

**Palmetto State Teachers Association**



**2026**

**F.O.C.U.S.**

**POLICY AGENDA**

[palmettoteachers.org](https://palmettoteachers.org)

## **Join PSTA Advocacy Efforts**

**As the largest professional association for educators in South Carolina, Palmetto State Teachers Association is committed to advocating for policies that advance the learning conditions students need and the working conditions educators deserve. The PSTA advocacy approach is grounded in developing relationships with policymakers and elevating the voices of educators to tell the stories about the changes needed in K-12 education.**

**PSTA members are actively engaged in ongoing grassroots advocacy efforts coordinated through routine Legislative Alert Network communications. PSTA also welcomes non-members to partner in efforts to advance needed education policy actions in our state.**

**Please scan the QR code or click on the link below to engage with PSTA advocacy efforts. The code will take you to the PSTA Advocacy Center, where you can take actions such as:**

- **Registering to vote**
- **Finding contact information for your state and federal elected officials**
- **Participating in PSTA advocacy campaigns through emails, phone calls, social media posts, and more**
- **Signing up to receive action alerts from PSTA regarding time-sensitive policy actions connected to components of the F.O.C.U.S. Agenda**



**<http://linktr.ee/palmettoteachers>**

# Overview of the 2026 F.O.C.U.S. Agenda

At the midpoint of this decade, South Carolina is positioned to achieve unprecedented improvements in PreK-12 education. Efforts over the last five years laid the groundwork for this growth through historic investments in educator salaries, student resources, and school infrastructure. The 2025 legislative session, in particular, resulted in historic improvements in educator working conditions and compensation.

However, many of these actions have yet to fully deliver their expected and hoped for returns. This failure is due, at least in part, to persistent and acrimonious debates over topics and controversies that have, at most, an indirect connection to the quality of education the overwhelming majority of South Carolina's students receive. Far too many students continue to experience unrealized academic potential due to understaffed schools, inefficient utilization of available resources, and a growing epidemic of school and community violence threatening their physical safety and mental well-being.

**Given these challenges, the debates in the 126th General Assembly must keep what students need and deserve squarely in focus as the top priority for policy actions.**

Palmetto State Teachers Association offers the **F.O.C.U.S. Agenda** as a guide for advancing the well-being and achievement of all South Carolina children through policy actions that can deliver on five conditions necessary for student success:

- **F**ull Staffing
- **O**ptimization of Time and Resources
- **C**omprehensive Systems of Support
- **U**niform Opportunities to Learn
- **S**afety and Security

As the largest association of professional educators in South Carolina, PSTA developed the F.O.C.U.S. Agenda by listening carefully to the voices and experiences of South Carolina's PreK-12 educators. This year's agenda includes several new policy ideas (indicated by a ★), an update made possible after numerous priorities from the 2025 F.O.C.U.S. Agenda were signed into law last year. PSTA looks forward to working with local, state, and federal leaders to enact these policies and create the learning conditions needed for every South Carolina child to reach their full potential.

Sincerely,



Kathy Maness  
Executive Director



Cely Johnson  
President



Patrick Kelly  
Director of Governmental Affairs

# Top Four F.O.C.U.S. Priorities for 2026

## ★ Persistently Disruptive/Dangerous Student Behaviors

Across South Carolina, the behaviors of a limited number of students are adversely impacting the ability of other students to learn and of educators to perform their job duties safely and effectively. In addition to disrupting instruction, these behaviors result in damage to personal and school property and cause physical injury for students and educators. South Carolina must institute policies and procedures to ensure persistently disruptive or dangerous student behaviors do not impede the ability of teachers to teach and of other students to learn.

## Compensation

Record investments in educator salaries over the past five years led to positive gains in educator recruitment and retention efforts. However, work remains to implement the full set of recommendations made by the 2023 Teacher Recruitment and Retention Task Force. The 126th General Assembly should prioritize completing the Task Force recommendations in the areas of compensation and benefits, including increasing the statewide minimum starting pay for teachers to \$50,000 while providing corresponding pay increases for veteran educators.

## ★ Protecting Educator Time

According to the 2025 RAND State of the American Teacher Survey, teachers continue to be more likely to experience job-related stress and burnout than “similar working adults.” Many teachers identified excessive demands on their time as the cause. South Carolina must fully implement and build on the significant improvement in educator working conditions accomplished through the passage of the Educator Assistance Act in 2025. Educators continue to identify the need for more time, smaller class sizes, and stronger school leadership and support as essential conditions for improving educator retention and effectiveness.

## Safety and Security

Over the past three budget cycles, the General Assembly invested \$60 million in grants to local districts to enhance school safety. Despite this effort, a significant percentage of classrooms and schools still lack basic facility and personnel requirements necessary for providing safe and secure learning environments. In 2026, the General Assembly and local districts must pass the policies and budgets required to address and reduce the volume of violence, threats, and, harassment that disrupts student learning and causes unhealthy levels of ongoing stress and anxiety for students, educators, and families.



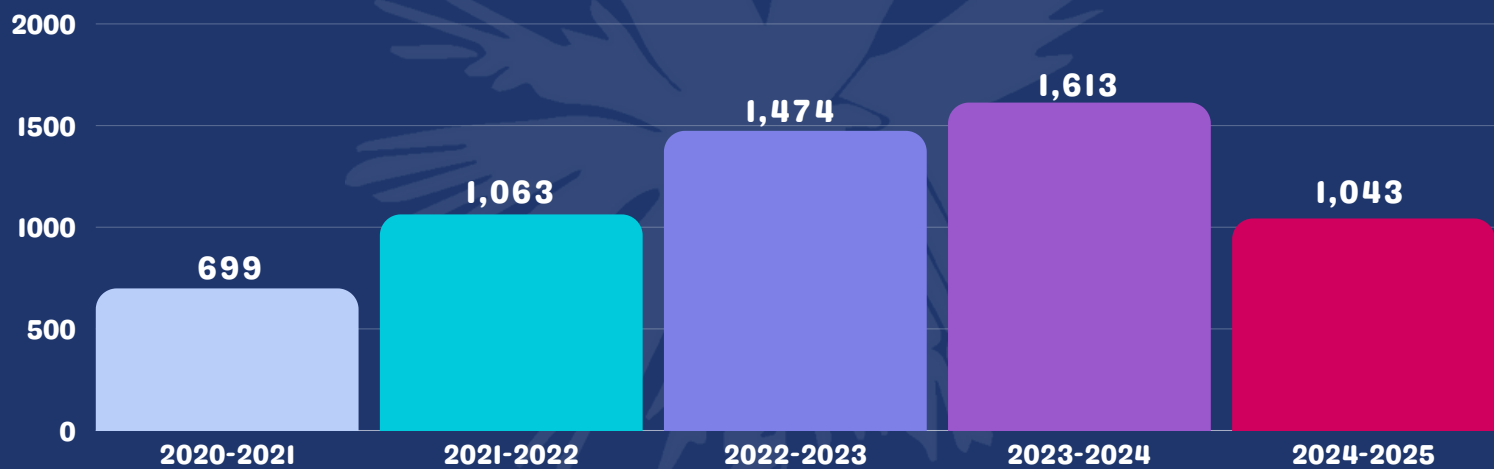
# Full Staffing

## In Principle

Research consistently shows the number one in-school influence on student success is access to an effective teacher. As a result, any policy agenda that seeks to keep student needs in focus must start with reversing South Carolina’s persistent educator shortages. Fortunately, preliminary evidence indicates that recent policy actions are making a difference. Last school year, CERRA reported the first decline in start-of-year teaching vacancies since 2019. However, more than 1,000 teaching positions remained vacant, meaning thousands of students lacked access to a highly-qualified teacher. Staffing shortages also exist across other school-based positions, especially those connected to transportation and student mental health services. Helping every student realize their full academic potential starts with ensuring South Carolina schools are fully staffed.

