

Merit Incentive Fund

Elevating the Profession. Rewarding Excellence.



The Arkansas Merit Teacher Incentive Fund, established by the LEARNS Act (Act 237 of 2023), is a state-funded initiative that rewards exceptional Arkansas educators who demonstrate outstanding performance and a strong commitment to student learning. Through this program, eligible teachers can earn up to \$10,000 annually.



This program is designed to do the following:

Elevate	Elevate the teaching profession,
Recognize and retain	Recognize and retain high-performing educators,
Incentivize	Incentivize service in critical shortage areas, and
Encourage	Encourage mentorship of future teachers.



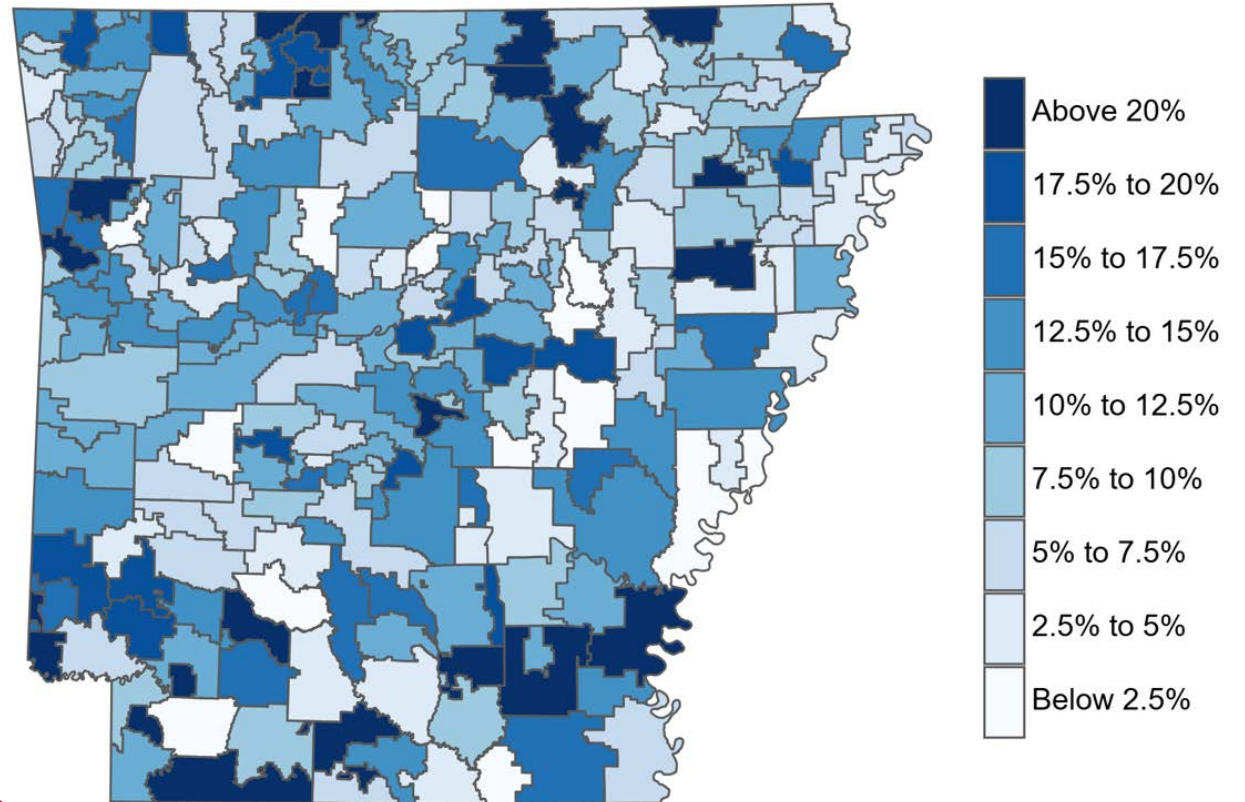
Fast Facts



2024-2025

- DESE used administrative data to identify all eligible recipients
- Over 4,200 teachers receiving bonuses (1,300 teacher increase from 2024)
- Over 800 teachers receiving >\$5,000
- Over 70 teachers receiving \$10,000
- Average bonus≈ \$3,300

Percentage of Teachers Receiving a Bonus



[Click here for Interactive Map](#)

Teachers in a wide variety of subjects and school levels received bonuses.

