

Easy-to-Read Reports Detail the Stark Impact of Cuts on Districts

State budget reductions continue to drive painful cuts at the local school district level. Because Georgia's public education system is funded by a combination of state, local and federal money, it can be hard to understand the education budget and the impact of state cuts. Two recent reports by the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, which is available at www.gbpi.org, paint a clear picture. They are essential reading in preparing for the 2014 Legislative Session and beyond.

GPBI's "Schoolhouse Squeeze" details how Georgia's school districts are struggling against a relentless financial squeeze. State policymakers have cut billions in funding for public schools in recent years: Per-pupil state funding has dropped an average of 15.3 percent over the past 12 years in inflation-adjusted dollars. During that same time, plunging property values have driven down property tax revenue, the main source of

local school funding. Meanwhile, the number of low-income students has soared, putting additional demands on schools.

In its "Cutting Class to Make Ends Meet" report, GPBI surveyed Georgia school districts for specifics on cuts necessitated by state funding reductions. Respondents comprised 140 school districts representing 92.8 percent of Georgia's public school students. The findings show schools at a tipping point.

- 71 percent of districts have cut the academic year
- 95 percent of districts have increased class size since 2009
- 80 percent of districts will furlough teachers during this school year
- 42 percent of districts have cut or eliminated art and music programs
- 62 percent have eliminated electives and
- 38 percent have cut programs aimed at assisting low-performing students. ■

Length of School Calendar	Number of Districts FY 2009	Number of Districts FY 2013
180+ days	123	40
175-179 days	13	72
170-174 days	4	14
160-169 days	0	9
<160 days	0	5

Number of Furlough Days	Number of Districts
30	1
10	16
9	2
8	8
7	6
6	15
5	21
4	21
3	14
2	7

Furlough days, increased local taxes, dangerously low fund balance, frozen salaries for everyone except state salary professionals, deferred maintenance, aging bus fleet, larger class sizes, longer school day, understaffed school administration, staff development at low ebb, outsourced custodial staff — the list goes on!

Pike County

	District Name	% Change State Revenue per FTE 2002-2014	% Free and Reduced Lunch
1.	Greene County	-65.5%	72.0%
2.	Quitman County	-38.6%	100.0%
3.	Dublin City	-38.2%	77.2%
4.	Baker County	-38.1%	100.0%
5.	Towns County	-36.4%	57.3%
6.	Rabun County	-35.4%	68.6%
7.	Fannin County	-34.7%	63.8%
8.	Putnam County	-34.5%	80.3%
9.	Glynn County	-34.1%	62.9%
10.	Randolph County	-33.9%	90.3%
11.	Baldwin County	-33.7%	80.2%
12.	Vidalia County	-32.5%	65.7%
13.	Talbot County	-32.4%	89.7%
14.	Stewart County	-32.0%	93.6%
15.	Hancock County	-33.2%	68.7%
16.	Miller County	-31.9%	73.0%
17.	McIntosh County	-31.7%	80.5%
18.	Meriwether County	-31.7%	80.8%
19.	Warren County	-31.5%	100.0%
20.	Bulloch County	-31.4%	62.4%

Facts + Stories = A Strong Case

The Georgia Budget and Policy Institute reports feature easy-to-understand appendixes that allow you to see state funding reductions, dropping property values and school cuts at your local level. Educators, parents and local business leaders can use the GBPI data and personal stories to powerfully communicate with each other, with state policymakers and with candidates seeking elected offices.

Douglas County Schools Superintendent Dr. Gordon Pritz, for example, gleaned local data from the GBPI reports to make a strong case about school funding cuts to the local media. The *Douglas County Sentinel*, in turn, published a Nov. 19, 2013 front-page article titled “School system could face \$13.8M shortfall next year.” Drawing from the reports, the article stated, “the Legislature has underfunded schools every year since 2003. Douglas County Schools have been shorted \$113.6 million over that 10-year stretch.” According to Pritz, the GBPI reports hit the nail on the head when it comes to demonstrating the impact of funding cuts.

When Georgia House and Senate Education committee members held legislative listening sessions across the state in fall 2013, PAGE shared the GBPI data with legislators. Moreover, local educators and school board members combined region-specific GBPI data with stories about the impact of cuts on their schools. Educators painted a picture of school communities rising to serve the needs of students in the face of budget challenges. It is our hope that these stories will compel legislators

to rethink maintaining state budget reductions. Public education advocates must continue to share such stories with state policymakers and encourage reversal of harmful funding reductions.

PAGE encourages all of you to discuss the 2014 agenda and share your school and district’s personal stories with legislators at PAGE Day on Capitol Hill on Tuesday, Feb. 18. The event kicks off with breakfast at the state capitol, followed by meetings with key legislators. Later in the day, you will meet with your

district’s House and Senate members and have lunch with them at the “Top of the Slop” in the Sloppy Floyd building, across the street from the capitol.

Some may stand to gain by painting a picture of Georgia’s public school system as a failing endeavor. These grim portraits are a disservice to educators and the students they serve. Instead of allowing others to do it for them, supporters of public education must tell our own stories. These stories are those of school success and student progress in the face of increasing challenges. As the 2014 legislative session opens and the upcoming election season nears, sharing these stories is more important than ever. ■

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— Douglas County Schools Superintendent Dr. Gordon Pritz

