

# GWINNETT COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS (GEORGIA)

## SUMMARY

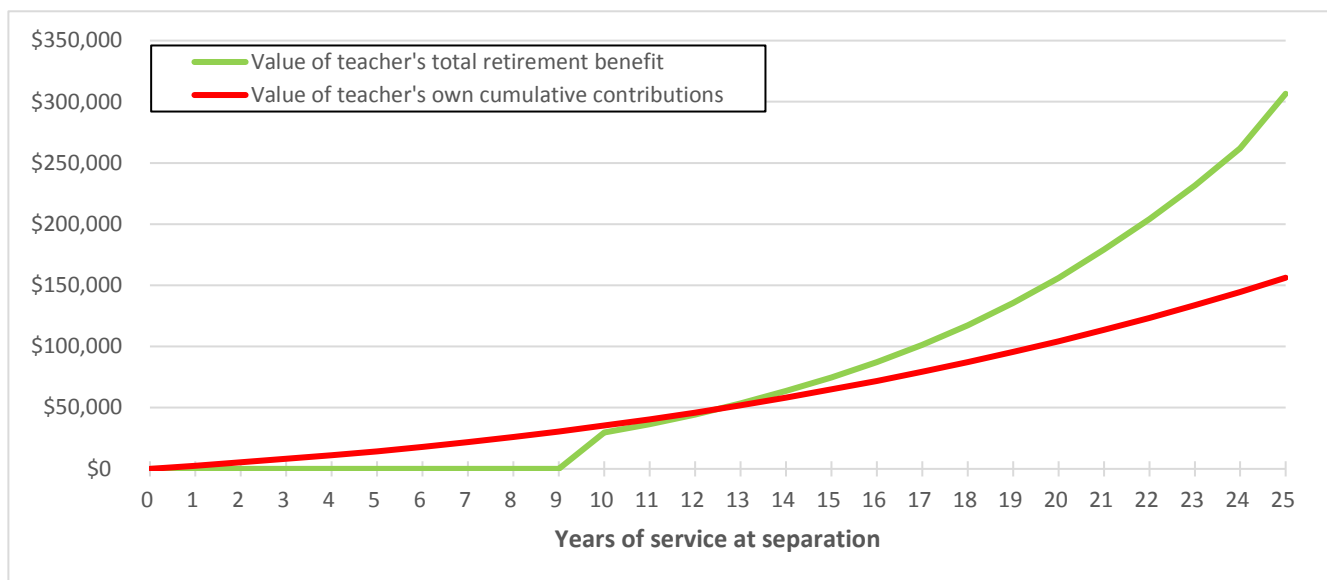
Gwinnett County Public Schools teachers enroll in traditional defined benefit plans under the Teachers Retirement System of Georgia and the supplemental Gwinnett Retirement System. In Gwinnett County, the crossover point occurs after 13 years of service, meaning that until that point the value of what a teacher would receive in pension wealth after she retires is *less* than the value of her cumulative contributions. This is much shorter than the national median crossover point of 27 years for the defined benefit plans in this study, and the *only* defined benefit plan in this study with a crossover point shorter than the career of the majority of American teachers.<sup>1</sup> The crossover point occurs much earlier than it does for teachers in the other districts in this study because of the supplemental Gwinnett Retirement System, which was established to provide Gwinnett County teachers with benefits similar to those they would receive from Social Security. Without the supplemental plan, the crossover point would occur at 20 years of service.

About the District	
Students	169,150
Teachers (FTE)	103,57

About the Retirement Plan	
Type	Defined benefit
Coverage	Teachers
Active members	213,675
Total members	399,813

Sources: Enrollment: NCES (2013–14). Retirement plan membership: [Urban Institute](#) (membership as of June, 2012; includes only membership in the state plan)

**Figure 1: A new teacher in Gwinnett County must remain in the pension system for 13 years before she realizes a return on her contributions**



Note: Calculations assume inflation of 2.5 percent, a real interest rate of 2.5 percent, and a female teacher first hired in FY13 with an entry age of 25.

