



QUALITY EDUCATION FOR EVERY KID

GEORGIA
—CENTER FOR—
OPPORTUNITY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
GEORGIA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS	2
Georgia's Public School System by the Numbers	3
How Public Schools are Managed	4
How Public Schools are Funded	4
How Student Achievement is Measured	5
OTHER EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE IN GEORGIA	8
Public School Transfers	10
How to Expand Public School Options for Families	11
Charter Schools	12
Georgia Promise Scholarship	14
Georgia Tax Credit Scholarship	18
Special Needs Scholarships	20
Microschools	22
Homeschooling and Hybrid-Homeschooling	22
CONCLUSION	23
GLOSSARY	24
CONNECT WITH US	25

INTRODUCTION

George Washington Carver said education is the “key to unlock the golden door to freedom.”

Education is one of the most powerful ways that kids connect with positive role models, ideas, and skills that enable them to imagine and pursue meaningful, prosperous futures.

At the same time, these futures are evolving—and fast. Modern technology, new industries, and new skills required for work mean that Georgia can no longer skate by having only 34% of fourth graders showing proficiency in math and 32% in reading, according to the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Georgia’s future depends on preparing future generations for health, resilience, and success in today’s world. An education system that honors every child’s unique situation and prevents a lack of quality education will forge the paths for social and economic mobility that our children deserve.

Research is clear that students who successfully complete high school tend to have higher lifetime earnings than their peers, better health, more involvement in their communities, decreased mortality rates, fewer criminal records, and lower teen pregnancy rates. This relationship between education and poverty is starkly reflected in poverty rates as of 2022: For those with no high school diploma, the poverty rate was 25.2%. It plummets to 13.3% among individuals who have a high school diploma but no college degree.

At the Georgia Center for Opportunity, we care deeply about education because it is a key building block of a flourishing life and a pillar of healthy,

stable communities. That’s why we champion a transformational vision for K–12 education in Georgia: A system where every child is able to access quality education without restrictions of income, race, zip code, or other life circumstances beyond their control.

The goal should be to provide the best education possible to our students. Less important is the structure of the delivery system for education. In a modern world where choice and flexibility is becoming expected, Georgia should embrace other forms of education opportunities that have proven successful within our state and across the country.

“George Washington Carver said education is the ‘key to unlock the golden door to freedom.’”

Most Georgia parents and students access education through their local public schools and will likely continue to do so. While this option is great for many kids, we still have an obligation to ensure that all kids have access to quality education—including the students who aren’t thriving in traditional public schools.

If we truly want all of Georgia’s students to obtain a quality education that prepares them for a meaningful career and a stable life, parents need more options. If we want Georgia’s economy to continue to thrive and attract new jobs and opportunities to our state, parents need more options. Expanding opportunities will lift our entire educational system—and entire lives.

This guide is designed to give Georgia’s elected officials, community leaders, and parents a better understanding of Georgia’s current education options and how they can be expanded to enable more kids to thrive in school, at work, and in life.

GEORGIA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS



BY THE NUMBERS

ENROLLMENT IN GEORGIA'S SCHOOLING OPTIONS 2022 Data

1,682,288
Public School Students
(less charter school students)

149,866
Private School Students
(less tax credit and special needs scholarship)

92,590
Homeschool Students

39,639
State-Approved Charter School Students

25,767
Locally-Approved Charter School Students

19,516
Tax Credit Scholarship Recipients

5,788
Special Needs Scholarship Recipients

Notes: Estimates are calculated from data provided by the Georgia Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, and EdChoice.

GEORGIA'S PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

Georgia's 2,200+ public schools serve approximately 1.7 million students.

↑
Largest school district
Gwinnett County
(187,095 students)¹

↓
Smallest school district
Taliaferro County
(165 students)²

219
Total school systems

159
County systems

21
Independent city school systems

101
State & locally commissioned charter schools

5
State schools

181
Local schools districts

14
Districts serve fewer than 1,000 students

6
Systems serve 50,000+ students

Source: Georgia Department of Education (unless otherwise footnoted).

¹ <https://georgiainsights.gadoe.org/Dashboards/Pages/District-Financial-Information.aspx>
² Ibid.

HOW PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE MANAGED

STATE LEVEL

The State Superintendent is the administrative head of the Georgia Department of Education. The position is filled via statewide election every four years.

The State Board of Education (SBOE) is a group of 14 members who represent each of Georgia’s congressional districts and set the policies and regulations for Georgia’s public education system. They are appointed by the Governor and serve seven-year terms.

LOCAL LEVEL

School districts are managed by locally elected boards of education.

HOW PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE FUNDED



Georgia’s student funding formula was created in 1985 through the Quality Basic Education Act, and no major reforms have been made since then. Funding for public school students comes from three sources:³

- 47.2%** Local funds, such as property and sales taxes
- 39.5%** State budget
- 13.3%** Federal government

EDUCATION FUNDING FACTS

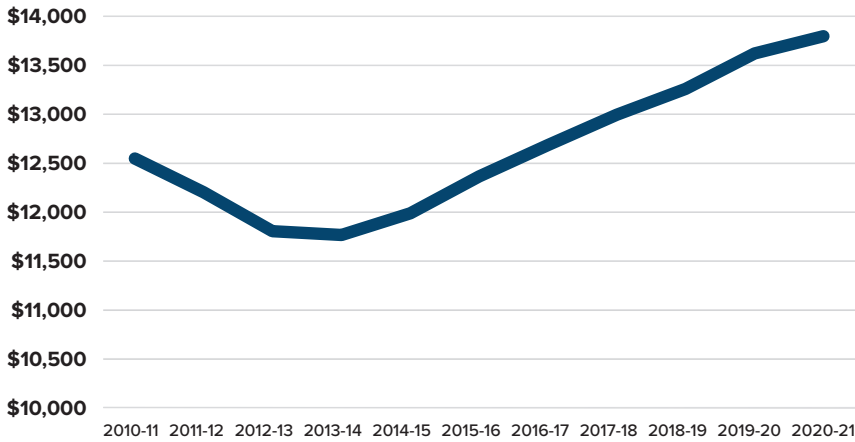
- Nationally, Georgia ranks 36th in education spending and 32nd in education funding.⁴
- Total Revenue to Public Schools: \$29.6 billion in 2023.⁵
- Total Public School Spending: \$28.7 billion in 2023.⁶
- At 52% for FY 2025, funding for education (pre-school to post-secondary) is Georgia’s largest budget item.⁷

3 <https://georgiainsights.gadoe.org/Dashboards/Pages/District-Financial-Information.aspx>
4 <https://educationdata.org/public-education-spending-statistics#georgia>
5 <https://georgiainsights.gadoe.org/Dashboards/Pages/District-Financial-Information.aspx>
6 Ibid.
7 https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/document/docs/default-source/house-budget-and-research-office-document-library/2025-fiscal-year/fy2025_budget_highlights_infographic.pdf?sfvrsn=89162248_2

