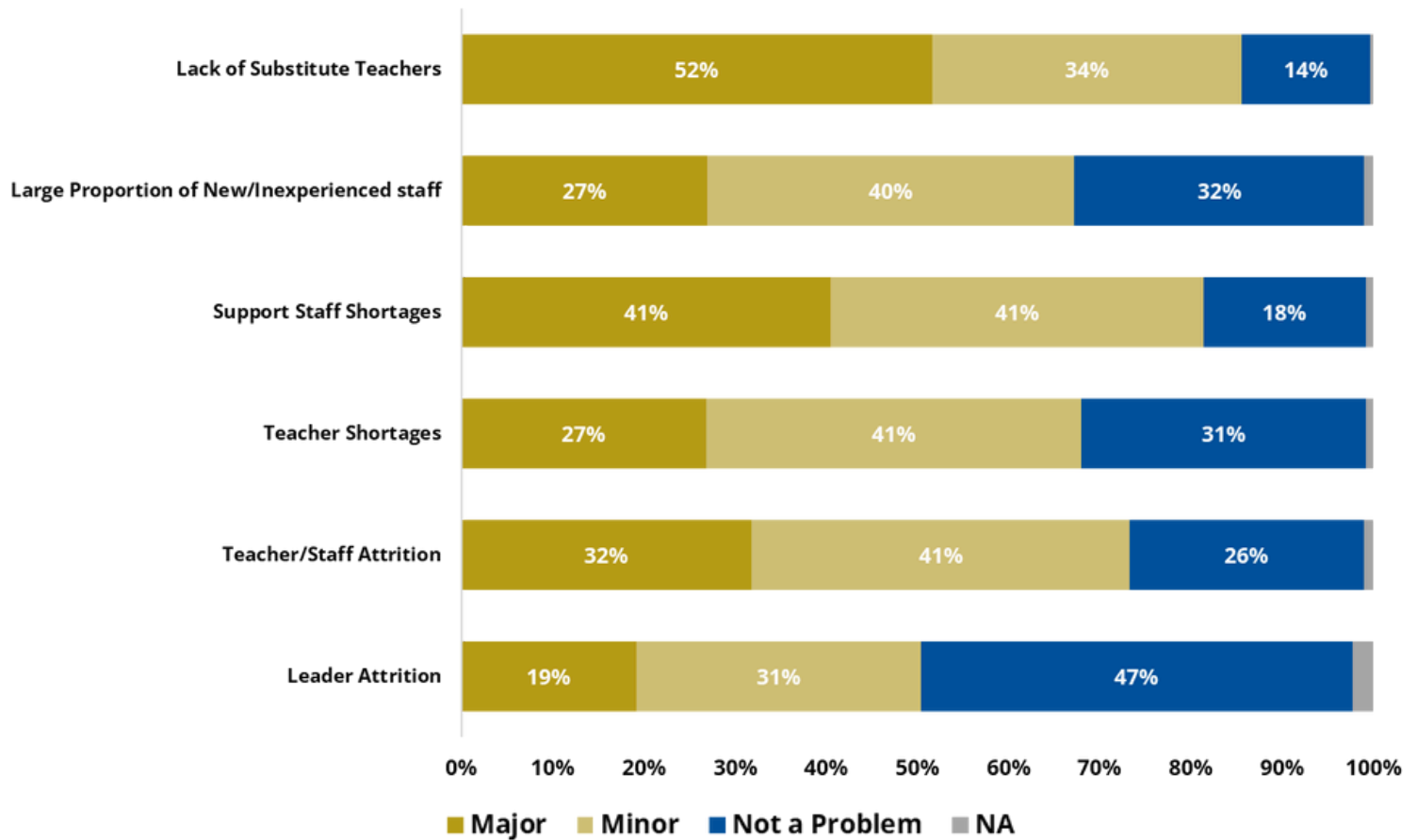


About 72% of teachers say their colleagues are supportive of each other, which also affects retention.⁹

Many teachers report staff-related challenges in their schools are minor or do not occur, However, 27% of teachers report teacher shortages are a major problem in their schools. Similarly, 32% of teachers characterize attrition as a major problem.

