



OKLAHOMA STATE  
DEPARTMENT *of* EDUCATION

## Teacher Signing Bonus

Updated 05/08/23

### Background

In FY23, the State Board of Education approved 4,437 requests for emergency certification, and 303 new alternative certificates have been issued to teachers. These numbers represent approximately 10 percent of the entire teaching force. The data highlights the teacher shortage plaguing Oklahoma public schools. To address this complex challenge, the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) is developing an incentive to recruit new teachers to the profession.

One strong recruiting strategy is to offer signing bonuses to incentivize professionals to the noble profession of teaching. Thus, the OSDE commits to offering significant bonuses to new teachers in critical shortage areas.

The OSDE submits an annual application to the U. S. Department of Education to identify the teacher shortage areas in Oklahoma. Data shows that Oklahoma is facing serious teacher shortages in pre-kindergarten through third grade classrooms, and pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade special education classrooms. Young children must be provided with high-quality education to support success in later years. Students with disabilities must be provided teachers who are highly skilled in the unique disability related needs of these students to provide a free and appropriate public education.

Through this signing bonus program, teachers who sign a contract to **teach in a critical shortage area in school year 2023-2024** and **commit to teaching for five years in an Oklahoma public school** will be rewarded financially. **Eligible teachers are those who have not been teaching in an Oklahoma public school during the 2022-2023 school year.** Teachers will be eligible to receive signing bonuses between \$15,000 and \$50,000 based on these criteria:

- Certified teachers new to the teaching profession
- Certified teachers returning to the profession
- Certified teachers moving to Oklahoma from out of state

The bonus structure also includes incentives for general education teachers of grades PK-3 and special education teachers of grades PK-12 who commit to teaching in a **rural or high-poverty school**. Many rural areas and high poverty schools have difficulty recruiting teachers to their communities. We know high quality teachers in all schools make a significant impact on student outcomes.



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**Program Highlights**

| <b>Eligible Teachers</b>                                       | <b>Years of Experience</b> | <b>Standard Signing Bonus</b> | <b>Elevated Signing Bonus for Teaching in a Rural or High Poverty District</b> |
|--|----------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| PK-3 <sup>rd</sup> grade                                       | Less than three years      | \$15,000                      | \$20,000   |
| PK-3 <sup>rd</sup> grade                                       | Three to four years        | \$25,000                      | \$30,000   |
| PK-3 <sup>rd</sup> grade                                       | Five or more years         | NA                            | \$50,000   |
| PK-12 <sup>th</sup> special education                          | Five or more years         | \$50,000                      | NA   |
| PK – 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade or PK-12 SPED teachers moving to OK | Less than five years       | \$25,000                      | NA   |
| PK – 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade or PK-12 SPED teachers moving to OK | Five or more years         | \$50,000                      | NA   |

**Contract Stipulations**

- Teachers must commit to teaching **five years** in a critical shortage area (grades PK-3 or PK-12 special education) in an Oklahoma public school.
- Teachers who leave their teaching position before the five-year period will be required to pay back a prorated amount to their districts amounting to 20% of the signing bonus per year.

**Eligibility**

Eligible teachers are those who have *not* been teaching in an Oklahoma public school during the 2022-2023 school year. Eligible teachers must meet one of these criteria:

- New to the teaching profession (with less than 3 years of experience) in grades PK-3 or special education PK-12;
- Returning certified teachers (previously retired or left the profession) in grades PK-3 or special education PK-12; or
- Out-of-state certified teachers in grades PK-3 or special education PK-12

**Estimate of Impact**

- Shortage in PreK to 3 - 1500 teachers
  - High estimate (all 50k) - 200 teachers with 10 million
  - Low estimate (all 15k) - 666 teachers with 10 million
- Shortage in Special Education PK-12 - 400 teachers
  - High estimate (all 50K) - 120 teachers with 6 million
  - Low estimate (all 25k) - 240 teachers with 6 million



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## Funding

The signing bonus program will be funded with American Rescue Plan federal relief funds and IDEA Part B, Other State Level Activities

## Frequently Asked Questions

Q. Who is eligible?

A. Any teacher certified to teach in grades PK-3 or Special Education grades PK-12 who did **not** teach in an Oklahoma public school in the 2022-2023 school year is eligible.

Q. Is there a limit to how many teachers per district can apply?

A. Depending on the popularity of the program, OSDE may impose a cap of \$150,000 in total signing bonuses awarded per district.