Take a look at Figure 1. The green line is the value of a teacher’s pension wealth should she separate from the two retirement systems after a given number of years of service. (She would not start receiving pension payments until she reaches the age of retirement eligibility, even if she leaves the systems before that.) Where the green line jumps quickly away from \$0 represents the time at which she vests. The red line shows the value of the total amount she has contributed to the systems up to that point. Where the red line lies above the green, the teacher’s contributions are worth more than her benefits. In other words, her “net benefit” is negative. Where the green line is higher than the red, her benefits are worth more than her contributions and her net benefit is positive. In Gwinnett County, a new teacher must stay 13 years to reach the crossover point (where the green line crosses the red) and receive any return on her contributions after retirement. Exact figures are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Let’s take a look at how this plays out should a teacher choose to separate from the systems at different points.

## WHAT IS THE CROSSOVER POINT?

This study asks: how long must a new teacher wait until the value of her retirement benefits exceeds the value of her contributions (the “crossover point”)?<sup>2</sup> A new teacher begins contributing a percentage of her salary to her retirement system the day she receives her first paycheck. The idea is that, over her career, she and her employer will make contributions to prefund her benefit and, when she leaves the system, she receives retirement benefits. The total benefit the teacher receives after she leaves depends on the plan’s parameters and provisions, among other factors.

In a traditional defined benefit (DB) plan, retirement benefits take the form of pension payments made periodically for the rest of her life after retirement. The pension benefit is based on a formula: the number of years of service in the system, multiplied by an average of her final years’ salaries, times an accrual factor, which is a percentage generally around 1 percent to 2.5 percent. In order to receive any retirement benefits, a teacher must be vested in the system, meaning she has stayed long enough that she’s eligible for a pension when she leaves. Vesting periods generally range from three to 10 years. A teacher can only begin to receive benefits once she reaches retirement eligibility, a condition usually determined by some combination of the teacher’s age and years of service.<sup>3</sup> The *total* value of the retirement benefit the teacher receives under a DB plan—her pension wealth—depends on the yearly benefit, plus her age at retirement and life expectancy.<sup>4</sup> Before the crossover point in a DB plan, a teacher’s expected lifetime retirement benefit is worth less than what she contributed over her career. After the crossover point, her benefit is worth more than what she contributed. The longer it takes a new teacher to reach the crossover point, the longer it takes for her to realize any return on her contributions.

In a defined contribution (DC) plan, retirement benefits are equal to what the retirement account is worth: her and her employer’s contributions, plus any gains (or losses) from investment performance over time. She typically can transfer the balance of her account to another retirement system, withdraw it completely as a lump-sum amount, or draw down balances as periodic payments (less taxes, should she leave early). In a DC plan there is no crossover point, and the value of her benefits will always be greater than her contributions (assuming the investment gained value over time).

A hybrid plan combines elements of both DB and DC plans. A teacher’s total benefits are equal to the balance of her retirement savings account plus whatever pension benefits she is eligible for. Depending on the specific terms of the plan, there may or may not be a crossover point.

In all three cases, to calculate the crossover point we compare the value of a teacher’s contributions with her expected benefits.<sup>5</sup> While the concept of retirement “benefits” implies a positive return on contributions, the analyses presented in this study show that, in order to reach the crossover point and receive a true benefit, new teachers in many of the nation’s largest districts must remain in their retirement system for 20 or 30 years—or more. These teachers, usually enrolled in traditional DB plans, are financially penalized if they leave at any point before the crossover. Moreover, they cannot enroll in a different system that would give them larger, or more short-term, benefits. New teachers in DC plans, and most of the hybrid plans we consider, do see a return on their contributions even early in their career.

