

Teacher Pay Reform in Oklahoma: Lessons from Texas

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About this policy brief:

The views expressed in this report are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the Oklahoma Center for Education Policy (OCEP) or the University of Oklahoma. OCEP is grateful to author Chad Aldeman for bringing his expertise on school finance and teacher compensation to this work and for his thoughtful execution of this project. We thank Mary Lynn Pruneda of Texas 2036 for providing thoughtful feedback on an early draft of this brief. At OCEP, we thank faculty associate Deven Carlson and executive director Adam Tyner for offering feedback on the draft and Lilah Jacobs for assisting with production and overseeing dissemination of the brief. The cover image can be found on the Texas Education Agency website and shows Texas school districts that are “participating and aspiring” for the Teacher Incentive Allotment.

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Oklahoma Center for Education Policy

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by Chad Aldeman

At a Glance

Oklahoma has raised teacher salaries and established new programs to reward teacher effectiveness, including OTEP (Oklahoma Teacher Empowerment Program), Growth-based Compensation, and National Board certification bonuses. This brief examines what Oklahoma can learn from Texas about the rigor, scale, and sustainability of differentiated teacher compensation.

Key Takeaways

1 **A teacher-quality challenge, not just a staffing shortage**
Oklahoma's traditional preparation pipeline has shrunk, and emergency-certified teachers leave at much higher rates

2 **Salary gains have not closed gaps**
Average teacher pay has risen in Oklahoma, but starting salaries remain low relative to regional peers

3 **Texas offers a model for durable performance pay**
Its TIA program combines validated effectiveness measures, large incentives, five-year designations, and formula-based funding. Early studies suggest positive impacts on both teacher retention and student learning.

Policy Implications

Four steps are worth considering as Oklahoma builds on its teacher compensation reforms.

1. Make incentives durable. Scale up compensation programs and fund them through the state formula.	**2. Reward effectiveness directly.** Strengthen OTEP designation criteria; compensate extra duties separately.
3. Target schools with greater need. Fine-tune awards for school poverty and rurality.	**4. Learn from the growth-based compensation pilot.** Measure effects on achievement, recruitment, and retention.

Oklahoma's Teacher Challenges

Oklahoma's teacher workforce has several interrelated problems.

One, the state has fewer people completing traditional teacher-preparation programs than it did a decade ago.[1] In 2024, the state had 1,037 individuals complete a traditional education preparation program, down from 1,630 a decade prior. Two, to fill the gap in its incoming teacher pipeline, Oklahoma schools have relied increasingly on emergency pathways to find people willing to teach. Three, teachers working with emergency licenses are less likely to remain in classrooms, putting further strain on recruitment efforts. And four, while Oklahoma has raised teacher salaries in recent years, its *starting* pay for teachers still trails most of the country. As a state, it ranks 37th in average salaries but comes in 48th for starting salaries, at $41,294.[2]

These teacher-workforce challenges matter because Oklahoma is also facing a serious student achievement problem. A recent University of Oklahoma analysis of the National Assessment of Educational Progress found that Oklahoma ranked 48th nationally in 2024 across fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math.[3] Oklahoma generally performed at or above the national average in the 1990s, but its relative standing has declined steadily since then, with the slide accelerating after 2015. What's more, the declines are broad rather than isolated to a particular subject, grade, or student group.

In other words, improving Oklahoma's teacher workforce is not just about filling classrooms or reducing teacher turnover but is directly related to the ultimate goal of improving outcomes for students. After all, researchers have documented that teachers are the most important school-provided factor for student learning.[4] So, if state leaders see their teacher workforce problems through the lens of how to improve the quality of instruction for students, they should pay particular attention to retention efforts, especially efforts to retain the state's best and most effective teachers.

In recent years the state has focused heavily on the pipeline of new workers into the profession. Such efforts, however, only attack one end of the funnel. If Oklahoma's teacher workforce challenges were simply about too few applicants, the obvious response would be to recruit more people. The state has tried that approach by offering large signing bonuses, expanding nontraditional entry routes, and creating scholarships for future teachers. Yet the evidence on those efforts suggests that getting someone into a classroom does not guarantee that they will be effective, or that they will stay.

Oklahoma already has programs intended to improve teacher retention, including the Oklahoma Teacher Empowerment Program (OTEP) and a new pilot that will reward teachers based on their students' academic growth. However, these efforts remain relatively small

and fragmented, and certain design features may limit their effectiveness as retention strategies.

Meanwhile, just across the border, Texas has taken a different approach. Its Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA) uses a more rigorous process to identify effective teachers, offers substantially larger and longer-lasting financial incentives, and directs more money to teachers working in high-need schools. In contrast to Oklahoma's programs, the Texas version is on more solid ground going forward, since it is baked into the state's school funding formula. Most importantly, emerging research suggests Texas has reduced turnover among highly effective teachers and improved student achievement. Oklahoma does not need to copy the Texas model wholesale, but TIA offers useful lessons for how the state could refocus OTEP around identifying excellent teachers, paying them enough to stay, and keeping their talents focused on students.

