

NEW TEACHER INITIATIVE STUDY

PERSPECTIVES FROM
EARLY CAREER EDUCATORS



SEPTEMBER 2026

A Letter From The Executive Director

Educators' goals and concerns evolve from their earliest days of exploring teaching as a potential profession to their years as veteran educators, skilled at supporting students and colleagues alike. The Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE) is committed to serving educators at every stage of their careers. To better understand the distinct experiences of new teachers and students enrolled in educator preparation programs (EPP) who want to be teachers, PAGE launched the New Teacher Initiative.

Through the initiative, the PAGE team reached out to new teachers and EPP students so that we could hear and learn directly from them about their concerns and develop effective solutions to address those concerns. PAGE legislative staff will share the concerns of early career educators and advocate for the solutions outlined in this report with state and district policymakers.

In addition to encouraging high school students to pursue a career in education through Future Georgia Educators (FGE), PAGE offers programs to support early career educators, including the [New Teacher Academy](#), which provides direct support and leadership development to educators who have completed their first through third years of teaching. The [PAGE Foundation](#) offers scholarships to high school seniors planning to go into teaching, postsecondary students earning their initial certification, and school support personnel who also are earning initial certification.

PAGE will seek opportunities to build on these efforts to support new teachers as well as all educators at every stage of their careers so that they may continue teaching, leading, and inspiring Georgia's children.