School administrators are a factor in staffing challenges. Teachers who describe their administrators as unsupportive are more likely to indicate teacher and staff attrition is a major problem in their schools.

Figure 10: Teacher Feedback on School Staffing Issues¹⁰



“Lack of substitutes, particularly for SPED [special education] paraprofessionals is a MAJOR problem due to super low pay and the nature of the job. Obtaining regular substitutes is also a major problem. Our school has to combine classes when there are no subs.”

***Elementary Teacher,
Urban District***

In written feedback on their schools’ staffing issues, some educators express frustration about lack of understanding and support from school and district leaders. Many describe difficulties caused by the lack of substitutes, which often require teachers to give up planning periods to cover classes for absent colleagues or take colleagues’ students into their own classes. Paraprofessionals and sometimes special education teachers also report being pulled away from their own students to substitute.

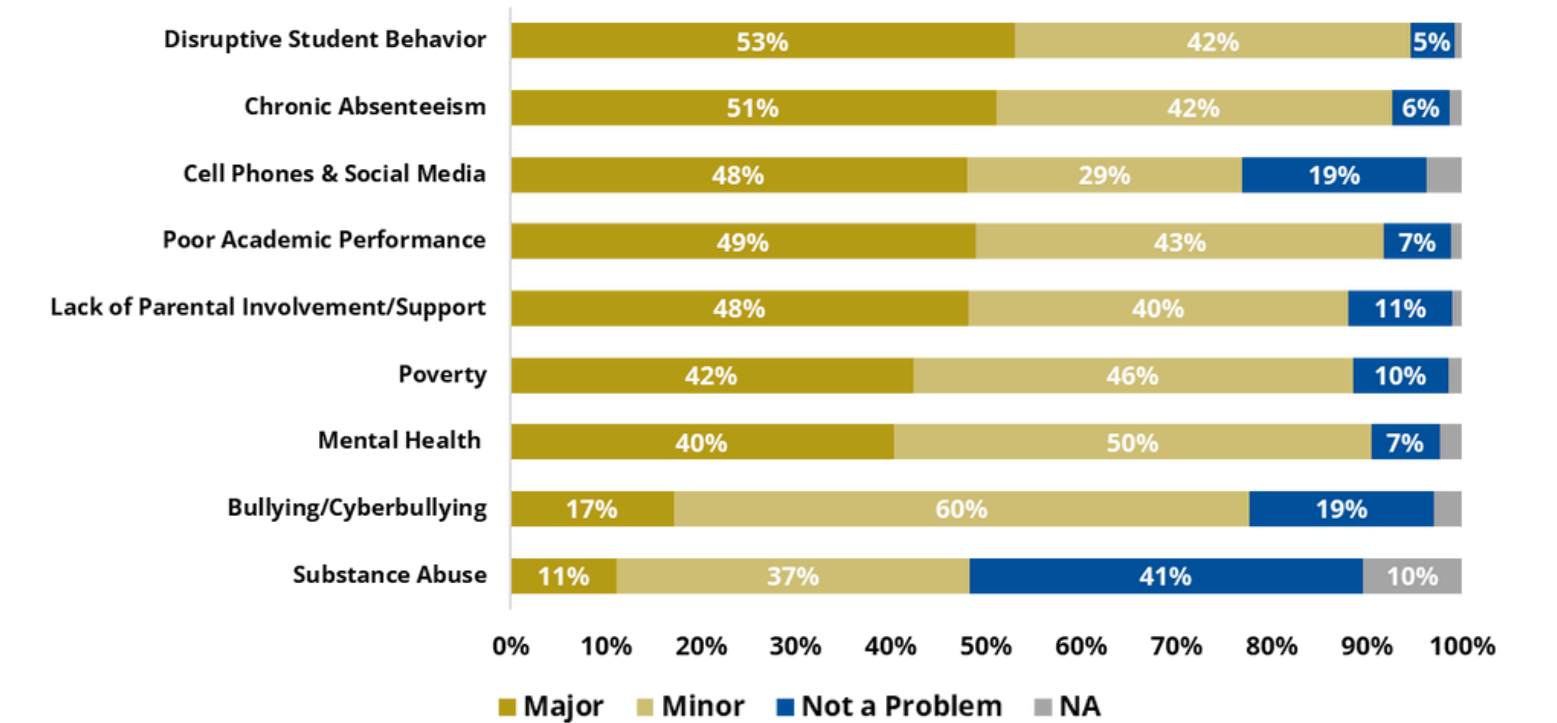
Student Concerns

Educators identify multiple student issues as major problems. The most common is disruptive student behavior, which can influence educators’ decisions to leave the profession.¹¹

Chronic absenteeism is also identified as a major problem by more than half of educators. Cell phones and social media, poor academic performance, and lack of parent support are also commonly cited as major issues.

In their comments on these issues, many educators reiterate the difficulty of disruptive behavior and flag student apathy as a problem. Responding educators also express frustration with a lack of support and accountability from parents and administrators in resolving these challenges.

