



UNIVERSITY OF  
ARKANSAS

College of Education  
& Health Professions  
*Education Reform*

## Research Brief

# Arkansas Teacher Retention Entering the 2023-24 School Year

Andrew M. Camp<sup>†</sup>, Gema Zamarro, and Josh McGee

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<sup>†</sup>Corresponding Author: Andrew Camp, Department of Education Reform, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR 72701. [ac103@uark.edu](mailto:ac103@uark.edu)

## SUMMARY

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- During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers experienced heightened stress and burnout, prompting worries about potential increased turnover and future shortages.
- Despite being relatively stable in the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, our analysis revealed that turnover increased by 5 percentage points (20%) above pre-pandemic levels in 2022-23.
- The increase was driven by higher rates of departures from the public education sector and a notable shift towards non-teaching roles within the sector.
- This brief examines Arkansas teacher turnover in 2023-24, marking the fourth post-pandemic year and the debut of the Arkansas LEARNS Act, which notably increased teacher salaries.
- Teacher retention improved slightly, rising by nearly 1.1 percentage points from 2022-23 to 2023-24. However, turnover remains above pre-pandemic rates, with 76% of teachers staying in the same school, compared to 79% pre-pandemic.
- Higher turnover continues to be driven by teachers switching into non-teaching roles or leaving the public education sector altogether.
- Retention rates vary across districts and subject areas, with the southern and eastern regions experiencing the highest turnover, mirroring geographic shortage areas.
- Middle school teachers notably show decreased retention rates across subject areas.
- In recent years, the number of teachers has slightly increased despite marginal declines in student enrollment, a trend worth monitoring as Education Freedom Accounts expand and ESSER funds expire.

## MOTIVATION

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers faced intense job-related stress<sup>1-3</sup>, sparking fears of increased turnover that could harm students<sup>4,5</sup> and worsen staffing challenges.<sup>6</sup> While turnover initially dropped in the 2020-21 school year, it edged up in 2021-22. By 2022-23, several states observed large increases in turnover<sup>7-9</sup>, hitting record highs in places like Washington State and Arkansas.<sup>8,9</sup>

In this brief, we revisit our [earlier analyses](#)<sup>11</sup> to examine teacher turnover in Arkansas entering the 2023-24 school year. While COVID-19's immediate impact has waned, lasting challenges stemming from learning loss endure,<sup>10</sup> and even small turnover increases can have an outsized impact on schools serving disadvantaged students. At the same time, the Arkansas LEARNS Act has significantly increased teacher pay and is reshaping the Arkansas education landscape in several other ways. This brief offers a timely snapshot of Arkansas' teacher workforce at the start of the 2023-24 school year.

## RETENTION IMPROVED BUT REMAINS LOWER THAN PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS

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To distinguish between different types of turnover that may have different implications for school districts, we use the following four terms:

- **Stayers** are teachers who remain teaching in the same school(s) from one year to the next.
- **Movers** leave their current school(s) to teach in another school or district.
- **Switchers** change from a teaching to a non-teaching role in the Arkansas education workforce from one year to the next.
- **Exiters** are teachers who leave the Arkansas education workforce entirely.