## In Practice

Vacancies in School-Based Certified Educator Positions at Start of School Year



Staffing Data for Key Student Support Positions in South Carolina Schools

Position	Student-to-Staff Ratio (24-25)	National Recommended Ratio	Vacancy Rate
School Counselors	304:1	250:1	1.3%
Psychologists	1,200:1	500:1	7.7%
Social Workers	2,419:1	250:1	14.1% (2023)
Mental Heath Counselors	8,048:1	N/A	N/A

Data based on: 2024–25 SC Staff by School Report (SCDE), 2024–25 Active Headcount (SCDE), 2023 School Vacancy Survey (Committee on Children), 2024–25 Supply and Demand Report (CERRA), NASW Standards, NASP Standards, NACAC Support for Counselors



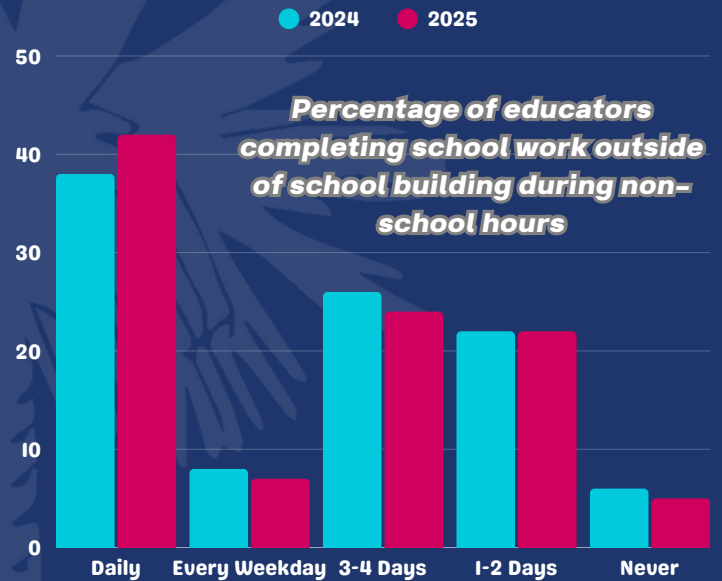
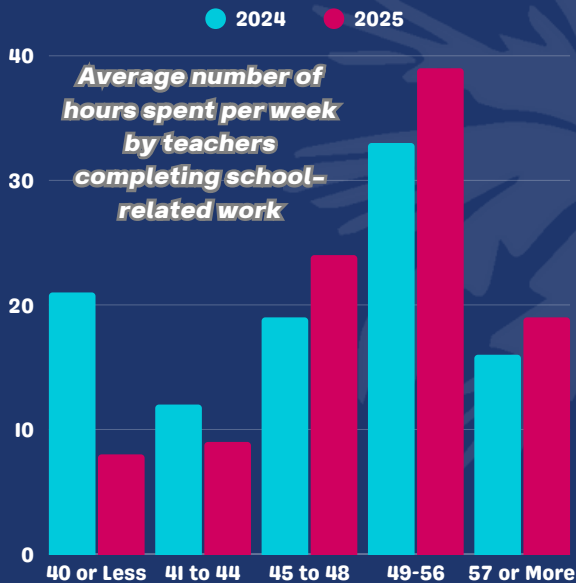
# Full Staffing Working Conditions

## In Principle

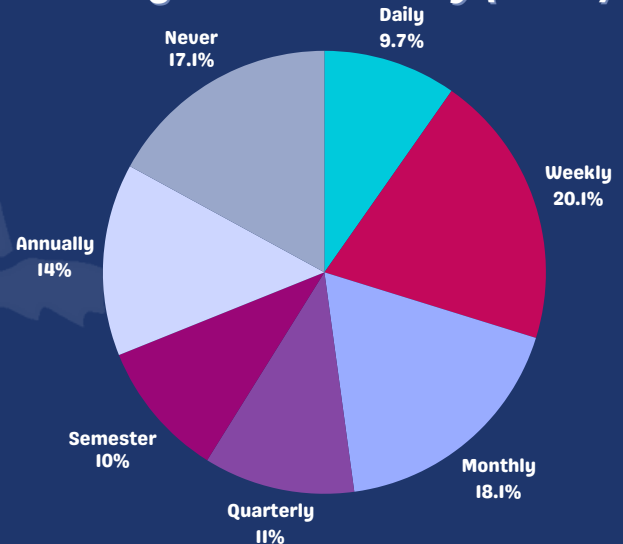
In the 2025 RAND State of the American Teacher Survey, teachers were nearly two times more likely to report job-related stress and burnout when compared to similar working adults. Teachers also identified working an average of 49 hours per week, nearly five hours per week more than the average professional. The 2023 South Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey showed “available time” to be the second lowest rated working condition measured, with most teachers indicating they did not have enough available time to complete the demands of their job. Relatedly, a September 2025 survey of PSTA members showed **17% of eligible teachers** were not receiving the daily unencumbered time mandated by Act 176 of 2022.

## In Practice

**Profile of Average South Carolina Teacher Working Conditions**



**Frequency of Required Work Outside of Regular School Day (2025)**



48% of South Carolina educators are **required** to complete an activity outside of the regular school day **without compensation** at least once per month

Source: 2024 and 2025 PSTA Member Survey





# **Full Staffing** **Working Conditions**

## ***In Policy***

### **Enforcement of Existing Policies**

South Carolina teachers continue to fail to realize the full potential of significant pro-educator policies passed by the General Assembly. Examples include teachers failing to receive self-directed work time required under the Educator Assistance Act or the daily unencumbered time required by a 2022 law for elementary and special education teachers. The Department of Education and State Board should pursue corrective actions for failure to implement such policies, and, if necessary, seek additional legislation to create enforcement mechanisms, similar to the language found in §59-29-150 for enforcement of curricular requirements.

### **Class Size and Max Student Load**

State Board Regulation 43-205 allows some of the largest class sizes and max student load caps in the Southeast, all to the detriment of students and teachers. Allowing 30 students in a first grade classroom is neither safe nor optimal for student learning. Similarly, requiring a high school English teacher to grade 150 student essays at one time is a certain pathway to educator burnout. The General Assembly and State Board must act on the 2023 Task Force recommendation to “review class size and caseload requirements,” with an eye toward reducing and enforcing more appropriate standards.

### **Training Videos**

Districts across South Carolina require educators to complete an ever-growing list of “training” videos at the start of each school year. These programs can require ten or more hours of personal time outside of school hours or contracted employment days to complete. Since these videos are repetitive from year-to-year, school districts should extend the recent focus on “competency-based” education models by allowing exemptions from viewing videos if an educator can pass a pre-assessment on the required training content. Greenville County Schools has already implemented such a policy. If districts do not act, the General Assembly should require this policy via legislation.

### **Contract Information**

The General Assembly should require teacher contracts to specify all assigned duties, with a requirement for compensation for duties required outside of school hours. Standard contracts currently stipulate teachers must complete “reasonable extracurricular activities” or “other duties as assigned” by administration. These additional, non-instructional tasks typically occur outside the school day without any compensation for the required work. H. 3210 is a good starting place for increasing the professionalism of teacher contracts in South Carolina.

### **Job-Embedded Time to Plan**

To serve students best, teachers need time to plan and engage in self-directed activities during the school day. In early 2023, the state required local boards to adopt policies ensuring elementary and special education teachers were receiving daily unencumbered time. Local boards must evaluate if these policies are being implemented equally across schools and address situations where they are not. The General Assembly should extend the unencumbered time requirement to all school staff and require either time or monetary compensation for teachers who lose planning time due to mandatory meetings or class coverage resulting from staffing shortages.

### **Limit Teaching Two Courses at Once**

Teachers of high school credit courses are sometimes required to teach two or more sets of sequential standards during the same class period, such as having Spanish 2 and Spanish 3 students enrolled in the same class. This arrangement can be detrimental to student learning and overextends a teacher’s ability to meet the needs of all learners. Similar to the prohibition on “dual modality” teaching enacted in 2021, the General Assembly should prohibit the creation of a single class requiring the simultaneous teaching of two or more sequential sets of state standards without instructor approval. Exceptions should be made for courses offered through Career and Technical Centers.



