

Hands

Just let us teach

Hands

Just let us teach

HANDS OFF,
JUST LET US TEACH

Hands

*Hands
Just let*

*Hands off!
Just let*



2023



HANDS OFF,
JUST LET US TEACH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Georgia school administrators are struggling to retain teachers and place substitute teachers. The Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE) surveyed nearly 4,600 teachers in the fall of 2021.¹ Over half of the respondents stated they would not recommend a career in education. The same report also noted that teachers with less than six years of teaching experience are very unlikely to remain in education.² This is not simply a Georgia issue, but it should be added to the long list of issues for the Georgia education system.

The initial problem is that Georgia schools have been underfunded over the last 18 to 20 years as a reflection of the budget cuts made by the Georgia Assembly. Funding for Georgia schools is provided under the Quality Basic Education Act (QBE) that was passed by the Georgia Assembly in 1985. A significant percentage of the funding system goes into paying the salaries of teachers, school administrators, and operational personnel as well as covering their health insurance, professional development, and operating costs. The QBE formula also helps dictate how much local money is allocated for teacher salary increases. In addition, QBE sets a minimum funding structure for schools within the state, a structure that should allocate enough money to provide a good education for all students, including those with special education needs and gifted students. Additional school funds are designated based on the training and experience of staff.³ Georgia has 181 school districts containing over 2,200 schools across the state. There are 114,800 teachers employed and approximately 1.6 million students enrolled in Georgia's schools who would be covered under the QBE formula.⁴

Teacher retention and poor school funding have pushed organizations like Deep Center and other supporters of public and equitable education to provide support for public school teachers because teachers cannot both educate our children and fight politicians who are enforcing laws that undermine teachers' confidence in our government. To transform education, we understand teachers are a big component. Without their voices and participation, decisions about our education system should not move forward. As a community at large, we must work closely with our local school board, local schools, and educators as community partners to meet the needs of the students in Savannah and the state of Georgia.

Under Governor Kemp's administration, the Protect Students First Act urgently works to dissolve critical race education. To us, it is clear that:

¹ Professional Association of Georgia Educators. (2022). Views from the Schoolhouse: Insights from Georgia Educators on the Education Profession and Supporting Students (Legislative Survey Report). https://www.pagelegislative.org/_files/ugd/bd220f_576fe65bf49e4e13abf4a623117f6cff.pdf

² Ibid., 7-8

³ Owens, S. (2019, May 23). *How Does Georgia Fund Schools?* - Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. <https://gbpi.org/how-does-georgia-fund-schools/>

⁴ Georgia *Schools and Districts*. (2019). Gadoe.org. <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/AskDOE/Pages/Schools-and-Districts.aspx#:~:text=There%20are%20currently%20181%20school,in%20the%20state%20of%20Georgia>

- I. The state of Georgia is okay with censoring teachers in public school classrooms.
- II. The value of hard and honest history as a mechanism to challenge inequity is not supported.
- III. The rights of public school students in Georgia are limited.

Although teachers have a reputation for persevering in the face of extreme challenges, the Protect Students First Act is more difficult to parse than physics. As media surfaced around the conditions of this law, we noticed that Georgia grade school educators hadn't had a fair chance to express to their government leaders what this means to them and how it impacts their job.

In a local community meeting last September, a Savannah resident stated that kids are not learning what it means to be citizens in America in our schools. Their thoughts were that civic courses were not available. This statement raised some concerns in the room. Our teachers acknowledge that many people, especially parents, have misconceptions about what really happens in schools from day to day. In fact, the U.S. Government, U.S. History, Georgia history, and other related courses are requisite for graduation based on the requirements set by Georgia's Department of Education.

Hands Off, Just Let Us Teach amplifies the voices of teachers after the enactment of the Protect Students First Act, formally House Bill (HB) 1084. This law not only censors curriculums but limits the voices of teachers and lessens the value of inclusive education. This paper argues that teaching is a complex and demanding position and this act poses additional challenges for educators.

Our teachers and community-based educators in Georgia have something to say to Georgia's lawmakers. The rules you have been implementing in our schools over the years have kept our state and the nature of our work continually on our minds. It is our hope that this work is embraced by our community at large and our leaders. We exclaim, take your hands off of the mouths of educators and let them teach as they see fit.



CND



WHERE WE ARE

We spent a Wednesday afternoon in one of the local Savannah high schools. It seemed every two minutes on the intercom, we heard, “Teachers, please check your email. Teachers, please monitor your students as they transition out of your class. Teachers, we will be meeting briefly today after school.” With the constant memorandums and requests on top of instruction and managing classrooms, a teacher’s job is never done. It has often been said that behind every great student is a great teacher. More than likely, those same great teachers are exhausted teachers. Lleano Najarro and Education Week reported that typical teachers work an average of 54 hours per week, which averages out to almost 11 hours per weekday.⁵ While this schedule may unfortunately be considered normal, we cannot forget there are teachers who serve as athletic coaches and advisors for student organizations who work an additional four to five hours a day to further the development of their students. Yet, those Savannah teachers continue to smile throughout their day and push to get the job done.

