

**GSBA Rural Task Force
Recommendations
June 2019**

Summary

The GSBA Rural Task Force is a group of 44 local board members and superintendents from all over Georgia brought together to discuss the challenges facing rural public education. Due to the geographical distance and logistics of the state, the task force was divided into a north committee and a south committee. These groups have met in person to identify and narrow the specific focus on issues facing rural school districts. This document outlines the topics of discussion and focus and also recommendations to begin to address these issues.

This document is intended to create meaningful dialogue among policy makers, educators, elected officials and state agencies to address the complicated challenges of rural public education. Several of the recommendations require additional funds to implement, the task force recognizes that there is a finite amount of money, therefore it is necessary to negotiate a reprioritization of financial resources to address the highest needs on rural public education. A significant amount of creativity is encouraged at all levels to solve these challenges.

There are many best practices currently in motion all over the state to serve students in rural areas. A few commonalities that have surfaced as themes all over Georgia. Some examples of these are area collaboration, or combined services to assist multiple districts, such as bulk purchasing. Another example of collaboration is a focus on grant writing for the various funding resources from federal agencies, foundations and state entities. Metro districts are important to rural districts by sharing professional development opportunities, low cost inventory items, and mentoring to name a few.

The success of our rural school districts gives way to success in metro areas. We all have a stake in the prosperity of public education in Georgia.

KEY: ● Legislative Recommendation ● School District Recommendation

Topics:

- I. Funding
- II. Early Learning
- III. Healthcare
- IV. Teacher Recruitment/ Retention

Rural Public Education Resources Around the Country

I. FUNDING

Sick Leave

One of the elements of the Quality Basic Education (QBE) funding formula the task force found in need of updating is sick leave. QBE provides only \$150 for 8 days of sick leave which would be \$18.75 per day. Many districts have a tiered pay scale for substitutes based on credentials. Based on an informal survey of some rural districts, the average pay is \$67 - \$89 per day.

There is a statutory obligation to provide sick leave. Georgia Code O.C.G.A. §20-2-850 states educators receive are entitled to full pay for 1.25 working days per completed contract month¹. Since 1985, when the QBE was enacted, inflation and market competitiveness have vastly increased worker pay. The districts are responsible for making up the difference which is a struggle in rural districts.

- **The GSBA Task Force recommends re-examining the QBE funding for sick leave and phasing in an increase to mirror current costs. At a minimum, increase the amount by the rate of inflation. Increasing the 1985 rate of \$18.75 per day to a 2018 equivalent would bring it to \$43.76, \$350 for eight days.**

Transportation

Transportation has two major areas of concern for rural school districts.

The wear and tear on school buses based on the extended miles to reach students and the difficult territory some of them must navigate drive up the costs of maintaining their buses and shorten the bus lifespan. Bus replacement funding has not kept up with the need. The cost of pupil transportation has shifted more and more to local districts. This is a hardship particularly in rural areas.

The second major concern is recruitment of school bus drivers. All districts struggle with this, but it is particularly hard in rural areas. The low pay and non-traditional work hours increase the difficulty. The available pool of drivers has also been limited by the growing numbers impacted by the opioid crisis. One of the biggest incentives districts can offer in recruitment, providing health insurance, has become increasingly hard for the district cost is now over \$11,000 a year per driver.

¹ [O.C.G.A. § 20-2-850](#)

The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends the following:

- Update the pupil transportation formula to reflect the varied costs in school districts.
- Due to long bus commutes for students, sometimes up to two hours, research the cost of providing wi-fi capabilities on some buses. These buses could then be used to act as hotspots for the community and create more equitable access for rural students.

School Counselors

The rural task force identified additional school counselors as a need in the buildings. According to the Quality Basic Education funding formula, the funding ratio of students to counselors is currently at 450:1². In 2015, the American School Counselors Association's (ASCA) State by State Student to Counselor Ratio Report suggests, on average, there are 484 students to 1 school counselor in a school.

In this day and age of increased school safety and focus on student's mental health and well-being, this is not an adequate data point. While, School Resource Officers are critical, one could argue that school counselors play a major role in assisting students in the services they need outside of the classroom, such as relationship building, career pathway awareness for community needs and also over all advisement. Counselors also play a crucial role in helping students understand and choose post-secondary options. The ASCA recommends a 250:1 student to counselor ratio³.

