

2021

MISSING OUT

Arkansas' Teacher Shortage and How to Fix It



INTRODUCTION

Every child in Arkansas—from Fort Smith to West Memphis to El Dorado and everywhere in between—deserves an effective, qualified teacher in their classroom. Teachers inspire, build perspective, and ultimately prepare their students for success in life. And research shows that teacher quality is the most important in-school factor affecting student achievement.¹

Unfortunately, Arkansas has faced a massive shortage of certified teachers for decades. This doesn't mean groups of students sit, unsupervised, in their classrooms—but because of the sacrifices schools make when they don't have the teachers they need, too many students are missing out on the educational opportunities they deserve. Sometimes schools have no choice but to combine multiple classes under a single teacher. Sometimes they stop offering certain advanced or specialized courses, particularly in high school. And, most often, they hire teachers who have not met the state's requirements for certification—including exams, coursework, and classroom experience—in their assigned content area. Statewide, 4 percent of public school teachers are uncertified, with another 3 percent teaching out of field. In many districts, the percentage of uncertified is much higher: as high as 56 percent in the Helena-West Helena School District, and 52 percent in the Forrest City School District.²

To be clear, earning certification by itself doesn't guarantee a teacher's effectiveness. But the fact that so many schools can't find enough teachers to even meet that bar shows that Arkansas isn't doing enough to recruit and retain great educators. This is one reason why Arkansas students lag behind the national average on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation's Report Card. In 2019, no more than 33 percent of Arkansas test-takers scored proficient or higher on any of the NAEP exams.³

Luckily, there are steps the state can take to address this problem. Especially given the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students, it has never been more important to get an effective, qualified teacher in every Arkansas classroom. It won't be easy, and will require dedication across the state. But Arkansas students are worth it.

In the following pages, we provide a roadmap for how to take up this challenge. First, we analyze the geography and extent of Arkansas' teacher shortage. Next, we provide potential explanations for why it is so high in certain areas, including an analysis of existing efforts to reduce the shortage. Finally, we propose a series of recommendations.

We hope this research is a useful resource for policymakers, educators, and advocates who believe that every Arkansas student—regardless of where they live—should have an effective, qualified teacher in their classroom.

¹ <https://www.rand.org/education-and-labor/projects/measuring-teacher-effectiveness/teachers-matter.html>

3.9 percent of teachers uncertified in 2019–20 compared to 4.1 percent uncertified in 2020–21.

² This includes teachers on Emergency Teaching Permits, Act 1240 waivers, and long-term substitutes (for more information on licensure exceptions, see Appendix). We did not find evidence that these rates changed much at the state level in the wake of COVID, with

³ <https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2019/nov/30/state-s-4th-8th-grade-report-card-score/>

MAPPING THE TEACHER SHORTAGE IN ARKANSAS

Across Arkansas, approximately 4 percent of teachers are uncertified, more than double the national average of 1.7 percent.⁴ But the severity of the problem varies widely from district to district: while some districts have achieved 100 percent certification, others face extreme challenges. Statewide, 30 districts have a workforce that includes at least 10 percent uncertified teachers. Of those, seven districts have more than 30 percent uncertified teachers, and in two districts more than half of teachers are uncertified.⁵

Year after year, districts facing severe shortages are forced to request waivers from the state to hire teachers who are uncertified in the subject they are assigned to teach. One Human Resources Coordinator in a high-vacancy district explained:⁶ “It’s actually gotten, I would say, worse. We’ve always had big shortage areas. We just never had as many. The list changes year to year, but it’s becoming a lot harder to fill those than it normally would. Let me rephrase that. It’s getting harder to fill them with certified teachers. That’s gotten a little bit easier because we’re one of the school districts that were allowed [the Act 1240] waiver, and that allows us to hire uncertified staff, which is not really our goal. But when we have to hire those type of employees, we do. We would prefer to hire certified staff, obviously. That’s helped a little bit, but it’s not really helping us get the type of people that we really want in those positions.”

Shortages Are Concentrated in Southern Arkansas and the Delta Region

Districts with the highest percentages of uncertified teachers are not spread evenly across the state. As *Figure 1* shows, Southern and Eastern Arkansas—particularly the Mississippi Delta region—have higher percentages of uncertified teachers than other areas of the state. In one Delta district, the superintendent pointed out the differences in teacher shortages he observed across the state, noting, “In this area, [the teacher shortage is]

extremely widespread. In Central Arkansas, which is where I originally worked, there was shortage there as well. I don’t see it as much in Northwest Arkansas.”

Students of Color Are More Likely to Have Uncertified Teachers

Some students face the brunt of Arkansas’ certified teacher shortage more than others. As *Figure 1* shows, shortages are primarily concentrated in the Delta and in the southern part of the state—districts that also serve higher percentages of Black students. In fact, this year in the state of Arkansas, Black students are more than five times more likely to attend school in a high-shortage⁷ district than white students.

It’s also worth noting that the diversity of the state’s teacher workforce does not reflect the diversity of its students, particularly in districts with the highest certified teacher shortages. Statewide, 40 percent of students identify as people of color, while only 12 percent of teachers do. This gap is even wider in high-shortage districts, with 69 percent of students but only 26 percent of teachers identifying as people of color. Because of the benefits of teacher diversity, particularly for Black students with Black teachers,⁸ addressing shortages in a way that also diversifies the workforce will lead to better outcomes for students.

