

DCSD FY 2027 Budget – Executive Synthesis Brief

Purpose

This executive brief synthesizes stakeholder feedback from Sections 2, 3, 4, and 5 of the FY 2027 Budget Survey. It translates survey findings into actionable budget principles and provides a board-ready narrative aligned with community voice. The core message is consistent across all sections: spend closer to students, earlier in the learning process, and with discipline.

What We Heard – Unified Themes

Stakeholders across roles and regions consistently identified the same pressure points: classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, special education staff, counselors, social workers, psychologists, and essential school-based support staff. These roles are underpaid, overextended, and absorbing work created by compliance-heavy district structures. Class size reduction—especially in K–3, inclusion, SPED, ESOL, and high-poverty schools—was the most frequently cited and highest-consensus investment. Early intervention, mental health supports, and special education staffing were repeatedly framed as both equity imperatives and long-term cost containment strategies.

Equity and Student Support (Section 2)

Respondents strongly favored needs-based, weighted funding models over equal distribution. Kindergarten paraprofessionals, early literacy and math intervention, and faster access to evaluations and placements were repeatedly emphasized. Special education and mental health services were described as under-resourced and legally vulnerable, with clear warnings that cuts would increase long-term costs through burnout, litigation, and student disengagement. When asked about cuts, the dominant response was no cuts to student-facing services, with any necessary reductions directed instead toward district-level overhead.

Workforce and Compensation (Section 3)

Across responses, compensation was framed as a student outcome issue, not solely a workforce concern. Respondents emphasized that competitive pay, annual cost-of-living adjustments, and retention incentives are necessary to stabilize classrooms and reduce turnover. Classified staff—particularly paraprofessionals, transportation, nutrition, custodial, and clerical staff—were cited as essential to school operations yet among the most underpaid.

Mental Health, Safety, and Well-Being (Section 4)

Mental health supports were repeatedly described as prerequisites to learning. Respondents called for more counselors, social workers, psychologists, and behavior specialists, along with safer facilities and improved campus security. These supports were not viewed as optional add-ons but as foundational to academic success, staff retention, and student well-being.

Open Feedback and System Trust (Section 5)

Section 5 responses reinforced earlier themes while highlighting trust and transparency gaps. Stakeholders asked for clearer budget data, fewer false trade-offs, and evidence of impact before program changes. Central office bloat was consistently identified as the most appropriate source for reallocation, while classrooms were described as already stretched beyond capacity.

FY27 Budget Principles

1. Spend closest to students first: classrooms, early intervention, special education, mental health, then district infrastructure.
2. Equity means weighted need, not equal distribution.
3. People before programs: invest in staffing before renewing software or consultants.
4. Early is cheaper than late: protect K–3 investments.
5. If cuts are required, start farthest from students.
6. Autonomy with guardrails: flexibility paired with transparency and accountability.

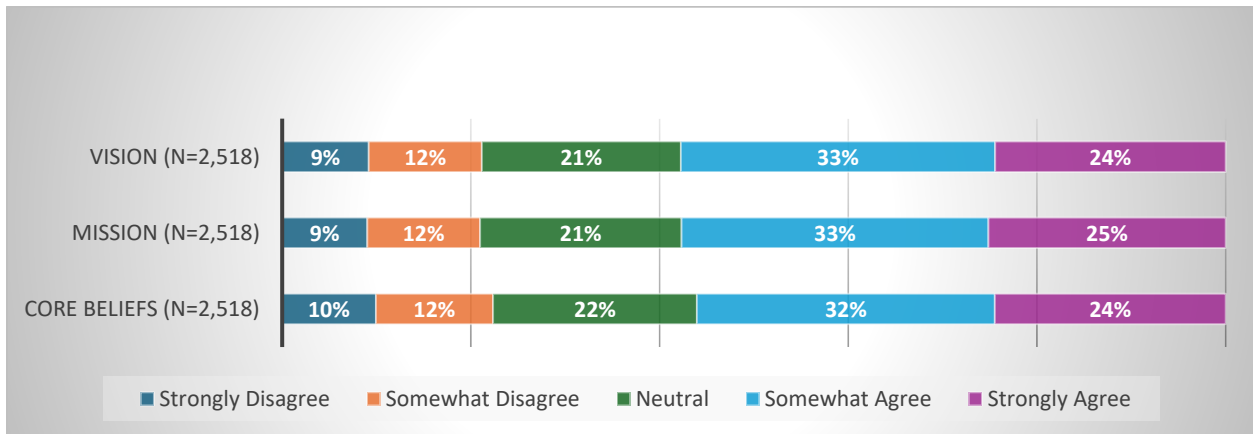
Board-Ready Narrative

Stakeholder feedback across all sections delivered a clear and consistent message. The challenge facing DCSD is not ambition but alignment. Communities are not asking the district to do less for students—they are asking the district to do less far away from them and more where learning actually happens. The FY27 budget should prioritize smaller class sizes, early intervention, special education, mental health, and competitive compensation for school-based staff. Where reductions are necessary, they should be targeted toward overhead, duplication, and low-impact initiatives. This approach aligns fiscal discipline with community voice and positions the district for improved outcomes and restored trust.

FY27 Budget Survey Questions

Section 1. Vision, Mission and Core Beliefs

1. **MANDATORY** Vision – To prepare students for success as lifelong learners and responsible global citizens. To what extent do you agree that we are moving forward in the direction towards DCSD’s stated vision?
 - a. **MANDATORY** Mission – To promote the academic, social, and emotional growth of each student by fostering a safe, supportive, and engaging learning environment. To what extent do you agree that we are moving forward in the direction towards DCSD’s stated mission?
 - b. **MANDATORY** Core Beliefs – We believe in meeting each student’s academic, social and emotional needs. We believe in supporting quality teaching and learning. We believe in creating equitable educational opportunities for all students. We believe in embracing cultural diversity. To what extent do you agree that we are moving forward in the direction towards DCSD’s stated core beliefs?



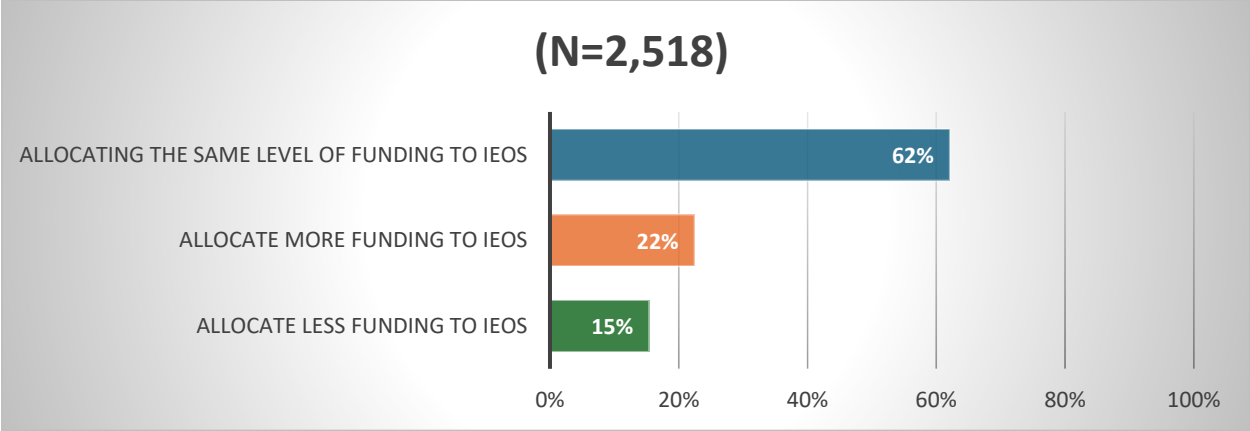
Section 2. Student Academic Success with Equity and Access

1. **MANDATORY** DCSD spends extra funds on non-mandated but successful programs called Innovative Educational Opportunities (IEOs), such as:

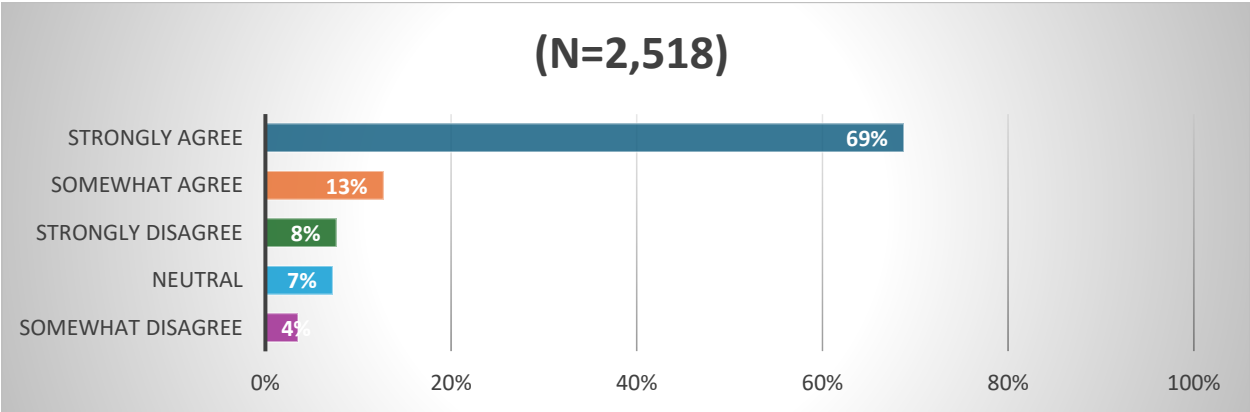
Acceleration Academies: Helps students who have dropped out or struggle in traditional school settings.