● The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends additional funding to phase in an increase in the number of school counselors to ensure an adequate number of school counselors in rural schools and for ongoing professional development to address social emotional learning issues and the ever-changing landscape of areas counselors must be trained to address.

Poverty

Poverty is a major area of concern for the entire state of Georgia but was more apparent in South Georgia as a priority. Specifically, the opportunity gap, lack of literacy and numeracy, unstable home life, teen pregnancy, generational poverty, inequity in healthcare, not knowing what possibilities and opportunities are available and lack of prioritization of education in the home to name a few.

² [NACAC & ASCA State by State Student-To-Counselor Ratio Report 2015](#)

³ [NACAC & ASCA State by State Student-To-Counselor Ratio Report 2015](#)

- The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends a weight be added to the Quality Basic Education funding formula for economically disadvantaged students. Each school district faces different challenges therefore poverty weights for funding these issues and the flexibility are a high priority to addressing these issues.

Legislation efforts to increase the incentives to provide new jobs in rural areas should be continued.

Best Practices

Irwin County- [Google Rolling Study Hall](#)- School buses equipped with wi-fi capabilities and computers for the long commutes to and from school.

**See Appendix I Funding for resources*

II. EARLY LEARNING

The achievement gap opens in the earliest years, the period when children's brains grow fastest. By age three, children of low-income families know only half as many words as children in more advantaged families. As a result, disadvantaged children can be 18 months behind their peers by the time they start kindergarten⁴. There are 4 main gaps that the task force identified: transportation, space, professional development and curriculum alignment.

- **The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends additional funding for pre-kindergarten, transportation and space for additional students to ensure the foundational elements are established before starting kindergarten so that students are on level and able to learn.**
- **The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends school districts work with faith-based communities and private early learning providers on shared professional development in order to ensure students are receiving the same standards of the public education institutions they will enter in kindergarten.**
- **The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends all early learning centers must have a curriculum that is aligned to the standards of the public institutions so that all children have the opportunity to be ready academically for kindergarten.**

Best Practices

Fannin County- [Pre-K Program at every Elementary School](#)

**See Appendix II Early Learning for resources*

⁴ [Ready Nation, The Vital Link: Early Childhood Investment is the First Step to High School Graduation](#)

III. HEALTHCARE

Recommendations

The task force identified 3 crucial areas around healthcare for rural public schools: Access to health services, keeping rural hospitals open, and the increasing costs of healthcare insurance for employees.

Access

Access to healthcare comes in many forms. The ability to have not only students receive healthcare but also their families. Untreated health issues can have many consequences.

- **The GSBA Task Force recommends school districts work with city and county governments to explore the use of telemedicine in their community to fill in some of the unmet needs. Telemedicine allows healthcare professionals to see and treat many conditions to help keep students in school and focused. There are many examples of the successful use of telemedicine in Georgia and around the country. Additionally, the USDA offers matching grants to help communities with this initiative.**

Similar to education, the healthcare industry continues to struggle to recruit and retain healthcare professionals. For many of the same reasons, healthcare workers have little incentive to live and work in areas that may not offer the same quality of life as larger cities and towns.

- **The GSBA Task Force supports initiatives led by the healthcare profession to recruit and retain personnel to provide access to care and treatment to students and adults in rural areas.**

Transportation to healthcare facilities continues to be a barrier for many to receive the care and treatment necessary to stay healthy.

- **The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends providing funding for low cost or subsidized transportation to healthcare facilities that are not easily accessible otherwise. This would assist those in rural areas in accessing quality healthcare.**

Rural Hospitals

Access also relates to proximity to healthcare facilities. Many rural hospitals struggle, due to the many requirements and regulations placed on them. Many rural healthcare facilities have not been able to remain open due to these requirements.

- **The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends a refinement and clarification of rural hospital tax credits. These tax credits allow for donations to be made to rural hospitals to split between clinics and hospitals. The Task Force encourages the legislature to continue its efforts to ensure the funds go to the hospitals serving rural areas. (See Appendix III, Recommendation from the 2018 House of Representatives Rural Development Council, page 8)**

Insurance Funding

While the student and community access to healthcare is a challenge, the classified employees in a school system also must have the type of affordable coverage necessary to keep the employee and their families healthy and in school supporting student's success. Funding for health insurance continues to skyrocket and rural districts are burdened with the cost to insure their workforce. Often, the school districts are the largest employer in the county. If they reach a point of being unable to offer insurance, it would greatly increase the healthcare needs and state costs in other ways.