# Full Staffing Compensation

## In Principle

In 2021, PSTA became the first educator association to call for increasing the statewide minimum teacher salary to \$50,000 over a five-year period. At that time, starting teacher pay in South Carolina was only \$36,000, and statewide average teacher pay was \$9,000 lower than pay in Georgia. Today, the statewide minimum salary for teachers is up to \$48,500, and average teacher pay increased nearly \$3,000 between 2022 and 2023. However, as noted in the 2023 Teacher Recruitment and Retention Task Force report, more work is needed to make educator pay competitive with “other states, as well as [with] the private sector.” SREB data show average South Carolina teacher pay trailing the Southeastern regional average by nearly \$1,400 annually.

## In Practice

### 2023 Southeastern Teacher Salaries and Benefits Information

State	Average Salary	Average Take Home Pay (15 years experience)	Average Retirement Withholding	Highest Health Premium (Individual/Family)	Maximum Health Deductible (Individual)
South Carolina	\$57,778	\$39,528	9%	\$98/\$307	\$4,000
Georgia	\$64,461	\$43,057	6%	\$170/\$581	\$3,500
North Carolina	\$56,559	\$36,972	6%	\$96/\$720	\$5,000
Tennessee	\$55,369	\$36,252	6%	\$411/\$1048	\$6,800
Virginia	\$63,103	\$45,476	5%	\$96/\$301	\$5,000
Florida	\$53,098	\$45,476	3%	\$50/\$180	\$1,500
Regional Average	\$59,145	\$39,094	7.1%	\$196/\$867	\$3,003

Source: 2023 Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Teacher Compensation Dashboard





# **Full Staffing** **Compensation**

## ***In Policy***

### **Minimum Salary to \$50,000**

Thanks to leadership from Governor McMaster, Superintendent Weaver, and members of the General Assembly, South Carolina is poised to reach the Governor's goal of a statewide minimum salary of \$50,000 by 2026. The General Assembly can and should complete that work in 2026. In doing so, it is important for the General Assembly to fund corresponding increases across the salary schedule while maintaining salary "lanes" for postgraduate level coursework and degrees.

### **Strategic Compensation**

Educator shortages are not uniform across certification areas or geographic regions of the state. In response, the General Assembly should evaluate the efficacy of prior strategic compensation programs (including the Rural Recruitment Initiative) and then build on the most promising models. Positive results in states like Hawaii and Washington highlight the potential benefits of strategically aligning salary incentives to address areas of greatest need. Research also demonstrates promise for increased compensation to highly effective teachers that work with increased student loads.

### **Health and Childcare Benefits**

Inflation and rising benefit costs often consume educator salary increases. The state must continue to fully cover the cost of any increase in health care premiums and make efforts to lower deductibles to the southeastern average while expanding the number of fully covered preventive services. The state should allocate funding to districts to support on-site childcare for educators, similar to Department of Administration efforts for state employees. As recommended by the 2023 Task Force report, South Carolina should join Tennessee in providing a tuition discount to children of educators attending state universities. The General Assembly should codify the Attorney General's recommendation to explicitly include stillbirth as an eligible event for paid parental leave. Leave benefits also must support educators serving as the primary caregiver for an elderly family member.

### **Career Ladders and Pathways**

One of the most innovative recommendations in the 2023 Teacher Retention and Recruitment Task Force report was an appendix illustrating a potential career ladder salary schedule. This reimagining of the traditional salary schedule can result in increased teacher leadership, improved educator retention, and improved student academic outcomes, as demonstrated by programs like the Teacher Incentive Allotment in Texas or the Advanced Teaching Roles program in North Carolina

### **Flexible Leave Policies**

Several districts across the state continue to distinguish between vacation and sick days when providing leave balances to employees. While teacher attendance is critically important to student achievement, educators inevitably need to take time off work for unavoidable events ranging from car repairs to medical appointments. As a result, all districts should adopt policies that award full leave balances as "paid time off" (PTO) in order to provide staff the necessary flexibility to address personal needs and life events. This shift to PTO should be accomplished without diminishing current annual leave benefits.

### **Maximizing Retirement**

Policies designed to meet the needs of retired teachers provides the quickest path to expanding the pool of highly-talented educators in South Carolina. Policies strengthening retirement should include eliminating the earnings limitation for retired teachers who return to work and/or the requirement for working retirees to pay the 9% South Carolina Retirement System contribution from their salaries, revising upward the existing \$500 limit on annual benefit adjustments for SCRS retirees due to recent inflationary pressures, and enacting smart policies like H. 3867 that can help educators better utilize existing retirement resources like 403(b) programs without requiring any additional state resources.



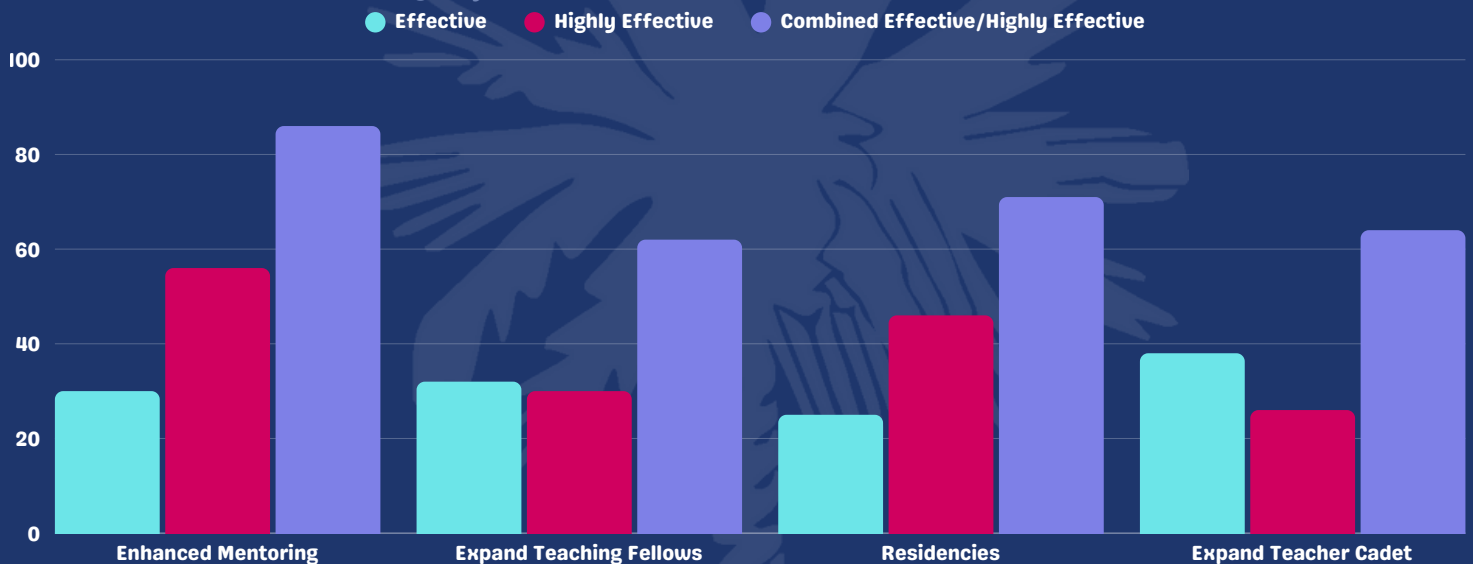
# Full Staffing Preparation and Support

## In Principle

CERRA data show that traditional educator preparation programs in South Carolina produced 135 fewer graduates in 2024-25 compared to the five-year average, while the number of educator retirements statewide exceeded the five-year average by 30. If these trends persist, South Carolina schools will be hard pressed to find qualified candidates to fill the natural vacancies created by annual retirements. At the same time, South Carolina is struggling to retain early career teachers, as 36% of educators who quit after the 2024-25 school year had five or fewer years of classroom experience.

