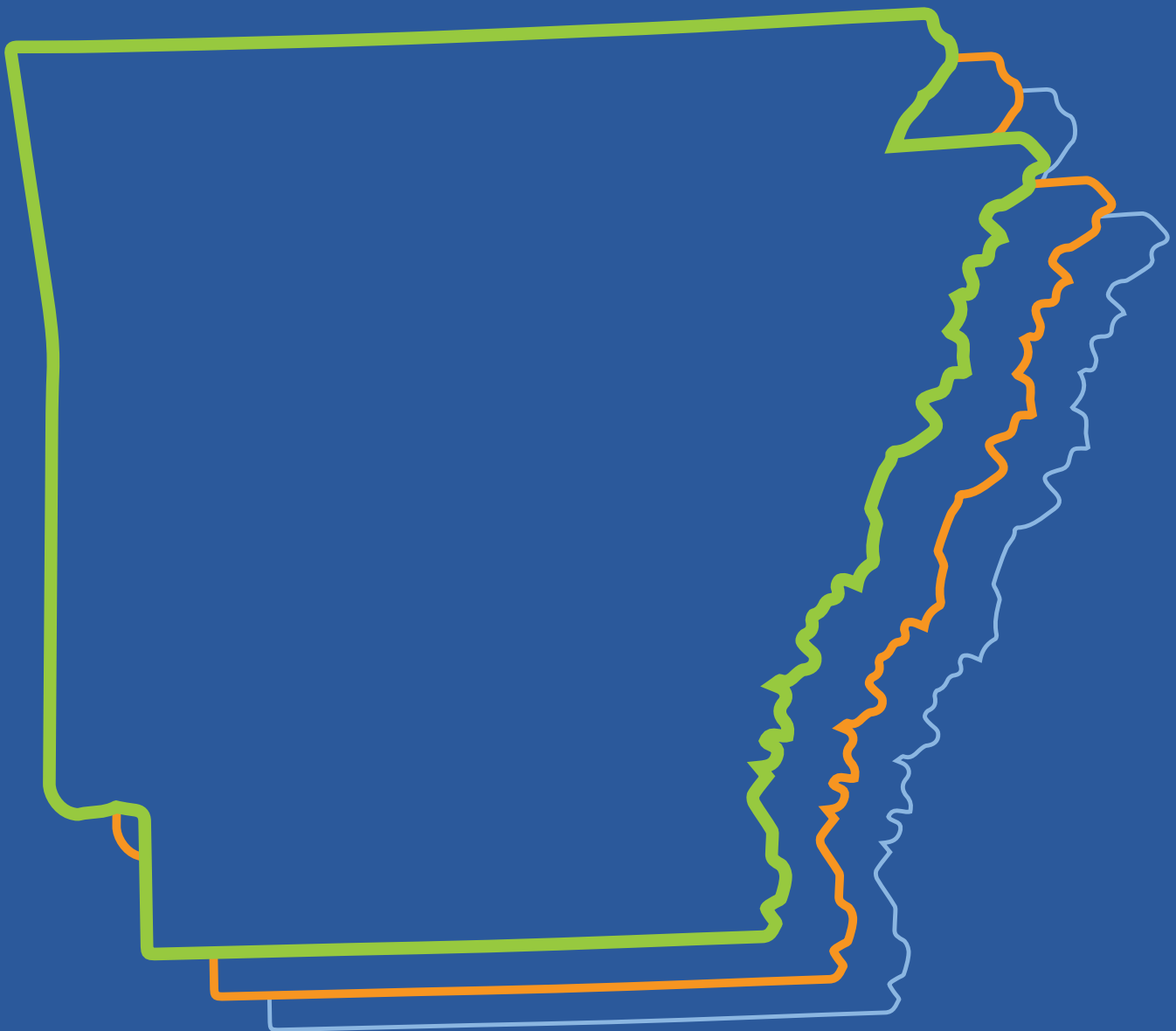
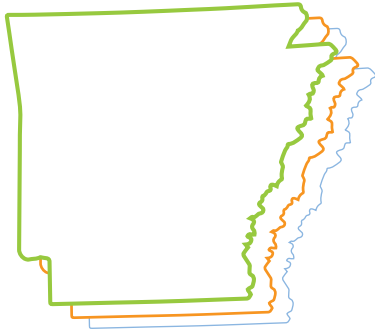


# Investing In What We Value

Teach Plus Arkansas Fellows Make Recommendations  
for Retaining Quality Educators in the State of Arkansas





## INTRODUCTION

*“Last year alone, seven of my colleagues in the English department left my school, many of them to seek jobs that would better support their families...If Arkansas continues to undervalue its teachers, students will suffer the consequences.”*

**-Holly Howard, excerpt from op-ed “Arkansas Should Pay Teachers As Professionals”**

Since 2020, our nation’s educational system has had to fight to survive a global pandemic, a seismic shift in political discourse, a continued increase in school violence, and extensive economic hardships for students and families.

