

# 2022 CARES IMPACT STUDY

YEAR - ONE REPORT



## PREPARED BY

The Georgia Partnership for  
Excellence in Education



Georgia Partnership  
FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION



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# CARES IMPACT STUDY, YEAR ONE: EARLY INVESTMENTS AND EMERGING ISSUES

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Georgia’s school districts and state-commission charter schools received an infusion of nearly \$6 billion in federal pandemic relief funds to enable them to continue serving students safely during the pandemic and address lost learning time and rising student mental health needs. Districts and state charter schools, also known as local education agencies or LEAs, must spend the funds by September 2024. They have considerable flexibility to use them to best meet the unique needs of their students. In 2021, with funding from the Georgia Department of Education, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education launched the CARES Impact Study to understand how LEAs are spending relief funds and identify best practices to help students recover from the pandemic’s negative effects on student learning and well-being. The study’s first report, the Baseline Report, drew on a statewide survey of LEAs in fall 2021. The Year-One Report is based on a follow-up survey conducted in June 2022 and interviews with LEA and state leaders.

LEAs’ use of federal relief funds, which flow through the Elementary and Secondary School Education Relief (ESSER) grant program, have shifted as pandemic conditions changed. In the first half of the grant period, March 2020 through June 2022, LEAs first operated in crisis mode, focused on safely providing academic and non-academic services to students. As conditions changed during the 2021-2022 school year, they intensified their focus on accelerating learning and continuing to address non-academic needs. The areas in which LEAs spent the largest amount of ESSER funds reflect this shift.

### Top Five Largest Areas of ESSER Funds Expenditures

2019-2020 through 2021-2022	2022-2023
1. IT & technology infrastructure	1. Additional certified staff
2. Additional certified staff	2. Summer learning programs
3. Providing recruitment and/or retention incentives to certified staff	3. IT & technology infrastructure
4. Summer learning programs	4. Instructional software
5. Providing recruitment and/or retention incentives to non-certified staff	5. Instructional resources (nontechnology)



Several of LEAs' core strategies to meet student needs are included in these expenditures:

- More than 87% of LEAs have added instructional staff to respond to students' academic needs, including teachers, academic interventionists, paraprofessionals, and instructional coaches.
- Approximately 81% of LEAs operated summer programs in 2022, and 74% are offering tutoring during the 2022-2023 school year.
- About 77% of LEAs hired additional staff to address student mental and physical health needs. More than 56% are investing ESSER funds in wraparound services to address academic and non-academic needs.

LEAs are also using ESSER funds to maintain operations and address persistent state funding gaps, which reflect outdated components of the Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula for public schools as well as the student transportation formula. Nearly 31% of participating LEAs report using ESSER funds for fuel costs. Fuel costs are an even greater burden on rural LEAs: 42% of rural LEAs are using ESSER funds to cover fuel. Components of the QBE formula that should be reviewed to ensure they reflect current costs include technology, state support for school counselors, paraprofessionals, and other support positions, and funding for low-income students.

As they move forward with their plans to accelerate learning and address non-academic needs, LEAs are navigating other pressures. Nearly half of participating LEAs—48%—have adjusted planned uses of ESSER funds due to inflation. Teacher shortages, particularly in special education, math, and science, continue to create staffing challenges as do shortages of bus drivers, school nutrition workers, and paraprofessionals.

LEA leadership has experienced significant turnover since the onset of the pandemic. Nearly half—48%—of the leaders of responding LEAs assumed these roles in the 2019-2020, 2020-2021, or 2021-2022 school years. An additional 28 leaders are new in the 2022-2023 school year.<sup>1</sup>

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1 J. Zauner (personal communication, August 31, 2022).



## *Emerging Issues*

The findings outlined in this Year-One Report confirm the complexity of the work to assist students and support schools that is underway across Georgia. They also point to issues policymakers and other stakeholders should consider, including:

- ***Shared Responsibility for Student Success:*** A comprehensive approach to addressing barriers, which links LEAs to local and state agencies and other organizations across sectors, is needed to foster student success.
- ***Sufficient and Effective Staff:*** Sufficient and qualified staff are necessary for the successful implementation of strategies that accelerate learning and foster positive student well-being. A comprehensive statewide approach to strengthen the educator pipeline is needed.
- ***School Staffing Models:*** Students often need assistance from multiple education professionals to succeed in school. Current state school staffing models should be reviewed and revised to ensure schools have necessary professionals.
- ***Evaluation Capacity:*** LEAs' knowledge and experience evaluating the design, implementation, and impact of instructional and support practices vary. Building their ability to undertake comprehensive evaluations would increase local and state knowledge about effective practices, which could be replicated.
- ***A 21st Century Funding Formula:*** Many components of state funding for public schools no longer reflect student needs and learning goals. The QBE and transportation formulas should be modernized to reflect current conditions.

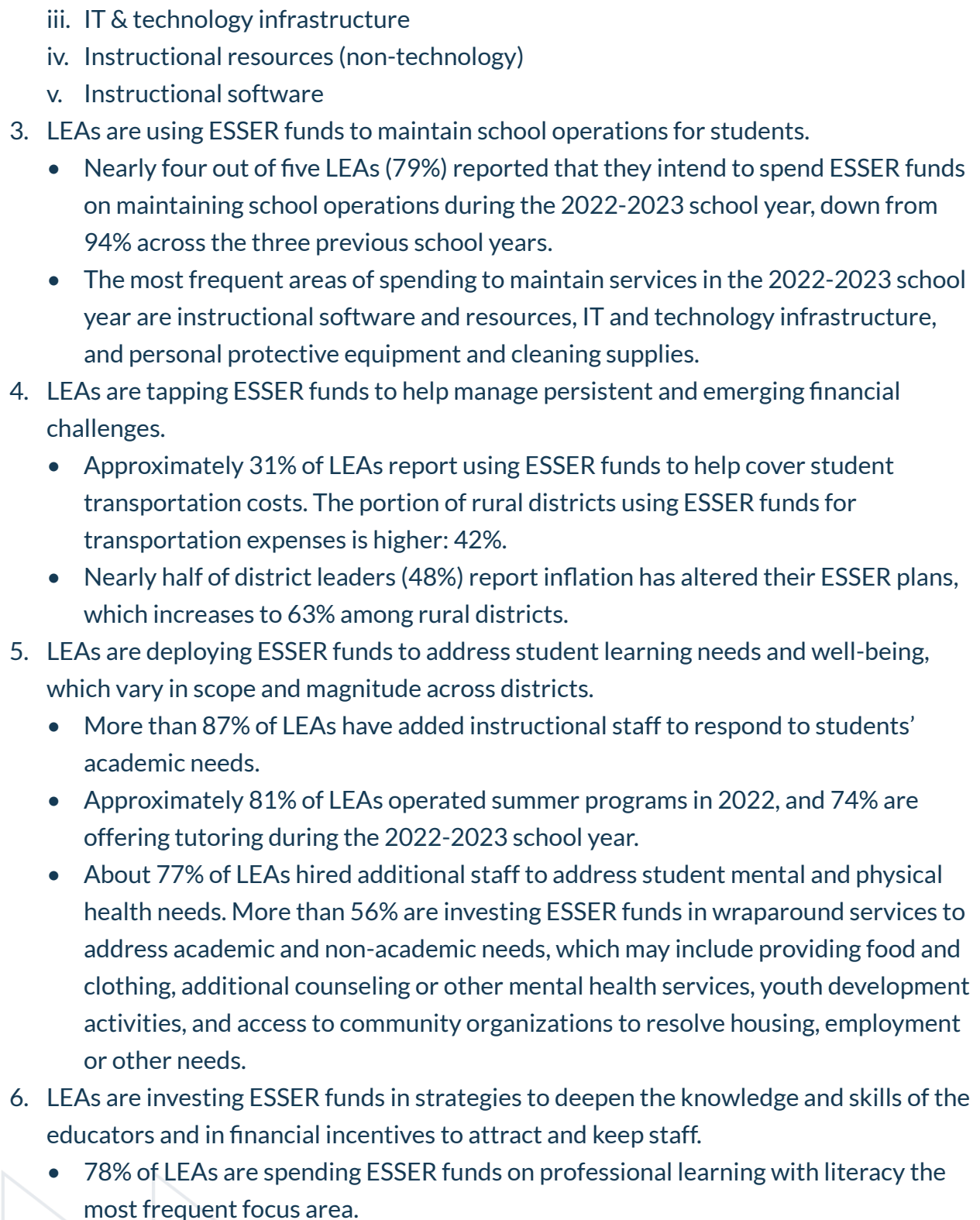
The Georgia Partnership will continue to share findings from the CARES Impact Study with state and local stakeholders. The Partnership and GaDOE will also continue to gather information on LEAs' work to help students recover from learning disruptions caused by the pandemic. The next phase of this project will entail additional surveys and interviews and explore selected issues in greater detail. The Partnership will release the next report in fall 2023.