⁴ <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/teaching/teachers-without-certification/results-in-brief.pdf>

⁵ Districts may use Act 1240 waivers or Emergency Teaching Permits to bring professionals with subject area expertise into classrooms without a teaching degree, a practice which may be particularly beneficial in science, technology, and career and technical courses. Given how frequently these provisional waivers are used by certain districts it is likely they are also being used to fill positions that would otherwise be vacant.

⁶ In December 2020 and January 2021, TNTP conducted interviews with central office staff in seven high-vacancy Arkansas school districts. We spoke with a total of 11 individuals in these districts to better understand their

experiences with teacher shortages, their thoughts on the causes of these shortages, and strategies they employ to staff their schools.

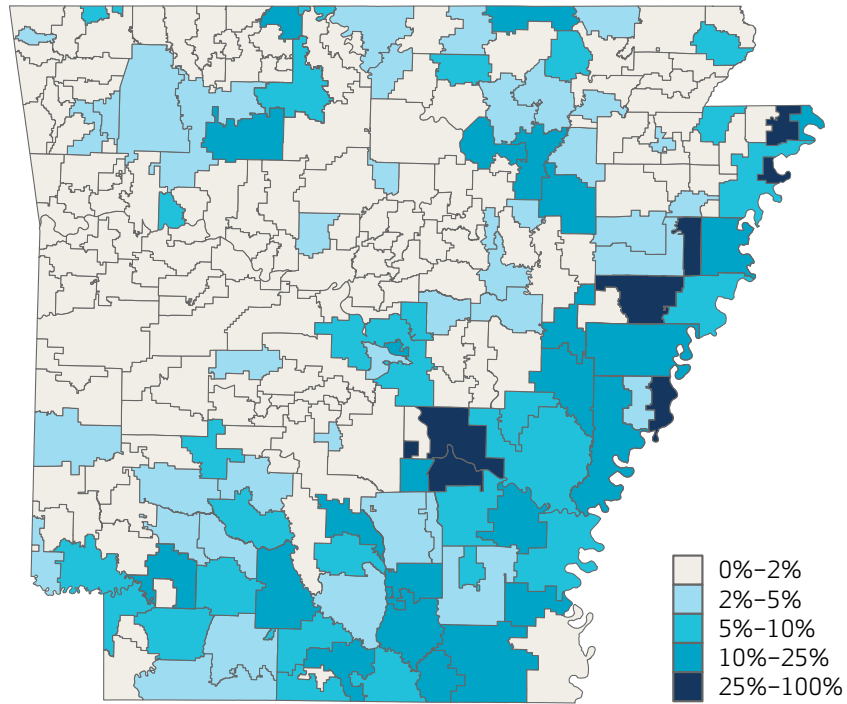
⁷ High-shortage is defined here as 10 percent or more uncertified teachers.

⁸ While all students benefit from racially diverse teachers, there are notable impacts of being taught by a same-race teacher for Black and Latinx students. Educational outcomes for Black students—particularly Black male students—are positively impacted when they have Black teachers. Having a Black teacher is associated with higher levels of achievement among Black students (Clewell et al., 2005; Clotfelter et al., 2007; Dee, 2004; Egalite et al., 2015; Yarnell & Bohrnstedt, 2017). For example, studies have

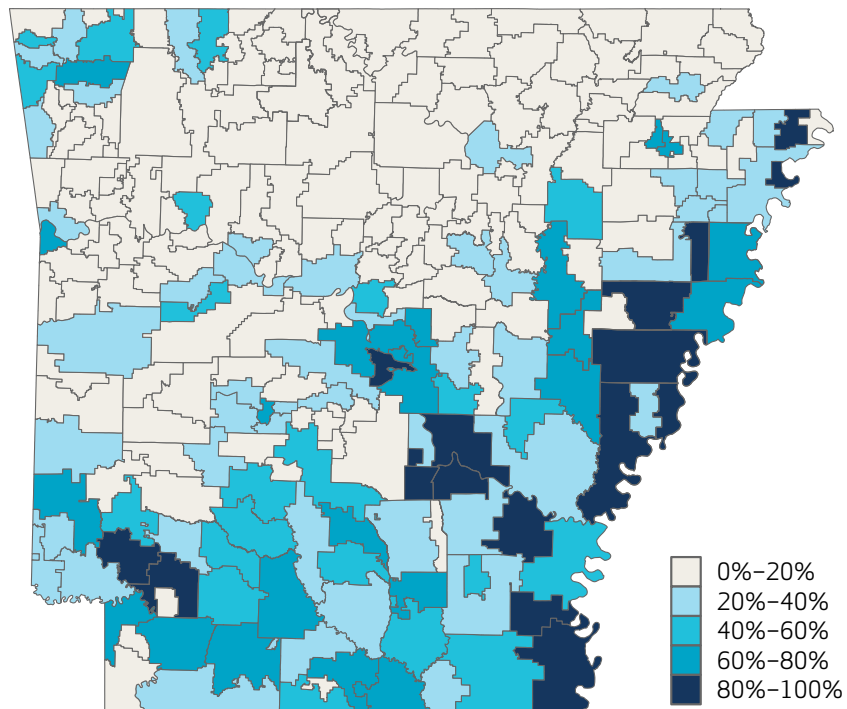
shown that Black students randomly matched to a same-race teacher scored 2–3 percent higher on standardized math and ELA exams; these effects continued at roughly the same rate for every additional year a Black student was taught by a Black teacher (Dee, 2004). Beyond assessment scores, when Black children had a Black teacher between third and fifth grades, boys were significantly less likely to later drop out of high school, and both boys and girls were more likely to attend college. Gershenson, Holt, and Papageorge (2016) found that for a Black male student in grades three through five, being taught by at least one Black teacher reduces the probability of dropping out by 39 percent. Additionally, Gershenson et al. (2018) demonstrated that Black students randomly assigned to a Black teacher in grades K through three are five percentage points more likely to graduate from high school.

