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### **2026 SESSION: EDUCATION BUDGET AND LEGISLATIVE HIGHLIGHTS**

Education was a key focus of the 2026 Legislative Session. The Legislature took up measures to improve reading outcomes for elementary grades by passing HB 1193 and funding nearly \$100 million to implement K-3 school-based literacy coaches and increased investments to school security and student support in the Amended FY 2026 and FY 2027 budgets.

#### **Literacy/Numeracy**

- HB 974, the FY 2027 budget, provides nearly \$100 million to support a statewide literacy initiative to improve reading outcomes for students in kindergarten through third grade. Research shows that reading proficiently by the end of third grade contributes to future academic achievement and life success. The FY 2027 budget includes \$70.4 million in newly appropriated funds for elementary school-based literacy coaches and \$18.4 million to realign Regional Education Service Agencies (RESA)-based literacy coaches to align with the purpose set forth the 'Georgia Early Literacy Act of 2026.' To improve student outcomes, the budget for the Department of Education also includes \$2.7 million to provide a one-time grant of \$15,000 to each school system to purchase vision and auditory screening equipment in order to provide annual screenings for students in kindergarten through third grade.
- HB 974 increases funds for the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) to carry out the requirements pursuant to the 'Georgia Early Literacy Act of 2026.' The \$2.4 million in new funds will support the review and recommendations of universal reading screeners; recommend high-quality instructional literacy materials in Pre-K through third grade; provide professional learning and development for current teachers, literacy coaches, and administrators; and establish a new director of literacy. HB 974 also provides \$527,966 for the Professional Standards Commission (PSC) to hire four additional program specialists to support the responsibilities outlined in the Act.
- [HB 1193](#) (Rep. Chris Erwin, 32<sup>nd</sup>), known as the 'Georgia Early Literacy Act of 2026,' expands state-wide literacy infrastructure, funding, and accountability across grades Kindergarten through third. Section 1-2 provides for a grant to local public schools with grades Kindergarten through third to receive funding for one school-based literacy coach. The State Board of Education, in collaboration with the Office of Student Achievement, will establish the qualification and duties for school-based literacy coaches. A few notable duties include spending no less than 70 percent of the school day working directly with students and teachers, and coaching educators on evidence-based practices and modeling instruction. Section 1-3 provides regional literacy coaches and leadership literacy coaches in Georgia's 16 regional

education services agencies (RESAs) to work with school-based literacy coaches throughout the state. Section 1-4 requires the Professional Standards Commission (PSC) to establish a literacy coaching endorsement for teachers and other certificated professional personnel. Section 2 amends the 'Georgia Early Literacy and Dyslexia Act' by requiring unified literacy plans for districts and charter schools, mandating high-quality K-3 instructional materials aligned to the science of reading (with escalating requirements tied to state funding by 2029-2030), and restructuring how universal reading screeners are selected and updated. Beginning January 1, 2027, the PSC will review state-approved educator preparation program compliance with curricula and instruction conforming to the science of reading, among other criteria, and report any significant findings to the various governing bodies and the legislature by November 1 of each year. The Code section further creates new state leadership roles, the state literacy director and Georgia literacy coach coordinator within the Office of Student Achievement. Article 4 establishes the Georgia Literacy Task Force within the Office of Student Achievement. This standing task force, under the leadership of the new state literacy director, will be integral in selecting K-3 high-quality instructional materials (HQIM), comprehensive professional learning, and universal reading screeners. Section 2-5 repeals the Georgia Council on Literacy on December 31, 2026. Section 3-3 requires local school systems to offer a full-day kindergarten program. The bill outlines early grade entry and readiness expectations by requiring children to attend kindergarten before entering first grade (with a readiness-based exception), encouraging school/home study beginning at age five, and requiring first grade readiness assessments and reporting. This section revises placement, promotion, and retention rules, and strengthens intervention and parent notification processes when students are significantly at risk of not reaching reading proficiency. This Code further allows parents or guardians to choose to enroll their child in the voluntary Georgia Pre-K program if the child is either four or five years old by September 1. It makes clear that eligible children must be allowed to enroll if a parent requests it, but a child can only participate in the program for one year. The bill ensures that both four and five-year-olds are treated equally when it comes to selection for available pre-K spots.