Subject	Teachers Receiving a Bonus	Percentage of Merit Pay Recipients Teaching at Least One Course in the Area
Middle School (5–8)	1,452	34%
Secondary (9–12)	1,105	26%
Elementary (3–4)	789	18%
Special Education	444	10%
Elementary (K–2)	324	8%
Physical Education and Health	218	5%
Fine Arts	130	3%
Career & Technical	127	3%
Counselor	111	3%
Foreign Language	87	2%
Library Media Specialist	85	2%





Merit Incentive Requirements

- Fit into one of the three categories (Outstanding growth, shortage area, mentoring)
- Standard or Provisional teaching license
- Three years of teaching experience
- Meet the definition of a teacher
- Demonstrate positive impact on student growth



3 Categories

Classroom teachers, library media specialists, and school counselors may be eligible for merit pay if they fall into **one** of the following categories:

- Demonstrate outstanding growth in student performance
- Are employed in subject, geographic, and other critical shortage areas
- Serve as a mentor to aspiring teachers participating in yearlong residencies

Criteria	Bonus
Category 1: Demonstrate outstanding growth in student performance.	
Top 0.5% 3-Year Average Student Growth Score Across Subjects	\$10,000
Top 1% 3-Year Average Student Growth Score Across Subjects	\$9,000
Top 5% 3-Year Average Student Growth Score Across Subjects	\$6,000
Top 25% 3-Year Average Student Growth Score in ELA, Math, or Science	\$3,000
Category 2: Teach in subject, geographic, and other shortage areas.	
Subject Shortage Area	\$2,500
Geographic Shortage Area	\$1,500
Lead or Master Designation Shortage Area	\$1,500
Category 3: Serve as a mentor to aspiring teachers participating in yearlong residencies.	
Mentor for a Yearlong Resident	\$3,000



Demonstrate Outstanding Growth in Student Performance



Category 1

- The **ONLY** category that requires a teacher growth score
- Requires a three-year average growth score (must have taught at least 10 non-highly mobile students in tested subjects and grade levels to receive a growth score for the same teacher role in 2022, 2023, and 2024)
- Awarded to teachers with the **highest** growth scores in the state

Demonstrate outstanding growth in student performance



Who received this bonus in 2025?

Teachers with a growth score in the same teacher role for the 2021-22, 2022-23, and 2023-24 school years are considered for outstanding growth bonuses.

- Teachers with a three-year average student growth score across all subjects in the top 5% of all teachers statewide (up to \$10,000)
- Teachers with a three-year average student growth score in the same tested subject area (ELA, Math, SCI) that is in the top 25% of all teachers in that subject area statewide (\$3,000).
 - Students not meeting reading/numeracy standards can be assigned to these ELA and math teachers (LEARNS Act).



Merit Incentive Growth Score Thresholds and Award Amounts for 2025

These will be updated yearly

- Top .5% 3yr Average Teacher Growth Score Across Subjects (≥ 90.83)-\$10,000
- Top 1% 3yr Average Composite Teacher Growth Score (≥ 89.55)- \$9,000
- Top 5% 3yr Average Composite Teacher Growth Score- (≥ 86.06) \$6,000
- Top 25% 3yr Average Teacher Growth Score in ELA (≥ 82.54), Math(≥ 83.54), or Science(≥ 82.29)-\$3,000

What is a Teacher Growth Score?