## EARLY CAREER

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A Gwinnett County teacher who leaves after **five years** of service (or at any point before the vesting point of 10 years) is not eligible to receive pension benefits at all, because she has not vested (Table 1). Her pension wealth is zero, and at five years she has contributed a total of \$14,276 into the retirement systems.<sup>6</sup> (In reality, should this teacher separate from the systems before she vests, she can only take a refund, which may or may not be credited with interest.)

**Table 1. At key points in a teacher's career, what is the value of her pension? What is the value of her contribution? And what is the difference between the two?**

Age	Years of Service	Value of teacher's pension benefit (combined state and local plans) (A)	Value of teacher's cumulative contributions to date (B)	Net benefit (A-B)
30	5	\$ 0	\$ 14,276	-\$ 14,276
38	13	\$ 53,443	\$ 51,961	\$ 1,482
40	15	\$ 74,725	\$ 64,895	\$ 9,830
50	25	\$ 306,547	\$ 156,211	\$ 150,337

## AT THE CROSSOVER

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If she leaves the systems with at least **10 years** of service, she has now vested in both and is eligible to start receiving pension benefits once she reaches retirement age.<sup>7</sup> A few years later—after 13 years in the systems—a Gwinnett County teacher reaches the crossover point, meaning her benefits are worth more than contributions. At that point, she will have contributed a total of \$51,961 into the systems and can expect lifetime pension wealth accrual worth \$53,443. Her net benefit becomes positive, though small (\$1,482).

## MID-CAREER

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Say she separates from the system after 15 years—the average experience of a teacher who leaves the profession.<sup>8</sup> Her pension wealth is \$74,725, and at this point she has contributed a total of \$64,895. Her pension wealth is worth nearly \$10,000 more than her cumulative contributions. Gwinnett County is the *only* defined benefit plan in this study where the crossover point occurs prior to 15 years of service.

## AFTER 25 YEARS OF SERVICE

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A 25-year career is longer than most teachers' careers—fewer than one out of four teachers nationwide stays more than 20 years.<sup>9</sup> After 25 years, a Gwinnett County teacher's net benefit is \$150,337, but it takes her long time to reach that point. (Said another way, even after the crossover point in Figure 1, the red and green lines are still quite close together for a number of years.)

**Bottom line:** Teachers who start at age 25 under the Gwinnett County Public Schools salary schedule must wait 13 years to reach the crossover point. Teachers who exit the Georgia and Gwinnett County retirement systems early are financially disadvantaged compared to teachers who remain teaching under the same systems much longer—in this case, at least 13 years.

## TECHNICAL MATTERS

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### Retirement System

Teachers working in Gwinnett County Public Schools belong to traditional defined benefit pension plans in the Teachers Retirement System of Georgia (TRS) and the supplemental Gwinnett Retirement System (GRS).

### Plan Provisions by the Numbers: Teachers Retirement System of Georgia (TRS)

#### *Eligibility for pension benefits*

- Vesting requirement: 10 years
- Normal retirement eligibility requirements (age/years of service): Lesser of 60/10 and any/30
- Early retirement eligibility requirements for reduced benefits (age/years of service): any/25

#### *Employer and employee contributions*

- Employee contribution rate: 6 percent of salary
- Employer contribution rate: 14.27 percent of salary
- Refundable contributions: employee contributions plus interest

#### *Defined benefit formula*

A new teacher's normal retirement benefit is equal to the formula below:

$$\text{Annual TRS benefit} = (2.0\%) \times (\text{YOS}) \times (\text{FAS})$$

Where YOS = number of years of service, and FAS = final average salary, the average of the two highest years of creditable earnings

### Plan Provisions by the Numbers: Gwinnett Retirement System (GRS)

#### *Retirement eligibility for pension benefits*

- Vesting requirement: 10 years
- Normal retirement eligibility requirements (age/years of service): 65/10
- Early retirement eligibility requirements for reduced benefits (age/years of service): the point at which the teacher becomes eligible to start receiving benefits under the TRS

#### *Employer and employee contributions*

- Employee contribution rate: 1 percent of salary
- Employer contribution rate: actuarially determined
- Refundable contributions: none

#### *Defined benefit formula*

- A teacher's supplemental retirement benefit is equal to a formula based on applying a multiplier of 2.2 percent to the first \$9,000 of earnings and 1.6 percent of earnings over \$9,000.