The structure of our schools does not provide open opportunities for discourse about the harsh treatment of teachers and how they are impacted by political influence. A local news report revealed that the Georgia Department of Education reported that more than 56,000 fights occurred in Georgia’s Public Schools in the 2021-2022 school year.⁶ The rise in violence occurred after Governor Kemp allocated \$69 million dollars for schools to receive \$30,000 each to increase security measures in 2019.⁷ Mental health counselors and school resource officers have been provided as a resource for the schools by way of this funding, but there are still high numbers of violent crimes happening in school environments. Since the return to in-class learning following pandemic-related school closures in 2020, a social media trend on TikTok has shown teachers dealing with disruptions from students that often lead to teachers and students physically fighting. Three viral incidents involve teachers from Gwinnett County and Rockdale County, GA.

The Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE) surveyed 4,583 Georgia teachers and found that 31% of the respondents were unlikely or highly unlikely to remain in the education field for another five years.⁸ In addition, a greater challenge that school boards across the United States face is the recruitment and retention of African American and Latino(x) teachers, particularly male.⁹ School-based violence, rent and housing

5 Najarro, I. (2022, April 14). *Here’s How Many Hours a Week Teachers Work*. Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/heres-how-many-hours-a-week-teachers-work/2022/04>

6 Wile, O. (2022, August 27). *Georgia Department of Education Reports School fights were up in 2021-2022 school year*. WJCL 22 ABC. Retrieved March 20, 2023, from <https://www.wjcl.com/article/georgia-department-of-education-reports-school-fights-were-up-in-2021-2022-school-year/41006554>

7 Office of Governor. Governor Brian P. Kemp Office of the Governor, 25 May 2022, <https://gov.georgia.gov/press-releases/2022-05-25/governor-kemp-provides-school-safety-update>.

8 Professional Association of Georgia Educators. (2022).

9 Viadero, D. (2018, January 24). Teaching Shortages: Many Answers for a Complex Problem. *Education Week*, 37(18), pp. 4-5.

rate increase, local and national policies, and other ongoing issues in the United States make teaching a difficult job that is made much more difficult by the continuous cycle of issues facing one of the most undervalued professions in our society. Broadly speaking, the increased workload brought by the pandemic and the increase in student debt also make teaching less attractive. Georgia's teaching salary averages at \$60,553 per year and places Georgia as #21 in the top 25 highest-ranked states for teacher pay.¹⁰ The Brookings Institution, however, found that Black borrowers owe about \$53,000 in student loan debt, or nearly twice as much as their white colleagues.¹¹

Teacher retention in the United States has been a great challenge over the last decade, especially in Georgia. Between 2020-2021, the state of Georgia made strides to improve teacher retention by passing ACT 159 (SB 88).¹² Section Two of this act provides means for teachers to enter the field through alternative teacher certification programs, including veterans who have been honorably discharged. The programs additionally apply to individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher with a designated grade point average or above, as established by the Professional Standards Commission. However, this nontraditional educator preparation program allows participants to teach for only three years before further certification is needed. To continue teaching, lateral entry teachers would have to pass the Georgia Assessments for Certification of Educators (GACE) test. Teachers that are labeled lateral entry enter the field through alternative certification pathways. While this approach may seem feasible for boosting teacher numbers, it does not address the fact that currently certified teachers are not being retained.

The Wall Street Journal reported from the Bureau of Labor Statistics that roughly 300,000 public educators and staff left the field between February 2020 and May 2022.¹³ The Georgia Association of Educators (GAE) claims teacher burnout, low pay, and limited freedom in the curriculum are key factors in the teachers' exodus. These are issues that labor unions, especially teacher unions, have addressed throughout their existence.¹⁴ GAE acts as a group of advocates and an association of professionals in education, but not as a union. Labor unions in Georgia have been fighting for workers rights and better wages, benefits, and work environments since the late 19th century. Georgia's labor union participation is very minimal in comparison to blue states like California and New York. As a red state and a right-to-work state, Georgia's labor laws restrict union membership.¹⁵ Therefore, GAE members and teachers cannot participate in collective bargaining, eliminating their ability to negotiate contracts, salaries, benefits, or classroom sizes.

According to a 2017 survey, teacher turnover has a considerable financial impact. In rural districts, the typical cost of replacing a teacher, including charges for separation, recruitment, hiring, and training, can be \$9,000, but in metropolitan districts, the cost can be more than \$20,000.¹⁶ Since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, public schools in the United States have faced a major downturn in the retention of teachers. The pandemic brought additional responsibilities for teachers to manage in their classrooms, including staying within the protocols of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). They had to modify their lessons from in-person to virtual, and if they met in person, they had to clean their classrooms and monitor the temperatures of each student, all without a pay increase.

10 Rankings & Estimates, NEA Research, June 2022.

11 Scott-Clayton, J., & Li, J. (2016, October 20). *Black-white disparity in student loan debt more than triples after graduation*. Brookings Institution <https://www.brookings.edu/research/black-white-disparity-in-student-loan-debt-more-than-triples-after-graduation/>

12 *Senate approves Kemp plan aimed at increasing teachers*. (2021, February 17). AP NEWS. <https://apnews.com/article/veterans-georgia-bills-legislation-77fdf7e1714ee758982ee318480a04d2>

13 Dill, K. (2022, June 20). School's Out for Summer and Many Teachers Are Calling It Quits. WSJ; The Wall Street Journal. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/schools-out-for-summer-and-many-teachers-are-calling-it-quits-11655732689>

14 Carl Vinson Institute of Government- University of Georgia. (2022). *Teacher Burnout in Georgia. Voices from the Classroom*. <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Documents/Teacher%20Burnout%20Task%20Force%20Report.pdf>