## CARES IMPACT STUDY, YEAR ONE: EARLY INVESTMENTS AND EMERGING ISSUES

Georgia's school districts and state-commission charter schools have used federal pandemic-relief funds to respond to challenges imposed on students and schools by the COVID-19 pandemic. Between March 2020 and March 2021, Georgia was awarded \$6.6 billion from the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund. The Georgia State Board of Education distributed 90% of these dollars—\$5.9 billion—to local school districts and state-approved charter schools. By federal law, the ESSER program provides these grantees — also called local education agencies or LEAs — significant flexibility to use ESSER funds to accelerate learning and improve student well-being based on their unique needs.

In spring 2022, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (Partnership) interviewed school district and education department leaders and conducted a statewide survey of LEAs to understand how local school systems and state charter schools are using ESSER funds and to learn from these investments. The information gathered from the interviews and survey are part of the second phase of a multi-year study funded by the Georgia Department of Education and undertaken by the Partnership on LEAs' use of ESSER funds. Key findings include the following:

1. Between March 2020 and June 2022, LEAs spent the largest amounts of ESSER funds on technology, staffing, and summer learning. The top areas of spending were:
  - i. IT & technology infrastructure
  - ii. Additional certified staff
  - iii. Providing recruitment and/or retention incentives to certified staff
  - iv. Summer learning programs
  - v. Providing recruitment and/or retention incentives to non-certified staff
2. For the 2022-2023 school year, LEAs reported shifts in ESSER spending, which included greater investments in instructional materials. The top areas of planned spending are:
  - i. Hiring additional certified staff
  - ii. Summer learning programs

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- iii. IT & technology infrastructure
  - iv. Instructional resources (non-technology)
  - v. Instructional software
3. LEAs are using ESSER funds to maintain school operations for students.
    - Nearly four out of five LEAs (79%) reported that they intend to spend ESSER funds on maintaining school operations during the 2022-2023 school year, down from 94% across the three previous school years.
    - The most frequent areas of spending to maintain services in the 2022-2023 school year are instructional software and resources, IT and technology infrastructure, and personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies.
  4. LEAs are tapping ESSER funds to help manage persistent and emerging financial challenges.
    - Approximately 31% of LEAs report using ESSER funds to help cover student transportation costs. The portion of rural districts using ESSER funds for transportation expenses is higher: 42%.
    - Nearly half of district leaders (48%) report inflation has altered their ESSER plans, which increases to 63% among rural districts.
  5. LEAs are deploying ESSER funds to address student learning needs and well-being, which vary in scope and magnitude across districts.
    - More than 87% of LEAs have added instructional staff to respond to students' academic needs.
    - Approximately 81% of LEAs operated summer programs in 2022, and 74% are offering tutoring during the 2022-2023 school year.
    - About 77% of LEAs hired additional staff to address student mental and physical health needs. More than 56% are investing ESSER funds in wraparound services to address academic and non-academic needs, which may include providing food and clothing, additional counseling or other mental health services, youth development activities, and access to community organizations to resolve housing, employment or other needs.
  6. LEAs are investing ESSER funds in strategies to deepen the knowledge and skills of the educators and in financial incentives to attract and keep staff.
    - 78% of LEAs are spending ESSER funds on professional learning with literacy the most frequent focus area.

- 54% of LEAs are providing financial incentives to certified staff in the 2022-2023 school year, down from 84% between the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years.
- 47% of LEAs are providing financial incentives to non-certified staff in the 2022-2023 school year.

These findings indicate that LEAs continue to spend ESSER funds in the areas they invested in earlier, as described in the [CARES Impact Study Baseline Report](#), the first report from the CARES Impact Study. However, some shifts in spending are emerging as LEAs' needs and circumstances change. As one district leader explained, while there were disruptions during the 2021-2022 school year, LEAs moved from crisis management mode, in which they focused on maintaining instructional delivery and keeping students and staff safe, to recovery mode, which centered on implementing plans to help students recover from lost learning opportunities. Their resource levels also changed as the largest portion of ESSER funds became available in July 2021.

District leaders interviewed by the Partnership described central components of their ESSER strategies and shared how technical and logistical challenges have hampered execution of their plans. Leaders also cited the importance of building state and local capacity to implement policies and practices that accelerate student learning and foster students' well-being.

## **GEORGIA PARTNERSHIP'S CARES IMPACT STUDY**

The Partnership launched the CARES Impact Study in August 2021 to understand how LEAs are using federal ESSER funds, identify best practices emerging from LEA efforts to accelerate student learning and foster their well-being, and reveal common challenges that LEAs have encountered as they carry out their plans. Funded by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), the study is a multi-year initiative including surveys and interviews with LEA leaders. An advisory group convened by the Partnership provides guidance and feedback on the direction and implementation of the study.

The Partnership shares findings from the study with LEA leaders, state policymakers, parents and community members, and other stakeholders to help them understand LEAs'



work and inform actions they may take to support schools. The Partnership conducted a statewide survey of LEAs in fall 2021 about their initial uses of ESSER funds and released findings in the project's first report, [CARES Impact Study Baseline Report](#), in January 2022. A summary of the baseline report findings is available in Figure 1.


