



Rural Task Force

2020 Rural Report

TEACHER RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

A Strong, Stable Teacher Workforce Matters

Teachers are considered the most important school-based factor in student learning.* A classroom visit demonstrates this, and research verifies it.¹ Veteran teachers, whose knowledge and skills have grown with experience, are more effective in fostering student learning than new teachers.² This makes recruiting strong candidates, helping them grow professionally, and cultivating their commitment to stay in the classroom a priority for districts.

The stakes are high. When a steady stream of educators leaves the profession, students and districts pay a price. Student achievement falls and school communities are disrupted, making it more difficult to move forward with improvement plans.³ It can also lead to more turnover down the road. These effects can be particularly harmful in schools serving primarily low-income students.

Each time a teacher leaves, districts spend thousands of dollars to replace her or him. Costs include recruiting, hiring and processing, and training new teachers and new hires. A 2006 study by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission found that the average cost of replacing a teacher who left for reasons other than retirement or reassignment was \$11,975.⁴ Other research has shown comparable costs though they vary across a range of factors including district location, size and training practices.⁵

Current Context: Teacher Recruitment and Retention in Georgia

Teachers in many subject areas are in short supply across Georgia. In the 2019-2020 school year, teacher shortages were reported in the following areas:

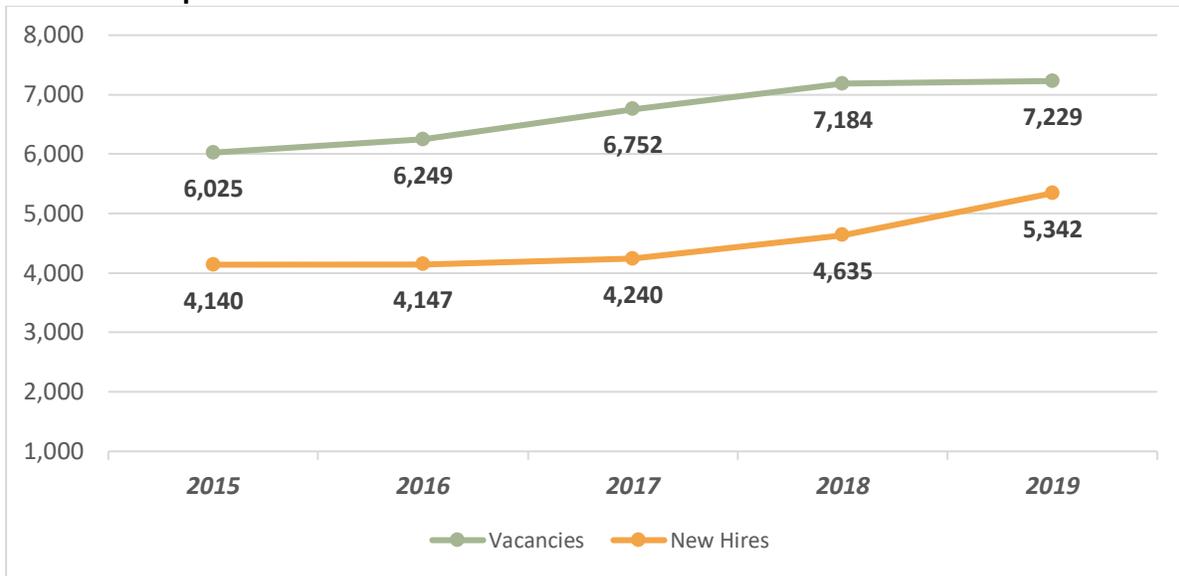
- Special education, all grade levels
- Elementary education/early childhood, grades K-5
- Science, grades 6-12
- Math, basic and advanced, grades 6-12⁶

Districts' accounts of gaps between vacancies and new hires is another sign of Georgia's teacher shortage. Many districts reported many more vacancies than new hires.[†]

* Out-of-school factors, including socioeconomic factors, have greater influence on student outcomes than in-school factors. Poverty is closely linked to lower levels of student achievement.

† These data refer to districts that use federal Title II, Part A funds for teacher recruitment activities. The funds are part of the money states receive under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act. More information about these funds is available from the Georgia Department of Education at <https://www.gadoe.org/School-Improvement/Teacher-and-Leader-Effectiveness/Pages/Title-II-Part-A-Home.aspx>

Persistent Gap between Vacancies and New Hires⁷



Source: Georgia Department of Education, ESEA: Title II, Part A 2018-2019 Annual Report

When districts are unable to hire certified teachers in the subject areas they need, they often turn to teachers with emergency or provisional teaching certificates or those who are certified in a different subject area.