While these challenges affect every aspect of education, one of the most pressing issues we face is a critical need for certified teachers in Arkansas’ classrooms. Not only are fewer people entering teacher preparation programs, there are also fewer potential educators completing these programs.<sup>1</sup> Along with the issue of recruiting teachers to the field, we are struggling to retain educators in the classroom once they begin their careers. Arkansas employs about 2,000 to 3,000 new teachers in public schools per year, and within five years, 31% of those educators leave the field.<sup>2</sup> An even more pressing problem is the number of experienced teachers considering leaving the field in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to one national study, nearly one in four classroom teachers reported a desire to leave the field at the end of the 2021 school year, compared with one in six planning to leave before the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

We are a group of Teach Plus Arkansas Policy Fellows and classroom teachers with a combined seventy-one years of experience in seven districts across the state. As veteran teachers, we were particularly interested in learning how the state can retain educators in our classrooms because we recognize the importance of all students receiving high-quality instruction from certified teachers.

To better understand the attrition problem, we interviewed teachers in our state and reviewed literature on state and national data regarding teacher retention. In this brief, we present our findings from this research and recommendation for district and state-level policymakers on how to best retain educators in Arkansas’ classrooms.

## Findings

1. Teachers feel they are under-compensated when it comes to their salaries.
2. Teachers feel that the current structure of pay schedules (which are set up to compensate educators for their qualifications, additional certifications, and responsibilities beyond their contractual obligations) are inadequate.
3. Micromanagement, lack of support, and increased stress are among the pressures causing teachers to leave the profession.
4. There is a lack of teacher voice in district and state-level policymaking, leading to educator disengagement and attrition.

## Recommendations

District leaders and elected officials should:

1. Increase statewide minimum starting teacher salary to \$46,000 and give a \$4,000 raise to all teachers.
2. Compensate teachers for additional certifications, district-assigned responsibilities, and professional development.
3. Involve teachers in district-level cabinets, survey teachers on their experiences in schools, and lift up teacher voice in decision-making.
4. Provide opportunities for teachers to lead from the classroom.

## METHODOLOGY

For this study, we interviewed 24 teachers over the course of the 2021-2022 school year, including novice and veteran teachers and those who have recently left the field. We asked teachers several questions about their experiences as educators in Arkansas, including some of the biggest challenges they face and what ideas they have to help the state retain veteran, highly-qualified teachers.<sup>4</sup> The teachers in our interviews came from different geographical and socioeconomic regions of the state and taught a range of grades from kindergarten to high school.

# FINDINGS

## 1. Teachers, regardless of regional pay discrepancies, feel they are under-compensated when it comes to their salaries.

The Arkansas legislature has conducted an [adequacy study](#) every two years since 2002 to assess, evaluate, and monitor the entire spectrum of public education and pass legislation that addresses the inequity in teacher pay across the state. Despite having these studies conducted for the last twenty years, a veteran educator from one of the highest paid districts in the state shared, *“The salaries that we receive do not match our expertise and the expectations of the job.”*

According to the 2022 Arkansas Adequacy study, “Arkansas’s 2020 average salary ranked 47th among the fifty states and the District of Columbia (D.C.), which is a drop from Arkansas’s prior year, 2019, ranking of 46th. As reported in the previous Teacher Salary Report, Arkansas’s 2018 average salary ranked 44th. Arkansas’s ranking compared to other states has steady declined in recent years.”<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Teachers feel that the current structure of pay schedules (which are set up to compensate educators for their qualifications, additional certifications, and responsibilities beyond their contractual obligations) are inadequate.

