

Georgia Appleseed advances justice for Georgia’s most underrepresented children, focusing on children who endure racism and discrimination, disability, poverty, abuse and neglect, and involvement in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.¹ We are dedicated to ensuring every school-aged child in the state has a safe and nurturing environment at school and at home in which to live, learn and grow up to become full and productive members of their communities.

We develop our policy priorities using a three-pronged approach: (1) making direct connections with Georgia children and families, (2) convening statewide coalitions and engaging local communities, and (3) employing rigorous legal research and analysis to craft pragmatic solutions to the systemic problems they face. Our 2025 policy recommendations aim to:

1. **Ensure every child has the chance to learn in a safe and positive school climate**, including by rejecting a return to zero tolerance discipline policies, ending the continued use of corporal punishment, and advancing positive behavioral interventions and supports that improve school safety and school climate.
2. **Expand children’s access to mental health supports in schools**, including by increasing investment in school-based behavioral health programs, addressing persistent healthcare workforce gaps, and improving access to qualified counselors and other support personnel in schools.
3. **Make stable and healthy housing a reality for every child**, including by restoring localities’ authority to register rental properties, expanding tenant protections and modernizing eviction laws.
4. **Improve the lives of children in foster care**, including by expanding housing opportunities, ensuring fair and trauma-informed treatment in schools, strengthening the child welfare system, and advancing foster children’s legal rights.

SCHOOL JUSTICE

A. Enhance School Safety and School Climate. Since the school shooting at Apalachee High School in Winder on September 4, 2024, we have noted an increase in schools using long-term suspension and expulsion as a first rather than a last resort for minor infractions, misunderstandings, and short outbursts that pose no safety risk. Zero tolerance policies are not new in Georgia and often reemerge after a school tragedy. Georgia’s Department of Education (DOE) and nonprofit partners like Georgia Appleseed have worked for years to educate schools about more effective, evidence-based approaches to school safety, such as positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) and restorative practices. Georgia is now recognized as a leader in these reforms which have proven effective in keeping kids safe

and focused on learning, and policy makers should resist the pressure to return to the failed policies of the past.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Expand PBIS programs to all Georgia schools.** PBIS is an evidenced-based, data-driven framework proven that reduces disciplinary incidents, increases school safety, and improves academic outcomes. In 2018, the House Study Committee on School Security recommended that Georgia expand PBIS programs to all schools in Georgia to improve school safety.² DOE now recommends that schools incorporate PBIS into a multi-tiered system of supports for the whole child.³ While approximately 1400 of more than 2000 Georgia public schools have implemented PBIS, there are still hundreds of schools in need of training or re-training.⁴ Georgia should expand the program statewide and assess the fidelity of schools already implementing it.
2. **Rebuild positive school climates, including by reinstating school climate ratings.** School climate describes the quality of school life based on the way students and staff experience the school's academic, social, safety and physical environment, and it is the *only* school characteristic that consistently correlates with school violence.⁵ A positive school climate has been shown to not only deter violence, but reduce out-of-school suspensions, increase student achievement and improve teacher retention.⁶ O.C.G.A. § 20-14-33 requires DOE to rate the quality of the climate at each school annually to identify troubled schools in need of support. It suspended the School Climate Star Rating system during the COVID-19 crisis and should reinstate it.⁷
3. **Reject a return to the harmful zero tolerance policies of Georgia's past.** When Georgia rejected zero tolerance discipline policies 25 years ago, it required that all schools put in place progressive and age-appropriate forms of school discipline to ensure the consequences for misconduct are fair and effective.⁸ Since the Winder tragedy, schools are resorting to zero tolerance policies to remove children from school for even the most minor offenses. Rather than improving school security, this practice makes schools less safe by requiring them to expend limited resources reacting to commonplace disturbances and diverting attention from serious threats that could cause harm. Georgia should re-invest in evidence-based approaches to safety, such as those described above, that reduce the number and severity of school discipline problems and make it easier to respond to children with more intense behaviors.
4. **Avoid disproven methods that try to predict violence by profiling students.** After an event like the one in Winder, there is pressure on schools to try to predict which students are likely to cause harm and take pre-emptive action. Current research shows that reliably predicting school shooters is impossible, because school homicides are exceedingly rare (fewer than 2% of homicides of school-age youth occur at school⁹) and there is no one set of behaviors that distinguish a potential shooter.¹⁰ The FBI has firmly rejected the use of profiling to prevent school violence. Instead, the FBI supports using a threat assessment

model that equips schools to take prompt action at the first sign of a threat, not before, and Georgia should do the same.¹¹