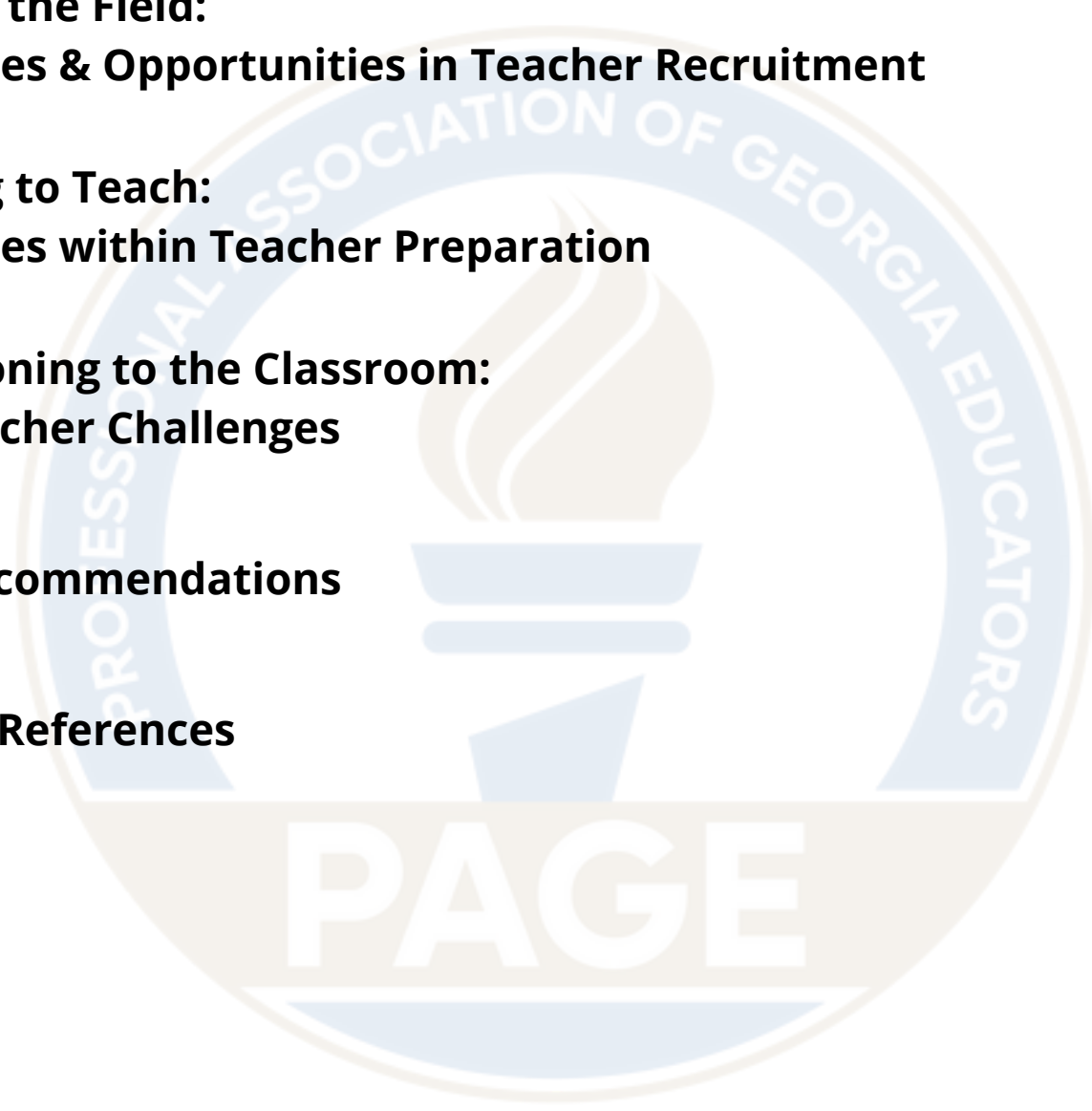


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Executive Summary

Facing a persistent teacher shortage, Georgia needs all new teachers to thrive so that every student can achieve success in school, the workforce, and in civic life. The Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE) launched the New Teacher Initiative to better understand new teachers' experiences and why some struggle and leave the profession. PAGE staff listened to first-year teachers, students in educator preparation programs (EPPs), and leaders of preparation programs to learn about challenges that can undermine prospective and current new teachers. Key findings include:

Gaps Early in the Teacher Pipeline

Education career pathways offered in Georgia high schools cultivate student interest in teaching but are often disconnected from activities that sustain their interest and help them move to the next stage of the teacher pipeline. This raises the risk that students will lose interest in education careers, a risk that is already elevated among high school and undergraduate students because of their negative perceptions about teaching.

Elevated Cost of EPPs

Earning an education degree and certification often has a steep price tag with costs unique to EPP students: transportation to required site placements and certification exams. Although 90% of new teachers reported working while earning their degree, most relied on student loans to cover tuition and living expenses.

Uneven Mentoring

While most student teachers and new teachers described their respective mentor teachers positively, others are left with negative experiences that made them less prepared for their own classrooms. Most mentors of both student teachers and new teachers are unpaid for this extra work, which makes recruiting effective mentors difficult.

Special Education Support Limitations

New teachers want more hands-on training and support in their preparation programs and school/district staff to fully meet federal special education requirements. They also want additional instructional and behavior management strategies to better serve special education students.

Gaps in Induction Support

Additional support is needed for new teachers as they transition to leading their own classrooms. This includes assistance with structured literacy instruction, mapping and implementing district curriculum, and managing student behavior. They also request more opportunities to observe highly skilled teachers and funds to cover materials and supplies for their classrooms.

Summary of Recommendations

Based on findings, PAGE recommends policymakers implement the following strategies to address challenges facing students and schools:



Reduce the cost of earning an education degree and certification by providing stipends for student teachers and investing in the Georgia Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Program



Provide state-funded \$500 stipends for mentor teachers to improve their recruitment



Design and fund a grant program to support high-quality induction programs in districts

Methodology

PAGE gathered information about the experiences of new teachers through three methods: focus groups with first-year teachers and EPP students; interviews with leaders of six EPP programs throughout the state; and a survey for first- and second-year teachers distributed to PAGE members. In total, 208 first- and second-year teachers participated in the survey. The interviews and focus groups were conducted in fall 2025, and the survey was conducted in spring 2026.

Entering the Field:

Challenges & Opportunities in Teacher Recruitment

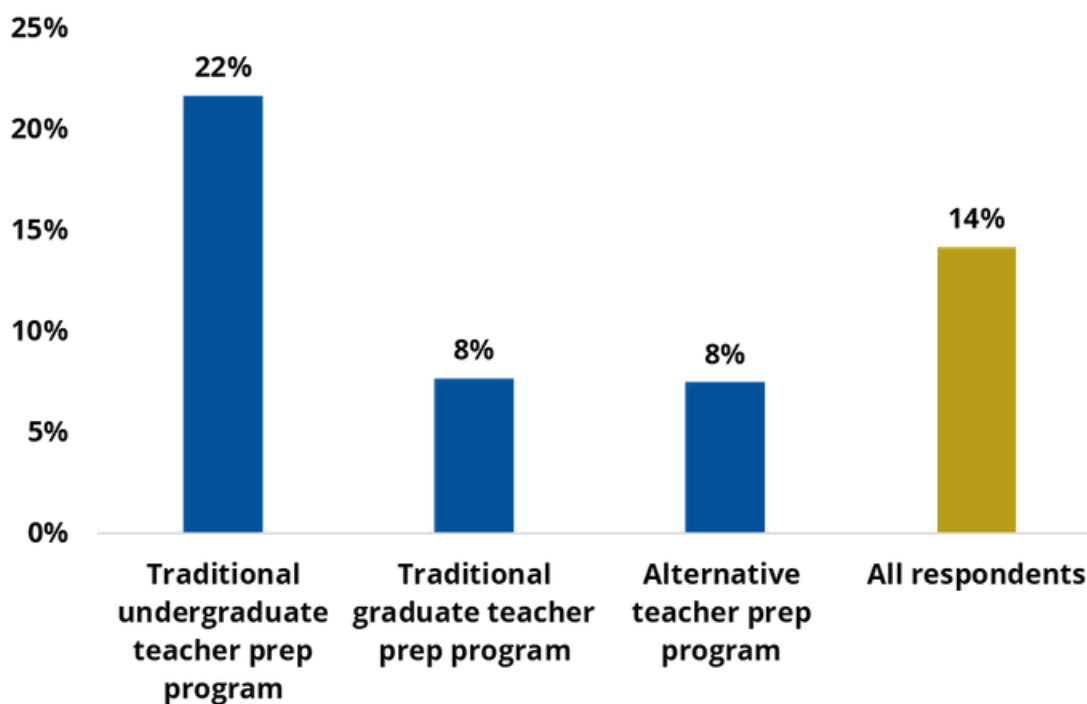
The number of people completing educator preparation programs in Georgia has increased since hitting a low in the 2017-2018 academic year, though it remains below the number of completers in the early 2010s. EPP leaders identified programmatic gaps in the early stages of the teacher pipeline that contribute to students opting out of careers in education. They also highlighted how perceptions of teaching differ between groups of prospective teachers, which presents both challenges and opportunities for recruitment.

Programmatic Pipeline Gaps

Most Georgia school districts offer to high school students the Education as a Profession (EAP) pathway, the Early Childhood Education (ECE) pathway, or both.¹ The pathways consist of a sequence of classes that help high school students learn about education careers and develop knowledge about and skills in teaching. In the 2023-2024 school year, 9,281 students enrolled in the EAP pathway, and 22,444 enrolled in the ECE pathway.² According to EPP leaders, high school students often lose interest in education careers after completing the pathways if they do not continue participating in teaching-related experiences. Ongoing engagement activities include teaching internships, apprenticeships, or taking education-related courses at a postsecondary institution through dual enrollment.

Despite this gap, the EAP and ECE pathways are a launchpad for teaching careers for some students. More than one in five new teachers who earned an undergraduate education degree completed one of these pathways, according to survey responses.

Figure 1: Percent of New Teachers who Completed an EAP or ECE Pathway



A similar scenario unfolds at postsecondary institutions. EPP leaders said they often lose college students in the years between when they are first admitted to their institution, and when they begin education preparation coursework. Students complete core subject-area coursework and other requirements during their first two years and often choose to pursue a different major. EPPs are developing strategies to maintain students' interest in teaching, such as creating freshman seminars on education-related topics, revising timelines for taking education courses, and hosting social events to connect students with one another and with faculty.

Perceptions of Teaching

The appeal of teaching differs between younger potential recruits into the profession and individuals who may consider teaching as an alternative to their current jobs. High school students and traditional undergraduate students hold less favorable views of teaching and are less interested in education careers than earlier generations, according to EPP leaders. Factors cited by EPP leaders that contribute to students' unfavorable view of teaching include:

- **Uncompetitive wages:** Many high school and college students regard teaching as poorly paid compared to jobs in other sectors.
- **Discouragement from parents:** Some parents discourage their children from pursuing education careers due to concerns about low salaries and negative perceptions of public education.
- **Negative rhetoric about public education:** The misconceptions and negative rhetoric surrounding public education, which have surged in recent years, paint an unappealing vision of teaching.³
- **Discouragement from teachers:** K-12 teachers sometimes discourage students from entering the education profession. Students also opt out of education careers when they see their teachers struggling with burnout, difficult student behavior, or other teaching challenges.