15 Knox, C. (2022, July 21). *Pandemic sparks unionization jolt across Georgia*. Atlanta Civic Circle. <https://atlantaciviccircle.org/2022/07/21/pandemic-sparks-unionization-jolt-across-georgia/>

16 Darling-Hammond, L. (2022, July 15). Why Addressing Teacher Turnover Matters. *Learning Policy Institute*. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/why-addressing-teacher-turnover-matters>

In Georgia, lawmakers saw the need to support school administrators who struggled to retain teachers and place substitutes. But that support did not come with immediate assistance for current teachers. In 2022, the senate enacted ACT 724 (HB 385), the right for retired teachers enrolled in the Teachers Retirement System of Georgia to return as full-time teachers for schools with high staffing needs while still receiving their retirement allowance.¹⁷ Was this a wise choice for our schools? Possibly. Yet, we still need our governing officers to look deeply into the issue of retaining the teachers we have, and retracting the Protect Students First Act (HB 1084) is a good place to start.

The Protect Students First Act seems to obliterate the presence and the heritage of the BIPOC citizens of Georgia. Even if the members who serve in the Georgia Assembly have already moved on, the local school boards have been left with the task of properly training teachers to reflect this new policy. It seems apparent that state officials did not take into account the issues our schools and teachers were already facing before implementing this policy. While this policy may have been modeled after the Heritage Foundation's policy or the policies of bordering states—the Stop W.O.K.E. Act in Florida¹⁸ and the Resolution Declaring the Preservation of Intellectual Freedom and Nondiscrimination in Alabama,¹⁹ it is unlawful and goes against the workings of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Intriguingly, this law was also promoted after the census showed that diversity in the state had increased and that 51% of Georgia's population was white at the time.²⁰

The Heritage Foundation is a right-wing public policy think tank organization based in Washington, D.C. The Heritage Foundation works to achieve mainstream conservative policy goals at the national level.

According to the Heritage Foundation (and counter to historical record), critical race theory (CRT) has its roots in the Marxist ideology of the 1970s, can be used to study racism and oppression, and is utilized in the classroom to create wide-scale resistance.²¹ The Heritage Foundation's policy priority for 2023 was released in 2019, long before the Georgia senate released the proposal for HB 1084. At the top of their priority list was empowering parents to make education choices. Through this priority, they hoped to combat critical race theory and radical gender ideology in education.²² The following verbiage is their approach to dismantling CRT:

We will support the introduction of legislation in Congress to eliminate the application of racist critical race theory both from our public schools and from the training of our military.

We will work to end race-based admissions in our colleges and universities by drafting and introducing legislation to bar federal funding, grants, and student loans to any educational institution that discriminates on the basis of race.

We will work to block any regulations that would eviscerate due process protections for those who are wrongly accused of sexual harassment in our educational institutions.

We will work to block any regulations that would replace the traditional biological understanding of male/female sex discrimination in education with one based on subjective transgender ideology—and that includes working to keep biological men out of women's sports.

We will push for congressional hearings to expose the Biden Administration's reliance on radical groups to facilitate the CRT and gender ideology agendas in our schools.

¹⁷ Act 724 (2022). <https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/59518>

¹⁸ Bobby Caina Calvan. (2021, June 10). Florida bans "critical race theory" from its classrooms. AP NEWS; Associated Press. <https://apnews.com/article/florida-race-and-ethnicity-government-and-politics-education-74d0af6c52c0009ec3fa3ee9955b0a8d>

¹⁹ Alabama State Board of Education Resolution Declaring the Reservation Of Intellectual Freedom And Non-Discrimination In Alabama's Public Schools.. (2021).<https://www.alabamaachieves.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ALSBOE-Resolution-Declaring-the-Preservation-of-Intellectual-Freedom-and-Non-Discrimination-in-AL-Public-Schools.pdf>

²⁰ Diversity rises in Georgia, with whites making up only half the state. (Published 2021).. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/12/us/georgia-white-population.html>

²¹ Butcher, J. (2019). *Critical Race Theory, the New Intolerance, and Its Grip on America*. The Heritage Foundation. <https://www.heritage.org/civil-rights/report/critical-race-theory-the-new-intolerance-and-its-grip-america>

²² *Empower Parents to Make Education Choices*. (2019). The Heritage Foundation. <https://www.heritage.org/fighting-for-americas-future/empower-parents-make-education-choices>

We will work on critical reforms at the state level and with local school board members.

We will work with state-based policy organizations and state legislatures to prohibit the application of the racist ideas of critical race theory, enact school choice legislation, protect and expand education savings accounts, and enact comprehensive parental rights bills. We will push to provide academic transparency to parents through state legislation that would require schools to report online the books, teacher preparation and development sessions, and other instructional materials they use in the classroom.

We also will work to eliminate teacher certification requirements in the states. Since the mid-20th century, left-leaning colleges of education have had a near-monopoly on providing teacher certifications, which means that other highly qualified and experienced individuals who have not specifically attended a college of education are often prevented from teaching. We will work with governors and state policymakers on alternative teacher certification routes or to eliminate teacher certification requirements altogether. This will weaken the grip that colleges of education have on the teaching profession.

We will continue to train hundreds of school board members from around the country each year on their roles and responsibilities and how they can provide a quality education while preventing special interests from indoctrinating our children.