5. **Update Georgia’s existing school threat assessment system.** Georgia’s Emergency Management and Homeland Security Agency (GEMA/HS) offers trainings to schools on a Behavioral Threat Assessment Model developed by the FBI and Secret Service.¹² Recent and extensive field testing has shown that schools face unique challenges and need an efficient way to distinguish commonplace, less serious threats from more serious threats requiring closer attention.¹³ Georgia lawmakers and agency leaders should review current best practices and evaluate newer threat assessment models, such as the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines, currently used in most states and required by statute in Florida and Utah.¹⁴
6. **Address chronic absenteeism, including by expanding School Attendance & School Climate Committees statewide.** After the COVID pandemic, chronic absenteeism spiked in Georgia and nationwide.¹⁵ When a child is chronically absent, as in the Winder case, this can be a sign of deeper problems at home or at school. To help counties detect and address problems early, O.C.G.A. § 20-2-690.2 requires superior courts to convene multidisciplinary Student Attendance and School Climate Committees in every county.¹⁶ To date, few counties have established these committees (or similar School Justice Partnerships),¹⁷ and policy makers should encourage and monitor compliance with the law to reduce absenteeism.
7. **Launch a public education campaign for students, parents, and teachers to prevent misconduct and misunderstanding, including copycat incidents.** In our experience representing children in school disciplinary proceedings, many children, parents, and even teachers do not understand the kinds of words and actions that may be perceived as a threat and result in long-term suspension and the negative outcomes that flow from that. For example, data shows that even an 11-day suspension from school can cut a child’s chance of graduating in half, leading to poorer outcomes over the child’s lifetime.¹⁸ The State should engage nonprofit partners to offer educational workshops at schools and launch a media campaign geared toward middle and high school students, featuring youth voices.
8. **Ensure students and their parents or guardians receive adequate notice of school disciplinary proceedings.** When schools seek to remove a child from school, they must notify the students and parents of their right to a school tribunal. Yet, in many of our cases, the notice fails to reach parents, and when it does, it fails to contain sufficient detail to respond. Most notices state that the child may be punished “up to expulsion” for even the smallest of violations, incentivizing students and families to waive their right to a tribunal rather than risk the maximum penalty. O.C.G.A. § 20-2-754(b)(1) should be amended to require that notices be given by certified mail, electronic mail with read receipt, or in-person delivery, and that they include the specific type and amount of discipline the school is proposing.

Zero tolerance policies:

- Make schools less safe. Because the teen brain is not fully developed, it is common for school-age students to say and do impulsive things that may appear threatening in the moment.¹⁹ Zero tolerance policies require schools to expend limited resources reacting to commonplace outbursts and minor disturbances, while diverting attention from serious threats that could harm the school.
- Reduce academic achievement: Students who are excluded from school are more likely to suffer academically,²⁰ repeat a grade, and drop out of school than other students.²¹ In schools with harsh exclusionary policies, studies show that even non-suspended students have lower test scores than students in other schools.²²
- Increase high school drop-out rates. According to a DOE study, even an 11-day out-of-school suspension can cut a child's chance of graduating in half.²³ Last year, Georgia schools expelled more than 130,000 students for two weeks or more, mainly for non-violent offenses.²⁴ More than 20,000 students across the state failed to graduate.²⁵ If zero tolerance trends continue, Georgia will see an even higher number of school dropouts this year.
- Elevates risk of criminal involvement. Suspended students are also more likely to become involved in the juvenile justice system, as soon as their first month out of school.²⁶ When schools use long-term suspension to punish non-serious threats, they take children who are not dangerous and expose them to much riskier behaviors inside the juvenile justice system, which often leads to adult incarceration and other negative outcomes. Studies show that 68% of adults in state prisons lack a high school diploma.²⁷
- Widens achievement gaps: Wide disparities in suspension rates worsen achievement gaps. According to the DOE, Black students made up 62% of students receiving out-of-school suspension in 2023, although only 38% of the total population. Children from low-income families accounted for 77% of all suspensions, while boys accounted for nearly 65%. Students with disabilities, while 15% of the school population, represented 22% of cases.²⁸
- Reduces the state's workforce and weakens its economy. Relying on exclusionary discipline for minor infractions also deprives Georgia of the educated workforce it needs and results in billions of dollars in economic loss, due to increased reliance on government benefits, greater criminal involvement, poorer health and lower tax contributions.²⁹ New data shows that each Georgia student who graduates high school earns \$502,000 more, lives 10 years longer on average, and relies significantly less on state healthcare dollars than students who do not graduate.³⁰

