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Overview of the Arkansas Teacher Workforce

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Abstract

The teaching profession is central to improving student outcomes and long-term success. High-quality teachers contribute not only to students' academic performance but also to their future economic opportunities, making teacher recruitment and retention a key policy priority. This paper examines the current state of Arkansas's teacher workforce and assesses the policy mechanisms available to strengthen the state's teacher pipeline. We analyze recent reforms under the Arkansas LEARNS Act and related initiatives designed to enhance teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention. Findings indicate that while teacher retention has stabilized since the pandemic, it remains below pre-pandemic levels, with ongoing shortages in specific subjects and geographic areas. The LEARNS Act represents a significant step toward evidence-based reform, but its impact will depend on effective implementation, continuous monitoring, and targeted interventions.

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1. Introduction

With about 3.8 million public school teachers,[1] the teaching profession constitutes one of the largest occupations in the United States. But teaching is important not just because of its size; teachers play a crucial role in student outcomes, constituting the primary way through which schools impact students (Gershenson 2021). Students with a high-quality teacher who has a high capacity for increasing students' test scores will experience gains not only in terms of standardized test levels but also have better chances of higher-paid jobs, reduced unemployment, and higher lifetime earnings (Chetty, Friedman, and Rockoff 2014). Consequently, finding ways to recruit and retain high-quality teachers in the profession is a crucial policy concern.

In this paper, we provide an overview of the current state of the Arkansas teacher workforce[2] and the policy tools at hand to better support Arkansas's teacher pipeline. We discuss recent state initiatives aimed at supporting teachers more effectively and provide guidance to state leaders to enhance their implementation and effectiveness in recruiting and retaining a healthy teacher workforce.

2. Overview of the State of the Arkansas Teacher Workforce

Arkansas public schools employ about 39,000 teachers and serve over 475,000 students. As is the case for the national teacher workforce, Arkansas teachers are predominantly female (77%).

[1] https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/clr/public-school-teachers

[2] The descriptive statistics on the Arkansas Teacher Workforce presented in this chapter are based on our own calculations using administrative data provided by the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) because of an ongoing research practice partnership between ADE and the University of Arkansas, Department of Education Reform, Office for Education Policy. These data cover the universe of traditional public and charter school teachers since the 2013-14 school year.

While there is not a widespread shortage of teachers in Arkansas, there are localized geographic and subject areas with teacher staffing challenges. Overall, around 8% of teachers in Arkansas are currently uncertified but teaching under a licensure waiver. However, as shown in Figure 1, this proportion is not equally distributed across the state. The areas of the state in the Lower Delta region (southeast), the Southwest, and Upper Delta regions (northeast) present the highest rates of uncertified teachers on waivers and are also identified as geographic areas of shortage by the Arkansas Department of Education[3]. Unfortunately, these are also the areas of the state with higher percentages of childhood poverty, which makes it a challenge to support these most vulnerable students.

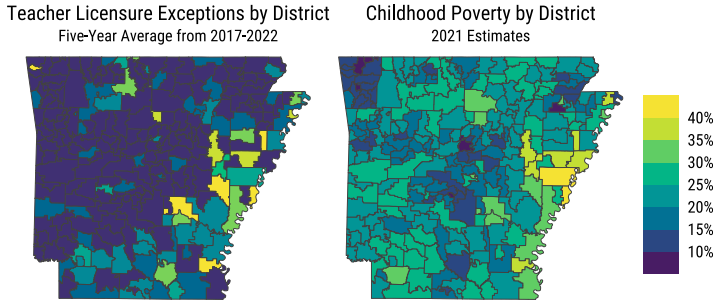
The need for teachers in Arkansas also varies by subject area. The Arkansas Department of Education, in collaboration with the University of Arkansas, defines shortage areas by comparing the demand for new teachers (i.e. sum of unlicensed teachers, teachers who exited the Arkansas workforce and deceased teachers) with their supply (i.e. number of new teachers from education preparation programs), as a share of the total number of teachers. Using this methodology, foreign languages and secondary mathematics are the areas of highest need in the state. These are followed by middle school teachers, special education teachers, art teachers, career and technical education teachers, and secondary English and social studies teachers[4].