The Protect Students First Act labels teaching about racism and bias as a ‘divisive concept.’ Section I (a) of the Protect Students First Act defines divisive concepts as concepts or views espousing that:²³

- a.** *One race is inherently superior to another race;*
- b.** *The United States of America is fundamentally racist;*
- c.** *An individual, by virtue of his or her race, is inherently racist or oppressive toward individuals of other races, whether consciously or subconsciously;*
- d.** *An individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of his or her race;*

- e.** *An individual’s moral character is inherently determined by his or her race;*
- f.** *An individual, by virtue of his or her race, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other individuals of the same race;*
- g.** *An individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress because of his or her race;*
- h.** *Meritocracy, performance-based system, or traits such as a hard work ethic are racist or were created by individuals of a particular race to oppress individuals of another race;*
- i.** *Any other form of race scapegoating or race stereotyping. Race scapegoating by these terms means assigning fault, blame, or bias to a race, or to an individual of a particular race because of his or her race. If one were to ascribe character traits, values, moral or ethical codes, privileges, status, or beliefs to a race, or to an individual because of his or her race, that is racial stereotyping.*

Under this law, a curriculum that addresses racial oppression, slavery, and discrimination is prohibited in schools. Furthermore, in Section 1-4, there is a revision of Code Section 20-2-739 that was enacted by the Georgia Legislature in 1999.²⁴ This code states:

On and after July 1, 2000, the Department of Education shall provide training programs in conflict management and resolution and in cultural diversity for voluntary implementation by local boards of education for school employees, parents and guardians, and students.

The Protect Students First Act added that these training programs should not advocate for divisive concepts. Therefore, any racial or bias training under the umbrella of diversity, equity, and inclusion that school administrators may want to implement has been banned.²⁵ As a penalty for these activities, under this law, the state has granted the state board of education the right to make corrective action plans for the school systems found to be teaching divisive concepts. If the schools do not follow the corrective action plans, the state board can revoke the school district’s strategic waivers. Schools that are in the Strategic Waiver School System (SWSS) operate under the terms of an SWSS

²³ Protect Students First Act, 22 LC 49 0887S H. B. 1084 (SUB) (2022). <https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20212022/207447>

²⁴ Code 1981, §20-2-739, enacted by Ga. L. (1999), p. 438, § 4.

²⁵ Protect Students First Act, (2022)

contract between the State Board of Education and the local Board of Education. The contract provides waivers of certain state laws, rules, and guidelines to help schools accommodate their students by way of curriculum modifications and other means to help students succeed.

Georgia charter schools, while part of a public school system, use their waivers to serve students in ways traditional school models cannot. One example is the implicit bias training, officially incorporated by the Georgia Charter School Association, for charter school administrators to support equity and inclusion in their schools prior to the installation of the Protect Students First Act. This training supports the development of school leaders to serve Georgia's charter school student racial demographics, which are predominately BIPOC populations. The waivers support the honor and tutoring programs, as well as provide openness for schools to modify courses to accommodate the learning needs of their students, which include special education programs and courses that are based on locality and current or historic events. Classroom size modifications and support for athletics also fall under the guidelines of the waiver. Many schools in Georgia run a high risk of being sanctioned under this new law because of these waivers.

Finally, the Protect Students First Act requires that all high schools that receive Quality Basic Education (QBE) funding for interscholastic sports events appoint an executive oversight committee. These watchdogs are meant to investigate the participating schools to determine if they are allowing transgender athletes to participate in sports. Under the act, athletic associations can prohibit students from participating in sporting events that do not match their assigned gender at birth. A transgender girl, for example, would be barred from participating in girls' soccer.

Ultimately, this regulation was created to rein in institutions that offer liberal studies that promote

LGBTQA+ rights and strengthen racial empowerment. Schools are expected to foster an environment that promotes respect between staff and students. The regulation ends discussions about racism and homophobia that students who identify as white and heterosexual may find awkward, but students holding other identities may find vital. Clearly, cisgender white males who do not identify as same-gender loving or queer are the ones who benefit most from this policy. White men's connection with racism and their own race is tumultuous—it is an unavoidable fact. White male sexuality, racism, and fragility often go hand in hand. Their privilege in society now has more opposition.²⁶ The shift in society and the ongoing culture of social movements have them questioning if their actions will be seen as racist or sexist.²⁷

Censoring curricula and limiting opportunities oppress minority groups. In Georgia, for example, 63% of public school students are BIPOC. Curricula should reflect our students.²⁸ Supporting BIPOC students is essential because they often face extra challenges when it comes to feeling accepted and valued in their classrooms, especially if they are the only minority students there. With healthy ties with the school community, BIPOC youth can build a strong sense of their cultural identity in a safe atmosphere. This is the same with same-gender loving students.

Georgia's education advocates at the Southern Poverty Law Center have expressed that this law lacks transparency and censors the voices of educators.²⁹ It censors discussions on race issues, but there are no guidelines offered to help teachers understand what is and is not allowable under the new framework. But can we be honest? The instruction a teacher can give within 30-90 minutes of a lesson, no matter how well-delivered, does not have the same impact as a 30-second video trending on social media. As a reminder, police brutality against African Americans shared on social media is why we're having this discussion.

26 Lempinen, E. (2022). Loss, fear and rage: Are white men rebelling against democracy?. Retrieved 31 March 2023, from <https://news.berkeley.edu/2022/11/14/loss-fear-and-rage-are-white-men-rebelling-against-democracy/>

27 Gillon, S. M. (2017, August 29). *Why are so many white men so angry?* Washington Post; The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2017/08/29/why-are-so-many-white-men-so-angry>

28 Quick Facts on Georgia Education 2021-2022. (2021). Gadoe.org. <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Pages/Quick-Facts-on-Georgia-Education.aspx>

29 *Free Speech Rights for Educators and Students in Georgia*. (2022). Southern Poverty Law Center. <https://www.splcenter.org/georgia-educators-students-rights-free-speech>

the

"If
the
teachers
have to censor
themselves,
then the
students
censor
themselves,
is that even
education
anymore?"