While most Arkansas educators appreciate the work done as a result of the biennium adequacy study, we found that teachers are still frustrated with the districts’ inequitable salary schedules and by the lack of compensation for the additional responsibilities they take on to support Arkansas’ most vulnerable students. Arkansas teachers are required to maintain 36 continuing education hours, while lawyers are only required to maintain twelve hours, nurses only sixteen, and doctors only twenty. While the state requirements for continuing education are high for teachers, pay remains low compared to other professionals.

Arkansas educators are required by their district or take it upon themselves to obtain certification to serve our most vulnerable student populations. English as a Second Language certification requires 12 hours of graduate-level courses, a portfolio of course work, and passing the state-required PRAXIS exam. Adding a special education endorsement to a standard teaching license requires three hours of graduate coursework and passing three state-required PRAXIS exams. Obtaining National Board Certification in various content areas requires multiple, consecutive years of designing, implementing, and reflecting on pedagogical practice. The state of Arkansas also provides a career continuum with a “lead teacher” and “master teacher” designation—requiring additional certifications and additional professional development hours—which allow teachers to serve as coaches to novice teachers. However, these additional certifications, and all of the responsibilities that come along with it, are currently not adequately or consistently across the state.

All of these certifications are time-intensive, expensive, and highly specialized; however, few districts provide salary-based incentives or compensation for teachers in return for their investment of time, energy, and study – even when the certification is in a high-need, shortage area.

One educator said, *“I think the reasons I would leave are lack of respect and support from administration and staff and inadequate pay that doesn't reflect what I actually do and the amount of time and resources that I have to put into my job. Those are the two biggest reasons I've considered leaving over in the past.”*

Another said, *“I just wanted someone to say ‘I see you,’ ‘I appreciate you,’ ‘I'm glad you're here.’ There has to be more. It can't be a jeans pass or a catered lunch, or a t-shirt with our school logo on it. We need to be seen and appreciated for our work in serious, meaningful ways.”<sup>6</sup>*

### **3. Micromanagement, lack of support, and increased stress are among the pandemic-related pressures causing teachers to leave the profession.**

The pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the stress teachers face on a daily basis. At the height of the pandemic, teachers saw a range of new district-level and state-wide policies that covered additional responsibilities ranging from classroom cleaning, hybrid (simultaneous virtual and in-person) instruction, time-intensive attendance documentation, and social distancing enforcement. While we continue to hope that these days are behind us, many teachers claim that since the pandemic, they have felt and are feeling an increased sense of micromanagement in their day-to-day workload.

According to a recent RAND survey, “teachers reported that the top-ranked sources of job-related stress were: supporting their students' academic learning because they lost instructional time during the pandemic, managing student behavior, taking on extra work because of staff shortages, supporting students' mental health and well-being, spending too many hours working, and having a salary that's too low.”<sup>7</sup>

We found in our interviews that educators in Arkansas share similar concerns. One Arkansas educator who left the field at the end of her tenth year said, *“I think some of the biggest challenges are the lack of support for teachers and an overwhelming amount of micromanaging, which makes everything hard—or impossible—to do the task at hand, which is to educate kids—not to fill out forms or check sheets or the documentation that you're doing your job. There's a lack of support when teachers say, ‘We need more time and resources in x, y, and z. No one asks how they can help you be a better teacher.’”<sup>8</sup>*

Another educator who left her high school teaching position mid-year said, *“It's just all too much. On top of everything else you do, clean your desks, make sure the students sit far apart, make sure kids are wearing masks—and in my school, make sure they're fed, make sure they're going home to safe environments. It's just all too much.”<sup>9</sup>*

While reflecting on her decision to leave the classroom, another teacher said, *“It was hard to decide to leave, but when I think about the lack of acknowledgement and support from administration, it was easier to make that decision.”<sup>10</sup>*

Another educator who stepped away at the end of her ninth year as a counselor said, *“At the beginning of every year, in my district [because we're one of the highest paid], even during COVID, the administration touts how many people applied for positions in our district as a brag. That's great for the district, but as a teacher, what I hear is, ‘You're entirely replaceable.’ I'm not even sure my district cares about making plans for teacher retention. There's no real exit interview, no one asking why you're unhappy enough to leave, why we have so many positions available each year, why you couldn't find a way to stay. While they say you matter, at the end of the day, you don't. You can be replaced.”<sup>11</sup>*

#### 4. There is a lack of teacher voice in district and state-level policymaking, leading to educator disengagement and attrition.