### Figure 1: CARES Impact Study Baseline Report: Summary of Findings

1. The COVID-19 pandemic's harmful effects have been widespread and include increased mental health needs among students and lower levels of literacy and school readiness among younger students.
2. LEA leaders make high-stakes funding decisions in a complex and continuously changing environment. Challenges include leadership turnover, difficulty recruiting qualified educators, funding shortfalls, and a compressed timeline to develop plans for using ESSER funds.
3. LEAs invested in continuing to provide core instructional and support services in safe environments.
4. Common strategies to address learning disruptions include extended learning time, targeted tutoring, and mental health supports for students.

The most frequent uses of ESSER funds reported by LEA leaders:

- Maintain core operations (continuity of services)
- Cover the FY 2021 austerity cut in state funding\*
- Hire additional staff to address academic needs
- Implement or expand summer programs
- Improve facility health & safety
- Provide financial incentives for certified staff
- Provide professional development
- Implement or expand tutoring programs
- Provide financial incentives for non-certified staff
- Hire additional staff to address mental & physical health needs
- Cover the FY 2022 austerity cut in state funding\*
- Reduce class size

*\*The General Assembly restored the funds cut from the Fiscal Year 2022 budget in the Amended Fiscal Year 2022 budget.*



This report draws on an online survey developed by the Partnership to gather information from LEAs on their use of ESSER funds and factors -- including workforce, funding and leadership -- that shape the conditions in which they operate. GaDOE distributed the survey in June 2022 to all LEAs, including 180 school districts, 39 state charter schools, and state-operated LEAs -- State Schools, the Department of Juvenile Justice, and the Department of Corrections. In total, 112 LEAs responded to the survey: 97 school districts, 12 state charter schools, and the three state-operated LEAs. These LEAs enroll about 66 percent of Georgia's full-time equivalent (FTE) students.

Interviews with leaders from 10 districts and GaDOE staff are the second primary source of data for this report. The Partnership selected LEA interviewees based on various factors, such as student enrollment, location, and per-pupil ESSER funding amounts. The Partnership conducted interviews between April and June 2022. A focus group with local school board members was also held. The Partnership supplemented the survey and interview data by reviewing materials from GaDOE, the U.S. Department of Education (US Ed), and other relevant sources, and engaging in ongoing discussions with key stakeholders.

## **ESSER FUNDING BACKGROUND**

Congress passed three pieces of legislation that provide federal pandemic-relief funding to states:

- Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act or CARES Act, approved March 2020
- Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act or CRRSA Act, approved December 2020
- American Rescue Plan Act or ARP Act, approved March 2021

Most federal relief dollars for LEAs flow through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund, which was created by the CARES Act. "ESSER I funds" refers to funds allocated under the CARES Act, "ESSER II funds" refers to CRRSA funds,

and "ESSER III funds" denotes ARP funds.

Under each pandemic relief act, 10 percent of ESSER funds are directed to state education agencies—the Georgia Department of Education—and 90 percent go directly to LEAs. Each act set a deadline for state agencies and LEAs to spend the funds though they can be carried over for one year past the deadline as indicated in Figure 2. LEAs submit plans outlining their strategies to support students and detailed budgets for each ESSER grant to GaDOE, which reviews and approves them. GaDOE distributes ESSER funds on a reimbursement basis.

**Figure 2: LEA Allocations & Spending to Date<sup>1</sup>**

	<b>Deadline for Expenditure (Includes carryover period)</b>	<b>LEA Allocation</b>	<b>Percent Spent as of 10/31/2022</b>
ESSER I/ CARES	September 30, 2022	\$ 411,452,867	94.4
ESSER II/ CRRSA	September 30, 2023	\$ 1,702,883,356	76.3
ESSER III/ ARP	September 30, 2024	\$ 3,827,188,522	31.7
<b>Total</b>		<b>\$ 5,941,524,745</b>	<b>49.2</b>

Following federal guidance, GaDOE determined LEAs’ ESSER allocations based on the proportion of federal Title I, Part A funds each received in Fiscal Year 2020. The Title I, Part A program provides funds to LEAs to meet the additional needs of low-income children. Using this distribution method, LEAs with larger proportions of low-income students received higher per-student funding amounts than school systems with smaller percentages of low-income students.

1 Percent spent includes only CARES Act Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund Grant-LEA, ESSER II-CRRSA Act-LEA, and ESSER III-ARP-LEA funds. It does not include other ESSER funds LEAs may have received such as LEA bonuses. Data retrieved from Georgia Insights, ESSER Funding Transparency <https://www.georgiainsights.com/essser-budget.html>

**Figure 3: Distribution of Per FTE ESSER Funding**

Total ESSER Funding per FTE	# of Districts
Above \$10,000	7
\$9,000 to \$9,999	5
\$8,000 to \$8,999	7
\$7,000 to \$7,999	10
\$6,000 to \$6,999	19
\$5,000 to \$5,999	20
\$4,000 to \$4,999	26
\$3,000 to \$3,999	32
\$2,000 to \$2,999	33
\$1,000 to \$1,999	16
Less than \$1,000	5

The [Baseline Report](#) provides more detailed information about the structure of the ESSER program and additional federal pandemic relief funds for education provided to governors.

Unlike recurring federal funds, CARES Act law gave LEAs broader flexibility to use ESSER funds to respond to problems created or worsened by the pandemic as well as to continue providing instructional and support services to students. They have invested these funds in three broad categories: school operations, student learning and well-being, and the educator workforce.

## **INVESTMENT SNAPSHOT: TOP AREAS OF ESSER USE**

LEAs ranked technology, staff, and summer learning programs as the areas in which they spent the largest amounts of ESSER funds between the 2019-2020 and 2021-2022 school years. Staff, summer learning, and IT & technology infrastructure remain areas of greatest spending in the 2022-2023 school year, though the types of investment in staff have narrowed. LEAs continue to prioritize having additional certified staff to meet students'

increased needs but have decreased their use of ESSER funds to provide financial incentives to educators. Instructional software and resources replaced incentives in the top five areas of planned ESSER spending in 2022-2023. (See Figure 4.)

**Figure 4: Top Five Largest Areas of Investment of ESSER Funds**


2019-2020 through 2021-2022	2022-2023
IT & technology infrastructure	Additional certified staff
Additional certified staff	Summer learning programs
Providing recruitment and/or retention incentives to certified staff	IT & technology infrastructure
Summer learning programs	Instructional software
Providing recruitment and/or retention incentives to non-certified staff	Instructional resources (nontechnology)

More detailed information about each investment category as well as information on state funding for components of each category is below.

## INVESTING IN SCHOOL OPERATIONS

LEAs have used ESSER funds to maintain school operations to ensure students continue to receive instructional and support services, whether in school buildings or virtually, since the pandemic’s onset. Nearly 94% of LEAs that participated in the survey used ESSER funds for continuity of services from March 2020 to June 2022. ESSER funds are being used to maintain services in 79% of LEAs during the current 2022-2023 school year. The most frequent expenditures of ESSER funds to continue providing services in 2022-2023 are:

- Instructional software and resources
- IT and technology infrastructure
- Personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies



ESSER funds are being used to renovate facilities or purchase equipment and fixtures to protect student health such as HVAC and facility upgrades by 70% of responding LEAs.