PER-PUPIL SPENDING OVER TIME

Public School Per-Pupil Expenditures, 2010-11 to 2020-21

Source: National Center for Education Statistics⁸



HOW STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IS MEASURED

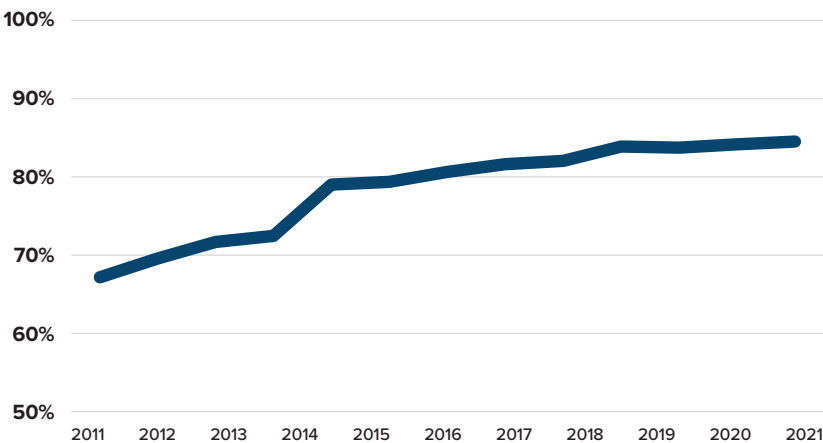
When it comes to academic accountability and achievement, there are a few assessments that give policymakers, school leaders, and parents information about how public schools are performing. While data from these sources provides much-needed insight on school performance, the findings are not tied to any enforced consequences for under-performing schools.

GRADUATION RATES

In 2023, Georgia’s graduation rate was 84.4%,⁹ which is on par with the national average for public schools (85%).¹⁰ According to the Georgia Department of Education’s reporting, the statewide graduation rate has increased 14.7% since 2012.

Georgia Graduation Rates, 2011-2023

Source: Georgia Department of Education



8 <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest-dashboards/state/georgia/>
9 <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Pages/PressReleaseDetails.aspx?PressView=default&pid=1075>
10 <https://www.publicschoolreview.com/average-graduation-rate-stats/national-data>

GEORGIA’S PERFORMANCE ON THE NATION’S REPORT CARD

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also referred to as “the nation’s report card,” tracks American students’ proficiency in core subjects and is considered the most accurate assessment for comparing student achievement across states. NAEP assessments evaluate student proficiency in math, reading, and science at the levels of fourth grade and eighth grade.

According to NAEP, proficiency is defined as “solid academic performance for the given grade level and competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter.”

Georgia NAEP Scores: 2022 Proficiency Levels¹¹

Grade	Reading	Math	Science
4th Grade	32% proficient	34% proficient	35% proficient
8th Grade	31% proficient	24% proficient	31% proficient

11 <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/>

12 <https://www.georgiapolicy.org/publications/2023-college-and-career-ready-performance-index/>

COLLEGE AND CAREER READY PERFORMANCE INDEX (CCRPI)

This index is a statewide measurement for Georgia schools. It scores school districts on how well they are preparing students for college and careers by considering several factors: content mastery, student progress, student performance gaps, readiness for the next levels of education, and high school graduation rates.

For many years, the Georgia Department of Education (GADOE) and the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) calculated this index as a 0-100 score for each school. This practice continued until the U.S. Department of Education granted flexibility waivers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In late 2023, GADOE sought and obtained a permanent flexibility waiver to discontinue calculating and publishing a single 0-100 school score. Instead, the five parts of the CCRPI score would be calculated and published separately.

While educators know and understand how to interpret the CCRPI component scores, parents and non-educators do not. Without a single score, parents would lose useful data for getting a general sense of the quality of their child’s education.

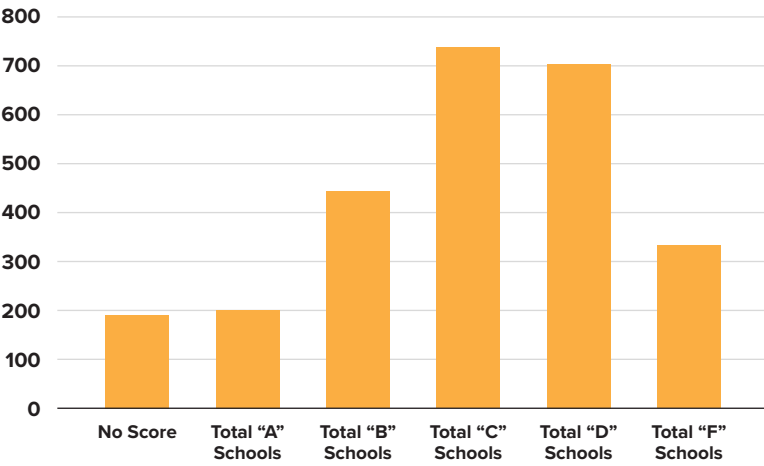
In 2024, Governor Brian Kemp signed into law House Bill 1122, which included a provision that GADOE once again calculate and publish the single 0-100 CCRPI school scores. This new law overrides the U.S. Department of Education flexibility waiver and preserves an important tool for transparency and accountability in Georgia’s public school system.

The most current set of scores is the 2023 College and Career Ready Performance Index.¹²

2023 CCRPI School Scores

Score	# of Public Schools	% of Total
No Score	189	7.26%
Total “A” Schools	200	7.68%
Total “B” Schools	442	16.97%
Total “C” Schools	737	28.30%
Total “D” Schools	704	27.04%
Total “F” Schools	332	12.75%
Total Schools	2,604	100%

A: 90-100 | B: 80-89 | C: 70-79 | D 60-69 | F: <60



GEORGIA MILESTONES

The Georgia Milestones Assessment System is a summative assessment system for students from third grade through high school. It measures how well students have mastered the knowledge and skills included in state content standards across core subjects of English/Language Arts (ELA), mathematics, science, and social studies.

Since federal law requires that states administer assessments in these areas as well, the Georgia Milestones are designed to serve both the federal and state requirements, reducing the number of assessments students must take overall.