Another important concern in the health of the teacher workforce is a state's ability to retain its teachers. While some turnover is inevitable and could be even desirable, teacher turnover is costly for schools (Barnes, Crowe, and Schaefer 2007; Birkeland and Curtis 2006; Milanowski and Odden 2007), disrupts school operations, and generally has negative

[3] https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/Teacher_Shortage_2024-2025_SY_EEF.pdf
[4] For more details, see https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Offices/educator-effectiveness/educator-workforce-data

consequences for students (Ronfeldt, Loeb, and Wyckoff 2013). In this respect, many worried about the potential detrimental and lasting effects on teacher retention of the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers experienced high levels of stress and job-related burnout during the pandemic (Diliberti, Schwartz, and Grant 2021), and especially those who had to change the mode of instruction, teach hybrid classes, or were approaching retirement age (i.e., were more experienced) were more likely to say they intended to leave the profession (Zamarro et al. 2022).

Figure 1. Teacher licensure exceptions and childhood poverty across Arkansas

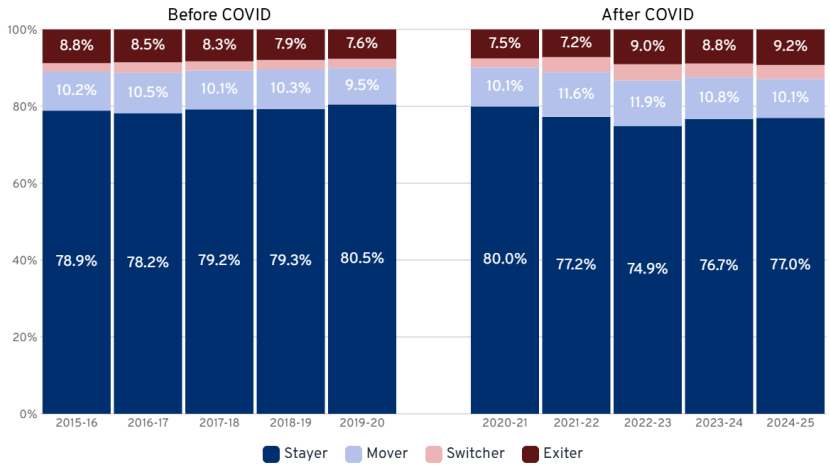


To monitor retention levels in the Arkansas teacher workforce, we study Arkansas' administrative records and place teachers into one of four categories based on their employment decisions from the spring of an academic year to the fall of the next academic year. We classify teachers as follows: **Stayers** remained in the same school(s); **Movers** transferred to a different school or district; **Switchers** moved to a non-teaching role within Arkansas public schools; **Exiters** left the Arkansas public school system entirely.

As we can see in Figure 2, pre-pandemic, Arkansas presented average rates of teachers' exits of about 8%, which aligns with those observed nationally (Bruno, 2025). About 10% of teachers moved to a different school each year, about 2% left the classroom by switching to a non-instructional role within Arkansas school districts, and about 80% stayed in their same school.

During the pandemic, exits remained stable during the first two pandemic years but increased to about 9% starting in the 2022-23 school year, remaining at that level since then. The rate of switches increased to about 4% during the pandemic, while retention rates decreased to between 75 and 77%. Retention rates during the pandemic also varied across districts and subject areas, with the southern and eastern regions in the state experiencing the lowest retention, mirroring the geographic shortage areas described above. Middle school teachers notably presented the largest decreases in retention during the pandemic (Camp, Zamarro, and McGee, 2024).

Figure 2. Arkansas teacher turnover and retention over time



While these changes in teacher retention do not qualify as the level of teacher exodus, rates of teacher exits and switches to non-instructional roles remain elevated. Also, retention patterns vary widely across districts[5] and, as mentioned above, these local disruptions have important implications for student learning and school stability. Therefore, it is crucial to continue efforts to support the teacher pipeline.

3. Policy Tools for Improving the Arkansas Teacher Workforce

[5] https://oep.uark.edu/2024-25-arkansas-teacher-retention-statewide-stability-amid-ongoing-local-challenges/

Teacher preparation

Arkansas, along with many other states, has expanded the pathways for its teacher pipeline in response to staffing challenges. In addition to traditional university-based teacher preparation programs, Arkansas routes to teaching also include alternative teacher preparation programs, both at and outside higher education institutions, as well as a grow-your-own registered apprenticeship program that targets and supports community members on their journey to become certified teachers.[6] However, as shown in Figure 3, most teachers in Arkansas continue to be trained by traditional university-based teacher education programs. But, as shown in Figure 4, Arkansas education preparation programs produce about 1,800 fewer teachers than the number who leave the classroom. It is therefore important to continue to support alternative pathways into teaching to alleviate the local staffing challenges in the state.