As teachers, we are on the front lines of implementing district and state-level policies in our state. Yet, teachers we spoke with pointed out that they are rarely invited to conversations to develop those policies. As highly-educated professionals, teachers are an often-untapped resource for insight, experience, and innovation in terms of policy development.

While the Arkansas Department of Education Division of Elementary and Secondary Education has introduced programs to promote a career continuum as a classroom teacher,<sup>12</sup> very few districts in the state are actually implementing these practices to promote teacher voice or leadership. Instead of creating leadership roles or opportunities for teachers to provide input on policies that affect them and their students, many only have an additional designation on their license that doesn't come with any meaningful position or compensation.

One teacher, seven years into her career, suggested that, *“the number one thing districts could do is find a way to value teacher input and use it wisely—from the people who are in the classroom and working with kids and who are experts in what kids do. If districts don't find a way to find out what teachers need and what teachers know, we're going to continue to see teacher burnout.”*<sup>13</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 1. Increase statewide minimum starting teacher salary to \$46,000 and give a \$4,000 raise to all teachers.

According to the [Arkansas Senate](#) website, average teacher salaries in Arkansas ranked 47th in the nation in 2020, down from 46th in 2019 and 44th in 2018. Arkansas Secretary of Education, Johnny Key, warned in August of 2022 that [Arkansas \[teacher pay\] would start next school year behind the base salaries of Oklahoma, Missouri, Tennessee and Mississippi.](#)<sup>14</sup>

In order to become competitive in recruiting and retaining teachers in Arkansas, starting salaries must be increased. Regardless of the district, salary schedules need to be reevaluated in order to provide adequate compensation for these highly-qualified professionals. This will require state legislators to reevaluate and modify the current state education funding matrix and local school boards to review current salary schedules and stipend ranges, as proposed by Governor Hutchinson in the summer of 2022. In his recommendation, he proposed raising the minimum starting teacher pay to \$46,000 and giving a raise of \$4,000 to every certified teacher in the state, which would be sustained by the current state surplus and future tax revenue.

## 2. Compensate teachers for additional certifications, district-assigned responsibilities, and professional development.

In Arkansas, stipends have historically been used to incentivize professional responsibilities beyond typical contractual duties (i.e., sponsoring clubs, coaching, department chair, etc.). We believe that stipends for additional certifications and responsibilities that target student achievement and teacher development should also be considered.

- + Provide stipends for additional licensure and certification beyond the specific content assigned to a teacher, including the following:
  - + English as a Second Language certification (requires 12 graduate hours and a portfolio of course work)
  - + Special Education endorsement (especially if used in a co-taught setting)
  - + National Board certification (advocate for a required minimum for district stipends and reimplementing of state bonus for up to twenty years of certification to promote long-term, continued development)
  - + Master Teacher Designation (ADE DESE)
  - + Lead Teacher Designation (ADE DESE)
  - + CPR Certification
  - + Completion of AR Teacher Leadership Program
- + Compensate teachers for professional development hours that go beyond the state minimum requirement.
  - + In the past, many districts in Arkansas compensated teachers for professional development hours that exceeded the state minimum or district minimum. This is no longer common practice. While the state has lowered its required hours to 36, many districts require many more hours. All districts should align required professional development hours.
  - + Establish a per-hour rate to pay teachers who go beyond the minimum state requirements if the professional development directly aligns with student achievement, social-emotional learning, and district-level or state-level goals.
  - + Develop a process to verify teacher participation and implementation of professional development in the classroom to maintain credibility in the process and a matrix to add additional steps on the district payscale.
- + Many districts rely on the expertise of their own faculty members to plan, lead, and execute professional development. Most districts currently provide teachers with “double hours” for this work.
  - + Remove the “double hour” policy at the district level.
  - + Replace the policy with the current district per-hour rate of pay to compensate teachers for planning and executing professional development.
  - + Require attendee evaluations of lead teachers to evaluate the quality of teacher-led professional development.
  - + Redirect money allocated for consultants and companies outside of the district into teacher-led professional development and other opportunities for educators.

### 3. Involve teachers in district-level cabinets, survey teachers on their experiences in schools, and lift up teacher voice in decision-making.