FLEX Academy: A virtual program for grades 9–12 offering online classes, credit recovery, and extended learning to meet graduation requirements.

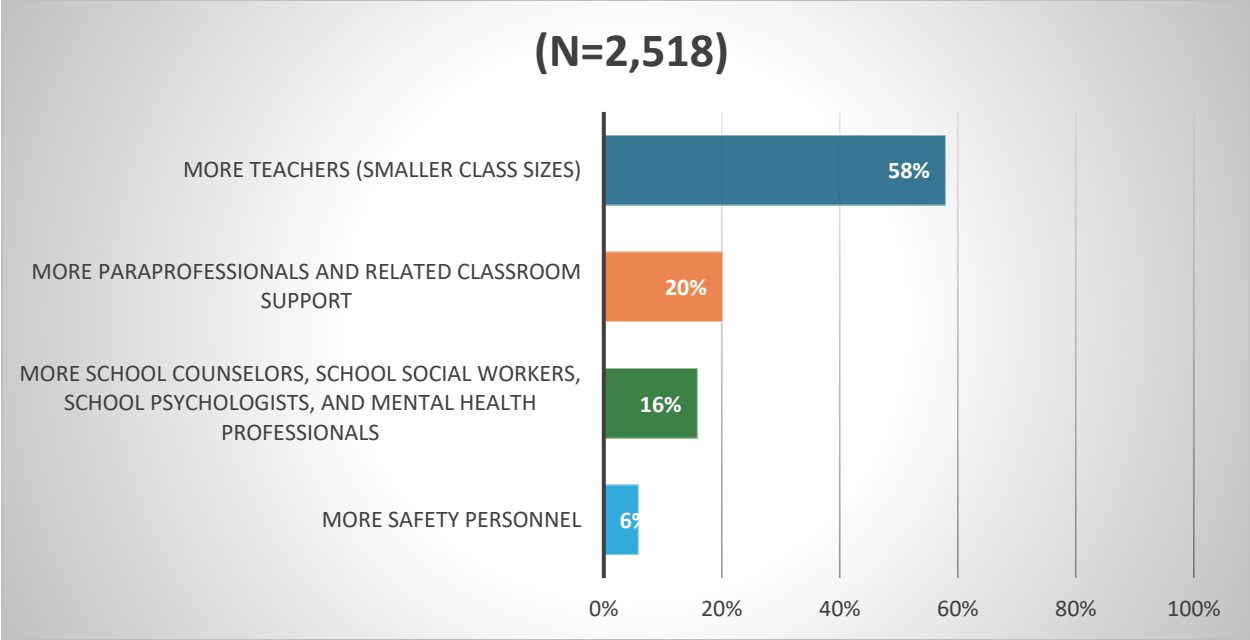
Question: How much should DCSD continue investing in these programs?



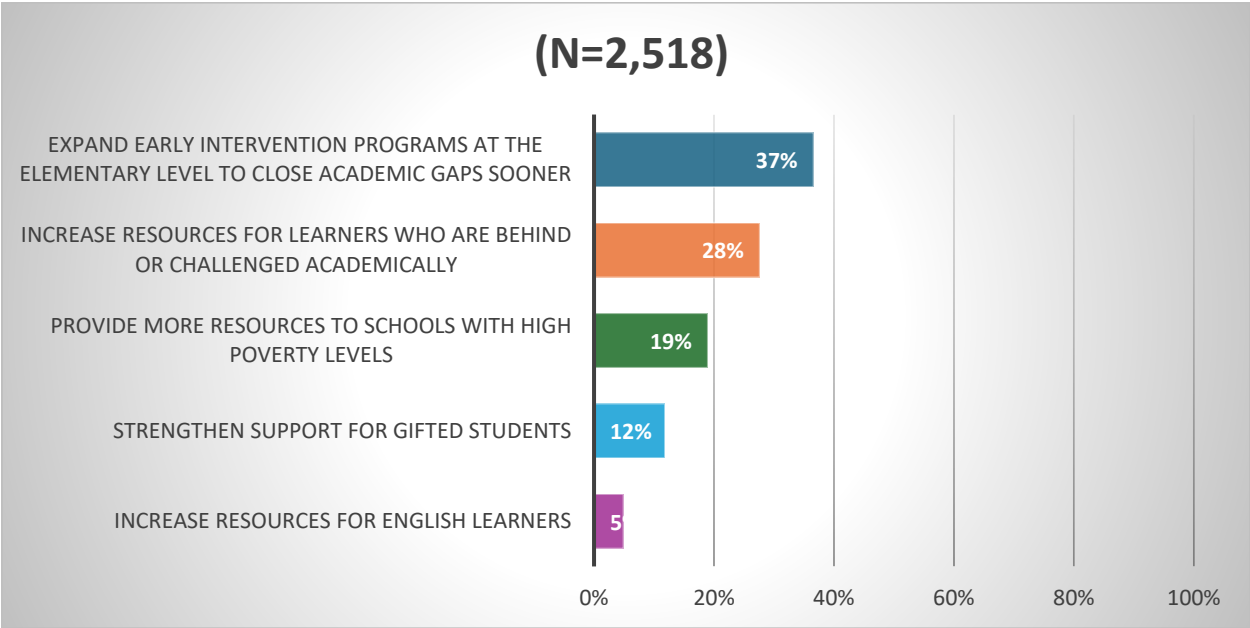
2. MANDATORY DCSD operates the state’s largest pre-K program, with 125 lottery-funded classrooms for 4-year-olds and 25 locally funded classrooms for 3-year-olds (paid by property taxes). Although these programs are not mandated and add costs to the general fund and our taxpayers, DCSD should continue them because they provide significant benefits to set up our youngest scholars and the community for long term success.



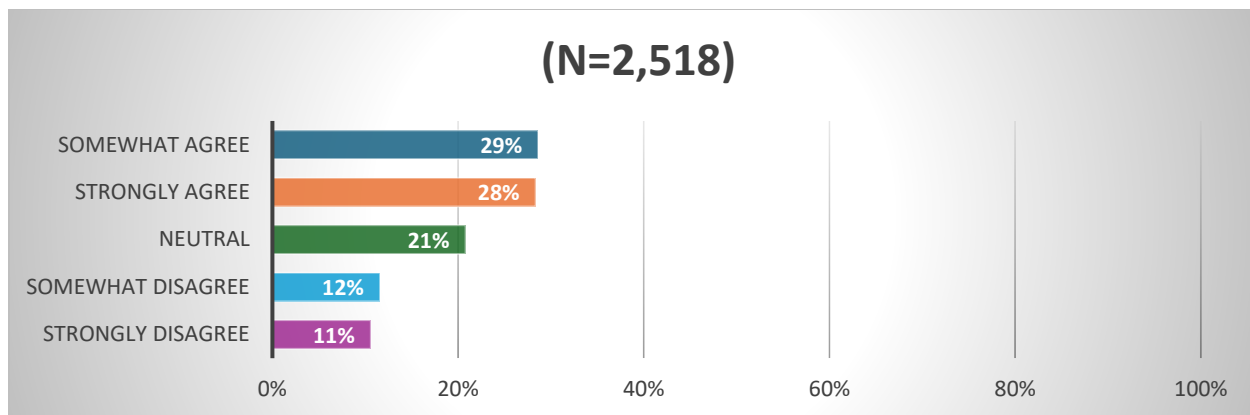
3. MANDATORY If DCSD can allocate additional staff to schools, how should we prioritize?



4. MANDATORY If DCSD can allocate additional resources to instructional programs / priorities, what should be the top priority?



5. MANDATORY DCSD uses the Resource Allocation Method/Plan (RAMP) to distribute funds and ensure consistent staffing and class sizes across schools. DCSD should consider revising its funding model to give school leaders more autonomy, even if it results in less uniformity across the district.