- A teacher growth score of 80 means, on average, students rostered to that teacher are meeting expected growth.
- A growth score higher than 80 means that teacher's students are growing more than expected on average, and a growth score below 80 means that teacher's students are growing less than expected on average.
- Teachers must have at least **10 non-highly mobile students in the same tested subject and teacher role** to receive a growth score.
- Student growth scores show us if a student learned as much as we expected them to learn in a year. Student growth scores are calculated by DESE using students' prior assessment score history.
- Measuring students' growth reinforces the idea that all students can learn and can demonstrate learning regardless of where they are on the achievement continuum.

Who has growth scores?



Teachers responsible for significant instruction of the following academic standards:

2022 and 2023

Primary teacher of record for

- 3-10 grade ELA and math
- 4-10 grade science

[2022 Course Subjects List](#)

[2023 Course Subjects List](#)

2024 and beyond

Primary and secondary teachers of record for

- 3-10 grade ELA
- 3-8 grade math, algebra, geometry
- 4-8 grade science, biology

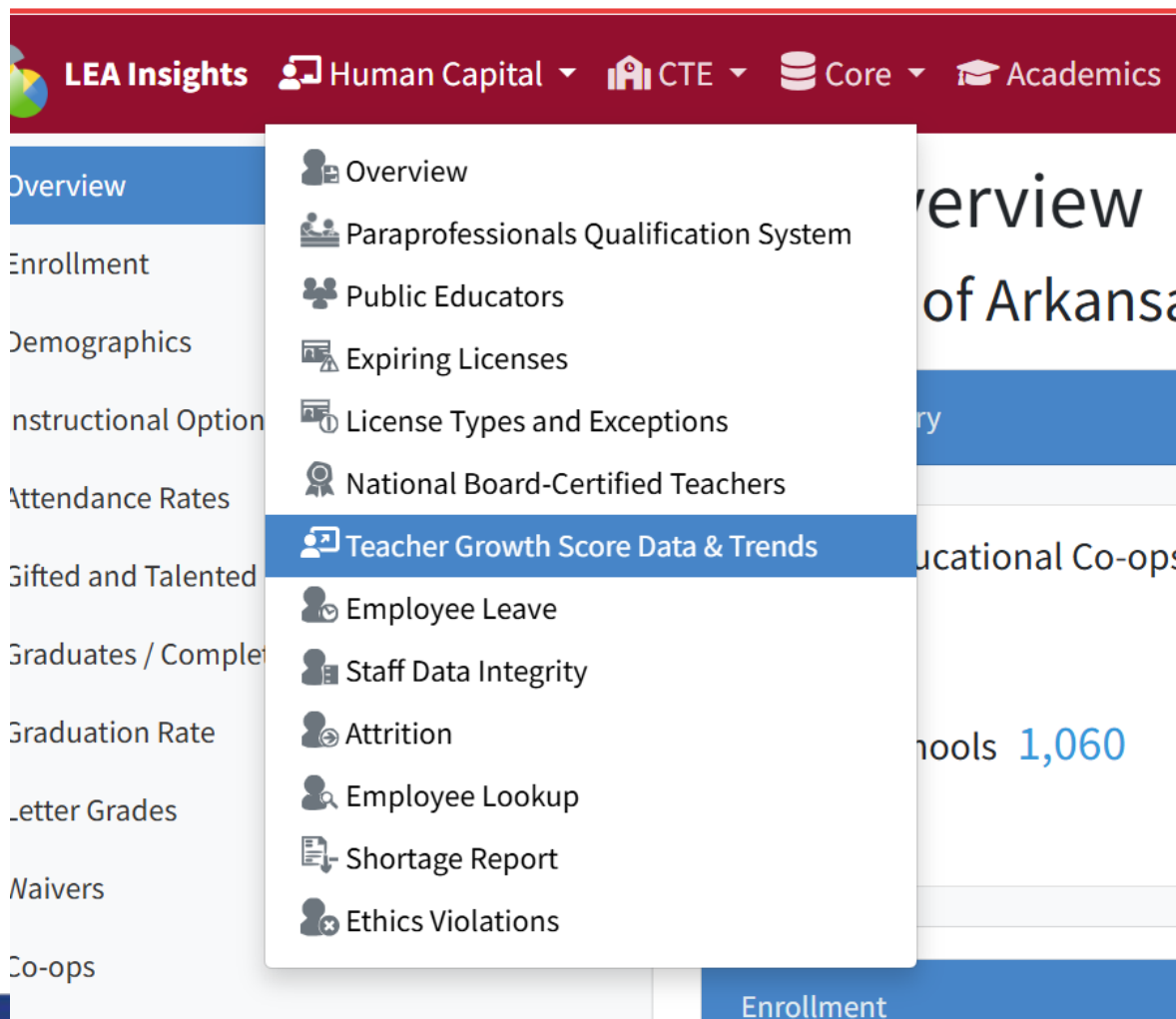
[2024 Course Subjects List](#) (educators could receive a growth score as a “contributor” if linked to students through the [Roster Verification System](#))