While teaching's appeal may have diminished among some high school and undergraduate students, several EPP leaders described growing interest in becoming teachers among career changers. Enrollment in their Master of Arts in Teaching programs as well as non-degree certification programs is growing. Individuals with non-education degrees can earn certification through both programs. Paraprofessionals are using apprenticeship programs, other district-supported recruitment initiatives, or are following their own path to earn a bachelor's degree in education. Leaders say these non-traditional students are drawn to the profession because they want jobs with purpose and through which they can have a positive impact. The financial stability provided by education careers is also a draw.

Learning to Teach:

Challenges within Teacher Preparation

New teachers and EPP students who participated in focus groups noted the quality and intensity of their preparation programs as well as the support they received from faculty members. While their overall experience was positive, new teachers and EPP students flagged several challenges: the cost of earning a degree, uneven mentoring, and the need for additional training to serve special needs students.

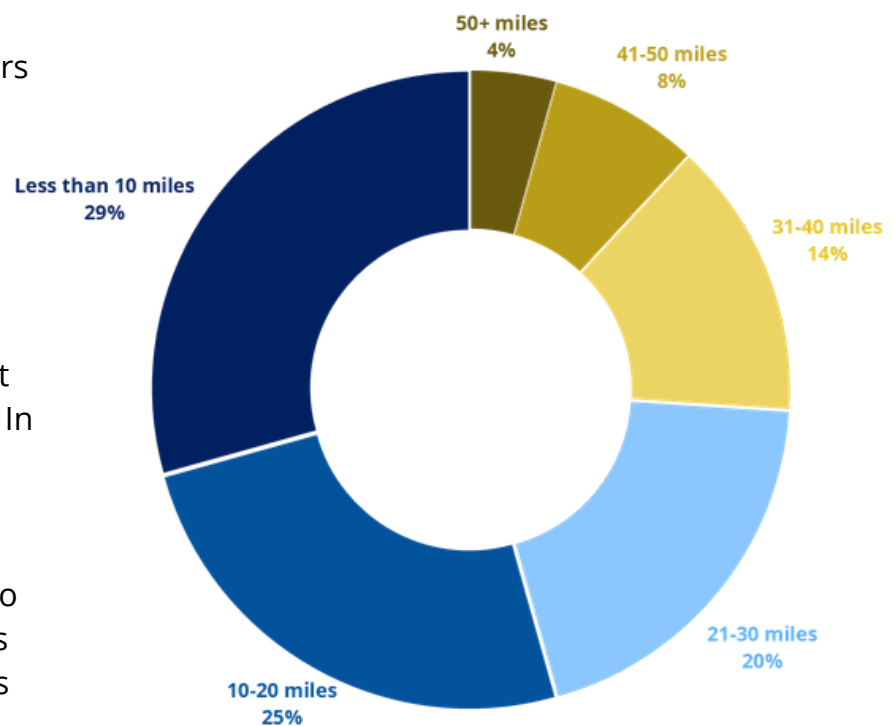
High Cost of Becoming a Teacher

Most paths into teaching carry a steep price tag. In focus groups, new teachers and EPP students identified the high cost of tuition, fees, and living expenses as the top challenge of their preparation programs. The difficulty of paying for college is not unique to EPP students. However, there are additional factors EPP students face that increase the cost of becoming a teacher and make covering the cost more difficult.

One factor is transportation. EPP students must complete student teaching, which typically occurs in their last semester. Student teaching entails working full-time in a school. In addition, EPP students must complete practicums or field experiences in which they spend several hours on multiple days each week in a school during the semesters prior to student teaching. Nearly 95% of new teachers who completed undergraduate EPP programs used their own cars to get to and from their student teaching and practicum sites, according to survey responses.

Though many new teachers who completed traditional undergraduate programs did not travel far to their site placements, more than one-quarter had a site placement 30 or more miles from where they lived. Over the course of a year, EPP students can spend hundreds of dollars, in some instances more than \$1,000, on gas traveling to site placements.

Figure 2: Traditional Undergraduate Completers Farthest Site Placement



A second factor raising costs for EPP students is the Georgia Assessments for the Certification of Educators, or GACE, exams. EPP students must pass a GACE ethics exam and, to earn certification, pass a GACE content assessment in their field (e.g. elementary education, math, biology, etc.) as well as an assessment in literacy instruction. The exam fees add up, particularly if EPP students take an assessment more than once.

