

Georgia's Teacher Dropout Crisis

**A Look at Why Nearly Half of Georgia Public School
Teachers are Leaving the Profession**

“Something must be done,
education is in a major crisis”

-Franklin County Middle School Teacher for over 20 years

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Executive Summary

In the fall of 2015 the Georgia Professional Standards Commission reported a worrying statistic: 44% of public school teachers in the state leave within the first five years of employment.¹ What follows is a report on the findings of a Georgia Department of Education survey taken from over 53,000 educators in the state on the possible reasons for this attrition. Before dissemination, the survey was vetted by members of the state superintendent's Teacher Advisory Council.

After asking about the teachers' school districts, grade level, and years of experience, the bulk of the survey focused on whether current teachers would recommend teaching as a profession to the next generation, and why so many teachers are leaving education. Two out of the three respondents stated that they are unlikely or very unlikely to recommend teaching as a profession to a student about to graduate high school—an alarming figure considering the substantial role that teachers play in motivating students to pursue a job in the field.²

Next, the respondents were given a list of eight possible causes for the high attrition rate. These options were chosen from elements of education that may be directly affected through policy. For this reason other influential causes (e.g. raising children, student discipline) were not included. There was also provided space to expand on why teachers believe their first ranked cause was such an issue. Through these two inquiries teachers described a profession that was overcrowded with mandated tests, evaluated by unfair or unreliable measures, and constantly being changed without any input from the professionals inside the classroom. All occurring while being compensated poorly when time and experience are taken into account.

The final question asked for additional reasons that teachers may be leaving at such a high rate. The tens of thousands of responses displayed the effects of the current state of teaching in Georgia: a workforce that feels devalued and constantly under pressure. Without significant changes in the future, what is a significant problem now may well be a crisis in the future of teaching, if it is not already.

Included throughout this report are quotes found directly from the survey. It feels appropriate that an account of the perception of educators should give room to actual transcribed concerns from teachers.

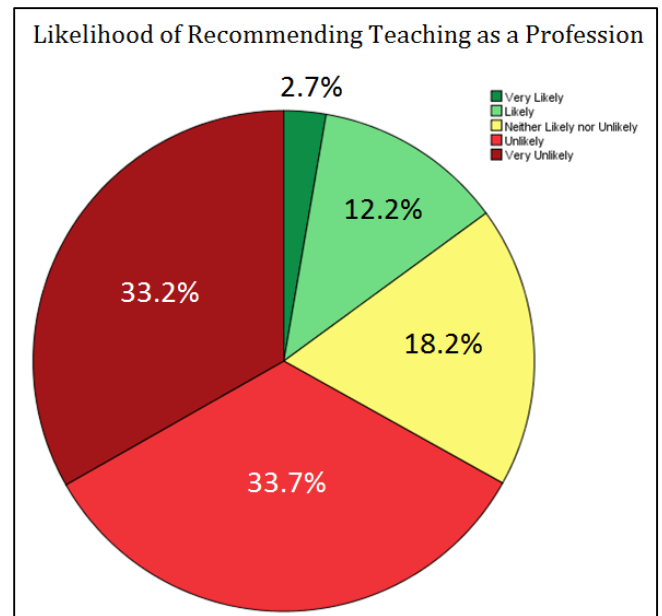
Methods

At the State Board of Education retreat in October of 2015, the Executive Secretary of Georgia’s Professional Standards Commission reported that 44% of the state’s public school teachers leave education within the first five years of employment. The Georgia Department of Education sought to better understand teachers’ perspectives in regards to this unusually high attrition rate. In November a short survey was sent to Georgia public school teachers on the website SurveyMonkey.com.³ Within three weeks over 53,000 surveys had been collected, a remarkably high response rate for online surveys.⁴ The distribution was evenly spread across elementary (26,603 surveys), middle (11,989), and high school teachers (13,773) when number of teachers per grade level is taken into account.⁵ The number of responses based on years of experience and geography is also consistent with the workforce in Georgia. Each question of the survey acts as a heading for the report with discussion included. Statistical analysis was done through the software package SPSS, and the open response questions were analyzed through QDA (Qualitative Data Analysis) Miner.

