

# "So Many Different Hats to Wear"

*Georgia Pre-K Teachers Share Insights on  
Recruitment, Retention, and Supporting the Workforce*

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# Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated challenges facing the early childhood sector, leaving a lasting impact on the recruitment and retention of educators, especially those who teach Georgia’s youngest learners. Additionally, teachers face a new classroom landscape that not only impacts their students, but also their ability to meet their own needs, care for their families, and cultivate their skillsets.

To better understand the experiences of Georgia’s early childhood educators and how to support this crucial workforce, GEEARS: Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students conducted a series of focus groups—16 in total—throughout 2022-23 with early childhood educators from a range of settings, including center- and home-based child care, Head Start, and Georgia’s Pre-K.

The report that follows outlines findings from the focus groups conducted specifically with Georgia’s Pre-K teachers and assistant teachers (henceforth “Pre-K teachers” and “Pre-K assistant teachers”). Georgia’s Pre-K is a unique and critical component of Georgia’s early care and learning landscape. It is a publicly funded program administered by the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), with classrooms in both local school systems and child care programs (see box), which directly employs teachers. Several key themes emerged from the focus groups including addressing children’s individual needs, the work environment and supports for teachers, compensation and benefits, and career development.

*Funded by the Georgia Lottery, Georgia’s Pre-K is a voluntary, free prekindergarten program open to all Georgia four-year-olds, regardless of parental income. Launched in 1992, the program has served over two million children since its inception. In 2022-23, Georgia’s Pre-K served 73,462 children, representing approximately 54% of the state’s four-year-olds. Administered by the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), Georgia’s Pre-K is a mixed-delivery system, operating in both public schools (52%) and private child care centers (48%).<sup>1</sup> Each classroom has a lead and assistant teacher, who are required to have minimum education/credentials (see “Career Development” for more information).*



1. Email communication with the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, December 14th, 2023.

Within the broader early childhood education landscape, Georgia’s Pre-K operates with many unique policies, such as those related to pay structure and degree requirements. However, the workforce for Georgia’s Pre-K is not exempt from the recruitment and retention challenges facing the broader field. As noted in Figure 1, only 66% of Pre-K assistant teachers and 80% of Pre-K lead teachers were retained at the start of the year in 2024, although retention rates decline throughout the year.

**Figure 1: Annual Retention of Pre-K Teachers<sup>2</sup>**

Year	% Retained Total		% Retained Public		% Total Private	
	Lead	Assistant	Lead	Assistant	Lead	Assistant
2024	80%	66%	82%	71%	78%	61%
2023	81%	65%	83%	70%	79%	60%
2022	81%	69%	81%	72%	81%	65%
2021	86%	73%	86%	78%	85%	68%
2020	82%	71%	82%	75%	82%	67%

While focus group participants described a range of challenges facing their workforce, they were also eager to share potential solutions to help recruit and retain more early childhood educators, specifically to Georgia’s Pre-K. The findings have important implications for policymakers and other stakeholders.



## Methodology

In October of 2022, GEEARS conducted four virtual focus groups with a combined 25 Pre-K teachers and assistant teachers who worked in both public school and child care settings. The participants—16 teachers and nine assistant teachers—were employed in Pre-K classrooms across the state, representing 14 Georgia counties. The majority (56%) identified as Black or African American, while 44% identified as white. During the virtual focus groups, trained moderators guided participants through a series of predetermined questions and utilized polling to gather more specific feedback on factors influencing teacher recruitment and retention (i.e., work environment, career development, compensation, benefits, and teacher stress).



## Why do educators choose and remain in Georgia's Pre-K?

An overwhelming majority of Pre-K teachers described entering and staying in the field due to their passion for working with younger children. One North Georgia teacher, for example, said that she wanted to make a “positive difference in as many lives as possible.” Another teacher from South Georgia said her background impacted her interest in entering the field: “Teaching Pre-K is the start of somebody's life and I feel like I missed that in my life with my parents, so it drew me to kids of low income and different settings to teach them . . . things that they don't get at home from parents that are working parents.”

Pre-K teachers described a variety of ways in which they were initially exposed to the field, from needing a career pathway in high school to teaching summer camp. For example, one metro Atlanta teacher said, “[This job] just fell into place. I was not the orchestrator of this. It all just happened. And I ended up growing to love it.” Several described initially being exposed to the field through having their own young children and appreciating the convenience and ease of mind it gave them to take their child with them to work. One teacher from metro Atlanta said several Pre-K teachers she knows see their current position as their “retirement job,” having returned to the workforce after retiring due to the teacher shortages.

Some teachers described initially working with children of other ages, from infants or toddlers to elementary-aged students, before landing in Pre-K.

A couple of the former infant or toddler teachers mentioned moving to Pre-K for the program's stability and the additional support and higher wages it often provides. One North Georgia teacher, for example, stated, “It's a lot of turnover in the [child care] industry as a whole. I think it's Georgia's Pre-K where people [are more likely to] stay in it.” A metro Atlanta teacher described moving to Pre-K after working in elementary education (K-5) for 15 years. She wanted, she expressed, to help prepare students for later school success.

Some teachers also emphasized Pre-K's impact on children's current and future success. They noted that this aspect of teaching Pre-K made it a personally rewarding experience. One teacher from North Georgia said, “I have no intentions to do anything else. I love being with them and helping them get a good foundation for their life of learning.”

When asked if they planned to continue working as Pre-K lead or assistant teachers, participants' answers varied. While many teachers indicated plans to stay in their current position, others expressed a desire to change positions or roles within the education field or leave the line of work altogether. Of those who planned to stay in their current positions, many described simply wanting to remain in the Pre-K classroom and continue to grow as educators. One metro Atlanta teacher said, “I don't see anything changing right now...so [my goal is to] just continue to grow and learn and keep improving.”





