

# School funding formula back on the minds of Georgia lawmakers



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Ninth grade students arrive for the first day of school at Seckinger High School in Gwinnett County on Wednesday, Aug. 3, 2022. State lawmakers are discussing changes to Georgia's education funding formula. Some speakers, including a former Gwinnett student, have suggested at public hearings more funding for transportation. (Hyosub Shin / Hyosub.Shin@ajc.com)

Among Zeena Mohamed's least fond memories from her teenage years are the cramped school bus rides in the scorching heat.

The former Gwinnett County student said a funding shortfall led to rides to and from school that were as uncomfortable as they were unreliable.

Most buses lacked air conditioning, students often had to squeeze in three per seat and there were frequent intercom announcements in her classrooms advising teachers to go easy on students because their bus was late again, the University of Georgia junior told state senators in August. "There was a consistent countywide bus driver shortage throughout my entire K-12 experience, so it was common for routes to be delayed by multiple hours," she said.

Mohamed, 20, asked the senators to give schools more money to cover transportation.

It's just one category of need lawmakers heard about when they spent the summer and fall studying the state's 37-year-old education funding formula.

The year 1985 brought forth New Coke, the movie “Back to the Future” and the last leader of the Soviet Union.

Mikhail Gorbachev died last summer, New Coke never really had a life and “Back to the Future” is very much in the past. But the school funding formula the Georgia General Assembly created that year endures more or less unchanged.

The [Quality Basic Education Act](#), passed in 1985 and implemented the following year, dictates how state revenues are divided among 180 school districts. It was written before digital devices were a staple and before mental health issues spiraled. It’s so outdated that Georgia is [one of only six states](#) that do not give schools extra money to deal with poverty, according to a new report by the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education.

After numerous failed efforts over the decades, Republican lawmakers are expected to put an overhaul on the agenda during the next legislative session.

State Sen. Mike Dugan, R-Carrollton, chaired Georgia’s Senate study committee. He said he will introduce legislation to modernize the state’s funding formula, which many refer to as QBE.

“Why? Because the formula we’re using was put in place when Reagan was president,” he said. “When your computer crashes, where in the QBE formula do you have that IT person?”

Dugan said his bill would also address funding for mental health care and poverty.

The Atlanta-based Southern Education Foundation believes a poverty adjustment “is the actual bare minimum of where we should start,” said Fred Jones Jr., the organization’s senior public policy director. He added that schools should be spending significantly more than they are, especially on low-income students.

Georgia currently allocates about \$11 billion for K-12 education — more than a third of the \$30 billion state budget.

Dugan would not commit to increased funding. But he was sanguine about the odds for passage of a bill during the two-year legislative cycle that starts this month. “Something’s going to happen,” he said. “I just don’t know if we’ll get it done this year.”

Prior attempts have foundered for several reasons: The formula is complicated; the state’s diverse school districts — urban, suburban, rural, rich, poor — have competing or at least differing needs; and the cost of meeting those needs rather than shifting money between them could be large.

The formula is often compared to an old but trusty car: The chassis might squeak, and the gas mileage might be low, but it still drives OK.

And those new cars sure are expensive.

The last attempt at a major overhaul fizzled. In 2015, then-Gov. Nathan Deal convened a panel of more than 30 lawmakers, educators and experts to study the formula and recommend changes. The [Education Reform Commission](#) wrote an [86-page report](#) that led to [no significant action](#).

One reason: Deal told his panel not to consider what the cost should be, perhaps fearing the answer. The state was still recovering from the Great Recession and was giving schools less than the formula dictated.

“The governor’s staff told me we’re not going to look at cost,” said Sen. Lindsey Tippins, R-Marietta, the Senate Education and Youth Committee chairman at that time. The former Cobb County school board member said that information would have been crucial for an effective formula.

“I’ve been in the construction business all my adult life and I’ve bid work all my adult life,” he said, “and to bid work, you’ve got to know what your cost is.”

Schools here spend less per student than in most other states.

The national average of combined state and local spending per pupil, adjusted for regional differences, was \$15,487 in 2021, according to the [Education Law Center](#). Georgia ranked 38th among the states at \$12,924 per pupil and received a D grade from the center for its funding level.

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### **Georgia’s school funding formula**

The Quality Basic Education Act is a 1985 law meant to narrow the gap between wealthier and poorer school districts. Its funding formula assigns the amount of state money districts should get based on the number of public-school students in a district and those students’ needs, among other things.