



# GEORGIA'S BEST YEAR 2

*ANNUAL REPORT*









# TABLE OF CONTENTS

01

**WORDS FROM THE  
SUPERINTENDENT**

02

**MESSAGE FROM  
THE DEAN**

03

**CELEBRATING  
SUCCESS**

06

**DISTRICT  
BENEFITS**

07

**FINANCIAL  
BENEFITS**

08

**A TALE OF TWO  
TEACHERS**

09

**GA BEST  
IMPACT**

11

**FACULTY  
MENTORING**

12

**SPECIAL THANKS**



# WORDS FROM THE SUPERINTENDENT

Now two years strong, Georgia's BEST—supported by the University System, the University of West Georgia, and our Board—continues to be one of the most significant commitments to support educators and ultimately, benefit students.

I remain thankful to the Cobb County Board of Education for their continued support and funding of a program that has cemented Cobb as the top destination for educators from across the state and country. We are incredibly pleased with the results from the past two years. Cobb was the first large Georgia school district with a partnership that allows educators—at no cost to them—to pursue advanced degrees with specialized curricula that benefit students.

Interest continues to grow, with more than 6,500 educators expressing interest and more than 750 students who are enrolled or have already completed their degree programs.

Of the educators who have graduated, 100% have committed to returning to Cobb classrooms—better prepared and more motivated than ever to serve their students. The program offers a substantial financial incentive for educators who continue their careers in Cobb County. The additional earnings exceed \$1 million!

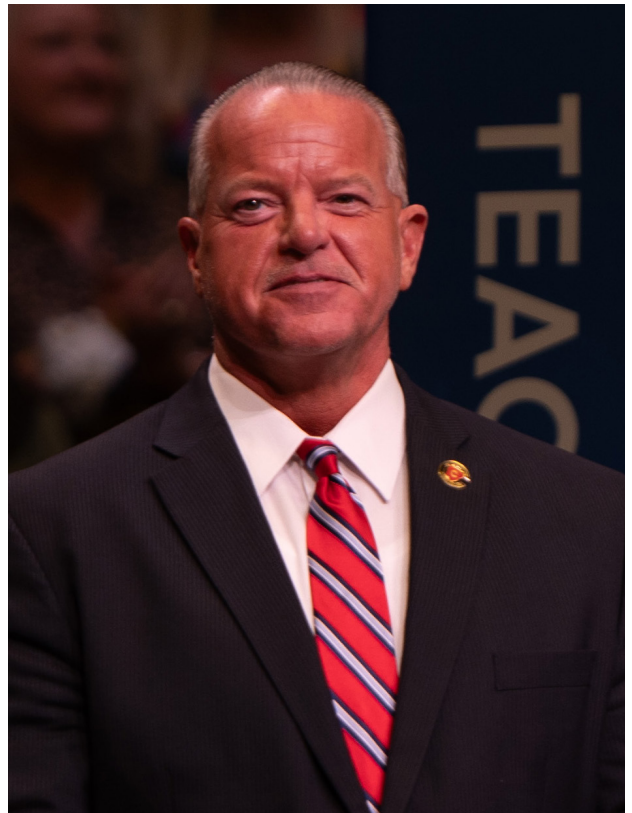
Georgia's BEST is an investment in the most important part of any school—educators.

Thanks to the innovative leadership of West Georgia's leadership team, Georgia's BEST continues to help Cobb recruit and retain teachers for the positions our schools need the most.

Thank you to Chancellor Perdue; the Board of Regents; the University of West Georgia; Dean Dishman; and Cobb's leaders, who have demonstrated how to solve a generational challenge in education.



**Chris Ragsdale**  
*Superintendent | Cobb County School District*





# MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN



In Fall 2022, following the Georgia Department of Education's "Educator Burnout" report, Superintendent Chris Ragsdale and I discussed challenges facing Georgia's educator workforce. These included educator career paths, motivation, retention, advancement – and as all conversations with Superintendent Ragsdale do – educator appreciation and support.

Teacher turnover was financially crippling school districts, between Georgia being among the hardest-hit states and a cost of approximately \$20,000 to fill the average teacher vacancy. We observed Georgia's traditional incentives were insufficient to enter or remain in the teaching profession. I offered this might be a result of the debt educators incurred in earning graduate degrees. The average Georgia educator pursuing a master's degree in the larger state universities left with approximately \$29,000 in student loan debt. As a result, student loan debt negated most of the raise educators received for the decade after earning their degree. We then posed the question: "What if Georgia had a HOPE Scholarship for teachers?"

In that question, Georgia's BEST was born.