B. End the Use of Corporal Punishment in Georgia Schools. Georgia is among a minority of states that still allow K-12 schools to use corporal punishment against school children.³¹ Under existing law, parents cannot opt out of this practice, unless they produce a doctor's note stating that their child would be emotionally harmed.

Today, 55 out of Georgia's 219 school districts authorize their administrators and teachers to paddle, spank and hit children as a form of punishment. In 2022-2023, Georgia schools reported over 2,000 instances of corporal punishment against children across the state, mainly for acts of incivility, disorderly conduct or other vague or undefined offenses. In May of last year, the Division of Family and Children Services announced that schools may not inflict corporal punishment on children in foster care, but thousands of other children in Georgia remain at risk.³²

Research shows that corporal punishment disproportionately affects students of color, students with disabilities, and students in kindergarten through second grade.³³ Our data shows that, in Georgia, kindergarten is the most common grade for the infliction of corporal punishment.

Corporal punishment has a widely disproportionate impact on Georgia's children. Black and Brown students in Georgia are 26% more likely to be corporally punished than their white peers, while children with disabilities are 50% more likely to endure this punishment than those without disabilities.³⁴

Corporal punishment in schools can have long-term harmful effects, including decreasing the child's sense of safety and belonging, reducing academic performance, and increasing, rather than decreasing, aggressive behavior.³⁵ In Georgia, the practice is likely to cause greater fear, shame and anger, because the punishment may only be meted out by a principal or assistant principal and the child must often wait among his classmates until the time when the beating can be delivered.³⁶

Corporal punishment in schools is not only harmful and ineffective, but it increases the exposure of schools and their staff to legal liability and negative publicity. Georgia law provides immunity for corporal punishment only when it is found to be neither excessive nor unduly severe. Parent lawsuits in Georgia have lasted years and attracted sensational media attention, even when a school ultimately prevails.³⁷

Today, corporal punishment is legal in only 17 states and practiced in 14, including Georgia. Many southern states have ended or limited its use, including North Carolina, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Arkansas.³⁸ Georgia's corporal punishment law is more than 80 years old, and it is time for the state to join others in abandoning this policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Amend O.C.G.A. § 20-2-731 to ban the use of corporal punishment in schools**, or at a minimum, require local boards of education to obtain parents' consent before school staff may administer any type of physical discipline involving the child.
2. **Amend O.C.G.A. § 20-2-732 to provide for civil and criminal liability** for teachers or administrators who administer corporal punishment, or at a minimum, administer it without parental consent.

SCHOOL-BASED BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

In the past two decades, the percentage of American youth with behavioral health disorders has risen significantly. A national survey of more than 200,000 adolescents (ages 12 to 17) showed an increase in major depression, serious psychological distress, and suicidal thoughts from 2005-2017.³⁹ Recent estimates show that up to 22% of school-aged youth have a diagnosable behavioral health disorder and nearly 40% of high school students experienced poor behavioral health, including anxiety and depression.⁴⁰

There is a growing behavioral health crisis impacting Georgia children and youth.⁴¹ According to Georgia's 2023 Student Health Survey, 165,055 of 418,705 (about 40%) of middle and high school students reported that anxiety or fear got in the way of their daily activities in the last 30 days, while 73,000 (nearly 20%) reported seriously considering harming themselves in the past year.⁴²

Yet nearly 50% of Georgia children who need behavioral, or mental health services have trouble finding them.⁴³ School-based behavioral health (SBBH) programs are a solution that provides services when children need them and where they can access them. SSBH programs improve students' health and well-being,⁴⁴ academic achievement and graduation rates,⁴⁵ while helping schools promote a positive school climate and increase teacher retention.⁴⁶ In a 2023 national survey of 1,000 teenage students, 65% said they would like their school to offer SBBH services.⁴⁷ By some estimates, students are six times more likely to complete mental health treatment when offered through school than other community settings.⁴⁸