A shrinking teacher pipeline

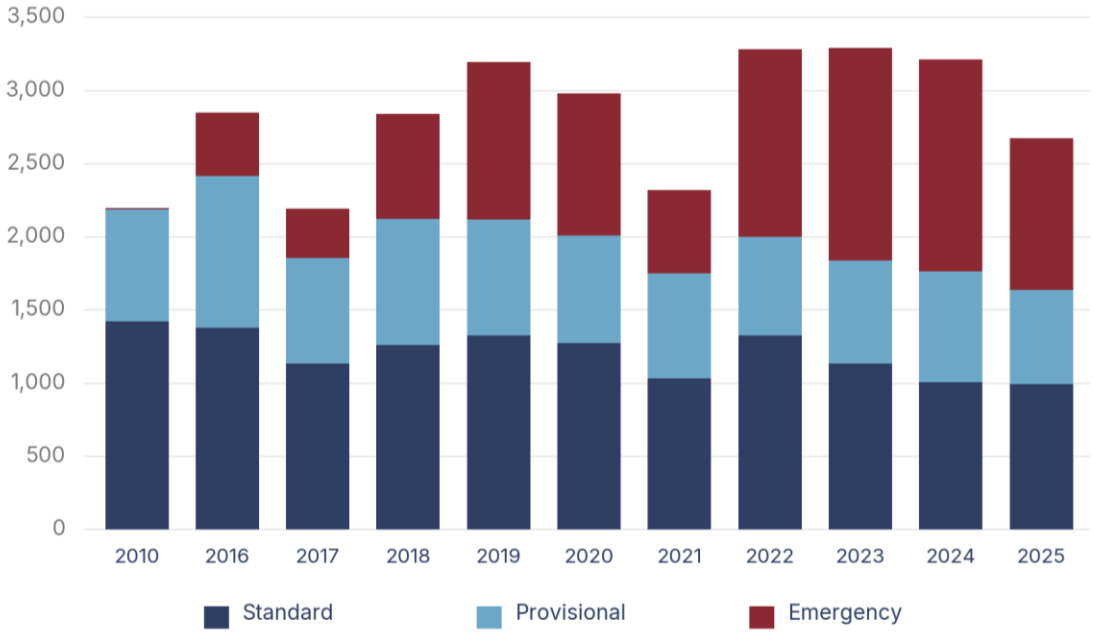
The first part of Oklahoma's teacher challenge is the shrinking traditional pipeline. According to the Oklahoma Office of Educational Quality and Accountability, the number of people completing traditional university-based educator preparation programs fell from 1,630 in 2014 to 1,037 in 2024, a decline of 36 percent.[5] The state has also seen a decline in the number of newly-hired teachers working on "provisional" licenses, which cover educators enrolled in an alternate teacher preparation program and completing courses towards becoming fully licensed. As Figure 1 shows below, in 2016, Oklahoma schools hired 1,036 of these teachers. In 2025, that number had fallen to 644 (Figure 1).

Research suggests that teachers from traditional and alternative teacher preparation programs are similarly effective.[6] Still, there are costs to relying on teachers who enter the classroom with little or no preparation at all. For example, a recent Massachusetts study found that teachers who entered classrooms during the pandemic with emergency licenses were less effective in math and science than other new teachers.[7]

And yet, Oklahoma schools have become increasingly dependent on teachers who enter the classroom on an "emergency" basis. This route helps fill an immediate gap for a principal who needs a teacher in August and cannot wait for the university pipeline to recover. Emergency certification allows Oklahoma districts that cannot find a certified teacher to put someone with a bachelor's degree into the classroom who has not completed a preparation program or served as a student teacher. The district must document that it tried unsuccessfully to hire a certified teacher, and the candidate must clear a background check, but the emergency pathway allows them to begin teaching without any preparation or the ongoing support of an alternative program. In 2016, Oklahoma had 433 teachers working on

this emergency basis. That number rose steadily over the years and surpassed 1,000 every year from 2022 to 2025. In percentage terms, more than one-third of new teachers are now coming through this route in recent years.

Figure 1: New teachers in Oklahoma schools increasingly hired on an "emergency" basis



Note: Oklahoma Office of Educational Quality and Accountability. State of Teaching in Oklahoma Dashboard.

Relying on short-term fixes on the recruitment side has also worsened the state's retention challenge. Among first-year teachers in 2025, about 87 percent of those with standard certification remained in the profession after their first year, compared with 84 percent of provisionally certified teachers going through an alternative preparation program, but only 69 percent of emergency-certified teachers.[8] The differences become larger over time. In the 2022 cohort, roughly 65 percent of standard-certified teachers were still teaching four years later, compared with 51 percent of provisionally certified teachers and 41 percent of emergency-certified teachers.

That is, filling a vacancy today may lead to another opening a few short years later, which sparks the same cycle all over again. Fewer traditionally prepared teachers lead districts to hire more teachers through emergency routes. Those teachers leave at higher rates, which forces districts to recruit another round of replacements. The classrooms are technically staffed, but districts are spending more time finding, hiring, and supporting novice teachers with no prior training.