- **The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends the cost to insure rural classified school employees be considered and funded partially the state level and to keep our rural communities healthy, educated. The Task Force also recommends the state continue to explore less expensive ways to provide this employment benefit.**

Best Practices

Turner County- [School Based Health Clinics](#)

**See Appendix III Healthcare for resources*

IV. TEACHER RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

The task force identified a number of areas within teacher recruitment and retention that need to be considered. The key areas were financial incentives, living assistance, and recruitment of special education and stem specific teachers. There is also a high degree of interest in retired teachers returning to the classroom and for fast track programs for para professionals to acquire teaching certificates to fill the ongoing need of teacher shortages in rural areas.

Financial Incentives

There is an opportunity to target rural areas with programs to improve the recruitment and retention of teachers. School districts have found the recruitment and retainment of teachers, specifically in special education and STEM programs, to be very difficult. People must be incentivized to live in rural areas.

- **The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends financial assistance targeted to special education and STEM teachers which would include loan forgiveness and cost of living stipends or housing. Examples of the financial assistance programs are found in Appendix IV of this report. The GSBA Rural Task Force also supports the 2015 Education Reform Commission’s recommendations on this subject which reinforced the task force’s recommendation. A pilot could be set up to test the viability of the incentives to ensure they work and are sustainable.**

Mentors

Nearly 50% of teachers will leave the profession in their first 5 years. The stress and burden placed on teachers is pushing quality people out because of incentives and training in other professions. Quality teachers are vital to the success of our public schools.

- **The GSBA Task Force recommends a mentor program to ensure that new teachers are supported with the guidance and professional development necessary to succeed. One example is to partner with Historical Black Colleges and Universities for teacher pipelines and mentors and also partner with Latino/ Hispanic organizations for teacher pipelines and mentors. Studies have shown that having a teacher of the student’s ethnicity improves student achievement⁵. The GSBA Rural Task Force also supports the 2015 Education Reform Commission’s recommendations on this subject which reinforced the task force’s recommendation. See Appendix IV Teacher Recruitment and Retention.**

⁵ [Learning Policy Institute: Diversifying the Teaching Profession: How to Recruit and Retain Teachers of Color](#)

Marketing

The rural education community must showcase the profession as a viable work option for students and people exploring new opportunities. All too often public education is receiving headlines only when something negative happens. The reality is that the positive in public education far outweighs the negative, but if educators do not tell their story, someone else will. The marketing and public relations aspect is an important part of showcasing rural communities and all that they have to offer to bring quality talent into the schools.

The strengths of rural communities are often missed when families and companies are exploring relocation. There is a strong focus on what is not available rather than on the unique characteristics of an area.

- **The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends an intentional focus on a marketing campaign in partnership with higher education to showcase the teaching profession and the support and guidance available for teachers to succeed.**

- ● **The Task Force recommends the increased promotion of teaching as a high demand workforce initiative designation by the state.**

- ● **Additionally, the Task Force recommends a pilot program to have a marketing specialist from the Department of Economic Development work with 2-3 school districts to help them create a strong promotion of their area to attract teachers. Packages must be developed to showcase the strengths and offerings of rural Georgia for what attracts and retains quality personnel.**

Retired Teachers & Para Professionals

The need for teachers in rural school districts is a high priority. Many school districts struggle to fill teaching vacancies due to declining populations, lack of economic development, quality of life and transportation challenges.

- **The GSBA Task Force recommends a change in statute to allow retired teachers who may already be living in the community to return to the classroom in rural public schools without penalty to their Teacher Retirement Benefits.**

- ● **The Task Force recommends exploring programs that assist paraprofessionals to obtain a fast track teaching certificate while working as a parapro, as a way of bringing employees already in the system and in the community as lead teachers.**

Best Practices

Dade County- Teacher bonuses to those who do not use sick time dadecountyschools.org

**See Appendix IV Teacher Recruitment and Retention for resources*

APPENDIX

I. Funding

Georgia Department of Education Local Finance General Guidelines

Best practices in school finance

- Shared school finance expert with two or more districts
- Districts should understand and closely follow the process for QBE data collections defined by the Department's Data Collections division. A variety of helpful documents exist to assist districts with this:
 - <http://www.gadoe.org/Technology-Services/Data-Collections/Pages/Data-Collections-and-Reporting.aspx>
- Districts should dedicate the appropriate resources to these processes to ensure both timely and accurate reporting of the data which is used to calculate the QBE formula.