UNFOLDING CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Critical race theory is an academic framework that has been predominantly deployed in higher education research, pedagogy, and as a legal framework since the 1970s, when legal scholars such as Derrick Bell started investigating how racism and racial discrimination have impacted the evolution of American law and society. The concept was later reintroduced in literary form by Kimberlé Crenshaw, an African American law scholar and civil rights advocate. The framework rules that systemic racism is part of American society, starting with the criminal justice system and continuing through education and housing to employment and healthcare. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is more than the result of individual bias and prejudice. The CRT movement is made up of a group of activists and scholars who have an interest in studying and transforming race, racism, and power. Theorists in education use CRT to develop comprehension of issues of school discipline and hierarchy, curriculum and history, and IQ and achievement testing.³⁰ CRT is not used for creating divisiveness, as presumed by the authors of Florida's, Georgia's, and other states' bans on teaching race issues.

In the field of education, CRT has been used primarily in higher education to assess inequality. According to pedagogical theorist Gloria Ladson-Billings, critical race theory sees the official school curriculum as a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a white supremacist master script. The idea of master scripting mutes and erases the stories of African Americans when they challenge dominant cultural authority and power.³¹ Researchers and activists who study CRT are not claiming that white people now are culpable for what their ancestors did in the past. They are challenging white people to do something about the racism that pervades our daily lives. In traditional United States public schools, this racism shows up in the lack of Black students enrolled or with access to advanced placement (AP) courses, underfunded predominantly Black schools, and harsh disciplining of Black students in comparison to white students.

The death of George Floyd, a Black man killed by Minneapolis police officers on May 25, 2020, prompted racial tensions and conversations over the ways systemic racism has been used to discriminate against African Americans. When Black protesters and advocates began to voice their opinions about the issues with legal systems and the disenfranchisement of Black/African Americans, especially Black men, critical race theory was highly referenced. CRT as a concept has caused a separation in the public sphere, especially in governing systems across the United States. Since 2020, 36 states have made efforts to restrict education on racism, bias, and the contributions of specific racial or ethnic groups to U.S. history

30 Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (1995). *Critical race theory: an introduction* (pp. 2–4). Temple University Press.

31 Taylor, E., Gillborn, D., & Ladson-Billings, G. (Eds.). (2023). *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education* (3rd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/b23210>

or related topics.³² Critical race theory has not been recognized more widely because it condemns racism as a system that has fostered inequality throughout the United States, and while it does not assert that white people are inferior, it does encourage them to accept responsibility for their visible and covert contributions to racism's negative impacts.

Georgia's divisive concept law and other state bans on critical race theory are visible examples of what CRT scholars have proved over time. In the meantime, the most powerful argument for why the Protect Students First Act should not exist comes from the people that have seen its immediate impacts, our Georgia educators. Their voices matter, and it's time that our community and local government leaders hear what they have to say.

32 Stout, C., & Wilburn, T. (2022, February 2). *CRT MAP: Critical race theory legislation and schools*. Chalkbeat; Chalkbeat. <https://www.chalkbeat.org/22525983/map-critical-race-theory-legislation-teaching-racism>







M E T H O D O L O G Y

To develop this research brief, we reached out to history teachers via phone, e-mail, or drop-in at 40 Georgia-based schools: four colleges and 36 middle and high schools. We found challenges in recruiting participants, who often chose to silence themselves because of the potential risk to their careers. To mitigate this risk, we offered our educators anonymity.

We interviewed 12 educators and four education advocates from across Georgia to give us their perspectives through personal interviews. We had three questions for them, but most of all, we allowed them to tell their stories. One of the tenants of critical race theory is storytelling. Storytelling provides personal narratives of lived experiences. It opens up a bridge to connect people and for us to reimagine the worlds that we live in.

The foundation of Deep Center is centered on impacting systems change through storytelling. We teach our youth to write and tell stories that empower them and celebrate their life experiences, their culture and neighborhoods. Through this method, participants gain agency as learners, artists, and community leaders, allowing them to speak up about issues that affect them and their families. In return, as adults, we listen and collectively develop solutions to make an impact for the greater good.

Our intent was to find a common ground and to see the landscape of Georgia's schools after the enactment of the Protect Students First Act. What we learned is that our schools continue to grapple with a world of problems and that teachers are having a hard time understanding the terms of this law, especially since some areas of Georgia and some districts are eliminating courses and modifying curricula when Georgia's standards have not been modified to match.

The teachers who interviewed with Deep researchers met on their personal time and not during the school day. The interviews for the educators were conducted on school holidays or in the evenings on Zoom after the teachers' workday between the months of October and January during the 2022-23 school year.

WHAT AND
HOW OUR
TEACHERS
FEEL:

LIFTING
THEIR
VOICES

As a collective group of teachers, community educators, and activists for equitable education, we have something to say to our state and national leaders. The Protect Students First Act raises further potential difficulties in teacher retention because it will almost certainly result in the dismissal of instructors who are caught passing down histories and realities that reflect their students' lived experiences. Instructors are already not compensated adequately, and standing in front of their classes to conceal ancestral secrets, control disruptive conduct, and deal with parents who ignore their children daily but expect the teachers to be aware of their genetic makeup creates an additional psychological toll that cannot be paid for by any salary level.