FIGURE 1: Percent Uncertified and Percent Students of Color by District

Percent Uncertified Teachers



Percent Student of Color



EXPLAINING ARKANSAS' TEACHER SHORTAGE

Why do some districts in Arkansas have greater teacher shortages than others?

While there are undoubtedly many reasons, our research pointed to three likely causes:

- 1 Many people who live in these areas do not possess the credentials (bachelor's degrees) to obtain a standard teaching license.
- 2 Teachers who are certified choose not to teach in these districts because they could make more money for teaching elsewhere.
- 3 Current incentive programs aren't reaching enough teachers.

Lack of Academic Credentials

Many of the adults already living in the communities experiencing teacher shortages cannot easily become certified teachers because they lack bachelor's degrees. While several alternative certification programs exist in the state to train those with bachelor's degrees in other fields to become teachers quickly and at relatively low cost,⁹ those without bachelor's degrees are not eligible for such programs. *Figure 2* shows that the communities most in need of certified teachers also have lower percentages of adults who could fill these roles without first obtaining additional college degrees.

The significant time and cost to obtain a bachelor's degree represent an insurmountable obstacle for many potential teachers without additional supports. A prior TNTTP study of paraprofessionals in five Arkansas Delta counties found evidence that these barriers are, in fact, preventing local paraprofessionals from becoming certified teachers. More than one quarter of survey respondents indicated that they were unable to work and meet time commitments of traditional teacher preparation programs; 40 percent cited the cost of the credential program as a challenge; and 35 percent identified the cost of earning a bachelor's degree as a key factor preventing them from pursuing or earning licensure.¹⁰

Teacher Compensation

A second likely cause of shortages is inadequate pay. For a teacher with a bachelor's degree and no experience, starting salaries vary widely across the state, from the state minimum of \$33,800 to a high of \$48,282 in Springdale School District. These disparities only widen as teachers gain experience or additional degrees, with a teacher at the top of the salary schedule earning \$45,950 in a state minimum district compared to \$76,782 in Springdale—a difference of more than \$30,000 per year. While the highest-paying districts are mostly concentrated in Northwest Arkansas, there are neighboring districts with significant differences in salary statewide, likely contributing to teacher shortages in lower-paying districts (see *Figure 3*).

For example, a beginning teacher living in Earle School District would make the state minimum of \$33,800 per year if she taught in her home district. However, with just a 30-minute commute, she could make \$42,300 teaching in West Memphis School District—a difference of \$8,500 a year. It should come as no surprise, then, that Earle faces a greater teacher shortage than West Memphis: in Earle School District, 43 percent of teachers are uncertified compared to only 8 percent in West Memphis. Patterns like this play out across the state, with teachers in districts with at least 10 percent uncertified teachers making an average of \$1,240 less than their counterparts in districts with less than 2 percent uncertified teachers to start, \$1,471 less at the middle of the salary schedule (with 15 years of experience), and \$3,046 less at the top of the salary schedule. Over the course of a career, that difference can add up to well over \$50,000.

Staff in high-vacancy districts told us the salary gap was a barrier to staffing their schools. A Family Community Liaison in one district noted, "I know we've trained a lot of people to go other places. They go to other school districts because they say they are going for the money." A Superintendent at another district told us, "We have to level the playing field with our salaries and our incentives because if we can get them here they are going to love it."

⁹ Alternative certification programs in Arkansas include: Arkansas Professional Pathway to Educator Licensure (APPEL), Arkansas Teacher Corps (ATC), American Board for Certification on Teacher Excellence (ABCTE), and Provisional Professional Teaching License (PPTL).

¹⁰ TNTTP (2018) "Developing Paraprofessionals in the Arkansas Delta."

FIGURE 2: Percent of Adults with Bachelor's Degrees or Higher and Percent of Uncertified Teachers by District