Assistant teachers, in particular, noted a desire to advance their careers *within* Pre-K. Many cited plans to become lead teachers in the future. One North Georgia assistant teacher said, “Once I finish school, I plan on not being a para anymore and being a [lead] teacher because being a para is nice, but being in that [lead] teacher role, you get to do a lot more things.” Several Pre-K lead teachers described moving to the lead position from the role of assistant teacher. One lead teacher from North Georgia said, “When I was an assistant, I aspired to get that add-on to my degree...and have my own classroom. And I've been able to do that now. I'm very content and happy with the progress that I've made.”

At the same time, a couple of Pre-K assistant teachers noted that they did not wish to become lead teachers. One assistant teacher from South Georgia said, “I get asked that question quite a bit, if I'm going to stay a parapro in Pre-K, and my answer is always yes. My heart's in Pre-K and my heart's not led [me] to be a lead teacher. I enjoy being the para. I enjoy being that extra they can go to when they just need a little extra love when the teacher is busy doing what she has to do . . . I feel like this is where I'm supposed to be.” She later added, “I see so much that my lead teacher takes on, and I don't think I could do it. I don't want to try to because what I do is enough in itself. I couldn't imagine trying to take on what she does as well.”

Some teachers described wanting to open their own child care centers in the future. One South Georgia teacher said, “I plan on getting my feet wet a little bit longer, but eventually I do want to be able to own my own early learning facility.” Several teachers expressed that they planned to move to early elementary as they aged because teaching young children is physically demanding.

Although most participants expressed a desire to remain in the education field, several teachers described plans to leave it, either temporarily or permanently. Citing the current education environment, one North Georgia teacher said, “As of right now, I think I'm going to be taking a break from Pre-K for a little bit because there's just too much stress.” A metro Atlanta teacher added, “I don't think I'll stay as a teacher. I would probably look outside of teaching if I decide to leave.”

## Addressing Children's Individual Needs

### *Supporting Social-Emotional Well-Being*

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers across the country noted a decline in their students' social-emotional well-being. This phenomenon inspired urgent calls for improved mental health and social-emotional resources beyond existing supports. Focus group participants shared this sense of urgency. Ninety-one percent rated support for children with challenging behaviors as “extremely important” to their job satisfaction.

When considering children's mental health, many teachers expressed that a lack of social interaction during the height of the pandemic created challenges once students entered a formal school setting, often for the first time. A North Georgia teacher described the state of the classrooms, saying, “This year has been exceptionally hard, coming out of the pandemic world . . . and seeing these kids that are coming from being stuck at home for the past, you know, two or so years without social interaction.” An overwhelming majority of teachers reported challenges when student needs exceeded their capacity to intervene successfully. One metro Atlanta teacher conveyed her frustration: “I cried every day, every day. I think we all did because there just wasn't enough of you to get around to all the needs.” Another metro Atlanta teacher reported that social-emotional challenges are impacting teacher retention: “This is a tough year, and I see it weeding people out.”

Pre-K teachers in public schools were more likely to report having additional personnel with specialized skillsets who were able to help address challenging behaviors. A metro Atlanta teacher reported that her school system responded to the increased need by using federal relief funding to create a full-time position for a child development specialist. This gave teachers the time to address other needs in their classrooms. In contrast, a center-based teacher from North Georgia reported, “No one’s here to help.” A metro Atlanta teacher described the need for a more hands-on approach, saying she would suggest “having someone who I can talk to and say, ‘This is what I’m encountering,’ and having that person come in and help immediately.”

Many teachers asked for additional support, including technical assistance, professional development, and mentorship, to address children’s social-emotional needs. Teachers asked for supports that are targeted (i.e., not one-size-fits-all) to their needs. One South Georgia teacher, for example, requested more training and strategies that aligned with the specific behaviors her children exhibited in the classroom.

### *Supporting Children with Disabilities*

In addition to managing the influx of children’s increased social-emotional needs, focus group participants highlighted a desire to address the needs of students with disabilities. They shared difficulties navigating the screening and referral process. Tangentially, they also expressed a need for more targeted support and resources for students with disabilities.

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Teachers expressed that it was hard to determine whether a referral to special education was necessary. They said they were especially challenged when they felt ill-equipped to navigate the formal processes set by local school districts or the state. The teachers working in private child care centers, in particular, described uncertainty about how to access the necessary supports. In some cases, they weren’t even aware that they could access supports.



One center-based teacher in North Georgia detailed the challenges of getting children evaluated through the local school district : “It’s like pulling teeth to get in touch with somebody because they’re so busy with K-12. Right now, our evaluations are backed up [six months], so our Pre-K kids are getting left behind.” Another center-based North Georgia teacher added, “By the time that they get an Individualized Education Program (IEP), it’ll be the end of the year, so they don’t get the support they need until Kindergarten.”

Additionally, most teachers said it was difficult to support parents and caregivers as they navigated the special education process. One metro Atlanta teacher described her experience with parents who were hesitant because the process was new to them and their expectations for the child were different

than they had anticipated. She explained, “We have to remember that our parents are grieving.” She went on to say she appreciated the helpful support she received from their school social worker, who provided weekly check-ins with the parents to make sure they had the knowledge and skills needed to make the best decision for their child.

Regardless of where children were in the evaluation and identification process, teachers across settings wanted additional, targeted professional development and behavioral supports that aligned with the specific needs of the children in their classrooms. A metro Atlanta teacher stated, “I find that it is so much more empowering knowing that you have things to pull from and a support system behind you. That’s far more helpful than having a book . . . because each child is so different.” A South Georgia assistant teacher gave an example: “We’ve got a child this year with cochlear implants . . . I don’t know sign language. My lead teacher doesn’t sign, and they don’t provide [the child] with someone [who knows sign language] to talk to her because she’s nonverbal, so we’re just doing the best we can.”

*Administered by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), Preschool Special Education offers eligible children the opportunity to participate and receive special education services in a preschool setting before entering Kindergarten. The program serves students ages three to five who have been identified by local school districts as in need of early intervention services. The process for determining eligibility begins with a comprehensive evaluation conducted by the local school district. Not all students who are evaluated meet the criteria for Preschool Special Education services.<sup>4</sup>*

## **Class Size: A Consistent Concern**

Pre-K policy prescribes class size based on two teachers working in the classroom: one lead teacher and one assistant teacher. During the 2022-23 school year (when the focus groups were conducted), Pre-K class size was set at 22 students/class or a ratio of 11:1 per teacher, although some changes have been temporarily implemented in the 2023-24 school year (see box).