There was a great deal of work between that question and February 2023, and we sought partners. Dr. Evan Horton and Coweta County School District became outstanding "founding" partners. Ultimately, what became "Georgia's BEST" represents thousands of hours of time, thought and action from the administrations of 18 school districts, RESA directors, and dozens of university administrators and staff members. We are deeply indebted to the Cobb and Coweta Boards of Education in having the vision and courage to fund this historic project.

Collectively, we had to find an incentive for school districts to accept this significant financial challenge AND a way for universities to reach a price point districts could afford. We also had a number of historic challenges on the proverbial table – such as the mismatch between degrees and certification educators pursued and the areas of greatest need by the districts – and sought to incorporate responses in the program. We sought to build robust and ongoing partnerships between universities and districts ensuring professional relevance across all aspects of

degree and certificate programs. This new model of partnerships allowed synergies to develop not just between institutions, but between professors and distinguished professional educators in a collaborative instructional model. This commitment to collaboration – to "Building Educator Success Together" – created a natural name for the project.

Georgia's BEST is the most ambitious model for educator support and education in our state's history. As you will see from the pages that follow, there has been a great deal done – and a great deal of opportunity remains. However, as Superintendent Ragsdale states, it was always our goal to build a state model, and in the last twelve months, we have seen that idea catch fire, with other districts and universities building partnerships. But none of it would have happened without the vision and leadership of Cobb County School District.

Thank you for letting us join you in his historic endeavor for Georgia.



A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "M. Dishman".

**Mike L. Dishman, J.D., Ed.D.**  
*Professor of Education Policy & Governance*  
*Dean, College of Education*  
*University of West Georgia*

# LEADING THE WAY

## COBB LEADS THE WAY WITH GEORGIA'S BEST

In a time when Georgia's educator workforce faces rising turnover and persistent vacancies, the Cobb County School District (CCSD) chose a different path—and it's working. Through Georgia's BEST (Building Educator Success Together), Cobb has developed a one-of-a-kind partnership with the University of West Georgia (UWG) that not only recruits top educators but retains and empowers them to thrive and make a lasting difference in their schools.

*"We are the only district in the country who can say we have solved the teacher recruitment and retention problem," said Superintendent Chris Ragsdale. "Through Georgia's BEST, every Cobb teacher has the opportunity for a higher ed degree that gives a one-million-dollar benefit, at no cost to them."*

The program's success is undeniable: More than 200 educators have graduated, over 600 are currently enrolled, and Cobb's teacher retention rate sits at an incredible 99%.

### From Idea to Impact

In Fall 2022, Superintendent Ragsdale approached UWG with a bold proposal—create a graduate program designed specifically for Cobb educators. The goal? Remove financial barriers for educators to pursue advanced degrees that align with the district's most critical need areas. The result? Better outcomes for Cobb educators and their students. Cobb has a legacy of student success, and the UWG College of Education has a legacy of being the top choice for Georgia educators. Together, they developed a program to build educator success in the classroom.

In February 2023, the Cobb County Board of Education unanimously approved a plan to support 500 educators annually for five years, pledging to fully fund tuition for high-need areas like special education, instructional technology, reading, and educational leadership. By Summer 2023, the first 200 educators were enrolled, marking the official launch of Georgia's BEST.

### Built to Last—And Built for Cobb

From the beginning, Cobb educators helped design the coursework, and many Cobb educators lead the classes, which are practical, personalized, and rooted in the realities of today's classrooms.

*Georgia's BEST is truly "by Cobb, for Cobb."*

Other districts have taken note, and new districts are lining up to follow Cobb's lead. But the foundation of the program—the vision, the investment, and opportunity—began here.

### What the Graduates are Saying:

Georgia's BEST offers a suite of advanced degree options that support Cobb's most critical education needs. For Stacy King, an M.Ed. student in Special Education, the program has been transformative.

*"The Georgia's BEST program has reignited my passion for teaching and learning," she shared. "I've learned so much about the science*

### FEBRUARY 17, 2023

*Georgia's BEST Partnership  
Announced*

### MAY 15, 2023

*194 Cobb County School District  
employees were accepted to the  
Georgia's BEST Alpha Cohort*

### FEBRUARY 20, 2023

*Over 5,000 Cobb County School  
District Employees completed the  
Georgia's BEST Program interest  
survey*

### JULY 11, 2023

*251 Cobb County School District  
employees were accepted to the  
Georgia's BEST Beta Cohort*



# CELEBRATING SUCCESS

*of reading and implemented new strategies with my students. I love that it is a personalized experience that gives me practical knowledge I can use now."*

She's not alone. Hundreds of educators echo similar sentiments. While the stories are personal, the results are universal—students are benefitting from better instruction, schools are retaining top talent, and educators across the state have another reason to choose Cobb.

