

2025 Policy Priorities Summary

Georgia Appleseed Center for Law & Justice created this summary so that legislators, community leaders, funders, and advocates can see at a glance what our recommendations are, why they matter, and how we work together to secure safe, stable, and educationally supportive environments for Georgia’s children.

Right now, over **41,000** of Georgia’s students lack secure housing each year, and more than **21,000** high schoolers drop out before earning a diploma—disproportionately affecting Black and Brown children, youth with disabilities, and those living in poverty. In the sections that follow, you’ll find **four key policy priorities**—with specific short-term policy recommendations for each—that we believe will address the root causes of these two urgent problems. You’ll also find **five principles (derived from our 20 years of policy advocacy in Georgia) that guide our work.**

1. School Safety & Discipline Reform

Why It Matters

Harsh, zero-tolerance policies often remove children from classrooms for relatively minor infractions. More than **130,000** Georgia students each year face suspensions of two weeks or more—frequently for non-violent offenses—and even an 11-day suspension can cut a child’s chance of graduation in half. This disruption places added stress on families, exacerbating the risk of youth homelessness.

At the same time, Georgia remains one of only 14 states permitting corporal punishment in schools, with over **2,000** reported incidents in 2022–2023. This practice disproportionately affects younger children, Black and Brown students, and those with disabilities—undermining their sense of safety and connection to school—and perpetuating historical injustices that harm individuals, families, communities, and Georgia as a whole.

Our Recommendations

- **Enhance School Safety and School Climate** by expanding Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) statewide and reinstating school climate ratings.
- **Reject a return to zero-tolerance discipline** that diverts resources from genuine threats and fuels dropout rates.
- **End the use of corporal punishment** by amending O.C.G.A. § 20-2-731 to ban it or, at a minimum, require explicit parental consent—and by providing civil or criminal liability under O.C.G.A. § 20-2-732 for educators who administer it without consent.
- **Avoid student “profiling”** and update school threat assessment methods (e.g., adopt Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines).
- **Address chronic absenteeism** through School Attendance & School Climate Committees in every county, as required by law.
- **Improve notification of disciplinary proceedings** so parents and students understand tribunal rights and potential consequences.

Focusing on prevention, fairness, and positive interventions keeps children in school, reduces behavioral problems, and alleviates the secondary harms that can lead to housing instability.

2. School-Based Mental Health Supports

Why it Matters

Untreated mental health needs—such as depression, anxiety, or trauma—are among the top reasons students struggle academically or drop out. Nearly half of Georgia students who need mental health services are unable to access them, and 90 of our 159 counties have no psychiatrist.

Our Recommendations

- **Increase funding** for school-based behavioral health (SBBH) programs, including Medicaid and private insurance coverage, and expand successful models like Apex.
- **Expand the healthcare workforce** by streamlining licensing (e.g., for international physicians) and closing gaps in culturally responsive care.
- **Improve access to counselors** by lowering student-to-counselor ratios and authorizing peer specialists or community health workers in schools.
- **Invest in tele-mental health** services for rural or under-resourced areas.
- **Train school staff** on mental health awareness to recognize warning signs early.
- **Explore innovative funding models** for sustainable program support and **enforce mental health parity** laws so children can receive the care they need.

Providing timely mental health support keeps students in class and helps families avoid crises that often lead to housing instability.

3. Housing Stability for Children & Families

Why it Matters

Over **41,000** children in Georgia’s public schools are homeless each year, and frequent evictions or dangerous rental conditions destabilize entire families. When households lose access to safe and affordable housing, children inevitably fall behind academically or leave school.

Our Recommendations

- **Repeal the ban on local rental registries** (O.C.G.A. § 36-74-30[b]) and strengthen code enforcement, enabling localities to hold landlords accountable.
- **Allow tenants to withhold or abate rent** when living conditions are unsafe or uninhabitable, amending O.C.G.A. § 44-7-50.
- **Seal certain eviction records** and clarify protections for families living in extended-stay hotels.
- **Use Georgia’s surplus** to expand the low-income housing supply.
- **Invest in local code enforcement** to improve housing safety and reduce childhood displacement.

Stable housing supports uninterrupted schooling, contributing directly to higher graduation rates and healthier family outcomes.

4. Foster Care Improvements

Why it Matters

Georgia’s foster care system includes about **11,000** children, 20% of whom are removed from their homes to care at least partly due to inadequate housing. These children face significant educational disruption (only 37% graduate from high school), and those aging out of care are especially prone to homelessness.

Our Recommendations

- **Leverage federal housing vouchers** (Family Unification Program, Foster Youth to Independence) to prevent removals due solely to housing and support youth exiting care.
- **Lower high turnover** at the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) by investing in staff, improving service consistency.
- **Increase transparency and accountability** under Georgia’s 2021 Trauma Impact Rule, including school reporting requirements.
- **Enact a foster child “bill of rights”** to ensure young people can stay in their schools, secure housing post-care, provide access to legal counsel, and file grievances if their needs are unmet.

Strengthening foster care systems prevents needless family separation and ensures that youth maintain stable schooling—and better life prospects—through adulthood.

Our Approach & Guiding Principles

1. **Prioritizing Children’s Well-Being and Dignity.**
Policies should nurture children’s growth and safeguard their mental and physical health, enabling them to remain engaged in school and out of homelessness.
2. **Eliminating Systemic Barriers.**
From outdated housing laws to rigid discipline codes, we tackle the structural inequities that push children to drop out or become homeless.
3. **Employing Evidence-Based, Child-Centered, and Collaborative Solutions.**
Every recommendation is drawn from proven practices—such as PBIS, telehealth, and trauma-informed care—to efficiently and measurably improve outcomes. The challenges we address and the solutions we propose originate from our work with children, their families, and their communities.
4. **Connecting School and Home.**
Children’s education and emotional well-being cannot be separated from their living conditions. Coordinated supports ensure that policy changes in one area bolster success in the other.
5. **Focusing on Long-Term Impact and Grounded in the Realities of Georgia Politics.**
Keeping children housed and on track for graduation lays the groundwork for a healthier, more prosperous Georgia, reducing future reliance on public assistance and boosting workforce readiness.