6. OPTIONAL How can the budget allocation better support the needs of all students, including those with special needs and those from low-income families? (Open ended).

Common Themes Across Responses (Section 2, Question 6)

1. Smaller Class Sizes Are Viewed as the Single Most Effective Equity Strategy

By far the most frequently repeated recommendation is **reducing class sizes**, especially:

- K–3
- Inclusion and cotaught classes
- Schools with high poverty, SPED, ESOL, or Horizon populations

Respondents repeatedly stated that:

- Large classes make *every* intervention less effective
- Coteaching fails when class sizes remain high
- Teachers cannot differentiate, monitor behavior, or provide IEP/504 fidelity in classes of 30–35 students

This theme cuts across **general education, special education, gifted, and ESOL** perspectives and is framed as a **foundational equity issue**, not a preference.

2. Kindergarten and Early Grades Are the Highest Leverage Investment

A strikingly consistent recommendation is:

- **Paraprofessionals in every kindergarten classroom** (and often grades 1–2)
- Expanded early intervention (literacy, math, behavior, speech)

Respondents emphasized that:

- DCSD is unusual in not staffing K classrooms with paras
- Early gaps compound into SPED referrals, discipline issues, and dropout risk
- Investing early reduces the need for costly interventions later

Many explicitly connected **early intervention to graduation rates and longterm cost containment**.

3. Special Education Is Understaffed, Overburdened, and Legally Vulnerable

Feedback related to special education was extensive and urgent. Core issues raised include:

- Excessive caseloads for SPED teachers and related service providers
- Inadequate numbers of paraprofessionals
- Delays in evaluations and placement
- Overreliance on coteaching where selfcontained or specialized settings are needed

Respondents frequently warned that:

- High caseloads risk IEP noncompliance
- Burnout is driving shortages in SPED, SLP, OT, PT, and psychology roles
- Underfunding leads to lawsuits and corrective action—raising costs longterm

Many called for **serviceintensitybased funding**, not flat allocations.

4. Weighted, NeedsBased Funding Is Strongly Preferred Over Equal Distribution

A major conceptual theme is the distinction between **equity vs. equality**.

Respondents overwhelmingly supported:

- **Weighted student funding models**
- Additional funding for:
 - Students with disabilities (by service level)
 - Lowincome students
 - English learners
 - Homeless/foster youth
- Concentrationbased funding for highneed schools

Many explicitly stated that **equal funding across schools perpetuates inequity**, especially where PTA/foundation support varies dramatically.

5. More People, Fewer Programs

Respondents repeatedly criticized spending on:

- Districtmandated software and platforms
- Frequent curriculum changes
- Redundant testing systems
- Thirdparty contracts with limited classroom impact

In contrast, they consistently requested investment in:

- Teachers
- Paraprofessionals
- Reading/math interventionists
- Counselors, social workers, psychologists
- Speech, OT, PT, and behavior specialists

A recurring sentiment:

“People change outcomes. Programs don’t—unless there are enough trained people to implement them.”

6. Facilities and Basic Resources Matter for Equity

Many respondents highlighted that:

- Older buildings (especially in South DeKalb) are unsafe, outdated, or unhealthy
- HVAC, plumbing, mold, and accessibility issues directly affect learning
- Teachers and families are subsidizing basic supplies outofpocket

Facilities are framed as **learning conditions**, not optional upgrades—and inequitable conditions were repeatedly cited.

7. Mental Health and Wraparound Supports Are Essential for Access to Learning

Respondents emphasized that students from low-income households often face:

- Food insecurity
- Housing instability
- Trauma and chronic stress
- Limited access to healthcare and therapy

Budget recommendations included:

- More school-based counselors, social workers, psychologists
- Food pantries, clothing closets, and free meals
- Afterschool tutoring with transportation
- Family engagement and parent education programs

These supports are seen as **prerequisites to academic success**, not add-ons.

8. Local School Autonomy With Guardrails Is Strongly Supported

Many respondents argued that:

- Schools have different needs
- Principals and teachers best understand their populations
- Centralized, one-size-fits-all spending reduces effectiveness

At the same time, respondents called for:

- Transparency
- Clear guardrails
- Accountability for outcomes

The desired model is **site-based decisionmaking within an equity-driven framework**.

9. Gifted Students Are Repeatedly Identified as an Overlooked “Special Need”

A notable subset of responses stressed that:

- Gifted students often receive little or no actual service
- State funds for gifted programming are not translating into delivery
- Mixedability classrooms dilute gifted instruction

Many explicitly asked that **gifted be recognized alongside SPED and ESOL** as a population requiring targeted support—not assumed to “be fine.”

Bottom Line (Section 2, Question 6)

Across hundreds of responses, stakeholders are remarkably aligned:

- **Reduce class sizes—especially early grades and highneed schools**
- **Fund paraprofessionals, interventionists, and special education staff**
- **Adopt a weighted, needsbased funding model**
- **Invest in early intervention to reduce longterm costs**
- **Shift dollars from districtlevel overhead and lowimpact programs to people**
- **Ensure equitable facilities and basic classroom resources**
- **Support the whole child through mental health and wraparound services**
- **Give schools flexibility within a transparent equity framework**

When viewed alongside **Sections 3–5**, Section 2 provides the **instructional equity foundation** of the survey:

If DCSD wants better outcomes for students with special needs and from lowincome families, the budget must move closer to classrooms, earlier in the learning timeline, and more precisely toward student need.

- 7. OPTIONAL** Do you disagree with (and would like to see cut) anything within this goal area? (Open ended).

Common Themes Across Responses (Section 2, Question 7)

1. The Dominant Response: “No—Do Not Cut StudentFacing Supports”

The **single most common answer** was an explicit “**No cuts,**” “**None,**” or “**Do not cut anything.**”

Key characteristics of these responses:

- Strong resistance to cutting **special education, Title I, mental health, gifted, ESOL, PreK, or intervention services**

- Concern that cuts would disproportionately harm **highneed students**
- Frustration with being asked to choose cuts **without seeing cost or outcome data**

This indicates that respondents generally **do not view this goal area as overfunded** and see it as **already stretched thin**.

2. If Cuts Are Needed, Respondents Want Them Outside the Classroom

When respondents *did* suggest cuts, they overwhelmingly targeted **districtlevel overhead**, not student services.

Most frequently named areas for reduction:

- Central office administrators
- "Topheavy" leadership layers (chiefs, deputy chiefs, coordinators)
- Positions created under prior leadership with unclear impact
- Districtmandated roles perceived as compliancedriven rather than instructional

A consistent framing emerged:

"If cuts must happen, cut farthest from students."

This mirrors themes from **Sections 3, 5, and earlier Section 2 questions**, reinforcing a systemwide perception of **administrative bloat vs. classroom scarcity**.

3. Strong Opposition to Cutting Special Education and Title I

Respondents were especially clear that:

- **Special education should not be cut**
- Reductions risk legal noncompliance, burnout, and harm to vulnerable students
- Title I funding is often misunderstood and already insufficient at the school level

Several responses explicitly warned that **cutting SPED or lowincome supports would increase costs later** through litigation, dropout rates, and staff turnover.

4. Acceleration Academy and FLEX Academy Are the Most Questioned Programs

Among *specific programs*, **Acceleration Academy and FLEX Academy** drew the most criticism.

Concerns raised included:

- Questionable academic rigor
- Cheating and low accountability
- Focus on graduation numbers rather than mastery
- Safety and supervision issues

Importantly, many respondents did **not** call for outright elimination—but instead asked for:

- Evidence of effectiveness
- Clear success metrics
- Program redesign or tighter eligibility criteria

This suggests a **“review and reform” sentiment**, not a blanket rejection.

5. Testing and Assessment Are Widely Viewed as Overfunded

A recurring and crosscutting theme was opposition to:

- Excessive benchmark testing
- Redundant assessments layered on top of MAP/Milestones
- Spending on platforms (e.g., benchmark systems) with limited instructional value

Respondents repeatedly argued that:

- Testing consumes time *and* money
- Overtesting reduces instructional minutes
- Funds could instead support teachers, paras, or class size reduction

Testing is framed as a **lowROI expenditure** in this goal area.

6. Mixed Views on PreK (Especially PreK 3YearOld Programs)

PreK elicited **divergent views**:

- Many strongly support PreK as early intervention
- Others argue that **PreK 3** should be:
 - Meanstested
 - Provided through external partners
 - Deferred until K–12 foundational needs are met

Notably, even critics often emphasized **protecting K and early elementary supports first**, rather than framing PreK cuts as costsavings alone.