Figure 11: Student Issues Identified as Major, Minor, or Not a Problem by Educators



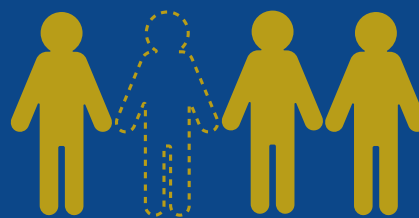
In the most challenging circumstances, student behavior problems can result in injuries to staff. Small but notable proportions of educators report being purposefully injured by students, requiring medical attention, during the past five years.

Percent of Educators Reporting Injury by Students During Past Five Years

- All Educators: 8%
- Special Ed. Teachers: 16%
- Paraprofessionals: 16%

Retention Highlight: Special Education Teachers

Shortages of special education teachers have persisted for years. Special education teachers often experience additional workplace challenges, which can prompt them to leave special education or the profession.



More than 25% of Special Education Teachers Expect to Leave The Field in the Next 5 Years

Among survey participants, about 35% of teachers who are certified in special education do not work in it. They teach in other content areas. More than one-quarter of those who do teach in special education say they are unlikely or very unlikely to remain in the field for the next five years. The top reasons for teachers leaving or not teaching in the special education field are largely the same.

Top Reasons for Not Teaching In or Leaving Special Education

- Data collection & reporting requirements
- Student behavior
- Inadequate staffing for special education classrooms
- Lack of understanding of special education teachers' needs and support from school leaders

Educator Strategies to Improve Recruitment

Strategies identified most frequently by educators to improve retention are:

1. **Increase salaries**
2. **Reduce class size**
3. **Protect teacher planning time**

