



Public Education Deserves Full State Investment: Results of GBPI 2024 School District Survey

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Executive Summary

For years, the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute has collected data through the public school superintendent/district leader survey. This tool offers insight into the educational funding landscape of Georgia school districts. This survey provides policymakers and state and local education stakeholders, including school board leaders and community-based partners, with information regarding district resource needs. This data will help decision makers make necessary improvements to ensure the success of all students. In the 2024 superintendent survey, 50 of the 224 school districts and individualized state-authorized public charter schools responded. This total represents 36% of the students in Georgia, providing valuable insights despite the limited participation.

This report analyzes survey findings and discusses the four main areas related to school funding:

1. Public school employee salaries
2. Education funding and supporting students in poverty
3. Economic inflation challenges
4. In-school healthcare implications

K-12 funding is critical to achieve education equity, and feedback from district leaders across Georgia will provide lawmakers with important information to help meet this goal.



According to the 2024 GBPI District Survey results, stakeholders should:

- Increase the base salary for teachers.¹
- Provide additional funding to support districts with the employer portion of health insurance for non-certified staff.
- Create an Opportunity Weight in the school funding formula to support students in poverty.

Introduction

For the past 20 years, GBPI has been a steadfast advocate for enhancing K-12 education funding. This includes pushing for higher teacher salaries, boosting funding for pupil transportation, shielding schools from budget cuts and opposing the use of public funds for private school vouchers. Districts that rely more heavily on state funds, like rural and poor areas, must contend with tough decisions when state funding is not sufficient.

Investing equitably in K-12 education requires comprehensive feedback from the educators who can best identify funding inequities. So, the survey gathers context from school leaders about funding implementation to understand financial barriers and how to improve statewide education funding. Respondents from across the state represent diverse school districts in size, local funding resources, geography and student populations. Ultimately, this data can inform education stakeholders and lawmakers about important school funding issues, enabling better decision making for schools at the local and statewide levels.

Impact of Inflation on Employee Salaries

Investing in competitive compensation for public education employees is critical to a quality education. Teacher pay plays a significant and invaluable role in academic instruction and school culture. However, Georgia ranks 20th in the nation for overall teacher salary and 39th for average teacher starting salary.²

During the 2024 Legislative Session lawmakers agreed to provide a \$368 million increase to the state salary schedule for all Georgia public school-certified employees. While additional money for teacher pay raises is helpful, low base salaries and economic inflation pose detrimental challenges to “competitive” teacher pay. For example, raises totaled \$3,000 in FY 2020; \$2,000 in FY 2023; \$2,000 in FY 2024; and \$2,500 in FY 2025. District leaders were asked about what they wish the public or policymakers knew about teacher/employee pay. They had the following to say:



“We want to be competitive with our teacher pay; however, anything above the state-funded amount must come from our local property taxes. Our digest isn’t as strong as some neighboring counties, limiting our ability to increase pay without increasing our millage rates. That is increasingly unpopular with school boards and stakeholders.”

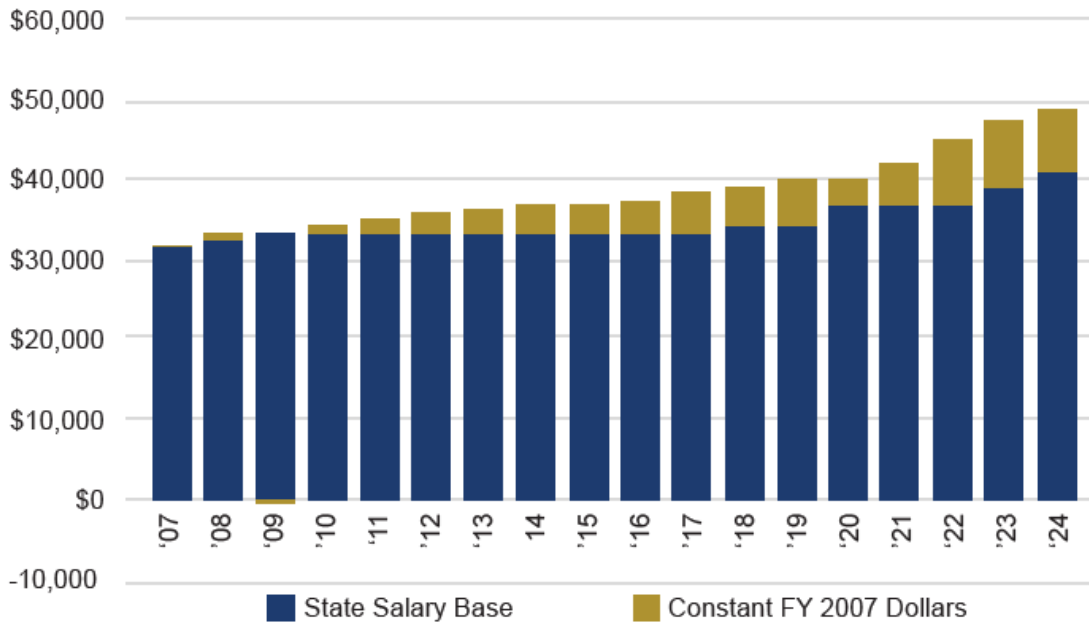
“Not all positions are fully funded through the state for teachers, paras, school foods, and bus drivers. Local tax dollars have to bridge the gap. Also, “assistant teachers” in pre-k do the same job as k-12 para-professionals. School districts cannot match the “assistant teacher” pay scale and it creates a huge discrepancy in small, rural districts.”