7. Technology and Software Spending Is Viewed as a Cut Candidate

Respondents frequently pointed to:

- Large software licenses
- Frequent curriculum/platform changes
- Devices replacing human instruction

Common sentiments:

- “Less tech, more teachers”
- Technology should support instruction—not replace it
- Ask teachers what tools are actually used before renewing contracts

Technology is often cited as **misaligned with classroom reality** and a candidate for reallocation.

8. Gifted Programming Should Be Improved—Not Cut

While a small minority suggested reallocating funds *away* from gifted programs, the dominant theme was:

- Gifted students are **underserved**, not overfunded
- State funds do not consistently translate into services
- Cutting gifted programs would accelerate student exits from DCSD

Several respondents explicitly warned against closing or reducing **highperforming magnets** and instead advocated for replication or improved neighborhood services.

9. Lack of Transparency Undermines Confidence in “Cuts” Conversations

A significant number of respondents stated they **could not answer meaningfully** because:

- Budget line items were not provided
- Program costs and outcomes were unclear
- Survey questions implied tradeoffs without data

This reinforces a broader theme seen elsewhere:

Stakeholders are willing to engage—but want facts, not forced choices.

Bottom Line (Section 2, Question 7)

Across responses, the message is clear and consistent:

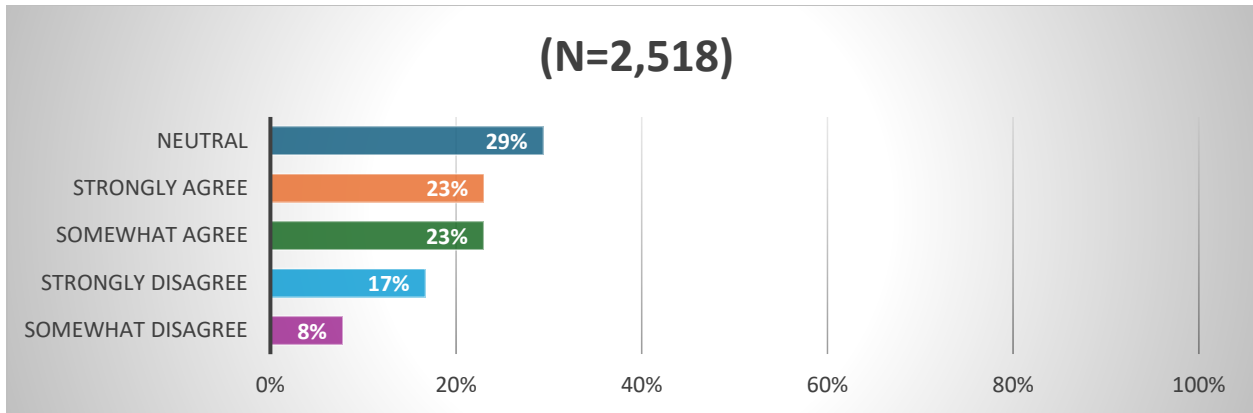
- **Do not cut studentfacing supports in this goal area**
- **If reductions are required, start with central office overhead**
- **Review—not blindly cut—alternative programs like FLEX and Acceleration**
- **Reduce spending on excessive testing and lowimpact software**
- **Protect special education, Title I, early intervention, and gifted services**
- **Provide transparency before asking stakeholders to endorse cuts**

In combination with **Section 2 Question 6**, this question clarifies an important distinction:

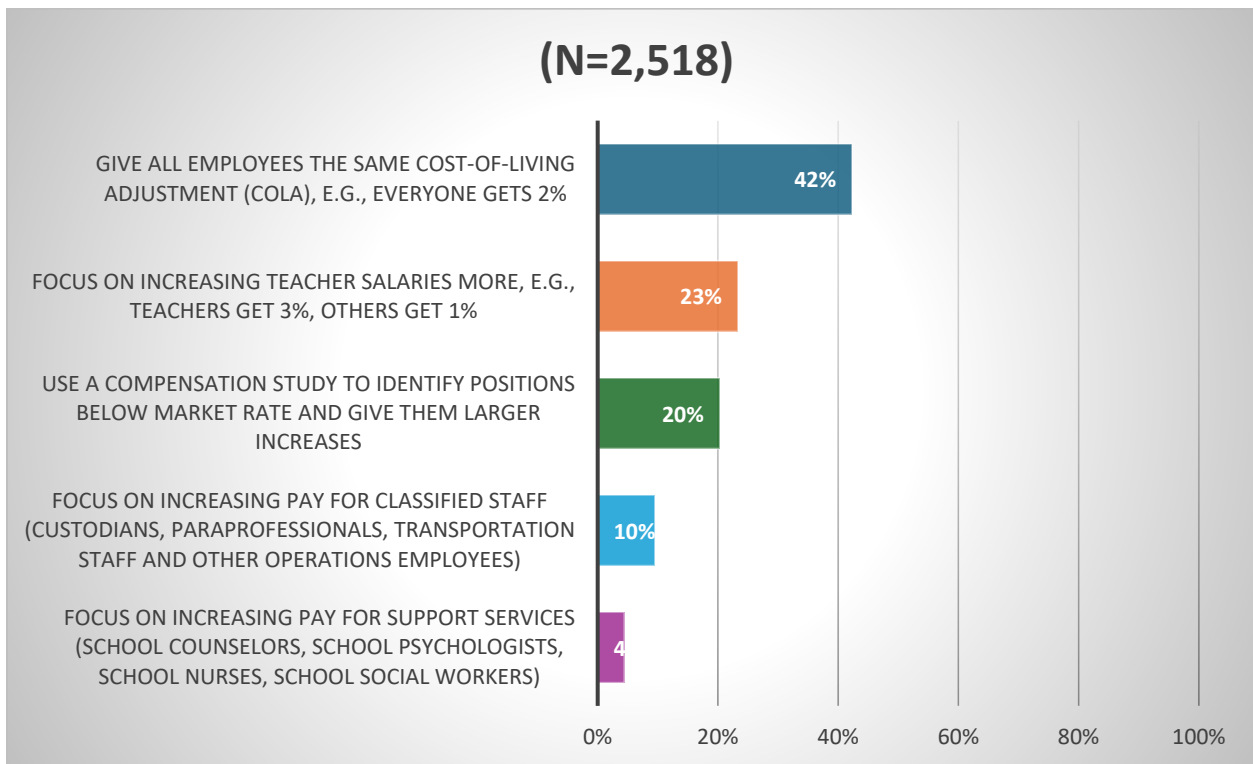
Stakeholders are not asking DCSD to spend less on students—they are asking DCSD to **spend differently**.

Section 3. Recruit, Develop and Retain Talent

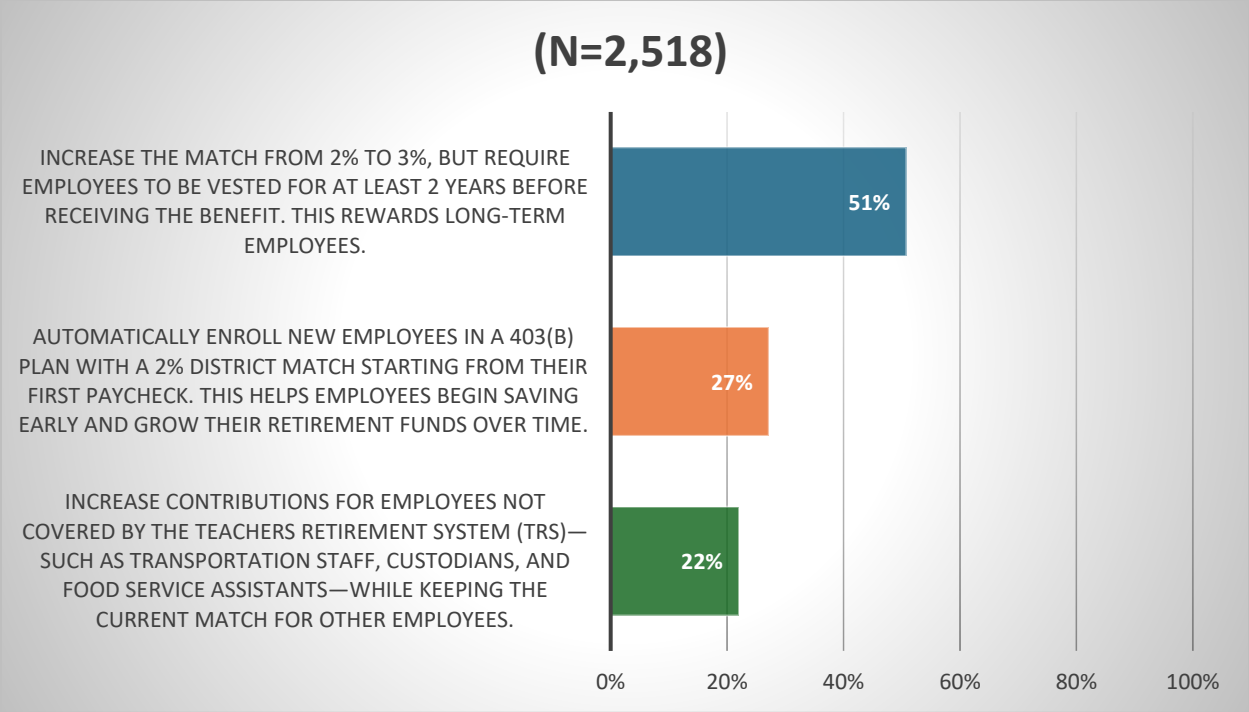
1. **MANDATORY** Salary and benefits comprise 80-85% of our general fund budget annually. In recent years, the cost for DCSD to provide health insurance through the State Health Benefit Plan (SHBP) has increased significantly and is projected to reach \$2,000 per month per covered employee. Given this information, DCSD should investigate alternative health insurance options outside of SHBP for non-teaching staff.