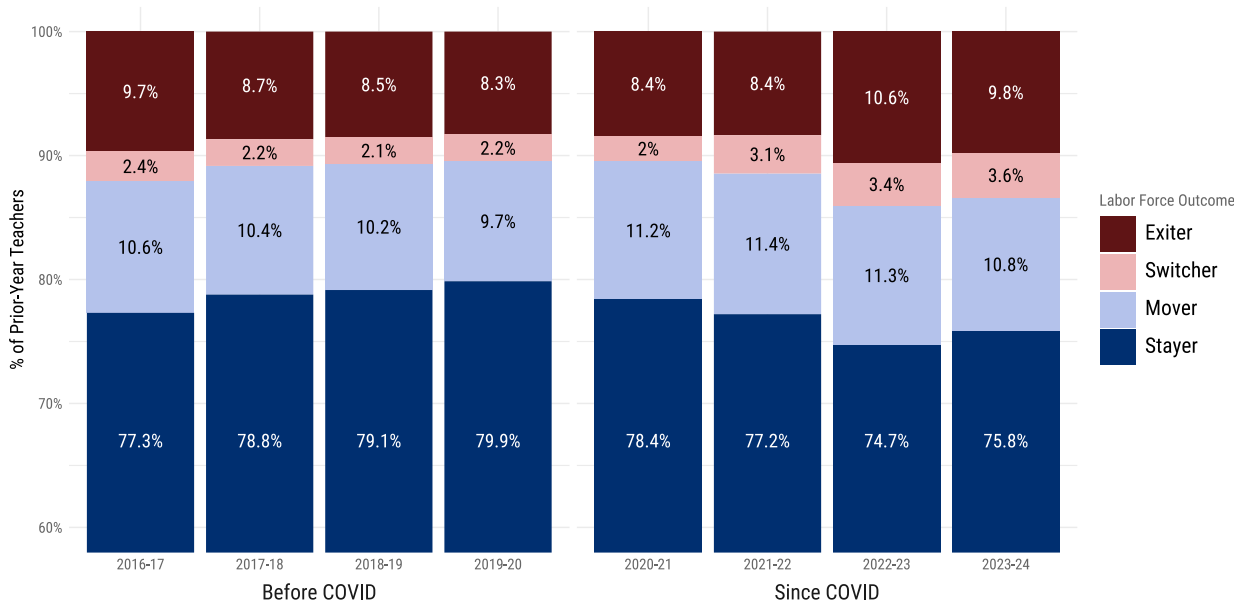
Figure 1 presents annual teacher turnover entering each school year from 2016-17 to 2023-24. Pre-pandemic, about 79% of teachers continued teaching in the same school from one year to the next (i.e., they were Stayers). Entering the 2023-24 school year, 75.8% of teachers were Stayers, 10.8% moved schools (with half making moves within the district and another half across districts in the state), 3.6% switched to non-teaching roles (with a majority, 3%, switching but remaining in the district), and 9.8% exited the Arkansas education workforce.

Although this represents a nearly 1.1 percentage point improvement in the Stayers rate compared with the 2022-23 school year, retention remains below the pre-pandemic average. Approximately 800 more teachers moved schools, switched roles, or exited the Arkansas public education system than we would have expected before COVID-19.

Consistent with recent trends, the decrease in Stayers is largely being driven by both a higher proportion of teachers moving into non-instructional roles within Arkansas public schools (i.e., Switchers) and a higher proportion exiting the education sector entirely (i.e., Exiters).

While Arkansas schools are still facing higher levels of turnover than they did just a few years ago, this year’s increased retention may indicate that the dynamics of the teacher workforce might be returning to pre-pandemic patterns. It could also be an indication that the large salary increases many teachers received because of the LEARNS Act are having a positive impact, a possibility we intend to investigate in future research.