Georgia Milestone	ELA	Math	Science	Social Studies
End-of-Grade	Grades 3-8	Grades 3-8	Grades 5 & 8 *High school physical science (Grade 8 only)	Grade 8
End-of-Course	American Literature & Composition	Algebra I / Coordinate Algebra	Biology	U.S. History

Visit the Georgia Milestones Results Dashboard to see the latest results:
<https://georgiainsights.gadoe.org/Dashboards/Pages/Georgia-Milestones.aspx>

OTHER K-12 EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES IN GEORGIA



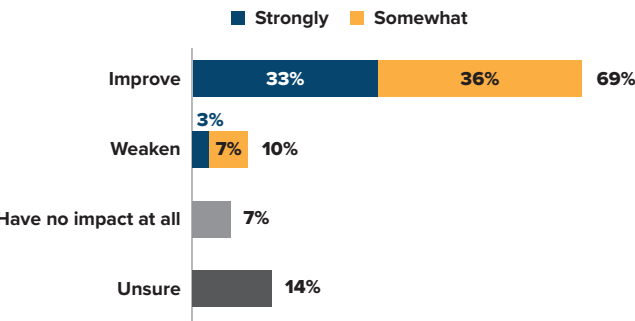
According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 87% of Georgia students are enrolled in a public school. A majority of students will continue to access education through local public schools. Even so, a growing number of Americans believe that our education system can serve all students better by embracing more flexibility—within the public school system, as well as outside of it.

To give Georgia’s kids the best possible futures, it is important that we have alternatives that uniquely serve individuals and communities alongside a robust public school system.

More Americans say that greater flexibility within K-12 education will improve our nation’s overall education system.

Source: U.S. National Survey conducted by yes. every kid. foundation. and YouGov, September 2023

If we make K-12 education more flexible for families, do you think this would improve or weaken our nation’s overall education system?

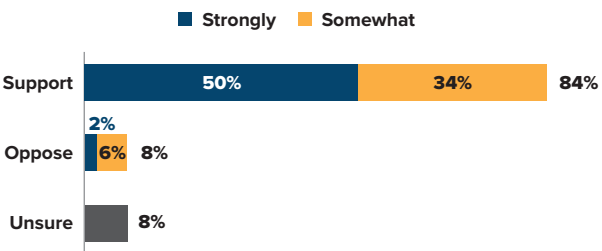


Key Demographics	% Improve
K-12 Parent	77%
Black	74%
Poor	73%
Republican	72%
Upper Middle Class or Higher	71%
Independent	70%
Middle Class	70%
Men	69%
Women	69%
Democrat	69%
White	69%
Hispanic	69%
Working Class	66%

Support is also high for giving every child the ability to attend the public school best suited to their needs, regardless of their zip code.

Source: U.S. National Survey conducted by yes. every kid. foundation. and YouGov, September 2023.

Thinking about it a different way... Do you support or oppose giving every child in the United States the ability to attend the public school in their state that best meets their needs?

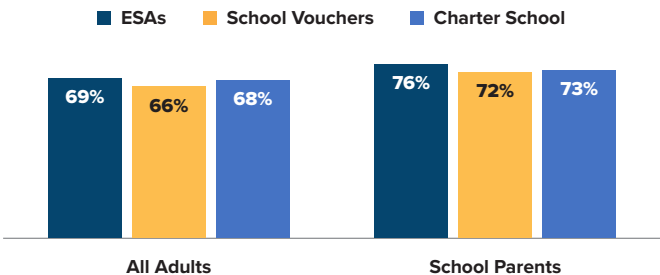


Key Demographics	% Improve
Black	92%
Democrat	88%
Working Class	87%
Women	86%
K-12 Parent	86%
Independent	85%
Hispanic	85%
Poor	85%
Upper Middle Class or Higher	84%
Men	83%
Republican	83%
White	83%
Middle Class	82%

Georgia residents, including those who are school parents, are highly in favor of policies that expand schooling options.

Source: EdChoice Public Opinion Tracker, Georgia State Brief.

% Total Support, Among All Adults (Strongly Support + Somewhat Support)



PUBLIC SCHOOL TRANSFERS

Public school transfers are an education option that allows parents to move their child to a different public school than the one they are zoned for.

INTER-DISTRICT TRANSFERS: Switching to a Different School Outside Student’s District of Residence

In 2024, the Georgia General Assembly passed Senate Bill 233, which included an update to Georgia’s inter-district transfer law.

Previously, a student could not attend a school other than the one they were zoned for without the express permission of the school the student was leaving and the school the student sought to attend. The State Board of Education provided procedures for the “compelling reasons and circumstances” that would merit a transfer being approved.

SB 233 removed the requirement of a “compelling reason and circumstance” and the need for permission from the school the student seeks to leave. Now, only the school the student wishes to attend needs to approve the student’s transfer.

Schools are allowed but not required to charge tuition for students transferring into the school. Beginning in 2026, this tuition will be capped at “total revenues less federal revenues less state revenues per full-time equivalent student”—in other words, the amount of local revenue per full-time equivalent student.

INTRA-DISTRICT TRANSFERS: Switching to a Different School Inside the Student’s District of Residence

In 2009, the Georgia General Assembly passed a law requiring local school systems to make transfers available to families.

Georgia law currently requires local boards of education to develop procedures allowing intra-

district student transfers. The ease with which these transfers are approved varies from school district to school district.

HOW DO PUBLIC SCHOOL TRANSFERS WORK?

Parents must contact the local school system to see which schools will accept transfers and for which grades. Each school system is required to notify parents by July 1 about which schools have space. Many systems post this information on their websites before July 1.

Parents must then apply for a transfer through their district’s website, at the district office, or at the local school. If more students apply than there is space available, some school systems will make decisions on a first come, first served basis. Others will hold a random lottery.

STUDENT ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

- A student must be enrolled in a public school in Georgia.

SCHOOL OPTIONS

- Another public school within the student’s district of residence that has available space in the student’s grade (intra-district transfer).
- Another public school outside the student’s district of residence that has available space and approves the transfer (inter-district transfer).
- Most districts only allow transfers at the beginning of the school year, but all can elect to accept students throughout the year.
- A student who transfers to another school may continue to attend the school until completing all grades of the school.

COSTS TO FAMILIES

- Transportation is the responsibility of the parent/guardian.
- Public schools have the option to charge tuition to students transferring from an outside district.

EXAMPLES FROM ACROSS THE STATES HOW TO EXPAND PUBLIC SCHOOL OPTIONS FOR FAMILIES



FLORIDA: UNRESTRICTED OPEN ENROLLMENT

In 2016, Florida passed a law creating state-wide open enrollment that required all districts to participate. Students can transfer from the school they’re zoned for to any public school that has space in their grade level.