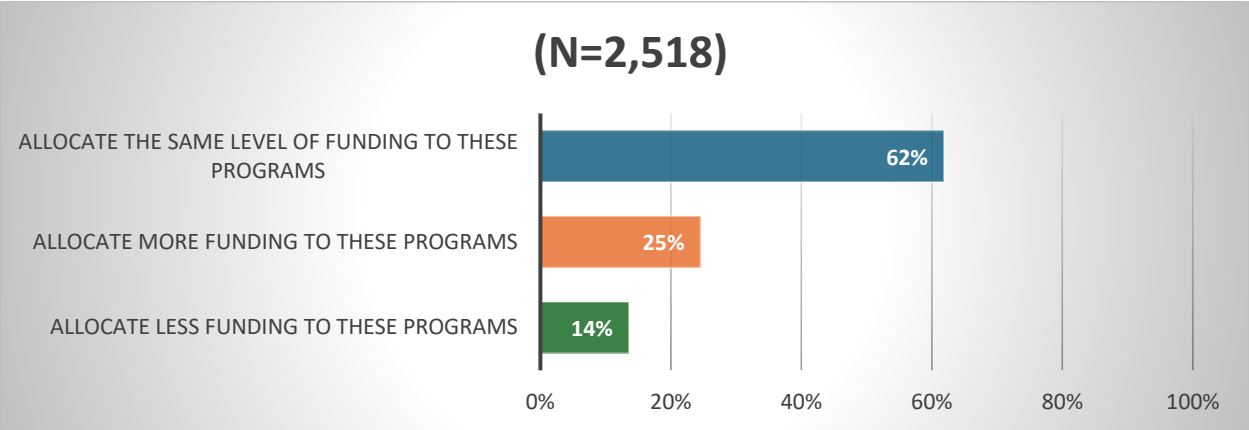
2. **MANDATORY** If DCSD can allocate resources to provide a cost-of-living increase, COLA, how should the increases be distributed?



3. **MANDATORY** If DCSD can invest more in retirement benefits, which option is most important to you?



4. **MANDATORY** DCSD has launched “Grow Your Own” programs like Ignite Residency and Para-to-Teacher pipelines to build internal talent for key positions. These non-mandated programs have successfully reduced teacher shortages and kept classrooms staffed. How much future funding should be dedicated to these valuable programs?



5. **OPTIONAL** How can the budget allocation process better support attracting and maintaining a diverse, highly qualified workforce? (Open ended)

Common Themes Across Responses (Section 3, Question 5)

1. Competitive Compensation Is the NonNegotiable Foundation

The single, overwhelming theme—more dominant here than in any prior question—is **pay**. Respondents across roles repeatedly stated that attracting and retaining a highly qualified workforce is fundamentally impossible without:

- **Teacher salaries competitive with APS, Cobb, Fulton, and Gwinnett**
- **Meaningful COLA increases** that keep pace with inflation (not symbolic 1–2%)
- **Restoration or expansion of retention bonuses**, particularly for returning staff
- **Fair salary progression**, especially in early and midcareer years (years 3–10)

Many respondents explicitly referenced **APS as the benchmark**, noting that DCSD is losing experienced teachers and specialized staff simply because pay gaps are too large to ignore.

2. Retention Matters More Than Recruitment

A clear throughline in the feedback is that **retention is the best recruitment strategy**. Respondents emphasized that:

- New hires will not stay if veteran staff are demoralized
- Losing experienced teachers undermines mentorship, culture, and stability
- Paying new hires the same as long-serving employees damages morale

Several responses noted that DCSD already *trains* talent—but fails to *keep* it—making retention bonuses, longevity incentives (5, 10, 20-year markers), and improved step structures critical.

3. Classified and Support Staff Are Severely Undervalued

While teacher pay dominated, respondents were equally forceful about **classified staff**:

- Paraprofessionals
- Bus drivers
- Custodians
- Cafeteria workers
- School nurses
- Therapists (SLPs, OTs, PTs)
- Counselors and psychologists

Many described these roles as **underpaid to the point of instability**, noting that retail wages often exceed paraprofessional pay. Respondents linked staffing shortages, IEP compliance risks, and burnout directly to low compensation in these roles.

4. GrowYourOwn Pipelines Are Valued—but Must Be High Quality

There was broad support for:

- GrowYourOwn
- ParatoTeacher
- Residency and alternative certification pipelines

However, respondents consistently warned that these programs must:

- Be **selective and wellsupported**
- Include **tuition assistance and paid pathways**
- Provide **ongoing mentoring**, not just entry access
- Avoid becoming a workaround for chronic understaffing

Several respondents explicitly noted that pipelines without support **increase turnover rather than reduce it**.

5. Working Conditions Drive Workforce Stability

Respondents repeatedly emphasized that **pay alone is not sufficient** if working conditions remain unsustainable. Key factors included:

- **Smaller class sizes**
- **Protected planning time**
- **Reduced paperwork and compliance burden**
- **Behavioral and safety support**
- **Administrative trust and autonomy**

A common sentiment was that teachers are not leaving education—they are leaving **DCSDspecific conditions**.

6. Central Office Overhead Is Viewed as a Direct TradeOff

Many respondents explicitly connected workforce investment to **reducing districtlevel administrative bloat**. Common framing included:

- “Cut topheavy positions and redirect funds to schools”
- “One central office salary could fund multiple classroom positions”
- “Too many coordinators, not enough teachers”

Respondents viewed this not as punitive, but as a **reallocation toward missioncritical roles**.

7. Diversity Is Framed Through Access, Fairness, and Support

While some respondents challenged the framing of “diverse” versus “qualified,” many others framed diversity more constructively as:

- **Equitable access to pipelines**
- **Recruitment from HBCUs and regional universities**
- **Support for bilingual, special education, and hardtostaff roles**
- **Pay equity across race, gender, experience, and role**

Notably, even critical responses often converged on the idea that **fair, transparent compensation and supportive conditions naturally produce a more diverse workforce**.

Particularly Insightful Responses

Several patterns stood out as especially strategic:

- **Retention over replacement:** Respondents noted that continually replacing teachers is more expensive than paying existing staff competitively—especially given training, onboarding, and lost instructional continuity.
 - **Midcareer salary compression:** Multiple respondents highlighted that DCSD loses strong teachers around years 5–8 because salary growth stalls just as expertise peaks. Addressing this could have outsized retention impact.
 - **Specialized staff economics:** Responses from nurses, SLPs, OTs, and psychologists were especially clear that DCSD’s pay scales are **noncompetitive to the point of being unsustainable**, directly causing shortages and reliance on contractors.
-

Bottom Line (Section 3, Question 5)

Across hundreds of responses, the message is remarkably consistent:

To attract and maintain a **diverse, highly qualified workforce**, the budget must:

- **Pay competitively and predictably**
 - **Prioritize retention over churn**
 - **Lift classified and specialized staff to livable wages**
 - **Stabilize working conditions**
 - **Reallocate from overhead to classrooms**
 - **Invest in people, not just programs**
6. **OPTIONAL** Do you disagree with (and would like to see cut) anything within this goal area? (Open ended)

Common Themes Across Responses (Section 3, Question 6)

1. Overwhelming Opposition to Cuts That Affect Workforce Pay or Stability

The dominant response to this question is **"No cuts."** A large majority of respondents explicitly stated:

- "No"
- "No cuts"
- "Nothing should be cut"
- "Do not cut this area"

This sentiment is particularly strong when cuts are perceived to impact:

- Teacher salaries or step increases
- Retention bonuses
- Health insurance and retirement benefits
- Classified staff compensation

Respondents consistently framed this goal area as **already under strain**, arguing that further reductions would worsen attrition and morale.