**Figure 1 - Teacher Turnover by Year and Outcome**  
(2016-17 Through 2023-24 School Years)



## TEACHER RETENTION VARIES ACROSS DISTRICTS

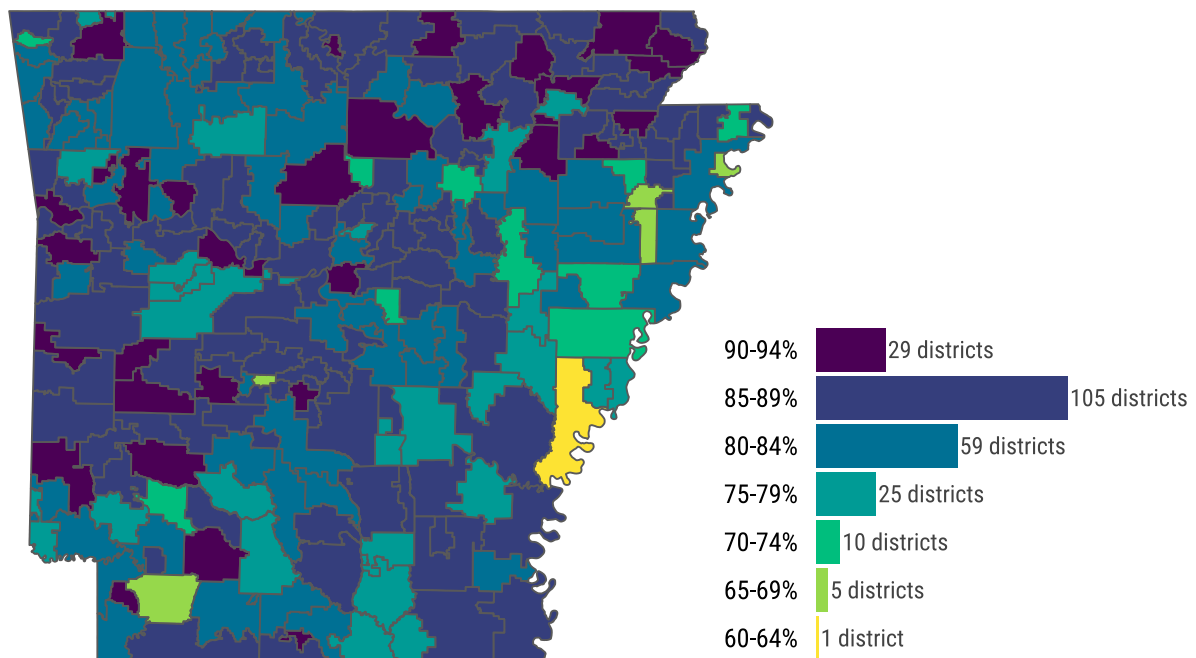
Discussions about teacher retention and staffing challenges often implicitly assume that all districts are the same. However, even nearby districts may face very different challenges in terms of recruiting and retaining teachers. In this section, we explore how teacher retention varied across the state.

For this analysis, we consider a teacher retained if they continued working in the same district from year to year, even if they moved schools or switched to a non-teaching role in that school district. This acknowledges that not all transitions imply staffing difficulties from the district's standpoint. For example, a teacher who leaves the classroom to work in that district as an instructional coach may be beneficial to other teachers in that district. Figure 2 displays the average retention rate by district since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the past four years, most school districts in Arkansas (N=134) retained 85% or more of their teachers on average, with 29 districts retaining 90% or more of their teachers. However, some districts struggled as 41 districts retained fewer than 80% of their teachers on average.

Consistent with our [prior work examining the Arkansas teacher workforce](#), we find that teacher turnover is highest in the southern and eastern regions of the state. These regions are also listed by the Arkansas Department of Education as [geographic shortage areas](#).<sup>13</sup> Teachers in these regions may be eligible for incentive bonuses to remain working in these districts under the Merit Teacher Incentive Fund created by the LEARNS Act. While details concerning how exactly these incentive payments will be allocated are not yet available, research has found that similar incentive payments can be effective at increasing teacher retention.<sup>14</sup> We plan to further study their effect on teacher turnover in Arkansas once they are implemented.

**Figure 2 – Average Teacher Retention by District**  
(Average Entering 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23, and 2023-24 School Years)



The district with the lowest average teacher retention rate (63%) was the Marvell-Elaine School District in eastern Arkansas, which this year became the state's first public school transformation district. The transformation contract between Marvell-Elaine and the [Friendship Education Foundation](#) (FEF) was enabled by the [Arkansas LEARNS Act](#) and allows FEF to oversee, manage, and operate the district. The low retention rate is likely the result of one-time restructuring, as the retention rates in previous years ranged from 70-85%.