### Summary of Plan Provisions

A Gwinnett County teacher's total retirement benefits are a sum of her TRS and GRS benefits.

Benefits under public pension plans are typically based on a combination of age and years of service. Under normal retirement eligibility requirements, a Gwinnett County teacher qualifies for full TRS pension benefits at any age with 30 years of service, or at age 60 with ten years of service (whichever comes first). The annual TRS benefit is equal to a teacher's years of service, multiplied by her average salary of her final two years, times an accrual factor of 2.0 percent. A teacher vests into the TRS pension system after 10 years—meaning after 10 years of service she qualifies for a pension benefit payable for life, starting at the earliest age that she becomes eligible for normal retirement.<sup>10</sup> The TRS plan does offer reduced pension benefits for early retirement, available at any age with 25 years of service.

Under normal retirement eligibility requirements, a Gwinnett County teacher qualifies for full GRS pension benefits at age 65 with 10 years of service. The GRS benefit is equal to a formula based on applying a multiplier of 2.2 percent to the first \$9,000 of earnings and 1.6 percent of earnings over \$9,000. A teacher vests into the GRS pension system after 10 years—meaning after 10 years of service she qualifies for a pension benefit payable for life, starting at the earliest age that she becomes eligible for normal retirement.<sup>11</sup> The GRS plan does offer reduced pension benefits for early retirement, available at the earliest point at which a teacher is eligible for TRS benefits.

The employer contribution rate to the TRS plan is set at 14.27 percent of earnings, and to the GRS plan is 1 percent of earnings. The employee contribution rate to the TRS plan is set at 6 percent of earnings, and to the GRS plan is 1 percent of earnings.

Gwinnett County teachers do not pay into Social Security. In Georgia, it is up to the district whether teachers do or do not enroll; Gwinnett County opted out of Social Security and created the GRS to replace it.

### **Assumptions for Computing Pension Wealth**

- Entry age: 25 years old
- Gender: female
- Teacher has bachelor's degree for first five years; master's degree for the remainder<sup>12</sup>
- Survival probabilities from *2007 CDC Life Tables*<sup>13</sup>
- Teacher salary schedule for 2012–13 school year<sup>14</sup>
- Overall rate of return: we use each system's own assumptions for return on investments

Sources: Teacher salary schedule is from district website (or requested directly from the district where required). The salary schedule is supplemented by the district collective bargaining agreement and/or teacher work rules for the 2012–13 school year where applicable/necessary.<sup>15</sup> Retirement plan parameters are primarily taken from a database assembled by the National Council on Teacher Quality, and supplemented where necessary with information from plan documents.<sup>16</sup>