“Our shortage of professionally qualified teachers will continue to be a significant barrier to quality education unless pay becomes comparable to that of other careers that require the similar levels of education and certifications.”

Governor Kemp’s policy agenda prioritizes public education and with the help of the Georgia General Assembly they have made strides toward allocating raises for employees. However, the buying power of the teacher base salary has decreased because of the cost of living in recent years, leaving teachers with \$7,900 less annually or \$395 less per pay period since 2007.



Teachers' Base Salaries Continue to Lag Growing Cost of Living



Source: GBPI State Salary Schedule FY07-FY25; CPI-adjusted FY07 dollars.
 Note: 2009 was the sole year where the pay raise exceeded inflation, providing a \$72 boost to teachers' salary.

District leaders face a tough challenge, needing to raise local property taxes to fund schools while facing resistance from education stakeholders who want to avoid these increases. The situation is made worse by economic inflation placing significant pressure on many districts.

The survey inquired about the impact of inflation on school budgets. Respondents were most concerned with the following areas:

1. Transportation Fuel/Utilities
2. Employee Healthcare Benefits
3. Employee Salaries

While many school leaders indicated that inflation has impacted all areas, the survey findings specifically mentioned transportation costs, such as fuel, as the most significant concern. In addition to high fuel costs, inflation has exacerbated bus driver shortages. Seventy-two percent of respondents replied “yes” when asked, “Did your district experience employment shortages for bus drivers or monitors during the 2023-2024 Fiscal Year?”

Even with a \$5 million (4.1%) increase allocated for public school transportation personnel and \$20 million for new school buses in the FY 2025 budget, district leaders continue to experience financial challenges. This issue is particularly significant in rural areas where pupil transportation

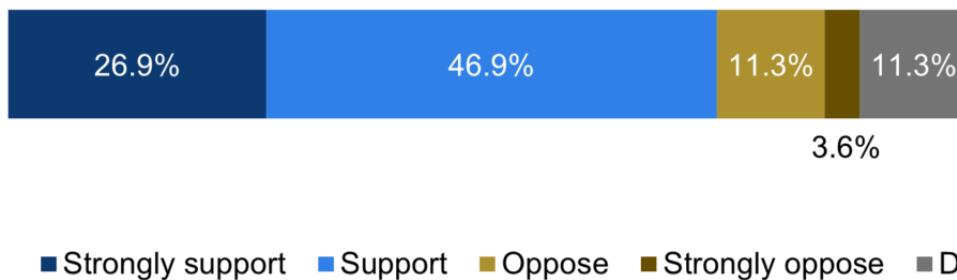


is a critical concern. While transportation obstacles are just one piece of the puzzle, the following quote summarizes the challenges faced by rural school districts due to inflation and stretched budgets.

“Rural school districts without a large property tax base are struggling and while state funding is helpful, it is often not enough to cover the salaries of all of the teacher and support staff that is required to operate a school district sufficiently.”

This data aligns closely with GBPI’s recent efforts to guarantee that the 55% of K-12 public school students who ride the bus have access to adequate transportation. In February 2024 GBPI collaborated with the School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Georgia to ask the opinions of over 1,800 residents regarding key education issues, including pupil transportation improvements.³ The survey results found that the majority of Georgia residents express support for school transportation. When asked the following question, 74% supported this policy recommendation.