- [HB 1030](#) (Rep. Sandy Donatucci, 105<sup>th</sup>) creates the 'Math Matters Act' to strengthen math education in Georgia by requiring schools to expand advanced math opportunities, increase core math instruction time, and improve math teacher preparation. The Department of Education will provide guidance and technical assistance to local education agencies in developing and implementing advanced math courses in grades six and seven. By January 1, 2027, the State Board of Education must create new state standards for advanced middle and high school math courses. By the 2027-2028 school year, students who achieve a score of distinguished learner on the state-wide end-of-grade math assessment will be automatically enrolled into advanced math (with opt-out options). Parents of students who score proficient may request the student be enrolled into an advanced math course. The bill requires at least 60 minutes of daily math instruction in the fourth and fifth grades. The bill updates teacher certification requirements to ensure educators are trained in evidence-based math instruction and the core skills needed to teach math effectively.
- [HR 145](#) (Rep. Chris Erwin, 32<sup>nd</sup>) urges the Department of Education and the Department of Public Health to collaborate to prioritize the expansion of vision and hearing screenings at various grade levels to identify students with undiagnosed and untreated vision or hearing problems.

## School Safety and Student Support Services

- HB 973, the Amended Fiscal Year 2026 budget, increases school security funds by \$550,000 for an emergency response system pilot program. The FY 2027 budget includes \$50 million in bonds to purchase school safety equipment, statewide.
- The Fiscal Year 2027 budget increases funds for mental health support grants by \$1.3 million to properly reflect school counts and increases social worker grants by \$1.6 million to help underserved districts that do not have a social worker, bringing the total funding to \$4 million. The Amended FY 2026 budget includes \$750,000 for a pilot program to assist districts in capturing the maximum reimbursement for mental health services.
- The General Assembly appropriates \$500,000 to the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities for school safety initiatives, including behavioral health training, school safety plan reviews, and technical assistance to high need schools. This is in addition to \$6.9 million in base funding in FY 2027 for student advocacy specialist positions.
- The General Assembly includes additional funding for out-of-school care, bringing the total appropriation for the BOOST 2.0 program to \$15.75 million for Amended FY 2026 and FY 2027.
- [HB 1009](#) (Rep. Scott Hilton, 48<sup>th</sup>) amends O.C.G.A. 20-2-324.8 to require Georgia public schools to adopt and enforce distraction free education policies restricting student access to personal electronic devices during the school day. Beginning July 1, 2026, students in grades K-8 are prohibited from accessing personal devices bell-to-bell, with the restriction expanding to grades 9-12 by July 1, 2027, subject to limited legal, medical, and IEP/504 exceptions. The bill mandates clear storage procedures, enforcement mechanisms, parent communication protocols, progressive discipline, and off-campus guidance, while allowing continued use of school-provided technology and making the policy non-waivable across school system types.

## Educator Workforce

- The Amended FY 2026 budget includes \$366 million to provide a \$2,000 pay supplement for all K-12 teachers, administrative staff, custodians, nutrition workers, school nurses, and bus drivers. House Bill 973 also includes \$17.2 million to the Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) to provide a \$2,000 pay supplement to all teachers and assistant teachers.
- The Fiscal Year 2027 budget includes nearly \$4 million in new funds and \$5.7 million in existing funds to provide five days of leave for Pre-K lead and assistant teachers.
- [HB 1107](#) (Rep. Carmen Rice, 139<sup>th</sup>) creates the 'Excellent Teacher Preparation Act,' a state-wide accountability system for teacher preparation programs requiring the Professional Standards Commission to develop and publish annual performance measures for every educator preparation provider (EPP) in Georgia. The bill tracks outcomes like exam pass rates, job placement, retention, employer and graduate satisfaction, and student performance, while protecting individual privacy. It requires EPPs to provide data to the state, mandates regular review of results, and directs the Office of Student Achievement to include these findings in its annual educator workforce report, aiming to strengthen teacher quality and program transparency across the state.

- [SB 150](#) (Sen. Billy Hickman, 4<sup>th</sup>) extends the sunset for retired educators to return to work from June 30, 2026 to June 30, 2030. The bill requires educators who return to work in the area of English, language arts, or writing to hold a current dyslexia or reading endorsement approved by the Professional Standards Commission (PSC).

