

Georgia leaders get serious about literacy, but are not ready to pay for it



Credit: Jason Getz / Jason.Getz@ajc.com

First grade students Destinee Walker (center) and Camila Sandoval (second from left) listen to their teacher Chantel Jones (not pictured) teach students with the “science of reading,” which emphasizes phonics, at Dunleith Elementary School, Friday, Feb. 3, 2023, in Marietta. (Jason Getz / Jason.Getz@ajc.com)

By [Ty Tagami](#)

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Georgia lawmakers, citing a childhood literacy crisis, have demanded a sweeping overhaul of the way public schools teach reading.

But so far, the politicians have not backed their new laws with significant funding.

Examples from other states — and even some school districts in Georgia — suggest the annual cost could rise into the tens, or even hundreds, of millions of dollars.

Among the requirements are that teachers get new literacy training, schools adopt proven literacy curriculums and young students take frequent literacy tests.

“I think we know what will work right now, and I hope we will move forward quickly on this,” [Sen. Chuck Hufstetler](#), R-Rome, said on the Senate floor back in March, during debate on one of the two literacy bills.

Both passed with broad bipartisan support though Democrats repeatedly raised one issue. [Rep. Park Cannon](#), D-Atlanta, said during debate that teachers are already overworked, and the House legislation was asking them to do even more: “Where is the funding?”

The school mandates will unfurl over time, reaching full effect in fall 2025.

The Senate [legislation](#) established a literacy council, providing \$250,000 a year to support the panel’s work researching best practices and overseeing implementation in Georgia. The [House bill](#) that imposes the mandates on schools came with no money.

Getting a handle on costs

Neither law requires schools to hire more personnel, but that’s been a strategy in places that lawmakers have pointed to as models, such as Mississippi. That state spent \$15 million a year to implement its 2013 law that preceded a rise in reading scores. [The money paid for](#) teacher training, testing, read-at-home plans, reading camps and literacy coaches.



Students at Van Wilder Elementary School listen to their teacher in Jackson, Miss., on May 16, 2023. Mississippi has seen improvement in reading performance in recent years after investing more money in teacher training, literacy coaches and other initiatives. (Trent Bozeman/The New York Times)

Georgia has four times more students, nearly 1.8 million, which suggests a higher price tag here.

One state agency estimated the annual cost for the effort at \$6 million to \$30 million a year. The Georgia Department of Education, meanwhile, [came up with one-time and ongoing costs](#) ranging from \$80 million to \$92 million.

State [Rep. Matt Dubnik](#), R-Gainesville, said after the legislative session that he thought the state cost estimates were excessive.

“I think if we’re honest, the answer would be nobody knows exactly what it is,” said Dubnik, a former chairman of his chamber’s Education Committee who now heads the House Appropriations Committee’s subcommittee on education.

Fulton County, with nearly 90,000 students, [budgeted \\$90 million](#) for a new literacy initiative. The money is paying for teacher training and the hiring of enough literacy coaches to [staff every elementary school](#). It came from one-time federal pandemic relief funds.

Marietta, a tenth the size of Fulton, [budgeted \\$7 million](#) for something similar: the hiring of 40 literacy coaches. It also benefited from [a \\$2.5 million philanthropic grant](#) through the United Way to prepare infants and toddlers with the speaking skills that are a prerequisite for reading.

Is there a crisis?

Before the pandemic sent them spiraling downward, student literacy rates in Georgia, as in the rest of the country, were mostly flat or slightly rising.

Less than half of third graders were reading well in 2022, according to the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement. The agency reported 44% of them scored proficient for third grade based on an exam called the Lexile Framework for Reading.

Ken Zeff, a former interim superintendent of Fulton County Schools, noted that third graders performed even worse on their Georgia Milestones English language arts test, which measures reading and writing. Just 36.5% scored proficient or better that year.

“If you break that out by class and race, it becomes even more stark,” said Zeff, who leads Learn4Life in metro Atlanta and received some of the United Way funding to coordinate Marietta’s literacy effort.

“I don’t know if there is a formal definition of a crisis, but that feels like a crisis to me,” said Zeff, who has announced he will [run for an Atlanta school board](#) seat.

The Georgia Department of Education has a rosier read on the 2022 literacy rates, reporting that 64% of third graders scored high enough on their Lexile exam to advance to fourth grade. That is a drop from 73% before the pandemic.

“Can we improve, should we improve? Yes,” State School Superintendent Richard Woods told lawmakers during a briefing last winter. “But are we as bad as some would portray it? Then that’s no.”

Georgia’s mandate requires teachers to be retrained in the “[science of reading](#),” a vast body of research that, the new law says, “identifies evidence based approaches of explicitly and systematically teaching students to read.”

A wait-and-see approach

An initial version of the House legislation would have required the hiring of literacy coaches, an element that was deleted due to cost.

Hufstetler and Dubnik said they wanted to see effective programs in place before putting money into them. Gov. Brian Kemp, [speaking at a recent education conference](#) in Atlanta, had a similar take. “We’re spending more on K through 12 education than ever before in the history of the state,” he said, noting that teachers have gotten \$7,000 in pay raises during his tenure. “So I don’t think funding is an issue.”



Credit: Steve Schaefer

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Ola High School's Dorcas Toledo-Acosta talks with Gov. Brian Kemp and first lady Marty Kemp after a press conference at Ola High School in Henry County on Friday, July 29, 2022. (Steve Schaefer / steve.schaefer@ajc.com)

Kemp added that if the new state literacy council calls for more money, it could be added to the budget later.

The Georgia Board of Education recently approved a \$6 million contract with a private speech school to train teachers in the reading science. The money is from one-time federal pandemic relief funds.

Cori Cain, a United Way administrator overseeing the Marietta grant, said many babies and toddlers have been deprived of the kind of language exposure that builds a foundation for learning to read.

The new mandate for Georgia will involve testing all young children for such skills and catching up the kids who lack them.

United Way hopes the Marietta experiment will produce best practices that can guide state policy for all classrooms.

It will likely cost money to implement statewide, Cain said.

“I don’t believe that the private entity can do it alone. That has to be a public-private partnership,” she said. “If we don’t get to that level, we won’t see the scalable, sustainable change.”

Reading in Georgia

Georgia students as a whole are underperforming on reading exams, which troubles many educators and state lawmakers. Just **36% of third graders scored proficient or better** on the 2022 Georgia Milestones tests for English language arts, which measure reading and writing. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution is taking a closer look at reading in Georgia’s schools after lawmakers demanded a new approach to literacy. This is the latest in these reports.