Overwhelmingly, focus group participants emphasized that the current class size of 22 students had a significant impact on their career satisfaction and ability to support the children in their classrooms. One South Georgia teacher stated, “[I think about] where would these kids be if we could actually teach them like we’re able to teach them when there’s a smaller class size. It would benefit them so much.”



Several others pointed out that the class size and student-to-teacher ratio for Pre-K was larger than for older ages in their district. One metro Atlanta teacher said, “Our Kindergarten sits at 15 [children per class] and our Pre-K sits at 22 [children per class]. There's something not quite equitable about that particular picture—not just for the adults, but for the children too. If we're going to really make a difference in preparing children to be literate when they're in the third grade, then 22 [children per class] is just a lot.”

A majority emphasized that even a small change in class size would positively impact their ability to provide one-on-one support to each child and, therefore, improve children’s readiness for Kindergarten. Several mentioned that reduced class sizes due to incidental events like the COVID-19 pandemic or child absences, had a positive impact on their students. One metro Atlanta teacher shared, “If we have two absent—and it doesn’t matter which two—it gives us the time to get around and get those one-on-one moments with a child.” A South Georgia teacher added, “During COVID, we only had 18, and my God, we had the best year of my life.”

Several spoke about the difference a smaller class size would make on the classroom environment and day-to-day logistics, such as taking restroom breaks or the ability to use the room’s physical space. One metro Atlanta teacher said, “I definitely think that smaller class size would make a huge difference . . . just the overwhelming feeling you get when you walk in . . . my assistant goes to the bathroom because she's allowed to, you know, and I'm like, oh, I have 22 [kids].” Another metro Atlanta teacher shared, “I think [smaller class sizes] would help with everything, not just the attention you can give the kids but planning materials . . . a couple of kids less would make such a difference in overall instruction and climate of the classroom.”

Many focus group participants emphasized the importance of smaller class sizes to be able to meet the unique needs of individual students. One metro Atlanta lead teacher spoke about this in the context of children who have experienced trauma. “They bring that [trauma] into the classroom. Sometimes they just need a person to talk to and so you lose your assistant for that time. Well, then you're still with 21 kids, and how do you do anything effectively with 21 [kids]?”

*Due to declining Lottery revenues, the Georgia General Assembly made several cuts to Georgia’s Pre-K Program for the 2011-12 school year, including an increase in class size from 20 to 22 students. Although all other cuts were restored within a few years, and despite increasing Lottery revenues, the increased class size of 22 students has remained in effect for the last 12 years.*

*Georgia’s class size of 22 students and corresponding teacher-student ratio of 11:1 does not meet nationally recognized standards of quality set by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), which has annually tracked state-funded preschool program funding, access, and policies since the 2001-2002 school year.<sup>5</sup>*

*For the 2023-24 school year, DECAL announced plans to conduct a class size reduction pilot, which allows providers to receive full payment for a class based on enrollment of only 20 students. The focus groups described herein were conducted prior to this announcement.*

## Work Environment and Supports

### *Planning Time and Resources*

Many teachers conveyed that they did not have adequate planning time during their scheduled workday to develop lesson plans and otherwise prepare for the day's activities. Teachers in public school settings were more likely to have a designated planning time or break during the workday. Many teachers, particularly those from child care centers, reported that they planned outside of their paid work hours. A metro Atlanta teacher stated "All the teachers that I know, there's never a time outside of school where we're not working. You always have work to take home if you want to keep up."

Teachers expressed an overwhelming need for additional support with materials and resources for their classrooms. Some teachers acknowledged that the center or school supplied them with resources on a one-time basis or when additional funding allowed for it but desired more consistent access to materials that would enhance their implementation of the Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards (GELDS).

Because teachers didn't want to limit their students' experiences, many reported that they often paid for student resources out of their own pockets. One teacher in metro Atlanta explained that it's difficult to quantify the number of resources needed but having more consistent access to standard-aligned resources would be useful. "As a teacher, whether you're at a daycare or a public school, it's almost not a number, really, but having that ability to say, hey, I need this, and respond in a timely manner."

*The Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards (GELDS) are a set of research-based, age-appropriate quality standards spanning five domains: physical development and motor skills; communication, language, and literacy; social and emotional development; approaches to play and learning; and cognitive development and general knowledge. Georgia's Pre-K teachers are required to use curriculum aligned with the GELDS.<sup>6</sup>*

***Nearly 75% of teachers reported that their overall stress levels were moderate to high. The same percentage specifically rated their work-related stress as moderate to high.***