## In Practice

Percentage of Teachers with 1-5 Years of Experience Rating Policies as “Effective” or “Highly Effective” for Educator Recruitment Efforts



## Teachers with Less than Five Years Experience, By the Numbers



21%  
Work a second job  
outside of school



35%  
Do not feel supported by  
school leadership in  
addressing challenging  
student behaviors

\$26,118  
Average Student  
Debt



76%  
Find that affordable  
housing is “unavailable” or  
“extremely limited” in their  
community



Source: 2025 PSTA Member Survey

# **Full Staffing Preparation and Support**

## ***In Policy***

### **Introduction to Education as a Career**

ProTeam and Teacher Cadets are South Carolina-developed “grow your own programs,” which are nationally recognized and have been replicated in other states. However, both programs remain unavailable in many schools and entire districts across the state, which is why the 2023 Task Force issued a wide range of recommendations for expanding these programs, including expanded course credit opportunities for students in Teacher Cadets. The General Assembly should ensure funding for the necessary teachers to provide these programs in every district. Efforts should also include expanding Introduction to Education coursework through CTE programs.

### **Enhanced Mentoring Programs**

South Carolina must expand on the requirements in the Department of Education’s 2017 Induction and Mentoring Guidelines to ensure all early career teachers have the support necessary to excel and remain in the profession. This expansion should be based on successful mentoring programs like Carolina TIP, where the retention rate of participating early career teachers is 30% higher than state and national averages. Enhanced mentoring should include three years of mentoring from a compensated, master teacher in the same certification area as the novice teacher.

### **Certification for Classified Staff**

South Carolina must reduce and eliminate barriers faced by career educational professionals seeking initial teacher certification. Programs like Columbia College’s APEC and USC’s CarolinaCAP, both of which provide accessible certification pathways for current instructional aides and classified school staff, should be expanded. The State Board should also implement the 2023 Teacher Retention and Recruitment Task Force recommendation to identify a replacement for the Praxis Core assessment currently required for enrollment in educator prep programs.

### **Expand Teaching Fellows**

The South Carolina Teaching Fellows program is one of the top teacher preparation models in the nation, with 80% of fellows graduating from the program and 93% of graduates satisfying the loan forgiveness requirement to work one year in a South Carolina public school for every year of financial support. Teaching Fellows annually receives hundreds more qualified applications than the number of available fellowships. Increased funding for Teaching Fellows could result in more of these applicants entering teaching and allow more colleges and universities to host cohorts.

### **Residency Preparation Models**

Several promising teacher residency programs exist across South Carolina, but these efforts lack the scope and depth of successful programs like Tennessee’s Registered Teacher Apprentice Program. Developing similar programs in South Carolina must start with the establishment of a clear, statewide definition of “residency program,” a definition that must include requirements for teacher residents to receive compensation for instruction across an entire school year. It is past time to move beyond the traditional “student teaching” model that requires pre-service educators to pay to work.

### **School Leadership Preparation**

SC TEACHER’s 2023 Teacher Working Conditions Survey found “administrative support [to have]...a consistent association with teacher’s job satisfaction and intent to stay in the profession.” To improve school leader preparation and performance, the state should develop more hybrid teaching roles to allow teachers to develop leadership skills prior to leaving the classroom. Policies should also seek to keep school and district leaders connected to the daily experiences of classrooms through requirements for routine classroom observations and expectations for school and district leaders with teaching certification to take on occasional instructional duties.