### **Early Childhood Education**

- The Amended FY 2026 budget directs DECAL to utilize existing funds to expand the Rising Pre-K program to 25 additional classes for Summer 2026. This targeted five-week program supports school readiness, particularly language and literacy development. The budget also directs the department to utilize existing funds to provide additional aftercare for the Pre-K priority group. In addition, the FY 2027 budget includes \$700,000 for DECAL, along with the recognition of \$881,000 in existing funds to expand the rising Pre-K program by adding 50 new classes.
- The FY 2027 budget provides \$9.7 million to DECAL to support the expansion of the extended day program for the Pre-K priority group. This addition fully funds extended day services with lottery funds, providing aftercare and school holiday care for 2,448 Pre-K students. This budget transaction frees up \$9.7 million in federal funds to expand the Child and Parent Services (CAPS) program to an additional 1,288 children.
- [HB 1123](#) (Rep. Jan Jones, 47<sup>th</sup>) amends O.C.G.A. 20-2-308 to require public schools that offer after-school programs and operate Georgia Pre-K programs to allow pre-K students to participate in those after-school programs starting in the 2026-2027 school year. The bill allows schools to request a temporary one-year waiver from the Department of Early Care and Learning if the school can show extenuating circumstances which prevent the school from offering the after-school program to pre-K students.
- [SB 589](#) (Sen. Matt Brass, 6<sup>th</sup>) allows parents or guardians to choose to enroll their child in Georgia's voluntary pre-K program if the child is either four or five years old by September 1. It makes clear that eligible children must be allowed to enroll if a parent requests it, but a child can only participate in the program for one year. The bill ensures that both four and five-year-olds are treated equally when it comes to selection for available pre-K spots. The changes would take effect in the 2026-2027 school year. The bill requires Georgia public schools that issue student ID badges to students in grades six through 12 to print information about the 9-8-8 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline on those badges. The message must include that students can call or text 9-8-8 at any time for help with suicidal thoughts, emotional distress, or substance abuse challenges. The requirement applies to ID badges issued on or after July 1, 2026.

### **School System Funding**

- The Amended Fiscal Year 2026 budget provides \$43.9 million to the Department of Education (DOE) for the Quality Basic Education (QBE) midterm adjustment to reflect current enrollment numbers. The formula also funds \$60,958 in growth for charter system grants; \$1.7 million for state completion special school grants; \$27.1 million in growth for the state charter school supplement reflecting two additional schools; and \$16.1 million in growth for the special needs scholarship.