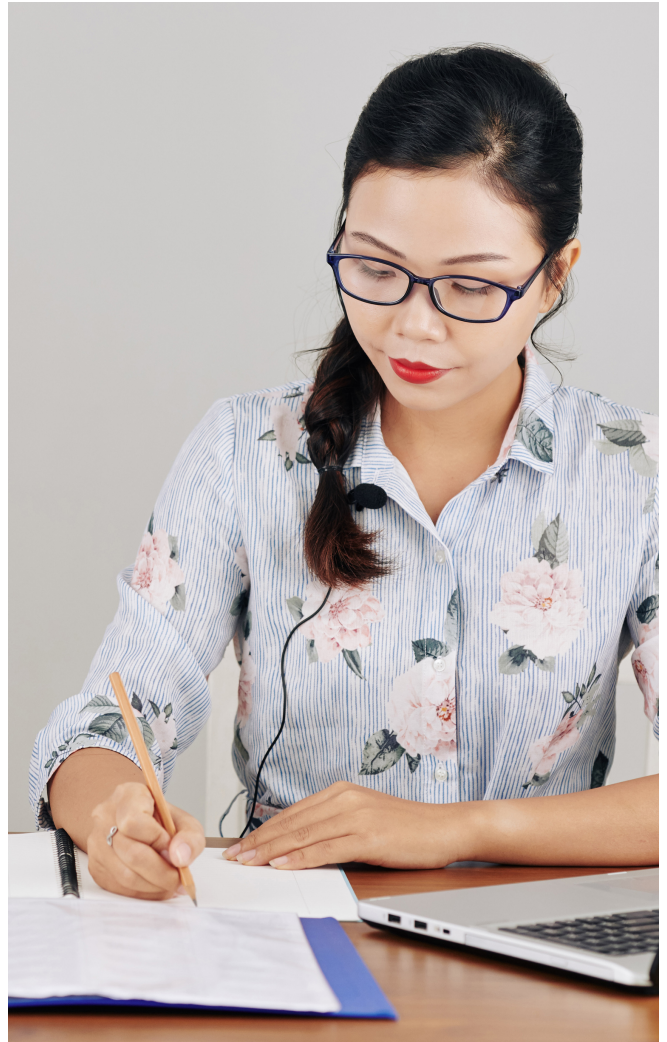
## Respect and Recognition

When polled, 91% of teachers indicated that respect and recognition were “extremely important” or “important” to their job satisfaction, yet several indicated that others, including administration, families, and other key stakeholders, do not understand the value of their role and importance of Pre-K.

Many of the Pre-K teachers expressed that they would have higher job satisfaction if they felt respected by school administration or center leadership, yet reported that they, in fact, didn’t feel supported by these individuals. As one metro Atlanta teacher explained, “People are going to give their all if they have that support.” A number of teachers indicated that a simple thank-you or visit to the classroom from leadership helped remedy feelings of disregard for the work. Some described feeling that their needs were not being heard. After her administration implemented a “Mindfulness Monday” to support teachers, one North Georgia teacher said, “That’s not necessarily what I need. I need a break during the day.”

Some teachers described a lack of respect and recognition from leadership and reported that this has impacted retention. One metro Atlanta teacher said, “I’ve seen a lot of quality teachers leave because they’re not respected.” In contrast, another metro Atlanta teacher indicated that support from administrators created a culture that encouraged job retention. Speaking about the effect of a strong leader, he stated “[The director] wasn’t there just doing his job. He did everything he could to elevate the children and the staff. And, when he left, I went and found him and went to go work for him again... I have all the support I can imagine from my director. And that’s the one reason why I’m staying.” Additionally, several Pre-K teachers within public school settings mentioned not feeling respected within the broader school or district, which often manifested as exclusion from certain programs or services. One North Georgia teacher, for example, reported that her school system had only recently started allowing Pre-K teachers to be named “Teacher of the Year.”

Many teachers indicated they did not feel adequately appreciated by parents and caregivers. One South Georgia teacher said, “They don’t look at us as teachers. They look at us as babysitters.” Some expressed that administrators can play a role in setting expectations and cultivating respect. One metro Atlanta teacher explained, “In my heart, I’m a teacher. I want them to be learning . . . My boss asks the parents to give us the respect of coming on time, putting education first . . . so that’s one reason I’ve stayed at this school so long and in the classroom so long.” Teachers consistently indicated a desire to be recognized as professionals in their work. One metro Atlanta teacher said, “You want to be respected as the person who knows what they’re doing. This is not an easy job.”





Beyond program leadership and families, teachers often discussed the importance of respect and recognition more broadly, particularly from others in the education field. For example, a metro Atlanta teacher shared, “A lot of [K-12] teachers thought we were teaching fingerpainting and shoe tying and all these fun things. Now . . . a lot of the Kindergarten teachers [say] you're really doing something, you're really making an impact, and you're doing more than what we thought you're doing. It's like real school.”

## *Professional Collaboration*

Most teachers expressed the importance of mentorship and collaboration with other professionals across various contexts. Both lead and assistant teachers emphasized that a positive relationship dynamic between a lead and assistant teacher increases their overall job satisfaction. One South Georgia assistant teacher said, “I plan to stay, to be quite honest, as long as my [lead] teacher stays.” Another metro Atlanta assistant teacher, in describing being paired with her lead teacher, said, “It’s just been like a rainbow.” In contrast, an assistant teacher from North Georgia, described feeling left out of the teaching partnership: “I could help you more if you, you know, incorporated me more.”

Pre-K teachers shared a desire to deeply connect with other professionals who can offer them “more than tips and tricks.” When considering the type of mentorship she’d like to receive, one North Georgia teacher described a differentiated approach: “Not all students are going to learn the same, so not all teachers are going to teach the same.” She went on to discuss the varying needs of teachers, expressing that mentorship should be tailored to those needs rather than based solely on a mentor teacher’s preferred approach. But several teachers, especially those employed at child care centers, reported having only one Pre-K classroom in their building, making collaboration with other Pre-K teachers difficult. This often drives them to scour social media or the internet for advice about meeting their students’ diverse needs.

Teachers also reported that collaboration among *all* staff members in the center or school is critical to creating a positive environment for students. A South Georgia teacher explained, “I don't care if you're a leader. I don't care if you're an assistant. I don't care if you work in the infant room. I don't care if you're making lunches or you're the person cleaning up at night. We are all just one team working together.”



Pre-K teachers overwhelmingly conveyed a passion for equipping students with the skills to be successful in Kindergarten. Some asserted that they needed more formal collaboration with elementary school teachers to adequately prepare their students. A metro Atlanta teacher expanded on this point, saying “I still have parents calling me now, this year, for their kids in kindergarten, telling me to talk to the kindergarten teacher about how to help their child get comfortable with writing or whatever.”

Some teachers also expressed confusion around the alignment between Pre-K and Kindergarten and emphasized the need for additional communication and collaboration between the early childhood and K-12 systems regarding curriculum, assessment, and expectations. One metro Atlanta teacher highlighted this challenge saying, “It's very different [from Pre-K to K], and it's unfair to the teaching staff. Just more cohesiveness—that’s what needs to be overhauled.”