Question: Georgia currently has a budget surplus of about \$16 billion. About a third of school buses in the state have been in service for 15 or more years. Do you support or oppose the state using surplus funds to replace these buses at a cost of about \$850 million?



Source: GBPI Analysis of the University of Georgia School of Public and International Affairs Survey Research Center Budget Surplus Poll, Winter 2024

On average, statewide funding in FY 2023 accounted for 46% of public education budgets, and the remaining 42% and 12% are from local and federal budgets, respectively.⁴ Some school systems with lower local funding must reallocate local tax funds to cover critical finance expenditures due to inflation, like teacher pay raises and increased pupil transportation costs. Lawmakers can allocate more state funds to offset rising costs resulting from inflation. Funding public education equitably will also ensure that local property tax shortages do not prevent



school districts from providing quality academic instruction, student support services and other operational needs necessary for student success.

Healthcare Benefits Hurdle & Mental Health Services

The State Health Benefit (SHBP) changes began in 2023 with an increased employer contribution of \$635 per month for each non-certified staff member, rising from \$945 to \$1580.⁵ This change has placed financial stress on local districts to cover the employer portion of health benefits for non-certified staff like paraprofessionals and bus drivers. Despite the state covering the employer portion of health benefit contributions for teachers, leaders and some staff, this change, along with teacher pay raises and economic inflation has forced district leaders to “do more, with less,” which can harm historically marginalized students the most.

The survey asked if additional state funding for SHBP increases for non-certified school employees falls short and what actions their districts would take to meet higher costs. Many responded that they would likely reallocate funds in their budget. However, some district leaders stated that they would also resort to staff layoffs due to the financial demands of SHBP. Around 38% of the respondents mentioned possibly resorting to personnel layoffs.

“We are already reallocating funds in our budget to account for the increased healthcare costs for non-certified staff. Other options include outsourcing to employment agencies and potential layoffs.”

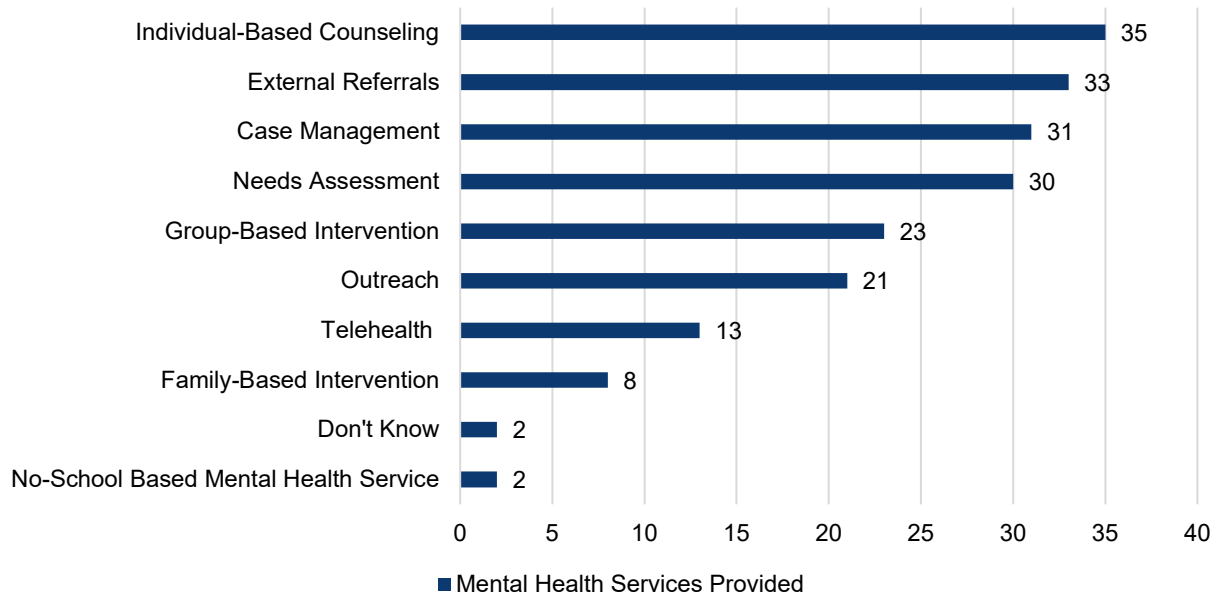
“Assuming there was state funding for non-certified school employees, and it was cut, we would look to reduce salaries, workdays, and number of staff at each school while still providing for the needs of our students. We would also look to increase the millage rate.”