Where can you find teacher growth scores?



LEA Insights

Administrators have access to the Teacher Growth Score Data & Trends module under the Human Capital tab.





Growth Score and Merit Pay Eligibility

- The first category of merit pay, demonstrating outstanding growth in student performance, is the **only category requiring a teacher growth score.**
- If a teacher has a three-year average composite growth score below 80, they are excluded from all merit incentives.



Turn and Talk: How would you explain teacher growth scores to a co-worker?



Employed in a Shortage Area-Category 2

Who received this bonus in 2025?

- **Teachers in a subject area experiencing a critical shortage (\$2,500).**
 - Secondary Science, Foreign Language, Secondary Math, Middle School Science, Middle School Math, Special Education
- **Teachers in a geographic shortage area (\$1,500) .**
 - Arkansas River ESC, Great Rivers ESC, Pulaski Co. Schools, Southeast ESC, South Central ESC, Southwest ESC, and other districts identified as high need based on unlicensed teacher and attrition data.
- **Teachers holding a Lead or Master Professional Educator licensure designation (\$1,500).**
 - Currently, around 1,100 teachers hold these designations. These designations are needed to:
 - Mentor yearlong residents (approx. 2,000 needed by 2026-27)
 - Students not meeting readiness standards in Math and/or ELA can be placed with a Master Professional Educator

Serve as a mentor to a yearlong resident-Category 3



Who received this \$3,000 bonus in 2025?

- Evidence of mentoring a yearlong resident in 2024 submitted by Educator Preparation Program
- Lead or Master Professional Educator Designation on Arkansas Standard License
- Completion of DESE recognized coaching training

Potentially 2,000 mentors will be needed when the yearlong residency becomes a requirement in the 2026-27 school year



Definition of a Teacher

A.C.A. § 6-17-2902

“Teacher” means a:

- Licensed classroom teacher who spends at least seventy percent (70%) of his or her contracted time working directly with students in a classroom setting teaching all grade-level or subject-matter appropriate classes;
- School counselor;
- Library media specialist; or
- Aspiring teacher

[2025 Course Code/Job Code List](#)

Demonstrate a positive impact on student growth

DESE Rules Governing Educator Performance

10.01.4



For those **with** a three-year growth score (i.e., who teach in tested grades and subjects):

- o Have a three-year average composite growth score of 80 or above **and**
- o An annual rating of “effective” or higher across at least four components in the Educator Effectiveness System.

NOTE: If the three-year composite growth score is below 80, the teacher is excluded from all categories of merit incentives.

For those **without** a three-year composite growth score:

- o Have an annual rating of “highly effective” across at least four components and have at least one growth artifact in the Educator Effectiveness System.



Turn and Talk

Why might someone not have received a merit incentive?