- The Fiscal Year 2027 budget fully funds the Quality Basic Education (QBE) program, totaling \$14.9 billion in state funds. HB 974 includes \$11.7 million to provide for enrollment changes and training and experience, \$40.3 million for growth in the State Commission Charter School supplements, \$500,000 to begin planning the next State Completion Special School in middle Georgia, and an additional \$5.5 million for the Special Needs Scholarship.
- [HB 1164](#) (Rep. Will Wade, 9<sup>th</sup>) amends O.C.G.A. 20-2-6 by creating a State Board of Education audit committee to review fiscal reports for school systems, state charter schools, and completion special schools designated as high risk or moderate risk. The committee will be made up of board members and meet no less than six times each fiscal year. The bill requires annual audit readiness certification attesting that audit requirements have been met by the Department of Audits and Accounts by December 31st of each year. The legislation expands risk designations (moderate/high-risk) tied to repeated audit problems. Section 11 creates O.C.G.A. 50-6-6.1, which sets up a four-tier state-wide fiscal monitoring and intervention system through the Department of Audits and Accounts, and increases required reporting and public transparency for financially troubled systems. The bill provides the State Board of Education and the Office of Student Achievement stronger tools to combat financial mismanagement, like reviewing waiver use, conducting additional audits, limiting superintendent contract extensions in high-risk districts, and allows contract changes or termination under severe fiscal conditions.
- [HB 328](#) (Rep. Kasey Carpenter, 4<sup>th</sup>) amends Georgia's student scholarship organization (SSO) laws by expanding eligibility and adjusting scholarship funding requirements for private school tuition scholarships. The bill expands the list of qualifying students to access SSOs without the current six-week public school attendance requirement if they are military dependents stationed in Georgia, students with IEPs, Section 504 plans, or certain diagnosed disabilities. The legislation would apply beginning with the 2026 tax year. The bill prohibits any member of the General Assembly or a member's spouse from receiving any income from a student scholarship organization during a taxable year in which the organization receives a contribution for a tax credit per O.C.G.A. 48-7-29.16. The bill amends O.C.G.A. 20-2A-5, relating to parent or guardian endorsement of awards, to allow for the use of an electronic signature for the deposit to be made into an account of a private school. The bill amends O.C.G.A. 48-7-29.16, relating to tax credits for contributions to student scholarship organizations, to increase the aggregate cap for tax credits to \$150 million. The amount that may be used against insurance premium tax liability is changed from \$6 million to 6 percent of the aggregate amount of tax credits. The bill amends O.C.G.A. 48-7-29.21, relating to tax credits for donations to nonprofit corporations awarding grants to public schools, to increase the aggregate amount of tax credits to \$25 million. The bill amends Georgia's Quality Basic Education funding provisions by placing new restrictions and accountability measures on local school systems that provide virtual instruction to students who live outside the district. The bill prohibits local school systems from offering virtual instruction to out-of-system students if the system or virtual school has a College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) score below 70 for the two previous school years. The bill prohibits counting out-of-system students toward equalization funding calculations. The section is effective July 1, 2026.
- [SB 472](#) (Sen. Billy Hickman, 4<sup>th</sup>) allows the State Board of Education to recommend to the governor that local school board members be suspended with pay when the state auditor flags a district for the highest level of financial monitoring or issues findings of financial mismanagement or misconduct.

Suspended members can petition the governor for reinstatement. The bill tightens rules for superintendent contracts in financially high-risk systems, limiting contracts to 12 month renewals, and requires contracts to treat certain auditor findings or failure to follow a required intervention plan as defaults that allow termination for cause. It caps how much the board can advance state funds to districts outside normal allotments, up to 50 percent of the prior year's allotment, unless the state auditor recommends it and a formal monitoring/intervention plan is adopted and followed. The bill requires the Department of Audits and Accounts to perform, or cause to be performed, annual financial and compliance audits for each local school system and state charter school. By July 1, 2026, the department will create a progressive monitoring, support, and intervention programs for districts and state charter schools. The bill explicitly authorizes the state auditor to investigate local school systems and state charter schools for suspected mismanagement or misconduct.

### **Other Educational Opportunities**

- HB 974 includes \$2.1 million in new funding in Agriculture Education to support extended day and extended year programs, revitalize and repair FFA and youth camps, and fund support staff for direct student services. In the Technology and Career Education program, the FY 2027 budget includes \$1.6 million for high-demand equipment and heavy equipment grants for new and expanding career and technical education labs to support high demand careers, as well as \$1 million for an artificial intelligence and coding literacy program.
- The Amended FY 2026 and FY 2027 budgets include an additional \$18.4 million and \$21 million, respectively, for the Georgia Student Finance Commission to fund the growing participation in the Dual Enrollment program. With these additional funds, the FY 2027 appropriation comes to \$130 million in state funds, which will provide awards to more than 70,000 students across the state.
- The Amended FY 2026 budget provides \$6 million to the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) to develop a new Georgia Career Navigator System, which is an upcoming statewide digital tool that will connect students, jobseekers, and employers by aligning education and training pathways with in-demand careers to support workforce readiness and economic mobility. Nearly \$4 million is provided to the Governor's Office of Student Achievement for ongoing costs associated with the career navigator system.
- [HB 907](#) (Rep. Jan Jones, 47<sup>th</sup>) amends O.C.G.A. 20-2-2096.3 to require completion special schools to twice annually submit a list of current program offerings to the resident school system, and for that school system to post these programs in a prominent place in the school. Section 2 amends O.C.G.A. 20-2-2096.7 dealing with new completion special schools being opened in an area where there was not one, but another completion school operated a program there, to ensure the state board provides for a transition period for students to move to the new school. Section 3 creates O.C.G.A. 20-2-2096.9, which requires local school systems within the territory of a completion special school to either partner with a completion special school through a collaborative agreement or directly provide alternative education programs and services for students in grades 9-12 at risk of not completing school. Local school districts must share with the local completion special school any contact information for students who stop attending or withdraw within 10 school days after attendance stops or withdrawal occurs.