Years experience	Surveys
1-5	10583
6-10	10610
11-15	10986
16-20	8788
21-25	6261
26-30	4139
More than 30	1699
Total	53066

Q. 1: If you had a student about to graduate from high school, how likely would you be to encourage teaching as a profession?

The responses were overwhelmingly to the negative. 66.9% of teachers answered that they are either unlikely or very unlikely to encourage graduates to pursue teaching. Only 2.7% of teachers responded that they are very likely to encourage it. The likelihood of recommending teaching decreases amongst those that have been in the classroom longer, hitting a low for those who have been in the profession for 21-25 years. Interestingly, the chance for a recommendation increases slightly for teachers who have taught for 26 years or more. Regardless of experience, it would seem that there is a connection between the grades that are taught and the likelihood of encouraging teaching as a profession: elementary school teachers are less inclined than middle school teachers to offer the recommendation, and both are less likely than high school teachers. These lopsided results provide ample justification for the administered survey and continued research on the topic.



Teachers are often blamed and held accountable for things they have no control over... I love my time with my students, but I would never choose this path again. Which makes me very sad.

-Elementary school teacher for over 25 years (Gwinnett)

Q. 2: In Georgia, 47% of teachers leave the profession within five years. Rank the following statements often cited as the predominant reason a teacher leaves the profession.

The second question presented eight often-cited reasons for teachers leaving education in Georgia and asked respondents to rank them with 1 being the “most predominant” and 8 being the least. The options were restricted to causes that can be influenced by state policy.

Causes for public school teacher attrition	Average Ranking
	1 = Most prominent
	8 = Least prominent
Number and emphasis of mandated tests	3.13
Teacher evaluation method	3.65
Level of teacher participation in decisions related to profession	4.20
Non-teaching school responsibilities/duties	4.22
Level of benefits/compensation	4.50
Level/quality of support, resources and professional learning	5.00
School level/District level leadership	5.01
Level of preparation when entering the profession	6.29

The answers could be grouped into four tiers. In the top tier, teachers overwhelmingly list standardized tests and the teacher evaluation method as reasons the state loses so many educators in a short period of time. Next, the level of teacher participation in decisions, non-teaching responsibilities, and the level of pay (including benefits) all followed as possible causes. The third tier would consist of the level and quality of support and resources necessary for the job as well as school/district leadership. Finally, the last tier holds the level of teacher preparation when entering the profession; a distant last in the ranking. After positioning the potential causes, respondents were given an optional open response question asking why they chose their number one choice. Of the 53,066 surveys recorded, over 95% included an answer to this optional inquiry. Review of these open response answers will be included in the analysis of each claim.

1. Number and emphasis of mandated tests

The surveyed teachers ranked the number and emphasis of mandated tests as the most predominant cause for attrition within the workforce. In the explanations, there were mentions to tests (e.g. test, assessment, SLOs, Georgia Milestones) in 14,699 responses, the most commonly referenced theme of the listed claims. Respondents often cited the time spent on implementing these assessments that takes away from teaching, the stress caused in students, and questioned the appropriateness of the practice generally (do tests actually represent learning) and specifically (several mentions of the tests being developmentally inappropriate for

There is a growing sense of frustration among teachers that testing is now the focus rather than teaching. People become teachers knowing the pay is low, but they do not expect to spend so much time doing what often amounts to meaningless assessments. Teachers want to make a difference and they do not do that by just giving mandated tests.

-Elementary school teacher (Henry)

the students based on grade). Teachers who work in a district located outside metro Atlanta⁶ as a trend ranked tests as a more predominant cause of teacher attrition than those working in districts located in the metro area. Furthermore, those who teach in elementary school are more likely to rank tests as a cause for attrition than their counterparts that work in middle or high schools.

2. Teacher evaluation method

Several responses coupled the number and emphasis of tests with the teacher evaluation method. Georgia's Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES) utilizes student achievement and growth as a significant

Teachers are only one-third of the equation (teacher, student, parent) that results in student performance. Because we are the only part of the equation that can be legislated and (poorly) quantified, we bear the burden of proof. It's too tenuous and burdensome. That is one reason I have not encouraged my two college graduates to teach.