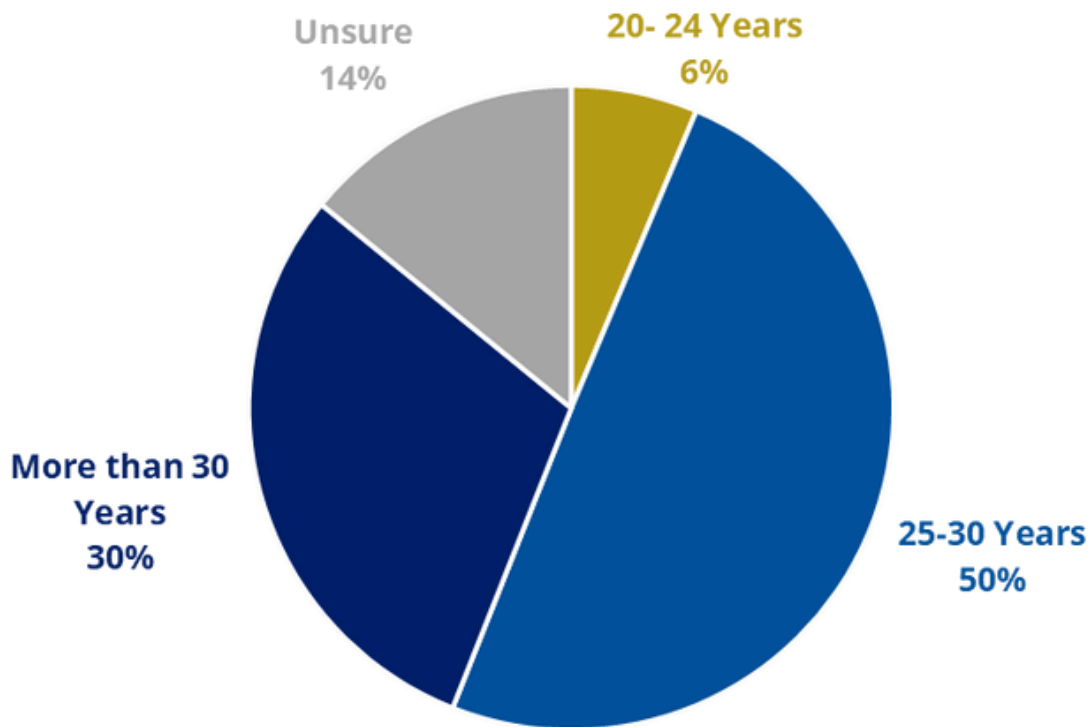
Educators' comments on retention strategies overlap with their feedback on recruitment, including addressing student behavior, increasing support from administrators, adding salary step increases for veteran teachers, and providing financial aid to educators earning advanced degrees. They also note the need for greater autonomy for and trust in teachers.

Retirement

Boosting salaries for veteran teachers and enabling more to return to the classroom full-time after retirement would help address the teacher shortage. Veteran teachers indicate interest in both strategies.

Most participating teachers with 20 or more years of experience plan to teach through their 25th year, and many even longer.

Figure 12: When Veteran Teachers Plan to Retire



The state does not provide salary step increases to teachers after their 21st year of service. Some districts offer a salary supplement to these veteran teachers, but only about a quarter of teachers with more than 20 years of experience say they receive these local increases. More than 40% of teachers with 20 or more years of experience indicate they would consider delaying retirement if they received salary step increases after 21 years.

“Increase pay for those teachers who have no more steps left and are experienced but receive no more incentive pay to continue. We are still relevant teachers and have so much to offer.”

*Elementary School Teacher,
Rural District*

Retirement Highlight: Return-To-Work

Almost half (46%) of teachers with 20 or more years of experience would like to participate in Georgia's return-to-work (RtW) program, a law that allows teachers who retire with 30 or more years of service to return to teaching full-time after waiting a year. To be eligible, teachers must also be certified in a subject area their RESA (Regional Education Service Agency) identifies as a top three shortage area in their region. Nearly 22% of these veteran teachers do not want to participate in RtW, and 33% are unsure about participating.



Percent of Veteran Teachers Who Would Participate in Return-to-Work

Reported barriers to participating in RtW among interested teachers include:

- Year-long waiting period: 51%
- Do not teach in a high-need subject area: 20%
- Will not retire with 30 years of service: 15%

Georgia teachers have on average 25.5 years of service when they retire.

Teachers described other issues that could prevent them from participating in RtW with student behavior being the most cited issue. They were also unsure about participating due to stress or burnout caused by teaching and lack of support from administrators.

Without legislative action, Georgia's RtW law will expire June 30, 2026.