# Compensation and Benefits

## Base Pay

An overwhelming majority of participants expressed that burnout is perpetuated by low wages that, in some cases, prohibit them from paying monthly bills or meeting other financial obligations. Additionally, several center-based teachers cited pay schedule challenges, with their programs paying annual salaries over a 10-month period as opposed to 12 months, which is common in public school districts. A metro Atlanta teacher conveyed the impact of wage-related challenges on recruitment and retention: “You’re losing people because the money isn’t there.” A lot of the teachers working in public school settings said that their school district supplemented their salaries for pay parity with the older grades. In contrast, the majority in private child care centers said that their salaries were not supplemented. Comparing her circumstances to those of her peers in child care settings, one North Georgia lead teacher working in a public school setting shared, “It’s also helpful [for us] because we do work in a public school system. There are more resources, so they very much supplement.”

Many teachers described having to find other ways to earn money, and some indicated these additional commitments interfered with their teaching obligations. A metro Atlanta lead teacher stated, “The passion is there, but people are burnt out because they have to take on a second job to maintain life. And that’s hard, and then you have to show up for the kids Monday through Friday and be full of energy, but they don’t realize that you’ve worked from 10 p.m. until 3 a.m. just to make ends meet.” Another metro Atlanta assistant teacher added, “Sometimes people at my work ask me, can I stay late and do this. I say, ‘No. I’m sorry. I have to go make money to pay the bills.’” Another metro Atlanta lead teacher advocated for a cost-of-living increase: “You just want to be able to pay all your bills and live, so raising the pay to meet the cost of living at the basic level would be a change tremendously.”

Assistant teachers in particular stressed that their pay was not adequate to meet their financial needs. This was a sentiment supported by many of the lead teachers. One North Georgia lead teacher said, “Assistant teachers still don’t get paid enough for what they do to help us out.” Many assistant teachers underscored that they lacked a pay scale for years of experience or additional education/credentials like their lead teacher peers enjoyed. One North Georgia assistant teacher said, “I’ve been in Pre-K for 15 years, but I have never received a raise for the experience that I keep bringing back to the table.” Additionally, several lead Pre-K teachers who were previously assistant teachers advocated for their years of experience as an assistant to count toward their pay scale as a lead. Finally, teachers expressed support for raises to be linked to the overall time that they had spent in the classroom and their tenure with the specific center or school.

*The amount DECAL provides Pre-K providers for lead teachers’ salaries is determined by teachers’ (1) education and/or credentials, with starting salaries ranging from \$34,315-47,343 and (2) years of experience as a Georgia’s Pre-K lead teacher and/or certified teacher in a K-12 public school, with a 3% increase in base salary each two years of service up to 20 years.*

*The average salary for a Pre-K lead teacher is \$43,728. In contrast, the average salary for Kindergarten teachers in Georgia is \$64,310 according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.<sup>7</sup>*

*The amount DECAL provides Pre-K providers for assistant teachers’ salaries is \$20,190 regardless of their education/credentials or years of experience. Although not required, Pre-K providers may supplement teacher salaries beyond what is provided by DECAL with other funds.*

7. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, State Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates Georgia Kindergarten Teachers, Except Special Education (May 2022). [https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes\\_ga.htm#25-0000](https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_ga.htm#25-0000)

## Bonuses, Stipends, and Tax Credits

When asked about various compensation mechanisms, teachers expressed that they appreciated supplemental pay, such as bonuses, stipends, and tax credits. But they noted that these supports were not as helpful to workforce recruitment and retention as raising base pay. Additionally, many teachers expressed a preference for supplemental compensation strategies that provided regular, guaranteed payments over those that were one-time in nature (e.g., bonuses) or could only be utilized infrequently (e.g., a tax credit that could only be used once a year).

*Administered by DECAL, POWER (Providing Our Workforce Essential Recognition) supplemental payments were a series of three \$1,000 wage supplements to early childhood professionals funded by the federal relief dollars dedicated to child care under the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).<sup>8</sup>*



Many teachers highlighted their experiences with previous incentive or bonus programs when discussing the impact of these strategies. Several, for example, highlighted their experiences with POWER supplemental payments provided by DECAL through federal relief funds [see box]. A metro Atlanta teacher stated, "I was struggling to just keep up with inflation and not take a massive pay cut, and the POWER payments helped with that." A metro Atlanta assistant teacher added, "The POWER payments were extremely impactful in keeping me in the industry long enough to say, 'Okay, this is the time.' I've finally reached a point in my personal life where I could afford to go back to school."

At the same time, teachers shared approaches that would make supplemental compensation strategies more beneficial for them. Some expressed that the application process for bonus payments was burdensome and difficult to navigate. They noted that they could not participate without support from their administration and they needed to re-submit paperwork to receive each payment. One North Georgia teacher said, "You had to jump through 15,000 hoops in order to get it . . . You almost just regret it."

Additionally, some discussed difficulty understanding the impact of supplemental compensation on their tax liability. A metro Atlanta

teacher commented, "I mean, it's nice, and appreciated, definitely appreciated, but it was difficult at tax time just knowing what to claim it under. Should I claim it? It was a lot." Overwhelmingly, teachers felt that awareness and education on how to access and manage supplemental pay helps motivate them to apply for such opportunities. The teachers also stressed that the amount of the supplemental compensation should be high enough to make an impact on teacher recruitment and retention.

Teachers also consistently agreed that supplemental payments should be inclusive of assistant teachers. One Metro Atlanta lead teacher said of assistant teachers' value, "They're the underdog of the program. You want to give a lot to the leads, and the leads deserve it, but so do these paras because they carry the program."



## Benefits

Participants frequently cited the accessibility of benefits such as health insurance, paid time off, and retirement as significant factors in whether individuals entered and remained in the early childhood field. One North Georgia lead teacher working in a public school said of her benefits, “It’s definitely one of the reasons why I stayed.”