Nonetheless, as we open new and alternative pathways into teaching, it is important to monitor the potential differences in teachers' effectiveness across different pathways. In this respect, researchers have found that differences across education preparation programs appear small, and variation in their teachers' effectiveness appears larger within programs than across different programs (von Hippel and Bellows 2018). The literature is also inconclusive about comparisons between traditional and alternative preparation programs. While some alternative programs, like Teach for America, could have benefits in terms of their teachers' contributions to students' test score outcomes (Aaronson, Barrow, and Sander 2007), fully virtual alternative teacher programs could have important detrimental effects (Kirksey and Gottlieb, 2023). At the

[6]https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Files/Arkansas_Teacher_Registered_Apprenticeship_(ATRA)_Guidebook_8.2024_EEF.pdf

same time, more differences are observed in terms of teacher retention across different programs (Goldhaber 2019), and there is consensus that education preparation programs could improve teachers' preparation, as teachers improve most in the first years of their career (Wiswall 2013; Papay and Kraft 2015) and often feel unprepared to manage student behavior.[7]

Figure 3. Number of new enrollees in education preparation programs in Arkansas, over time and by program type

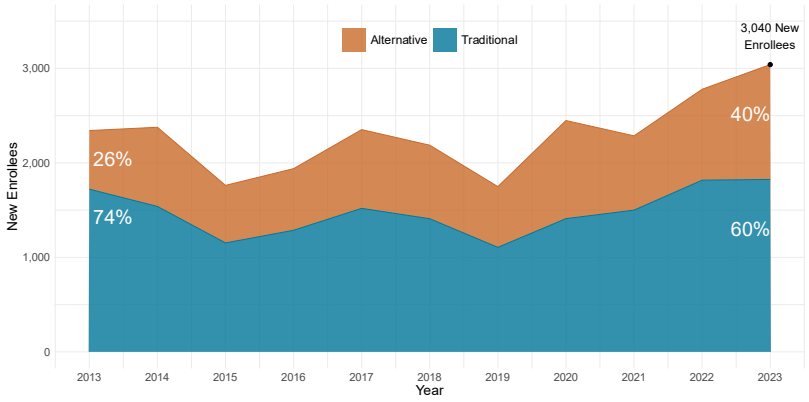
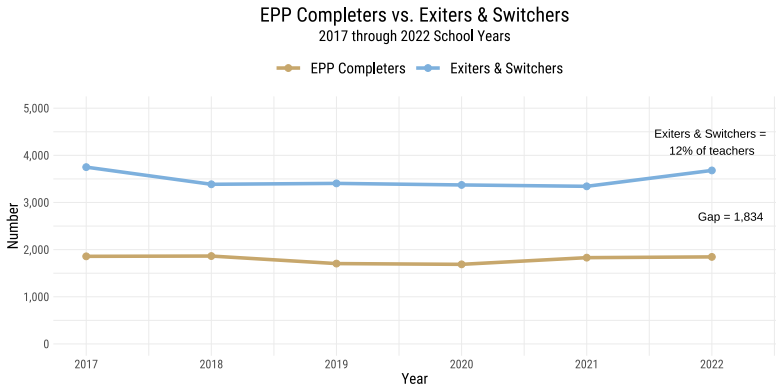


Figure 4. Education preparation programs completers Vs. exiters & switchers



One aspect of teacher training that appears especially relevant is the student internship experiences within their education preparation programs. Student-intern clinical placements that

[7] https://oep.uark.edu/2023-2024-novice-teacher-survey-report/.

are well-supervised and aligned with methods coursework, with student teachers being matched with more effective mentors, in higher-functioning schools, and in schools with higher levels of teacher collaboration, are found to help support student teachers' development and retention (Gooldhaber 2019). Similarly, student teachers are better retained in the profession if their clinical experiences are in schools with characteristics that match the school where they ultimately teach (Krieg, Goldhaber, and Theobald, 2019). Starting in May 2027, Arkansas will require all first-time licensed teacher-candidates to complete a year-long supervised student teaching residency, instead of a one-semester-long requirement currently in effect. This change provides a unique opportunity to enhance teacher preparation in Arkansas. Carefully planning the placements in this year-long residency, using the evidence-based practices described above, could help enhance the effectiveness and retention levels of new teachers in the state.