# Optimization of Time and Resources

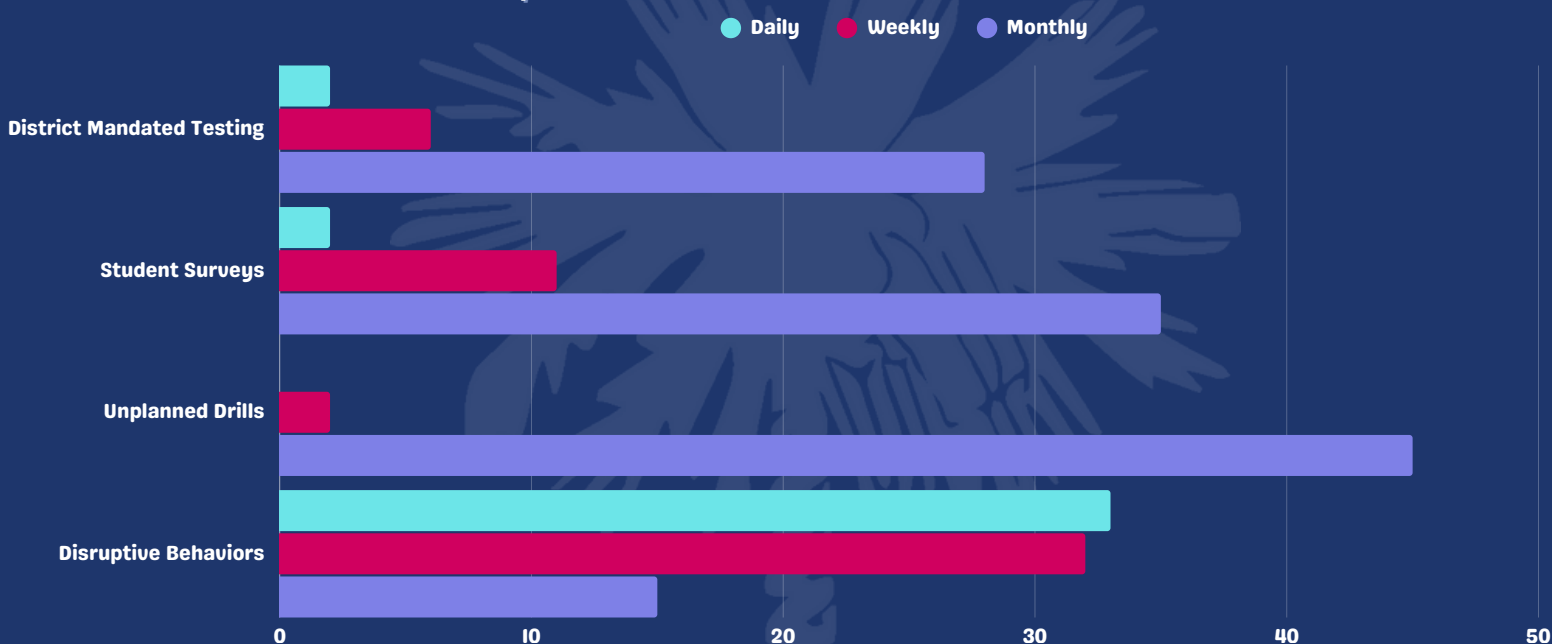
## Time

### In Principle

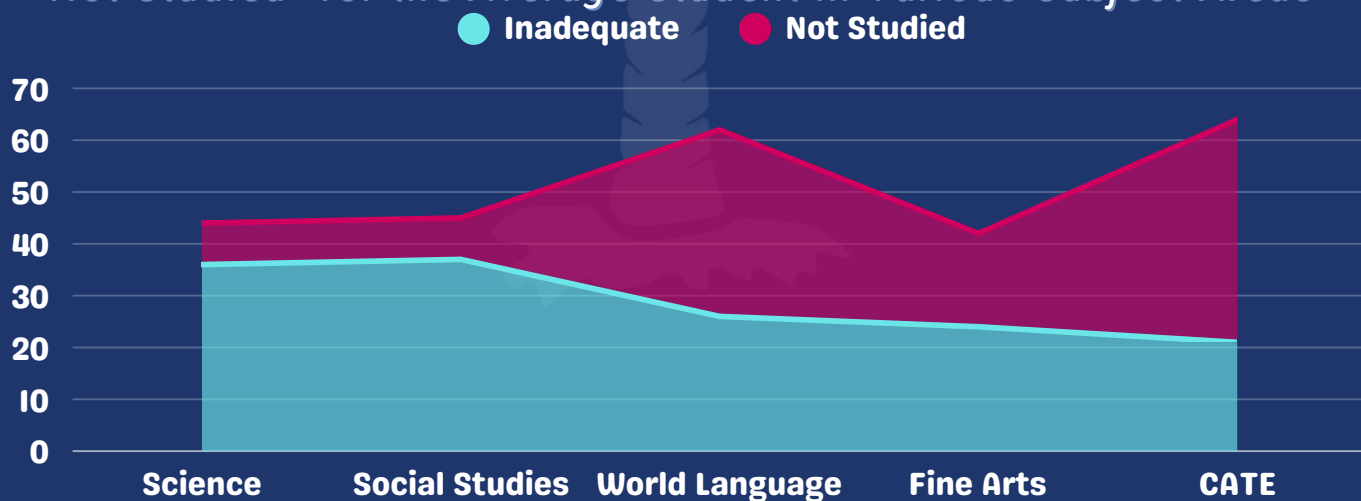
Of all the elements needed for student learning and growth, none is more finite than time. Acknowledging the importance of time in learning rests at the heart of the South Carolina Department of Education's Free to Focus campaign. This campaign serves as a reminder of the importance of minimizing disruptions to the instructional day and optimizing all available minutes in the school year, both in-class and through enrichment activities. Making the most of every available moment during the day is the key to providing students with ongoing access to a high quality and rigorous educational experience.

### In Practice

#### Percentage of Teachers Reporting Frequency of Instructional Disruptions Due to Various Factors



#### Percentage of Teachers Rating Instructional Time as "Inadequate" or "Not Studied" for the Average Student in Various Subject Areas



Source: 2025 PSTA Member Survey





# Optimization of Time and Resources

## Time

### In Policy

#### Time Cap on Testing

A Council for Great City Schools report found the average American student takes 112 standardized tests during their K-12 education experience, an amount equivalent to nearly 23 weeks of learning time. South Carolina students are losing instructional time due to state-mandated testing and district-required “benchmark” assessment programs. To protect student learning time, the General Assembly should pass legislation ensuring no student loses more than 3% of their annual instructional time to state or district-mandated testing and surveys.

#### Higher Quality Assessments

The 2023 Teacher Task Force reported a “disconnect between the use of assessments, the data they yield, and instructional practices.” Addressing this disconnect requires shifting our assessment systems away from the old one-time, high-stakes summative model and toward the type of ongoing, formative assessment systems being pioneered in states like Florida and Louisiana. These systems provide timely and rich feedback on student growth and proficiency while providing teachers with current year data that can help inform instructional practices and priorities.

#### Credit Retrieval and Seat Time

Chronic absenteeism continues to have a significant negative impact on student achievement in South Carolina, providing clear evidence that “seat time” policies for course credit are failing to adequately encourage regular school attendance for all students. This failure stems, in part, from the heavy use and abuse by districts of “credit retrieval” programs that allow students to “earn back” missed time in order to earn credit. The Education Oversight Committee should conduct a careful evaluation of credit retrieval programs and issue recommendations to ensure credit retrieval is only used in appropriate instances and provides meaningful learning opportunities for students.

#### Time for Play

An ever-growing body of research affirms the essential role of unstructured play in improving the mental health and academic achievement of students, especially in the younger grades. However, nearly 30% of elementary and middle school students statewide do not receive at least twenty minutes daily for unstructured play, according to the 2025 PSTA Member Survey. The Senate should review and pass H. 3195 in order to ensure protected student access to play and physical activity during the school day.

#### Improved IEP Evaluation Timeline

Current law requires districts to complete an initial evaluation of disability status under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act within 60 days. However, families across the state often find the evaluation process can take much longer due to onerous paperwork requirements and insufficient human resources. The General Assembly must examine ways to streamline the evaluation process while also ensuring districts and SDE have the necessary staff and resources to conduct evaluations in a timely manner.

#### Well-Rounded Program of Study

Since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001, schools have increasingly prioritized instruction in math and reading due to their heavy weighting in accountability systems. This emphasis marginalizes instruction in areas like science, social studies, fine arts, physical education, and world languages. The State Board should strengthen regulations for the Defined Minimum Program to ensure a well-rounded curriculum, and the state accountability system should give greater weight to non-assessment measures of students’ opportunities to learn.

Scan the QR code to learn about the importance of a well-rounded curriculum from 2025 SC Teacher of the Year Braden Wilson





# Optimization of Time and Resources



## Resources

### In Principle

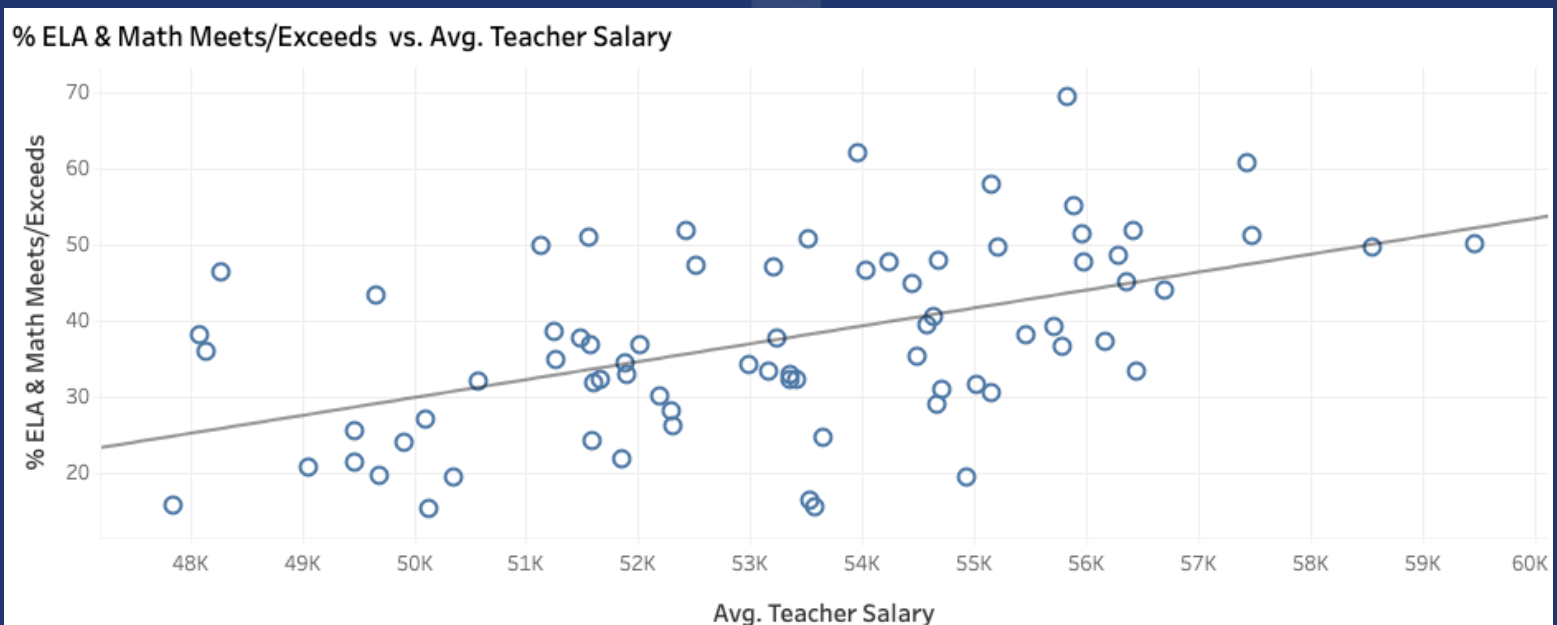
In 2025, the General Assembly appropriated a significant portion of new recurring revenue to K-12 education. This investment is both a recognition of the importance of financial resources in schools and of the urgency of maximizing the use of those funds. Optimizing funds requires elected officials and school leaders to ensure resources are being targeted and delivered directly to classrooms and the work of individuals interacting daily with students. Targeted use of funds is not occurring in too many districts.