Balancing school district budget priorities was a major theme in addressing the financial gap for SHBP benefit costs. Fifty-six percent of the participants who responded to this question said they would consider staff reductions and potentially increasing local property taxes to afford SHBP benefits for non-certified staff. Some respondents also stated they would increase class sizes and “reduce services and opportunities for students.”

As school districts navigate funding for staff health benefits, district leaders must also ensure that students receive the mental health services needed to be successful. There has been an uptick in poor mental health, and school staff can build supportive relationships with students to improve their mental well-being.⁶ In the survey, participants were given a list of mental health services and were asked to indicate which services were offered in their districts. Respondents could choose multiple mental health service options. The services that were utilized most were individual-based counseling, external referrals and case management.



District Leaders Mention of School-based Mental Health Services Provided in 2024-2025



Source: GBPI Analysis of the GBPI District Leader Survey, Summer 2024

While most participants stated that their school districts offered mental health services, two districts did not provide any mental health support for students. School districts with limited or no access to mental health services are facing an alarming increase in unmet need. Nationally, 1-in-5 students in K-12 education experiences a mental health problem while enrolled in school.⁷

Respondents were also asked about the funding sources for mental health services in school districts. The primary sources of funding were found to be local district funding, state funding, American Rescue Plan Funding and Medicaid reimbursements, with local district revenue representing the most-mentioned source. Some school districts are forced to reallocate money to fund other budget priorities and must make hard decisions about offering critical services to students.

Students in Poverty

Poverty remains a crucial challenge for the state’s school districts, as Georgia is one of only six states that does not provide additional funding to schools for educating students living in poverty.⁸ Students in densely concentrated, high-poverty schools, without equitable education funding and meaningful safety net programs, experience lesser learning outcomes than those experienced by students in wealthier schools.⁹



High-poverty districts are most vulnerable in this scenario because local school budgets are directly impacted due to property values and the role of property taxes in school funding. Georgia's school funding formula aims to account for these disparities and provides grants to low-wealth districts to help equalize funding across the state. School systems can spend these equalization grants as they see fit. However, state equalization grants have been trimmed back over the years, and now Georgia's low-wealth districts receive billions of dollars less than they once did.¹⁰

Lawmakers should also consider the anticipated changes brought by HB 581.¹¹ This proposed constitutional amendment, if approved by voters, would cap home property tax increases at the rate of inflation. The amendment could reduce public school funding and impact local property tax revenue allocation by limiting school districts' capacity to fund their local schools. Respondents have mentioned raising the millage rate to increase property taxes to help fund schools locally, but that is a limited power, subject to the will of local voters.

School leaders were asked to rank poverty compared to other barriers that prevent students from obtaining an excellent education, from 1 (no challenge) to 5 (the greatest challenge). The issue of poverty averaged a 4 among all respondents. Additionally, 82% of participants ranked poverty as either a 4 or 5. Participants also provided insightful comments about their district and student financial constraints:

"While we are considered a wealthy county, over 70% of our students are from low-income families, and many of these live in extreme poverty. Much of the wealth is from second-home families and retirees which does not translate to students with resources."

"As a school system with high poverty rates, additional funds are needed to address the unique challenges that our students face. The finances will be essential in providing academic support, counseling, health care services, and access to necessities, meals, and school supplies. Additional resources can create a more equitable learning environment which will ensure that all students have equal opportunities to succeed in school and beyond regardless of economic background and current or past hardships."

Failure to acknowledge the systemic and oppressive roots of poverty has led to generations of divestment in public school education, with racially marginalized students and students in Georgia's Black Belt especially harmed.¹² For schools that enroll more than 90% of students who are racially marginalized, on average \$733 less is spent per student compared to schools with 90% or more white students.¹³ Advancing education equity requires lawmakers and

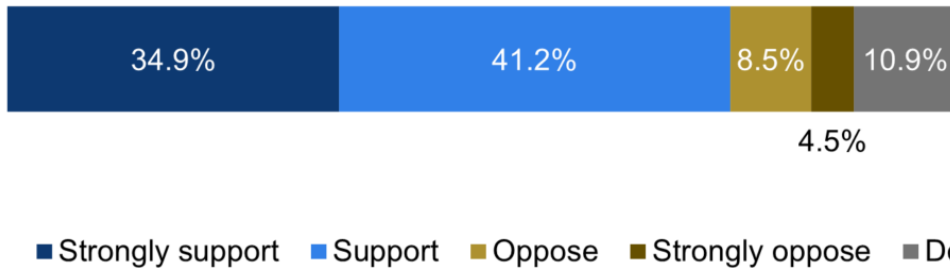


stakeholders first to understand the pervasive nature of poverty so they can develop education policies to address the disparities.