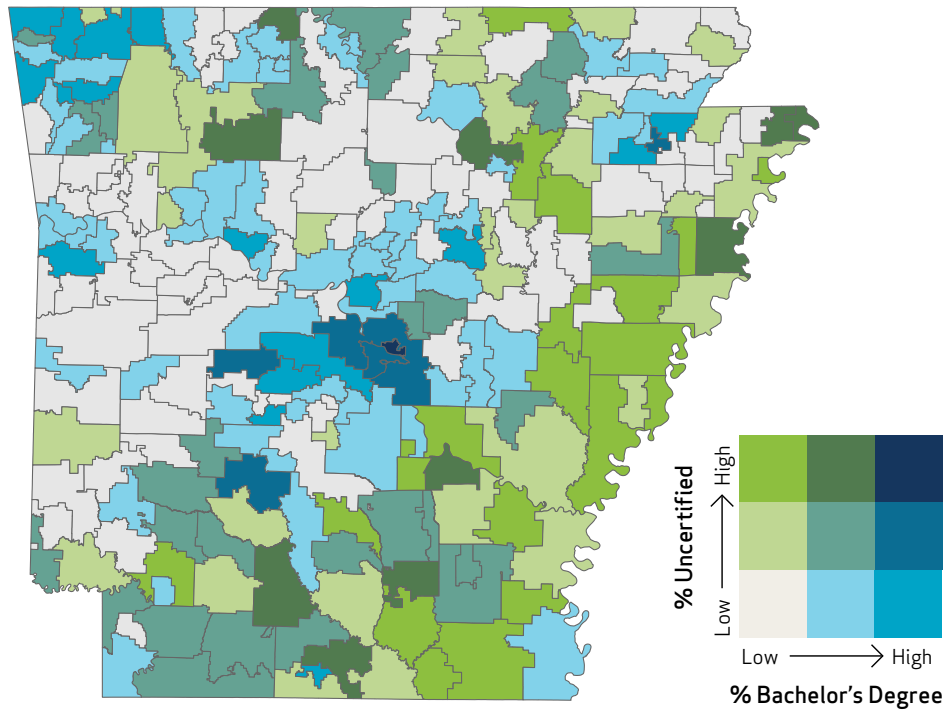
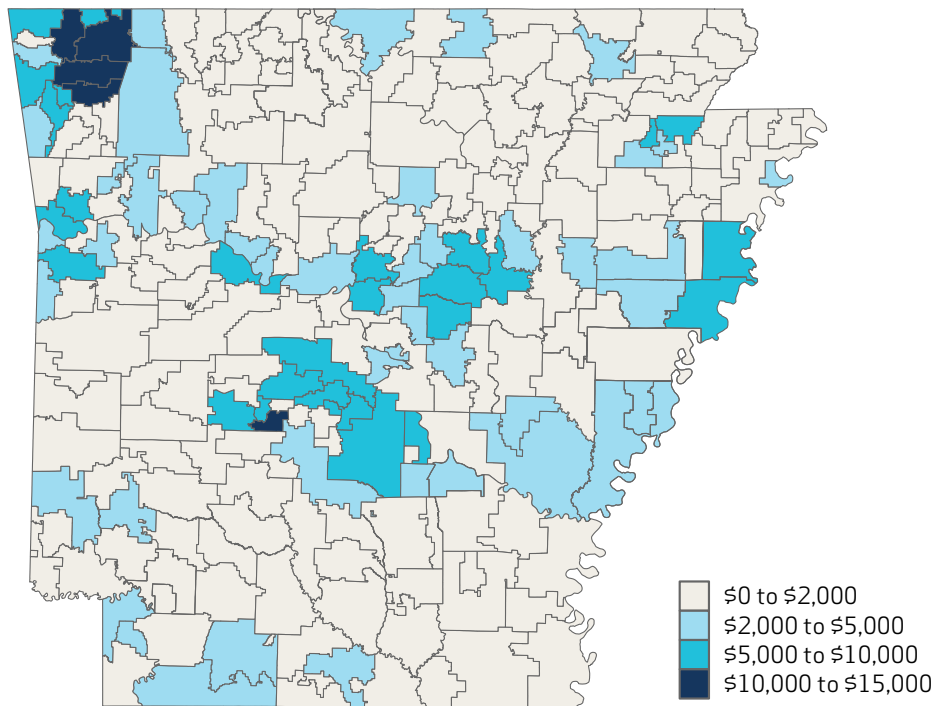


FIGURE 3: Starting Teacher Salaries by District: Difference from State Minimum



Insufficient Reach of Incentive Programs

The Arkansas Department of Education has implemented several programs to help reduce the teacher shortage, especially in communities with large numbers of uncertified teachers. Those programs are described in *Table 1*.

However, despite these opportunities and others,¹¹ severe teacher shortages persist in some districts. To understand why, TNTP conducted a survey of teachers and paraprofessionals in seven districts with especially high teacher shortages.¹² Based on those surveys, we identified several possible reasons current incentive programs are not adequately addressing shortages statewide.

Many prospective teachers aren't familiar with program details. When asked about their level of familiarity with each of these programs, most respondents said they had heard of the programs but were not familiar with the program details. The program with the highest name recognition was the Teacher Loan Forgiveness program, and this was also the only program where respondents indicated that they were familiar with the program but had not participated in it.

We also asked whether respondents would consider participating in each program, and why or why not. In an open response field included with these questions, a common theme was that respondents needed more information before they could decide whether they would be interested.

Many teachers or potential teachers do not qualify—or believe they do not qualify—for incentive programs.

When we asked respondents why they wouldn't consider participating in various programs, the most commonly selected response was that they did not qualify.

This is probably true in many cases—particularly for the Arkansas Geographical Critical Needs Minority Scholarship, for which white educators (44 percent of our survey respondents) would not be eligible. However, all but 22 of our survey respondents would be eligible for the State Teacher Education Program (STEP) based on the Geographical Shortage status of their current district (provided they have eligible loans in repayment). This indicates that many teachers or prospective teachers who could benefit from these programs mistakenly believe they're ineligible.

Financial incentives are not large enough or not offered at the right time. The second most common reason respondents cited for lack of interest in most programs was that the financial incentive was not large enough. It's worth noting that this was among educators already working in Geographical Shortage Area districts—so it's probably even less likely that educators would consider these incentives large enough to move or change districts, especially in cases where the incentives are not large enough to compensate for a lower salary.

In addition to the amount of the incentives, many respondents told us they did not want to take out loans to pay for their education, limiting their interest in loan forgiveness programs. Others had already paid off their loans without knowing about these programs and therefore could not take advantage of them. One respondent wrote, “the debt I accrued getting my degree was not a loan, I used a credit card. I wish I had known better at the time.” In both cases, the loan forgiveness structure of some incentives seems to be limiting the field of potential participants.

