



Abrams vows to raise minimum teacher pay to \$50K if elected governor



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Credit: Steve Schaefer

POLITICS

By Greg Bluestein, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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Democrat Stacey Abrams proposed raising the minimum salary for Georgia public school teachers to \$50,000 a year if she's elected governor, part of a four-year plan that would hike the pay of K-12 educators by \$11,000.

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Abrams said Sunday she would finance the estimated \$412 million annual cost over each of the next four years by relying upon revenue from Georgia’s budget without increasing taxes or imposing new fees. She framed the \$1.65 billion plan as essential to retain teachers and improve the state’s education system.

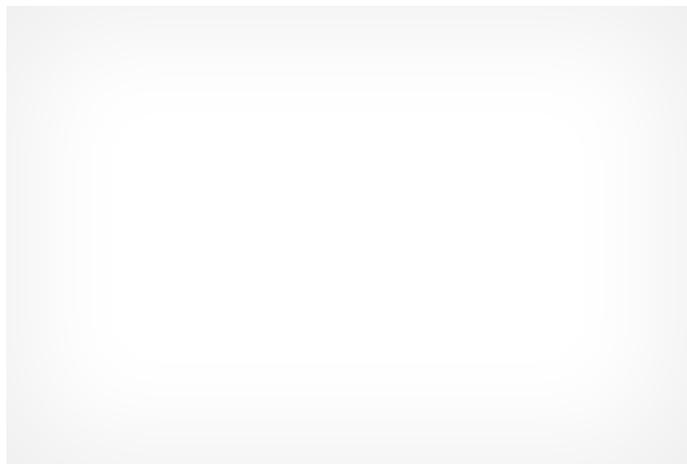
“When our pipeline is thinning and our exodus is increasing, we are losing the fight for our children’s future,” said Abrams. “We need a governor who does not see education as an election-year gimmick but sees our responsibility as a guarantee for the strongest future for our people.”



The video player interface includes a thumbnail on the left with the text 'Politically Georgia' and 'AJC Journal One' over an image of the Georgia State Capitol. To the right of the thumbnail, the title 'Politically Georgia' is followed by the subtitle 'Georgia lawmakers make moves on gun laws'. Below this, a description reads: 'AJC Political Insiders Greg Bluestein and Patricia Murphy explain red flag laws and what it takes to get major gun reform bills passed.' A progress bar is shown with a time of 00:00:00. At the bottom, there are links for 'SHARE', 'SUBSCRIBE', 'COOKIE POLICY', and 'DESCRIPTION', along with the 'Megaphone' logo.

The Democrat’s proposal would more than double Gov. Brian Kemp’s pledge in 2018 to hike annual teacher pay by \$5,000, a promise he made weeks before the election that became a central part of his appeal to a broader set of voters after a bruising primary.

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At the time, Abrams derided the Republican’s proposal as a “gimmick” and said he couldn’t be trusted to carry it out. Kemp signed a record \$30.2 billion budget earlier this year that included the final installment of the promised pay hike.

In a scathing response, Kemp’s campaign predicted that Abrams was understating the price tag of her proposal and asserted that she would have to levy new taxes to pay for it.



“Following the lead of her pals in the Biden administration, Stacey Abrams’ latest Hail Mary proposal for over \$2 billion in new state spending annually joins an ever-growing pile of pie-in-the-sky plans that would make inflation worse and require higher taxes on Georgia families to pay for it all,” said Kemp spokesman Tate Mitchell.

Abrams rolled out her proposal in tandem with the endorsement from the Georgia Association of Educators, an influential advocacy group that represents roughly 23,000 teachers. Lisa Morgan, the association’s president, assailed a Republican-backed school policy overhaul that Kemp engineered.

“Adjusted for inflation, our educators are making less now than they did in 1999,” Morgan said outside the group’s headquarters, adding: “It’s not just about salaries. It’s about educators being treated as the professionals they are.”

‘Starting from the tricycle’

The Democrat’s campaign hopes her push for a pay hike for about 118,000 teachers gives supporters a new rallying cry in a tough midterm climate for Democrats, as voters worried about high inflation and energy prices focus on pocketbook issues.



Credit: Stephen B. Morton

Within the past week, she [pressed Kemp](#) to extend the motor fuel tax break until 2023 and pushed the White House to [forgive](#) student loan debt. And she criticized the state’s handling of federal funds aimed at helping struggling families avoid evictions.

The base pay for teachers in Georgia is about \$39,000. A National Education Association study [published in April](#) ranked the state’s starting teacher salary 35th in the nation. Under Abrams’ plan, Georgia would be pushed into the top 10.

The average salary for Georgia teachers is higher, since pay ranges based on experience, certification level and geography, as most local governments offer supplements. Last year, the average salary for American public school teachers was \$65,293. Georgia’s public school teachers fell in the middle range, with an average salary of \$60,553.

Explore Opinion: Abrams vows \$50,000 pay for teachers. Will it pay off for her?

Surrounded by teachers and students in brightly colored shirts, Abrams said the lack of political will to significantly raise teacher pay earlier has turned Kemp’s salary hike into a stopgap measure.

“It is important to remember that we aren’t starting from the Cadillac. We are starting from the tricycle. Because under Republicans, they took money away from our teachers, they decreased their pay, year-over-year in terms of real dollars,” Abrams said.

She added: “We needed to give them the \$5,000 to get them back in the game. This is about moving them forward.”

Count Lisa Hall-Favor among the educators who feel like they're still trying to catch up. Hall-Favor, a Richmond County special needs teacher, is in her 27th year of teaching and is "nowhere near where I need to be."

"It would be a game changer. I am trying to help my son go to college without student loans, and I'm a single parent," said Hall-Favor of the proposed raise. "It would help a lot. Because without teachers where would you be? Nowhere!"

Budget crunch

The new proposed pay hike would put added pressure on Georgia's fiscal bottom line.



Credit: Natrice Miller / Natrice.Miller@ajc.com

During solid economic times, the state usually takes in about \$1 billion in new revenue each year. But growing school enrollment and Medicaid costs take up a major chunk of that spending, leaving less wiggle room to pay for other priorities.

To pass his teacher pay hike, Kemp carved it up in two different installments. He secured a \$3,000 increase in 2019 shortly after he narrowly defeated Abrams.

A GOP clash over whether to slash taxes rather than boost teacher pay, then economic fallout from the pandemic, delayed the passage of the remaining \$2,000 until this year.

In all, state financial officials estimate the \$5,000 pay raise wound up costing about \$1 billion.

The Democrat's plan is based on projections that show the state's tax collections will grow about 3.5% a year, or at least \$1.1 billion annually, said spokeswoman Jaylen Black.

Under the campaign's calculations, that leaves enough room to finance the \$412 million annual pay raise along with the estimated \$264 million price tag for expanding Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, another cornerstone of Abrams' bid for governor.

The election-year pledges for higher teacher pay is not unusual in Georgia politics.

When Gov. Zell Miller was running for another term in 1994, one of the pillars of his platform included 6% pay raises for each year of his second term. Thanks partly to a strong economy during his second term, Miller fulfilled that promise.

Staff Writer Maureen Downey contributed to this article.

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