As experts who are on the front lines of education and are closest to students, teachers bring invaluable insight and ideas to education policy discussions. So often, districts hire expensive educational consultants instead of consulting and compensating experienced teachers within their districts to address identified issues. Giving teachers the autonomy to develop and design solutions to the problems a district faces would go a long way in the effort to retain teachers. Districts could involve teachers in the following ways:

- + Engage more teachers as members of building- and district-level leadership teams
- + Bring teachers in as consultants to school boards on curriculum, instruction, and district-level policy
- + Include teachers in identifying, planning, and executing district professional development programs

### 4. Provide opportunities for teachers to lead from the classroom.

Every single teacher we interviewed said the one thing that keeps them in the business of education is the relationship they are able to develop with students. It is also the reason that prevents many of these teachers from leaving the classroom and entering educational administration.

However, just because teachers choose to stay in the classroom doesn't mean they don't want to take on leadership roles within a building or district. Schools and districts leave much untapped leadership potential unseen and underutilized. We encourage districts to do the following:

- + Create more opportunities for hybrid positions that allow teachers to continue teaching students, while also coaching novice and developing teachers. Hybrid roles would allow experienced and highly-qualified teachers to support novice and struggling teachers in their practice while remaining in the classroom. Others might enable teachers to become student success counselors, with time necessary to develop relationships and monitor the success of our most vulnerable students.
- + Support teacher involvement in organizations, professional development, and leadership programs, even if this requires some time out of the classroom. Compensate teachers for their involvement in leadership development.
- + Utilize teachers to lead professional development instead of establishing high-cost consultancy contracts with outside organizations and companies.

One retired educator said, *"I really feel there's no room for advancement in education. [There needs to be] opportunities for teachers to advance without leaving to go into administration. Those teachers who have those extra abilities should be compensated for the things they bring to the table....Every teacher needs the opportunity to have a voice."*<sup>15</sup>



## CONCLUSION

When we asked teachers why they continue to stay in the field, we heard the same answer from every teacher we interviewed: the students. Each teacher mentioned the relationships they form with students and how students inspire them every day. Because we care about the children we teach, their learning, and their future, teachers have been willing to make sacrifices within our profession. But teachers cannot go on sacrificing their time, energy, and livelihoods forever.

Because of their expertise and dedication, teachers bring invaluable perspectives to the table. Districts and the state of Arkansas should leverage this expertise when making education policies. Teachers are essential to the livelihood of our communities, and it is time for Arkansas legislators to step up and provide raises to recruit and retain these dedicated professionals and to support local districts in their efforts to do so.

A district's best teachers and best leaders are those who are dedicated to developing their practice. Many teachers work hard to add additional licensure areas and to research and study. Districts should find a way to compensate teachers for this effort. Most importantly, districts should engage teachers at the decision-making table and bring them into conversations every step of the way.

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## ABOUT TEACH PLUS

The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that affect their students' success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning, to create an education system driven by access and excellence for all. [teachplus.org](https://teachplus.org)



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## ENDNOTES

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- 4 Question 1: How long have you been teaching? Question 2: In which district are you currently teaching? Question 3: How did you get into the profession? Were you personally recruited? Question 4: What are some of the biggest challenges facing classroom teachers today? Question 5: What ideas do you have to help the state retain veteran, highly-qualified teachers?
- 5 Bureau of Legislative Research Adequacy Study. (2022). *2022 Adequacy Report: K-12 Teacher Salaries*. <https://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/Calendars/Attachment?committee=410&agenda=5067&file=Handout+C4+-+K-12+Teacher+Salaries+Report+BLR+12.pdf>
- 6 See appendix
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- 8 See appendix
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- 10 See appendix
- 11 See appendix
- 12 ADE Division of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2022). *Impact Tomorrow: Grow Through the Career Continuum*. Retrieved September 20, 2022, from <https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Offices/educator-effectiveness/impact-tomorrow-grow-through-the-career-continuum>
- 13 See appendix
- 14 Arkansas Democrat Gazette. (2022). Retrieved September 21, 2022, from <https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2022/jul/17/battle-lines-being-drawn-in-debate-over-arkansas/>
- 15 See appendix

### Appendix

- Q1: How long have you been teaching?
- Q2: In which district are you currently teaching?
- Q3: How did you get into the profession? Were you personally recruited?
- Q4: What are some of the biggest challenges facing classroom teachers today?
- Q5: What ideas do you have to help the state retain veteran, highly-qualified teachers?