### In Practice

*Total Staffed Instructional Positions in K-12 Classrooms Falls Short of Potential Number of Positions Funded by State Aid to Classrooms*

	Student-Teacher Ratio (Instructional Positions)		
	11.14	10.81	13.60
	Formula Ratio*	Funded Ratio**	Actual Ratio***
	Instructional Positions		
	67,685	70,096	55,758
	Formula Positions	Funded Positions	Actual Positions

### Correlation of Student SC READY Performance to Average Teacher Salary by District



Source: SC Revenue and Fiscal Affairs Office SC Funding Dashboard, FY 2022-23

# Optimization of Time and Resources

## *In Policy*

### **Update State Aid to Classrooms**

Since 2022, the General Assembly has used the State Aid to Classrooms funding program to support significant increases in educator salaries. However, given the historic changes made to the statewide minimum salary schedule in recent years, the teacher salary figure used to determine the funding level required should be revised upward from 12 years of experience. The General Assembly should also establish the formula via the regular legislative process rather than through a proviso in order to afford opportunities for public feedback and to provide districts and charters with greater stability and certainty in their budgeting practices. Such feedback is critical in light of the requirement in Proviso 1.3 for RFA to conduct a review of formula weightings to ensure “more consistent distributions” of funds to traditional and charter schools.

### **Revisions to Federal IDEA Funding**

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) authorizes Congress to cover up to 40% of the cost of special education services. Congress, however, has routinely appropriated funds to cover less than 15% of total costs, and the existing funding formula can lead to an even lower percentage of federal funds in an individual state. According to the Brookings Institute, South Carolina in 2023 received \$1,276 per student less in IDEA funds than the state receiving the highest funding level. South Carolina’s congressional delegation should lead the push for full federal funding of special education services required under IDEA.

### **Resources for Literacy**

In 2024, the State Board assumed regulatory control over all instructional materials in South Carolina schools. The vast majority of non-textbook materials, however, are funded through a mix of local funds, educator purchases, and private donations. School media centers are funded almost exclusively through local funds. Because the state is now the governing authority for all instructional materials in media centers, the state should also appropriate annual funds to support the purchase of these materials.

### **Fiscal Transparency**

The Revenue and Fiscal Affairs Office’s Education Funding Dashboard is a significant improvement in fiscal transparency, but the processes used to generate the Dashboard must be improved in order to provide more timely and relevant information. Additionally, the General Assembly should evaluate ways to ensure the maximum amount of State Aid to Classrooms funds are used on dashboard categories aligned to Instruction and Instructional Support. Finally, the SCDE should develop a financial dashboard for the Education Scholarship Trust Fund to report on education scholarship account uses and program management costs.

### **Comprehensive Tax Reform**

While the General Assembly fully funded the increase in the state contribution to State Aid to Classrooms necessary to pay for increased teacher salaries in 2025-26, many local districts struggled to fund the increase to the required 25% local contribution. This challenge was driven in large part by the continued impact of Act 388 on local school funding. The negative impact of Act 388 should be addressed through comprehensive tax reform, an effort that should also include addressing the significant annual decrease in Education Improvement Act funds resulting from 23 pages of exemptions to the sales and use tax.

### **Tax Abatements**

In 2023, South Carolina students and schools lost out on \$541 million in potential education funding due to property tax abatement programs, an amount representing \$727 per student. While programs to attract jobs and foster economic development are valuable to the state, they have an outsized negative impact on school funding due to Act 388. In response, tax abatement programs should either exempt school operation funding or place a reasonable limit on the total number of years for an abatement.



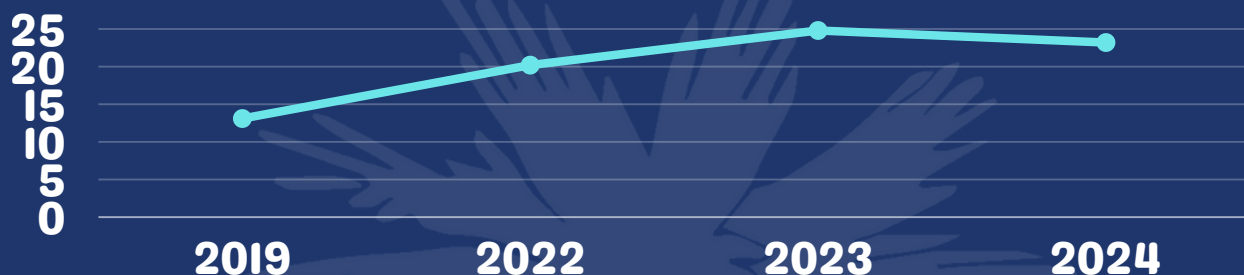
# Comprehensive Systems of Support

## In Principle

A basic maxim of effective teaching is “Maslow before Bloom,” which shows students must have their basic needs fulfilled before they can engage in the deep learning necessary to reach their full academic potential. However, too many South Carolina students are suffering due to unmet physical and mental health needs. Students in distress require wraparound support and resources as a precondition for being ready to learn.

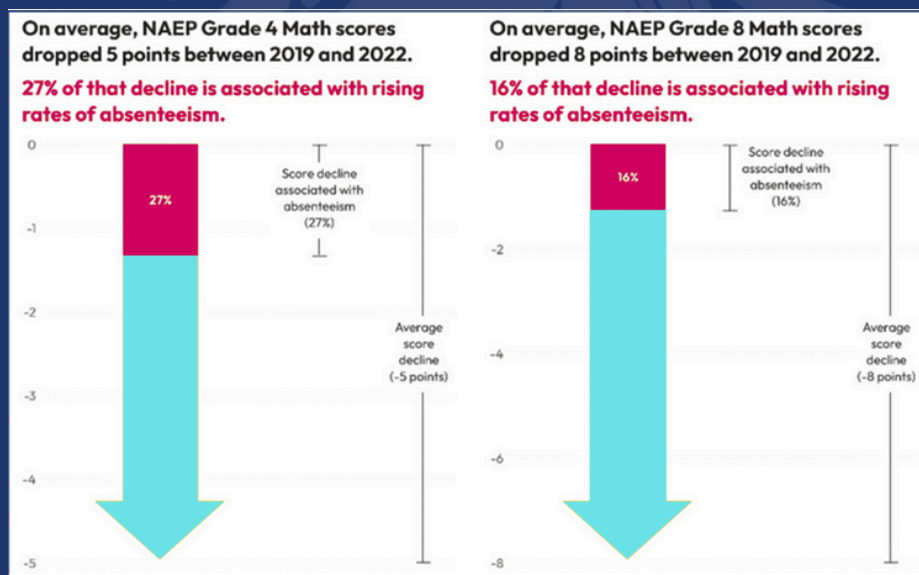
## In Practice

### Percent of South Carolina Students Chronically Absent



Source: South Carolina School Report Cards, 2019-2024

### Impact of Chronic Absenteeism on Student Achievement on Nation's Report Card



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2023

### Educator Voices on Needed Systems of Support

We need quicker processes and more teachers for students in special education. The student intervention process takes too long. Regular ed teachers in 5K should not be asked to assist in changing pull-ups and wiping students.

It would be helpful if all early childhood grades received an instructional aide, not just Pre-K and Kindergarten. My coworkers need the help.

Source: 2025 PSTA Member Survey

# Comprehensive Systems of Support

## *In Policy*

### **School-Based Mental Health Services**

In 2023, the Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children (JCLCC) conducted a School Vacancy Survey for local school districts. The results showed significant rates of vacancies in funded positions essential to student mental health and wellness. To address what Governor McMaster has correctly identified as a “student mental health crisis,” it is imperative for state leaders to enact policies to ensure every student has access to high-quality, in-school mental health services. Such action should include a SCDE-led audit of tasks performed by individuals employed in certified instructional service fields, including school counselors.