**Table 2: Benefits, contributions, and net benefit for a representative new teacher in Gwinnett County Public Schools**

Age	Years of Service	Value of teacher's TRS pension benefit (A1)	Value of teacher's cumulative TRS contributions to date (B1)	Value of teacher's GRS pension benefit (A2)	Value of teacher's cumulative GRS contributions to date (B2)	Total value of pension benefits A = (A1+A2)	Total value of cumulative contributions B = (B2 + B2)	Net benefit (A-B)
25	0	\$ 0	\$ 0	\$ 0	\$ 0	\$ 0	\$ 0	\$ 0
26	1	\$ 0	\$ 2,214	\$ 0	\$ 369	\$ 0	\$ 2,583	-\$ 2,583
27	2	\$ 0	\$ 4,536	\$ 0	\$ 756	\$ 0	\$ 5,292	-\$ 5,292
28	3	\$ 0	\$ 6,971	\$ 0	\$ 1,162	\$ 0	\$ 8,132	-\$ 8,132
29	4	\$ 0	\$ 9,536	\$ 0	\$ 1,589	\$ 0	\$ 11,125	-\$ 11,125
30	5	\$ 0	\$ 12,237	\$ 0	\$ 2,039	\$ 0	\$ 14,276	-\$ 14,276
31	6	\$ 0	\$ 15,401	\$ 0	\$ 2,567	\$ 0	\$ 17,968	-\$ 17,968
32	7	\$ 0	\$ 18,770	\$ 0	\$ 3,128	\$ 0	\$ 21,898	-\$ 21,898
33	8	\$ 0	\$ 22,355	\$ 0	\$ 3,726	\$ 0	\$ 26,081	-\$ 26,081
34	9	\$ 0	\$ 26,198	\$ 0	\$ 4,366	\$ 0	\$ 30,564	-\$ 30,564
35	10	\$ 17,647	\$ 30,312	\$ 12,134	\$ 5,052	\$ 29,781	\$ 35,364	-\$ 5,583
36	11	\$ 21,575	\$ 34,727	\$ 14,835	\$ 5,788	\$ 36,410	\$ 40,515	-\$ 4,105
37	12	\$ 26,208	\$ 39,459	\$ 18,021	\$ 6,576	\$ 44,229	\$ 46,035	-\$ 1,807
38	13	\$ 31,668	\$ 44,538	\$ 21,775	\$ 7,423	\$ 53,443	\$ 51,961	\$ 1,482
39	14	\$ 37,733	\$ 49,923	\$ 25,945	\$ 8,320	\$ 63,678	\$ 58,243	\$ 5,435
40	15	\$ 44,279	\$ 55,624	\$ 30,446	\$ 9,271	\$ 74,725	\$ 64,895	\$ 9,830
41	16	\$ 51,650	\$ 61,653	\$ 35,514	\$ 10,275	\$ 87,164	\$ 71,928	\$ 15,236
42	17	\$ 60,024	\$ 68,031	\$ 41,272	\$ 11,338	\$ 101,296	\$ 79,369	\$ 21,927
43	18	\$ 69,522	\$ 74,771	\$ 47,803	\$ 12,462	\$ 117,325	\$ 87,233	\$ 30,093
44	19	\$ 80,295	\$ 81,898	\$ 55,211	\$ 13,650	\$ 135,506	\$ 95,547	\$ 39,959
45	20	\$ 92,495	\$ 89,425	\$ 63,599	\$ 14,904	\$ 156,094	\$ 104,329	\$ 51,766
46	21	\$ 106,312	\$ 97,379	\$ 73,100	\$ 16,230	\$ 179,411	\$ 113,608	\$ 65,803
47	22	\$ 121,933	\$ 105,775	\$ 82,102	\$ 17,629	\$ 204,035	\$ 123,404	\$ 80,632
48	23	\$ 139,600	\$ 114,643	\$ 92,082	\$ 19,107	\$ 231,682	\$ 133,750	\$ 97,932
49	24	\$ 159,097	\$ 123,978	\$ 102,831	\$ 20,663	\$ 261,928	\$ 144,641	\$ 117,287
50	25	\$ 190,899	\$ 133,895	\$ 115,649	\$ 22,316	\$ 306,547	\$ 156,211	\$ 150,337

*Pension wealth, contributions, and net pension wealth for a female teacher who begins teaching at age 25. Ex: After her fifth year of service, her pension benefits are worth \$0 (A) and her cumulative contributions are worth \$14,276 (B). Her net pension wealth accrued at this point is -\$14,276, which is her pension wealth minus her cumulative contributions (A-B). All values are adjusted for inflation.*