2. If Anything Is Cut, Central Office and “TopHeavy” Administration Is the Clear Target

Among respondents who *did* identify areas for cuts, the **most consistent and forceful theme** was reducing:

- Central office staffing
- Districtlevel coordinators, executives, and cabinet roles
- Highsalary administrative positions perceived as disconnected from classrooms

Many respondents explicitly contrasted **sixfigure district roles** with:

- Overcrowded classrooms
- Underpaid teachers and paraprofessionals
- Staffing shortages in transportation, special education, and related services

The framing was not antiadministration in principle, but rather **antibloat**—with repeated calls to reallocate funds closer to students.

3. Strong Skepticism Toward Alternative Pipelines (Ignite, ParatoTeacher, GrowYourOwn)

While pipeline programs were praised in prior responses, Question 6 reveals **deep concern about execution and outcomes**:

- Ignite Residency
- ParatoTeacher
- Some GrowYourOwn initiatives

Critiques centered on:

- Insufficient preparation and mentoring
- Placement of underprepared candidates in highneed classrooms
- Perception that pipelines “fill seats” but not quality gaps

Importantly, many respondents did **not** argue against pipelines entirely, but rather for:

- Tighter admission standards
- Better supervision and support
- Independent evaluation of outcomes before continued funding

This represents one of the **few areas where cuts or restructuring received notable support**.

4. Workforce Supports Should Be Expanded, Not Reduced

Across responses, respondents emphasized that this goal area should focus on:

- Increasing pay, not cutting benefits
- Expanding retirement and insurance options
- Restoring retention and attendance bonuses
- Improving working conditions (class size, safety, planning time)

Several respondents explicitly warned that cutting benefits—especially health insurance or retirement—would accelerate exits, particularly among veteran staff and classified employees.

5. Perceived Misalignment Between Spending and Impact

A recurring concern was not the *existence* of spending, but **where the money goes**:

- “Too many people watching teachers, not enough helping them”
- “New positions but no improvement in outcomes”
- “Money spent farthest from students”

Respondents repeatedly asked for:

- Audits of highlevel positions
- Evidence of ROI for noninstructional roles
- Clear linkage between expenditures and improved recruitment/retention

This reflects a desire for **strategic pruning**, not across-the-board cuts.

6. Health Insurance and Retirement: Caution, Not Cuts

Health insurance and retirement benefits generated nuanced feedback:

- Some respondents questioned rising premiums or limited provider options
- Others explicitly warned against changing providers or reducing benefits
- Many advocated for **improvements**, not reductions (e.g., higher match, earlier vesting, broader coverage)

The clear takeaway: **benefits are viewed as a retention anchor**, and changes here must be handled carefully.

Particularly Insightful Patterns

Several responses stood out for reframing the question constructively:

- **“Cuts aren’t the solution—reallocation is.”**
Respondents repeatedly argued that the problem is not spending too much on workforce, but spending **inefficiently and too far from classrooms**.
- **Quality vs. quantity in pipelines.**
The strongest critiques of Ignite and ParatoTeacher programs focused on protecting students and veteran staff from burnout caused by insufficiently prepared colleagues.
- **Retention as risk management.**
Many respondents framed retention spending as *cost avoidance*—preventing expensive churn, recruitment, onboarding, and loss of institutional knowledge.

Bottom Line (Section 3, Question 6)

Across Section 3, Question 6, stakeholders are clearly saying:

- **Do not cut workforce compensation, benefits, or schoolbased staffing**
- **If cuts are unavoidable, start with central office and duplicative roles**
- **Evaluate and redesign pipeline programs rather than funding them blindly**
- **Protect health insurance, retirement, and retention incentives**
- **Shift dollars closer to students, classrooms, and frontline staff**

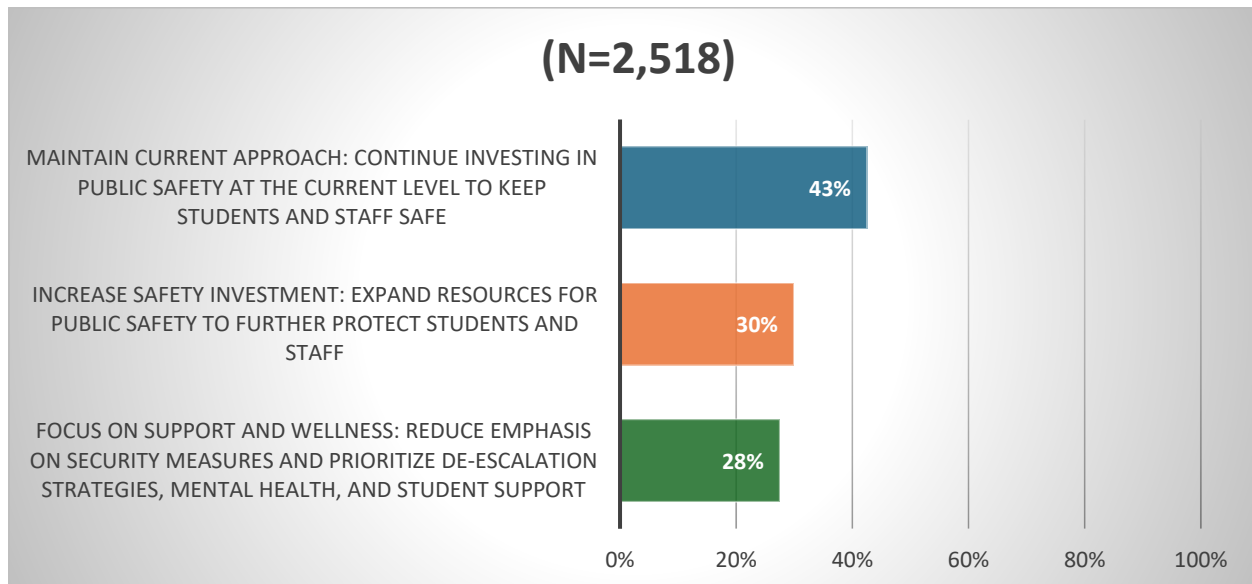
When combined with **Section 3 Questions 5 and 6**, the message is internally consistent and powerful:

Attracting and retaining a highly qualified workforce requires investment, not austerity—paired with discipline about where dollars actually make a difference.

Section 4. Culture and Climate / Mental Health and Wellness

1. **MANDATORY** DCSD has made significant investments in public safety over the past few years. These efforts include building secure vestibules, installing intruder alarm systems,

implementing panic button alert systems, providing safety associates at every elementary school, increasing the number of sworn officers at middle and high schools, installing weapons detection and conveyor belt systems, and acquiring mapping software, among other initiatives. Given this level of investment, which statement do you agree with most?



2. **OPTIONAL** How can the budget allocation process better support our culture and climate or mental health and wellness? (Open ended)

Common Themes Across Responses (Section 4, Question 2)

1. Mental Health Support Is Viewed as Core Infrastructure, Not an AddOn

The most consistent message is that **mental health and wellness are foundational to safety, learning, and retention**, not discretionary programs. Respondents repeatedly emphasized:

- Schoolbased **counselors, psychologists, social workers, and therapists**
- **Lower caseloads** so staff can provide preventative—not just crisis—support
- Mental health services for **both students and staff**

Many respondents explicitly stated that underfunding mental health leads to:

- Escalating behavior issues
- Teacher burnout and attrition
- Increased reliance on security measures that do not address root causes

2. Strong Desire to Shift from “Security Theater” to People Centered Safety

One of the clearest fault lines in the responses is **how safety dollars are spent**.

A large portion of respondents expressed skepticism toward:

- Weapon detectors and conveyor belt systems
- Highly visible but inconsistently operated security technology
- Measures perceived as “performative,” “prisonlike,” or easily circumvented

In contrast, respondents repeatedly advocated for reallocating funds toward:

- **Trained mental health professionals**
- **Deescalation training** for staff and security
- **Early identification and intervention**
- Adequate staffing to operate any safety equipment already purchased

This does *not* reflect opposition to safety—rather, a call for **evidencebased, humancentered approaches**.

3. Equity Gaps in Facilities and Access Are Undermining Climate

Many respondents highlighted **uneven implementation** of basic safety and wellness infrastructure:

- Schools without secure vestibules or functioning door locks
- Schools relying on trailers with multiple unsecured entry points
- Wellness offerings centralized at AIC and inaccessible to schoolbased staff

This inconsistency was frequently framed as:

“Some schools are protected and supported—others are not.”