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Increasing funding for school-based behavioral health programs statewide.** Georgia's state-funded Apex program provides in-school mental health services to students in 808 schools in the state, serving 3-11% of Georgia students depending on their grade. An interactive map created by the School-Based Behavioral Health Coalition (Georgia Appleseed is a member) shows wide swaths of the state without an Apex program or any behavioral health services at all.⁴⁹ Georgia should fund the expansion of Apex and other SBBH services in schools and ensure that Medicaid and private insurers cover school-based services.
- 2. Expand the healthcare workforce through licensing reform.** Serious workforce shortages impede Georgia's ability to expand access to mental health care for school-age children. According to the state, 90 out of 159 Georgia counties have no psychiatrist.⁵⁰ In these and other counties, families rely on family doctors and pediatricians for help with their children's mental health needs. There are shortages of these physicians as well, and it is vital that the state invest in building this workforce, especially as it moves toward the integrated models of behavioral health care that are the future of child healthcare, school-based clinics, and insurance parity.

Lawmakers should expand the pool of doctors by amending O.C.G.A. § 43-34-34 to streamline the pathway to re-licensure for qualified international physicians, including those already living in Georgia's refugee and immigrant communities but unable to practice due to licensing barriers.⁵¹ This reform would not only strengthen but diversify the physician workforce, expanding access to culturally and linguistically responsive services for the 10% of the state's population that is foreign-born⁵² and the more than 100,000 school students enrolled in English learning programs.⁵³

In a 2022 survey of 1,000 parents of school-age children nationwide, nearly 60 percent of parents said they would go to their doctor to talk about teen mental health treatment before they would talk to a mental health provider, a school guidance counselor, or even a close friend.⁵⁴

- 3. Improve access to qualified school counselors and other support specialists in schools.** National experts recommend a student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1.⁵⁵ The state-mandated ratio, 450:1,⁵⁶ is nearly twice as large, and Georgia counselors report having caseloads even larger. Lawmakers should increase funding to improve the student-to-counselor ratio in Georgia schools. They should also work with the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities to integrate certified peer specialists into the schools and empower community health workers (CHWs) to help children and families access care by authorizing Medicaid reimbursement for CHW services.
- 4. Invest in tele-mental health programs in schools.** Telehealth technology allows students and working families to access mental health services more easily while the child is in school, enabling the child, parent, and counselor to participate from separate locations. This technology can be particularly useful in rural areas where local providers are scarce and mental health appointments often require long drives and many hours away from school. It can also expand access to linguistically and culturally responsive providers, who are often concentrated in metro areas. While not appropriate in all cases, telehealth offers an opportunity to free up in-person counselors for those children in greatest need.
- 5. Require all public-school staff to receive mental health awareness training, offered for free by the Georgia Department of Education.** These trainings empower teachers with a five-step plan on how to assess students with mental health needs, and how to connect these students with the right resources.
- 6. Explore innovative funding models for school-based behavioral health.** School districts rely on a mix of federal and state short-term grants. Reliable, sustained funding is needed to encourage long-term investments and community buy-in. Expanding Medicaid coverage to more types of mental health practitioners and services would increase the quality of school-based behavioral health care. Our research shows that requiring Managed Care Organizations and Commercial Plans to contract with local educational agencies or allow them to bill out of network would greatly increase the number of students eligible for services.

- 7. Enforce mental health parity.** Since the enactment of the Georgia Mental Health Parity Act (H.B. 1013) in 2022, Georgia has required that all insurers cover mental health care to the same extent as medical care,⁵⁷ but implementation has been inconsistent. To ensure Georgia children and families can access quality mental health care, Georgia should continue to build on the success of the Act and educate consumers about mental health parity and how to report parity violations.

HOUSING JUSTICE

Across the state, dangerous housing conditions and evictions have led to housing instability and homelessness for tens of thousands of Georgia children. During the 2022-2023 school year, more than 41,000 preschool and school-aged children lacked stable housing.⁵⁸ More than 13,000 school-age children lived in chronically dangerous apartment complexes in Metro Atlanta alone.