LEAs are also using ESSER funds to cover student transportation costs. Nearly 31% of participating LEAs report using ESSER funds to offset fuel costs. Fuel costs are a greater burden on rural districts: 42% of rural LEAs are using ESSER funds to cover fuel. About 22% of LEAs are using ESSER funds to help cover non-fuel transportation costs, which rises to 31% among rural LEAs.


Inflation is affecting how LEAs use ESSER funds. Nearly half of LEAs—48%—report adjusting their plans to use ESSER funds due to inflation. Rising inflation and supply chain problems have prompted some LEAs to scale back or eliminate planned renovations. Many also describe rising fuel costs as a challenge while several others cite higher costs across operational categories as a growing difficulty.

### ***State Funding Context***

LEAs' decisions about deploying ESSER funds have been influenced by several components of the state's education funding formula, which needs to be modernized. Georgia's primary mechanism for funding public schools – the Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula – was created in 1985.<sup>2</sup> Though tweaks have been made to the QBE formula since then, it has not been revised to reflect current student and school system needs or state priorities. This has led to gaps in resources available to LEAs, which may affect how they deploy resources after ESSER funds expire. Three of the outdated areas of state funding are technology, student transportation, and inflation, which are summarized below.

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<sup>2</sup> The Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula is the state's formula for calculating how much funding public school districts and state-commission charter schools receive each year.



**Technology:** The state’s investment in technology is limited. Since FY 2014, districts have received funds for technology through the allocation for instructional materials under the QBE formula. This allocation also covers purchasing textbooks. The amount allocated to a regular high school student for instructional materials in FY 2023 is \$55.65, the same amount that was allocated in FY 2014. Formula allocations for instructional materials for all student categories have not increased over the past eight school years. Some LEAs had invested in one-to-one devices for students prior to the pandemic, but others did not. Many LEAs across the state have used a significant amount of ESSER funds to provide students with individual devices to ensure they will have access to instruction regardless of their location. However, electronic devices have a limited duration of use, raising questions about how they will be maintained and replaced in the years ahead.

**Student Transportation:** The portion of student transportation costs covered by the state has shrunk from about 50% in the 1990s to less than 15% currently. In FY 2021, the state provided \$136 million for transportation operating costs with LEAs spending nearly \$780 million more to bus students to and from school.<sup>3</sup>

**Inflation:** Components of the QBE formula are not adjusted for inflation, which LEAs aim to manage with local funds. This can limit how LEAs use their local funds to support instruction, particularly if local revenues have not kept pace with rising costs.

## INVESTING IN STUDENT LEARNING AND WELL-BEING

LEAs are using ESSER funds to mitigate the pandemic’s adverse effects on student learning and well-being. The pandemic’s impact on students varied in scope, according to several district leaders who participated in interviews. Some describe larger portions of students needing extra assistance while others see challenges arising within smaller groups of specific students, a variation they ascribe to students participating in virtual learning for an extended time, being economically disadvantaged, or both.

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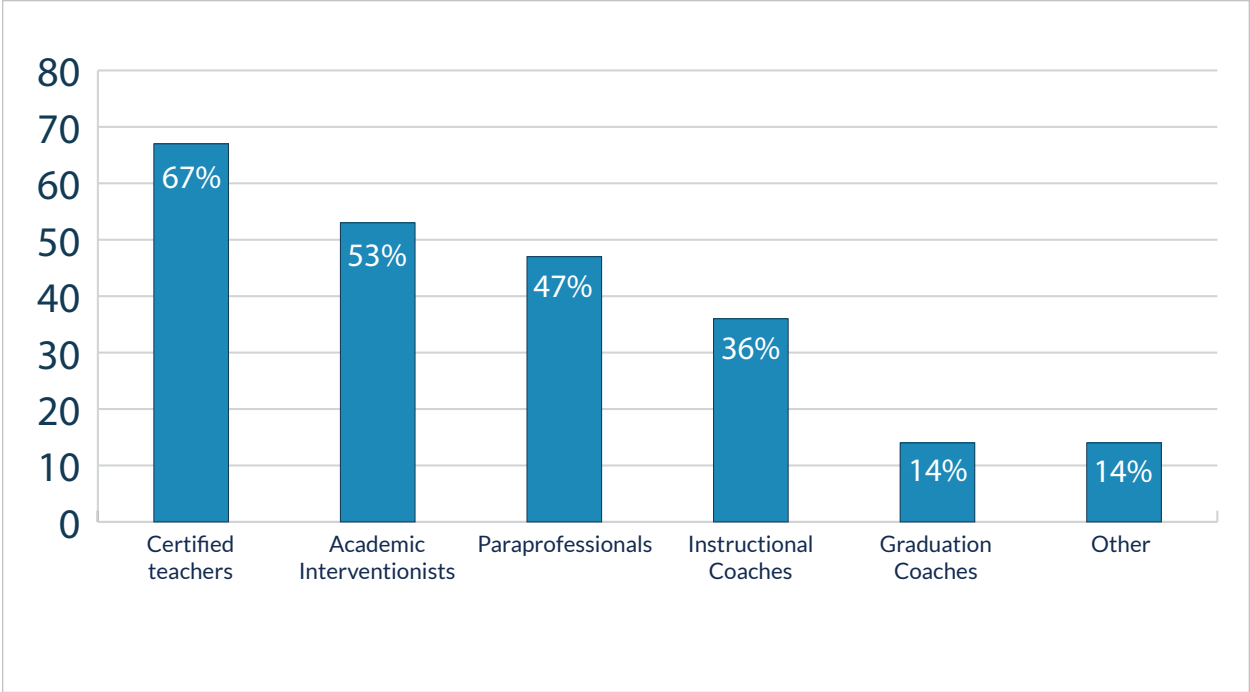
<sup>3</sup> The General Assembly also provided \$40 million for bus replacement in FY 2021.

The three strategies on the 2021 baseline survey most reported on to help students recover from challenges caused or worsened by the pandemic were adding staff, summer learning, and tutoring. The 2022 survey asked LEAs about these specific strategies as well as two approaches to improving student well-being: expanding support staff and providing wraparound services. They were also asked to identify the most promising strategies their districts or schools are using to assist students. Many named their summer programs as well as targeted interventions for individual or small groups of students, including tutoring. Several LEAs highlighted initiatives to improve student well-being as their most promising practices.


**Increasing Instructional Staff**

Approximately 88% of responding LEAs hired additional staff to address students’ academic needs. The new positions were added in multiple areas. (See Figure 5.)

**Figure 5: Percent of LEAs Hiring New Instructional Staff by Position**







These additional personnel are supporting many of the strategies LEAs are using to accelerate learning.

### ***Summer Learning Programs***

LEAs are using summer programs to provide additional learning time to students.<sup>4</sup> Approximately 81% of responding LEAs used ESSER funds to operate summer learning programs in 2022. This is an increase over the 72% of these LEAs that ran summer programs in 2020 or 2021 using ESSER funds.<sup>5</sup>

Nearly 94% of LEAs served students identified as low performing in their summer programs with 60% or more also targeting students with disabilities, low-income students, students learning English, racial and ethnic minorities, or students experiencing homelessness. A few opened their programs to all students, and several incorporated programming for gifted students.