*Using Lottery funds, DECAL gives funding to all Pre-K providers for lead and assistant teachers’ benefits in public and private settings. For most, this is calculated at 24% of their base salary. For Pre-K lead teachers in public schools with a teaching certificate issued by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission, this is calculated at 51% of their base salary. Although this funding is given to all Pre-K providers, it is the provider’s decision whether to utilize these funds for benefits. The funding could alternatively be used to pay additional salary or classroom expenses.<sup>9</sup>*

However, there were significant differences among participants’ access to benefits and, in some cases, the quality of those benefits, particularly between those in public school settings and those in private child care. In fact, many teachers in public school settings indicated that the greater accessibility of benefits is why they chose to work in that setting as opposed to private child care. And regardless of setting, lead teachers were more likely to report having access to benefits than assistant teachers.

A center-based assistant teacher from South Georgia emphasized these disparities: “I feel that we should have the same benefits as [those] working in the school system. There’s no difference. We’re still working with kids. We still have 22 kids in our class. I feel like we at the centers, being assistants [and] being on hourly pay, do not get the holidays, do not have health insurance, and we still have to pay for all those things out of our checks.”

Although several teachers reported simply going without a particular benefit if it was not offered by their employer, some indicated that they sought out and paid to access benefits on their own. But often, they noted, their current salary made this challenging. One metro Atlanta teacher noted, “I pay for my own insurance and have to create my own 401(k) for retirement, which is really difficult on the salary scale as it stands.” If she had access to benefits, another Metro Atlanta assistant teacher added, “I would quit all my side hustles, stop babysitting every weekend and doing data entry at night [to be able to afford benefits].”



9. Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning. "2023 - 2024 School Year Pre-K Providers’ Operating Guidelines." <https://www.dec.al.ga.gov/documents/attachments/guidelines.pdf>

When asked by poll about the impact on teacher recruitment and retention of specific benefits, including health insurance, retirement, and paid time off, participants routinely prioritized health insurance. In some cases, even when the Pre-K provider offered health insurance, the employee copay was too expensive for many teachers to take advantage of it, compelling them to find health insurance elsewhere or go without it entirely. One South Georgia teacher explained, “I’m covered under my husband’s insurance. [Otherwise], it wouldn’t be worth me working because insurance versus my pay, one outweighs the other.” A teacher from a child care center in North Georgia explained, “I get offered health insurance, but it’s still a very high rate because there are not as many employees. We have a high copay, high everything, and I can’t afford it.” A few assistant teachers shared that they receive health insurance through government-funded programs for those with low incomes. One metro Atlanta assistant teacher said that this allowed her to stay in the early education field: “Otherwise, after a year of teaching Georgia’s Pre-K, I was looking for another job because I didn’t have health insurance.”



Additionally, many participants discussed the accessibility and breadth of their paid leave policies, from sick and medical leave to vacation days. Some described having limited or no PTO, particularly outside of sick leave and regular school breaks. One North Georgia lead teacher working in a public school shared that she and the other Pre-K teachers experienced more restrictive paid time off policies than teachers in older grades.

Several described other specific challenges with taking time off, such as needing a doctor’s note to take sick leave. One metro Atlanta teacher described a lack of planning for and coordination of classroom coverage during teacher absences: “It’s not left to the administration to figure it out. It’s left to the teachers.”

Paid time off is often synonymous with vacations or rest, but some teachers reported that, to make ends meet, they had to take advantage of other job opportunities during breaks, particularly the summer. One metro Atlanta teacher shared, “If I choose to work summer school, I’ll get [my regular salary] and summer school pay, so it’s like double pay, so I can catch up on bills.” One South Georgia teacher said summer pay is critical to meeting the needs of her family: “The paid time off—I couldn’t do without that either. I also work a second job during the summer because my kids eat more during the summer. We, of course, want to have time, vacations, during the summer, but you got to have the extra money to come in to help cover what you need.”

## Career Development

Many of the participants reported a desire to attain additional credentials, and several were actively enrolled in degree or certificate programs. Participants often cited the value of salary increases that accompany such credentials, whether moving from an assistant to lead teacher position or to a higher category on the pay scale for lead teachers. “I’m getting my specialist degree right now, and part of my driving factor is money,” one metro Atlanta teacher stated. The added degree, she noted, would also have a positive impact on her benefits in the public school system: “It increases my retirement significantly.”

Some of the teachers who tried or desired to go back to school reported difficulty completing their education while working and supporting their families. They reported that it was hard to make ends meet financially and have the time to complete coursework. Several teachers specifically cited DECAL Scholars' (see box) tuition assistance, as well as some other local or state-level initiatives, as especially helpful. As one metro Atlanta assistant teacher shared, "If you want to go back to school, tuition assistance is super important. Our [school] system did it for a really short time actually. They would pay for you to go back to school, and it's life changing because you don't have to carry that debt with you."

Some teachers described policies within higher education institutions that made it difficult for them to complete their degree program, specifically requirements related to student teaching (i.e., internships or apprenticeships). A number of teachers, especially those in child care centers or working as assistant teachers, described not being able to utilize the hours that they were already working toward the student teaching requirements of their degree program.

*The minimum educational requirement for a Georgia's Pre-K lead teacher is generally a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or related field. Pre-K assistant teachers must hold an approved credential, such as a Child Development Associate (CDA). As previously noted, lead teachers' salaries vary drastically based on their highest degree or certificate, whereas assistant teachers' salaries do not vary based on credentials or tenure.*

One teacher from South Georgia described her journey: "I tried to go back to school, and I only have a year left. But I was going to have to leave my job because they wouldn't count my hours [at work] towards my own student teaching. You're basically working for free and still have to find a way to pay your bills." A North Georgia teacher described her daughter's similar experience: "She's currently in school to become a teacher. She works full time as a Pre-K assistant [teacher]. Next year is her last year [in her degree program], and she has to do an internship. They won't let her do her internship as an assistant in Pre-K, doing the lessons and everything, because colleges don't consider it actual teaching experience. She's going to have to leave [her current position] to do her internship in the morning and a part-time job in the afternoon." She later added, "What really bothers me is that she now has to quit, and she might not come back to early childhood because of it."

