

Teacher Retention in Rural Arkansas Schools

**Statewide Stability Amid Local
Challenges**

Based on OEP Report (2023-25)

Learning Policy Institute (2024)

Jon Laffoon

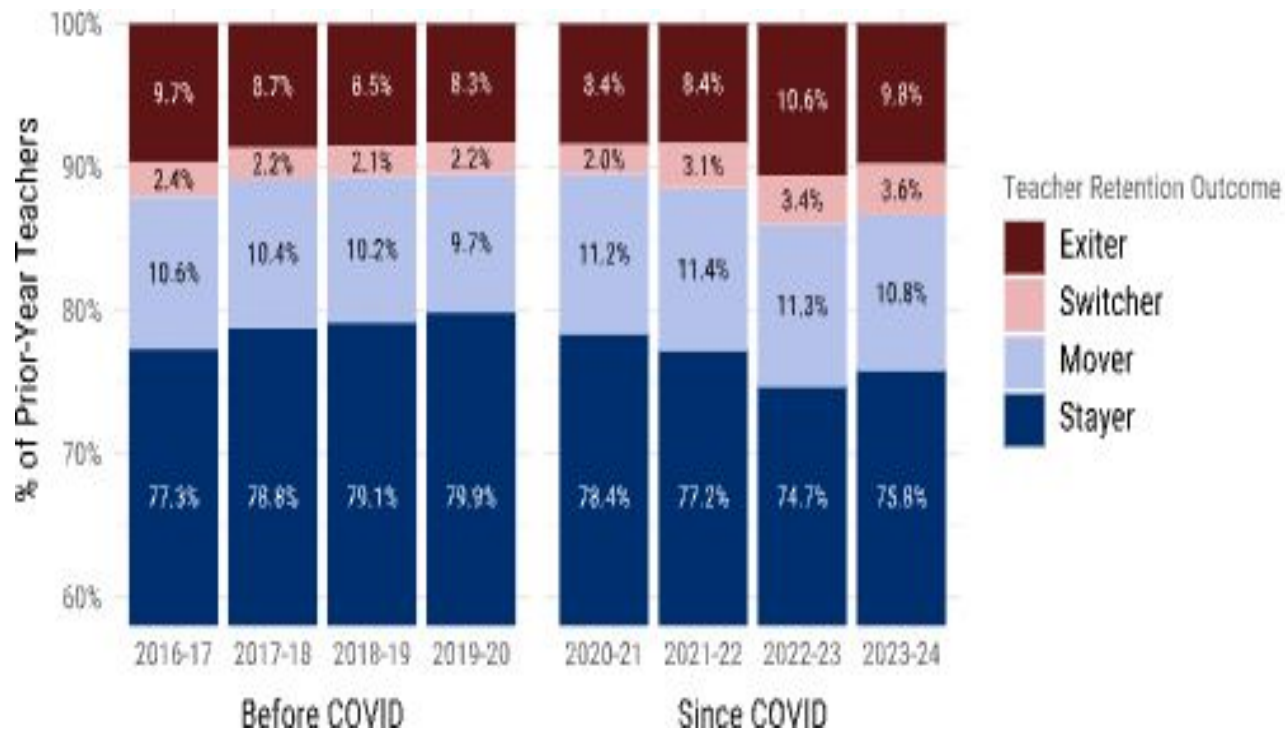


- Believer, Husband, and Father
- Science & PE Teacher, Coach, Athletic Director, Dean of Students, Principal
- 26th Year in Education
- 10th year as Superintendent
- 2025 AREA Superintendent of the Year
- Experience in Private, Public, and Charter Education
- Experience: Episcopal, Lonoke, Greenwood, Riverview, Pea Ridge, Star City, Farmington

Current Landscape & Key Challenges

- Teacher shortages continue to grow nationwide, with nearly one in eight positions either vacant or staffed by uncertified or unqualified teachers, new research concludes.
- Work outside the school system in AR– 16.4% of teachers
- Outstanding student loans in AR– 41.6% of teachers
- Statewide retention 77%, still below pre-pandemic levels (80%)
- Retention varies widely (55%–95%), with lowest in rural south/east (delta) where the average is almost 20% lower
- Growing reliance on uncertified/out-of-field teachers
- Early-career teachers face highest turnover