About 87% of responding LEAs reported having the capacity to serve all the students identified for their summer programs, but 13% did not. Ninety percent stated they met all or most of their goals for their summer programs.

“Highly effective teachers” was the element cited most frequently by LEA leaders as the most important component of effective summer programs. Transportation is also essential for most districts to offer summer programs that reach all students who need them. (See Figure 6.) For example, reflecting the experience of many LEAs, ESSER funding enabled Pike County to double its summer program, and transportation was a critical piece of its expansion: “(I)n a rural community like this, if we don’t provide door-to-door transportation, they [students] will not come.”

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4 In the 2021 baseline survey, LEAs reported they are also providing additional learning time through after school, weekend, and intersession programs.

5 The [CARES Impact Study Baseline Report](#) includes detailed information about the format of summer programs offered by LEAs in 2021.

**Figure 6: Most Important Components of Effective Summer Programs Identified by LEA Leaders**

<b>Fund Use</b>	<b>Percent of LEAs</b>
Highly-effective certified teachers	92%
Transportation	74%
Curriculum aligned with school-year standards	65%
Small class sizes	64%
Three-hour minimum of daily academic instruction	54%
Inclusion of enrichment activities	46%
Adequate planning time	39%
Duration of at least four weeks	28%
Pre-program training for teachers in summer curriculum & materials	28%
Effective student and family recruitment strategies	19%
Program director who spends 50% or more of his/her time on summer program	17%

LEAs’ on-the-ground perspective on critical components reflects research on best practices in most areas, particularly the use of highly effective teachers (92%), curriculum aligned with school-year standards (65%), and small class sizes (64%).<sup>6</sup>

Difficulty recruiting teachers and students was the most common challenge LEAs experienced with their summer programs. Several reported scaling back summer programs or not offering them because of difficulty staffing them. When students did enroll, maintaining their participation was a problem for some LEAs. Several also cited difficulty with transportation, including recruiting drivers.

<sup>6</sup> McCombs, J. & Augustine, C. (2021). Advancing student learning and opportunity through voluntary academic summer learning programs. Annenberg Institute for Education Reform at Brown University [https://www.annenberginstitute.org/sites/default/files/EdResearch\\_for\\_Recovery\\_Design\\_Principles\\_2.pdf](https://www.annenberginstitute.org/sites/default/files/EdResearch_for_Recovery_Design_Principles_2.pdf)

## Promising Practice Highlight: Summer Programs

Several LEA leaders describe strategies to incorporate activities in summer programming that are usually out of reach for low-income students. Gainesville City Schools partnered with two local organizations to send low-income students to an arts-centered summer program and a science-based summer program operated by the organizations in addition to its own academic-focused program. The district also coordinated 17 college visits throughout the summer for students attending low-income high schools.

Bibb County Schools broadened its CTAE pathways to include graphic arts, culinary arts, and entrepreneurship, and incorporated these pathways into its summer program for middle school students to encourage early exploration. The district also covered the cost of dual enrollment for rising 10th graders as an enrichment opportunity if they met the Zell Miller requirements. Rising 10th graders are eligible for dual enrollment if they meet Zell Miller requirements or self-pay. This offers students the opportunity to participate in dual enrollment or career pathways, so that all students are college or career ready

### *Targeted Interventions*

LEAs across Georgia are providing interventions tailored to the needs of individual or small groups of students through different mechanisms. Some do so through tutoring programs often held outside of normal school hours. Others use academic interventionists to deliver instruction one-on-one or in small groups or are using classroom teachers and paraprofessionals to do so.

Seventy-four percent of responding LEAs are providing tutoring during the 2022-2023 school year. This is an increase from 66% of LEAs that offered tutoring in the 2021-2022 school year.<sup>7</sup> The percent that met student learning objectives varied:

- Met all objectives: 13 percent
- Met most objectives: 63 percent
- Met some objectives: 23 percent
- Met few objectives: 1 percent

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<sup>7</sup> The [CARES Impact Study Baseline Report](#) provides information about the structure of LEAs' tutoring programs in the 2020-2021 school year.

“Content that aligns with curriculum and student needs” was the element identified most often by LEA leaders when asked to identify the most important components of effective tutoring programs. (See Figure 7.)

**Figure 7: Most Important Components of Effective Tutoring Programs Identified by LEA Leaders**

Components	Percent of LEAs
Aligning tutoring content with curriculum & student needs	89%
Using certified teachers as tutors	75%
Data collection & analysis to track student progress	70%
Continuous communication between teachers & tutors	52%
Holding tutoring sessions of 30 minutes or more	49%
Capacity of district & school administrators to coordinate content & logistics	46%
Holding tutoring sessions 3X per week	39%
Tutor:student ratio of 1:3	34%
District-level manager to coordinate & support tutoring	17%

LEAs encountered similar challenges in their tutoring programs as in summer programs: the most common difficulties were recruiting teachers to provide tutoring outside of regular school hours and student attendance. Transportation was a barrier for several LEAs that operated tutoring programs before or after school. Maintaining good communication between teachers and external tutors was also challenging for a few LEAs.

More than half of LEAs added academic interventionists, teachers who work with individual students or small groups of students who are struggling academically. Carrollton City Schools created two interventionist positions at each of its schools and moved highly skilled, experienced teachers into these

“These master teachers that we selected as interventionists... they’ve helped a lot of kids. They’re working with them [students] one-on-one, one-on-two, one-on-three.”  
**-CARROLLTON CITY SCHOOLS**

roles. They work closely with school teams to identify students who are struggling and create schedules and targeted plans to provide additional instruction to them. Finding and keeping the right individuals to fill these positions is critical according to district leaders, a task that has been difficult for some LEAs. This can also have ripple effects as many interventionist positions are filled by classroom teachers, creating more vacancies to fill.

Another challenge to providing targeted or individualized instruction reported by LEAs is time. Teachers often lack the time during the school day to compile and analyze student data, plan interventions, and collaborate with colleagues for feedback and to ensure alignment across instructional strategies. Several LEAs hired additional Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) staff to support teachers and administrators in developing and implementing interventions. Two school systems reported adding data staff at the school level to assist with data collection and analysis, enabling teachers to focus on identifying student needs and developing plans to meet them. LEA leaders also need time to fully implement their strategies, particularly as staffing challenges have interrupted plans at times.