- Ethics assessment: \$30
- Content assessment: \$169
- Literacy instruction assessment: \$90⁴

Student teaching and practicums constrain the time EPP students can engage in paid work since both requirements occur during traditional work hours and are in addition to the normal class load students take. Finding employers able to accommodate EPP students' schedules is often difficult, according to focus group participants.

Despite scheduling constraints, 90% of survey respondents worked while earning their degrees, including 86% of new teachers who completed traditional undergraduate preparation programs.

"My junior year at one point I was working 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the elementary school [and] 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. at a restaurant. And then overnight I would work at a gym, and it was just like that: back to back to back."

First-Year Teacher

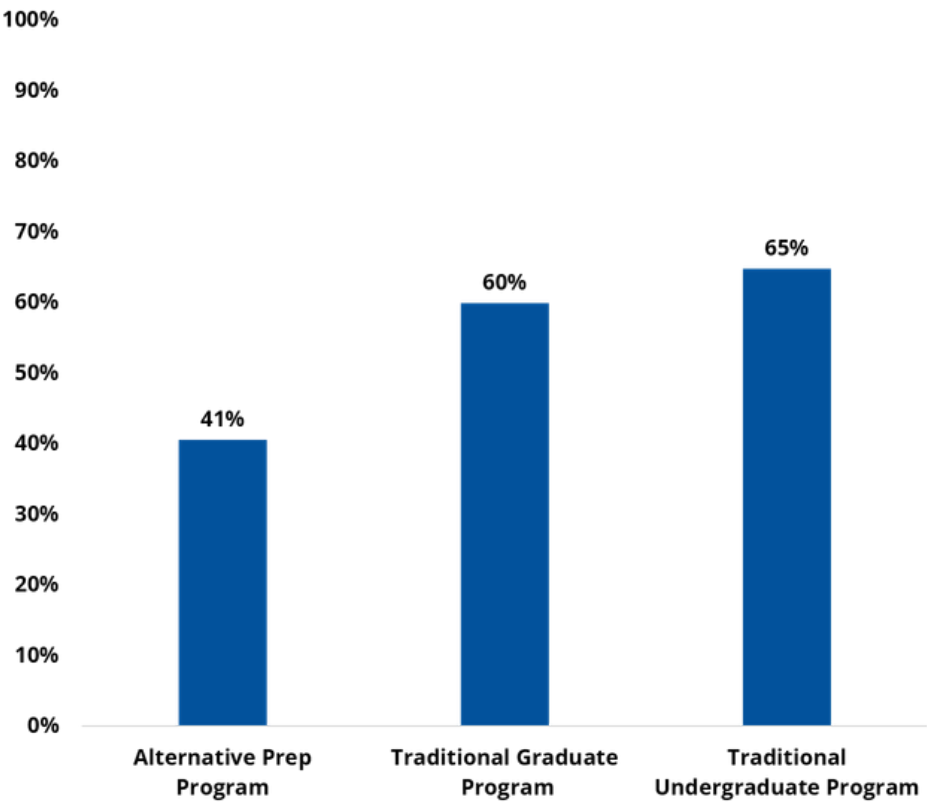
"I know that a lot of people are encouraged not to work during student teaching... that is not something that most of my peers are able to do because you have to live somewhere and you have to eat food."

EPP Student

Historically, EPPs discouraged or required students not to work while completing their student teaching. During student teaching, EPP students work at their school sites full time. This often includes additional preparation such as lesson planning outside of their school hours and taking a course connected to their student teaching. Even with these demands, most EPP students work at a paid job while student teaching, according to survey responses, including 52% of new teachers who completed a traditional undergraduate preparation program.

Despite working for a wage while earning their degrees, most new teachers indicated they relied on student loans in survey responses, which was also the norm among focus group participants.

Figure 3: Percent of New Teachers with Student Loan Debt



Even with jobs and student loans, some EPP students struggle to cover all their costs. Several EPP leaders described their students relying on food pantries at their institutions or reported tapping into emergency funds to help students avoid dire situations concerning their housing or other basic needs.

“I took out loans to pay for college ... and working paid for housing and food and stuff like that.”

New Teacher

Uneven Experiences with Student Teaching Mentors

Student teachers are assigned to a specific school and mentor teacher for their student teaching placement. There is a similar process for their practicums. Mentor teachers fill a critical role for EPP students. They demonstrate instructional and classroom management strategies, guide student teachers through implementing them, and provide feedback to improve their practice.