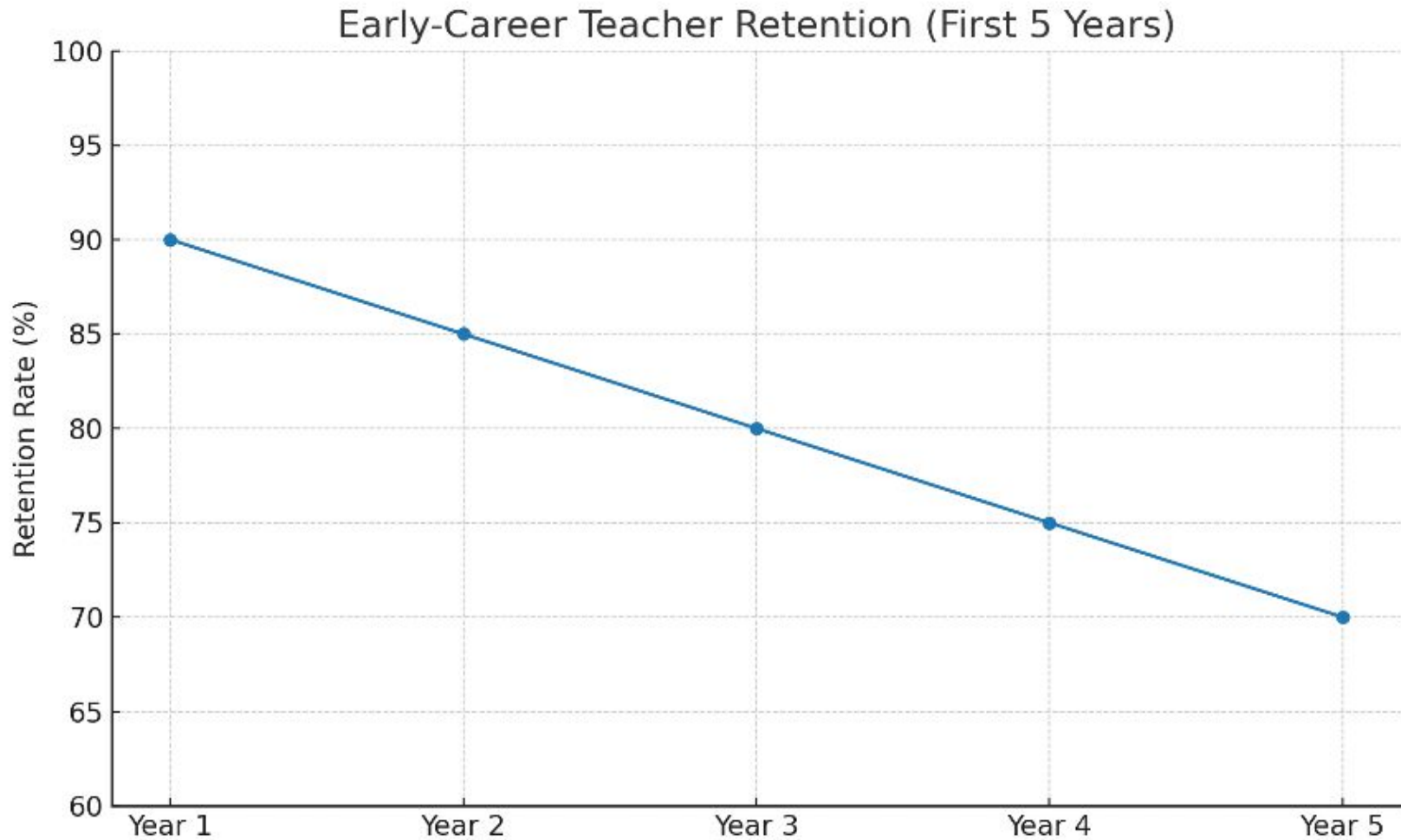
Teacher Retention



Teacher Retention

- On average, 24.8% of teachers left their school in the 2023–24 school year—a slight increase from the pre-pandemic spike.
- In Arkansas only 20.8% of teachers left their school in 2024-25; signifying a decrease in attrition.
- Schools serving the greatest proportion of students experiencing poverty lost 29% of teachers between 2022 and 2024, compared to 19% in schools with the lowest concentration.
- **30% of New Teachers Leave the Profession by year 5...**