### **Promising Practice Highlight: Strengthening Reading Instruction**

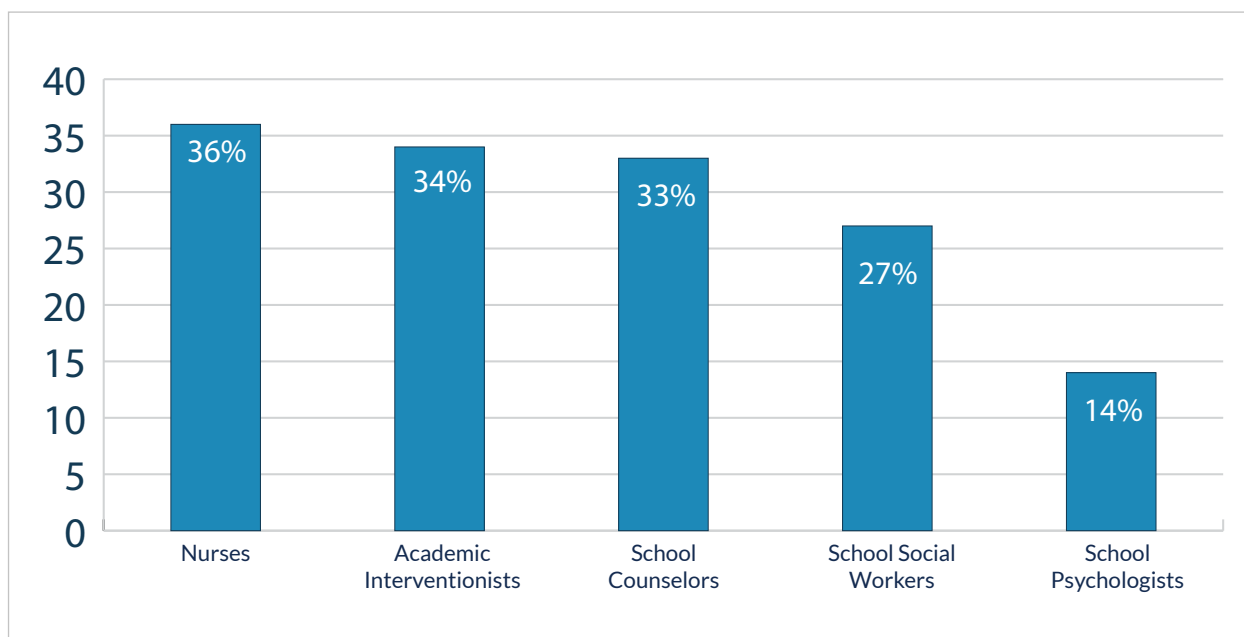
Fulton County Schools has used ESSER funds to launch Every Child Reads, a comprehensive literacy initiative aimed at creating a shared culture of literacy across the district. Components include extensive professional development in the science of reading for teachers as well as school and district leaders, literacy coaches to provide assistance to students and teachers in elementary schools, and paraprofessionals trained in reading interventions for students who need extra support. The district has also adopted reading textbooks and materials to be used across the system to foster consistency. Fulton developed this initiative after reviewing its previously decentralized approach to reading instruction and concluding that there was significant variation across schools in their use of research-based practices and materials.

DeKalb County and Houston County school districts are also using ESSER funds to bolster reading curriculum and strengthen instruction and cited these efforts as most promising for improving student learning.

## Fostering Student Well-being

LEA leaders described increases in behavioral problems and mental health concerns among students, which can create barriers to learning or lead to student harm, in interviews. They shared similar observations in the 2021 baseline survey. They are using ESSER funds to expand or launch efforts to address these issues, including hiring additional support staff. More than three quarters of responding LEAs – 77% – indicated that they have increased the number of mental and physical health professionals. These new staff were added in multiple position areas. (See Figure 8.)

Figure 8: Percent of LEAs Hiring New Support Staff by Position



One approach pursued by more than 56% of responding districts is providing wraparound services to students and their families. These are often offered through a whole-child framework, a model that brings multiple types of support, such as counseling, food and clothing assistance, and access to healthcare, into the school building through partnerships with community organizations. Fulton County Schools is expanding its Safe Centers program, an initiative launched at one of its high schools to provide additional support to students. Gainesville City Schools and Bibb County Schools are also expanding their programs that provide comprehensive supports to students.

Other examples of LEAs' efforts to foster student well-being include:

- Henry County Schools staffed each school with a mental health and wellness facilitator, who works with school teams to identify students who need additional assistance and develop plans to provide it. The facilitator serves as a link to other district and community resources, which may be professionals inside the district including counselors and social workers or outside the district such as licensed clinicians. Accessing other professionals allows teachers to focus on curriculum and instruction and enables students to address problems that interfere with learning.
- Seminole County Schools hired a full-time social worker, which had been beyond its reach, as it receives partial funding for one from the state due to its small size. This staff person's work has included developing partnerships to address students' dental and healthcare needs, implementing a substance use prevention programs for high school students, and providing assistance to low-income families.

### ***State Funding Context***

Funding for school support staff is another component of state funding that is outdated. There is a better understanding now of the significant impact of poverty on student learning and well-being than when the QBE formula was established nearly 40 years ago. For example, rising student mental health needs spurred by the pandemic heighten the need to ensure that sufficient school counselors and other support staff are available to students. Learning disruptions have had a disproportionate impact on low-income students, many of whom were behind their middle- and upper-income peers before the pandemic. Current state funding for school support staff, such as school counselors, and funding for low-income students are discussed below.

***Support Staff:*** State funding for school counselors does not include counselors for special education and gifted students. All other groups of students are allocated state funds for counselors at a ratio of one counselor for 450 students, above the one to 250 ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the state

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<sup>8</sup> American School Counselor Association. (n.d.) The role of the school counselor. <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/ee8b2e1b-d021-4575-982c-c84402cb2cd2/Role-Statement.pdf>

funds one school social worker and one school psychologist for every 2,475 students, ratios which are above the recommended ratios of one to 250 students for social workers and one to 500 for psychologists.<sup>9</sup>

**Funding for Low-Income Students:** Georgia is one of six states that does not provide extra funding for low-income students through the K-12 funding formula.<sup>10</sup> Low-income students often face barriers to learning that require additional support and resources, such as the initiatives LEAs are undertaking now, including afterschool and summer learning programs.

## INVESTING IN THE EDUCATOR WORKFORCE

A skilled educator workforce with resources and professional supports is essential to students' academic success. LEAs are investing in developing educators' professional knowledge and skills so they can effectively meet the increased academic and non-academic needs students are bringing to the classroom due to the pandemic. The educator workforce is also under significant strain. About one-third of new teachers leave the classroom by their sixth year,<sup>11</sup> and a growing percentage of the teacher workforce indicate that it is unlikely they will remain in education for another five years.<sup>12</sup> Many of these pressures existed before the pandemic and have worsened since its onset. LEA leaders recognize this and have invested ESSER funds in incentives to attract and keep educators. Some are also investing in efforts to foster educators' well-being.

### *Investing in Building Educator Expertise*

Approximately 78% of LEAs are spending ESSER funds on professional development for

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9 School Social Work Association of America. (2013). *School social workers helping students succeed: recommended school social worker to student ratios*; National Association of School Psychologists. (2020). *The professional standards of the National Association of School Psychologists*.