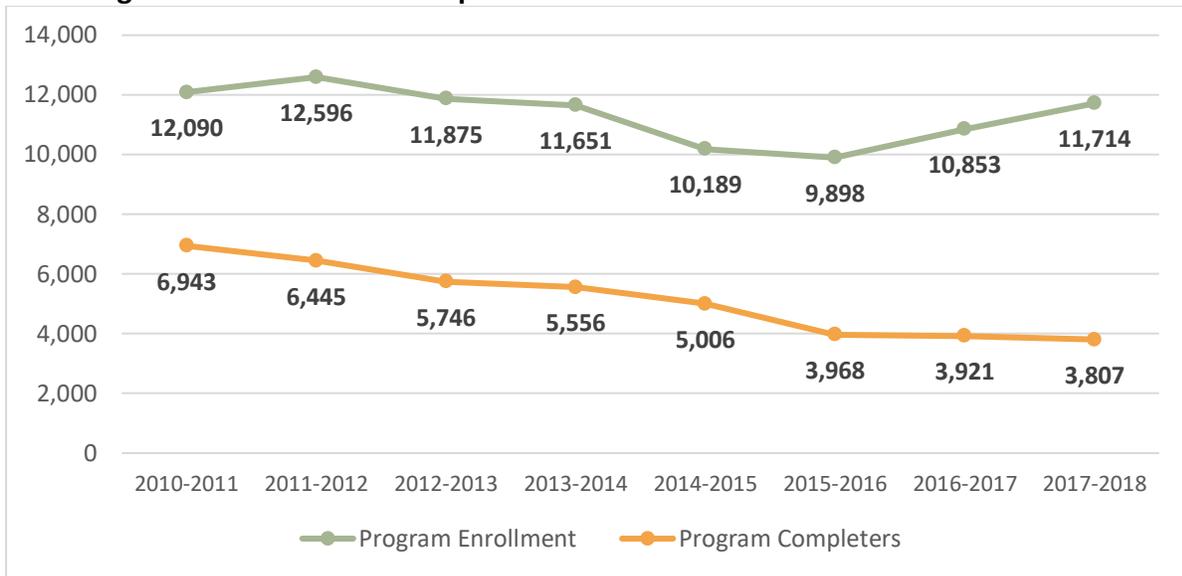
Percentage Georgia Teachers Out-of-Field & on Emergency/Provisional Certificates 2019

	Out-of-Field	Emergency/Provisional Certificates
Total	11%	10%
High-Poverty Schools	16%	7%
Low-Poverty Schools	10%	8%

Source: Georgia Department of Education, ESEA: Title II, Part A 2018-2019 Annual Report

Teaching out-of-field or with an emergency/provisional certificate has been linked to lower levels of student achievement.^{8 9} Fluctuations in enrollment in teacher preparation programs is one cause of the teacher shortage. A second is the steady decline in the number of people who complete preparation programs even as program enrollment has rebounded.

Troubling Trends in the Teacher Pipeline



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Teacher Area Shortage Report, Georgia

The educator workforce squeeze is worsened by the number of teachers who leave the profession each year. Forty-four percent of new teachers in Georgia leave in their first five years in the classroom.¹⁰ Keeping teachers is harder in high-poverty schools than in low-poverty ones. For too many teachers, the classroom has become a revolving door.

Rural Needs in the Spotlight

Rural school districts are not spared these challenges. Turnover is high among those entering the profession, and “staffing churn” can be worse in rural areas than urban ones.¹¹ This is particularly true in small rural schools (e.g. those with fewer than 300 students), which often have higher turnover rates than larger schools.¹²

Rural districts face other challenges, including recruiting new teachers. They do not have a deep pool of candidates to draw on from their own communities. Fewer rural high school graduates go on to postsecondary institutions than their urban and suburban peers.¹³ Many of those who do go onto college do not return to their home communities. They head to metropolitan areas in search of economic opportunities and professional advancement.¹⁴ Moreover, rural districts often pay less than those in urban and suburban communities. This may offset by a lower cost of living, but lower wages can still be a deterrent.¹⁵

Teachers in rural districts can experience professional isolation. They may be the only teacher in a particular subject area or one of a handful. If they are the sole teacher, they may also teach all sub-fields within that subject area. For example, a high school science teacher may teach biology, chemistry and physical science. This creates a heavy workload and limits teachers’ ability to specialize.¹⁶

There are non-school factors that also influence teachers' decisions to come to or stay in rural areas. They may be socially isolated from peers, have long commutes, or lack attractive housing options.