A.C.B.

A Georgia activist, was on the ground in our state capital when HB 1084 was introduced. They noticed the absence of public school teachers. "At the creation of this law, teachers' voices were not heard. Now we have teachers dealing with the lack of trust, especially from parents," they said.

B.H.T.

A local school board official, noted that as a retired teacher, they wondered about the real intent behind this policy. Her experience teaching social studies was in accordance with state standards, not in the format of critical race theory. Race issues were "cruel, and that's what we taught! These are things that happened, but it's the truth!" she explained. She also identified that Georgia Day is a big celebration of Georgia's history and a holiday observed in the public school system. But slavery is not covered in the way that it should be. For example, she noted that in Savannah there is history that should be covered in the classrooms such as the Weeping Time, the largest slave sale in the United States that took place in Savannah. Or the 1864 Ebenezer Creek Massacre that took place 20 miles outside of Savannah, in which General Sherman's army left hundreds or more freed African American slaves to drown. The extremes of camouflaging history are absurd and raise more challenges for our schools.

C.R.B.

A Georgia middle school teacher, said, "I come from a family of educators. I grew up knowing that Black people were 'property' in the Constitution. The province of Georgia is the only of the original 13 colonies that banned slavery in its bylaws. My students need to know that. I teach students to be owners of their own success. The Protect Students First Act (HB 1084) stifles the voice of the student and their power. Not teaching the struggles of our ancestors, this is death... It does more harm than help."

"I prefer
to teach
current events
in a transparent
way. It's a fact
that Georgia's
history is the
dark history
of racism."

D.J.B.

A Georgia high school teacher preferred not to sugarcoat their lessons. “I prefer to teach current events in a transparent way. It’s a fact that Georgia’s history is the dark history of racism. I am a culturally responsible teacher. I once had a white student stand up and call Black students ‘n___ and monkey.’ For that reason, I believe my students should know their history,” they said.

E.A.F.

A Georgia high school teacher protested that this act was regressive. They said, “The act is oppressive on a whole new level, and it makes teachers want to creatively rebel. Teachers I know at predominantly white schools fear their kids will blackmail them, so they really have to communicate with parents and let them know. I have a very important role as an educator to teach truthful and honest history. It’s obviously an attempt to again prevent students of color from gaining knowledge. Knowing that, it almost makes me want to creatively rebel.”

F.S.B.

A Georgia middle school teacher, believed that the Protect Students First Act was a great reason to teach our students true history. “We have to work harder to make sure that hidden histories are made clear. It makes it even more important that we do not raise another generation of students that accept the Euro/American fairy tales and instead actually learn skills that enable them to research and critically think about written histories, as well as teach as much of the true histories as is known so they do not cling to beliefs about historical people and events that have no real basis in truth. We work in our classroom to find bias in vocabulary (like calling conquerors explorers), ‘facts’ (like the invention of the cotton gin made landowners need more slaves), etc,” they said.

G.S.S.

A Georgia high school teacher, found a need to advocate for the teaching of history because teachers were self-silencing themselves because of potential scrutiny from school administration. They said, “Our team has never openly talked about this, but our principal did read over the act with us. It’s definitely having a silencing effect. I care about the truth because I’m a history teacher. This has gotten to the point where teachers are silencing themselves, and that’s not good.”

H.R.Y.

A Georgia activist and policy analyst, recalled to us that tribal extracurricular activities were under scrutiny and that some schools had already begun eliminating special programming that would celebrate Native, Black, and Asian people. They said, “When teachers are afraid to speak up, what type of culture does that lead to? Teachers are human beings. If the teachers have to censor themselves, then the students censor themselves, is that even education anymore?”

I.C.E.

A Georgia professor for middle and secondary education, insisted that this act was definitely intended for higher education programs that teach from a critical race lens—but that at the university level, students were meant to be shaped to be critical thinkers and teachers. “When we are teaching content, everything can be considered divisive. Teachers should be given the autonomy to teach whatever is the standard curriculum for our students to be effective learners and critical thinkers. If we talk about the dynamics of race, when we talk about slavery, we talk about westward expansion, European imperialism, and round up by talking about economics and disparities within groups and people. I refer my students to primary source documents as their main source. And the resources that I bring in to my students are based on the state’s standards,” they said.

J.S.J.

A Georgia educator and critical race scholar, believed that this act was another form of censorship and a way to disenfranchise BIPOC students. They believed this act could be where educators drew the line. They said, “This act is uninformed. A law like this is, first, anti-intellectual. You can’t take racism out of Georgia’s history or any history. You can’t not say how racism shaped the world as it is today. Restricting literacy is a tradition. This is not written in favor of any children in Georgia. It’s not going to advance them in any capacity.... Teachers need the ability to make the decisions for their students, and they are capable. Why do we want to resist uncomfortability in schools? Learning algebraic equations can be uncomfortable, but you still have to learn. We cannot remove uncomfortability from learning. If so, educators will go to a state where they can thrive.”

K.S.B.

A Georgia high school teacher, acknowledged that teachers in all humanities-based content felt constrained, but especially in English, in which teachers had to change some of their chosen literature. “The law is poorly written. It’s kind of hard to take any action on it. It’s not actionable, it’s vague, and it’s wishy-washy. Teachers are confused, and admins are trying to stay on the safe side. It wasn’t written for our parents or students. If you want to talk about local control, teachers are the control. If you don’t trust us, then you need to get rid of us. Lawmakers don’t need to make it harder,” they said.

