

School Districts Get Growing Tab for Student Transportation

By Claire Suggs, Senior Education Policy Analyst

Years of deep cuts in state student transportation funding saddle school districts with more of the cost to bus students to and from school safely. These ongoing cuts could be made permanent if Georgia lawmakers adopt a proposal for a new formula to distribute state money to districts.

Georgia requires its 180 districts to provide transportation to all special education students and to any others who live 1.5 miles or more from their schools. Some districts also bus students at school system expense within 1.5 miles due to safety concerns, such as a lack of sidewalks or students' age.

The state contributed less than 17 percent to districts' transportation costs in the 2013-2014 school year, according to calculations using Georgia Department of Education (DOE) data. That amounts to \$126 million of the \$749 million districts spent to bus students. This is part of a two-decade trend that leaves districts shouldering a greater share of the student transportation tab. State money amounted to 33 percent of districts' transportation spending in the 2003-2004 school year, down from 49 percent in the 1995-1996 school year, according to [information](#) from the State Education Finance Study Commission.

One key culprit in the declining share of state support for transportation spending is the outdated numbers used to determine how many buses the state will fund in each district. The state calculates the number of funded buses in 51 districts using data 20 or more years old, according to DOE data. The bus data for 106 other districts range from 15 to 19 years old. As a result, the state funded 9,029 buses in 2012, the most recent year available, but districts operated 12,382 buses eligible for state money, a gap of 3,353 buses.

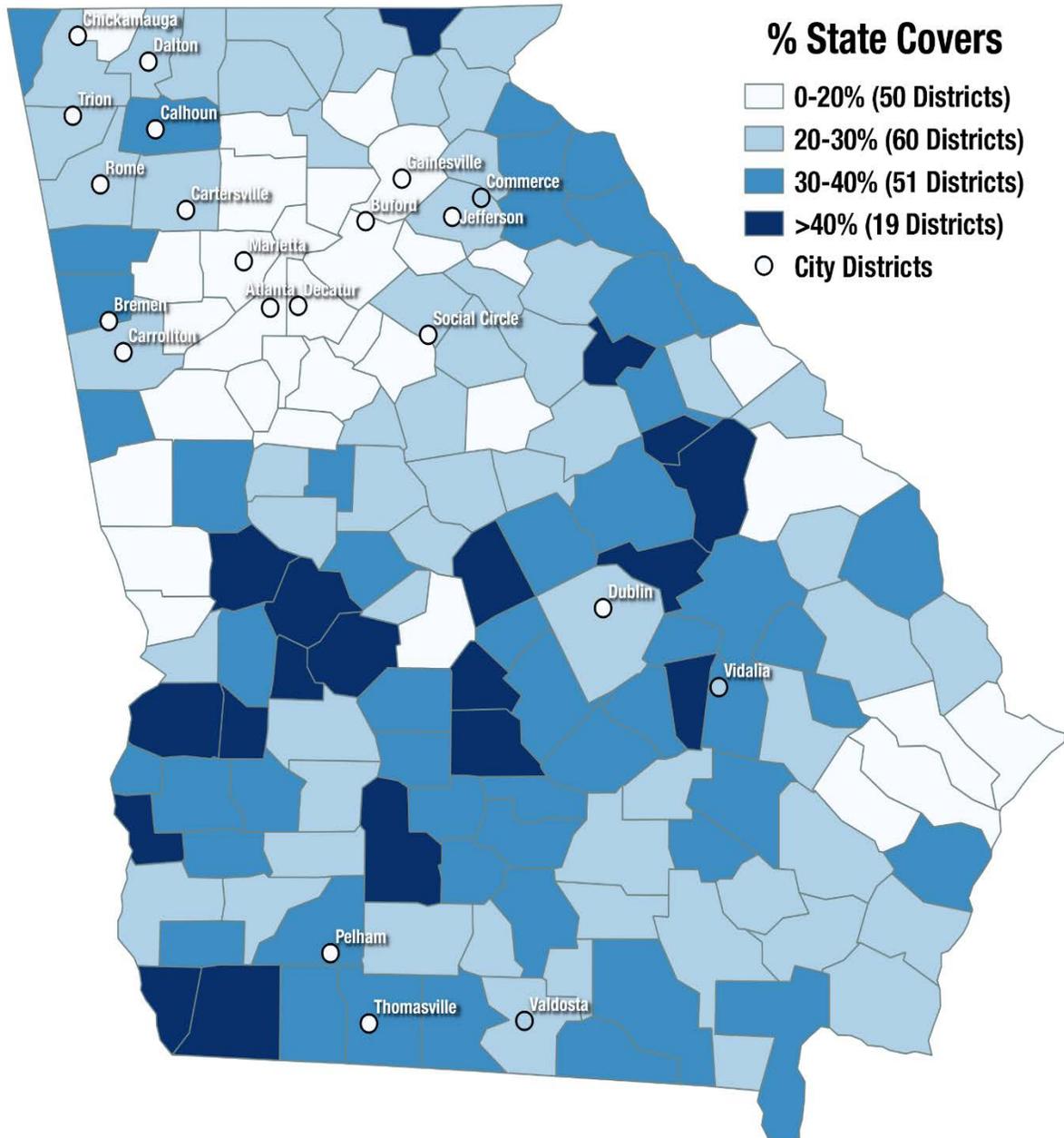
A second reason is the Legislature does not pay its full obligation, as calculated by the state's own transportation formula, for the 9,029 buses it does fund. The state formula calls for \$306 million to go to districts for these buses in the 2015-2016 school year. The state is contributing \$126 million instead, leaving districts scrambling to cover the \$180 million shortfall.

This squeeze is worsened as the state shifts more health insurance costs for bus drivers and other non-certified district employees to local school districts. Georgia's school districts [now contribute a combined \\$400 million more per year for health insurance costs](#) compared to 2011, the year Georgia started shifting more of the charges to school systems.

The governor's Education Reform Commission is considering a new funding formula that caps future K-12 state spending at this school year's level. The Legislature could cement existing cuts into the new formula if it approves the proposed version. That means districts will likely be forced to divert more local dollars to busing students to and from school rather than adding classroom resources to help them learn more.

■ State Shifts Cost to Bus Schoolchildren to Districts

Twenty years ago Georgia paid half the cost to transport schoolchildren. Now the percentage is much smaller in nearly all school systems.



State funding paid less than 17% of the \$749 million cost to bus children in Georgia's 180 districts during the 2013-2014 school year.