II. Early Learning

DECAL- Georgia Department of Early Care & Learning Support & Resources

DECAL's focus is to support school readiness

- Improving child care quality by aligning & strengthening curriculum and instruction
- Helping families understand the importance of quality
- Partnering with communities

Quality Rating for Childcare Facilities (Aligning & strengthening curriculum & instruction)

- One, Two, and Three Star Rating System for child care programs that go above and beyond meeting state health and safety standards to implement high quality learning environments.
- **Free** resources such as mini-grants, classroom supplies, educational materials
- **Free** onsite coaching for the teachers and director, training, and professional development for child care teachers of all ages
- **Financial incentives** to support continuing education, staff retention, and ongoing quality improvement.
- www.QualityRated.org

Georgia Early Learning & Development Standards (GELDS)

The purposes of the GELDS are to:

- Guide teachers who work with children from birth through five in providing quality learning experiences;

- Guide parents in supporting their children’s growth, development, and learning potential;
- Lay the groundwork for applying the standards in pre-service training, professional development, curriculum planning, and child outcome documentation;
- Create a “Universal Language” for all stakeholders to use regarding the learning and development of children. Stakeholders would include parents, teachers, pediatricians, early interventionists, policy-makers, etc;
- Raise public awareness about the significance of the early years as the foundation for school success and lifelong learning and the importance of the teacher’s role in the process; and
- Support the early identification and referral of children with special learning needs.
- <http://www.gelds.decal.ga.gov>

DECAL Regional Community Partnership Resources

DECAL Area Representatives

- North West, **Glenda Davis-Canteen**, Glenda.DavisCanteen@decal.ga.gov
- North East, **Clayton Adams**, Clayton.Adams@decal.ga.gov
- Central West, **Bridgette Washington**, Bridgette.Washington@decal.ga.gov
- Central East, **Audrienne Smith**, Audrienne.Smith@decal.ga.gov
- South West, **Edward Rowell**, Edward.Rowell@decal.ga.gov
- South East, **Kati Cosby**, Kati.Cosby@decal.ga.gov
- **Jill O’Meara, Early Education Community Partnership Manager**, Jill.Omeara@decal.ga.gov

III. Healthcare

State Office of Rural Health

<https://dch.georgia.gov/state-office-rural-health>

Access

Telemedicine

[Telehealth Use in Rural healthcare](#)

[Telehealth Startup & Resource Guide](#)- US Dept of Health & Human Services

Tax Credits

Rural Hospital Tax Credit

(Recommendation from the 2018 House of Representatives Rural Development Council, page 8)

- Introduce legislation that increases the cap on the Rural Hospital Tax Credit to \$100 million, and require the Department of Community Health to provide and post on their website a list of qualifying hospitals in need of financial support.
- Further clarify contributions rules and processes.
- Further clarify qualifying expenditures.
- Direct the departments of Community Health and Revenue to work together to ensure the intent and integrity of the credit is maintained.

[Tennessee Governor’s Rural Task Force Report](#)

INCENTIVES FOR RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Increase resources to recruit and place health professionals (especially dentists and behavioral health professionals) in targeted rural counties, particularly those currently without hospital inpatient and emergency department services. Report page 29

[Medical College of Georgia push for free tuition for recipients to practice in Rural Education](#)

The Medical College of Georgia is pushing for medical school students to receive free tuition and a 3-year program if they will spend 6 years practicing in rural Georgia.

<https://www.ajc.com/news/local/medical-college-georgia-pushes-free-tuition-you-practice-rural-area/IVocJKmKvfq5ygAnbeLe9O/>

IV Teacher Recruitment & Retention

[Student Loan Forgiveness Program](#)

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Recommendation 10

Investigate the benefit of reinstating the service cancellable loan program for students graduating from a University System of Georgia teacher education program. Designate the teaching profession as a High Demand Workforce Initiative in Georgia.

To reduce the impact of Georgia’s growing teacher shortage, the commission recommends that the funding should include tailored grant programs supporting low-income teacher candidates who go on to teach in Georgia public schools. The program should apply to graduates who teach in Georgia public schools for a pre-determined number of years and be limited to teachers who teach in high-need schools and/or subject areas. Georgia should develop clear guidance to help prospective students understand financially viable options to a degree and that college completion does not have to result in excessive student loan indebtedness.