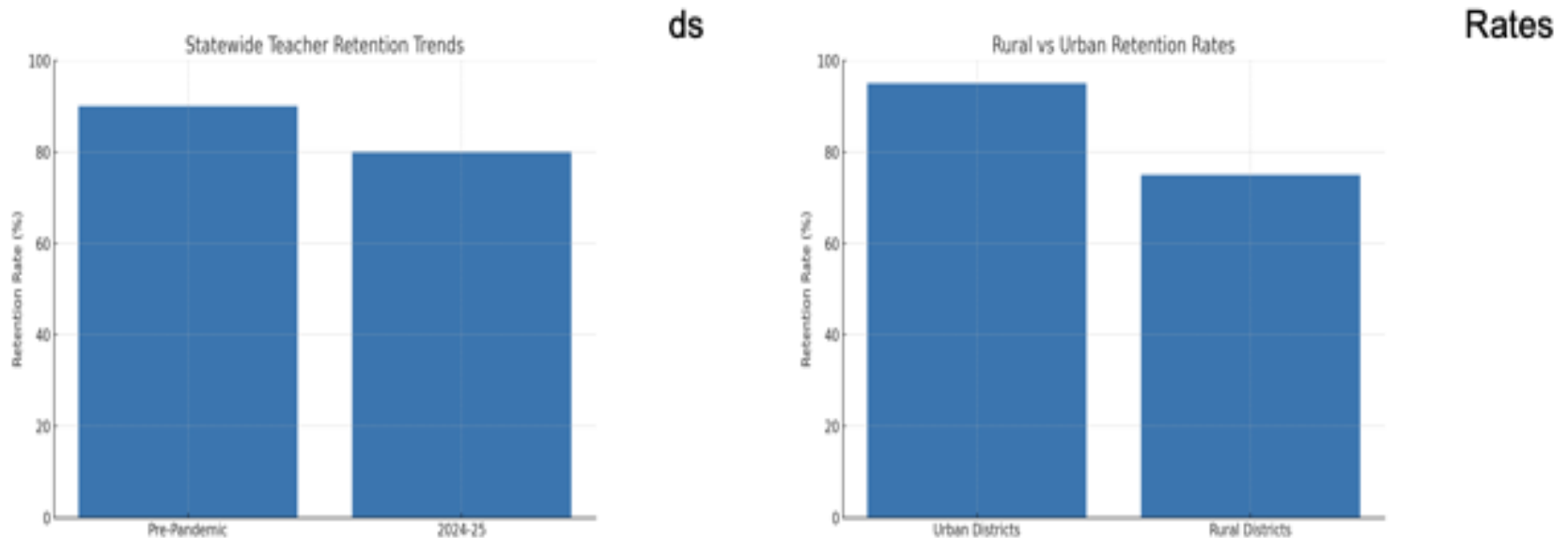
New Teacher Retention Data



Recent Policy Efforts & Impacts

- LEARNS Act raised minimum salary to \$50,000
- Pay gap between rural & urban closed by LEARNS
- Merit Teacher Incentive Fund: bonuses of \$1,500–\$10,000
- Bonuses help short-term, but not long-term retention according to surveys; only 10% receive
- During the past four years, most school districts in Arkansas (N=134 of 240) retained 85% or more of their teachers on average. However, 41 districts retained fewer than 80% of their teachers
- **Rural districts (including the Delta) make make up 80% of those 41.**