¹¹ Additional programs include a High-Priority District Incentive Bonus and a National Board of Professional Teaching Standards Certification Bonus, both administered by the state.

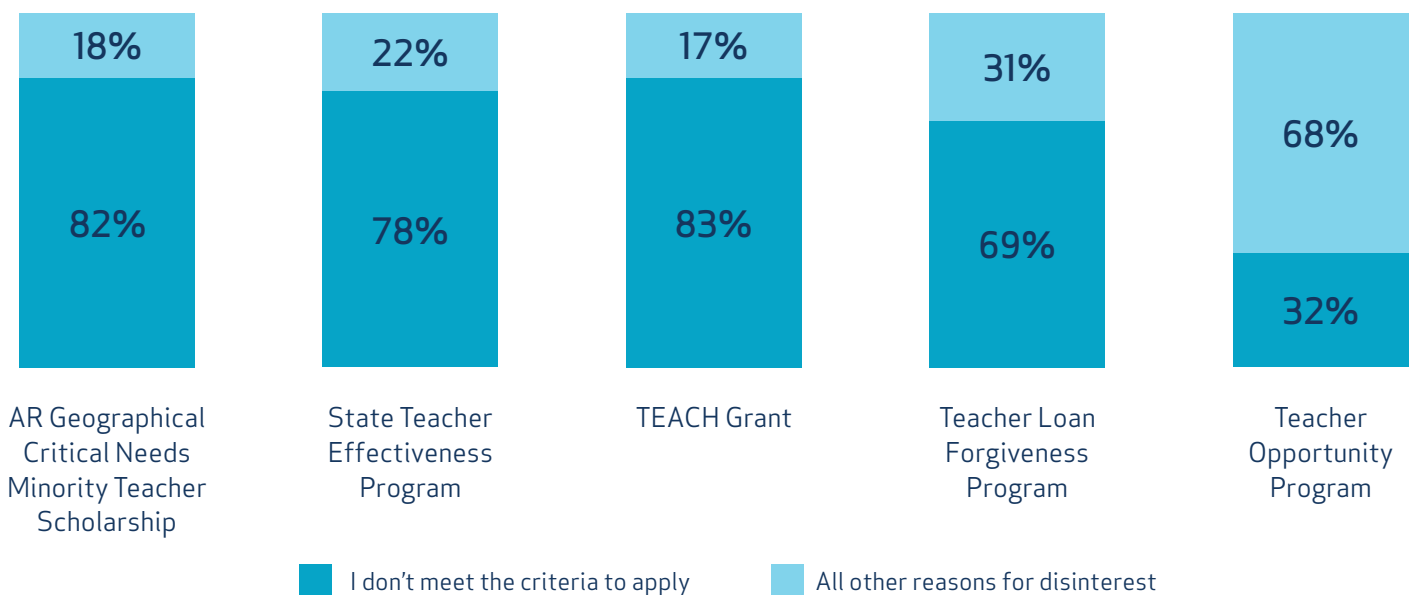
¹² District level shortage data was obtained from the Arkansas Department of Education and districts with 15 percent or more uncertified teachers in the 2020–21 school year were invited to participate in surveys and interviews. Participating districts were Brinkley, Earle, Hope, Marion, Marvell-Elaine, Ozark Mountain, and Pine Bluff. From these districts combined, we received 406 responses to this survey (293 teachers and 69 paraprofessionals), an overall response rate of 41 percent.

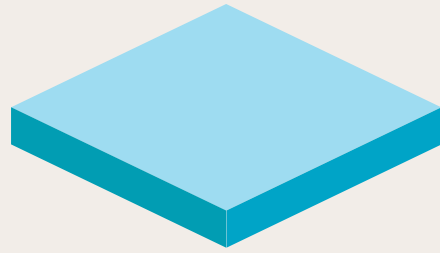
TABLE 1: Overview of Teacher Financial Incentive Programs in Arkansas

Program Name	What is it?	Who is it for?	What is the award amount?
Arkansas Geographical Critical Needs Minority Teacher Scholarship	Scholarship program	Any individual who is a minority and who expresses an intention to teach in a geographical area of the state in which there exists a critical shortage of teachers	Up to \$1,500 per year
TEACH Grant	Grant to use toward tuition	College students who sign an agreement to serve in a high-need field at a school that serves low-income families for at least four complete academic years	\$3,764 per year
State Teacher Education Program (STEP)	Loan repayment program	Current educators teaching in a subject of geographical shortage area in an Arkansas public school	Up to \$4,000 per year paid directly to lender
Teacher Loan Forgiveness Program	Loan repayment program	Teachers who have been employed as a full-time, highly qualified teacher for five consecutive academic years at a school serving low-income students	Up to \$17,500 for secondary math and science teachers or special education teachers Up to \$5,000 for all other teachers
Teacher Opportunity Program (TOP)	Reimbursement program	Current Arkansas teachers and administrators who wish to continue their education	Up to \$3,000 per year reimbursed to applicant

Source: Arkansas Department of Education Website, https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/20201029145554_Financial_Aid.pdf

FIGURE 4: Reasons Respondents Would Not Consider Incentive Programs





RECOMMENDATIONS

While the state’s previous efforts to address teacher shortages have created a helpful foundation, Arkansas must do more to ensure all students have the teachers—and the education—they deserve. Our recommendations for addressing certified teacher shortages are designed to target the three likely causes we identified above. While we offer ideas to address each cause individually, the state needs to address all three to solve this challenge over the long run.