Another Georgia's BEST graduate praised, *"It was the first time in my academic journey that everything I did in class had a clear, practical application in my school."*

Before taking advantage of the Georgia's BEST opportunity, one graduate confessed they had considered giving up teaching altogether. These stories illustrate what makes Georgia's BEST so effective: it empowers educators to immediately apply what they learn, reignite their passion, and stay where they're most needed. One graduate summed it up best: *"This program not only helped me—it helped my students, my school, and my community."*

## The Financial Impact—And the Greater Return

Georgia's teacher turnover rate is close to 11% with over 3,000 vacancies reported at the start of recent school years. That's not the case in Cobb, which boasts only a 1% vacancy. Georgia's BEST is one of the reasons.

Every time a teacher leaves, it costs Cobb \$21,000. In contrast, the retention benefits of Georgia's BEST have saved Cobb \$10 million and counting.

Recruitment and retention savings are clear, but the greatest impact is in the classroom—through students and the teachers who guide them.

As Cobb Schools Board Chair David Chastain said, *"In more than ten years on the Board of one of the highest-achieving districts in the state, I've heard more about the benefits of Georgia's BEST than anything we've ever done. If your budget is a reflection of your priorities, I'm proud to say we show our teachers how much they are valued."*

## Looking Ahead: The Legacy Grows

Georgia's BEST isn't just a program. It's a promise to Cobb students and their teachers. A promise that Cobb Schools will continue to be a school district of excellence where all students—and their teachers—succeed.

*"Because of your support, I earned a degree with no student debt," one graduate wrote. "That changed not just my career, but my family's future."*

It's not just educators who recognize the impact of Georgia's BEST. Parents are seeing the difference the program makes too.

One parent shared, *"I felt like I won the lottery with my son's teacher. She challenges, supports, and truly connects with him. When I learned she was a Georgia's BEST graduate, it all made sense. Her professional development isn't just helping her grow—it's helping my son thrive."* From the classroom to the community, Georgia's BEST is leaving a legacy, and Cobb is proud to lead the way.

### NOVEMBER 28, 2023

66 Cobb County School District employees were accepted to the Georgia's BEST doctorate of education Cohort

### MAY 17, 2025

175 more teachers graduate from GA Best

### JULY 27, 2024

First Georgia's BEST students graduate from the program

### JULY, 2025

Next Cohort Begins

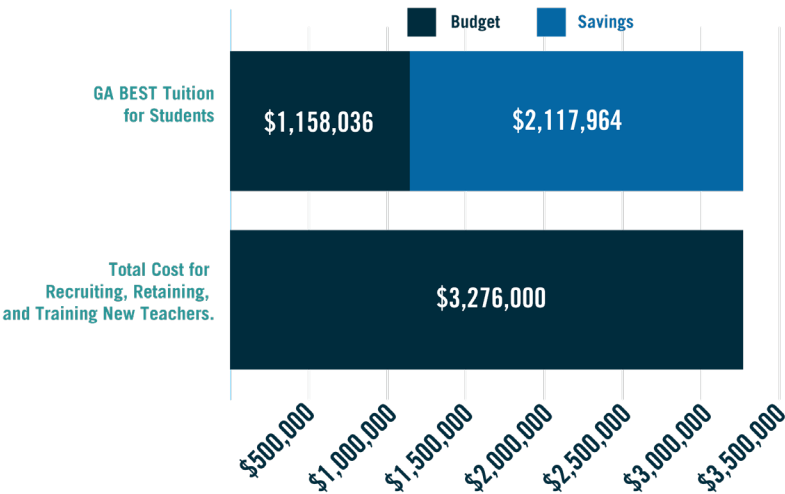






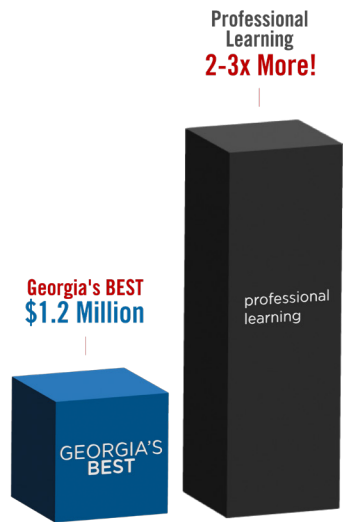
# DISTRICT BENEFITS

## THE COST OF TEACHER TURNOVER



**Teacher Turnover:**  
A Costly Challenge for School Districts. This graph illustrates the significant expenses incurred by school districts due to the recruitment, retaining, and training of new teachers. The data underscores the importance of identifying innovative retention strategies to mitigate these costs and enhance overall K-12 student learning.