## RETENTION DIFFERS FOR TEACHERS IN DIFFERENT SUBJECTS

Much like turnover between districts, teacher retention also varies significantly across subject areas.<sup>15</sup> In this section, we maintain our definition of a retained teacher as one employed by the same district from year to year and analyze how retention rates have shifted across subjects. Figure 3, plots the average retention rate pre-pandemic as a dot and the arrow indicates how retention has changed since the pandemic. The percentage point change is shown next to the arrowhead.

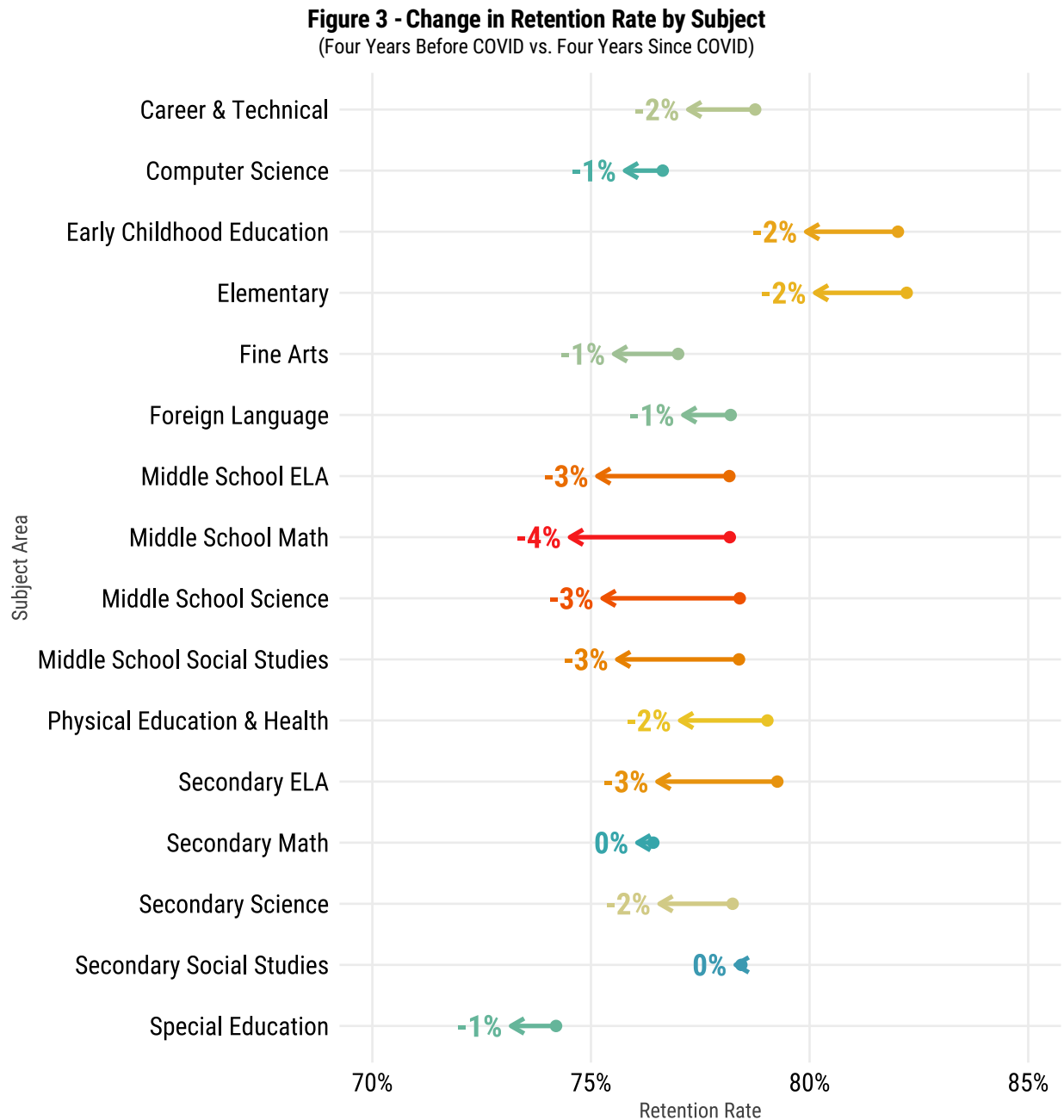


Figure 3 shows that both retention rates and changes in retention rates vary substantially across subjects. Retention rates among teachers of some subjects, such as general elementary classes, have decreased but remain above the pre-pandemic retention rates for most other subjects. Conversely, retention rates for secondary math and social studies teachers have hardly changed since the start of the pandemic.