L.S.S.

An award-winning Georgia middle school teacher, felt this law to be a legal tactic to get rid of teachers. They said, “It makes me angry that we are putting partisan politics over truth. For new teachers, the seeds of fear have been sown. It really bothered me. Education across the board is bleeding out teachers. Teachers don’t get paid enough, but now you want to take legal action due to what we teach blows my mind....I’m not trying to stoke the racial flames, but I’m trying to teach history as accurately as possible. It makes me angry because no one cares about Black kids’ feelings. In the 1950s, 60s, we did not care about Black kids’ feelings.”

M.H.T.

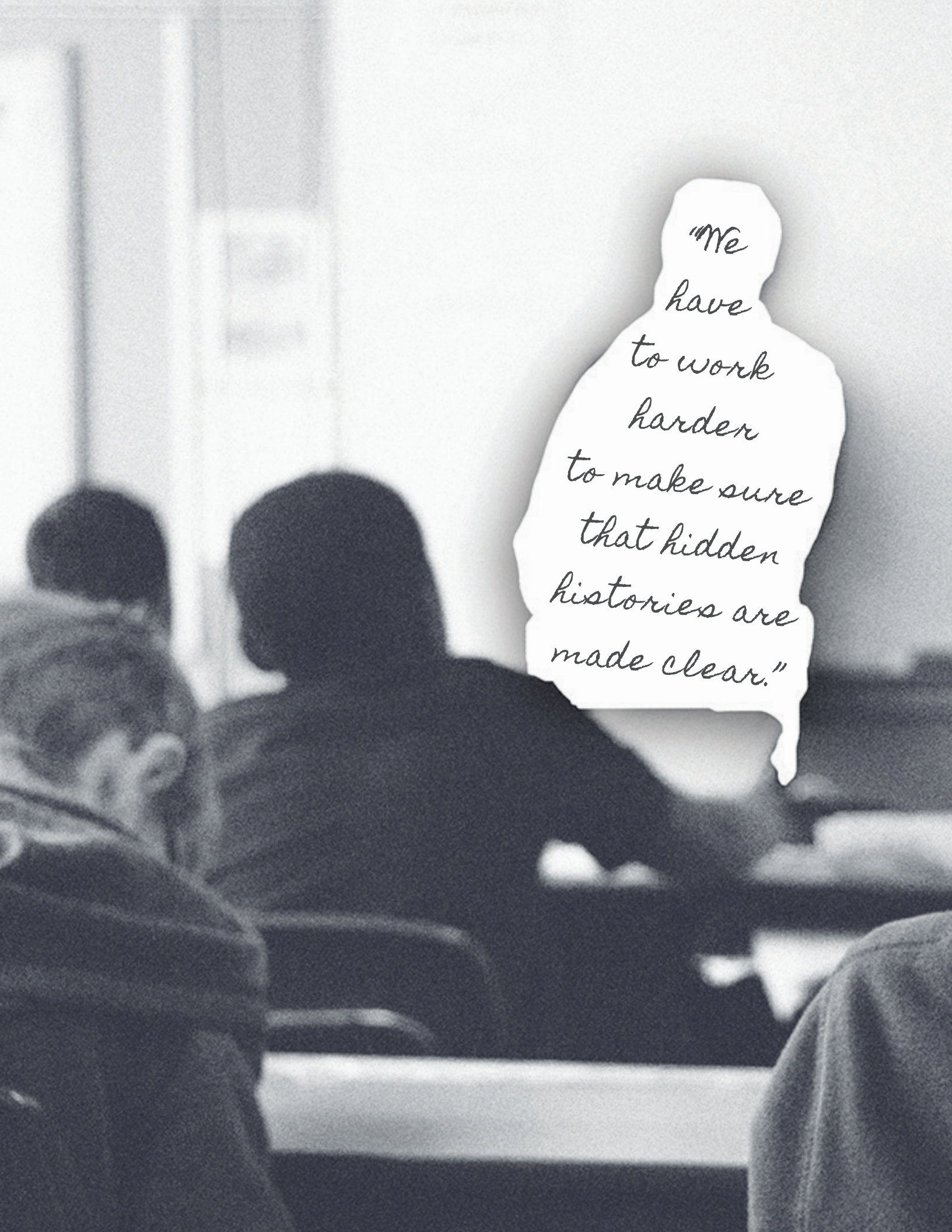
A Georgia middle school teacher, had already taken into consideration that this law could bleed into other subjects. “I teach math, and I am not totally impacted by this law. But it’s tricky because I often think about what subject could be next. It could easily be science and math,” they said.

N.C.W.

A Georgia educator, spoke about this issue from a teacher training level. They felt that without a racial bias and diversity training for educators, the law could have a long-term effect on students. They said, “This law is not clear. It’s meant to create confusion and doubt, specifically for white teachers speaking about white supremacy. The lack of clarity is intentional. If we bring in new white teachers and put them in a classroom and don’t have these uncomfortable conversations, we will continue the inequities. I can change what I put out in the world, but I cannot change how someone feels. The idea that I should be responsible for how someone feels is not actionable. There are plenty of children that feel bad because of how we are following standards.”

O.K.F.