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 209.10, [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14\\_209.10.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_209.10.asp).
- <sup>2</sup> Results are based on the retirement plan's rules as they apply to new hires who began in FY13. Provisions for state-covered plans were obtained from the National Council on Teacher Quality pension database (<http://www.nctq.org/statePolicy/2015/nationalFindings.do?policyIssueId=4&masterGoalId=22>).
- <sup>3</sup> A vested teacher who leaves a DB pension plan *before* reaching retirement eligibility faces a choice: She can leave her contributions in the pension fund and wait until she reaches retirement age to receive benefits. Or she can “cash out” and immediately receive a refund of what she has contributed up to that point, sometimes with interest. In rare cases, refunds may also include some or all of the employer contributions, potentially with interest, depending on the terms of the plan and whether the teacher is vested. There are also exceptions where a refund benefit is actually less than what the teacher put in. For instance, Illinois keeps 1 percent of earnings for survivor benefits (see <https://trs.illinois.gov/members/pubs/tier2guide/Refunds.pdf>).
- <sup>4</sup> In technical terms, pension wealth is the total expected value of a teacher's yearly stream of pension payments over her lifetime, discounted back to the present and accounting for life expectancy, conditional on the age of separation. See *Appendix B*.
- <sup>5</sup> The value of a teacher's contribution is the employee's required payment into the retirement system, grown by each system's assumed rate of return.
- <sup>6</sup> “Contributions” here and throughout refer to the value of a teacher's total contributions—the amount she contributes, grown by each system's assumed rate of return.
- <sup>7</sup> Retirement age depends on years of service; see the “Technical Matters” section for more.
- <sup>8</sup> S. Provasnik and S. Dorfman, *Mobility in the Teacher Workforce* (Washington, D.C.: NCES, 2005), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/2005114.pdf>.
- <sup>9</sup> NCES, *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 209.10, [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14\\_209.10.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_209.10.asp).
- <sup>10</sup> A teacher who opts for a refund receives the total of her employee contributions, plus interest. A teacher who leaves the system prior to vesting can receive a refund only; one who leaves after vesting but before retirement eligibility can choose either a refund or deferred pension benefits.
- <sup>11</sup> There are no refunds for the GRS system.
- <sup>12</sup> According to the *Beginning Teacher Longitudinal Study*, 80 percent of beginning teachers had a bachelor's degree. See NCES, *Beginning Teacher Longitudinal Study*, <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/btls/cohort.asp> (accessed October 30, 2016). Additionally, given that about [55 percent](#) of the current teaching workforce has a master's degree or higher, but approximately [21 percent](#) of current teachers have five or fewer years of teaching, the analysis assumes that a teacher who remains five years will have a master's degree by that point.
- <sup>13</sup> E. Arias, “United States Life Tables, 2007,” *National Vital Statistics Reports* 59, no. 9 (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, September 2011).
- <sup>14</sup> “Professional growth” credits are not included in salary calculations. First, they cannot be applied uniformly across districts: one district may give teachers a salary increase when they earn, for example, 10 credits, while another may specify a salary increase at 20 credits. Second, there are no data available as to the rate at which teachers earn salary credits throughout their career. As others have demonstrated, however, the provisions governing public pension plans will be the primary determinants of benefit accrual patterns (see R. Costrell and M. Podgursky, “Peaks, Cliffs, and Valleys: The Peculiar Incentives in Teacher Retirement Systems and their Consequences for School Staffing,” *Education Finance and Policy* 4, no. 2 (2009), 175–211). Variation in a teacher's earnings path, such as that just described, will likely have limited impact on pension wealth accrual patterns or the timing of the crossover point.
- <sup>15</sup> For example, some districts specify longevity payments in the contract instead of in the salary schedule.
- <sup>16</sup> NCTQ, “2015 Pension Flexibility,” <http://www.nctq.org/statePolicy/2015/nationalFindings.do?policyIssueId=4&masterGoalId=22>. Some plan parameters were also independently verified using the Urban Institute's State and Local Employee Pension Plan Database (<http://apps.urban.org/features/SLEPP/data.html>).