Interestingly, the largest decreases in retention rates are among middle school teachers. These decreases might reflect the increased challenges that these teachers face in helping students recover from the academic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although further research is needed to confirm this hypothesis, early research shows lower rates of learning recovery for middle school students.<sup>16</sup> Despite these decreases in retention rates for middle school teachers, middle school subjects are not currently considered statewide subject shortage areas by the Arkansas Department of Education.

## SOME DISTRICTS MAY FACE DIFFICULT STAFFING CHOICES MOVING FORWARD

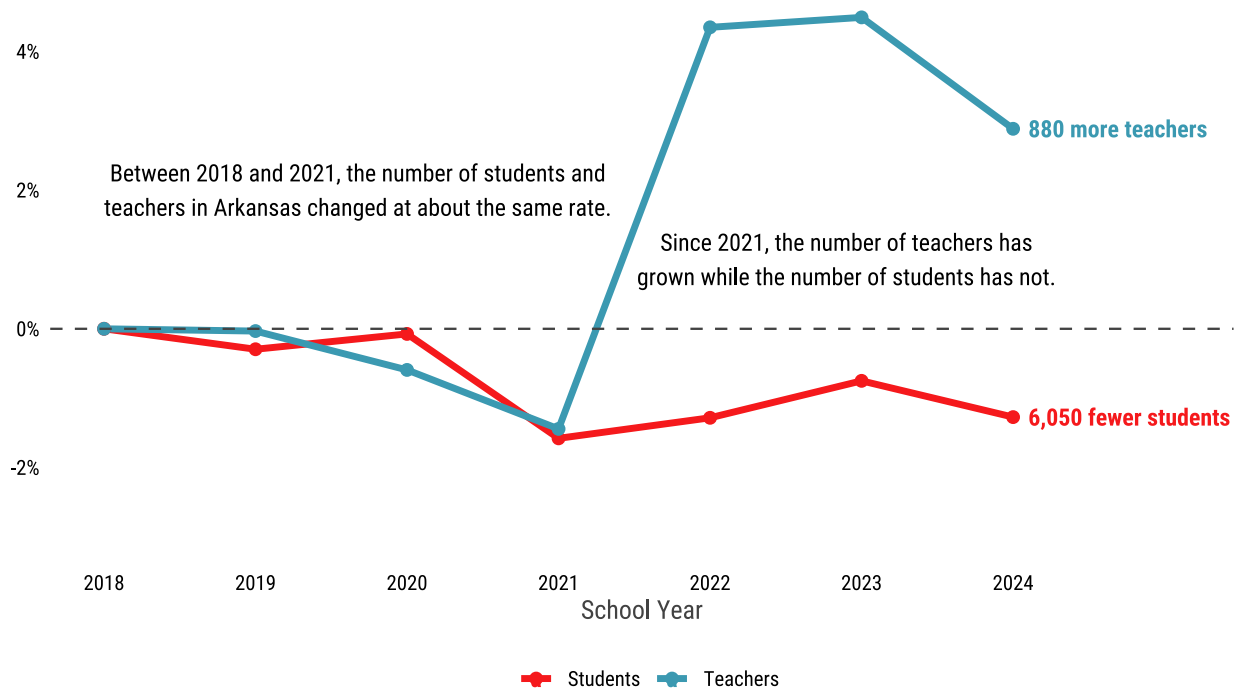
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While heightened attention has centered on rising teacher turnover as a key staffing issue, a newer concern has emerged. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, school districts nationwide have faced declining student enrollments<sup>17</sup> and districts appear to have become less responsive to changes in student enrollment<sup>9</sup>, potentially as the result of federal COVID-19 relief. Declining enrollments could lead to financial challenges for districts.<sup>18</sup>