For example, the impact of bolstering teacher pipelines for districts with large teacher shortages will be limited without compensation reform—because even the most generous time-limited incentives to work in a high-shortage district will pale in comparison to the chance to make a significantly higher salary in a neighboring district. Conversely, raising teacher salaries in high-shortage districts won’t be effective without a strong local pipeline of aspiring teachers who can meet state requirements to earn full certification. Without that pipeline, many districts would continue to be burdened by the costs associated with high turnover among uncertified teachers. In the 2008–09 school year, the costs of teacher turnover in Arkansas (e.g., teacher recruitment and training) were estimated to be between \$10 million and \$20 million.¹³ And even the most well-targeted incentives to strengthen teacher pipelines won’t be effective if the teachers and prospective teachers who could benefit from them don’t know they exist or whether they’re eligible.

¹³ Richard Ingersoll and David Perda, “How high is teacher turnover and is it a problem?” Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania.

1

Design a supportive pathway to standard licensure for paraprofessionals, long-term substitutes, and classroom aides.

Rationale

Arkansas already has multiple provisional licensure options, traditional and alternative certification pathways to standard licensure, and financial assistance programs to help individuals with a bachelor's degree become teachers. But the state doesn't currently have a pathway to help the many talented professionals already working in classrooms without bachelor's degrees—paraprofessionals, long-term substitutes, and classroom aides—become fully certified teachers. Our proposal would not only create this pathway but also invest in the academic and professional growth of educators who have a demonstrated track record of effectiveness with students in their community.¹⁴ This recommendation is also designed to increase the ethno-racial diversity of the teacher workforce in high-shortage districts. Research suggests that supportive pathways to teaching such as the model outlined below attract more participants of color than traditional programs, and ultimately produce teachers who remain in the classroom at much higher rates than other new teachers.¹⁵

Objectives

We encourage state leaders to design a partnership with high-shortage districts and institutes of higher education (IHEs) to create a supportive pathway, including academic coaching and mental health services, to standard teacher licensure for paraprofessionals, long-term substitutes, and classroom aides. The length of this pathway must be adaptable given that some candidates will have already completed two or more years of study at an IHE. By successfully completing this pathway to teaching, candidates will:

- Obtain a bachelor's degree with the appropriate number of credit hours in the relevant content area;
- Demonstrate that they have the content knowledge traditionally assessed by the Praxis II through a performance-based measure (e.g., Arkansas Alternative Assessment Plan);

- Have the credentials necessary for a standard teaching license; and
- Be eligible for complete loan forgiveness for their bachelor's coursework if they serve as an effective full-time teacher in the district that nominated them for this program for at least five years.

Eligibility

To be eligible for this program, candidates must meet the following criteria:

- Have served as a full-time paraprofessional, long-term substitute, and/or classroom aide in a high-shortage district for at least three years; and
- Have demonstrated effectiveness as evidenced by their evaluations, student academic growth, and a letter of recommendation from a school or district leader.

When piloting this program, state leaders are encouraged to invite high-shortage districts to nominate a select number of aspiring teachers subject to the availability of funding and capacity of IHE partners.

Commitments

To be accepted to the program, candidates must make the following commitments:

- Complete a customized program of study with an IHE to obtain a bachelor's degree;
- Fulfill the state's content knowledge requirements for licensure through a performance-based measure in the classroom;
- Work closely with a teacher mentor towards professional growth goals; and
- Serve as a full-time teacher in their district for at least five years to be eligible for loan forgiveness.

¹⁴ Related to this recommendation, the Arkansas Department of Education is currently supporting a pilot partnership between one high-priority district and the Oxford Teachers Academy to help support staff such as paraprofessionals earn a bachelor's degree and become fully licensed to teach.

¹⁵ "Teacher Residencies in California," Learning Policy Institute, last modified January 19, 2016, <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/teacher-residencies-california>.

Supportive Pathway to Standard Licensure

YEAR 0 Selection	<p>A competitive process in which full-time paraprofessionals, long-term substitutes, and classroom aides in high-shortage districts with at least three years of experience and who have demonstrated effectiveness (e.g., evaluations, references) apply for this pathway program.</p>
YEAR 1-3 Course of Study	<p>Candidates complete a customized course of study with an accredited institute of higher education to obtain a bachelor's degree with the appropriate number of credit hours in the relevant content area.</p> <p>The course of study will vary in length based on the candidate's existing credit hours.</p>
YEAR 2-3 Mentored Teaching Experience	<p>Candidates serve as the teacher of record for two to three years with high-touch, job-embedded support from an in-school mentor identified through a competitive selection process.</p> <p>The length of the teaching experience should be at least two years, even if the course of study is for one year, to allow the candidate to receive ample mentoring and have time to fulfill the content area knowledge requirement in a performance-based manner.</p> <p>To remain eligible for this pathway program, candidates must receive effective ratings on their evaluations.</p>
YEAR 2-3 Performance-Based Measure of Content Area Knowledge	<p>To demonstrate their content area knowledge in a performance-based manner (this is traditionally assessed by the <i>Praxis II</i>® assessment series in Arkansas), candidates must provide evidence of student academic growth using a state-approved assessment (e.g., Arkansas Alternative Assessment Plan).</p> <p>Student academic growth will be measured annually, ideally by comparing assessment results from spring 2022 to spring 2023, as an example.</p> <p>Student academic growth targets should be developed for each state-approved assessment. At a minimum, at least 50 percent of students must demonstrate academic growth, but the targets should be closer to 75 percent of students demonstrating academic growth.</p>
YEAR 4 AND BEYOND Full-Time Teaching	<p>Candidates who successfully complete their course of study, mentored teaching experience, and performance-based measure of content area knowledge will receive a standard teaching license.</p> <p>In order to qualify for loan forgiveness, program completers must serve as a full-time teacher in a high-shortage district for at least five consecutive years.</p>