A Georgia educator, noted that colleges across Georgia did not have to focus on changing their curriculum, but they still saw issues in university programs designated for students of color. “Higher education institutions in Georgia did not see the impact of this law in their curriculum. However, we are seeing some issues in the funding of our diversity and opportunity programs at universities across the state,” they said.

A black and white photograph of a classroom. In the foreground, the silhouettes of several students are visible, sitting at desks and facing away from the camera. The background is a bright, slightly out-of-focus classroom with a whiteboard or wall. Overlaid on the right side of the image is a white, torn-paper-like shape containing a handwritten quote in cursive.

"We
have
to work
harder
to make sure
that hidden
histories are
made clear."



RECOMMENDATIONS

Deep Center, Georgia Advocates, and Georgia educators recommend:

For Lawmakers:

- I.** Repeal the Protect Students First Act and enhance the curriculum to reflect advancing Georgia's students.
- II.** Recognize that the Protect Students First Act is unconstitutional and oppressive. Students have a right to learn history. They have a right to read books that reflect themselves.
- III.** Work with school districts to implement a mandate for courses that are inclusive of teaching about all races and demographics.
- IV.** Extend funding to public schools and higher education to maintain state level programs that support cultural studies.
- V.** Be clear about the outcomes you seek from laws that you enforce, especially when it pertains to our schools.

For Community Members:

- I.** Provide opportunities for history to be taught within your community.
- II.** Engage your local school board. Find out what is being taught in your local school district.
- III.** Join local education advocacy groups that support the greater good of ALL students.

For School Administrators:

- I.** Create community with lawmakers to reform this act and any other laws that are not beneficial for our schools, and strengthen the voices of educators.
- II.** Listen to the frustrations of your teachers and support them as needed.
- III.** Create a space for your students to learn honest and truthful history.

For Teachers:

- I.** Be intentional when teaching your students their history. Hold yourselves accountable for improving student learning and social mobility. Drive students to ask those hard questions and create spaces in your classroom that allow your students to share and learn from each other and their backgrounds.
- II.** Maintain a space for students to ask critical questions. Remember education is key for the futures of our students.
- III.** Continue to be the rock stars that you are.

Teachers are the backbone of education. Without their voices, our lives, the global world, and the economy would not thrive today. The Protect Students First Act limits the voices of our teachers and stifles the growth of our students.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This policy brief is a wholehearted, clear-eyed, and collective effort in a moment of reckoning for our country, though one that has been long in the making. Its breadth has been made possible by Deep's village, a community dedicated to making Savannah a more just, vibrant, and equitable place for young people and their families through conversations and a commitment to pushing the limits of what is considered possible in policy change in Chatham County—a place where the phrase “it can’t be done here” is used far too often.

This brief has been authored by:

Desmond L. Kemp, Ph.D., *Policy and Research Fellow*

Deep Center is grateful for the insight and guidance from our local educators and collective group of advocates for education provided for this brief. We extend special gratitude for their support for Hands Off, Just Let Us Teach:

- » Judge LeRoy Burke, III
- » Amanda Fanelli
- » Anthony Downer, Georgia Educators for Equity and Justice, Inc.
- » Dr. Chantee Earl
- » Dr. Jim Garrett
- » Sean Simpson, Clarke County Teacher of the Year
- » Ruth Youn

We are grateful for the institutional technical assistance, policy expertise, and data from those who have been walking this road and supporting systems-change work:

- » Arnold Ventures
- » Annie E. Casey Foundation
- » Berkeley Law Policy Advocacy Clinic
- » Coastal Georgia Indicators Coalition
- » Coalition Against Education Censorship
- » The Debt Free Campaign
- » Forward Promise
- » Georgia Appleseed Center for Law and Justice
- » Georgia Budget and Policy Institute
- » Georgia Youth Justice Coalition
- » IDRA
- » Justice Innovation Lab
- » Justice Reform Partnership of Georgia
- » The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights
- » The Offender Alumni Association
- » Kresge Foundation
- » Public Welfare Foundation
- » Sapelo Foundation
- » Southern Center for Human Rights
- » Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP)
- » Vera Institute of Justice
- » Voices for Georgia's Children

The institutions that funded the work that produced this policy brief are:

- » Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation
- » Public Welfare Foundation
- » Ford Foundation
- » Forward Promise
- » The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights
- » Public Welfare
- » Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- » Sapelo Foundation
- » Vera Institute of Justice

Deep Center receives funding and support in part from Arnold Ventures, Chatham County Board of Commissioners, City of Savannah, Cities and Counties for Fines and Fees Justice, Ford Foundation, Forward Promise, Georgia Council for the Arts, Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network, Gulfstream Aerospace Corporation, Heising-Simons Foundation, Johanna Anderson Trueblood Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, National Endowment For the Arts, Public Welfare Foundation, Publix Super Markets Charities, The Sapelo Foundation, Savannah Community Foundation, United Way of the Coastal Empire, Vera Institute of Justice, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and many other generous institutions and individuals.

We could not do what we do without Deep Center's board of directors:

- » Chris Middleton
- » Whitney Shephard
- » Honorable Leroy Burke III
- » Jöel Diaz
- » Monisha Johnson
- » Mark McDaniel
- » Carl Walton
- » Courtney Williams

Finally, we recognize the technical and creative labor that went into this document and want to thank:

- » Keenan Alexander, graphic designer
- » Maria Zoccola, copyeditor



Deep Center
PO Box 5582 | Savannah, GA 31414
deepcenter.org