Moreover, since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001, mandates for "highly-qualified" teachers are at odds with the needs of rural schools to hire adaptable teachers able to teach multiple subjects.¹⁷ This is a particular issue for special-education teachers; proportionately more students in rural districts are recommended for special education, but fewer teachers in those districts are certified to work with that population.¹⁸

COVID-19 and the Teacher Workforce

The COVID-19 pandemic may worsen the teacher shortage in Georgia. Teachers in high-risk categories due to age or health condition such as diabetes or heart disease may be reluctant to return to the classroom. They could retire earlier than planned, take leaves-of-absence, or seek positions in fields they consider lower risk.

Teaching in the midst of the pandemic—with uncertainties about best safety practices, scheduling and logistical challenges related to social distancing, possible budget cuts, and the chance that instruction will be online—may push some teachers to leave regardless of their health risk. New teachers, striving to master the core elements of effective instruction and rich curriculum, may be particularly vulnerable to the stresses of teaching online or other facets of pandemic teaching.

The economic shutdown triggered by the pandemic and subsequent budget cuts add another layer of issues that may generate instability in the teacher workforce. The General Assembly cut \$950 million from the state's K-12 funding formula, the Quality Basic Education formula, for the 2020-2021 school year. In the short-term, partly offset with federal funds intended to help cover pandemic-related costs, the cut may not have a large effect on teachers. If the economic downturn and budget cuts persist for several years, districts may implement furloughs, freeze salaries, reduce positions or take other steps to lower costs. This could lead to increased attrition.

Persistent budget cuts could make the profession less attractive to potential candidates. Enrollment in teacher preparation programs could slide, as it did in the wake of the Great Recession. At the same time, reduced job opportunities in other sectors or other districts may prevent some educators from leaving the classroom.

Best Practices

Scholarships/Loan Forgiveness

Offering scholarships or loan forgiveness to teachers who commit to staying in a high-need district for a defined time period can lead to higher retention rates according to research. The [Colorado Center for Rural Education](#) at the University of Northern Colorado, with support from the state, offers multiple stipends to current and prospective educators in rural districts. They include stipends for teacher candidates, current non-certified district employees seeking to earn licensure, and current certified teachers who are pursuing additional endorsements. In exchange for the stipends, recipients agree to teach in rural districts for an allotted period of time.

Georgia operated a service-cancelable loan program, the Georgia Promise program, from 1996 to 2011. Funded by the state lottery, the program provided nearly 13,000 teacher candidates with loans of up to \$3,000 for their junior and senior years that could be cancelled if they taught in public schools for up to four years. The program was cancelled in 2010-11 as part of budget cutbacks. The Georgia Promise II scholarship provided similar benefits to paraprofessionals to enable them to complete a bachelor's degree and teaching certification. It provided nearly 1,000 teacher candidates with loans from 2001-05. Such programs have proven successful in attracting outstanding students to education¹⁹ and keeping students in teaching careers longer than teachers not receiving such incentives.²⁰

Housing

Another strategy for retaining and supporting new teachers is helping them find affordable and appropriate housing. Several states and districts have developed programs to offer subsidized housing for teachers, although most of the best-known programs are in high-cost urban areas, such as parts of California; Newark, New Jersey; and Philadelphia.²¹ In North Carolina, the State Employees Credit Union Foundation has partnered with districts and local foundations to build apartment complexes to rent to teachers at below-market rates.²² For example, the Echo Ridge apartment complex was financed by the foundation in partnership with the Hoke County Schools near Fayetteville in eastern North Carolina. Two-bedroom apartments are available only to district employees. Four other complexes have been built across the state, and all have been rented at or near capacity since being built. Once construction loans are paid off, the complexes become an additional revenue source for the district.²³

Induction/Mentoring

Strong relationships with effective mentors improve teacher retention among new teachers. The [Alaska Statewide Mentor Project](#) provides mentors to new teachers across the state's mostly rural districts. Funded with state and federal dollars, the program provides extensive training to exemplary retired teachers who serve as mentors to teachers in their first two years in the classroom. Using a model developed by the [New Teacher Center](#), each mentor provides

one-on-one support to about 15 new teachers. Retention rates for new rural teachers who participate in the program are higher than they were before its implementation.²⁴

The New Teacher Center partnered with the Southeast Kansas Education Service Center-Greenbush to establish an [e-mentoring program for new teachers](#). Kansas requires mentoring for new teachers, but districts struggled to find experienced teachers to serve as mentors, particularly for new special education teachers.²⁵ The program provides experienced mentors who work with a cohort of new teachers. The cohort approach enables participants to tap their peers for advice and support as well as their mentors.

Marketing

Communicating directly and holistically with prospective hires is critical. An Arkansas study found that public school job listings for teachers did not discuss incentives apart from salary and benefits, while charter-school listings noted opportunities for public service, freedom and opportunity to innovate in the classroom, opportunities for advancement and professional growth, and other metrics.²⁶ Teacher recruitment, the authors concluded, needed to offer holistic benefits, not just compensation, for teachers.