While there are a few ways Florida could improve its public school transfer policy, its unrestricted approach is one other states can learn from.¹³



WISCONSIN: OPEN ACCESS TO ANY SCHOOL DISTRICT

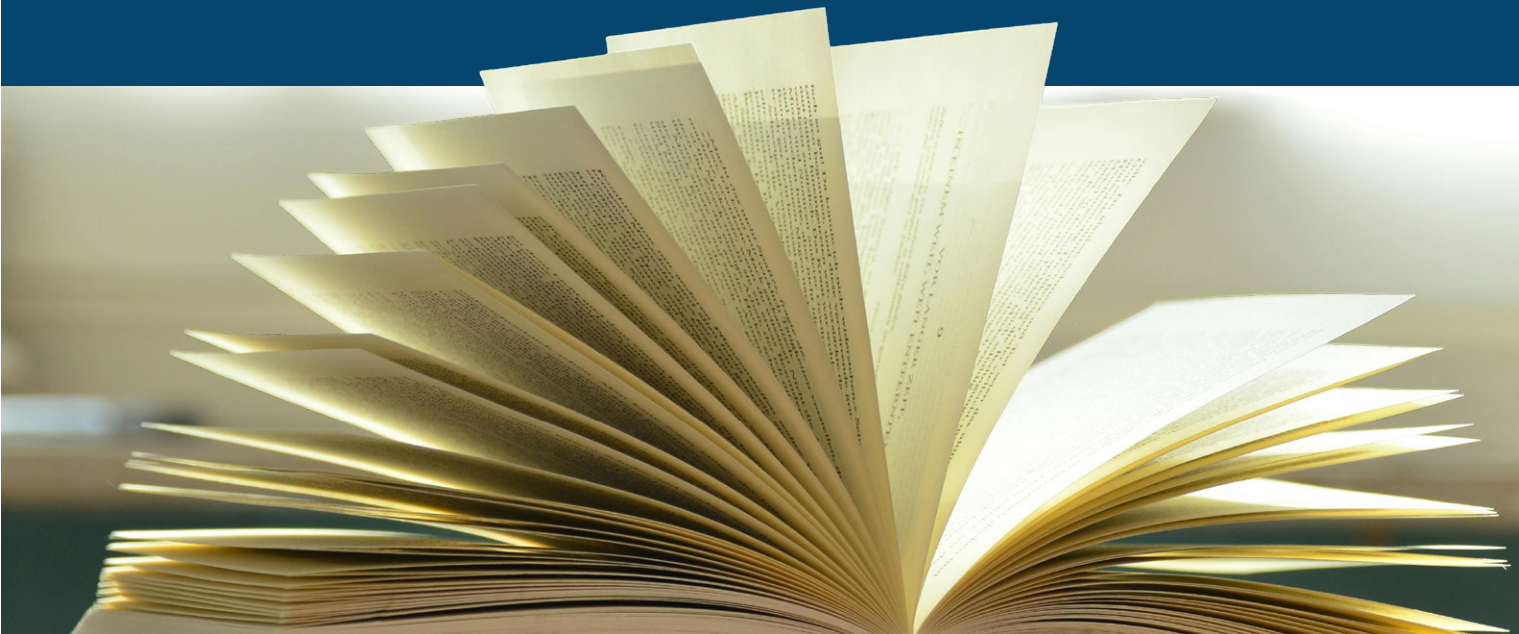
Over 70,000 students are thriving in school, thanks to Wisconsin’s cross-district open enrollment policy, which allows students access to any public school inside or outside of their district.¹⁴

A unique feature of Wisconsin’s program is that, when a student moves to a new school district, a large chunk of their state funding goes with them. Another portion is left behind in the student’s old district to help offset costs associated with student transfers.

Through this arrangement, families can meet their needs, and public schools enjoy an incentive to accept transfers.

13 <https://reason.org/commentary/floridas-open-enrollment-policy-can-serve-as-a-school-choice-model/>, <https://myschoolchoice.com/state-roadmaps/florida-school-choice>

14 <https://reason.org/commentary/how-states-can-learn-from-wisconsins-cross-district-open-enrollment-system/>



CHARTER SCHOOLS

Georgia's charter schools are public schools governed by nonprofit boards. They agree to certain student achievement outcomes and increased accountability in exchange for exemptions from many state and local regulations.

Georgia voters authorized the Georgia General Assembly to create charter schools and the State Charter Schools Commission (SCSC) when they passed the Georgia Charter Schools Amendment in 2012. Charter schools are authorized by local school boards or by the State Charter Schools Commission. These authorizers approve and renew charters, monitor charter schools' performance, ensure their compliance with state and federal law, and enforce the terms of the charter.

CHARTER SCHOOL FACTS

- Charter School Enrollment: **65,406 students**¹⁵
- Total Number of Charter Schools in Georgia: **101**¹⁶
- Students Waitlisted: **14,000**¹⁷
- Average Per-Pupil Spending: **\$9,490**¹⁸

STUDENT ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

- To attend a locally approved charter school, a student must live within the school system of the charter school.
- If a charter school has an attendance zone, enrollment preference is given to students living in those zones. If space is still available, the charter school can open enrollment to students outside the attendance zone.
- State-commissioned charter schools have attendance zones and are only open to students who live in those zones.

- Virtual charter schools have a statewide attendance zone.
- If charter schools receive more applications than they have open seats, state law requires a lottery to determine which students will be admitted.

SCHOOL OPTIONS

- Some Georgia school systems have multiple charter school options, while others do not have any.
- Georgia also has multiple online charter schools open to students who live anywhere in the state.



A list of charter schools is available from the Georgia Department of Education.

COSTS TO FAMILIES

- No tuition cost. As public schools, charters have open enrollment and do not charge tuition.
- Some charter schools do not provide transportation.

CHARTER SCHOOL FUNDING

The state funds charter schools approved by the SCSC, based on a calculation that prevents schools from receiving more than the statewide average funding, even if the students they serve come from districts where charter schools earned significantly more money.

As a result, the SCSC is often not a viable option for charter schools attempting to serve students from high-cost districts across the state.

SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY

The State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia reviews charter schools and holds them accountable for their performance. If a charter school does not meet its academic standards or other terms of its contract, the school is not eligible to renew, and it closes.¹⁹

NEXT STEPS FOR GEORGIA: Equitably Fund Charter Schools

Unpredictable, unequal funding is a significant barrier to charter schools' success. Despite being public schools themselves, charter schools don't receive any local funding through property taxes or education sales taxes.²⁰ As a result, they are funded at a lower level than traditional public schools, and funding levels can vary widely across individual school districts. Georgia does have a charter school supplement, which has made the funding gap smaller in recent years.

Charter schools are also not typically given a facility. As a result, charter schools must use a large percentage of their per-student funding on facility costs, straining student funding that is already more limited when compared to traditional public schools.

In 2017, the Georgia General Assembly created a charter schools facilities grant to address this challenge, but because it has not been fully funded each year, the grant hasn't achieved its full impact. In 2021, the grant was limited to \$40,000 per eligible charter school. Full funding would be \$100,000 per school.

The recently adopted FY 2025 budget eliminated the facility grant for State Commissioned Charter Schools, immediately putting a significant hardship on State Commissioned Schools. These schools need this funding restored and the facility grant program promised in 2017 needs to be fully funded.