While most survey respondents had positive experiences with their mentors, 21% reported that only some or a few of their mentor teachers were welcoming and supportive.

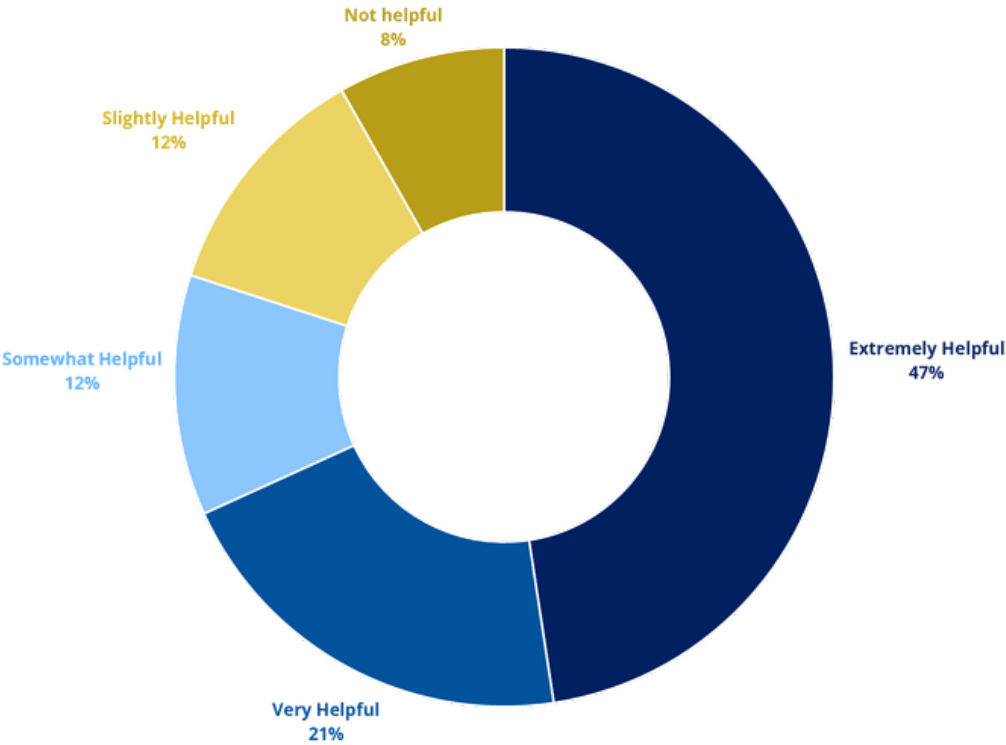
Similarly, most focus group participants described having positive experiences with mentor teachers. However, a few had negative experiences with mentors who made it clear they did not want a student teacher or did not have the expertise to effectively guide and support one. This left those student teachers less prepared to succeed in their own classrooms.

Lack of compensation for mentor teachers is the biggest hurdle to ensuring every student teacher has an effective mentor, according to EPP leaders. Most EPPs cannot provide a stipend to mentor teachers, and those that do can provide only a small amount, such as \$50, for a semester of work supporting a student teacher.

Another barrier to recruiting mentors is the requirement that mentor teachers have completed three years of successful teaching. Some K-12 schools have high teacher turnover, and there are few teachers with three years of teaching experience in some of these schools. This can make finding schools to place student teachers difficult in some areas.

Workload is a third hurdle to recruiting mentors. Many veteran teachers are asked to take on multiple additional duties and leadership roles in their schools. Serving as a mentor for a student teacher is sometimes too much.

Figure 4: Percent of Student Teachers Who Described their Mentors as Welcoming & Supportive



Additional Training to Serve Special Needs Students

New teachers in the focus groups identified special education as an area in which additional training in preparation programs would be helpful. Most focus group participants, including general education teachers, work with special education students. Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and Section 504 plans that outline the services these students receive have specific requirements under federal law. Participants learned about these requirements in their preparation programs but had neither observed nor been a part of the process of developing or reporting on the plans. Now in their own classrooms, they are uncertain about their role in implementing the plans as well as federal reporting requirements. They want additional training in their preparation programs to help them fully adhere to plan requirements.