10 Owens, S. (2022). Three ways to fix Georgia education funding. Georgia Budget & Policy Institute.

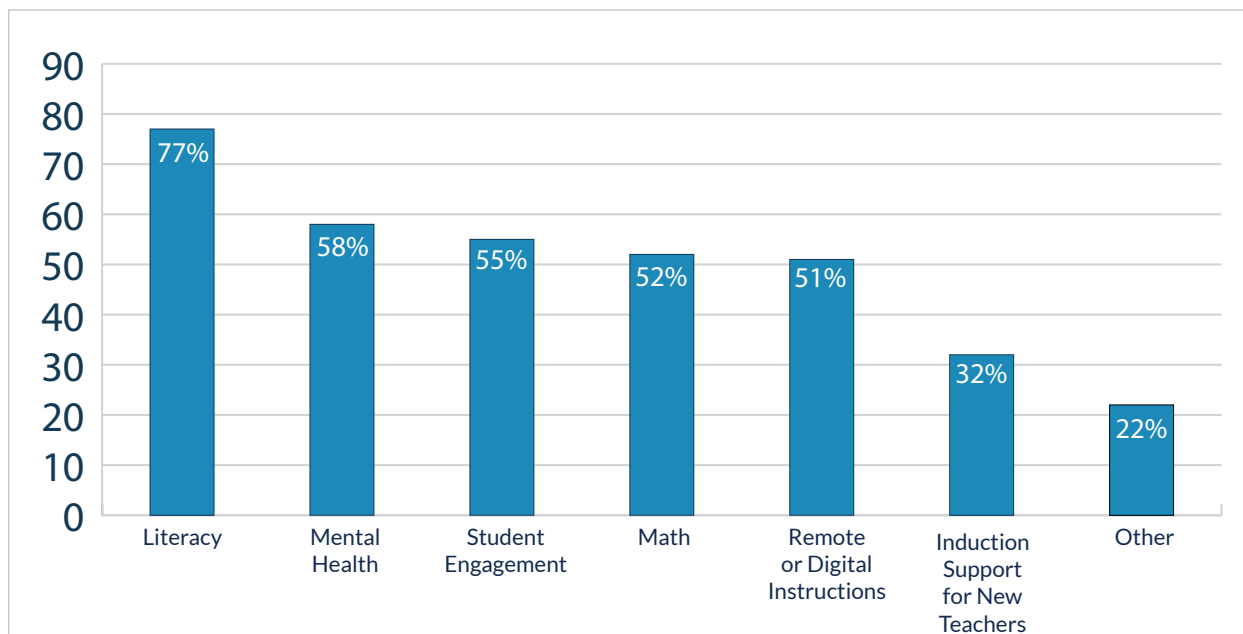
11 Governor's Office of Student Achievement. (2021). 2020 Georgia K-12 teacher retention addendum. <https://gosa.georgia.gov/georgia-k-12-teacher-and-leader-workforce-report>

12 Professional Association of Georgia Educators. (2021). Views from the schoolhouse: Insights from Georgia educators on the education profession and supporting students. <https://www.pagelegislative.org/2022-legislative-survey-full-report>



teachers and other staff members. Literacy is the most frequent focus area, as it was in the baseline survey. Most LEAs investing ESSER funds in training are doing so across multiple topics. (See Figure 9.)

**Figure 9: Focus of Professional Development for Educators**




Several LEAs noted that they are including leadership development in their professional development programming. Two specifically highlighted investments in strengthening the practices of their professional learning communities (PLCs) to ensure each PLC component is fully implemented, and there is consistency in practice and focus across school and district levels.

“This money [ESSER funds] has provided a lot of opportunities for professional learning that otherwise a system like us would not have been able to have.”

**-SEMINOLE COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT**

A few LEAs report covering the cost for teachers to earn endorsements in specific areas where additional expertise is needed, including Gainesville City, Bibb County, and Seminole County.



Thirty-six percent of LEAs added instructional coaches, who provide on-site training, guidance, and feedback to teachers on effective instructional practices. Paulding County has invested ESSER funds to put literacy coaches, intervention specialists, math coaches, and a writing specialist in schools and at the central office to provide training and coaching to teachers over the next two years. These positions are temporary for the duration of ESSER funds, but district leaders believe this intensive support will build long-term staff capacity to effectively meet students' learning needs.

### ***Investing in Recruiting & Retaining Educators***

Indicators of strain on the educator workforce emerged in both survey and interview data. One marker is difficulty recruiting teachers. Eighty-six percent of LEAs participating in the survey indicated finding teachers is difficult. LEAs ranked the subject areas in which they had the largest number of unfilled positions. The percent of LEAs that ranked the following subjects in their top three areas of need are:

- Special education: 71%
- Math: 71%
- Science: 47%
- English language arts: 23%
- Elementary education: 18%

LEA leaders noted other signs of pressure on the teacher workforce including hiring candidates with lower qualifications than they would have accepted in previous years. Some LEAs have left positions unfilled, such as school counselors and instructional coaches because they cannot find qualified candidates. Several described increased mental health needs among staff. These challenges can undermine LEAs' efforts to boost student learning, as shown in the difficulty many LEAs faced trying to staff summer learning and tutoring programs, and they can heighten existing pressures on current staff.

There are similar pressures among non-teaching staff. Approximately 73% of LEAs have difficulty recruiting staff in support roles. The percent of LEAs that ranked the following positions in their top three areas of need are:

- Bus drivers: 78%
- Nutrition staff: 53%
- Paraprofessionals: 41%
- Custodians: 37%
- School psychologists: 19%

One strategy most LEAs rely on to bolster the educator workforce is financial incentives. Eighty-four percent of LEAs provided financial incentives to certified educators between the 2019-2021 and 2021-2022 school years, and 82% of them to non-certified staff during the same period. Fewer LEAs are providing them in the 2022-2023 school year: 54% are giving them to certified educators and 47% to non-certified staff. (See Figure 10.) For both groups, retention supplements are the most common incentive type used.


**Figure 10: Incentive Types Used by LEAs, 2022-2023**

	Certified Staff	Non-Certified Staff
Retention supplement	88%	92%
Recruitment bonus	33%	40%
Student loan repayment	0%	0%
Tuition reimbursement	16%	12%

The amount of the incentives that LEAs are using vary, though most are between \$1,000 and \$2,000. (See Figure 11.)

**Figure 11: Incentive Amounts Offered by LEAs, 2022-2023**

	Retention Supplement	Recruitment Bonus
Less than \$1,000	6%	5%
\$1,000 to \$1,499	33%	26%
\$1,500 to \$2,000	46%	58%
More than \$2,000	15%	11%



LEA leaders have taken other steps to support teachers. In interviews, two described employee assistance programs their LEAs have launched for staff and their families. In addition to mental health counseling, these programs offer other services including wellness programs and financial planning assistance. In Henry County, the school-based mental health and wellness facilitators also serve staff and work to identify and assist staff members who may be struggling. Several leaders highlighted the need to support educators for their own well-being and so that they can effectively serve students.

An additional area of workforce spending is substitute teachers. Nearly half – 48% – of LEAs are using ESSER funds to help cover the cost of substitutes, which has risen significantly in many areas due to a shortage of individuals willing to do the job and increased teacher absences due to illness and quarantine requirements.<sup>13</sup> The substitute shortage adds to the workload of teachers and paraprofessionals when they cover classes for absent colleagues, which has also hindered the delivery of interventions to struggling students. The shortage has interfered with plans in several LEAs to provide professional development during the school day when leaders could not find enough substitutes to cover teachers' classes. LEAs shifted to offering it outside of normal school hours, but attendance has been uneven.


### ***State Funding Context***

State funding for paraprofessionals and substitute teachers no longer reflects LEAs' expenditures on these staff members. Both are needed for LEAs to maintain a highly qualified educator workforce. Current state funding for these positions is summarized below.