Teacher Licensure Requirements

New teacher candidates must pass one or more standardized license tests to achieve their teacher certification. In Arkansas, aspiring teachers generally take the required ETS-developed Praxis content exams[8] toward the end of their time in their education preparation program (EPP). In this respect, Arkansas has a leaky teacher pipeline where many EPP enrollees do not become teachers within six years. Only 66% of EPP enrollees pass the licensure exam on their first attempt, and about 40% of those initially enrolled in an Arkansas EPP are still not licensed and employed as teachers six years later. There is, therefore, an opportunity to reconsider licensure requirements in Arkansas, as they may be restricting the entry of high-quality teachers to the teacher workforce

[8] https://praxis.ets.org/.

(Orellana and Winters 2025) and exacerbating the previously described teacher staffing challenges.

For Arkansas, our analysis shows that failing the first attempt of the licensure test, given cutoffs used by the state until 2023, did not have an effect on the probability of eventually being employed as a teacher in Arkansas public schools but that it could create a short term barrier for middle school, math and STEM teachers, all subject areas of shortage in the state. Moreover, we did not find a statistically significant relationship between exam performance and teaching effectiveness (value-added) (McGee et al., 2024). This result suggests that potential marginal changes to Arkansas' licensure test cutoffs could have minimal effects on teacher quality while enhancing Arkansas teacher supply. This is exactly what the Arkansas Department of Education did in 2023 when it decreased its teacher licensure test cutoff scores. The state also recently introduced alternative pathways for licensing. As these changes are being implemented, however, it is important to monitor their effects on the quantity and quality of Arkansas's teacher supply.

Professional Development, Mentoring, and Feedback

School systems in the U.S spend tens of billions of dollars annually on professional development for their teachers (Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan 2018). In Arkansas, public school teachers holding a standard license are required to complete 36 hours of professional development annually.[9] However, research has shown limited effects on teacher quality (VAM) of traditional professional development often offered to teachers (Harris and Sass 2011). While professional development might have some positive effects, these effects appear only for longer-term programs and training

[9] https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Offices/learning-services/LS_professional-development/scheduled-professional-development-k-12#:~:text=Each%20educator%20shall%20obtain%2036,completion%20of%20professional%20development%20hours.

that is more content focused in certain subject areas. Overall, there appears to be a need for rethinking current professional development training.

In this respect, teaching coaching is a promising alternative to traditional professional development, which has shown effectiveness in improving students' academic performance (Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan 2018). Arkansas law requires public schools to provide mentoring for novice teachers, offering individualized support by a qualified mentor,[10] and most novice teachers in the state report positive experiences with their mentoring program.[11]

Despite the potential of mentoring programs, one of the main challenges is the recruitment of effective mentors to scale up such programs (Blazar, McNamara, and Blue 2024). Therefore, strategic planning to build corps of highly qualified mentors appears crucial for this type of program's success, which can be difficult, especially in areas already suffering teacher staffing challenges. Virtual coaching could be an option in these cases, but research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of such virtual programs. Adequate monetary compensation for teachers taking mentoring responsibilities could also be important for their recruitment.

Another promising avenue for improving teacher quality is the use of structured, low-stakes, peer observation to provide teachers with feedback on their practice. Burgess, Rawal, and Taylor (2019) showed that such feedback practices can produce student achievement gains equivalent to replacing a novice teacher with one with five years of experience. Peer observations feedback appears to be an inexpensive but effective professional development tool that is currently underutilized.

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[10] https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Offices/educator-effectiveness/educator-support--development/mentoring-for-novice-teachers#:~:text=Arkansas%20state%20law%20requires%20that,Mentoring%20Point%20of%20Contact

[11] See, https://oep.uark.edu/2023-2024-novice-teacher-survey-report/

Monetary Incentives and Benefits under the LEARNS Act

Increasing teacher salaries could help retain and attract additional and higher-quality teachers to the profession. Nationally, average inflation-adjusted teacher salaries have stagnated over the past several decades (Kraft and Lyon 2024), and public-school teachers' wages appear lower or, at most, on par with those of other college graduates (Allegretto and Mishel 2024; Taylor 2008; Richwine and Biggs 2011; West 2014). Recognizing this deficit, the LEARNS Act included one of the most comprehensive statewide changes in teacher compensation policy in several decades.