Although more commonly reported by teachers in center-based settings, a few public-school Pre-K teachers also described difficulty meeting degree programs' requirements within their existing roles. One North Georgia public school teacher described participating in a Pre-K through fifth-grade degree program that required one of her internships to take place outside of Pre-K, meaning she had to leave her Pre-K position to teach Kindergarten for a year to satisfy the program's requirements.





The DECAL Scholars program offers educational counseling, as well as financial assistance and rewards, to early childhood educators. As of November 2023, this program includes:

- Scholarships, which provide financial assistance to professionals currently pursuing credentials or degrees in early childhood education or child development.
- Incentives, which provide annual bonuses to professionals who've earned an ECE credential within the last five years and have been employed at the same provider for over a year.

DECAL Scholars is funded through the federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) and federal relief dollars dedicated to child care under the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).<sup>11</sup>

To navigate the process and competing demands of finding and completing a degree or credential, the teachers expressed that they needed the support of their school administration or center leadership. One metro Atlanta assistant teacher said support from her program's leadership alleviated a great weight. "I came to Georgia's Pre-K . . . and my boss, who's amazing, did all the leg work for me to get my parapro [certificate]." On the contrary, even with the support of administrators, teachers wanting to advance their education often encountered challenges understanding which degrees or certificates met the requirements for certain positions. One metro Atlanta teacher stated, "Barriers for me would be clarity in the steps in receiving the credentials needed for the position. My bachelor's degree is not in early learning. My director is super helpful, but she doesn't have all the answers."

### Georgia's Pre-K helps set the stage for children's future educational endeavors.

This is the central reason, participants expressed, that they're committed to entering this field and, in many cases, remaining in it. As one teacher from North Georgia shared, "**Pre-K is the beginning of everything.**" A metro Atlanta teacher added, "Our program has a reputation for preparing kids [for Kindergarten]. We go really far out of our way to make that happen, and it takes a lot." However, Pre-K teachers are not exempt from the recruitment and retention challenges facing the broader education field.

Focus group participants outlined **multiple factors** that influenced their career decisions and identified potential ways to improve recruitment and retention in the field. **Increased compensation was at the core of teachers' recommendations.** They also prioritized addressing **key pay and benefits disparities** between both assistant and lead teachers and public school and private child care teachers.

Participants also described a need for more **targeted support and professional development**, especially to help address children's social-emotional needs and ensure access to services for children with disabilities.

Finally, teachers highlighted the importance of **respect and recognition**—both in everyday experiences at the classroom level and in broader discourse and policymaking related to Pre-K. One North Georgia teacher requested that leaders "listen to all of our ideas, and respect each of us individually, too."

# Recommendations to Improve Recruitment and Retention of Georgia's Lottery-Funded Pre-K Teachers

## Recommendation #1: Compensation

- **Increase pay for Pre-K lead and assistant teachers by implementing pay parity between:**
  - Pre-K teachers and K-12 teachers  
*Many Pre-K teachers have the same education and experience as their K-12 peers, yet Kindergarten teachers in Georgia make on average 147% more than Pre-K teachers. This discrepancy in pay contributes to many teachers leaving Pre-K to teach older ages.*
  - Pre-K teachers in private and public settings  
*School districts often supplement Pre-K teachers' salaries to equal the pay of their K-12 counterparts, but private child care centers are less likely to have the financial means to do so. Higher compensation for Pre-K teachers in public settings creates heightened competition for qualified instructors and incentivizes the move from center-based Pre-K programs to public school programs. This places a drain on the pool of teachers for center-based programs, exacerbating the teacher shortage and impeding centers' ability to compete financially. Both center-based programs and school-based programs are necessary to meet communities' needs.*
- **Improve and expand pay scales for Pre-K teachers, including:**
  - Implementing a pay scale for Pre-K assistant teachers accounting for years of experience and education.  
*Currently, assistant teachers do not receive pay increases based on years of experience or education.*
  - Allowing experience as a teacher of ages 0-3 in formal licensed child care settings to count as creditable experience and, for Pre-K lead teachers, experience as an assistant teacher to count as creditable experience.
- **Explore mechanisms to supplement base pay (e.g., bonuses, stipends, and tax credits) for all early educators, including Pre-K lead and assistant teachers.**

## Recommendation #2: Benefits

- **Increase access to benefits, such as health insurance, retirement, and paid time off, for Pre-K teachers, particularly center-based and assistant teachers, by:**
  - Increasing the amount of funding provided for benefits for Pre-K lead teachers in center-based settings and assistant teachers regardless of setting
  - Requiring Pre-K providers to direct funding provided by DECAL toward staff benefits rather than other expenses
  - Increasing access to shared services models for providers in private settings



## Recommendation #3: Professional Development and Collaboration

- **Increase opportunities for Pre-K teachers to expand their skillsets through targeted professional development, specifically by:**
  - Delivering job-embedded professional development so that teachers have the ability to apply what they learn and receive real-time feedback.
  - Expanding the purpose and breadth of professional learning communities to provide opportunities to plan collaboratively and strategically.
- **Increase educators' capacities to meet students' social-emotional and mental health needs through trauma-informed practices, research-based professional development, and programs supported by licensed clinicians with training specific to this area by:**
  - Continuing to provide training to all Pre-K teachers on the Pyramid Model to support students' increased social-emotional needs in a systematic way;
  - Exploring other infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) evidenced-based interventions, such as Circle of Security or infant and early childhood mental health consultation; and
  - Ensuring that students in Pre-K classrooms in public schools are integrated in Georgia Apex Program partnerships.