Why might someone who appeared to meet an eligibility category (outstanding growth, shortage area, mentoring) not have received a merit bonus?

- They did not have a three-year composite growth score, and they had an annual rating of “effective” (Demonstrate Positive Impact on Student Growth)
- No annual rating
- 3yr composite growth score less than 80
- No license/not licensed in the subject shortage area they taught
- Their job code was not considered by DESE as aligning with the definition of teacher/the class they were coded as teaching was not considered a shortage area course
- They didn't have three completed years of teaching experience
- They were mentoring, but not a yearlong resident in an approved ed prep program.



While educators can only receive one bonus for outstanding student growth, all other bonus categories can be stacked.

Total bonus cannot exceed \$10,000.

	Student Growth Bonus	Subject Shortage Bonus	Geographic Shortage Bonus	Lead/Master Designation Bonus	Total Bonus
 Ms. Ozark Secondary math teacher in a subject and geographic shortage area, top 25% in student growth in math	✓ \$3,000	✓ \$2,500	✓ \$1,500		\$7,000
 Coach Buffalo Secondary science teacher in a subject shortage area with a Lead/Master designation		✓ \$2,500		✓ \$1,500	\$4,000
 Mrs. Delta Special education teacher in a geographic and subject shortage area		✓ \$2,500	✓ \$1,500		\$4,000
 Ms. Mockingbird Secondary math teacher in a geographic and subject shortage area, top 5% in student growth	✓ \$6,000	✓ \$2,500	✓ \$1,500		\$10,000
 Mr. Diamond Foreign language teacher in a geographic and subject shortage area, Lead/Master designation		✓ \$2,500	✓ \$1,500	✓ \$1,500	\$5,500

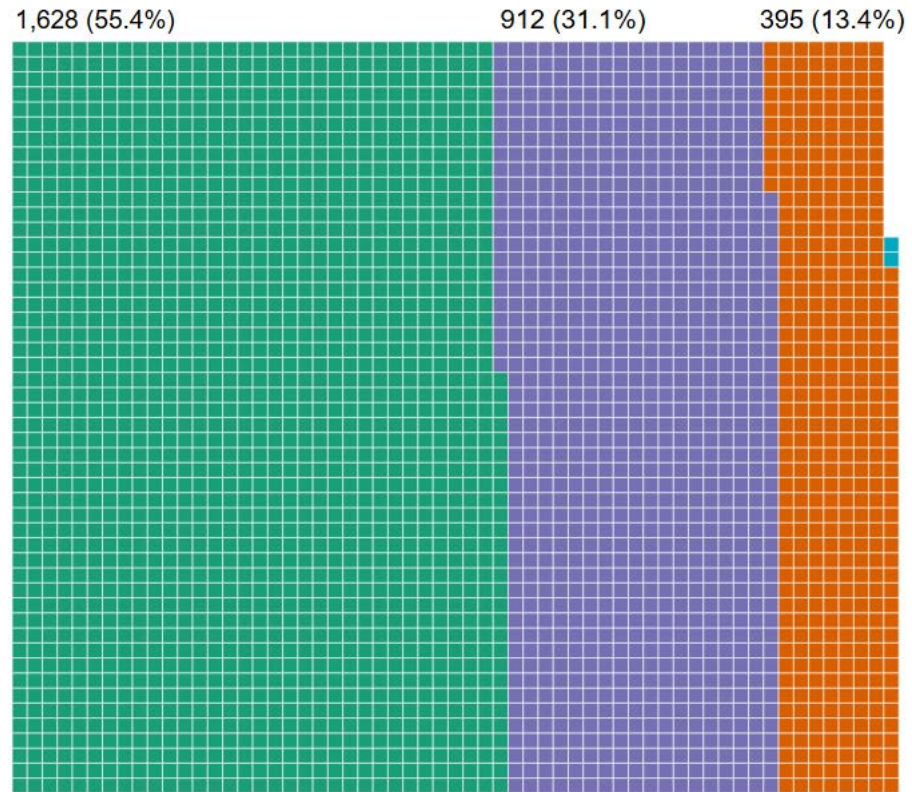
The number of bonus payments expanded significantly in 2025