Facility grants to public charter schools allow charters to direct more of their dollars where they matter most—to students, not buildings. Georgia lawmakers can make this possible by fully funding facility grants to public charter schools.

Other reforms to the charter school system that should be considered include encouraging or even incentivizing local Boards of Education to approve charter school applications that come before them. Very few local charter schools have been approved since the Charter School Constitutional was approved by the voters in 2012. More locally approved charter schools would ease the pressure on the charter supplement in the state budget.

Finally, the Georgia Charter Schools Association also estimates that 14,000 students are waiting to get into a charter school. Allowing more charter schools to be approved both locally and by the State Charter School Commission would reduce this waiting list and open up this option to more students across the state.

CHARTER SCHOOL IMPACT: DeKalb County's Story

For parents in south DeKalb, there's a promising new school on the block. DeKalb Brilliance Academy is a public, tuition-free charter school that opened its doors in August 2022.

DeKalb Brilliance Academy was founded with a profound mission in mind: to encourage and empower students to lead. It combines social-emotional learning with a rigorous, college-prep academic curriculum. The school's founders built its programs through the lens of Entrepreneurial Project-Based Learning, which gives students the opportunity to learn from teachers, peers, and professionals in the workforce, such as engineers, designers, lawyers, and scientists.

The Academy's students learn by completing projects based on their specific areas of study, such as history,

¹⁵ Totals are calculated from reports provided by the Georgia Department of Education.

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¹⁷ <https://gacharters.org/about-ga-charters/>

¹⁸ https://www.edchoice.org/state_fast_facts/georgia/

¹⁹ <https://scsc.georgia.gov/state-charter-school-performance/scsc-comprehensive-performance-framework/operational>

²⁰ <https://scsc.georgia.gov/resources-guidance/guidance/state-charter-funding>

math, science, and English. For example, a fifth grade class learning about historical inventions may be asked to create a concept for an invention that solves a current societal issue. For every project, teachers partner with professionals, entrepreneurs, and experts from the surrounding community to give students hands-on experience. These experts coach student teams throughout the year, coming alongside the students to challenge them to improve what they’re creating. Students can later build on that experience, leveraging what they learn at a young age into relevant, in-demand careers.

DeKalb Brilliance Academy isn’t the first state charter school to use this model—there are several Georgia charter schools that follow a similar format. For parents who want a secure, forward-thinking learning environment that honors their children’s unique personalities, DeKalb Brilliance Academy and schools like it offer a well-rounded education rooted in real-world lessons.

“It was a no-brainer for me to enroll [my son],” said one DeKalb Brilliance Academy parent. “Entrepreneurial-based learning is vitally important because not everybody follows the same path.”

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GEORGIA PROMISE SCHOLARSHIP

The Georgia Promise Scholarship is a type of education savings account program. It would give parents \$6,500 per student and per school year to cover the education option best suited to their child’s needs. Promise Scholarships would be state-administered, state-funded accounts that parents could direct.

The Georgia Promise Scholarship was signed into law in April 2024 and will be available to eligible students beginning in the 2025-2026 school year.

PROGRAM FUNDING

Funding for the Promise Scholarship program is capped at one percent of the total appropriation to the Quality Basic Education (QBE) formula.

- The QBE appropriation for FY 2025 was \$14,101,605,664.
- If fully funded, the Promise Scholarship program funding would be approximately \$141 million, which would provide approximately 21,694 scholarships.

PROGRAM TIME LIMIT

The program is slated to sunset in 10 years, unless the legislature affirmatively reauthorizes the program.

Students receiving a Promise Scholarship would be allowed to complete their K–12 education using the scholarship in the event the legislature allows the program to sunset.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO WITH A PROMISE SCHOLARSHIP?

Unlike other choice programs, education savings accounts allow parents flexibility to buy multiple education products and services to personalize their child’s schooling. The Georgia Promise Scholarship would be no different.

Parents could use funds to pay for one or more qualifying education expenses, including:

- Tuition and fees for private schools, vocational programs, or college.
- Cost of online programs or classes.
- Tutoring services.
- Curriculum and textbooks.
- Technology, including adaptive or assistive technologies for students with special needs.
- Educational therapies.
- Transportation costs.

STUDENT ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

SB 233 sets the following eligibility criteria for Promise Scholarships:

- Parents must be Georgia residents.
- The student’s family income is less than 400% of the federal poverty level (approximately \$120,000).
- The student must be enrolled in a Georgia public school that ranked in the bottom 25% of public schools for two consecutive years, according to the College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) as calculated by the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (GOSA).
- The student must have been enrolled in an eligible school for at least one school year.
- The student may be entering pre-kindergarten or kindergarten.
- Once eligible, a child remains eligible through 12th grade, even if the Legislature allows the program to expire.
- The student cannot be enrolled in a local school system, charter school, or state charter school while participating in the scholarship program.
- Parents must agree to use accounts only for qualifying education expenses.



SCHOLARSHIP AMOUNT

Promise Scholarships are set at \$6,500, which is approximately the average per-pupil amount that the state sends to local school districts, based on Georgia’s current student funding formula.

SCHOOL OPTIONS

- Promise Scholarships can be used to pay for a variety of public school alternatives, including private schools, virtual schools, homeschooling, or hybrid education options.
- Any student receiving a Promise Scholarship cannot be enrolled in a local school system, charter school, or state charter school while participating in the program.

GOOD NEXT STEPS FOR GEORGIA: Fund and Grow the Georgia Promise Scholarship

- Fully fund the Promise Scholarship program (approximately \$141 million/year) in the FY 2025 mid-year budget.
- Increase eligibility beyond only the bottom 25% lowest-performing schools. There are hundreds of thousands of Georgia students outside the bottom 25% of schools who are not receiving an education suited to their needs.
- Remove the one-percent cap of QBE funding cap to allow the program to grow to meet the demand.
- Remove the 10-year sunset.

ESA APPROACHES ACROSS THE SOUTHEAST

ALABAMA

Alabama became the tenth state in the country to adopt a universal ESA program when it passed the CHOOSE Act in 2024. Administered by the state’s Department of Revenue, the program operates education savings accounts as refundable income tax credits. Students enrolled in a participating school may receive up to \$7,000, and students not enrolled in a participating school may receive up to \$2,000 for homeschool, co-ops, or similar programs. After a phase-in period of three years, all Alabama students will be eligible to apply.²¹

FLORIDA

As of 2023, Florida’s Family Empowerment Scholarship Program became the most expansive ESA in the nation. Open to all students, the program gives parents \$8,000 per student to use for allowed education expenses. Over 136,000 students participated in 2023-2024.²²

Florida’s ESA program is a leading model not only because of its expansiveness, but also because of its education outcomes. A November 2023 study of Florida’s educational landscape found that as school choice programs matured, the positive effects were felt across the board, including within public schools:

“We observe growing benefits (higher standardized test scores and lower absenteeism and suspension rates) to students attending public schools with more preprogram private school options as the program matured. Effects are particularly pronounced for lower-income students, but results are positive for more affluent students as well.”²³

NORTH CAROLINA

In a 2023 bipartisan effort, North Carolina passed a state budget that expanded education savings accounts eligibility to all North Carolina students. Scholarship amounts will range from \$3,200 to \$7,500 and will be based on family income. This expansion has put North Carolina’s ESA program on track to be the second largest in the country after Florida.