Table 1: Oklahoma's starting teacher salary ranks 11th among 12 SEC states

STATE	AVERAGE STARTING SALARY	REGIONAL RANK
Arkansas	$50,076	1
Texas	$49,465	2
Florida	$49,435	3
Georgia	$48,722	4
South Carolina	$48,426	5
Alabama	$47,955	6
Tennessee	$47,230	7
Louisiana	$46,850	8
Mississippi	$43,814	9
Kentucky	$41,901	10
Oklahoma	**$41,294**	**11**
Missouri	$40,682	12

Note: NEA Starting Teacher Salaries, 2026 data. "SEC states" are those with a university whose athletic teams participate in the Southeastern Conference.

Pay is part of this story too, particularly at the beginning of a teacher's career. Oklahoma has substantially increased teacher pay over the last several years. Since 2017–18, its average teacher salary has risen from about $45,700 to nearly $62,000, a 36 percent increase, while its national ranking improved from near the bottom to 37th.[9] Starting salaries have risen too, from about $32,000 to $41,300, a 29 percent increase. Yet Oklahoma has struggled to keep pace with other states at the front end of the salary schedule. As Table 1 shows, among the 12 states with a university whose athletic teams participate in the Southeastern Conference (SEC), Oklahoma ranks second to last. The gap between Oklahoma's progress on overall pay and its progress on starting pay may explain part of Oklahoma's challenges with recruiting and retaining early-career teachers.

Oklahoma's teacher recruitment efforts

Oklahoma has pursued several different teacher policy strategies over the last few years. The broadest intervention was a large pay increase that passed in 2023. The legislature raised the minimum salary schedule by $3,000 for teachers with zero to four years of experience, $4,000 for those with five to nine years, $5,000 for those with 10 to 14 years, and $6,000 for teachers with at least 15 years. The package also included six weeks of paid maternity leave.

The legislative summary framed the package as a major recurring investment in public education.[10] The 2023 raises followed earlier salary increases after the 2018 teacher walkout.

The state has also attempted to bolster the recruitment pipeline. The Inspired to Teach program offers Oklahoma college students up to $25,500 in scholarships and employment incentives if they complete an approved teacher-preparation program and agree to teach in an Oklahoma public school for at least five consecutive years.[11] The policy tries to rebuild the traditional pipeline by offering upfront financial investments in exchange for students' commitments to serve in Oklahoma schools. In addition to federal teacher loan forgiveness programs, the University of Oklahoma offers its own version that forgives up to $5,000 a year for four years for graduates who agree to work in high-need schools in the state.[12]

Oklahoma has used much larger, more targeted incentives for immediate shortages. In 2023, the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) allocated money for signing bonuses that could reach $50,000 for teachers entering or returning to critical shortage areas such as early elementary education and special education, if they agreed to serve for five years. OSDE reported that 530 teachers across 197 districts received a bonus.[13] In 2024, Oklahoma offered $15,000 signing bonuses to qualifying in-state math and science teachers and $25,000 to out-of-state teachers who took jobs in rural schools. OSDE later reported that the program recruited 61 teachers into 55 districts.[14] In 2025, the department launched a similar program for special education, offering $10,000 to newly certified teachers entering the profession and $20,000 to experienced special education teachers recruited from out of state.[15] Those bonuses were eventually awarded to 147 special education teachers.[16]

Without more data, it is hard to know what to make of these recruitment efforts. Did they actually shape behavior? That is, how many of those teachers were truly additional? An expensive signing bonus does little to expand the teacher pipeline if it goes to someone who would have accepted the position anyway, but it could be valuable if it persuades someone to enter teaching, return to the profession, or move into Oklahoma. Even then, a recruitment bonus tells us nothing about whether the teacher will stay or how effective that teacher will be once in the classroom. Recruitment reforms may help get someone into a job, but schools still have to worry about retention and quality challenges.

Oklahoma has tried to address these latter issues through a structured support program for beginners. Launched in 2026, the Educator Launch & Mentorship Initiative enrolled 463 first- and second-year teachers in its inaugural cohort, just shy of its 500-teacher capacity.[17] Participants attend a five-day summer institute and receive monthly classroom observations and coaching from experienced former educators throughout the school year. The program is promising in concept and relatively inexpensive compared with large recruitment bonuses,

but it is too new to judge. Its first cohort has only just begun the 2026–27 school year, so Oklahoma does not yet know whether the program improves teacher effectiveness or reduces attrition.

Oklahoma's teacher compensation programs

In recent years, Oklahoma has created new programs to identify strong teachers and pay them more money, without forcing them to leave the classroom and become a principal or administrator. The three most significant programs of this type are the Oklahoma Teacher Empowerment Program (OTEP), the Growth-Based Teacher Compensation Program (GrowthComp), and the National Board Certification program.