Georgia's outdated and inadequate housing laws contribute to unsafe and dangerous rental housing conditions for its children and their families. The United Health Foundation notes that 15.2% of all Georgia homes (21% for Black Georgians) have severe housing problems, including a lack of plumbing or lack of complete kitchen facilities. These percentages do not include other widespread dangers that often go uncorrected such as pest infestations, plumbing malfunctions, mold, and water leaks.

Unsafe housing conditions can lead to serious negative health outcomes, particularly for children.⁵⁹ Even low levels of lead exposure can have serious effects on a child's nervous system and cognitive development.⁶⁰ Water leaks, mold and pests can cause respiratory problems and asthma.⁶¹ Today, 9.6% of Georgia children suffer from asthma, about 50% higher than the national average.⁶² Inadequate heating or cooling, missing smoke detectors, and faulty stairs and other dangerous structural defects can result in physical injury.

Poor housing conditions not only damage children's health but make it hard for them to concentrate on learning at home and perform at school. They often lead to frequent moves and school transfers, which further increase the child's risk of behavior problems, grade retention, and high school drop-out.⁶³ Children who experience housing insecurity also report higher levels of depression and anxiety than those in stable housing.⁶⁴

Not least, children living in poor or unstable housing are at risk of being removed from their families and placed in state care. According to state records, inadequate housing was a reason for the removal of thousands of Georgia children statewide, approximately 20% of the 11,000 currently living in foster care.⁶⁵

Georgia also has one of the highest rates of eviction in the nation,⁶⁶ with families more vulnerable to eviction than others. Black women with children are the most adversely impacted.⁶⁷ Nationwide, Black Americans make up only 19% of renters but account for 51% of those

threatened with eviction, compared to White Americans who make up more than half of all renters but only one-quarter of those facing eviction.⁶⁸

A major reason for Georgia's housing instability is the concentration of ownership of rental apartments and single-family homes in large corporate landlords. The U.S. Government recently reported that 25% of Georgia's rental properties are owned by institutional investors,⁶⁹ and a new study ranked Georgia as the most at-risk state in the nation for market disruptions and unsafe housing conditions from private equity investment firms.⁷⁰ In 2024, the Atlanta Regional Commission reported that seven large corporations owned more than 51,252 single-family homes across the metro region, using hundreds of shell companies to evade accountability.⁷¹

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Repeal the state ban on rental registries so that local governments can hold landlords accountable for providing decent and habitable housing for renting families.** More than 20 years ago, Georgia enacted legislation to prevent local governments from requiring that all rental properties in their communities be registered. Since that time, the rental market has changed dramatically, with an influx of institutional investors buying up properties and shielding their identities to evade accountability. Georgia should restore local governments' authority to create rental registries by repealing the ban within O.C.G.A. § 36-74-30(b), so that local officials can identify the parties responsible for the rental properties in their communities and provide the information they need to enforce housing safety and health regulations.
- 2. Protect children and families from dangerous housing conditions by allowing them to withhold or abate rent payments until repairs are made.** Georgia landlords have a legal duty to repair and keep their rental units in a condition "fit for human habitation."⁷² Under Georgia law, however, tenants must pay rent or face eviction, even when their rental units are uninhabitable and landlords fail to make repairs. Georgia legislators should amend O.C.G.A. § 44-7-50 to allow tenants to abate or temporarily withhold their rent payment until repairs are made. Alternatively, they should authorize local magistrate courts to collect and hold rent until landlords can provide evidence that safe housing conditions have been restored.
- 3. Ensure that families are able to secure stable housing by authorizing courts to seal certain types of eviction records.** In Georgia, the mere filing of an eviction notice can destroy a tenant's ability to secure new housing and lead to housing instability for children. Lawmakers should amend Georgia's Open Records Act, O.C.G.A. § 50-18-72, to prevent the disclosure of eviction filings pending final judgement in the case. O.C.G.A. § 44-7-50 should also be amended to authorize courts to seal eviction records post-judgment upon a motion that the property owner did not prevail, a settlement was reached, or in other extraordinary circumstances.