Respondents clearly want **districtwide minimum standards** for:

- Physical security (vestibules, locks, alarms)
 - Counselor and social worker access
 - Mental health programming availability
-

4. Counselors and Social Workers Are Overextended and Misused

A recurring theme was frustration that counselors and psychologists:

- Are consumed by **scheduling, testing, and administrative tasks**
- Have **insufficient time** for actual counseling
- Carry **unsustainable student ratios**, especially in middle and high schools

Respondents strongly supported:

- Dedicated 504 coordinators
- Additional clerical or advisory staff
- Reprioritizing counselors' roles back to **mental health, SEL, and crisis support**

5. Staff Mental Health and Working Conditions Are Central to School Climate

Teachers and staff repeatedly tied **their own mental health** to:

- Class size
- Workload and paperwork
- Loss of planning time
- Constant initiatives layered on without support
- Mandatory wellness activities scheduled during instructional hours

Common suggestions included:

- **Paid mental health days**
- Protected planning time
- Fewer meetings and compliance tasks
- Wellness offerings **outside the school day** or embedded into work time

Many respondents explicitly stated:

"You cannot fix student wellness while staff are burnt out."

6. Early Intervention and Family Centered Supports Are Critical

Respondents emphasized that schools are often dealing with **symptoms of deeper issues**:

- Trauma
- Poverty
- Housing instability
- Substance use
- Family stress

As a result, many advocated for:

- Schoolbased therapy and smallgroup counseling
- Partnerships with community mental health agencies
- Parent education, family liaisons, and bilingual outreach
- Wraparound services that reduce pressure on teachers to “do everything”

7. Balance—Not Either/Or—Between Safety and Wellness

Despite polarized language in some responses, the **dominant synthesis** is balanced:

- Safety is nonnegotiable
- Mental health is preventative safety

Many respondents explicitly stated:

“This is not an either/or. We need both.”

They supported:

- Maintaining current safety investments **where effective**
- Redirecting ineffective security spending toward counseling, deescalation, and staff training
- Using data and outcomes—not optics—to guide decisions

Particularly Insightful Patterns

Several ideas stood out as especially strategic:

- **People before hardware:** Respondents repeatedly noted that technology without trained staff, followthrough, and trust **creates a false sense of security**.
- **Mental health as cost avoidance:** Many framed counseling and early intervention as preventing downstream costs—discipline removals, alternative placements, lawsuits, and turnover.

- **Working conditions as wellness policy:** Smaller class sizes, fewer initiatives, and protected time were repeatedly identified as **the most effective mental health intervention** available to the district.

Bottom Line (Section 4, Question 2)

Across Section 4, Question 2, stakeholders are clearly saying:

- **Fund people before platforms**
- **Mental health is safety**
- **Equity in facilities and access matters**
- **Counselors need time to counsel**
- **Staff wellness is a prerequisite for student wellness**
- **Reallocate from performative measures to preventative supports**

When aligned with **Sections 3 (Workforce)** and earlier **Goal Areas**, this completes a coherent narrative:

Culture, climate, and mental health improve when adults are supported, students are known, and schools are resourced to intervene early—not just react late.

3. **OPTIONAL** Do you disagree with (and would like to see cut) any budgeted initiatives under these goal areas? (Open ended)

Common Themes Across Responses (Section 4, Question 3)

1. A Clear Majority Do *Not* Support Cuts to Mental Health & Safety Overall

The dominant response to this question—by volume and consistency—is **“No cuts.”**

Many respondents explicitly stated:

- “No”
- “Nothing should be cut”
- “Do not cut this area”
- “No cuts—more support is needed”

This reflects a broad belief that **culture, climate, safety, and mental health are already underresourced**, and that cutting further would worsen staff burnout, student behavior, and safety concerns.

2. If Cuts Occur, Respondents Want Them to Be Targeted—Not Across the Board

Among respondents who *did* identify areas to cut or reduce, the feedback was highly specific. The message was not “cut the goal area,” but rather:

“Stop funding things that don’t work or are purely performative.”

This distinction is important: respondents largely support the *goal*, but question the *methods*.

3. Strong Opposition to “Security Theater”

The most frequently cited area for reduction was **highcost, highvisibility security technology** perceived as ineffective or misaligned with real school conditions, including:

- Weapon detectors and conveyor belt systems
- Panic button badges
- Excessive surveillance technology
- Clear or mesh backpack proposals

Critiques focused on:

- Ease of circumvention
- Inconsistent staffing to operate systems
- Instructional time lost
- “Prisonlike” atmosphere that harms school climate
- False sense of security without addressing root causes

Many respondents explicitly said they would **reallocate—not eliminate—these dollars** toward peoplebased supports.

4. Culture & Climate Positions at the District Level Are Heavily Questioned

A recurring theme—mirroring Section 3—is skepticism about **district level culture and climate roles**. Respondents described these positions as:

- Too far removed from schools
- Reactive rather than proactive
- Duplicative of schoolbased leadership

- Heavy on meetings, light on direct impact

Several respondents recommended:

- Cutting or reducing district level culture/climate coordinators
- Reassigning those funds to **school based counselors, social workers, and behavior specialists**
- Requiring any remaining roles to spend meaningful time in schools

This was one of the **clearest and most consistent “cut” recommendations.**

5. Mixed Views on Safety Associates and Officers—Training & Effectiveness Matter

Respondents were divided on safety personnel:

- Some strongly supported maintaining or increasing officers
- Others questioned the effectiveness of safety associates, especially in elementary schools

However, **both sides converged on one point:**

If these roles are funded, they must be well trained, actively engaged, and held accountable.

Suggestions included:

- Cutting positions that are poorly trained or underutilized
- Investing instead in fewer, better trained personnel
- Providing deescalation, restraint, and child development training

This reflects concern about **quality, not quantity.**

6. Mental Health Services Should Be Protected—If Anything, Expanded

Very few respondents supported cutting:

- Counselors
- Social workers
- Psychologists
- Therapists
- Schoolbased mental health services

In fact, many respondents explicitly warned against:

- Cutting mental health funding
- Reducing counseling capacity
- Treating mental health as secondary to safety

Several respondents stated that **cutting mental health while increasing security is backwards**, arguing that early intervention reduces safety incidents over time.

7. Demand for Evidence, Metrics, and Accountability

Across the responses, there was a strong call for:

- Data on whether security investments are working
- Evaluation of program outcomes
- ROI analysis before continuing or expanding initiatives

Respondents were not opposed to spending—but wanted **proof that dollars improve safety, climate, or wellness**, not just optics.

Particularly Insightful Patterns

Several strategic reframings emerged:

- **“Reallocate, don’t retreat.”**
Stakeholders want ineffective spending redirected—not eliminated.
- **Mental health as prevention.**
Many framed counseling, SEL, and deescalation as *preventative safety infrastructure*, not soft add-ons.
- **Atmosphere matters.**
Respondents repeatedly noted that environments that feel punitive or carceral undermine trust, learning, and emotional safety—especially for younger students.

Bottom Line (Section 4, Question 3)

Across Section 4, Question 3, the message is consistent and nuanced:

- **Do not cut mental health, wellness, or core safety supports**

- **Cut or reduce ineffective, highcost, lowimpact security technology**
- **Reevaluate districtlevel culture & climate staffing**
- **Invest in people, training, and accountability—not optics**
- **Use data to guide decisions, not fear or PR pressure**

When combined with **Section 4 Question 2**, the narrative is clear:

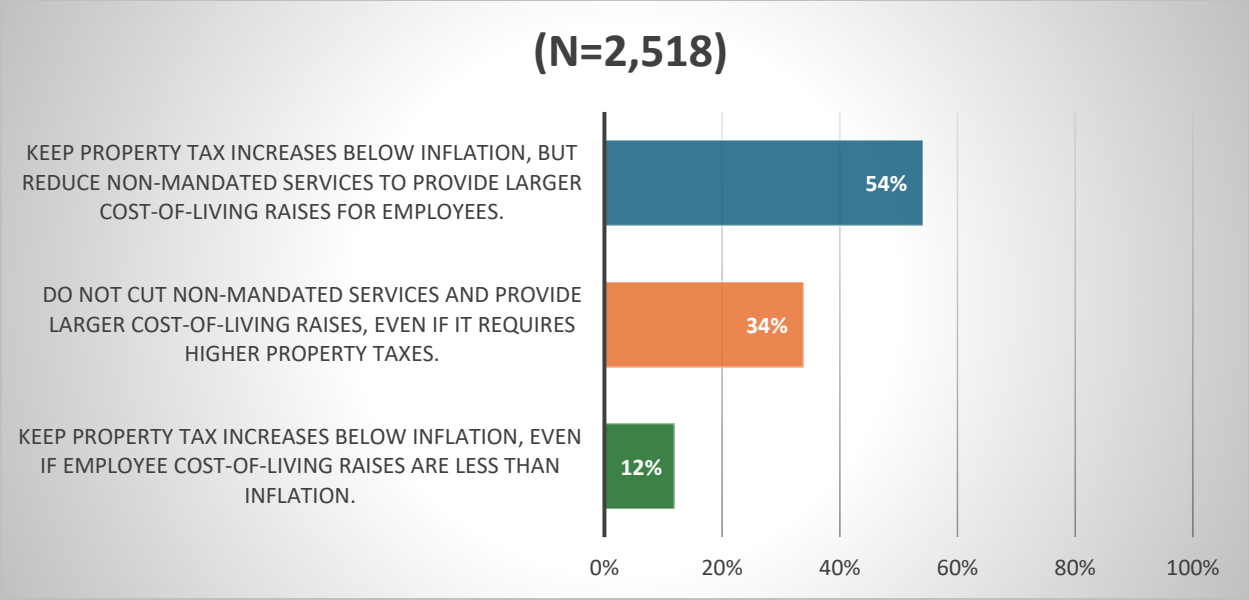
Stakeholders want schools that are safe *and* humane—protected without being punitive, and supported without being performative.