Oklahoma Teacher Empowerment Program

Established in 2022, the OTEP program enables districts to identify up to 10 percent of their highest-quality teachers for Advanced, Lead, or Master designations. The state leaves wide discretion to districts about which teachers are selected and how. Participating districts must use classroom observations and measures of student performance, but they can combine these in any way they choose, and they can also consider mentoring, leadership, surveys, or other locally chosen and subjective factors. A district's OTEP evaluation rubric may include items such as "demonstrates leadership as team player," "school culture leadership," letters of reference, and volunteer service.[18] Districts may also restrict awards to teachers with a minimum number of years of teaching experience or employment in the district, eliminating the opportunity to gain OTEP awards for newer teachers in some participating districts.

Table 2: OTEP awards can reach $15,000 in highest-need districts

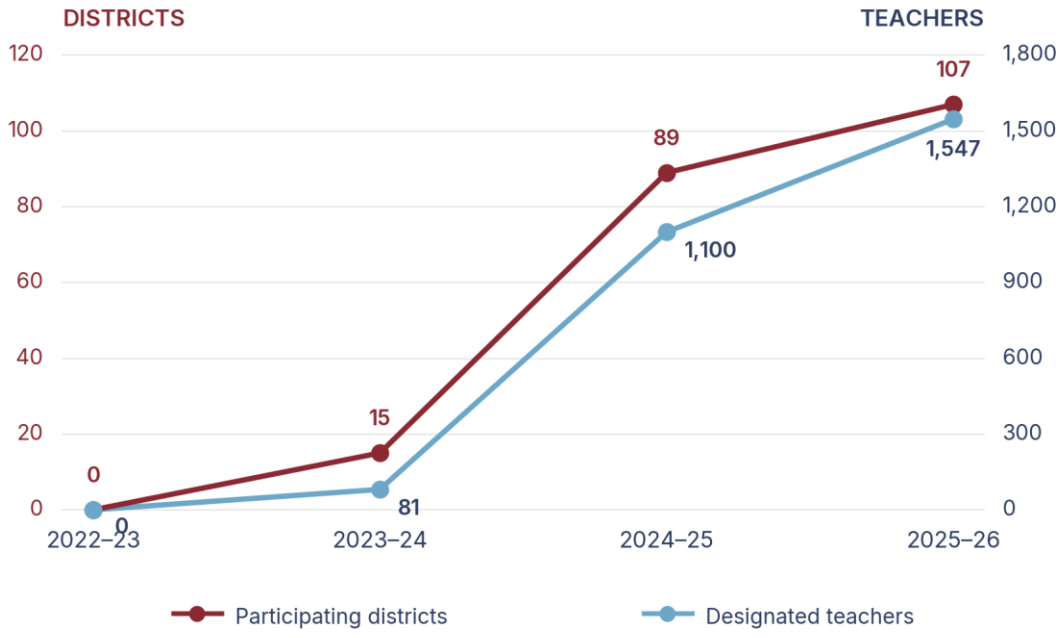
DESIGNATION	PERFORMANCE STANDARD	BASE AWARD	SUPPLEMENTAL STIPEND	MAXIMUM AWARD	ADDITIONAL DAYS
Advanced	Top 10%	$3,000	$1,500	$4,500	5
Lead	Top 10%	$5,000	$2,500	$7,500	10
Master	Top 10%	$10,000	$5,000	$15,000	15

According to current OSDE guidance, teachers who apply for the program and are designated as Advanced receive $3,000, Lead teachers $5,000, and Master teachers $10,000 stipends (Table 2).[19] Unlike ordinary salary increases, these stipends do not count toward teachers'

retirement contributions or benefits. Teachers in qualifying high-poverty schools or small districts can receive larger awards, adding $1,500 to $5,000 to their awards, depending on their designation.

The OTEP program requires identified teachers to perform additional work to receive the bonus, so teachers must apply for the OTEP bonus individually with their district and agree to the additional work. Advanced teachers are expected to work five additional contract days, Lead teachers 10, and Master teachers 15. The program is designed for teachers to use that additional time to strengthen instructional leadership, but districts have substantial flexibility over what that means in practice. As a result, districts use the extra time in different ways. Oklahoma City Public Schools, for example, has used designated teachers to help emergency-certified teachers prepare for certification exams, work with pacing guides, develop curriculum, lead training, and provide high-intensity tutoring to targeted students.[20] The state gives broad leeway to districts about how they utilize the extra days, and the state says that designated teachers "may share their expertise through mentorships and professional development."[21]

Figure 2: More than 100 districts now participate in the Oklahoma Teacher Empowerment Program



Note: 2023–24 figures from OSDE budget testimony; 2024–25 figures from Oklahoma House of Representatives (Nov. 4, 2025); 2025–26 figures from FY 2027 Oklahoma Executive Budget.

The program initially struggled to attract districts because of a requirement that districts must match state funds. In 2023–24, just 15 districts participated (Figure 2). After the

legislature removed that requirement, participation expanded sharply, reaching 107 districts and more than 1,500 teachers in 2025–26, with an average teacher bonus of $7,466.[22]

Despite this expansion, substantial OTEP funding has gone unused. OSDE reported approximately $58 million available at the beginning of 2025–26, and during the 2025–26 academic year $11.6 million was ultimately awarded to teachers.[23] The reasons for limited participation are not yet well understood, but they may include the administrative burden of developing district-specific evaluation systems, concerns about differentiating compensation among teachers, and requirements that designated teachers work additional days. Whatever the explanation, the substantial balance in the Teacher Empowerment Revolving Fund suggests that funding is not the limiting factor to scaling the program.