-High school teacher for over 25 years (Fayette)

percentage to measure teacher effectiveness.

When discussing TKES, respondents repeatedly mentioned a sense of injustice that the mandated tests of minors might determine the assessment of an instructor's performance.

There was a direct correlation between how likely teachers are to recommend education as a profession and the average ranking of the teacher evaluation method as a cause for attrition; the less likely the respondent was to recommend the profession, the higher teacher evaluations were ranked as a cause of attrition.

3. Level of teacher participation in decisions related to profession

Throughout the surveys, respondents repeatedly wrote in tones resembling frustration and hopelessness. Responses often included the assertion that the decision makers in the state had never spent any time "in the classroom" and would require things (tests, paperwork, changes to salary schedule, etc.) without any input from those being affected.

The recommendations on how the profession should change went the

range of the spectrum, but a feeling of being left out of important decisions was consistent across the workforce regardless of grades taught, location of district, and years of experience.

I could continue for days about why this ... is absurd, but I'm sure nothing will be done, and none of you really care why teachers are so unhappy, or care that we quit, you are just putting on a show to make us think you want to get to the bottom of the problem. I will be extremely shocked if I see any positive changes that come from this survey.

-Elementary school teacher for over 20 years (Toombs)

4. Non-teaching school responsibilities/duties

As mentioned previously, many of these possible causes for teachers leaving are related in the survey responses. Consequently, many teachers remarked on the lack of time (a word mentioned in over 19,000 surveys) that results after required duties such as ticket collection at athletic events, data input for

I went into education to teach children. I feel like all I do now is document everything I do all day for each child and do all kinds of paper work that no one ever looks at or is not necessary for students to learn...

-Elementary school teacher for over 15 years (Chatham)

standardized tests, lunch monitoring, school meetings, etc. are completed. Teachers working in districts that are located in rural Georgia⁷ rate these duties as less predominant than teachers working in an urban or suburban district.

5. Level of benefits/compensation

Based on the results of this survey, the topic of compensation appears polarizing within the teaching ranks. There were sharp increases in the number of respondents who rated this cause as the most predominant and as the least. The 4.5 average rating may be a bit misleading for that reason. Words relating to compensation (e.g. pay, salary) were mentioned in 12,788 responses, for example. Differences could be due to geography and cost of living: teachers in metro Atlanta were more likely to rate this cause higher than their non-metro counterparts. As to the explanation, several teachers mentioned the option to leave

I can't pay my bills every month with two teachers in the house. I feel like I need a second job to support my teaching habit.

-High school teacher

teaching and immediately receive higher pay in the private sector. Others remarked on the relatively competitive benefits, but expressed fear that future reform may diminish them. In the middle, there was an undeniable sense that the salary of teachers was one of many factors that led to a feeling of disrespect and de-professionalization of their work.

6. Level/quality of ongoing support, resources and professional learning

Although the phrasing of this possible cause is general, teachers across the state ranked it consistently across grade levels, years of experience, and geography. As an example of what this answer means to teachers, many respondents noted having to pay for classroom resources out-of-pocket.

Each year, we are asked to do more with less and less support, funding, training, and adequate resources.

-Elementary school teacher (Bryan)

7. School level/District level leadership

The survey responses made it clear that the school and district leadership make an immense impact on the teacher perception of attrition causes. There is inconsistency, however, between whether this impact is positive or negative. The sheer number and variation of school- and central-office administrators in the state of Georgia makes results like these unsurprising. As a trend, the more experience a teacher has, the less likely

My principal does not make me feel valued.

-Elementary school teacher for over 20 years (Fulton)

they are to rate leaders as a cause for educators leaving the workforce. Several respondents wrote that instead of as a cause for attrition, strong school leadership could and does insulate classroom teachers from many of these other potential stressors becoming too burdensome. Future research would assist in understanding school leaders' roles in attrition for some and retention for others.

8. Level of preparation when entering the profession

Teachers in Georgia overwhelmingly rated preparation at entry as the least predominant cause of teacher attrition within the first five years.

Of note, there is a strong correlation between the likelihood that an instructor will recommend the profession and whether or not they see preparedness as an issue. The less likely respondents were to recommend teaching, the more likely they were to rank the level of preparation at entry as a potential concern.