\*Based on number of teachers in Cohort A.  
Cost of recruiting, retaining, and training x Average number of new employees.

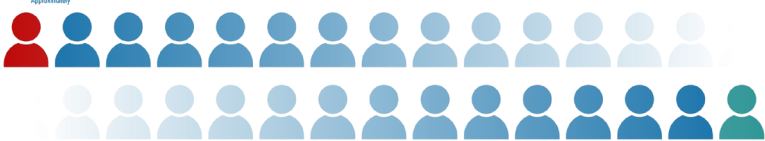


### COST

Georgia's BEST is a cost-effective way to enhance teacher training and student education. **Replicating its benefits through professional learning would cost at least 2-3 times more!**

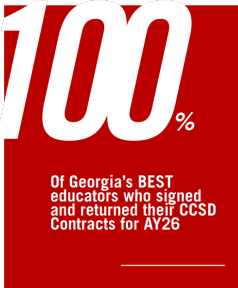
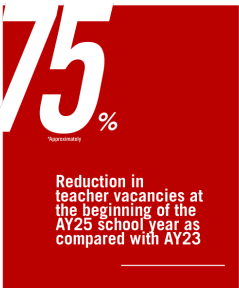
\*Estimates based on 2024 Alpha Cohort.\*

**Turnover costs Cobb**  
**\$21,000 per teacher.**



**Georgia's BEST has**  
**already saved Cobb**  
**more than**  
**\$10,000,000!**

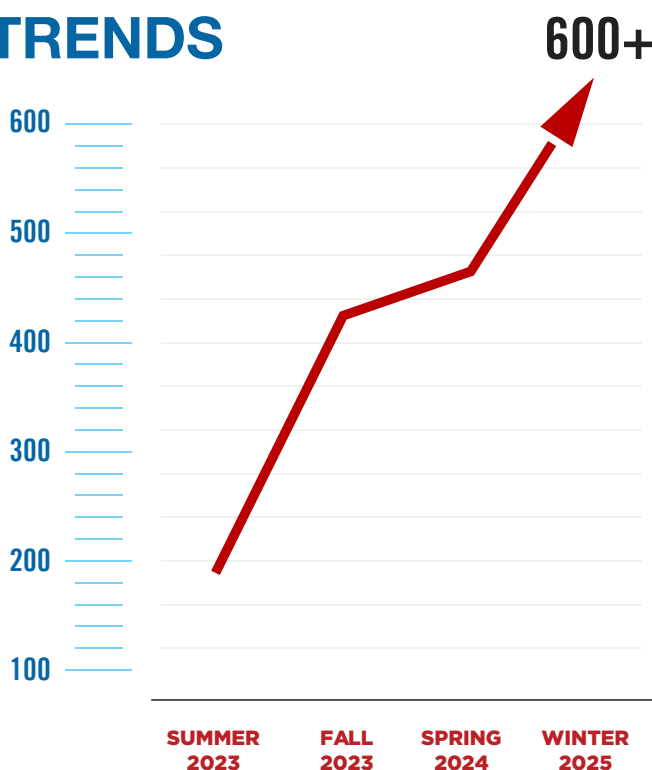
\*Estimated saving based on total GA BEST Enrollment



# FINANCIAL BENEFITS

## THE UWG COLLEGE OF EDUCATION IS THE #1 CHOICE FOR GEORGIA EDUCATORS

### PROGRAM ENROLLMENT TRENDS



UWG College of Education is the largest producer of certified educators for Georgia's schools.



**Georgia's BEST is a \$1 Million benefit for our staff members that comes at no cost to them and positively impacts the entire Cobb community.**

TOTAL GRADUATES  
**370**

SPRING 25' ENROLLMENT  
**629**



**Keeping and developing teachers takes a small investment, the right partner, and incentives they actually care about.**

**John Floresta | Chief Strategy Officer**



# A TALE OF TWO TEACHERS

## TEACHER A

Teacher A (25 years old) takes a federal student loan of \$22,000 to fund their advanced degree in education.

After degree completion, Teacher A earns an additional \$7,300 annually (net approximately \$5,000 or \$412 monthly) due to their advanced degree\*.

Teacher A begins paying their student loan debt of \$285/month (\$3,420 annually) for the next ten years. They invest the remaining \$127 from their raise each month (\$1,524 annually) in a Roth IRA\*\*.