Georgia residents also strongly support state lawmakers equitably investing in public education. A February 2024 GBPI poll indicated that 76% of participants support increasing funding for students living in high-poverty districts.

“Our district has high poverty and high minority populations that require us to address the whole student more comprehensively, thus requiring more funding and support. We are challenged with meeting many of the basic needs of students as a school district that families are not providing for and as such, we require additional support and services that cost money. We need the additional poverty funding to assist with these programs and services.”

Question: Georgia is one of six states that does not provide additional money to K-12 public schools that serve students from families with low incomes. Do you support or oppose providing additional funding for K-12 schools tied to the number of students they serve from families at or near the poverty level?



Source: GBPI Analysis of the University of Georgia School of Public and International Affairs Survey Research Center Budget Surplus Poll, Winter 2024

In addition to asking about poverty’s role in the lives of their students and schools, the district leader survey also probed respondents on how they would use additional funds if available. School leaders stated that they would focus primarily on supplemental academic instructions, student support services, parental/family programs, meals for students and student necessities.



“We would use the funds to provide parental resources to assist with education, after-school tutoring, after-school enrichment, transportation after participating in after-school activities, and academic interventions during the day.”

“Creation of a school-based health clinic; increased access to wraparound supports in school; free snack and meal program for all students; increased access to tutoring; before and after school program costs; uniform and school supply costs; more teachers to improve student-teacher ratios.”

“We would use the funds to hire additional teachers to reduce class sizes or contract staff to provide 1:1 intervention support for those students living in poverty. We would also provide family supports to help parents/guardians understand the importance of being involved in their child's education.”

Policy Implications

The data offers valuable insight into the most pressing challenges faced by public school leaders. Inflation and limited local tax revenue, coupled with an inequitable funding formula, exacerbate issues of competitive teacher pay, mental health provisions and additional funding for students experiencing poverty.

The following policy recommendations are based on data from the 2024 GBPI School District Survey. State lawmakers could consider these recommendations to improve education policy in Georgia:

1. **Increase the base salary for teachers to mitigate inflation.** Rising inflation has reduced the purchasing power of teachers' base salaries.¹⁴ This has led to a staffing crisis that has driven many teachers nationwide to seek employment in other career fields that offer better salaries.¹⁵ District leaders welcome the recently approved pay increase for teachers, but express concerns about its sustainability and the impact of teacher pay inequities on staff retention and stability. State lawmakers could allocate more funding in the QBE formula to create better compensation opportunities for teachers to ensure that all districts can afford teacher pay increases that keep pace with inflation and stabilize the teacher workforce.

2. **Provide additional funding to support districts with the employer portion of health insurance for non-certified staff.** Employer contributions to the State Health Benefits Plan spiked 67% in FY 2025,¹⁶ creating unprecedented financial pressure on public education district leaders. Many respondents to the survey highlighted the challenge of reallocating funds to meet this financial need. They also raised concerns about potential staff layoffs, larger class sizes and decreased student services. Georgia lawmakers could prioritize increasing state funding to bridge the financial gap of SHBP for non-certified staff. This will help prevent school leaders from having to cut critical programs, services and staff positions.
3. **Create an Opportunity Weight in the school funding formula to support students in poverty.** In the 2024 Legislative Session, Georgia lawmakers did not pass three integral bills that would have increased public school funding: HB 3¹⁷, HB 668,¹⁸ and SB 284.¹⁹

Acknowledgements

The Georgia Budget & Policy Institute would like to thank the school districts who participated in this survey and were vital in collecting valuable insights on the status of Georgia's schools. The thoughtful responses and honest feedback collected in the survey are greatly appreciated and will be used to advocate for policies that best support students across the state. District leaders, school leaders and educators have our respect and gratitude for the work they do each day to serve Georgia's students.