The LEARNS Act of 2023 increased the state's minimum teacher salary from $36,000 to $50,000, guaranteed all teachers a minimum raise of $2,000 above their 2022-23 salaries, removed the minimum teacher salary schedule, and relaxed other salary schedule requirements in state law. The state is providing all funds for the required salary increases, which represents an increase of 6.5% (approximately $183 million) in state education funding.

Our work shows that the LEARNS Act has substantially changed Arkansas teacher compensation (Zamarro et al. 2024). Starting teacher salaries in Arkansas are now more equally distributed and provide more pay equity for teachers working in rural and higher-poverty districts. However, more differentiation in pay across districts reappears as teachers gain experience, and it remains advantageous to work in more urban areas of the state that continue to offer higher salaries to their experienced teachers. Because experience is an important predictor of teacher quality (Wiswall 2013; Papay and Kraft 2015), this could have future implications for the equitable distribution of quality teachers. Thus far, the effects on teacher retention and mobility have been limited during the first year of implementation.

It is possible that we need more time to fully see the effects of the salary changes under the Arkansas LEARNS Act. Using survey data from a state-representative sample of teachers, we find that while salary increases were not related to levels of teacher wellbeing or job satisfaction, they were related to lower reported intentions to leave the profession (Zamarro, Schellhase, and McGee 2025). While intentions to leave do not fully correspond with actual teachers' labor transitions, they are predictive of future teacher turnover (Harbatkin et al. 2023). Therefore, these results suggest a potential for a meaningful reduction in teacher turnover in the future.

On the other hand, it is also possible that the salary changes under the Arkansas LEARNS Act are not enough to address the state's localized teacher staffing challenges. So far, school districts have only made the minimum required changes to satisfy the law. Funding uncertainty and a lack of assistance with teacher compensation plans might be limiting further desired changes to school districts' salary schedules (Zamarro et al. 2024). It is also possible that differentiated incentive programs and grow-your-own initiatives, as described above, will still be needed to better recruit and retain high-quality teachers in the rural and high-poverty districts in the state. Along these lines, the LEARNS Act also established the Merit Teacher Incentive Fund Program, commonly known as Merit Pay.

The Arkansas Merit Pay program is designed to retain high-performing teachers and improve recruitment and retention in geographical and subject areas of shortage, as well as in priority roles such as mentor teachers.[12] The Merit Pay program provides educators with annual bonuses of up to $10,000 across three categories: demonstrating outstanding growth in student performance, teaching in critical shortage areas, and serving as a mentor to aspiring teachers

[12] https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Offices/educator-effectiveness/merit-teacher-incentive-fund.

participating in year-long residencies. All K-12 classroom teachers, special education teachers, library specialists, and school counselors are eligible for merit pay. In the 2023-24 school year, the first year of implementation, 2,937 teachers were awarded bonuses, with an average award of $3,299. In the second year of implementation, 2024-25, a total of 4,283 teachers received a bonus, representing more than 10% of the teacher workforce. Of this, the average award was $3,325, but 800 teachers received a bonus of $5,000 or more, and 76 earned the maximum bonus of $10,000. Most teachers in Arkansas who received merit pay did so through teaching in critical shortage areas, but teachers can qualify for multiple bonuses if they meet the requirements.[13]

While it is still early to know the effects of the Arkansas Merit Pay program, research shows that well-designed merit pay programs can have a positive impact on student outcomes (Pham, Nguyen, and Springer 2020). Merit pay incentives are found to be more effective if combined with professional development mentoring programs and if provided for individual teacher effectiveness instead of group incentives. Larger effects are also observed if teachers feel more in control of the results of their students, and if multiple measures are used to determine teacher effectiveness. Finally, higher merit pay awards lead to larger effects, but programs appear to diminish in effectiveness over time. Moving forward, it will be important to monitor the effectiveness of the Arkansas Merit Pay program to ensure it is achieving its goals over time.