Q. How do teachers apply?

A. Teachers can find a link to the application on the [OSDE website](#).

Q. Who is considered new to the profession?

A. An individual new to the profession is a certified teacher with less than 3 years of experience.

Q. Who is considered a returning teacher?

A. A returning certified teacher is an individual who has previously retired or left the profession.

Q. Which public schools are considered rural or high poverty?

A. For purposes of this program, a high poverty school is one with a free/reduced lunch rate of 50-100%. A [rural school](#) is defined by the National Center for Education Statistics.

Q. What if a teacher is not certified to teach in grades PK-3 or Special Education?

A. Teachers will need to obtain certification to teach in grades PK-3 or a Special Education area prior to the 2023-2024 school year to be eligible for the signing bonus.

Q. Since districts provide teacher contracts on an annual basis, how does the five-year commitment align with annual contracts?

A. Districts continue to manage teacher contracts per district policies. If a teacher becomes ineligible to teach in a district or is not offered a contract to teach beyond the 2023-2024 school year, the signing bonus does not continue for that teacher in that district. If the teacher changes districts in Oklahoma, the receiving district may determine if the signing bonus is still applicable.



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DEPARTMENT *of* EDUCATION

Q. Why is there a five-year commitment?

A. A five-year commitment is required to ensure long-term success and address the teacher shortage.

Q. What happens if a teacher leaves within the 5 years?

A. If a teacher leaves the profession and/or shortage area before 5 years, districts will be responsible for collecting a pro-rated portion of the funds (20% of the signing bonus per year) from the affected teacher.

Q. What happens if a teacher moves to another district during the five years?

A. If a teacher transfers districts within the five-year period, the receiving district has the option of continuing the signing bonus option for the teacher. The receiving district will assume responsibility for collecting the prorated portion of the signing bonus if the teacher does not fulfill the 5-year requirement.

Q. How does the signing bonus work?

A. After a teacher applies for a signing bonus, applications will be reviewed by the OSDE. Qualified applicants will be determined by order of application. The teacher and the employing district will receive notification from the OSDE with further instructions. Once a district confirms a teacher's employment, which means approval by their local board and a background check has been completed, the district will receive funds from OSDE.

Q. Are the bonuses taxable?

A. Yes.

Q. Are the signing bonuses paid directly to teachers or to the districts to pass through to teachers in payroll procedures?

A. The bonuses will be paid to districts. Districts will use payroll procedures to deduct state taxes and FICA.

Q. Are the bonuses included in Teacher Retirement System (TRS) deductions?

A. The OSDE is working with TRS to provide details about TRS deductions. Information will be forthcoming.

Q. What does a district do with funds paid back by teachers who break the five-year commitment?

A. The district keeps the funds.

Q. What types of public schools are eligible?

A. Any public school is eligible although bonus amounts are higher for teachers employed by a rural or high poverty school.

Q. How long will the program last?

A. This program is a one-time effort for the 2023-2024 school year.



OKLAHOMA STATE  
DEPARTMENT *of* EDUCATION

Q. Can a teacher quit their current teacher job and reapply for the upcoming school year?

A. No. Current Oklahoma teachers cannot resign and reapply to an Oklahoma school district. Teachers are only eligible for the signing bonus if they did **not** teach in an Oklahoma public school during the 2022-2023 school year.

Q. If a teacher is moving from out of state, will their teaching certification be accepted?

A. If a teacher holds a full teaching credential issued by any state's Department of Education, you are [eligible for certification in Oklahoma's most equivalent subject areas](#).

Q. If a teacher was employed by a public school in the 2022-2023 school year but as an emergency certified teacher, are they eligible for the signing bonus?

A. If an emergency certified general education teacher obtains a non-emergency teaching certification to teach in grades PK-3 prior to the 2023-2024 school year and meets other program requirements, then they will be eligible for the signing bonus. They would be considered new to the profession.

If an individual participates in the paraprofessional pathway or boot-camp pathway working toward a master's degree in special education and obtains a provisional special education teaching certificate prior to the 2023-2024 school year and meets the other program requirements, then they will be eligible for the signing bonus. They would be considered new to the profession.

Title I and Title II paraprofessionals are not eligible for the signing bonus.

Q. If a teacher worked as a substitute teacher or tutor in a public school during the 2023-2023 school year, are they eligible for the signing bonus if they are certified in general education PK-3 or special education PK-12?

A. Yes. The OSDE encourages certified substitute teachers or tutors to teach full-time in the critical shortage areas.

Q. How long is the application for signing bonuses open?

A. Applications will be open until May 31, 2023. Pending availability of funds, OSDE may open a second round of applications on July 1, 2023.

**Questions** - Email [SignOnBonus@sde.ok.gov](mailto:SignOnBonus@sde.ok.gov)