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Abrams vows \$50,000 base pay for teachers. Will that sway educator votes?



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By Maureen Downey, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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In the high-stakes contest for teacher support in November, Democrat Stacey Abrams has essentially told Republican Brian Kemp, “I’ll see your bet and more than double it.”

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution broke the news this weekend that Abrams, if elected governor, would push to change the minimum salary for public school teachers to \$50,000 a year, part of an ambitious four-year plan to eventually raise the pay of the state's 118,000 public school educators by \$11,000. Under the plan, the average teacher salary in Georgia, now \$62,500, would climb to \$73,500 in her first term.

Kemp has already done his part to sway teachers, delivering on a 2018 promise to increase annual teacher pay by \$5,000. He made good on \$3,000 of that pledge in 2019. This year, faced with a challenge by former U.S. Sen. David Perdue in the GOP primary for governor, Kemp ponied up the remaining \$2,000.

In proposing to hike the state base salary for teachers from \$39,092 to \$50,000, Abrams would vault Georgia teachers to among the highest paid in the country, a status I doubted Georgia would ever achieve but a vital one to attracting to more young people to the field.

“This will get teachers saying nice things about Abrams. Teachers are highly likely to vote and are probably opinion leaders in their own families and in broader circles,” said University of Georgia political scientist Charles Bullock. “It certainly was a good move for Abrams. Will it turn the election? It could because this will be a close election.”

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Education professors welcomed Abrams' proposal as a way to revive waning interest in the profession.

"We were in a full-blown teacher shortage before the pandemic and the pressures that COVID and its aftermath created have only made it worse," said Robert Helfenbein, associate dean for research and faculty affairs in the Tift College of Education at Mercer University. "With all the economic growth in the state, one would hope that our education system could grow as well and better support Georgia's kids."

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"It might make the profession a little more attractive to young people. And it's a nice reward for teachers who've worked through some very challenging years, if there is a ripple effect up the payroll," said University of Georgia professor emeritus Peter Smagorinsky.

"In 2020, the [National Low Income Housing Coalition](#) found that people living in Atlanta need to make \$46,680 annually for a two-bedroom apartment. This increase is beyond needed and overdue. Our teachers are the backbone of society. We saw that in the thick of the pandemic. They deserve a living wage in one of the greatest cities in America," said former UGA education professor Bettina L. Love, who is joining Columbia University's Teachers College.

Professors said a salary hike is but one needed change.

"Eliminating the unpaid internship requirement, raising the base salary to \$50,000, and giving raises to teachers already in positions that correlate with that entry-level salary of \$50,000 could go a long way to recruiting teachers for sure," said University of Georgia professor Stephanie Jones. "The retention part will still depend on the actual working conditions of teachers, which vary wildly from place to place but are overall extremely difficult right now."

Increasingly, surveys show that stressful working conditions are driving teachers out of the field. That is where Kemp could be on shaky ground with teachers. Yes, he gave them a raise this year, but he also embraced politically motivated legislation to ban books and restrict classroom discussions of gender, race and racism.



Credit: Stephen B. Morton for The Atlanta Journal Constitution

Abrams' plan benefits rural educators who typically earn less than their metro counterparts. "It's a good move because it can help to close the talent gap between wealthy and poor districts. Most teachers in rural school systems don't get much of a local supplement if they get one at all, so an \$11,000-per-teacher investment in attracting teachers to those schools will be a big help," said Brenau University education professor Bryan Sorohan.

But the hardships facing teachers go beyond salary and even include a lack of safe and sanitary buildings, as recently shown in [DeKalb County schools](#), said Smagorinsky. "Teaching and learning are compromised when the surroundings are unhealthy. I realize that these economic times are putting a strain on every budget. But it's unrealistic to think that you can underfund schools and not pay a price."

Brandon Haas, a University of North Georgia associate professor of social foundations and leadership education, said teachers also want relief from high-stakes testing. "Testing then places undue pressure on teachers to have students score well on exams instead of utilizing disciplinary skills to address real-world problems. This is exemplified by the fact that Gwinnett's teacher of the year left the district."

"I do think that such a move will signal that Abrams respects the job of teaching and understands the fact that you don't attract the best and brightest with appeals to dedication while paying a salary that puts new teachers ever nearer to the poverty level with inflation," said Sorohan. "Whether she can get it past the Republican General Assembly is another matter, but it's a great start for improving education statewide."