### **Chronic Absenteeism**

According to the Education Oversight Committee, one in five South Carolina students missed more than 10% of their school days in 2023-24. Among these chronically absent students, less than half were proficient in reading and less than one quarter met grade level expectations in math. Addressing the root causes of absenteeism requires investments in wraparound student services, staff positions focused on student attendance, and robust communication efforts with families about the importance of school attendance.

### **Special Education Services**

In 2022, the Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children released the “Educational Services for Children with Disabilities Report,” but few of those recommendations have been enacted. Implementation of those policies must be partnered with increased resources and support for special education teachers, including reducing the maximum class size for SPED classrooms, requiring and funding an instructional aide for every full-time SPED teacher, and improvements to the efficiency and usability of online databases and caseload management systems such as EdPlan. South Carolina should also enact a version of Virginia’s §22.1-274.1 to ensure emergency evacuation plans are considered and developed as part of the IEP process.

### **State Funds for Instructional Staff**

While a significant level of attention is paid to statewide vacancies in certified educator positions, vacancy rates are often even greater for the classified instructional aide positions that play a tremendous role in student well-being and success. Non-competitive pay is a driving factor in shortages of classified staff, which is why the General Assembly should institute a state funding line for these positions. The funding line should be similar to the existing cost sharing structure for state funding sent to school districts to support bus driver salaries.

### **School Nutrition Programs**

Hunger and food insecurity is a significant barrier to childhood growth and development across South Carolina. According to a 2022 report, 62% of South Carolina students relied on free or reduced-price school meals, a fact underscoring the need for policies to expand student access to no cost meals while also improving the nutritional content of food in schools. Policies can also help expand community partnerships, such as faith-based “backpack programs,” that support student food security outside of the school day.



### **Community Volunteers**

Research consistently demonstrates the transformative power of community engagement for student academic achievement and success. As a result, the Department of Education should continue to build on its Project Raise Your Hand initiative through greater coordination with local districts. The General Assembly can help expand this effort through additional funding or providing tax incentives for employers that provide time off for their employees to volunteer in schools. Additional investments are also needed in programs with a proven track record of success providing mentoring and support to students, such as Communities in Schools.





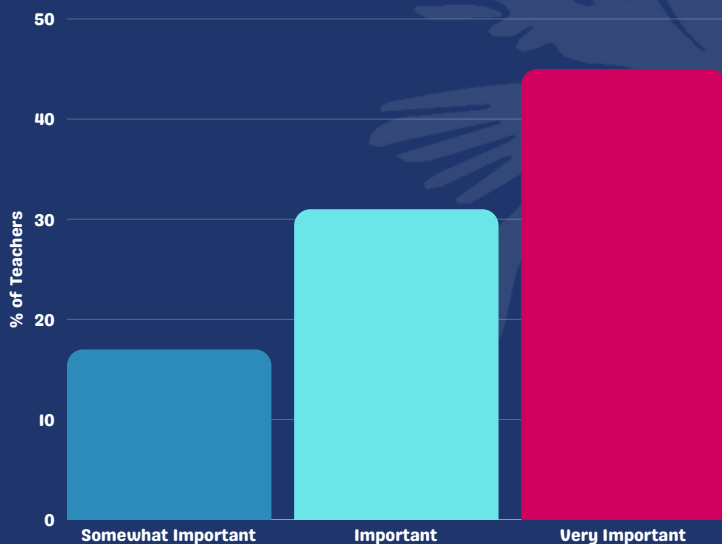
# Uniform Opportunities to Learn

## In Principle

The state constitution requires the General Assembly to provide a “system of free public schools open to all children.” South Carolina must make certain every educational setting receiving state funds is both **affordable** and **accessible** to all students to ensure uniform opportunities to learn for all students. The state must also maintain appropriate and sufficient systems of **accountability** to provide transparency for school performance. At the same time, the state must develop policies to govern grading practices and the acceptable use of artificial intelligence in education so students are ready to meet the high bar for college, career, and citizenship readiness established in the Profile of the SC Graduate.

## In Practice

*Teacher Views on the Importance of Reforms to “Grade Inflation Policies” as a Tool to Improve Student Growth and Achievement*



Source: 2025 PSTA Member Survey

## Teacher Views on “Grade Floor” Policies



“We have the 50% rule, which I think is ridiculous.”

“Being given a 50 percent for doing nothing seems to enable laziness.”

“Everybody gets at least a 50 percent is insulting to the students who work.”

“We have gone to the ‘Do nothing, get a 50’ grade policy. Students have figured out that, if they work hard for a quarter (usually the first) they can ‘coast’ the rest of the year and get a D.”

“Forcing teachers to give students half-credit on assignments that have not been completed and/or turned in is a disservice to students.”

“Most teachers can’t stand the gift fifty.”<sup>[22]</sup>

Source: Fordham Institute National Survey of Teachers, 2025

Are South Carolina students and educators prepared for the growth of generative AI technology?

**Prompt and Response  
from ChatGPT,  
September 2024**

“Overall, while there’s progress, there’s still work to be done to ensure that all students and educators in South Carolina are fully prepared for the rapid advancements in generative AI technology. Efforts to enhance AI literacy...and develop clear guidelines for ethical use will be crucial in shaping the future readiness of the education system.”



# Uniform Opportunities to Learn

## *In Policy*



### **Grade Inflation**

The Profile of the South Carolina Graduate promotes development of “life and career characteristics” such as integrity, self-direction, perseverance, and work ethic. Student growth in these areas is inhibited significantly by the implementation of grade-inflating practices like “grade floors” and “no zeros” policies. The General Assembly should address the use of these practices through passage of H. 4306/S. 537. Ensuring grades accurately reflect what students know and can do also requires State Board review of the Uniform Grading Policy as well as expansion and strengthening of the governance of benchmark assessments under Proviso 1.118.

### **Uniform Accessibility**

The South Carolina Constitution requires a system of education open to all children. This reality is reflected in the non-discrimination language in §59-40-40 of the Charter Schools Act. The General Assembly should amend §59-8-150(A)(3) to require all education service providers receiving funds from Education Scholarship Accounts (ESAs) to admit students under the same non-discrimination criteria. Similarly, any effort to amend Article XI, Section 4 of the state constitution should be rejected unless that attempt, at minimum, explicitly states that public funds can only be directed to K-12 educational settings available and accessible to **all** South Carolina children.

### **Access to Curriculum and Materials**

The State Board’s implementation of Regulation 43-170 led to a lack of uniformity in access to instructional materials across school districts. Many districts micromanaged and unduly burdened educators due to uncertainty about the regulation’s full scope. In response, either the State Board or General Assembly should refine and clarify the criteria for “age appropriate” in R. 43-170. In the interim, the SCDE should continue to build on initial guidance to districts about best practices for implementing the regulation with an eye toward preventing excessive non-instructional burdens on teachers.

### **Artificial Intelligence**

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT continues to transform the work of students and educators across South Carolina. The 2023 AI standards released by the Department of Education are already in need of significant revision and expansion in order to better align with new technologies and provide greater depth of study for students across their K-12 experience. The State Board of Education should also lead the development of a statewide model policy for ethical use of AI by students and educators.

### **Uniform Affordability**

An education scholarship account (ESA) does little to expand educational opportunities for a family if their service provider of choice can price them out of attendance. However, research shows this type of tuition inflation occurring in early ESA-adopting states like Iowa and Arizona. In response, the General Assembly should amend §59-8-140 to prohibit an education service provider from increasing the fees for a student paying for services through ESA funds, both within a single academic year and from one year to the next. This cap should apply whether a family is using an ESA to pay for services or courses from a private vendor or from a traditional public school outside of the student’s zoned district.