Rural districts can bolster their appeal to student teachers by collaborating with teacher preparation programs to incorporate strategies to build student teachers' personal connections to rural communities into students' practicum experiences.²⁷ The community itself may be a place from which to recruit new teachers through alternative certification pathways and other resources as well—the “grow-your own” approach often touted for rural educators. Midwestern districts that have used some of these strategies to tap their own communities, including their alumni base, report success. Principals in the districts noted that these new teachers were already comfortable with life in a rural community.²⁸

The Education Reform Commission, which was established by former Gov. Nathan Deal in 2015, recommended a statewide media campaign featuring Georgia teachers to promote positive aspects of teaching. The aim of the campaign, if implemented, would be restoring and growing the pride of the teaching profession for current practitioners as well as those who are considering entering the profession.

Expanding the Pipeline

States and districts are exploring multiple strategies to attract and train new teachers. The [Texas Education Agency](#) launched its [Grow Your Own grant program](#) in 2018, which provides grants to districts to implement strategies build their teacher workforce. The program prioritizes funding for rural districts. The program funds three models: implementing education and training courses in high school; transitioning paraprofessionals, aides and substitutes to teaching roles; and developing well-qualified teacher candidates.

These are valuable strategies that districts can leverage to attract, support and keep effective teachers. They should fit within a broad approach to provide supportive work environments—the chief factor for retaining good teachers. Aspects of this include relationships with students, a safe environment, small class sizes, and support from administrators.²⁹ Another study found that the ultimate factor in teacher retention is providing a school environment with an attractive teaching and learning environment.³⁰ This includes safety, a strong mission shared by leaders and staff, clear accountability, authentic leadership from administrators, high expectations for students, high time on task, and the engagement of parents. Community-building should be a top priority, including mentoring, staff development, and attention paid to recruitment.

A study of a rural K-8 school in North Carolina found cultivating teachers' resiliency bolstered their retention. Resiliency is a concept more often brought to bear on students, but resilient teachers are critical to rural schools and communities.³¹ According to the authors, the school was successful because caring and support for teachers, especially new ones, was emphasized and demonstrated by veterans and administrators. High expectations were set by staff through orientation and meetings throughout the year, and teachers were empowered to voice ideas and concerns about curriculum, administration, and community relations.

Georgia rural superintendents echo this point: The Newton County School System brought in Teach Upbeat, a firm that takes an analytics-based approach to teacher retention, to survey teachers and identify areas of concern that might cause teachers to leave. The survey identified key issues such as engaging teachers in school governance, enabling district leaders to work with principals to improve relationships. Retention increased from 80 percent to 87 percent, and the system won an award from the Georgia Association of School Personnel Administrators.

Recommendations

School District Recommendations

- **The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends a mentor program to ensure that new teachers are supported with the guidance and professional development necessary to succeed.**

High-quality mentor programs for new teachers can support them in successfully transitioning to their new professional role and boost the likelihood that they will remain in the classroom.

- **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.**

Collaborations between school districts and their higher education partners can target and maximize shared resources to highlight the benefits of teaching and attract new candidates to the field.

Legislative Recommendations

- **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.**

Targeted financial incentives have demonstrated effectiveness in bolstering teacher retention in high need fields.

- **The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends a change in statute to allow retired teachers to return to the classroom in rural public schools without penalty to their Teacher Retirement System benefits.**

Removing financial disincentives will create a new pathway for experienced educators to work with students in the classroom.

Joint Recommendations: School District and Legislative

- **The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends increased promotion of teaching as a high demand workforce initiative designation by the state.**
- **The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends a pilot program in collaboration with the Department of Economic Development to build promotional campaigns for two to three rural districts to attract teachers**

Raising awareness of the satisfactions and benefits of the teaching profession as well as rural communities can broaden the pool of people entering the field and willing to work in rural areas.

- **The GSBA Rural Task Force recommends exploring programs that assist paraprofessionals to obtain a teaching certificate**

Creating a ladder into teaching for paraprofessionals with deep commitment to and experience in education expands the workforce with candidates and may reduce attrition.

This report was prepared by Claire Handley Suggs and Welch Suggs. Welch Suggs is an associate professor of journalism and sports media at the University of Georgia and has written extensively on issues in higher education, including gender equity and athletics. Claire Suggs has worked in education policy for the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, the Southern Education Foundation, and currently the Professional Association of Georgia Educators. Her areas of expertise include school funding, teacher quality, and equity.

End Notes

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