

MISSING OUT

Arkansas' Teacher Shortage and How to Fix It

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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.

Unfortunately, Arkansas has faced a massive shortage of certified teachers for decades. 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.

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 this report, 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. If you have any questions or would like to discuss, please contact us.

Mapping the Teacher Shortage in Arkansas

Shortages Are Concentrated in Southern Arkansas and the Delta Region. Across Arkansas, approximately 4 percent of teachers are uncertified, more than double the national average of 1.7 percent. 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.

Students of Color Are More Likely to Have Uncertified Teachers. Shortages are primarily concentrated in the Delta and in the southern part of the state—districts that also serve higher percentages of Black students. Black students are more than five times more likely to attend school in a high-shortage district than white students.

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

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

³ <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/teaching/teachers-without-certification/results-in-brief.pdf>

⁴ 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.

⁵ High-shortage is defined here as 10 percent or more uncertified teachers.

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:

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.

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.

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. Yet we found many prospective teachers aren't familiar with program details and/or do not qualify (or believe they do not qualify), and financial incentives are not large enough or not offered at the right time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1

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

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. 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.

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.

State leaders are also encouraged to:

- Fully fund the stipends for teachers in high priority districts with 1,000 or fewer students.
- Triple from to \$3,000 to \$9,000 the maximum amount of federal student loans that can be forgiven annually for up to three years through the State Teacher Education Program for teachers working in high-priority district.
- 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 teacher in a geographical area designated as having a critical teacher shortage for as many years as they received the scholarship.

3

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

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.

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.