*The Pyramid Model is a tiered, evidenced based approach to promoting positive social-emotional development. At the base of the pyramid model, a skilled, well-trained workforce supports the differentiated supports detailed in each tier. As the tiers increase, the model prescribes more targeted supports, moving from universal interventions to intensive, child specific strategies. In this way, children do not receive more support than they need as they have the opportunity to respond to general interventions.<sup>12</sup>*

*The Georgia Apex Program, administered by the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, works to increase access to mental health services for students in Pre-K through 12th grade. The program promotes coordination and collaboration between mental health services and schools, prioritizing access in a child's natural environment.<sup>13</sup>*



12. National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations. (2023). Pyramid Model Overview. <https://challengingbehavior.org/pyramid-model/overview/basics/>

13. Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities. (n.d.). Georgia Apex Program. <https://dbhdd.georgia.gov/georgia-apex-program>



## Recommendation #4: Pre-K - 12 Alignment

- **District leaders and program administrators should facilitate stronger, more intentional collaboration between Pre-K and early elementary teachers and leadership to support successful Kindergarten transitions and improved alignment.**

*Ongoing, intentional joint professional development opportunities for early childhood educators and leaders can improve curricular alignment and provide valuable opportunities for data-sharing across settings.*

- **Provide families with resources and opportunities (e.g., parent workshops) to learn how they can support their children in successful transitions.**

*Families experience transitions along with their children. Frequent, regular communication among birth-five educators, K-3 teachers, and families will nurture secure, positive relationships and promote continuity in children's learning as they move from one setting to the next.*

## Recommendation #5: Class Size

- **Reduce Pre-K class size to 18.**

*Research suggests that small class size and corresponding teacher-child ratios characterize the most effective programs for young children. The smaller the class, the easier it is for a teacher to develop a good understanding of each child's interests, needs, and capabilities.*

*DECAL's targeted pilot to reduce class size in some classrooms to 20 students during the 2023-24 school year provides an opportunity to understand the impact of reducing class size and scale the approach so all Pre-K students and teachers experience the benefits of smaller classes.*



## Recommendation #6: Classroom Operating Costs

- **Increase classroom operating costs by at least 10%.**
  - Ensure the operating classroom budget covers the materials listed on the Pre-K Basic Equipment List, providing for high-quality instructional materials that align with the approved curriculum.

*DECAL annually allocates operational funds per Pre-K classroom. Examples of classroom operating costs include instructional supplies and materials, training, rent, utilities, and administrative costs, such as the Pre-K portion of the director's salary. Additional funding for classroom operations is needed to keep up with inflation, ensure high-quality environments, and prevent funding from being taken from other buckets, such as teacher benefits, to support operating costs.<sup>14</sup>*

## Recommendation #7: Special Education Supports

- **Strengthen supports that directly impact both the special education referral and evaluation process as well as the systematic interventions that enable student success before a referral is made.**
  - Provide education on and build awareness of Georgia SEEDS for Success.
  - Increase the number of DECAL’s Inclusion and Behavior Specialists, who provide coaching in evidenced-based practices to Georgia’s early care and education workforce focused on general classroom management and social skill development.

*Georgia SEEDS for Success is a responsive, collaborative program co-administered by the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, the Georgia Department of Education, the Georgia Department of Public Health, the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, Get Georgia Reading, and higher education institutions. Seeds for Success offers a wide range of services to early educators in the face of students’ increased social-emotional and mental health needs. These services include a coordinated State Health Leadership team, which prioritizes an integrated approach to meeting children’s needs, training and instructional materials for teachers, and a Pyramid Model Implementation Project, among others. District staff, program administrators, families, and teachers can call a hotline to gain access to services most aligned with their needs under the Georgia SEEDS for Success umbrella.<sup>15</sup>*

- **Increase the number of school psychologists to ensure timely evaluations and eligibility determinations.**
  - Consider providing tuition reimbursement to school psychologists to attract them to the field so they can provide more timely evaluations to children referred for special education  
*The pandemic exacerbated the shortage of school psychologists and led to an increase in the number of students receiving special education services.*





## Recommendation #8: Career Planning and Development

- **Develop streamlined processes and procedures to disseminate information so that program and school leadership are knowledgeable about potential career advancement opportunities and can effectively relay that information to their staff.**
- **Maintain improvements made to the DECAL Scholars Program through federal relief funds, such as increasing the *Incentives* amounts, expanding eligible employers, and rewarding tenure.**
- **Build out ECE pathways in Georgia’s secondary and postsecondary education infrastructure to better recruit and prepare early educators in partnership with the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG), and the University System of Georgia (USG), including:**
  - Expanding the number of high schools offering the Early Childhood Care and Education Pathway; and
  - Expanding the number of degrees within USG and TCSG that are specifically tailored to early childhood education.
- **Ensure that degree requirements do not create unnecessary barriers. More specifically, ensure that policies for student teaching (e.g., internships, apprenticeships) allow students to count relevant experience teaching in center-based settings or as an assistant teacher toward required student teaching experience.**



## Recommendation #9: Additional Capacity to Support Family Well-Being

- **Provide funding for staff positions to support family and child well-being, comparable to the part-time Transition Coaches required as a part of the Pre-K Summer Transition Program.**

*In the Pre-K Summer Transition Program, Transition Coaches provide assistance with identifying and enrolling eligible children in the program, family engagement activities, and referrals to other services for children and families.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, prior to the cuts to Georgia’s Pre-K Program in 2011-12, Pre-K providers could apply to a separate, voluntary competitive grant program to employ a transition coach (a.k.a., resource coordinator).<sup>17</sup>*

## Recommendation #10: Respect and Recognition

- **Ensure that Pre-K teachers are respected as professionals and recognized for the critical work they do—both in their classrooms, schools, or programs as well as in the broader education ecosystem.**

*The early years of a child’s life are critical to positive brain development. Yet, these years and the educators who teach children during this critical period are often overlooked at various levels of policy and practice. State and local leadership, program directors, and elected officials can ensure that Pre-K teachers are respected and recognized for the work that they do in both big and small ways. A positive work environment where Pre-K teachers feel heard, respected, and included in the larger ecosystem of the school or center is critical to efforts to support recruitment and retention of this workforce.*

16. Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning. "Summer Transition Program 2023 Operating Guidelines."

17. Schumacher, R., Greenberg, M., and Lombardi, J. Universal Access to Prekindergarten: Georgia's Experience (April 2001). <https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/public/resources-and-publications/states/0004.pdf>





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