- [HB 1284](#) (Rep. Deborah Silcox, 53<sup>rd</sup>) allows high school students with a terminal medical condition who are receiving end-of-life care to be awarded their high school diploma. A parent or guardian must submit a written request to the local superintendent, along with medical documentation confirming the student's condition. Within 14 days, the local board will petition the State Board of Education to waive normal graduation credit requirements. If approved, the student will be granted a diploma. The bill allows diplomas to be awarded posthumously, if necessary, and directs the State Board of Education to create rules to make sure the process happens quickly and respectfully.
- [HB 1293](#) (Rep. Jan Jones, 47<sup>th</sup>) transitions the Dual Achievement Program from a pilot program to a permanent program within the Technical College System of Georgia. In order for a student to be eligible for the program on or after July 1, 2028, the student must meet the following criteria: be between 18 and 23 years of age; be withdrawn from a public school in this state; have not yet earned a high school diploma; meet admission requirements; participate in provided wraparound services; and provide written acknowledgement of specified information. The bill allows eligible 16 or 17-year-old students to participate in the program if they live in a completion special school attendance zone that does not have an operating completion special school. The bill requires the State Board of Education to coordinate with the Office of Planning and Budget to develop a funding formula for the program, to be implemented by Fiscal Year 2028.
- [HB 1302](#) (Rep. Matthew Gambill, 15<sup>th</sup>) restructures and modernizes Georgia's education and workforce development system. The bill renames the "Office of Student Achievement" to the "Office of Education and Workforce Strategy," and expands its role in coordinating education, workforce planning, and data systems across agencies. It requires development of a combined 'Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act' (WIOA) Plan and Perkins State Plan, aligning secondary, postsecondary, and adult workforce programs with regional labor market needs and federal requirements. The bill designates TCSG as the state apprenticeship agency, and renames the High Demand Apprenticeship Program to the Top State for Talent Pre-Apprenticeship and Apprenticeship Program. It expands support for pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship sponsors, provides financial incentives (including contract completion awards), prioritizes high-demand careers, and updates definitions and reporting requirements related to apprenticeships. The bill creates an "Education Data Governance Board," and directs the Office of College and Career Academies within TCSG to support workforce-aligned education programs.
- [SB 369](#) (Sen. Shawn Still, 48<sup>th</sup>) makes changes in how Georgia handles nontraditional education programs, virtual students, extracurricular participation, and charter schools. The State Board of Education is required to create clear rules and standards for nontraditional education programs, such as dropout recovery, credit recovery, and flexible scheduling, including how their performance is measured and reported. The bill expands and clarifies policies around dropout recovery charter schools, including how they are defined, approved, and evaluated. It requires the state to create specific standards and accountability measures for these schools, separate from traditional charter schools, while also allowing existing charter schools to convert into dropout recovery charters. The bill amends the 'Dexter Mosley Act' by adding virtual school students to the program so they may participate in extracurricular and athletic activities at their local public schools, as long as they meet requirements like enrollment, academic performance, and tryouts. The bill requires local school boards to consider the total cost of ownership when buying technology like laptops, tablets, or interactive boards. This includes looking at repair costs, how adaptable devices are over time, and the resale or salvage value compared to the

purchase price. Starting in 2027, school systems must submit annual reports to the Georgia Department of Education showing how many devices they use, how often devices break or need repairs, how many were fixed or taken out of service, and how much money was spent repairing or replacing them. The Department of Education must then compile this information and submit a state-wide report to state leadership each year. Section 7 of the bill revises Georgia law related to charter schools and the approval of new local charter school petitions. It updates an incentive grant program that provides funding to local boards of education that approve new charter schools. Local school boards may receive \$250,000 per approved charter school each year for the first three years of the school's operation, subject to available funding, with a state-wide cap of \$2.25 million per fiscal year. Finally, the bill establishes procedures for handling records if a state charter school closes, requiring the managing nonprofit to maintain records for a 180-day period before transferring them to the commission.