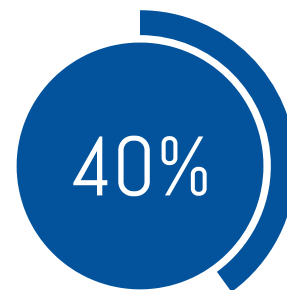
General education teachers also said additional training in instructional and behavioral strategies that better support special education students would be helpful.

Transitioning to the Classroom: New Teacher Challenges

Being a first-year teacher is a big change from being a student teacher. In focus groups, new teachers identified several challenges that make this transition difficult, which echo concerns they cited about preparation programs: financial pressures, uneven mentoring, and gaps in induction support.

Financial Pressures

Making ends meet is difficult for many new teachers. The state’s starting salary for new teachers is \$43,592. In a 2024 PAGE member survey, forty percent of teachers with five or fewer years of experience said they always have difficulty covering their living expenses in 2024.⁵



**Percent of New Teachers who
Report Difficulty Covering Living
Expenses**

“I’m paying back my loan repayments, and I’ve been doing a couple hundred dollars a month ... I can’t afford to live on my own right now. And I would love to be able to afford to live on my own... I look at the pay scale ladder [and] at what point will I be able to afford to buy my own house?”

First-Year Teacher

Student loan debt contributes to the financial strain many new teachers experience. A 2025 PAGE member survey found that the average student loan debt among Georgia teachers exceeded \$34,000, making covering monthly loan payments on a new teacher’s salary difficult.⁶

Teachers often turn to advanced degrees to boost their pay while also deepening their knowledge. Many EPP students and new teachers indicate they either plan to pursue a Master’s degree or are already enrolled in a program. These advanced degree programs can be expensive and exacerbate student debt burdens.

Uneven Experiences with New Teacher Mentors

Mentors for new teachers fill a similar role as mentors who work with student teachers, serving as advisors, problem solvers, and encouragers. Critical components of mentoring appear to be in place for most new teachers, though mentor support falls short for some. Nearly nine out of 10 survey respondents, 88%, reported having a mentor, but all should have one.

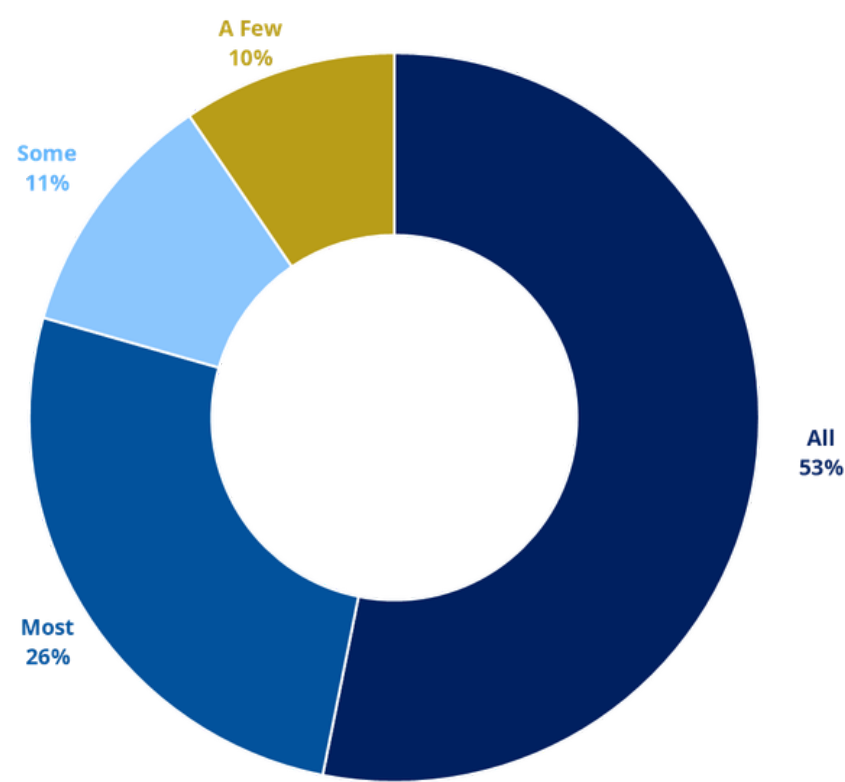
Over three-quarters of new teachers who have mentors report that their mentors are in their same grade level or content area. This fosters a supportive relationship as the new teacher and their mentor likely share planning time, work on the same or similar curriculum, and overlap in other areas of work. It can be difficult for mentors to provide robust support to new teachers if their schedules and content areas do not align.