After 10 years, Teacher A will have paid a total of \$34,200 in student loans and earned \$23,154 by investing their remaining raise after loan payment in a Roth IRA.

Teacher A makes no additional contributions to the Roth IRA after age 37.

**At retirement, Teacher A has a Roth IRA balance of**

**\$281,834.70**

## GA BEST TEACHER

Teacher B (25 years old) is in the Georgia's BEST program where their employer pays for their advanced degree in education.

After degree completion, Teacher B will earn an additional \$7,300 (net approximately \$5,000 or \$412 monthly) due to their advanced degree\*.

Teacher B begins investing their raise (\$412 monthly or \$5,000 annually) into a Roth IRA\*\*.

After 10 years, Teacher B earns \$75,965 by investing their entire raise in a Roth IRA.

Teacher B makes no additional contributions to the Roth IRA after age 37.

**At retirement, Teacher B has a Roth IRA balance of**

**\$924,659.81**

\*Net Estimated raise from bachelor's to master's degree \$5,000.

\*\*Age at degree start is 25, age at degree completion is 27, age of retirement is 67, estimating a 9% rate of return.

Note: All dollar amounts are estimates, calculated using the Roth IRA calculator at <https://www.bankrate.com/retirement/roth-ira-plan-calculator/>, and serve as an example only. Please consult a certified financial advisor for retirement planning.



*"This program not only helped me but helped my students, my school, and my community. Thank you."*



*"I stayed in Cobb County because of this program. I was considering leaving the profession entirely."*



*"The program helped me reconnect with why I became a teacher in the first place. It made me feel valued and re-energized my passion for special education."*

# GEORGIA'S BEST IMPACT

*"Since completing my Ed.S., I have been encouraged to apply for an assistant principal position. I would never have imagined myself doing that a year ago."*

*"Completing this program made me see my own potential differently. I have taken on more responsibilities in my department, and I'm now mentoring new teachers."*

*"I would like to sincerely thank the Cobb County School Board for believing in us and making this investment. It has changed my life."*

*"Because of your support, I earned a degree with no student debt. I'm not sure I can ever fully express what that means to me and my family."*









# FACULTY MENTORING

## WHAT OUR FACULTY THINKS COBB SCHOOLS



“

*I was thrilled to join the team at UWG and work with the Georgia's BEST Program. My Instructional Support Mentor has been a tremendous support throughout this program. She is knowledgeable, approachable, and always available to help.*

**Dr. Hannah Polk | Principal, Hightower Trail Middle School & UWG Part-Time Faculty**

“

*As an instructor in the Georgia's BEST program, I'm proud to partner with Cobb educators who bring energy, creativity, and insight to every session. This collaboration allows me to both facilitate meaningful instructional technology experiences and learn directly from our teachers about their evolving technology needs. Together, we're shaping professional learning that is impactful, relevant, and deeply rewarding.*

**Dr. Starla Townsend | Director of Instructional Technology, Cobb County & Georgia's BEST Part-Time Faculty**



“



*The mentorship provided... during my part-time faculty appointment with Georgia's Best at UWG has been invaluable... This support system has successfully bridged potential divides between the nuances of higher education and the public PK-12 educational landscape, enriching my experience and the learning environment for the graduate students under my guidance.*

**Dr. Denise Osborn - Instructor**



# SPECIAL THANKS

## COBB COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT BOARD OF EDUCATION



**DAVID CHASTAIN**

Post 4  
BOARD CHAIR

“  
*In more than ten years on the Board of one of the highest achieving districts in the state, I've heard more about the benefits of Georgia's Best than anything we've ever done. If your budget is a reflection of your priorities, I'm proud to say we show our teachers how much they are valued.*

**Board Chair David Chastain**



**BECKY SAYLER**

Post 2  
BOARD MEMBER



**LEROY TRE' HUTCHINS**

Post 3  
BOARD MEMBER



**RANDY SCAMIHORN**

Post 1  
BOARD MEMBER



**JOHN CRISTADORO**

Post 5  
BOARD VICE-CHAIR



**NICHELLE DAVIS**

Post 6  
BOARD MEMBER



**BRAD WHEELER**

Post 7  
BOARD MEMBER



**COBB COUNTY**  
SCHOOL DISTRICT

**ONE TEAM. ONE GOAL.  
STUDENT SUCCESS.**





UNIVERSITY OF WEST GEORGIA



COBB COUNTY  
SCHOOL DISTRICT

YEAR 2 REPORT

2025

GEORGIA'S  
BEST

BUILDING EDUCATOR SUCCESS TOGETHER