Recommended Next Steps

To create this pilot pathway, state leaders should convene representatives from high-shortage districts and IHEs to collaboratively design the following components:

- Programs of study for candidates that (1) take into account their existing credit hours and desired licensure area, (2) provide an appropriate number of credit hours for teaching during the program, and (3) can be completed while the candidate is serving as a teacher of record (e.g., online during the school year, intensive summer coursework);
- Candidate-selection process, including sample lessons to understand their pedagogical strengths and opportunities for growth;
- Mentor-selection process, including role playing to understand their approach to supporting teacher candidates;
- Professional-learning scope and sequence to build mentors' capacity to coach teacher candidates;
- Performance-based methods for determining a candidate's basic skills and content knowledge (e.g., Arkansas Alternate Assessment Plan, micro-credentialing);
- Performance-based methods for evaluating a candidate's professional growth while they are in the program (e.g., classroom observations, student academic growth data) to make informed decisions about professional learning needs and when necessary, to determine which candidates to remove from the program; and
- Communications strategy to effectively promote the pathway to aspiring teachers serving in other instructional roles in high-shortage districts.

Policy Implications

To create the necessary policy conditions for this pathway to teaching, state leaders will need to ensure:

- Candidates can serve as the teacher of record for at least one school year, if not more, while engaged in the pathway program in order to demonstrate their basic skills and content knowledge in an applied manner;
- Candidates can fulfill the states' licensure exam requirements (e.g., basic skills, content knowledge) through performance-based measures, through mechanisms such as the state's Alternate Assessment Plan; and
- Funding is available to help candidates complete their bachelor's degrees as well as to hire and train mentors to provide high-quality, job-embedded coaching and professional learning for candidates.

2

Raise the average teacher salary statewide, and provide districts whose average teacher salary falls below the target average with additional funding to help narrow their salary gap with nearby districts.

Rationale

Arkansas provides financial incentives to teachers who work in high-priority districts through STEP, bonuses for teachers with National Board Certification serving in high-poverty districts, and bonuses for teachers serving in high-priority districts. STEP repays up to \$3,000 a year for up to three years of outstanding federal student loans for teachers who work in a public school located in a geographical area of the state or in a content area designated as having a critical teacher shortage. Initiatives such as STEP help address teacher shortages by providing targeted financial assistance, albeit only for a certain number of years. Arkansas also provides a \$10,000 annual bonus for up to ten years to any teacher with National Board Certification who teaches in a high-poverty school located in a high-poverty district.

The state also has a program to provide bonuses to teachers in high-priority districts with 1,000 or fewer students, at least 80 percent of whom must qualify for free or reduced-price meals. The program offers a one-time \$5,000 signing bonus for the teacher's first year of service in a qualifying district, a \$4,000 bonus at the end of the teacher's second and third years, and a \$3,000 bonus in subsequent years. However, the state legislature has not yet been able to fully fund this initiative. Stipends and bonuses for teachers working in high-priority districts or content areas, while commendable, can fluctuate from year to year based on available funding and the extent to which a geographical area or content area is identified as having a critical teacher shortage.

Finally, the Arkansas Department of Education recently requested that the Arkansas State Board of Education waive teacher licensure exam fees. This represents another important example of how the state is actively working to eliminate financial barriers to teacher certification. While fee waivers and loan forgiveness initiatives are helpful, we believe teacher compensation has to be directly addressed to remedy Arkansas' teacher shortages.

Objectives

To make teacher compensation less of a barrier for teacher recruitment and retention in high-priority districts, Arkansas must work to narrow the gap between the highest and lowest average

teacher salaries across the state. It should also raise average teacher salaries across the board. According to the Southern Regional Education Board, the average teacher salary in Arkansas is the fourth lowest in the sixteen-state region.¹⁶ Legislatures in neighboring states, Mississippi and Tennessee, have already passed bills in 2021 to increase teacher pay.

To start narrowing the gap between the highest and lowest average starting teacher salaries in Arkansas, the state should create a categorical fund in the state's K-12 education budget to provide districts whose average teacher salary falls below the state's target average salary of \$51,822 with additional restricted aid for teacher salaries. To be clear, this fund will not close the gap entirely between the highest and lowest average starting teacher salaries but will help reduce the competitive advantage that higher-paying districts have in teacher recruitment.

Recommended Next Steps

In addition to exploring the feasibility of raising the average teacher salary and narrowing the gap between the highest and lowest average teacher salaries, state leaders are also encouraged to:

- Fully fund the bonuses for teachers in high priority districts with 1,000 or fewer students.
- Triple from \$3,000 to \$9,000 the maximum amount of federal student loans that can be forgiven annually for up to three years through the STEP for teachers working in high-priority districts to account for the rising cost of higher education to become a teacher and the disparity in teacher pay in high-priority districts. The scholarship amount has not changed since the program's founding in 2009.
- Triple from \$1,500 to \$4,500 the maximum scholarship that aspiring teachers can receive annually through the Arkansas Geographical Critical Needs Minority Teacher Scholarship Program. As a part of this program, scholarship recipients must agree to teach in a geographical area designated as having a critical teacher shortage for as many years as they received the scholarship. The scholarship amount has not changed since the program's founding in 2001.