Educator Strategies to Address Retirement

While survey respondents were not directly asked to rank or propose strategies addressing teacher retirement, survey results suggest that the following strategies could be effective in delaying the retirement of veteran educators:

- 1. Provide salary step increases after 21 years of service**
- 2. Reauthorize and expand the return-to-work program**

PAGE Recommendations

Working in education is very fulfilling for most educators. Reducing the challenges within education that diminish educators' experiences would attract more people to the field and encourage them to stay. Policymakers can make significant progress in resolving those challenges by taking the following action steps:

1 Reduce the financial cost of becoming a teacher by restoring financial aid programs for educators previously provided by the state and offering need-based stipends to student teachers.

Sixty-nine percent of teachers incurred student loan debt. To reduce the financial burden of becoming a teacher, policymakers should restore and update service cancellable loan programs the state previously offered:

- The Promise Scholarship for college juniors and seniors entering teaching, eliminated in FY 2011.
- The Promise II Scholarship for paraprofessionals seeking to complete their degrees and earn certification, eliminated in 2007.
- Teacher Scholarships for individuals pursuing advanced degrees in critical shortage areas such as math and science, eliminated in FY 2011.

Policymakers should also provide need-based stipends to student teachers. Student teaching is a full-time job in which student teachers invest significant costs. Covering tuition and living expenses while doing this crucial but unpaid work and absorbing travel costs to their student teaching sites can cause financial hardship. Providing need-based stipends to student teachers would enable more student teachers to participate, lessen reliance on student loans, and reduce the likelihood that student teachers must take a second job during this period.

2 Increase state funding for substitutes to help ensure teacher planning time is protected.

Teachers need time to design effective and engaging instructional plans, review and provide feedback on student work, and analyze student data. Yet, they often lose planning time to cover classes for absent colleagues as districts struggle to find substitute teachers. Similarly, paraprofessionals are often pulled away from serving their assigned students to cover for absent teachers.

The state provides \$150 annually to cover the cost of a substitute for eight days, or \$18.75 per day. This amount has not changed since 1985, and it is well below the amount districts must spend to attract substitutes. To reduce districts' reliance on teachers and paraprofessionals to cover classes and to protect their planning time, state lawmakers should increase funding for substitutes.

3 Extend and refine return-to-work to maximize its impact on Georgia's teacher shortage.

RtW enables districts to hire veteran teachers for high-need subject areas that otherwise may be unfilled or filled by a teacher inexperienced in that content area, which can undermine student learning. If the law sunsets in June 2026, districts lose the opportunity to fill high-needs classrooms with effective, experienced teachers who can make a positive impact on student learning.

Many experienced teachers are interested in returning to the classroom as a post-retirement option but cannot as they are not in a high-need subject area, which is limited to three and set regionally, not locally. Many teachers are also excluded because they have less than 30 years of service. Expanding the subject areas eligible for RtW and lowering the required years of service to 25 (the average years of service among Georgia's retired teachers) would put more skilled teachers in classrooms serving students.

The optimal RtW legislation would enact the following:

- Remove the current law's sunset date
- Establish math, special education, reading, writing or English language arts, as statewide high-need subject areas
- Allow districts to determine high-need subject areas
- Allow retired educators with 25 years of experience to participate in RtW

4 Provide state-funded step increases on the state salary schedule for certified teachers with more than 21 years of service.

Approximately 44% of veteran teachers said they would consider delaying retirement if salary steps were added for teachers with more than 21 years of experience. Adding salary step increases for these teachers would incentivize these skilled teachers to remain in the classroom and help shrink the teacher shortage.

5 Include elementary schools in student mental health grants, which are provided to middle and high schools, to boost resources available to address student behavior and mental health needs.

Recognizing significant unmet student mental health and behavioral needs, lawmakers added new student mental health grants to the FY2026 budget. These grants provide \$20,000 to every middle and high school, which can be used flexibly to address student mental health and behavioral needs. Elementary students would also benefit from additional mental health and behavioral support. Elementary schools should be included in the mental health grant program.

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