More than half of survey respondents met with their mentors at least once a week while 30% met only once a month or less.

- More than once a week: 34%
- Once a week: 24%
- Two to three times per month: 13%
- Once a month: 12%
- Less than once a month: 18%

Almost 70% of new teachers described their mentors as extremely or very helpful.

Figure 5: Percent of New Teachers Who Described Their Mentors as Helpful



The frequency with which new teachers meet with their mentors matters. Ninety percent of new teachers who met with their mentors at least once a week said their mentors were extremely or very helpful, compared to 40% of new teachers who met with their mentors once a month or less.

The experiences new teachers participating in focus groups had with their mentors echo survey responses. Most received valuable support from their mentors, but a few issues emerged. These include mentors who were supportive but had not been trained in specific ways to help new teachers, mentors whose content areas differed from those of their new teachers, and a mentor who did not want to be one and rarely engaged the new teacher.

The experiences of new teachers align with information reported by mentor teachers in a 2025 PAGE member survey. Nearly 56% of mentor teachers reported not receiving training to serve as mentors.⁵ Only half of mentor teachers received a handbook or other resources to guide their work with new teachers, and approximately 61% did not receive a stipend.

Increased Induction Support

New teachers often need more support than what their mentors can provide. New teachers who participated in focus groups repeated their desire for more hands-on guidance to fully comply with IEPs and Section 504 plans for special education students. Other areas in which new teachers requested help from district or school staff include structured literacy instruction, state standards, mapping and implementing district curriculum, and managing student behavior.

"There's a school that I hear so much about, and I would like to go over and observe [it], but I haven't even brought it up to my principal because I would need a sub ... Allowing that time, making it mandatory for us to go to other schools, the schools that are performing well, the excellent teachers [would be helpful]."

First Year Teacher

New teachers want regular opportunities to observe skilled teachers to learn new strategies. Observations usually fall outside the normal interactions new teachers have with their mentors, according to focus group participants, because they are teaching.

New teachers also want help covering the cost of classroom supplies and materials. Teachers must create a welcoming classroom environment and ensure they and their students have basic supplies. However, focus group participants said the supplies they receive from districts often fall short of what they need, and new teachers dip into their own pockets to pay for supplies, adding to their financial squeeze. Findings from a 2025 PAGE member survey affirm this: 92% of teachers reported they spent their own money to cover classroom supplies.⁷

Recommendations to Strengthen the Early Career Teacher Pipeline

The challenges new teachers face during their preparation programs and as they transition to their own classrooms are solvable. Georgia lawmakers can make strategic investments that would remove barriers into the profession and enhance the preparation and support new teachers receive. These investments would improve recruitment and help new teachers thrive and stay in the field.

1 Reduce the cost of earning an education degree and certification.

A) Provide stipends for student teachers: The vast majority of student teachers work while earning their degrees and certification to cover tuition, fees, housing, food, transportation, and other essential costs. However, student teaching places unique demands on EPP students, making it difficult for them to hold a job. Stipends for student teachers would reduce their financial burden during this period and lower their need for student loans.

B) Invest in the Georgia Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Program: The [Georgia Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Program](#) offers an affordable pathway for high school students and paraprofessionals to earn education degrees. The program creates a bridge from EAP and ECE pathways to preparation programs to keep students on track. High school students work as pre-apprentices while in high school and as paraprofessionals in college. The program was launched with a temporary federal grant. The Strategic Plan for the Recruitment and Retention of Georgia's Educators, which was developed by a statewide taskforce led by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission, recommends \$3.2 million in state funding for this purpose.

2 Provide state-funded stipends of \$500 for mentors of student teachers and new teachers.

Effective mentors for student teachers and new teachers deepen their knowledge of instructional and classroom management practices and, most critically, help them apply it. Mentor teachers often are not paid for this additional and time-consuming work or, if they are, the amount is insignificant. To ensure student teachers and new teachers have effective mentors, the state should provide stipends of at least \$500 for both groups.

3 Design and fund a grant program to support high-quality induction programs in districts.

The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) created the [Certified Teacher Induction Program](#), which provides a comprehensive framework for a three-year induction program that districts can use to develop their own induction programs. However, the state does not fund induction programs, and not all districts offer them. State lawmakers can help fill this gap by providing grants to districts for induction support.

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