In Arkansas, school districts are largely funded on a per-pupil basis with state aid supplementing the difference between a baseline “foundation” funding amount and how much local property taxes are collected per student. There are additional funds made available based on student needs (e.g., districts receive an additional \$366 per English language learner student). This means that predicting the exact impact that a student enrollment change might have on a district’s finances is complex. In general, however, fewer students mean less money for a district to spend on things like teachers’ salaries and benefits. As student enrollments decrease, some districts might face tough decisions ahead, potentially leading to necessary reductions in the teaching workforce in some instances.

To study how this might affect Arkansas school districts, in Figure 4 we explore how student enrollments and the teacher workforce have changed from the 2017-18 school year to the current 2023-24 school year. We find that between the 2018-19 and 2019-20 school years there was relatively little change in either statewide enrollment or teacher workforce - the lines remain relatively flat for those school years. In 2020-21, both the teacher workforce and statewide student enrollment in public schools decreased by about the same amount (1.5%) meaning that the statewide student-teacher ratio was essentially unchanged. However, in 2021-22 the teaching workforce grew and has remained elevated above 2017-18 levels while statewide student enrollments have remained below those levels. As a result, in the current school year Arkansas public schools employ about 880 more teachers while teaching 6,050 fewer students than they did 6 years ago.

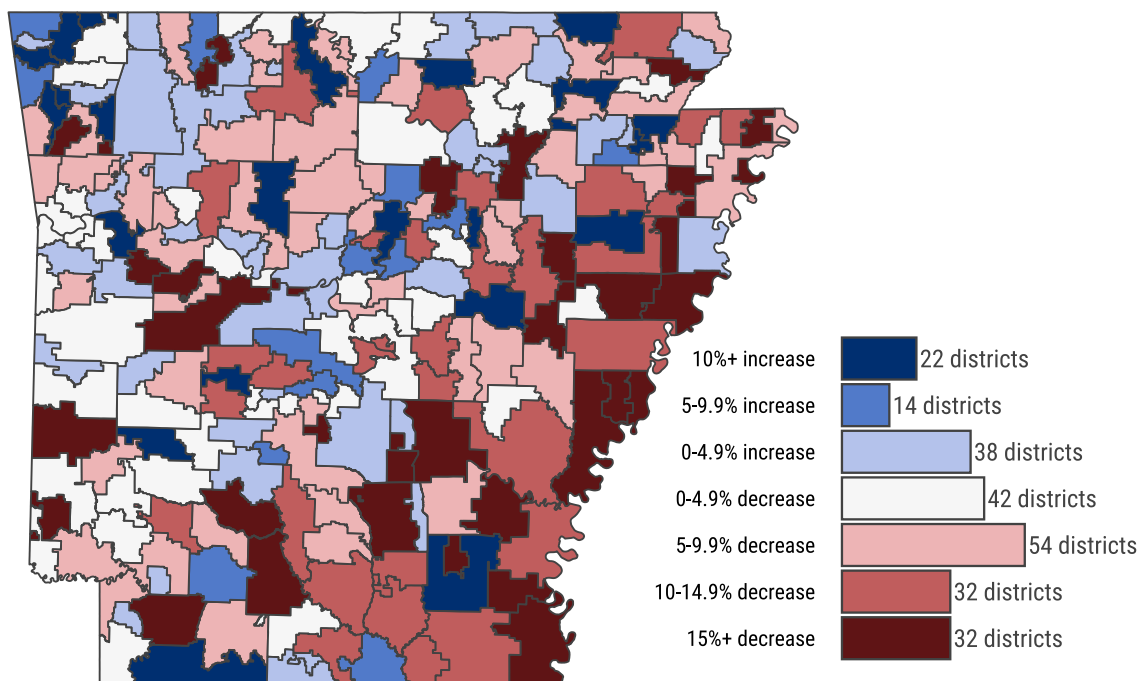
**Figure 4 - Change in Enrollments and Teacher Workforce Since 2018**  
(Statewide Totals)