### **Other Education Budget Items/Legislation**

- The FY 2027 budget appropriates \$1 million to the Department of Education Nutrition program and \$1 million to the Department of Human Services to begin the implementation of SUN Bucks, a new summer nutrition program for economically-disadvantaged students. This total funding of \$2 million will allow the state to draw down significant matching funds from the United States Department of Agriculture to help with administrative costs of the program. This effort is in addition to the Happy Helpings program administered by the Department of Early Care and Learning that works with organizations to provide meals and snacks for eligible children over the summer.
- HB 974 reduces the governor's recommended increase for the State Health Benefit Plan (SHBP) employer contribution per-member-per-month (PMPM) rate from \$2,028 to \$1,935. The increase of \$50 PMPM, rather than \$143 PMPM, in addition to a direct appropriation of \$31 million in the Department of Community Health's SHBP program, helps the plan address the unfunded liability of future retirees, while putting less strain on local school system budgets.
- [SB 148](#) (Sen. Bo Hatchett, 50<sup>th</sup>) amends the 'Quality Basic Education Act' to allow local school boards to offer hunting safety instruction for students in grades six through 12. Each local board of education is also authorized to establish a curriculum for hunter safety instruction based on the hunter education courses offered by the Department of Natural Resources. The State Board of Education will adopt instructional standards no later than April 1, 2026. Section 2 creates O.C.G.A. 20-2-590, which establishes an outdoor learning spaces pilot program. Private, nonprofit, and local school system funding may be utilized for community engagement, design, and construction costs. The Department of Education will provide a report on results to the House and Senate Education Committees after the third year of the pilot. Section 3 removes the requirement of involvement from a licensed physician or other person authorized by the Georgia Composite Medical Board in automated external defibrillator programs. Section 4 increases the number of personal days school personnel may utilize accumulated sick leave for from three days to five days.
- [SB 179](#) (Sen. Clint Dixon, 45<sup>th</sup>) amends O.C.G.A. 20-2-149.3, to implement a new graduation requirement. Beginning in the 2031-2032 school year, students must have completed a computer science course or a career, technical, and agricultural education (CTAE) course embedded with computer science in grades eight through 12 in order to graduate. The computer science course will be

in-person, in a blended learning environment, or through virtual instruction. Section 2 amends O.C.G.A. 20-2-319.1, to increase the payment by local school systems to Georgia Virtual School from \$250 per student per semester course to \$350 per student per semester course. Section 3 creates O.C.G.A. 20-2-324.10, to encourage local school systems to facilitate access for students to participate in citizenship, civic, and patriotic activities provided by a patriotic society. Representatives of patriotic societies must have the opportunity to speak with students to promote good citizenship. These societies include, but are not limited to, Boy Scouts of America and the Girl Scouts of the USA.

- [SB 431](#) (Sen. Kay Kirkpatrick, 32<sup>nd</sup>) revises various definitions in Title 20 like area school system, county school system, independent school system, etc. The bill clarifies parents' and legal custodians' rights to access education records and replaces various uses of "school day" or "business day" with the more specific term "school business day." Section 3 removes a prior time limitation on when a parent or legal custodian may request student records. The bill aims to strengthen protections for foster care students transferring schools by requiring receiving schools to enroll them within three school business days after receiving a completed registration form, whether through permanent or provisional enrollment. It creates a process for reporting noncompliance and allows the Department of Education to require corrective action plans. In addition, Regional Education Service Agencies (RESA) student affairs officers and the Department of Education must prepare reports on disputes and enrollment issues. Section 6 expands the Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) grant program by allowing grants to be used not only at University System of Georgia and Technical College System schools, but also at certain eligible private postsecondary institutions that offer approved programs for students with intellectual disabilities. Section 6 sets rules for award amounts and removes the prior sunset date for students enrolled by July 1, 2028.
- [SB 523](#) (Sen. Russ Goodman, 8<sup>th</sup>) prohibits the exclusion from participation, denial of benefits, or discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, or religion of any person in this state, as related to educational programs or employment through a public school that receives federal or state financial assistance. The bill establishes a state-wide K-12 Title VI coordinator dedicated to monitoring complaints of discrimination and harassment in public schools, in accordance with Title VI of the federal 'Civil Rights Act of 1964.'