SOUTH CAROLINA

Signed into law in 2023, South Carolina’s Education Scholarship Trust Fund Program offers \$6,000 scholarships to K–12 students from low- to moderate-income families. This amount nearly matches average annual private school tuition in the state,²⁴ though families can use the funds for other education alternatives. There’s growing interest in making the program universal. In 2024, a bill to implement universal eligibility passed the South Carolina House of Representatives but did not advance through the rest of the legislative process.

TENNESSEE

Much like the path Georgia is taking with Promise Scholarships, Tennessee has forged a slower-paced integration of school choice options. The Volunteer State’s ESA passed in 2019 but got held up in court battles. In 2022, a two-year pilot of the program finally got underway.

For the 2024-2025 school year, around 20,000 scholarships will be available to Tennessee students who qualify based on income or a disability. The following school year, however, eligibility goes universal.

21 <https://www.revenue.alabama.gov/tax-policy/the-choose-act/>

22 <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/programs/florida-family-empowerment-scholarship-program/>

23 Figlio, David N., Cassandra M. D. Hart, and Krzysztof Karbownik. 2023. “Effects of Maturing Private School Choice Programs on Public School Students.” *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 15 (4): 255–94, <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/pol.20210710>.

24 <https://www.privateschoolreview.com/tuition-stats/south-carolina>

GEORGIA PROMISE SCHOLARSHIP IMPACT:

Joshua’s Story

Our adopted son, Joshua, has been in upwards of 20 schools during his educational journey. Joshua suffers from dyslexia and dysgraphia. He has experienced trauma, neglect and abuse that have also contributed to his learning challenges.

The local public school simply hasn’t been a great fit for Joshua. The school flagged him for reading challenges in the first grade but never put interventions in place because he didn’t have a parent advocate. Though Joshua was in the third grade when we adopted him, he couldn’t read even at a basic level.

The help Joshua truly needed came from outside the classroom in the form of a local private tutor who specialized in dyslexic learners. That avenue helped Joshua to thrive, growing from a kindergarten to second-grade reading level. Unfortunately, the arrival of the pandemic in spring of 2020 ended his access to that tutoring.

The pandemic also worsened his experience in public school. His teachers were doing the best they could, but Joshua needed alternatives. The last straw for us came when the administration at our school determined that Joshua was on a non-college track and gave him schoolwork several grade-levels below his abilities. That’s when we decided to move him to a homeschool co-op in November. At the time, there were many gaps in his learning, and he was falling behind.

There is an urgency to Joshua’s situation, and the situation of countless other adoptive and foster kids across Georgia. Joshua is a smart, bright child, but the best way for him to advance is to have the necessary resources.

Unlike other programs, a Promise Scholarship would allow my family to use funds for a variety of educational expenses, not just private school tuition. That includes specialized tutoring for dyslexic

learners that would benefit Joshua greatly. Contrary to popular belief, homeschooling is not free. Promise Scholarships would also give a financial lifeline to families like mine to make home education work better for our kids.

We support the traditional public school system. For most parents, public schools are the right choice. But we don’t live in a one-size-fits-all reality anymore when it comes to education. School options should be as diverse as the individual needs of students. For many families like mine, alternatives to the public schools are what’s best for students.

— Gina McCarn, Norcross

WHAT OTHER GEORGIA PARENTS ARE SAYING ABOUT PROMISE SCHOLARSHIPS

“Our family fully supports both public and private schools. But one size does not fit all for every child or every family—and unfortunately, that means extra out-of-pocket costs for families who choose different paths to properly educate their children. Promise Scholarships empower parents to do what they think is best for their children, whether it’s a family like mine that requires flexibility for a unique circumstance...or a family that simply chooses a private school option. Our tax dollars should follow the child and meet the individual needs.”

— Molly Gareau, West Cobb

“There are so many other families like mine in Burke County. We basically have no school choice here, as the only private schools around do not have special educators or services and our closest charter school is 35 minutes away. Home education is our best option so that we can tailor an education to the unique needs of our children. Promise Scholarships provide the type of resources to ensure that our children are not left behind.”

— Tanya Schlegel, Waynesboro

GEORGIA TAX CREDIT SCHOLARSHIP

Established in 2008, the Georgia Tax Credit Scholarship Program creates a public-private partnership that incentivizes businesses and individuals to invest directly in K-12 education.

Through the program, individuals and corporations donate toward private school scholarships so that more students can access private schools as a viable education option. They receive a dollar-for-dollar credit against their state income tax liability for donating to Student Scholarship Organizations (SSOs), which provide scholarships to public school students.

The program enables families to access private schools that they otherwise could not afford. By law, scholarships are capped at no more than what a K-12 public school student would receive (average per-pupil spending in the state), but the scholarship disbursements are much lower on average.

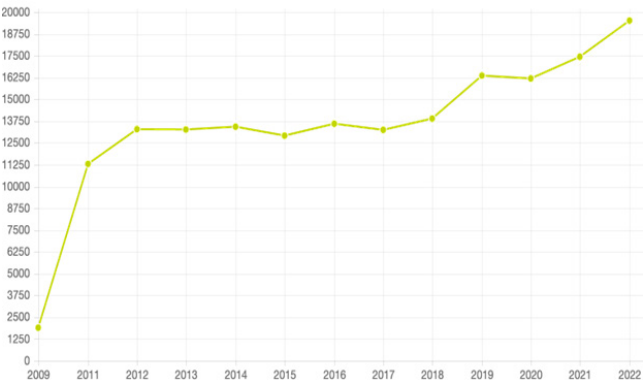
Since eligibility only extends to students already receiving public education dollars and not current private school students, the program can be fiscally neutral (or positive) to the state while still providing an education that better suits the individual needs of the child.

TAX CREDIT SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM FACTS:²⁵

- 19,516 scholarships distributed.
- 89% students eligible statewide.
- \$4,356 average scholarship amount.
- 20 organizations awarding scholarships.

25 <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/programs/georgia-qualified-education-expense-tax-credit/>
26 <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/programs/georgia-qualified-education-expense-tax-credit/>

Student Participation in the Georgia Tax Credit Scholarship, 2009-2022²⁶



STUDENT ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

- Available to students statewide.
- Must be a Georgia resident.
- Eligible to enroll in a qualified first grade, kindergarten, or pre-kindergarten program or enrolled in and attending (for at least six weeks) a Georgia secondary or primary public school. Waivers are available for students assigned to low-performing schools, students who have suffered from school-based physical or verbal abuse, and students previously enrolled in a home study program.
- No family income limit.
- No enrollment cap.