Teacher Retention Data Overview

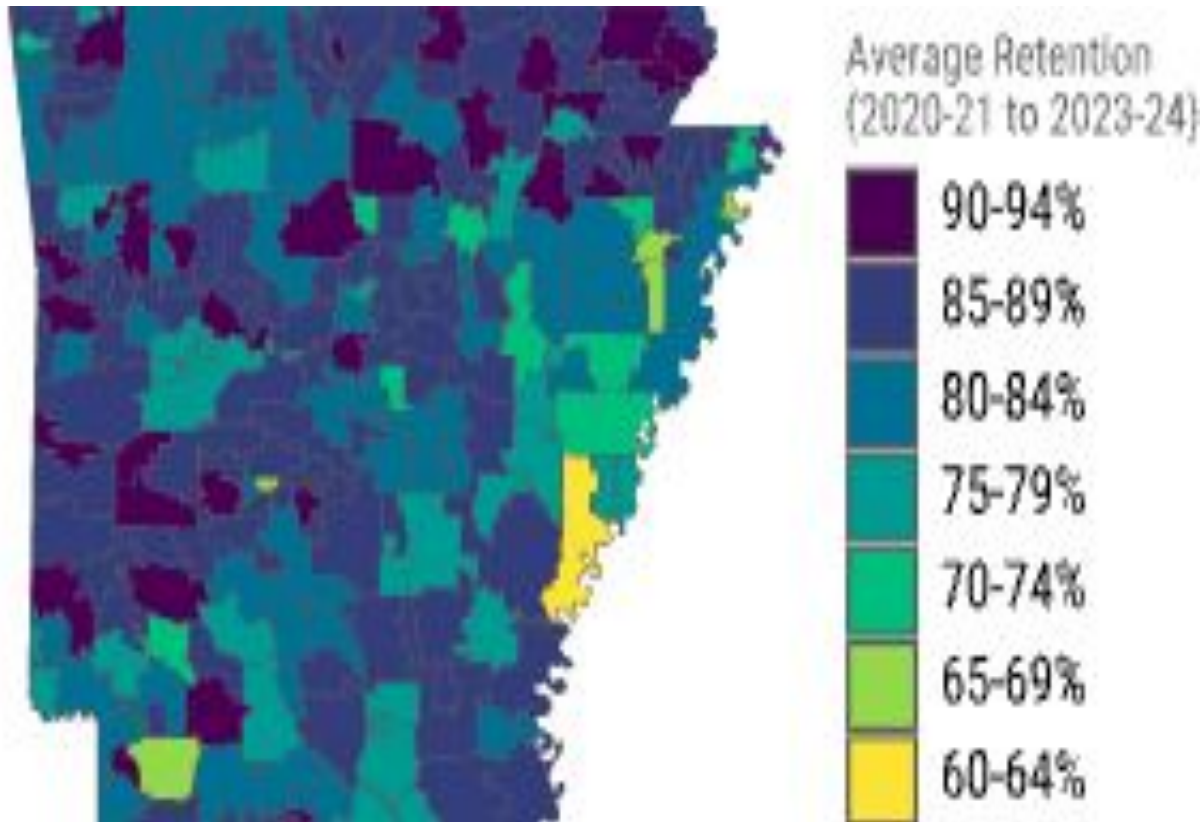


- Almost 88% pre-pandemic
- 76% post pandemic; back to 80% 24-25
- **Rural districts still in 75% range (+ or-20%); compared to over 90% in Urban Districts**

Key Implications for Rural Districts

- Salary advancement remains flat beyond entry-level
- Merit pay = temporary, not enough, sustainable
- Rising uncertified teacher numbers = pipeline issue
- Early-career support systems underdeveloped
- Local solutions vary by district context: housing, bonuses, performance pay
- **Housing Availability is the greatest challenge in our Arkansas Rural Districts.**

Rural Exits



Strategic Recommendations for Leaders

1. Expand mentoring and induction programs
2. Think Tank and group stipend and come up with your own 3-5 recommendations for your own
3. Invest in 3-5 teacher stipends for your own
4. Supporting alternative certification pathways
5. Tailor strategies to local data: retention/ housing are critical to retention.
6. Build supportive school leadership & culture
7. Bonuses: attendance, retention, or performance
8. Provide perks: daycare, TOSA, benefits

Housing Initiatives

- Bentonville: Housing in partnership with Mercy, Bentonville City, Arvest and Excellerate Foundation. 120 Duplexes and 40 cottages at \$750 and \$1000 monthly.
- Marianna: 1500 sq foot duplexes for teachers at \$860 a month including utilities.
- Cross County: Partnered with County & City to develop affordable housing sites (lots $\frac{1}{3}$ acre).

Marianna Teacher Housing

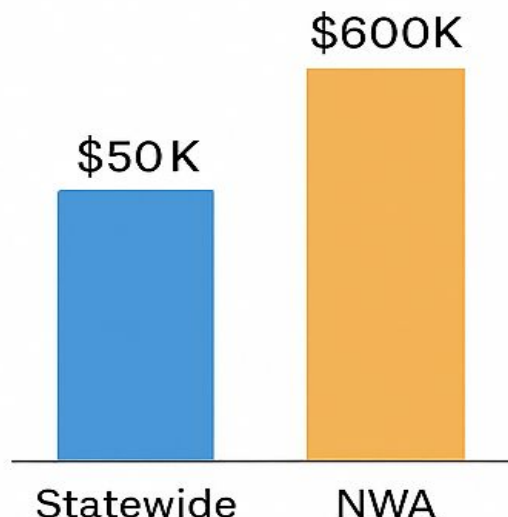


Teacher Housing Affordability in Arkansas



Statewide Picture

- Median home price: \$200K–\$370K
- Average rent: –\$1,100 (below U.S. avg.)
- Result: Housing is generally affordable statewide



Regional Reality

(Nonhwest Arkansas)

- Median home price: –\$600K (up from \$450K in 2021)
- Rent \downarrow 35% since 2019
- Teachers earning \$50K–\$52K are priced out of local housing

Community Solutions Emerging

- Bentonville: \$25 M project with rentals (\$750–1 K) and homes (\$180 K–\$200 K) for teachers
- Lee County: New duplexes built using ESSER funds

Conclusion: Path Forward

1. Progress made through salary raises and bonuses
2. Urban and Rural districts face persistent structural challenges such as housing affordability and availability.
3. Sustainable retention requires:
Supportive school culture: Mentoring & Support
Housing Solutions
Financial Incentives
4. Local teacher pipelines: Grow Your Own
5. Adaptive leadership ideas: Daycare, TOSA, and leadership development for new teachers.

Questions?

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