***Paraprofessionals:*** Kindergarteners are the only students who are allocated state funds for paraprofessionals, although LEAs often have additional paraprofessionals to assist students in other grades. In FY 2023, state funding to cover a paraprofessional's salary is \$15,738. The low salary level is a significant factor in turnover among paraprofessionals.

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<sup>13</sup> Tagami, T. (2021, September 7). COVID-19 amplifies chronic shortage of substitute teachers, Atlanta Journal Constitution. <https://www.ajc.com/education/covid-19-amplifies-chronic-shortage-of-substitute-teachers/YZ2FUWPBSRE3NIETD5TYKI7A/>



State funding for bus drivers and school nutrition staff costs also falls short of LEAs' expenditures for these staff members.


**Substitutes:** LEAs receive \$150 per teacher each year in state funds to cover the cost of a substitute for five days or \$30 per day. This amount has not changed since 1985, and it is well below the amount many LEAs pay, which tops \$100 per day.

## ELEMENTS OF IMPLEMENTATION

Common themes emerged in interviews with LEA leaders about their approach to designing and implementing strategies to support students in the wake of the pandemic in content and process as well as limitations they encountered. Every leader did not voice each theme, but they were expressed in multiple discussions.

**A Systems Approach.** LEA leaders discussed developing or sustaining systemic approaches to teaching and learning, which incorporate processes to ensure high quality curriculum and effective instructional practices are consistently used and student well-being is fostered. For Dougherty County Schools, which identified early literacy as a priority in its strategic plan, this meant using ESSER funds to hire literacy coaches to build teachers' knowledge about and skills to teach reading effectively. In Henry County Schools, health and wellness facilitators work to remove barriers to learning complements existing processes to improve math and early literacy instruction. Leaders used their strategic plans to identify and develop their ESSER recovery strategies and avoid adding programs disconnected from their core practices.

**Commitment to Sustainability.** Aware that ESSER funds are temporary, leaders sought to avoid significant increases in recurring costs. They limited new hires to positions they consider essential to their core processes for improving teaching and learning and aimed to build staff and district capacity to deliver and support effective instruction. They are considering ways to sustain the strategies they are instituting to support students and strengthen teaching and learning. Many strategies require ongoing staffing and funding. Some anticipate having sufficient local funds to maintain these efforts, but others do not.




**Variations in Evaluation Capacity.** Leaders want to know if their strategies to improve student learning and well-being are yielding the desired results, but their capacity to assess the process and impact varies. One LEA has an internal evaluation team that carries out assessments of initiatives, and it is partnering with external experts to evaluate several of its interventions. Others have staff experienced in identifying, tracking, and assessing indicators of progress and impact. Several have less experience developing ways to measure their progress. Leaders know data showing effectiveness is critical to advocating for funds to sustain these strategies.

**Limitations on a Shared Vision.** Leaders described communicating regularly with their peers in the early months of the pandemic, often through meetings convened by education associations and state agencies. These discussions were a valuable resource as participants shared challenges, information, and ideas while navigating the uncharted territory of a global pandemic. The discussions were less helpful on issues of instructional practice and processes. Some leaders sought other organizations and resources to help them develop and refine their responses to student learning needs.

**Focus on Communication.** Communicating clearly and frequently with community members was a priority for leaders. They described relying on local data to make decisions, being transparent on benchmarks for action and reasons for decisions, and willingness to engage with parents and community members. Several used regular video messages to disseminate information, a format they found effective. Disagreements were not avoided, but relationships with parents and community members remain strong.

**Uncertainty in Implementation.** LEAs expressed frustration about uncertainty in allowable expenditures under ESSER. As described in the Baseline Report, one reason was that the U.S. Department of Education (US Ed) did not release guidance on allowable fund use until ESSER III and applied the guidance retroactively to ESSER I and II funds. A second reason was differing interpretations of federal ESSER guidance by GaDOE, which administers the funds, and the Georgia Department of Audits and Accounts, which audits LEAs to ensure that they comply with requirements. LEAs could not move forward with plans until the difference in interpretation was resolved, which was after the GaDOE consulted with and received clear guidance from US Ed.



These themes speak not only to issues connected to using ESSER funds to improve student learning but also to the importance of leadership. There has been significant turnover among LEA leaders since the onset of the pandemic. Nearly half—48%—of the leaders of responding LEAs assumed these roles in the 2019-2020, 2020-2021, or 2021-2022 school years. An additional 28 leaders are new in the 2022-2023 school year.<sup>14</sup> Leadership churn can upend well-designed plans to improve student outcomes. Considerations of supporting and stabilizing the educator workforce should extend to leaders.

## EMERGING ISSUES

The findings and themes outlined in this report build on those of year one of the study, as presented in the Baseline Report. They confirm the complexity of the work to assist students and support schools that is underway across Georgia. They also point to issues policymakers and other stakeholders should consider, including:

- ***Shared Responsibility for Student Success:*** Addressing unfinished instruction and learning loss, as well as learning barriers that existed before the pandemic, is a responsibility that extends beyond LEAs. A comprehensive approach to resolving barriers, which links local and state agencies and other organizations across sectors, is needed to foster student success.
- ***Sufficient and Effective Staff:*** Sufficient and qualified staff are necessary for the successful implementation of strategies that accelerate learning and foster positive student well-being. The pandemic worsened existing teacher shortages and revealed other strains in the educator workforce, including an inadequate pipeline for mental health staff and high turnover among staff in lower-wage roles. A comprehensive statewide approach to strengthen the educator pipeline is needed.
- ***School Staffing Models:*** Students often need assistance from multiple education professionals, including academic interventionists, paraprofessionals, and graduation coaches, to succeed in school. Current state school staffing models should be reviewed and revised to ensure schools have necessary professionals.

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<sup>14</sup> J. Zauner (personal communication, August 31, 2022).

- **Evaluation Capacity:** LEAs' knowledge and experience evaluating the design, implementation, and impact of instructional and support practices vary. Building their ability to undertake comprehensive evaluations would increase local and state knowledge about effective practices, which could be replicated. LEAs' evaluation capacity could be enhanced through action research partnerships with postsecondary institutions, training, or additional staff with evaluation expertise.
- **A 21st Century Funding Formula:** Many of the components of state funding for public schools no longer reflect student needs and learning goals. The QBE and transportation formulas should be modernized to reflect current conditions.

LEAs' efforts to accelerate learning and foster student well-being continue to evolve as LEAs review new data and adapt to changing needs and circumstances. When the first and second ESSER grants were released, LEAs concentrated on ensuring student health and safety and minimizing disruptions. They are now focused on learning recovery, and their efforts, often still in early phases, will continue beyond September 30, 2024, the end date of ESSER funding.

The Georgia Partnership will share findings from both phases of the CARES Impact Study with policymakers, district and community leaders, parents, and other stakeholders. The Partnership and GaDOE will continue to engage state and local education leaders as well as other members of the education community to gather information on LEAs' work to help students recover from learning disruptions caused by the pandemic.

The next phase of this project will entail additional surveys and interviews and explore selected issues in greater detail. The Partnership will release the next report in fall 2023.





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