GrowthComp and National Board Certification

In the 2026 legislative session, Oklahoma lawmakers added two new merit-based approaches to rewarding teachers.[24] House Bill 4268 created a Growth-Based Teacher Compensation Program (GrowthComp) pilot program to cover approximately 1,500 fourth- through eighth-grade English and math teachers. Rather than relying on locally developed designation systems, the pilot, which is to last a minimum of three years, will identify high-performing teachers based solely on their students' academic growth on state assessments. The same legislation created $5,000 annual bonuses, available for up to five years, for qualifying teachers who hold National Board Certification. Both programs draw from the same Teacher Empowerment Revolving Fund that supports OTEP.

In effect, Oklahoma is now experimenting with three different ways to identify and reward teachers based on merit: locally developed OTEP designations, a state value-added measure of student growth, and National Board certification. There are promising elements to each, but each also brings its own trade-offs and challenges. For example, a growth-based system based solely on state test scores can only cover teachers in tested grades and subjects, leaving most Oklahoma teachers outside the system (Table 3).

All told, Oklahoma's recent policies provide a substantial foundation on which to keep building. The state has embraced the principle that high-performing teachers should be able to earn substantially more without becoming administrators, begun incorporating objective measures of student growth into compensation, and created incentives for teachers to earn an external professional credential. Yet these efforts remain fragmented, and some are explicitly temporary. Oklahoma's next step should be to turn those separate initiatives into a durable system for identifying, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers.

Table 3: A fraction of Oklahoma teachers are eligible for growth-based awards

GRADE	ENGLISH	MATH	SCIENCE	SOCIAL STUDIES	OTHER SUBJECTS
K	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE
1	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE
2	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE
3	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE
4	ELIGIBLE	ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE
5	ELIGIBLE	ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE
6	ELIGIBLE	ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE
7	ELIGIBLE	ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE
8	ELIGIBLE	ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE
9	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE
10	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE
11	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE
12	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE

Note: Science is tested in grades 5, 8, and 11, and several subjects are tested in grade 11, but because there is no previous year test score in the same subject, growth-based measures cannot be constructed, and House Bill 4268 explicitly limits eligibility to math and English teachers in grades 4 through 8.

The Texas Model

Texas's Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA) bears a resemblance to OTEP, especially at first glance. Both programs provide additional funding for highly rated teachers teaching a range of subjects, both programs offer districts flexibility in their ratings systems, and both programs award more money for teachers in higher-need school districts. In practice, however, TIA is quite different from OTEP, both in implementation and in scale.

The Texas TIA program was created to identify highly effective teachers and provide enough additional compensation to make classroom teaching a more financially attractive long-term career. Like Oklahoma, Texas allows districts to develop their own teacher designation systems, but Texas imposes more rigorous requirements for evaluating and validating those systems. Under the TIA system, districts must incorporate both classroom observations and measures of student academic growth, using approved evaluation instruments and growth measures. These can include value-added models, pre- and post-tests, student learning objectives, or portfolios, allowing teachers in virtually any subject to qualify. Districts must first secure approval of their evaluation plans from the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Then, Texas Tech University independently analyzes their actual teacher-performance data to

assess the reliability and validity of their designations, including their alignment with statewide performance standards. TEA uses this analysis to determine whether to grant final approval.

To illustrate how this works, consider the case of Atlanta Independent School District (AISD), a district of about 1,900 students in northeast Texas.[25] In AISD, teacher designations are based on a combination of classroom observations (50 percent) and student academic growth (50 percent). The district uses the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS) evaluation framework for classroom observations, but varies its measures of student growth by subject and grade. For example, elementary reading and math teachers are evaluated using MAP Growth assessments, while teachers of subjects such as world history and Spanish are evaluated using curriculum-based pre- and post-tests. Career and technical education teachers are evaluated using industry-specific assessments. To qualify for a designation, teachers must meet minimum performance thresholds on both classroom observations and student growth, with higher standards for higher designations.

Table 4: TIA allotments range from $3,000 to $36,000

CATEGORY	ACKNOWLEDGED	RECOGNIZED	EXEMPLARY	MASTER
PERFORMANCE STANDARD	Top 50%	Top 33%	Top 20%	Top 5%
BASE ALLOTMENT	$3,000	$5,000	$9,000	$12,000
MULTIPLIER AMOUNT	$1,500	$2,500	$4,000	$6,000
NON-ECO-DIS (×0)	$3,000	$5,000	$9,000	$12,000
TIER 1 (×0.5)	$3,750	$6,250	$11,000	$15,000
TIER 2 (×1.0)	$4,500	$7,500	$13,000	$18,000
TIER 3 (×2.0)	$6,000	$10,000	$17,000	$24,000
TIER 4 (×3.0)	$7,500	$12,500	$21,000	$30,000
TIER 5 (×4.0)	$9,000	$15,000	$25,000	$36,000

Note: Funding levels reflect Teacher Incentive Allotment amounts under HB 2 and vary by designation and campus need tier. The system increases the multiplier tier for rural districts on top of any adjustment for economic disadvantage. “Non-Eco-Dis” refers to districts that are not economically disadvantaged.