There are signs, however, that districts are responding to these changes in enrollment this current school year. Entering the 2023-24 school year, the teacher workforce decreased by a larger percentage than enrollments. We anticipate that, if the size of the teacher workforce continues to contract at the same rate, the number of teachers employed by school districts and statewide enrollments may converge sometime within the next 3 academic years.

To better understand how enrollment changes vary across districts and regions, Figure 5 maps the percentage change in each district's between the 2017-18 and 2023-24 school years. Examining enrollment changes by district, we see that districts in eastern Arkansas have experienced the largest decreases in student enrollment since the 2017-18 school year. In total, 118 districts have had enrollment decreases greater than 5% while 36 districts have had enrollment increases greater than 5%. Districts that experience enrollment increases appear to be concentrated in the northern and western regions of the state with nearly all districts in Northwest Arkansas experiencing relatively large enrollment increases.

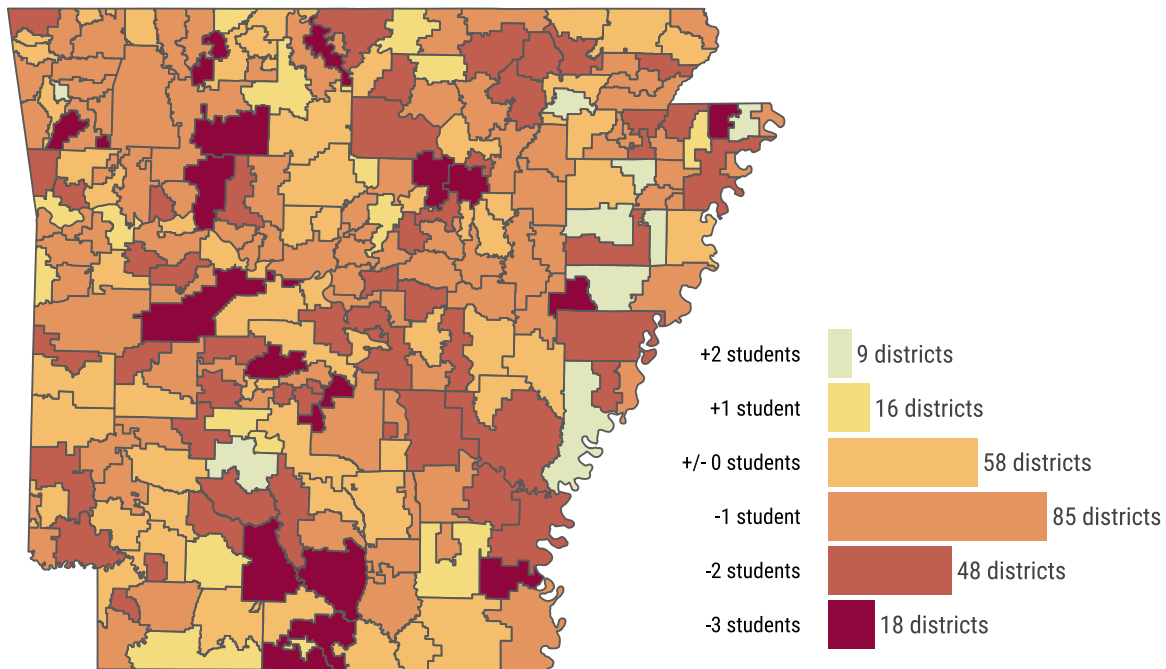
**Figure 5 – Enrollment Change by District**  
(As a Percent of 2017-18 Enrollments)