4. **Extend legal protections to families living in extended-stay hotels.** High rents, prior evictions, and inequitable access to safe housing have forced thousands of Georgia children and their families to resort to living in extended stay hotels.⁷³ Because hotel operators are considered innkeepers rather than landlords, they are not legally required to initiate eviction proceedings before removing families from their property.⁷⁴ In 2022, the Georgia Court of Appeals rules that hotel operators may sometimes be viewed as landlords and required to go through eviction proceedings, but the Georgia Supreme Court vacated and remanded the decision.⁷⁵ Lawmakers should address the uncertainty in the law by passing legislation to provide that families in extended stay hotels are entitled to tenant legal protections under certain conditions.

5. **Tap into Georgia’s surplus to expand housing opportunities for low-income children and families.** Georgia currently has cash reserves in the amount of \$16 billion dollars. Homelessness in the state has been on the rise,⁷⁶ and Georgia should use this surplus to make a substantial contribution to the State Housing Trust Fund. This one-time investment would allow the state to fund residential housing projects for low-income Georgians and meet the increasing need for housing among Georgia families.

6. **Increase investment in local housing safety code enforcement.** Housing code enforcement is an important tool that localities can use to ensure the safety and welfare of the children and families living in their community. Local code enforcement offices are often understaffed and under-resourced, limiting their ability to investigate cases to those where a complaint is made or violations are visible from the street. State and local authorities should increase investment in code enforcement programs to better protect the right of renting families to safe and healthy housing.

FOSTER CARE

Children in foster care are particularly vulnerable to adverse academic outcomes, interactions with the criminal justice system, and future home and job insecurity. We can better support the children the state has placed under its care with meaningful and intentional collaboration between legislators, state agencies, and community stakeholders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Leverage federal housing vouchers to prevent children from entering foster care and to help youth aging out of care to secure stable housing.** The federal Family Unification Program offers housing vouchers to help families whose lack of adequate housing puts their children at risk of being removed and placed in foster care. While 20% of Georgia children in foster care are removed from their families due at least in part to inadequate

housing, the state has not made full use of this voucher program. Only six of Georgia’s 21 public housing agencies that are eligible for the federal vouchers have applied for them.⁷⁷

The federal program also offers Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) vouchers that could help the estimated 700 youth aging out of care each in Georgia.⁷⁸ Studies show that 20% of youth will become homeless when they exit foster care, while 36% will experience homelessness over their lifetime.⁷⁹ Similarly, Georgia has secured only a handful of FYI vouchers for youth in the state,⁸⁰ compared to the hundreds obtained for youth in comparable states.⁸¹ Georgia should draw down this federal aid to improve stability for children who are at risk of, or who are exiting, foster care.

2. **Continue to take steps to lower turnover rates at the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) and better serve children in state care.** The state legislature should increase funding for caseworkers charged with caring for approximately 11,000 Georgia children in foster care⁸² and providing other services to hundreds of thousands of children living in poverty and at risk of entering care. While the state has provided salary increases in recent years, the turnover rate at DFCS remains high, leading to the understaffing of child welfare cases and long delays in the delivery of public benefits.⁸³ In 2022 alone, 55% of Georgia caseworkers left their jobs, according to state records.⁸⁴ In the face of the recent national scrutiny into DFCS’s ability to provide safety and security for children in care,⁸⁵ Georgia should address persistent problems at the agency, including increasing investment in the hiring and retention of experienced caseworkers.
3. **Increase transparency and accountability with respect to public school treatment of children in foster care.** Georgia Appleseed has trained hundreds of caseworkers, court-appointed special advocates, attorneys, and others working with foster children in Georgia’s public school system. Many are unaware of Georgia’s Trauma Impact Rule, enacted in 2021 to require schools to address the trauma many foster children endure and provide needed supports. O.C.G.A. § 20-2-152.2 should be amended to add school reporting requirements and charge DOE with tracking compliance.
4. **Provide children in care with comprehensive legal rights** that nurture positive child development, academic success, and independence for older youth. Children in care fare better when they have enumerated, enforceable rights that allow them to advocate on their own behalf. While Georgia has a Foster Parent Bill of Rights, O.C.G.A §49-5-281, it has no similar statute for foster children. At least 15 states have enacted a bill of rights for children in care,⁸⁶ and DFCS policy contains a list of basic rights, from the right to be treated with dignity and respect to the right to stay informed and seek redress for a violation of rights.⁸⁷ While Georgia acted to protect some of these rights last year – codifying the right to a free state identification card, for example⁸⁸ -- many rights remain unprotected, such as the right to legal counsel in education and immigration cases, to enroll themselves in school