In my opinion, new teachers underestimate the amount of work teachers are asked to manage. As a student teacher, they are not always adequately exposed to data collection, paperwork, grading, lesson planning, communications, and having to report or attend meetings, conferences, and extra duties and responsibilities as the true homeroom teacher has to do. To begin to feel established, one really needs to try and give the profession at least 3-5 years...

-Elementary school teacher (Bryan)

Q. 3: Please list any additional reasons why you believe 47% of the teachers in Georgia leave the profession within five years

The last question gave teachers the chance to provide reasons for the attrition rate outside of the ones given in the survey. Again, teachers showed a desire to have their collective voices heard as well over 95% of responses included an answer to this optional question. Respondents painted a dismal picture of disillusionment and powerlessness within education in the state of Georgia. Unsurprisingly, given the previous literature⁸ on teacher attrition, issues with student discipline were mentioned as one of the top causes of the high rate (student discipline, accountability, and behavior were mentioned in 18.6% of answers). What is surprising is that words associated with discipline were mentioned less than those related to time (19.4% of answers). Responses included a lack of support (17.6%) from parents (19.3%), leaving the instructors to blame for all possible student issues. As the profession currently stands teachers reported

The profession has become less and less encouraging, it expects A LOT in return and maintains a punitive culture that essentially strikes fear, anxiety and burn out.

-High school teacher (Columbia)

feeling disrespected (12.4%) and stressed out (9.7%) by the workload and the general feeling of having no control (mentioned in over 2000 responses) in or outside the classroom. Interestingly, more responses mentioned holding those in government responsible than the media, school principals or district superintendents combined.

Discussion

Taken by itself, a 44% dropout rate is a statistic that calls for action. The fact that two-thirds of teachers surveyed would not recommend teaching as a profession may predict this problem compounding in the future, with disastrous effects to the state of education in Georgia. Education's place as central to our society guarantees that teacher shortages would affect the entire state.

This report is not equipped to inform specific policy recommendations, although decision makers would do well to take results like these seriously. Almost all reforms within public schools rely on the implementation efforts of the classroom teacher. For this reason, those in power that want to influence education in any way must consider the educator perspective. Georgia's public school educators responded unequivocally that standardized tests and the current teacher evaluation method are two (of several) factors that they believe are pushing teachers away from the profession. Thankfully many of these factors are legislated and, therefore, amendable.

Georgia's poor high school dropout rate has finally been seen as a serious issue in need of long- and short-term action. Teacher retention in this state must be given similar attention. In any given five-year period, nearly half of the state's professional public educators dropout of the classroom. It is time for this fact to be viewed for what it is, a problem that is quickly becoming a crisis. State and local leaders might be advised to invite teachers to the table for discussion on these issues before Georgia has to contemplate education without its educators.

Endnotes

¹ The survey included the number 47%, but it was later corrected that this was the attrition rate for all school officials. 44% of teachers leave the profession within five years in Georgia.

² See <http://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2015/jan/27/five-top-reasons-teachers-join-and-quit>; Thomson, M. M., & McIntyre, E. (2013). Prospective teachers' goal orientation: An examination of different teachers' typologies with respect to motivations and beliefs about teaching. *Teacher Development*, 17(4), 409-430.

³ The following instructions were included: The Georgia Department of Education is studying the reasons why teachers leave public education as a profession. We are inviting current public school classroom teachers across the state to take a few moments to answer the following 7 questions to help us better understand how to reverse this trend in Georgia. We greatly appreciate your time and feedback and know that working together we can make a difference in public education in Georgia.

⁴ The survey was sent to roughly 106,000 teacher emails, putting the response rate right at 50%.

⁵ The remaining surveys reporting teaching in more than one school level.

⁶ Metro Atlanta as defined by the Office of Management and Budget within the Office of the President: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/bulletins/2013/b-13-01.pdf>

⁷ Urban and rural classification as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau: <https://www.census.gov/geo/reference/urban-rural.html>

⁸ See, among others, Pearman, C. J., & Lefever-Davis, S. (2012). Roots of attrition: Reflections of teacher candidates in Title I schools. *Critical Questions in Education*, 3(1), 1-11.