Not all Texas districts are as inclusive as AISD, but the TIA system enables Texas districts to identify and reward effective teachers across a wide range of grades and subjects – not just those whose students take annual state assessments. Requiring independent verification of district performance criteria places strong guardrails around how effective teachers are identified. Although Texas districts retain substantial discretion over their evaluation systems

and eligibility rules, the state's requirements for objective student-growth measures and independent validation provide important safeguards against inconsistent teacher designations.

TIA offers bonuses to a broad swath of high-performing teachers. Starting in 2026–27, Texas will have four designated categories: Acknowledged, Recognized, Exemplary, and Master. The state has established performance benchmarks that roughly correspond to the top 50 percent of teachers for Acknowledged, top 33 percent for Recognized, top 20 percent for Exemplary, and top 5 percent for Master (Table 4). These benchmarks guide locally developed designation systems rather than imposing fixed quotas, meaning that individual districts may designate higher or lower percentages of their teachers depending on teacher performance and local criteria.[26]

Under TIA, each of the designations carries a base amount, which is currently $3,000 for Acknowledged, $5,000 for Recognized, $9,000 for Exemplary, and $12,000 for Master (Table 4). Additionally, the state applies a “multiplier” tied to student poverty rates at the teacher’s campus, sorted into five different poverty “tiers,” and whether the school is in a rural area. TIA uses a nuanced approach to adjusting funding for campus poverty and rurality, recognizing that poorer districts face distinctive teacher staffing challenges, that economic disadvantage is a spectrum, and that rural districts face challenges that intersect with their economic disadvantage. With these detailed multipliers, the total allotment amounts can reach $9,000 for an Acknowledged teacher and $36,000 for a Master teacher in the highest-need rural schools.[27] This system provides a large incentive for teachers to work in the districts that need them most, with the largest incentives available to the highest-rated teachers.

Comparing TIA and OTEP

These factors explain why TIA is much larger than Oklahoma’s OTEP even after accounting for the different scale of the states’ student populations. In June 2026, Texas announced more than $750 million in TIA funding for more than 65,000 teachers.[28] Most school districts in Texas are receiving money through the program: 555 have approved designation systems, another 455 have submitted applications to get their designation systems approved, and many districts receive money from designated teachers moving in, even if the destination district itself is not currently approved to designate teachers. That means that TIA now reaches roughly 18 percent of Texas teachers, compared with only about 4 percent of Oklahoma teachers participating in OTEP, and another 3 or 4 percent potentially eligible for the growth pilot bonuses, as well as slightly less than 1 percent who have National Board Certification.[29] Texas’s annual investment in 2025–26 was roughly $135 per public-school student, around eight times the $17 per student allocated through the OTEP program that year.[30]

Infographic: OTEP vs. TIA

How Oklahoma's and Texas's teacher incentive programs compare

Program reach

	OKLAHOMA (OTEP)	TEXAS (TIA)
DISTRICT PARTICIPATION	20% of all districts — 107 of 541 districts	46% of all districts — 555 of 1,202 districts
TEACHER COVERAGE (participating districts)	10% +10% — 10% All districts; +10% Highest-need districts	50% benchmark

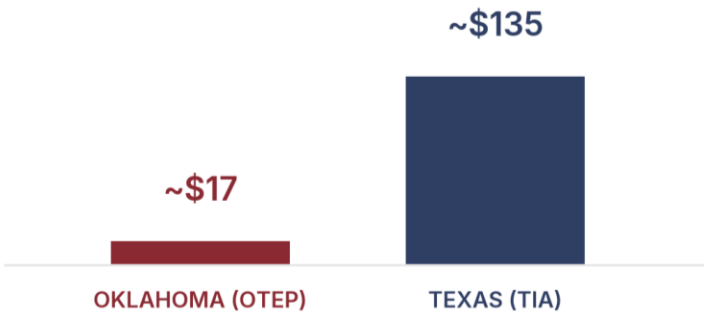
Annual teacher incentives

Every money-stack icon represents $3,000

	OKLAHOMA (OTEP)	TEXAS (TIA)
MINIMUM AWARD	$3,000	$3,000
MAXIMUM AWARD	$15,000	$36,000

Annual state investment per public-school student

Teacher incentive awards and allotments, 2025–26



Note: Oklahoma teacher coverage figures reflect designation limits; Texas figures reflect performance benchmarks, not observed participation. TIA figures represent state allotments generated by designated teachers, not necessarily the amount an individual teacher receives.

There is also a major difference from the teacher's perspective, in that the designations in Texas are attached to teacher licenses, fully portable across the state, and valid for five school years. (See Table 5 for a detailed comparison of the programs.) That makes the designation closer to a professional credential than an annual bonus decision. The funding follows the designated teacher's campus employment, and at least 90 percent of the allotment generated by designated teachers must be spent on teacher compensation at that campus. Districts decide how to distribute the money, so the allotment amount is not necessarily identical to the amount a particular teacher receives, although in practice most districts pass the full 90 percent directly to the designated teacher.[31] And unlike OTEP stipends, compensation paid to teachers through TIA counts toward their retirement contributions and benefits, potentially increasing the long-term value of the awards.

