

### INTRODUCTION

We are a group of Arkansas educators and Teach Plus Arkansas Policy Fellows dedicated to advancing student outcomes across our state. Our cohort is committed to transforming education for Arkansas' students through solutions-oriented educator advocacy aimed at changing policy to improve teaching and learning. Based in Northwest Arkansas, our cohort of Policy Fellows is specifically working to address teacher pipeline issues by researching the pathways to becoming an effective educator, from teacher preparation through the first few years in the classroom.

Our research in this area has led us to identifying three areas that could positively impact the educational pipeline in Arkansas: mentorship, testing, and funding

1. First, research shows that teacher mentorship programs are an important part of teacher success, and the LEARNS Act offers some guidance for mentorship programs.<sup>1</sup> We are excited by this focus and have identified ways to strengthen the consistency and quality of mentorship programs. This will help to retain high-quality teacher candidates and create highly qualified educators who can ultimately help every student achieve.
2. Next, once a candidate successfully navigates the path through the educational requirements, the state of Arkansas requires passing various standardized testing before educators enter the profession. While we acknowledge the validity of these requirements, this testing often proves to be a barrier for some entering the profession. We feel that providing additional support throughout the testing process and offering alternative opportunities for candidates to showcase their skills in lieu of testing should be pursued.
3. Finally, funding is inconsistent for teacher preparation programs. The current environment has various grant-funded opportunities and limited scholarships that may help offset some of the identified roadblocks for future educators. Still, some candidates cannot achieve their dreams of becoming educators due to inconsistencies. Addressing these issues will ultimately lead to closing the gap in student achievement and ensuring every child in Arkansas has access to high-quality educators at every step in their educational journey.

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<sup>1</sup>Cutler, D. (2014) Why new teachers need mentors, Edutopia. Available at: <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/why-new-teachers-need-mentors-david-cutler>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Improve High-Quality mentorship.

“The LEARNS Act mandated that by 2027, all aspiring teachers in Arkansas educator preparation programs complete a one-year residency with a mentor, creating a need for additional mentor teachers (approximately 2,000).”

Teach Plus Arkansas Educators would like to address the following provisions of this law:

- + **Norms of professionalism.** We believe that teachers should be held to the highest standards of professionalism. However, the language of this provision in the LEARNS Act simply states, “norms of professionalism.”

We recommend that mentors should be selected for novice teachers to foster trust, communication, and psychological safety, resulting in the ability of novice teachers to communicate their needs openly and develop models of professionalism best suited to their needs. Mentorship assignments are often created based on location and proximity. However, research shows that mentors who share demographic and cultural similarities with mentees are better equipped to address their unique challenges, which vary by school conditions and identity.<sup>2</sup> A sense of belonging is essential for authentic conversations, professional growth, and reducing teacher attrition. To address this, we recommend pairing new teachers with mentors they can trust and communicate with then proximity and availability.

- + **Qualified mentor.** The LEARNS Act requires teachers to have access to qualified mentors. However, there are currently no guidelines around the selection of their mentors. We recommend developing a consistent rubric that values coaching and professionalism skills to ensure novice teachers have consistent access to excellent mentors. Seasoned, professional educators should have access to professional development in coaching processes that have proven results. While there are several pathways to becoming a teacher leader, we advocate for a consistent, clear path for all experienced educators to understand and participate in this program. While in-person mentorship is optimal, virtual mentorship can also create culturally and demographically supportive spaces. We recommend piloting this in our state. The pilot should require new teachers to meet with their mentors face-to-face (either virtual or in person) at least once a month.
- + **Formative years.** While the state requires one year of mentorship, research suggests that two or three years allow more time for continued growth for new teachers.<sup>3</sup> While we understand a

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<sup>2</sup> Najarro, I. (2024) How effective mentors strengthen teacher recruitment and retention, Education Week. Available at: <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/how-effective-mentors-strengthen-teacher-recruitment-and-retention/2024/03>

<sup>3</sup> Loftin, K. (2023) Promoting teacher retention through mentoring, Edutopia. Available at: <https://www.edutopia.org/article/promoting-teacher-retention-through-mentoring/> (Accessed: 25 January 2025).

one-to-one relationship is essential to the first year, for years two and three, a successful leadership coach should assist new teachers with monthly coaching opportunities and develop relationships to reaffirm a sense of community and continued learning.