While declining enrollments are a challenge that many districts face, how districts choose to respond to this challenge has significant implications for what decisions they may need to face soon once districts can no longer access ESSER funds. To see how districts have adjusted staffing in response to these changes, we map the change in student-teacher ratio between the 2017-18 and 2023-24 school years in Figure 6. Decreases in a district's student-teacher ratio indicate that there are fewer students per teacher and that districts likely are experiencing decreases in revenue but employing the same number of teachers.

Comparing Figures 5 and 6, we see that although many school districts have experienced significant decreases in student enrollment since the 2017-18 school year, some of these districts have maintained or even increased their student-teacher ratio. This indicates that these districts are being responsive to changes in enrollment and employing fewer teachers to teach fewer students. Other districts, however, have experienced significant decreases in student enrollment and student-teacher ratios. These districts, shown in red in Figure 6, may face difficulties funding teacher positions once temporary COVID-19 relief ESSER funds expire in September 2024.

**Figure 6 – Change in Student-Teacher Ratio by District**  
(2023-24 Ratios as Compared to 2017-18 Ratio)



## DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges for teachers, raising concerns about a potential surge in teacher turnover that could impede student recovery efforts. Our prior analysis indicated relatively stable turnover rates entering the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years. However, we observed an increase of 5 percentage points (20%) above pre-pandemic levels in the 2022-23 school year. In this brief, we build upon this analysis and examine teacher turnover during the 2023-2024 school year- the fourth academic year since the pandemic's onset and the first year of implementation of the Arkansas LEARNS Act.

Our findings suggest a modest improvement in teacher retention entering the 2023-24 school year compared with the preceding year (2022-23). The percentage of teachers remaining in the same school increased by nearly 1.5 percentage points, signaling a potential recovery from the pandemic-induced stressors. This improvement may also be the result of the new Arkansas LEARNS legislation, which, among other policies, increased teacher salaries statewide.

Despite the positive trend, turnover rates remain elevated compared to pre-pandemic levels. Diminished retention stems from both a higher proportion of teachers moving into non-instructional roles within the Arkansas public education sector and a higher proportion exiting the education sector

entirely. Some of these non-instructional positions might have been sustained through federal COVID-19 relief ESSER funds, raising uncertainty about their continuity as these funds expire.

Our results also demonstrate that teacher turnover is not uniform across districts or subjects. Many districts, especially those in the eastern and southern areas of the state, face persistently high levels of teacher turnover. Similarly, teachers of special education continue to be retained at lower rates than teachers of many other subjects and we find worrying signs of increased turnover among middle school teachers. Any policy or program intended to address teacher turnover and potential staffing challenges will need to target these geographic and subject areas to be effective.

Looking ahead, Arkansas school districts may have to confront challenging staffing decisions if the teacher workforce is not appropriately aligned with declining levels of student enrollment. Our analysis shows that despite districts exhibiting increasing responsiveness to enrollment changes in the current school year, the state is employing about 880 more teachers in 2023-24 than in pre-pandemic years while educating 6,050 fewer students.

In the event of necessary teacher layoffs, drawing lessons from the Great Recession experience would be crucial. Studies found that such layoffs negatively impacted student achievement, with disproportionate effects on disadvantaged students. Specifically, seniority-based (“last-in-first-out”) policies exacerbated these effects, as disadvantaged students are more likely to be taught by early career teachers.<sup>19</sup> We recommend district and state leaders closely monitor the situation and, if necessary, engage in discussions to design layoff policies that avoid adverse effects, especially as students strive to recover from the academic impacts of the pandemic.

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