Table 5: Comparing Oklahoma and Texas teacher compensation programs

STATE	OKLAHOMA	TEXAS
PROGRAM NAME	Oklahoma Teacher Empowerment Program (OTEP)	Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA)
WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?	Teachers in all subjects in participating districts	Teachers in all subjects in participating districts
DISTRICT PARTICIPATION RATE	107/541 (20%)	555/1,202 (46%)
HOW TEACHERS ARE IDENTIFIED	Locally determined criteria	Locally determined criteria subject to independent statistical validation, or National Board certification
FUNDING	Teacher Empowerment Revolving Fund, via Oklahoma Education Lottery Trust Fund	Formula-driven funding through the state's school finance system
OVERALL STATE SPENDING (2025–26)	~$17/student	~$135/student
AWARD/ALLOTMENT LEVELS	$3,000 to $15,000	$3,000 to $36,000
ADDITIONAL WORK REQUIRED	5–15 additional days	None
HIGH-NEED WEIGHTING	High-Title I districts may designate an additional 10% of teachers; high-poverty schools and small districts qualify for supplemental stipends	Graduated scale based on economic disadvantage (five tiers), with an additional boost for rural schools
DURATION	Annual designations	Designations are attached to a teacher's license for up to five years
SCALE	1,547 teachers (~4% of all teachers statewide)	65,000 teachers (~18% of all teachers statewide)
RETIREMENT BENEFITS	Stipends excluded from pension calculations	Compensation generally counts toward pension calculations

In contrast to the OTEP program, a Texas teacher does not have to take on any additional tasks or roles to satisfy the designation, nor do they need to work extra days to receive the

money. Essentially, Texas is identifying teachers who have demonstrated strong performance, and the state pays them substantially more money to keep them in classroom roles, especially in schools serving students with greater needs. Texas is beginning to push participating districts toward broader strategic staffing and performance-based compensation through a new “Enhanced” model, but the basic TIA designation itself is grounded in teacher effectiveness rather than a requirement to lead professional development or take on a separate administrative role.

This difference matters because it keeps the direct student benefit in view. If an effective teacher remains in the classroom because a large compensation increase makes teaching a viable long-term career, students continue to receive that teacher’s instruction. If the funding formula encourages effective teachers to work in high-need and rural schools, more disadvantaged students gain access to strong teachers. Those mechanisms are not guaranteed to produce achievement gains, but the chain from policy to student experience is relatively short.

In important respects, Texas's TIA pulls policy levers that are split across several programs in Oklahoma. Like OTEP, it allows districts to develop their own systems for identifying effective teachers across subjects and grade levels. Like GrowthComp, it places substantial weight on objective measures of student learning. But Texas integrates these elements within a single framework that includes independent validation, multi-year designations, larger financial incentives, and permanent funding through the state's school finance system. It is also much more expensive than Oklahoma’s programs. Oklahoma has adopted many of the same building blocks, but the resulting programs lack TIA’s scale and coherence.

Oklahoma’s programs have not been comprehensively studied. By contrast, several preliminary studies suggest that TIA is improving student learning and reducing turnover among the most effective teachers (Table 6). More study of TIA is needed, and the study of its effects on teacher mobility suggests that it is so far not driving higher quality teachers to the most understaffed schools, despite substantial financial incentives for designated teachers to move to high-poverty and rural schools. Still, the preliminary research on TIA is largely promising.

Table 6: What does preliminary research show about Texas TIA?

FINDING	EVIDENCE
HIGHER STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT	After TIA adoption, math and reading achievement increased by 0.09–0.10 standard deviations, or roughly one-third of a year of additional learning. Effects grew over time.
LOWER TEACHER TURNOVER	After four years, teacher turnover in TIA districts was about 2 percentage points lower than in similar districts that had not yet adopted the program.
BETTER RETENTION OF EFFECTIVE TEACHERS	By the third year, teachers in the top third of effectiveness were 1–2 percentage points less likely to leave the Texas teaching workforce, approximately a 20 percent reduction in attrition for that group. No similar effect appeared among the least effective teachers.
LIMITED EVIDENCE OF IMPROVED TEACHER DISTRIBUTION	Designated teachers initially became less likely to change campuses, but later became more mobile, and designated teachers generally did not move to the schools with the greatest staffing needs.

Note: J. Jacob Kirksey, Texas Tech University; Patrick Massey, Michigan State University.[32] Oklahoma does not yet have similar program evaluations in place, although the 2026 legislation requires an independent review of whether GrowthComp improves student achievement and teacher recruitment and retention, with the report due in 2028.[33]

Implications for Oklahoma

The dramatic growth of Texas's Teacher Incentive Allotment and the preliminary evidence of its success comprise one of the biggest national education stories since the COVID-19 pandemic. The promise of TIA is to achieve the holy grail that policymakers have sought through teacher evaluation systems for a generation: identifying highly effective teachers, rewarding them for their performance, and incentivizing them to work in schools where their talents are most needed. The early evidence suggests meaningful progress toward the first two goals, although the program's effects on teacher distribution remain unclear.