## **2. Access to support and scholarships for licensure tests.**

While we recognize that licensure assessments can help predict whether an individual will be successful in the classroom, too often, these assessments can serve as barriers to teacher candidates, especially candidates entering the profession from nontraditional backgrounds.<sup>45</sup> Some programs in Arkansas provide teacher candidates with support and funding for the Praxis assessments, but they are not available to every teacher candidate. We recommend the state provide a centralized, easily accessible resource of available tutoring, study tools, and funding opportunities so that all teacher candidates can access the same information. This resource should be provided to all candidates who have unsuccessfully attempted the licensure assessment. Further, we recommend that the state provide a scholarship to pay for the next exam attempt for those who have accessed and used those resources.

## **3. Consistent and reliable funding to aspiring educator candidates**

We recommend adding a line item to the state budget to provide consistent and reliable funding for aspiring candidates to complete the entire pathway toward licensure, up to four years in an accredited program. This funding should include a provision for nontraditional students seeking ways to enter education from other professional field careers and first-generation, post-secondary education candidates.

From 2013-2019, Title II data showed that the decline in the number of new teachers came from traditional preparation programs at colleges and universities. The number of individuals who completed traditional preparation programs fell by 29 percent, while the number of candidates who completed alternative pathways rose by 18 percent.<sup>6</sup> Alternative certification programs tend to be shorter and cheaper than traditional preparation. Evidence shows that non-traditional, first-generation, and post-secondary candidates, when given secure funding for their education and access to flexible programs, especially to those who are concurrently full-time employed and raising a family, not only complete their education journey but are retained and stay in the profession at a higher rate.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Shuls, J.V. & Trivitt, J.R. (2015). Teacher Effectiveness: An Analysis of Licensure Screens. Educational Policy. 29(4) 645–675. Retrieved from: 29(4) 645–675

<sup>5</sup> Driven By Data: Using Licensure Tests to Build A Strong, Diverse Teacher Workforce. (2021). National Council on Teacher Quality. Retrieved from: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ut5n\\_Q2wu5ApdW-r-M74FYw1yzxNHCdH/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ut5n_Q2wu5ApdW-r-M74FYw1yzxNHCdH/view)

<sup>6</sup> Aldeman, C. (2024) Why are fewer people becoming teachers?, Education Next. Available at: <https://www.educationnext.org/why-are-fewer-people-becoming-teachers/>

<sup>7</sup> Whitley, S., Benson, G. and Wesaw, A. (2018) First-generation student success, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/>. Available at: <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/first-gen-student-success.pdf>

Arkansas has a variety of non-traditional pathways and initiatives, including the Arkansas Teacher Apprenticeship, Pre-Educator Certified Teaching Assistant Credential, AR Teacher Corps, and the University of AR Project ELEVATE. One roadblock is that funding is often grant-based and impermanent, leading potentially successful candidates without resources to complete their education. When funding is unstable or inconsistent, those candidates who would otherwise be able to complete the program are most likely to withdraw from the programs based on economic hardship.

## CLOSING

Teach Plus Arkansas calls on policymakers and community leaders to take bold action to address our state's teacher pipeline and retention crisis. Our research has identified critical areas—mentorship, testing, and funding—that must be prioritized to create a sustainable, diverse, and effective teaching workforce. We call for creating stronger mentorship programs that are culturally responsive, provide ongoing support for new teachers, and include robust leadership coaching. Additionally, we advocate for expanding access to resources for licensure assessments, including tutoring and funding for retakes. Finally, we urge state leaders to commit to consistent funding for teacher preparation programs, ensuring that nontraditional and first-generation candidates have the financial support they need to succeed. By acting now, we can build a more inclusive, equitable, and successful education system that meets the needs of every student across Arkansas. Join us in making this vision a reality.

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