Improving other teacher benefits, like maternity leave, could also help make the teaching profession more attractive and improve retention for young teachers. Considering this, the Arkansas LEARNS Act introduced a measure by which school districts could opt in to grant up to 12 weeks of paid maternity leave, co-sharing costs with the state. However, by the school year

[13] For more details about the Arkansas Merit Pay program first two years of implementation see here: https://oep.uark.edu/explaining-the-2025-arkansas-merit-teacher-incentive-fund-program/

2024-25, out of the 237 school districts in Arkansas, only 27 have opted in for participation in the LEARNS Act's maternity leave program.[14] Starting in this school year, 2025-26, all school districts in Arkansas are required to provide maternity leave, while the state will cover the cost.

Teacher Working Conditions

State education leaders should also think about teachers' job conditions beyond pay. Our research shows that the median teacher in Arkansas who exits the profession makes almost $4,000 less one year after this job transition.[15] While teacher pay is important, other factors are influencing these teachers' job transitions.

In collaboration with the Arkansas Department of Education, we have been monitoring teacher well-being and job satisfaction in the state. Our work shows that, while most teachers in Arkansas appear satisfied with their job (86%), teaching remains a stressful profession, and managing student behavior is a top source of teachers' job-related stress (Zamarro, McGee, and Schellhase 2024). Working conditions, and particularly a positive work environment, appear to be a significant predictor of teachers' levels of job satisfaction and wellbeing (Zamarro, Schellhase, and McGee 2025). Schools with strong communication, targeted training, meaningful collaboration, fair expectations, and authentic recognition can help support teachers even in times of crises (Kraft, Simon, and Lyon 2021). Lack of support is the top reason teachers say they are considering leaving their current school (Zamarro, McGee, and Schellhase 2024). Thus, principals' communication skills and ability to create such positive work environments are

[14] https://www.thv11.com/article/news/local/27-arkansas-school-districts-support-paid-maternity-learns/91-24672cf0-4e88-4700-bbd1-cb8a0c508d5d
[15] https://oep.uark.edu/oep-edre-conference-materials-and-teacher-workforce-snapshot/

key for teachers' wellbeing and future retention (Zamarro, Schellhase, and McGee 2025). We should then also invest in the quality and health of our administrators' pipeline.

In the hope of increasing teacher recruitment and retention, some districts in Arkansas, especially rural districts, have adopted a four-day school week schedule. While only eight districts adopted 4-day school weeks in Arkansas in the 2020-21 school year, by the 2024-25 school year, 47 school districts across the state were using four-day school weeks. Improving teacher recruitment and retention appears to be the main reason administrators give for adopting a four-day school week calendar (Barnes and McKenzie, 2025). Barnes (2025) shows that 4-day school schedules are associated with lower levels of teacher burnout, which is encouraging. However, the actual effect on teacher retention in Arkansas appears small and might decrease as surrounding districts all adopt four-day calendars (Camp, 2024). These limited recruitment and retention effects should be contrasted with the potential negative effects on student outcomes. If four-day school week calendar districts are slightly better at retaining their teachers, but do so at the expense of student learning, that might not be a desirable outcome. In this respect, the literature shows how four-day school weeks could have negative impacts or at best null impacts on students' test scores (Morton, Thompson, and Kuhfeld, 2024; Barnes, 2025).

4. Conclusions & Policy Implications

Like many states across the country, Arkansas faces localized teacher shortages, both geographically and by subject area. Teacher retention appears to have stabilized since the pandemic, but it still remains below pre-pandemic levels. As such, recruiting and retaining teachers, especially in high-need areas and subjects, remains a critical policy priority.

Arkansas has enacted several key policies through the Arkansas LEARNS Act aimed at strengthening the educator workforce. While these changes represent important steps towards evidence-based education reforms, their success will depend on effective implementation. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation will be essential to ensure these reforms achieve the desired impact and support a stronger teacher pipeline.

The state may need more targeted interventions to address persistent localized staffing challenges. Thinking carefully about the student internship experiences in the newly required one-year residency could also be key to better preparing and retaining future educators. Marginal changes to licensure requirements may help expand the teacher supply without compromising quality, but their effects on both supply and teacher effectiveness should be carefully monitored.

Additionally, current in-service professional development programs should be evaluated for their impact on instructional quality, and investments should continue to be made in more effective teacher support, such as mentoring, coaching, and peer observation. Monitoring the effects of the LEARNS Act salary changes and Merit Pay incentive programs will also be important. Finally, the ongoing monitoring of teacher wellbeing and job satisfaction is equally important, paired with sustained investment in recruiting and retaining high-quality school principals, who play a key role in creating strong school cultures and supporting teacher success.

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