[Mentors/ 1-year internships for teacher training](#)

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Recommendation 3

Provide grants to support districts in developing strong teacher induction programs. Charter systems and strategic system contracts should include a description of how the district will provide support for induction-level teachers.

High-quality teacher induction programs can advance teaching practice and improve teacher retention.⁵ The mentoring of teachers early in their careers by effective and experienced teachers is essential to ensure they have the support to develop the skills and have a positive impact on student learning.

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Recommendation 6

Investigate a sustainable state-level funding program for providing compensation to classroom teachers for supervising teacher interns.

Educators who supervise teacher interns play a pivotal role in ensuring Georgia has effective instructors in each classroom. The state needs its best educators to serve in these positions, yet they are also the ones who are often the most burdened by other responsibilities.

Moreover, school and district officials at times assign teacher interns to lower performing educators in an attempt to ensure that more adults are in these struggling classrooms. Providing experienced educators with compensation for supervising teacher interns will address both challenges. Effective teachers will be enticed to serve as mentors, and schools may hesitate to assign teacher interns to lower performing educators if additional compensation is included.

Marketing/ Public Relations Plan for Recruitment

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Recommendation 8

Develop and implement a statewide media campaign to promote the positive aspects of teaching as a profession.

Enrollment has declined in teacher preparation programs, and the reality is that only 44 percent of new teachers in 2005 have remained in education for the required ten years to become vested in the Teacher Retirement System. The state must be proactive in highlighting the positive impacts and rewards of teaching. In the current flux of the educational landscape, active teachers have also reported negative feelings about the profession during the commission's teacher input sessions. Additionally, deans of the several Georgia teacher preparation programs have reported that they struggle to find positive supervisors in schools for their student placements.

The commission recommends that a systemic campaign featuring teachers across the state be implemented in order to restore and grow the pride of the teaching profession for those who are current practitioners, and for those who are considering entering the profession.

[Tennessee Governor's Rural Task Force Report](#) outlines two programs.

1. The Rural Education Network- An online network and collaborative to provide resources, videos, and professional learning and leadership development. Report page 20
2. The Rural Teacher Initiative- a program to recruit and retain rural teacher through state subsidies compensation and in state scholarships for teachers committing to teach in rural areas. Report page 22

RURAL TEACHER INITIATIVE Need: Rural communities struggle to recruit and retain highly effective teachers. Objective: Develop a program to grow, recruit and retain teachers in the poorest rural counties in the state. The plans will create avenues over a five-year period to establish pilot programs in economically distressed rural counties in the state to build up the teacher workforce. Description and Suggestions:

- Rural districts with the largest issues of teacher shortages will target high school students to receive Grow Your Own Scholarships which will cover up to \$32,000 in student loans at a Tennessee public college or university as long as the student makes a commitment to teach in a rural district for four years following graduation and maintains a specified GPA.
- Up to 100 stipends to individuals in approved educator preparation programs who agree to teach in a rural school or school district for at least three years. The stipends, known as Tennessee Rural Teaching Stipends (TRTS), offset tuition costs and may not exceed \$4,000 each.
- Up to 100 stipends of up to \$6,000 each to teachers in rural areas who are seeking certification as a national board-certified teacher, seeking certification as a concurrent enrollment teacher, or completing an alternative licensure program that leads to employment in a rural area or addresses a high need subject area.
- Up to 100 stipends to teaching assistants currently working in rural schools to finish their undergraduate degree to become a licensed teacher within 14-months to provide another pipeline of potential teachers. The stipends known as Tennessee Para-Professional Advancement Stipends (TPAS), offset tuition costs and may not exceed \$5,000 each. State Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) will accept these potential teachers and fast-track them to earn professional licensure.

[U.S. Department of Education loan forgiveness program for teaching in a low income area.](#)

V. National Ideas

Education Commission of the States

[National perspective of recruitment for teachers to rural areas
Teacher Recruitment & Retention](#)

Rural Public Education Resources Around the Country

Georgia

<https://www.ruralga.org>

Nebraska

Center for Rural Affairs

<https://www.cfra.org>

North Carolina

North Carolina Rural Center

<https://www.ncruralcenter.org>

10 Strategies

<https://www.ncruralcenter.org/engagement/advocacy/rural-counts/>

Vermont

Vermont Council on Rural Development

<https://www.vtrural.org>