SCHOOL OPTIONS

Any private school that meets the following criteria:

- Accredited or in the process of becoming accredited.
- Located in Georgia.
- Adheres to the provision of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964.
- Satisfies the requirements prescribed by law for private schools in Georgia.
- Accepts tax credit scholarships from an approved SSO.

SCHOLARSHIP AMOUNT

SSOs and private schools determine scholarship amounts. The maximum scholarship in any given year cannot exceed the average state and local expenditures per student in public elementary and secondary education.

- Average scholarship amount in 2022: \$4,356²⁷
- Maximum amount allowed (January-December 2024): \$12,857²⁸

COSTS TO FAMILIES

- Scholarship funds can only be used for private school tuition and fees.
- Transportation is the responsibility of the parent/guardian.

NEXT STEPS FOR GEORGIA:

Increase the Tax Credit Scholarship Cap

As of 2023, Georgia's Tax Credit Scholarship program takes donations up to \$120 million and caps scholarship amounts at \$12,140.²⁹ However, demand for the program has skyrocketed—both from parents and from donors.

In January 2024, over \$190 million in donation requests flooded in, indicating an increased demand on the part of the community and corporations to provide more assistance to students through this funding mechanism.

An audit of the tax credit scholarship program, known in the Official Code of Georgia as the Qualified Education Expense Tax Credit (QEEC), showed positive benefits for taxpayers:³⁰

In addition, there are certain local cost savings due to the QEEC. With a switcher rate of 67%

for 2021 contributions, local cost savings would total \$24.8 million. Calculating based on the 90% switcher rate taken from research, local cost savings would total \$33.4 million. It should be noted that local expenditure reductions depend on the number of students receiving an SSO scholarship in each school system.

Given the positive educational benefits to students and to the taxpayers, the Georgia General Assembly should raise the cap to meet demand and reduce the waiting lists many SSOs have.

TAX CREDIT SCHOLARSHIP IMPACT:

The Kids in Zip Code 30314

With Georgia's Tax Credit Scholarship, kids in one of Georgia's most crime-ridden neighborhoods have found a safe place to go to school, allowing them to improve academically, go on to college, and achieve their dreams.

Watch their story





27 <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/programs/georgia-qualified-education-expense-tax-credit/>
28 <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/Policy/Documents/SSO%20Cap.pdf>
29 Ibid.
30 <https://www.audits.ga.gov/ReportSearch/download/29827>

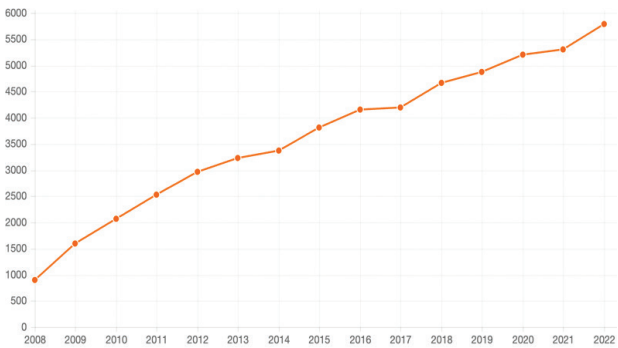
SPECIAL NEEDS SCHOLARSHIP

In 2007, the Georgia General Assembly created the Special Needs Scholarship Program, which allows students with special education needs to choose the public or private school that best meets their unique needs. In the event that a parent chooses a private school, they receive a scholarship equivalent to the amount their child would have received for state-based services.

SPECIAL NEEDS SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM FACTS³¹

- 5,788 students participating as of 2021-2022.
- 12% students eligible statewide.
- 273 schools participating.
- \$6,590 average scholarship amount.

Student Participation in Georgia’s Special Needs Scholarship Program, 2008-2022³²



STUDENT ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

- Available statewide to students with special needs. Does not include preschool or homeschool students.

- Attended public school for at least one year. This requirement may be waived for military dependents, students adopted or placed in permanent guardianship from foster care, or students with a medical or behavioral need.
- Has received special education services through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 plan at any point in the year.
- No family income limit.
- No enrollment cap.

SCHOOL OPTIONS

- Another public school within the student’s district of residence that has available space.
- Another public school district outside the student’s district of residence that has available space.
- A private school authorized to participate in the program.
- One of the three state schools for the blind or deaf.

SCHOOL ELIGIBILITY

The Georgia Department of Education approves all participating private schools. To be approved, schools must meet the following criteria:

- Accredited or provisionally accredited or in the process of receiving its accreditation.
- Physically located in the state of Georgia. Students physically attend classes and have direct contact with teachers each day. Instruction is 180 days for 4.5 hours each day or its equivalent. (Homeschool and virtual programs are not accepted).
- Program of instruction includes, at a minimum, the core subjects of math, science, language arts, reading, and social studies.
- One full school year of operation as a private school in Georgia (or demonstrates fiscal soundness through documentation that complies with standards established by the GADOE and conducted by a CPA).
- Complies with relevant federal, state and local law (including 42 U.S.C. Section 2000(d), Section 504

of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Amendments Act of 2008) and all applicable state/local health, safety, and welfare laws, codes, and rules.

- Employs/contracts teachers who hold a baccalaureate or higher degree, or have at least three years of experience in either education or health.
- Conducts criminal background checks of teachers before teaching and maintains documentation of its background check process as well as written protocols in place for proper administrative action in the event a criminal background check or other inspection reveals criminal history after a teacher has been hired at the school.
- Administers valid and reliable pre- and post-academic assessments to scholarship students and reports results in writing to the parent(s) and the GADOE.
- Provides clear written quarterly descriptions of academic progress to the parents of scholarship students during a school year.

SCHOLARSHIP AMOUNTS

In 2021-2022, the average Special Needs Scholarship amount was \$6,590. Scholarships may only be used for private school tuition and cover whichever is less:

- Tuition and fees of the private school.
- Amount of public school funding the student would have received in public school.

COSTS TO FAMILIES

- Transportation is the responsibility of the parent/guardian.
- Scholarships do not cover costs of out-of-district tuition or other public school choice options available.

SPECIAL NEEDS SCHOLARSHIP IMPACT:

Jan’s Story

Imagine the challenge of raising two children with special needs. That’s the task that Jan—a small business owner in Georgia—has faced in bringing up her two girls. Katie has ADHD, dyslexia, and autism spectrum disorder, and Jessica has an auditory processing disorder and ADHD.

Public school teachers told Jan that there was nothing they could do to help Katie—and that she would never learn to read or write—and that Jessica would never be able to pass state tests.