and vocational programs, the right to housing upon exiting foster care, and the right to a clear process for filing grievances. Lawmakers should move forward with a statutory bill of rights for children in the state's care.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Our focus our efforts on supporting Black and Brown children, those with disabilities, LGBTQ+ kids, refugees and children of immigrants, and children experiencing poverty or foster care.
- ² Georgia House of Representatives, Final Report of the House Study Committee on School Security, H.R. 1414 (2018), available at https://www.house.ga.gov/Documents/CommitteeDocuments/2018/School%20Security/HR_1414_REPORT_FINAL.pdf.
- ³ Georgia Department of Education, Georgia Tiered System of Supports for Students, <https://gadoe.org/whole-child-supports/gatss> (last visited Jan. 17, 2025).
- ⁴ Fulton County Schools, 26 Fulton County Schools Recognized for Exemplary PBIS Programs, <https://news.fultonschools.org/details/~board/district-new-stories/post/26-fulton-county-schools-recognized-for-exemplary-pbis-programs> (last visited Jan. 17, 2025).
- ⁵ Brian A. Jackson et al., The Role of Technology in Improving K–12 School Safety, RAND CORP. (2016), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1400/RR1488/RAND_RR1488.pdf.
- ⁶ National Council on Teacher Quality, Building a School Climate That Makes Teachers Want to Stay, NAT'L COUNCIL ON TCHR. QUALITY, <https://www.nctq.org/blog/Building-a-school-climate-that-makes-teachers-want-to-stay> (last visited Jan. 17, 2025).
- ⁷ The last available School Climate Star Rating data and comparisons are from 2019. Georgia Department of Education, School Climate Star Ratings Data and Comparisons, <https://georgiainsights.gadoe.org/Dashboards/Pages/School-Climate-Comparison.aspx> (last visited Jan. 17, 2025).
- ⁸ O.C.G.A. § 20-2-735.
- ⁹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, School-Associated Violent Death Study, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/schoolviolence/fastfact.html> (last visited Jan. 17, 2025).
- ¹⁰ Mary Ellen O'Toole et al., The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective, FBI NAT'L CTR. FOR THE ANALYSIS OF VIOLENT CRIME (2000), https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2024-10/24_0730_IA_BTAM_508.pdf.
- ¹¹ Mary Ellen O'Toole et al., The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective, FBI NAT'L CTR. FOR THE ANALYSIS OF VIOLENT CRIME (2000), https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2024-10/24_0730_IA_BTAM_508.pdf.
- ¹² Georgia Department of Homeland Security, Behavioral Threat Assessment Model, <https://www.dhs.gov/behavioralthreatassessment> (last visited Jan. 17, 2025).
- ¹³ Dewey G. Cornell, Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines, 2nd ed. (2024), <https://education.virginia.edu/documents/yvp-forms-comprehensive-school-threat-assessment-guidelines2019-07-27pdf> (last visited Jan. 17, 2025).
- ¹⁴ Safe Supportive Learning, Discipline Compendium: Florida Threat Assessment Protocols, https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/discipline-compendium?state=florida&sub_category=Threat%20Assessment%20Protocols (last visited Jan. 17, 2025).
- ¹⁵ Georgia Public Broadcasting, Chronic Absenteeism Soaring in Schools, Most Parents Aren't Sure What It Is, <https://www.gpb.org/news/2024/06/12/chronic-absenteeism-soaring-in-schools-most-parents-arent-sure-what-it> (last visited Jan. 17, 2025).
- ¹⁶ O.C.G.A. § 20-2-690.2.
- ¹⁷ Georgia Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, School Justice Partnerships, <https://gaappleseed.org/resource/school-justice-partnerships/> (last visited Jan. 17, 2025).
- ¹⁸ Georgia Department of Education, Research Shows Student Attendance Significantly Impacts Student Achievement, <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Pages/PressReleaseDetails.aspx?pid=19> (last visited Jan. 17, 2025).
- ¹⁹ Dewey G. Cornell, Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines, 2nd ed. (2024), <https://education.virginia.edu/documents/yvp-forms-comprehensive-school-threat-assessment-guidelines2019-07-27pdf> (last visited Jan. 17, 2025).

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