

Elevating High-Quality Instruction: Arkansas's Merit Teacher Incentive Fund

Moving Learning Forward

From Policy to Progress:
The LEARNS Act



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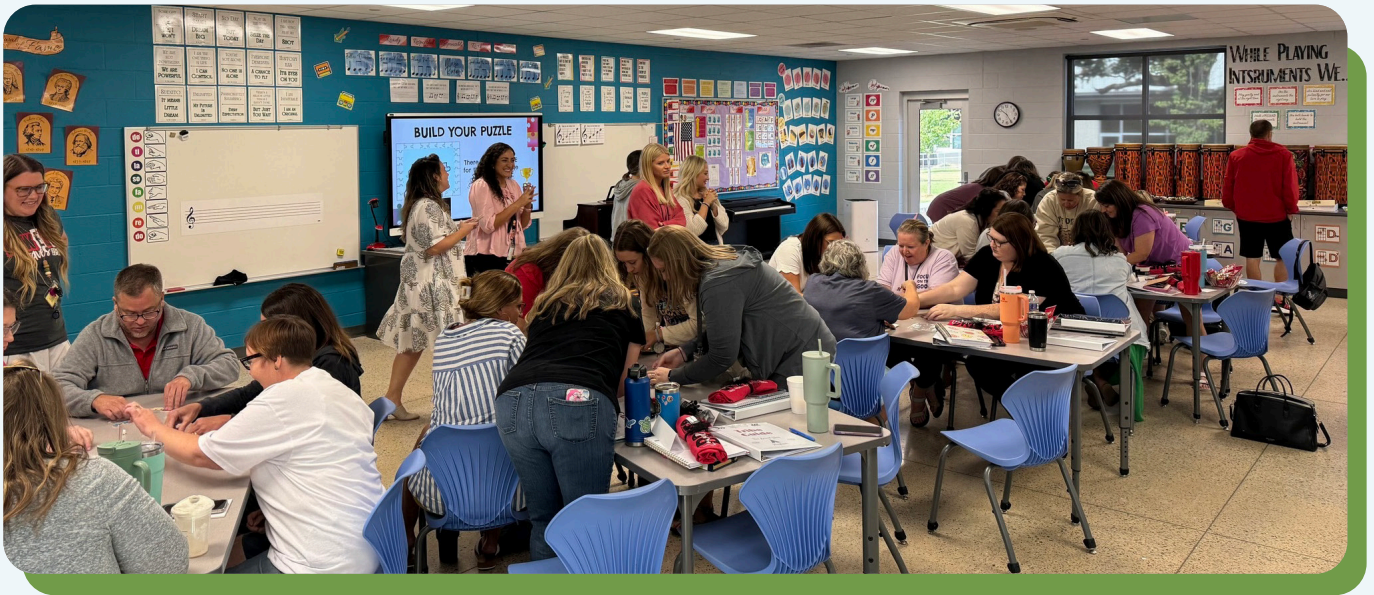
When Great Teaching Pays Off for Students and Educators

Arkansas's embrace of performance-based merit bonuses is spotlighting high-quality instruction across the state.

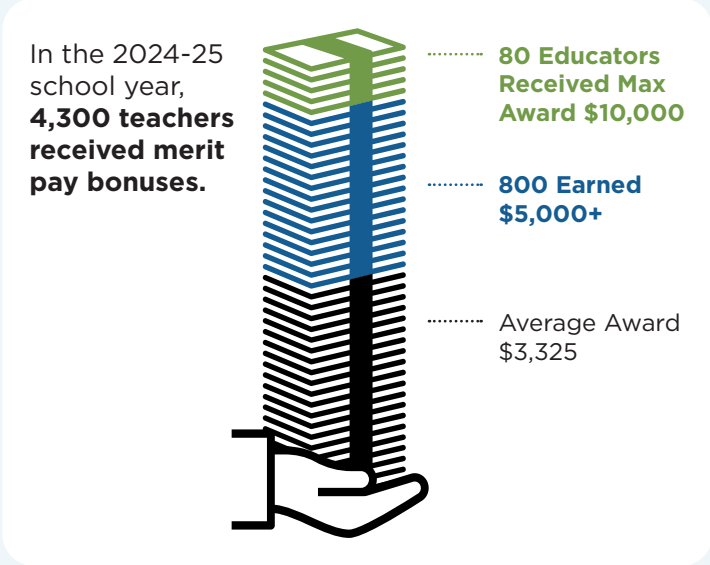
With the LEARNS Act, Arkansas has taken a dual approach to elevating the teaching profession and strengthening educator retention. Two new initiatives—the Merit Teacher Incentive Fund and the Excellence in Teaching Fellowship—are designed to recognize the state's highest-performing educators and foster a collaborative learning network, with the long-term goal of boosting retention and future recruitment.