¹⁶ Southern Regional Education Board. Teacher Compensation Dashboard. Retrieved from: <https://www.sreb.org/interactive/teacher-compensation-dashboard>

3

Design a website that clearly illustrates the state's pathways to teaching and related financial incentives.

Rationale

While we believe the pathway program and compensation reform recommended above will help the state address its teacher shortages, there are also opportunities to better leverage the state's existing initiatives. For example, Arkansas requires individuals to have a bachelor's degree to teach on a waiver or emergency permit. Because they have a bachelor's degree, these individuals qualify for one or more of the state's five programs that offer alternative routes to licensure. As such, the state is encouraged to strengthen its communication about the numerous ways that teachers serving on waivers or emergency permits can obtain a standard license. Additionally, the survey data we gathered from teachers identified the need to improve awareness of Arkansas' scholarship and loan forgiveness programs for teachers interested in serving in a high-priority content area or district.

Objectives

We encourage state leaders to invest in the development of a standalone website that clearly describes

- Each of the state's pathways to teaching (e.g., admission criteria, completion requirements, cost);
- Licensure requirements and benefits;
- Federal and state financial assistance and incentive programs; and
- Employment opportunities.

For example, North Carolina recently partnered with TEACH.org, an organization led by Microsoft and the United States Department of Education, and local funders to launch a website for prospective teachers. The site is organized as a roadmap to ensure aspiring educators (1) understand the career, (2) see the possibilities, (3) imagine their teacher-self, (4) choose their pathway, (5) get licensed to teach, and (6) find their classroom. Such a user-centered design approach would be valuable as Arkansas works to promote the financial incentives available to teachers and more broadly, to clearly illustrate the process for becoming a certified teacher in the Natural State.



CONCLUSION

Eliminating Arkansas' teacher shortage won't be easy. But it is a necessary step if we want to ensure every child in every community in the state can achieve their potential. By addressing this problem head-on through strong, evidence-based policies, the legislature can move Arkansas toward a more equitable future.



APPENDIX

How Districts Hire Uncertified Teachers

As of the 2020–2021 school year, 7 percent of Arkansas’ teachers are uncertified or teaching out of field. In order to staff classrooms that would otherwise be without a teacher, the state provides four exceptions to teacher licensure requirements that districts may employ.

Act 1240 allows districts to petition the State Board of Education for the same waivers that are granted to open-enrollment public charter schools if a student who resides in the district attends a charter school. This allows districts to petition the State Board of Education for the flexibility to hire teachers who do not hold licenses for the classes they teach in every licensure area except special education.

Districts can also apply to the State Board of Education for an Emergency Teaching Permit for an individual teaching in an area for which they are not licensed. The permit is for one year and can be extended by the state for an additional year. The individual must have relevant work experience in the content area and a bachelor’s degree from an accredited college or university. They also must meet one of the following criteria:

- Hold a bachelor’s degree or advanced degree in the content area in which the educator will teach;
- Hold a bachelor’s degree or advanced degree that contains a minimum of eighteen (18) college credit hours in the content area in which the educator will teach;
- Have successfully completed a content area assessment approved by the State Board of Education for the content area in which the educator will teach; or
- Be a National Board Certified Teacher for the content area in which the educator will teach.

Districts can submit Additional Licensure Plans (ALP) to the State Board of Education to employ an educator out of their licensure area for up to three consecutive school years. Districts are required to submit a “Plan of Study” to the State Board of Education to describe how the individual will meet the requirements for licensure in the subject area they are teaching in within three school years by completing coursework in the content area or passing the relevant content knowledge exam.

Finally, districts can petition the State Board of Education to allow a long-term substitute to take the place of a contracted teacher for no more than two consecutive semesters. Long-term substitutes must have a bachelor’s degree from an accredited college or university or be licensed to teach by the state of Arkansas.

Among the uncertified teachers currently in Arkansas classrooms, more than half (57 percent) are on Act 1240 waivers with the remainder including long-term substitutes (26 percent) and staff on emergency teaching permits (18 percent).

In addition to uncertified teachers, 3 percent of teachers in Arkansas are currently teaching out of field on an Alternative Licensure Plan (ALP). These are teachers who are certified in some area, but not in one or more of the subjects they are currently teaching. Subject areas in which the state generally experiences shortages include secondary mathematics, secondary science (including chemistry and physics), computer science, foreign languages (Spanish and French), and special education.¹⁷

¹⁷ 2015–16, 2016–17, 2017–18, and 2018–19 data from <https://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/Bureau/Document?type=pdf&source=education%2fK12/AdequacyReports/2018%2f2018-07-12&filename=ADE%20Recruitment%20and%20Retention%202018%20Report>; 2019–20 and 2020–21 data from https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/20201123143546_19-20_Shortage_Areas_for_ADE_website_revised_091819.pdf



TNTP believes our nation's public schools can offer all children an excellent education. A national nonprofit founded by teachers, we help school systems end educational inequality. We work at every level of the public education system to attract and train talented teachers and school leaders, ensure rigorous and engaging classrooms, and create environments that prioritize great teaching and accelerate student learning. Since 1997, we've partnered with more than 200 public school districts, charter school networks, and state departments of education. We have recruited or trained more than 50,000 teachers and inspired policy change through acclaimed studies such as *The Mirage* (2015), *The Irreplaceables* (2012), and *The Widget Effect* (2009). Our latest report, *The Opportunity Myth* (2018), followed nearly 4,000 students in five diverse school systems to learn more about their experiences in school. Today, TNTP is active in more than 50 cities.

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