“I remember all the days at the bus stop crying and just telling my daughters, ‘We just have to make it through the end of the year,’” Jan shared. “If you don’t fit into the box, you fall through the cracks.”

Desperate for options, Jan turned to Georgia’s Special Needs Scholarship Program. Thanks to this education opportunity, both of Jan’s daughters were able to access schools better suited to their needs. Katie started attending a small private school specifically designed for students with reading challenges. The results have been astounding. She advanced to reading at grade level and performing several grade levels above in math. Meanwhile, Jessica also excelled, taking advanced-level chemistry and performing several grade levels above in other subjects.

“Our experience at the private school is night and day,” Jan said. “I remember my daughter saying, ‘Mom, I don’t think I ever want to leave this school. Everyone here has a disability and it’s not a big deal.’”

31 <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/programs/georgia-special-needs-scholarship-program/>

32 Ibid.

MICROSCHOOLS

Microschools are small private schools—usually fewer than 15 students. Some microschools are hybrid homeschool schools, an arrangement where students attend classes at the school three or four days a week and then are homeschooled one or two days per week. Other microschools are full-time schools like larger private schools.

While microschools existed before the COVID-19 pandemic, their popularity soared in 2020 as parents grappled with online schooling and disruptions to their work lives. Their popularity has continued post-pandemic.

According to the National Microschooling Center, between 1.1 million and 2.1 million students attend a microschool. In their April 2024 survey of 400 microschools across 41 states, the National Microschool Center found:³³

- The median number of children served is 16.
- More than half of microschools (55%) offer full-time weekly schedules, defined as at least four days per week and four hours per day. Twenty-eight percent offer part-time/hybrid schedules, and 17% offer families the choice between these.
- For both currently-operating and pre-launch microschools, Project-Based Learning was the most prevalent factor prioritized in their educational approach, followed by social-emotional learning and self-directed learning approaches.
- Founders identify more children attending microschools as being from households at the average income for their area (48%) or below the average income (40%) than above the average income for their area (12%).

Promise Scholarship Option

Tuition to a microschool could be covered by a Georgia Promise Scholarship if the microschool meets the requirements of the law and the student meets the scholarship eligibility criteria.

HOMESCHOOLING AND HYBRID-HOMESCHOOLING

Georgia has a long tradition of protecting the right of parents to homeschool their children. The first law protecting the rights of homeschooled children was passed in 1984, and the basic structure of homeschooling has remained mostly the same since then.

The flexibility, hands-on, and self-paced nature of homeschooling continues to attract many parents to this option. During the COVID-19 pandemic, homeschooling exploded in popularity and has remained strong even as the pandemic receded. According to the Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey, 5.4% of all students were homeschooled in 2023.³⁴

Hybrid Homeschooling is a variant of traditional homeschooling that is also growing in popularity. In a hybrid-homeschool school, students attend classes at the school three or four days a week, and then are homeschooled one or two days per week. This flexible schedule is appealing to a growing number of students and parents who like homeschooling but may feel less equipped to teach certain subjects.

We should expect to see the number of homeschooled students to continue to increase in Georgia.

GEORGIA’S HOMESCHOOLING REQUIREMENTS

- Parents must file paperwork with the Department of Education and meet a few basic requirements.³⁵
- Homeschool students are required to receive 180 days of instruction just like students attending traditional public schools.
- Homeschool students must be taught at least five subjects: Mathematics, English Language Arts, Science, Social Studies, and Reading.

33 <https://microschoolingcenter.org/hubfs/Website%20Final%202024%20Sector%20Analysis.pdf>

34 <https://reason.org/commentary/homeschooling-is-on-the-rise-even-as-the-pandemic-recedes/>

35 <https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Pages/Home-Schools.aspx>

Promise Scholarship Option

With the passage of SB 233, Promise Scholarship-eligible families who opt for traditional homeschool or hybrid-homeschool arrangements could use the scholarship to purchase homeschooling materials or supplementary education services.



Learn more about Georgia’s homeschooling laws and requirements.

CONCLUSION

With more schooling options, students have better opportunities to get an education that’s tailored to their needs and sets them up for success in today’s world.

The education options available now are a good start, but if we are serious about investing in our communities, we must keep working to close the education opportunity gap for all of Georgia’s kids. Lawmakers can do this by embracing a more expansive vision for education in our state, and parents can help by continuing to voice their desire for more choices and using different education options when it makes sense for their family.

Together, we can build an education system that honors every child’s unique situation and expands their opportunities for a fulfilling and flourishing life.

“The best gift we can give our next generation is a quality education that opens the doors for new opportunities.”



RANDY HICKS
Georgia Center for Opportunity
President & CEO



GLOSSARY

CCRPI: COLLEGE AND CAREER READY PERFORMANCE INDEX.

This index is a yearly statewide accountability measurement for Georgia schools.³⁶ It evaluates how well schools and school districts are preparing students for college and careers by considering several factors: content mastery, student progress, student performance gaps, readiness for the next levels of education, and high school graduation rates. The CCRPI is calculated by the Georgia Department of Education and approved by the State Board of Education.

CHARTER SYSTEM

Charter systems are not the same as charter schools. Schools within a charter system are governed by the local school board, while charter schools are governed by independent, non-profit boards. Both charter schools and charter systems emphasize school-level governance, but they are separate and distinct models, with no bearing on one another.

QBE: QUALITY BASIC EDUCATION

This is the funding formula for Georgia's public education system. It was established in 1985 when the Georgia's General Assembly passed the Quality Basic Education Act, which created a framework for providing free basic education for Kindergarten through 12th grade.

NAEP: NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS

Known as "the nation's report card," this assessment tracks American students' proficiency in math, reading, and many other subjects. NAEP assessments in math and reading are administered every two years. The NAEP serves as the most accurate way to compare student achievement across different states since the tests that states administer themselves can vary widely and do not provide reliable points of comparison.

IEP: INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN

This is a plan or program, provided at no cost to the family, that details the instruction, support, and services necessary for a student with special education needs. To receive an IEP, a student must have one or more of the 13 disabilities listed in the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the disability must affect the child's academic performance such that they need specialized instruction to progress in school.

504 PLAN

A 504 Plan provides services and adjustments to a general learning environment so that a child with any disability can learn alongside their fellow students. This type of plan covers a variety of struggles a child may face in school. To qualify, a disability must affect the child's ability to succeed in a general education environment.

³⁶ An Overview of the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI), Georgia Department of Education
<https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Accountability/Documents/Reference%20Guides%20and%20Support%20Files/CCRPI%20Overview%20110317.pdf>

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Removing barriers to ensure that every person — no matter their race, past mistakes, or the circumstances of their birth — has access to a quality education, fulfilling work, and a healthy family life.

OUR VISION

Vibrant communities where everyone can achieve their potential.

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