Section 5. Organizational Excellence

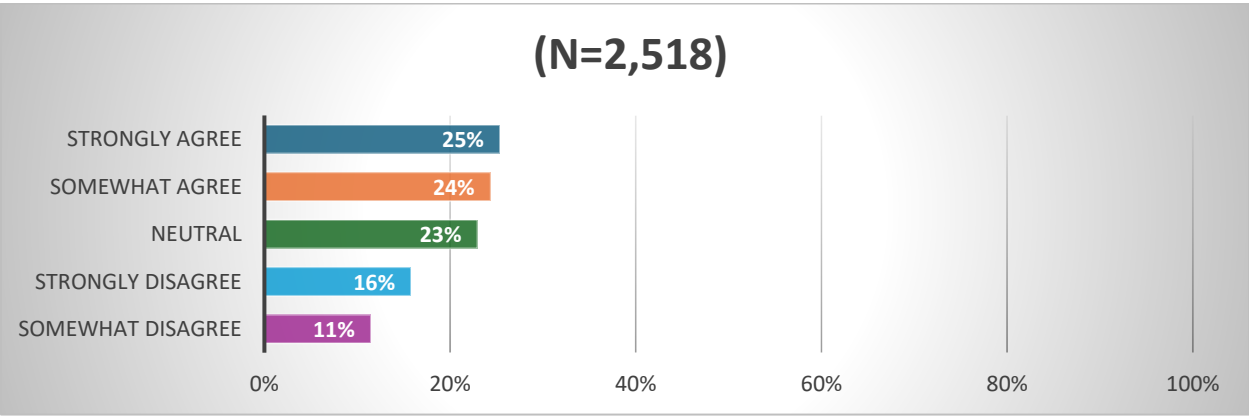
- 1. MANDATORY** Over the past decade, property taxes in Georgia have increased significantly, prompting strong advocacy at both the state and local levels to address this issue. In response, House Bill 581 was introduced during the 2024 legislative session and successfully passed. This legislation established a floating homestead exemption, which limits property tax increases on homesteaded properties to no more than the rate of inflation.

Although the DCSD Board of Education chose to opt out of House Bill 581, the district still reduced the overall school tax rate for 2025, effectively keeping the resulting tax increase below the rate of inflation. However, DCSD employees did not receive a cost-of-living adjustment.

Considering this context, which statement do you agree with most?



2. MANDATORY DCSD currently offers transportation for school choice and specialty programs, which most other school systems in Georgia do not. With rising health insurance and other costs, DCSD should reduce non-mandated transportation services to help balance the budget and limit property tax increases.



3. Optional: Share any additional feedback you think is important for DCSD as we plan the FY2027 budget. (open ended)

Common Themes Across Responses (Section 5, Question 3)

1. Compensation Is the Overwhelming Priority—Across All Employee Groups

The most dominant, unmistakable theme is **pay**. Respondents repeatedly emphasized that **current compensation is not livable**, especially given inflation and regional competition.

Key points raised:

- **Cost of Living Adjustments (COLA)** must be annual and meaningful
- **Teacher salaries** must be competitive with APS, Cobb, Gwinnett, Fulton
- **Paraprofessionals, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, custodians, clerks, nurses, and substitutes** are severely underpaid
- Many staff report **living paycheck to paycheck**, holding second jobs, or facing housing insecurity

There is strong resentment toward:

- Step increases without COLA
- Missed or eliminated bonuses
- Perceived raises for upper administration while frontline staff received none

Bottom line: Respondents see pay as a *retention, equity, and moral issue*, not just a budget line item.

2. Central Office “TopHeaviness” Is Viewed as the Primary Source of Waste

Across hundreds of responses, respondents repeatedly identified **district level administration** as the first place to cut or restructure.

Common language included:

- “Top heavy”
- “Bloated”
- “Too many coordinators/chiefs/directors”
- “Positions created under previous leadership”
- “People farthest from students make the most”

Stakeholders consistently proposed:

- Reducing central office headcount
- Freezing or capping executive salaries
- Reassigning district staff back into schools
- Using savings to fund **classroom positions, raises, and class size reduction**

This theme is **remarkably consistent across teachers, parents, and classified staff**.

3. Smaller Class Sizes Are Seen as the Highest Impact Investment

Respondents repeatedly linked **class size** to:

- Teacher burnout
- Student behavior
- Learning loss
- Retention failures

Specific calls included:

- Eliminating class size waivers
- Adding paraprofessionals (especially K–2 and special education)
- Hiring more teachers instead of creating new programs or administrative roles

Many respondents explicitly stated:

“If you fix class size, many other problems improve automatically.”

Class size reduction is framed as **foundational infrastructure**, not a luxury.

4. Support Staff Are Critical—and Chronically Undervalued

A strong equity theme runs through feedback regarding **classified and support employees**:

- Paraprofessionals
- Bus drivers
- Cafeteria workers
- Custodians
- Nurses
- Clerks and registrars
- Transportation and operations staff

Key concerns:

- Pay levels that are **not livable**
- Lack of retirement parity
- Disproportionate workload compared to compensation
- High turnover disrupting school operations

Many respondents explicitly stated that **schools cannot function without these roles**, and budgeting that ignores them undermines everything else.

5. Facilities and Infrastructure Are Failing—and Affect Morale

Facilities emerged as a major concern:

- Aging buildings
- HVAC, plumbing, mold, and safety issues
- Trailers and overcrowded classrooms
- Unequal conditions across schools

Respondents urged DCSD to:

- Prioritize **repair and maintenance over new administrative buildings**
- Address inequities between highperforming and underresourced schools
- Use consolidation savings transparently to reinvest in classrooms

Facilities are viewed as **working conditions**, directly tied to staff retention and student dignity.

6. Transportation and School Choice Are Deeply Polarizing—but EquityFramed

Transportation—especially for **magnet and school choice programs**—generated strong, opposing views:

- Some argue transportation is essential for **equitable access**
- Others believe parents should assume responsibility for choice transportation
- Many noted confusion and lack of clarity about current policy

What is consistent:

- Transportation is **expensive**
- Any cuts would have **equity implications**
- Decisions must be transparent, datadriven, and clearly communicated

Respondents repeatedly asked DCSD to **stop framing choices as false tradeoffs** (e.g., transportation vs. pay).

7. Mental Health, Special Education, and Early Intervention Must Be Protected

While compensation dominated, respondents strongly emphasized:

- More counselors, social workers, psychologists
- Better staffing ratios
- Early intervention in elementary grades
- Improved special education structures and placements

Several noted that **underfunding these areas leads to lawsuits, burnout, and student harm**, costing more longterm.

8. Trust, Transparency, and Accountability Are Broken—and Must Be Rebuilt

A striking metatheme is **lack of trust**:

- Confusion about where money goes
- Frustration with surveys lacking budget context
- Calls for independent audits
- Concerns about nepotism, promotions, and ineffective leadership
- Desire for clearer metrics and outcomes

Respondents repeatedly asked DCSD to:

- Show how savings are reinvested
- Tie leadership accountability to staff retention and outcomes
- Communicate honestly—even when decisions are hard

This is not just about money—it's about **credibility**.

Bottom Line (Section 5, Question 3)

Across thousands of openended comments, stakeholders are delivering a **cohesive, systemwide message**:

- **Pay people a livable, competitive wage—across all roles**
- **Reduce central office bloat and redirect funds to schools**
- **Lower class sizes and add schoolbased staff**

- **Fix buildings before expanding bureaucracy**
- **Protect mental health, special education, and early intervention**
- **Be transparent, datadriven, and honest with the community**

When combined with **Sections 3 (Workforce)** and **4 (Mental Health & Safety)**, Section 5 serves as a **capstone**:

DCSD's FY27 budget will succeed or fail based on whether it clearly prioritizes people closest to students and restores trust that resources are being used wisely.

|