### **Charter School Governance**

While public charter schools have long provided universal opportunities for all South Carolina children, the effectiveness of these educational choices has been marred in recent years by reports of mismanagement of funds and lagging academic performance in some schools. In response, the General Assembly must revise the 1996 Charter Schools Act by, at a minimum, capping the approval of new authorizers, imposing strict controls on authorizer fees and activities, enhancing transparency of authorizer and charter board policies and actions, and taking steps to eliminate the practice of “authorizer shopping” by underperforming schools.



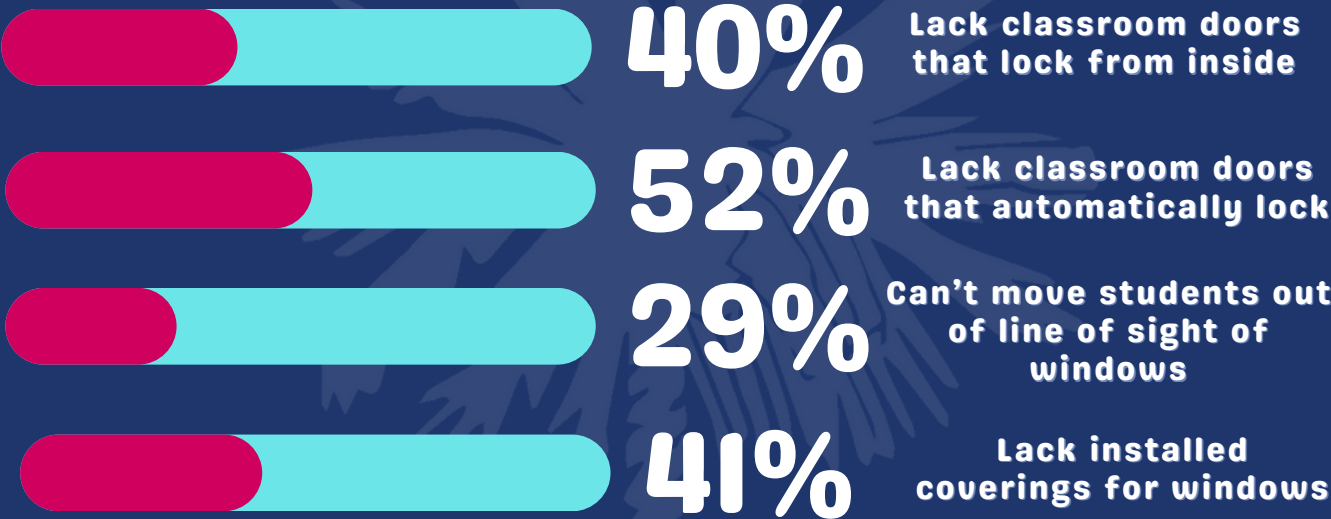
# [ Safe and Secure ]

## In Principle

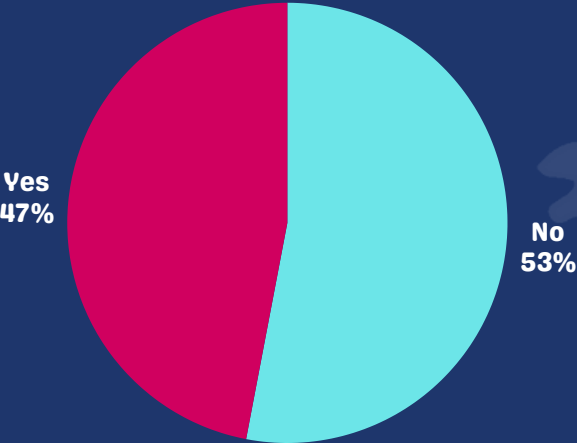
Every student in South Carolina deserves the right to learn- and every educator the right to work- in a safe and secure environment, free from harassment and fear. South Carolina families should be able to drop their children off at school without worrying about potential violence during the day. While student learning and growth are the primary purposes of schooling, the paramount duty of the state is to ensure the protection and safety of the children and adults in every school. The importance of safety is the driving reason why PSTA is a proud founding member of the South Carolina Coalition for Safer Schools.

## In Practice

### Percentages of South Carolina Classrooms Without Basic Elements of Safe School Facilities



### Percentage of South Carolina Teachers that Have Been Threatened with Bodily Harm



### Most Likely Outcome from Teacher Report of Violent Student Behavior in Class

Student Permanently Removed	7%
Removed from class for more than one day	45%
Removed from class for remainder of day only	23%
Returned to class on same day	22%

Source: 2025 PSTA Member Survey



# [ Safe and Secure ]

## In Policy

### Accountability for Student Behavior

To date, no progress has been made on the the 2023 Teacher Task Force recommendation to develop a model policy for “accountability of student behavior.” The State Board must update Regulation 43-279 to provide clear and consistent procedures for addressing persistently disruptive and dangerous behavior. Teachers statewide report how inadequately addressed or completely unaddressed violent student behaviors lead to disrupted learning, damaged classrooms, and harm to students and educators. The regulation must establish adequate accountability for such behaviors while upholding all students’ access to a high quality education. The policy must also prohibit destruction of discipline reports made by teachers.

### Cell Phones and Social Media

The General Assembly should take action prior to the end of the 2026 session to codify Proviso 1.99, which governs student cell phone access at school. The General Assembly should also finish the work started in 2025 in H. 3431 and S. 268 to limit the harmful effects of social media on children. Such measures should build on the Age Appropriate Design Code requirements already in place in England, California, and Maryland. Far too many of the threats disrupting schools across South Carolina begin on and spread through social media.

### Cyber Security

School districts across the state continue to face daily threats from malevolent actors seeking to access sensitive student and staff information and data. The Department of Education must lead in identifying best practices and resources for cybersecurity across all South Carolina school districts, and the General Assembly must ensure adequate funding for these measures. The House Committee on Artificial Intelligence must also ensure that recommendations and legislation developed to enhance state cybersecurity efforts include coverage for traditional and charter public schools. Policy action is also required to ensure the maintenance and protection of school security camera footage.

### School Facilities

The tragic mass shooting at a Georgia high school to open the 2024-25 school year once again demonstrated the critical importance of basic safety features for school facilities. Too many schools continue to lack locking classroom doors, window coverings, and universal staff ability to lock exterior doors. The General Assembly should continue to use one-time funds for the types of facility upgrades identified in Proviso 1.77 of the 2025 General Appropriations Act. The SCDE should conduct an audit of school facilities to identify schools that lack basic safety features. Passage of H. 3258 into law should occur and be partnered with state appropriations to institute mobile panic alert systems.

### Threats and Harassment of Educators

In a 2022 national survey conducted by the American Psychological Association, 56% of teachers reported experiencing at least one physical attack at work, a 12% increase from 2020. In the same survey, 80% of teachers reported experiencing verbal harassment or threats from students, and 63% of teachers reported similar behaviors from parents and guardians. To protect public servants, the General Assembly should pass S. 73/H. 3052 to provide enhanced criminal penalties for assault of a teacher or law enforcement officer. Legislation is also needed to provide penalties or civil remedies for online harassment or defamation of an educator.

### Potty Training

A growing number of non-potty trained students presents significant hygiene and safety risks in 4K and early childhood classrooms that typically lack sufficient staffing, training, and facilities to meet the needs of these students. In response, the Department of Education should convene a task force of parents, early childhood educators, and medical professionals to identify the reasons more children are not potty trained by age 4 and to make appropriate recommendations for potential changes to state law, State Board regulations, and/or CERDEP policy to ensure classroom teachers are never required to provide diapering services they are not trained or equipped to provide.



# Palmetto State Teachers Association

**Palmetto State Teachers Association was organized in 1976. It has grown into the largest professional association for educators in South Carolina. PSTA is governed by an elected Board of Directors, comprised of educators from across the state who volunteer their time.**

## **Benefits of membership include:**

- **\$3 Million in Liability Coverage**
- **Full-Time, On-Staff Attorney**
- **Legislative Representation**
- **Reasonable Dues**
- **Free Professional Development**
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