The Merit Teacher Incentive Fund grants bonuses of up to \$10,000 annually to licensed educators with at least three years of experience whose students demonstrate outstanding academic growth. Licensed educators include classroom teachers, library media specialists, and school counselors. Outstanding academic growth is determined by a growth score of 80 or above and an annual rating of “effective” or higher across four or more parts of the Arkansas Department of Education's (ADE) Educator Effectiveness System. Serving as a mentor for a teaching residency program or teaching in a subject or geography with critical shortages can also qualify teachers for increased merit pay, and it's possible to earn merit pay for multiple reasons.





According to an analysis by the Office for Education Policy at the University of Arkansas, in the 2024-2025 school year, nearly 4,300 teachers—more than 10% of Arkansas’s teacher workforce—received merit pay bonuses. While the average award was \$3,325, more than 800 educators earned bonuses of \$5,000 or more. Nearly 80 received the maximum award of \$10,000 by qualifying in multiple categories. Merit pay recipients are represented widely across the state, with half of last year’s beneficiaries hailing from smaller, more rural districts.



For the 2025-2026 school year, ADE selected 23 Merit Teacher Incentive Fund recipients for the inaugural Arkansas Excellence in Teaching Fellowship program, giving them access to structured professional development and networking opportunities.

Through these two teacher-focused initiatives, ADE hopes to reaffirm the value of effective teachers while establishing clear performance expectations and stronger instructional practice across the field. As awareness of the Merit Teacher Incentive Fund and Excellence in Teaching Fellowship increases, ADE believes these investments in Arkansas educators will make a lasting impact that goes beyond a single paycheck, even helping current and future educators remain in the field.

The Power of Being Seen: Merit Pay as a Catalyst in a Rural District

Poyen Elementary School third-grade teacher Lyndsey Laster has been teaching for 13 years, the same length of time she grew up attending schools in the tiny town. “We have a gas station and one diner, the Hwy 270 Grill, that serves really wonderful comfort food,” says Laster, who went to kindergarten through 12th grade in Poyen. “The community is very family-centered.”

When it came time to put down roots, Laster and her husband felt the pull of their close-knit community, with its warm feel and small schools. “We only have two classes per grade level in K-6 and only 500 students in the whole K-12 school system,” Laster says. “It’s homey. Everybody knows everybody.”

Laster believes the deep familiarity and care she feels for Poyen—and her close partnership with fellow third-grade teacher Holly Beard—have been critical to her remarkable success in the classroom. In 2024, her third-grade students earned the highest scores in Arkansas on the ATLAS math assessment and the eighth highest in ELA. Last year, her students placed third in both math and ELA.

“It’s easier to build rapport with families because I’m from here,” Laster explains. “I go to their ball games and church functions and let them know that we are more than just their teacher. We support them in everything they do, not just their education.”

For the past two years, Laster has received merit pay bonuses for her exceptional student outcomes and her mentorship of other teachers. This year, she earned the maximum amount of \$10,000. The recognition is meaningful, but the bonus has also made a tangible difference in her life. “The merit pay has helped my family—just having money to put to the side when a month ran short or when we needed extra groceries,” Laster says. “Normally I wouldn’t have that, so it has been really nice and definitely an incentive to keep doing what I’m doing.”

This year, Laster was also selected for the Arkansas Excellence in Teaching Fellowship, which earned her a \$1,500 stipend. The cohort meets virtually every two months to discuss challenges, successes, and innovative strategies. During a recent session, Laster honed new skills by leading a breakout session on using artificial intelligence to enhance instruction. “I’ve really enjoyed meeting with other teachers in our state, hearing what they’re doing in their classrooms, and sharing what I’m doing in mine,” Laster says.

Looking ahead, Laster hopes the Merit Teacher Initiative Fund and the Arkansas Excellence in Teaching Fellowship program will garner more visibility. “When teachers see that it’s about celebrating teachers and getting to learn from one another, I think it will draw more people in,” she says.

Recommendations

1. **Don’t whisper the win.**

Make public recognition of merit pay and fellowship programs an essential strategy. Promote high-quality teachers’ achievements at school board meetings, in district newsletters, and on social media. Lifting up our best teachers elevates the profession and builds a culture of achievement.

2. **Establish clear pathways to recognition.**

Every teacher in the state should know exactly how student growth is measured and how merit pay is earned. Transparency makes the aspirational actionable.

3. **Hold up your best teachers as experts and case studies.**

Encourage merit pay recipients to open their classrooms for learning walks or share innovative instructional strategies with others in or considering entering the field. Growth isn’t just for students.

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