Appendix: Methodology

Dr. Stephen Owens and Ashley Young developed the survey questions. Jae-kur Lockhart, a Southern Education Leadership Initiative fellow placed at GBPI during the summer of 2024, distributed the survey, conducted follow-up outreach, supported respondents with any questions and analyzed the results.

The survey was sent via email to every superintendent in the state. A link to the online survey was included in the email, along with a PDF version of the same survey. Mr. Lockhart subsequently contacted superintendents and other central office staff via phone and email to request their participation over six weeks. The survey was available between June and September of 2024. Participation was voluntary. Mr. Lockhart manually entered PDF submissions into the online survey link, and GBPI exported a spreadsheet with all survey responses.

Endnotes

- ¹ For more on how school funding works, see: Owens, S. (2019, May 23). *How does Georgia fund schools?* Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. <https://gbpi.org/how-does-georgia-fund-schools/>
- ² Schaefer, D. (2024, August 8). *Georgia education budget primer for state fiscal year 2025*. Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. <https://gbpi.org/georgia-education-budget-primer-for-state-fiscal-year-2025/>
- ³ Kansa, D. (2024, February 28). *New GBPI/UGA poll shows Georgians oppose private school vouchers; support funding public schools*. Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. <https://gbpi.org/poll-k12-2024/>
- ⁴ Georgia Department of Education. *School system revenues: Fiscal year 2023 financial data collection system*. <https://financeweb.doe.k12.ga.us/FinancialPublicWeb/ReportsMenuPublic.aspx>
- ⁵ Stephens, J. (2024, May 17). May 2024 Department of Community Health Board Meeting report. *PAGE Legislative*. <https://www.pagelegislative.org/post/may-2024-department-of-community-health-board-meeting-report>
- ⁶ Whitney, D. G., & Peterson, M. D. (2019). US National and State-Level Prevalence of Mental health Disorders and Disparities of mental health care use in children. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 173(4), 389. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2018.5399>; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Promoting mental health and well-being in schools*. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/mental-health-action-guide/index.html>
- ⁷ National Association of School Psychologists. (2021). *Comprehensive school-based mental and behavioral health services and school psychologists* [handout]. Author.
- ⁸ Education Commission of the States. (2021). *K-12 and special education funding: Funding for students from low-income backgrounds*. <https://reports.ecs.org/comparisons/k-12-and-special-education-funding-06>
- ⁹ Cookson, P. (2020, October 6). *A World of hardship: Deep poverty and the struggle for educational equity*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/covid-deep-poverty-struggle-education-equity>; Berliner, D. (2013). Effects of inequality and poverty vs. teachers and schooling on America's youth. *Teachers College Record* 15: 1-2; Suggs, C. (2017, December 4). *Tackle poverty's effects to improve school performance*. Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. https://gbpi.org/tackle-povertys-effects-improve-school-performance/#_edn2
- ¹⁰ Owens, S. (2019, August 29). *Georgia's K-12 equalization grants explained*. Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. <https://gbpi.org/georgia-k-12-equalization-grants-explained/>; Owens, S.

(2018, December 11). *Beyond basic education: Five ways for Georgia to fund schools fairly*. Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. <https://gbpi.org/beyond-basic-education-five-ways-for-georgia-to-fund-schools-fairly/>

¹¹ House Bill 581 (as introduced February 23, 2023). <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/64811>

¹² Owens, S. (2019, October 10). *Education in Georgia's Black Belt: Policy solutions to help overcome a history of exclusion*. Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. <https://gbpi.org/education-in-georgias-black-belt/>; United Negro College Fund. (2024, May 1). *Education inequality: K-12 disparity facts - UNCF*. UNCF. <https://uncf.org/pages/k-12-disparity-facts-and-stats>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Walker, T. (2023, April 24). *Teacher salaries not keeping up with inflation, NEA report finds | Georgia Association of Educators*. <https://gae.org/advocating-change/new-from-gae/teacher-salaries-not-keeping-inflation-nea-report-finds>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Stephens, J. (2024, May 17). May 2024 Department of Community Health Board Meeting report. *PAGE Legislative*. <https://www.pagelegislative.org/post/may-2024-department-of-community-health-board-meeting-report>

¹⁷ House Bill 3 (as introduced December 21, 2022). <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/63471>

¹⁸ House Bill 668 (as introduced March 2, 2023). <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/65069>

¹⁹ Senate Bill 284 (as introduced March 1, 2023). <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/65031>