Oklahoma has already adopted many of the building blocks of a differentiated teacher compensation system. The state's OTEP program gives strong teachers a way to earn more without becoming administrators. The new GrowthComp program rewards teachers directly for student growth without requiring additional duties. And the state has added bonuses for teachers who earn National Board certification.

The resulting programs, however, are of narrow scope, applying to a small sliver of Oklahoma teachers. To address the state's teacher pipeline and retention challenges and ensure that Oklahoma students have high-performing teachers leading their classrooms, Oklahoma should consider expanding these programs and placing them within a coherent system. Texas offers useful lessons for what a more robust – albeit more expensive – system could look like, with larger awards, multi-year designations that are based on objective standards,

and much greater incentives to drive teachers into high-need schools, including schools with many students living in poverty and rural schools.

As Oklahoma builds on its teacher compensation reforms, four steps are worth considering.

First, scale up teacher compensation programs and build them into the state's funding formula. Polling of Oklahomans shows strong support both for raising and differentiating teacher pay.[34] A system that rewards teachers for teaching in a high-need subject, serving in a high-need school, and positively impacting the academic performance of their students is not just common sense: The Texas experience shows that it can help broaden the educator pipeline and ensure that students in every zip code get access to high-performing teachers. Yet to meaningfully influence teachers' career decisions, these programs must offer substantial and predictable financial rewards. As the National Council on Teacher Quality has noted, funding uncertainty has undermined previous teacher incentive programs: Districts are reluctant to invest the resources and political capital necessary to overhaul their compensation systems if the funding may disappear.[35] Texas addressed this problem by incorporating TIA into its school funding formula, establishing an ongoing source of funding for each qualifying teacher designation rather than relying on discretionary grants. Oklahoma's lottery-funded programs represent a promising start, but a similarly durable funding commitment could give districts greater confidence to invest in rigorous evaluation systems and give effective teachers greater reason to see classroom teaching as a financially rewarding long-term career.

Second, strengthen designation criteria under OTEP and reward effectiveness separately from additional duties. OTEP requires districts to consider classroom observations and student performance, but teachers must apply for the program and agree to work additional days. As a result, district evaluation criteria may function more to justify awards to applicants than to systematically identify the most effective teachers. This blurs the distinction between rewarding excellent classroom teaching and compensating teachers for additional responsibilities. It may also help explain why some districts rely on factors such as years of experience and leadership roles that do not necessarily demonstrate classroom effectiveness. Texas offers a different approach: Districts retain flexibility over their evaluation systems, but must use student-growth measures and classroom observations, with results subject to independent validation. Oklahoma should adopt similar safeguards to ensure that OTEP awards recognize demonstrated teaching effectiveness. Excellent classroom teaching should itself be sufficient to earn substantially higher compensation; mentoring, tutoring, and other additional responsibilities can be compensated separately.

In any case, if the state is going to purchase additional time, as Oklahoma does under OTEP, it should care about how districts use it. Some uses, such as tutoring students or providing

intensive classroom-based coaching to novice teachers, have a relatively direct connection to instruction.[36] Others, such as committee work or generic professional development, depend on a longer chain of events to produce benefits for students.

Third, differentiate incentives more precisely by school need. Whether under OTEP or GrowthComp, awards could be subject to fine-grained need-based multipliers, as is done under TIA. In Oklahoma, as in many other states, high-need schools not only provide a more challenging work environment but also frequently pay teachers no more – or even less – than lower-need schools. As a consequence, students living in poverty or students in rural areas are often less likely to have access to a high-performing teacher. Oklahoma could incentivize high-performing teachers to teach in the schools that need them most by differentiating awards by poverty level and rurality.

Finally, use GrowthComp to generate evidence about the effects of performance pay. The GrowthComp pilot offers Oklahoma the opportunity to study how these incentives shape teacher recruitment and retention in different types of schools. Rather than treating the pilot as another temporary initiative, policymakers can use the evidence on student achievement, recruitment, and retention to decide which elements deserve to be expanded and incorporated into a permanent compensation system.

Oklahoma's teacher workforce challenges are not simply about getting enough teachers into classrooms. The state also needs to ensure that its most effective teachers have compelling reasons to stay. With student achievement near the bottom nationally, keeping classrooms staffed is not enough. Oklahoma needs to focus on getting excellent teachers in front of students and keeping them there.

Oklahoma has already taken important steps toward differentiated teacher compensation. The next challenge is to bring those efforts together into a system with rigorous standards, meaningful financial rewards, and reliable funding. Texas offers encouraging evidence that such a system can improve student outcomes and retain effective teachers. Oklahoma need not replicate the Texas model, but it should learn from its example.

In the simplest terms, when Oklahoma finds an excellent teacher, it should make it worthwhile for that teacher to keep teaching.

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