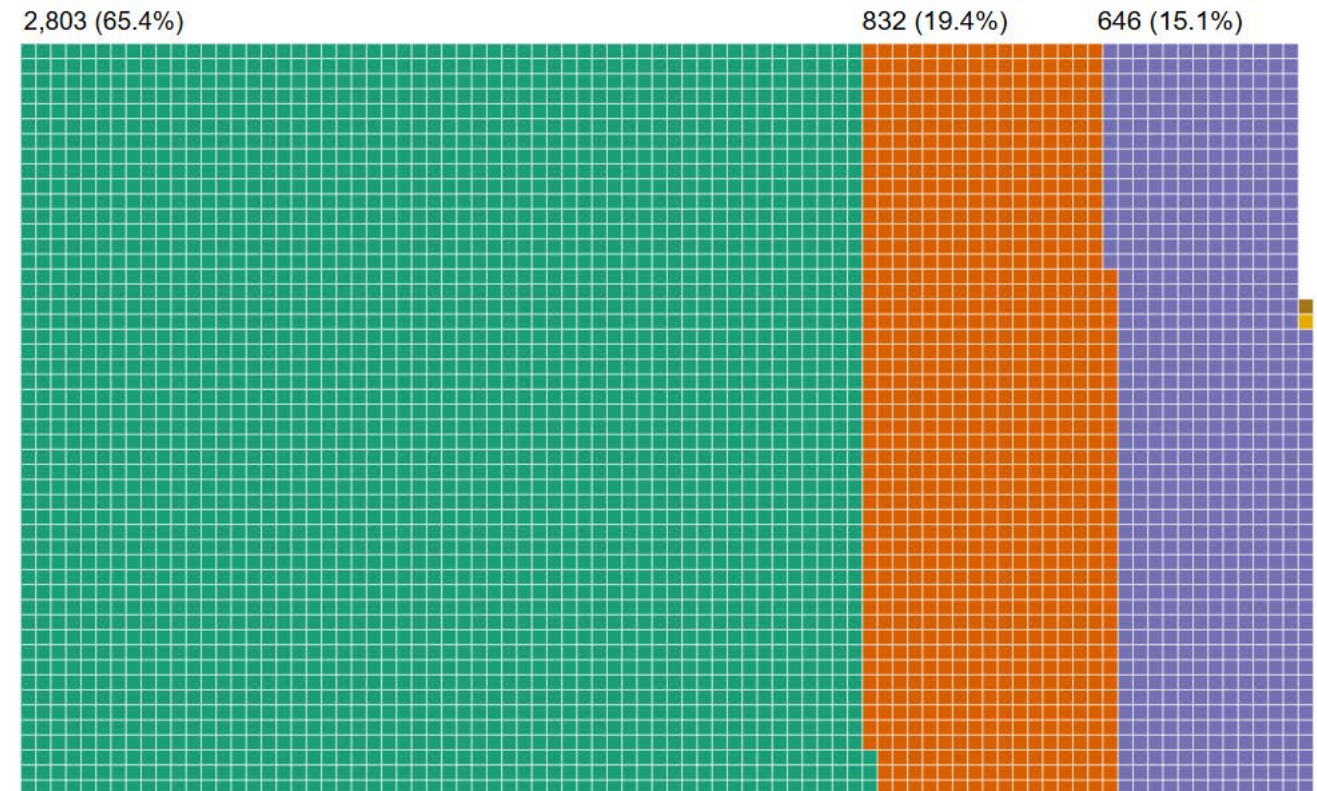
2024 vs 2025 Number of educators receiving merit pay by category

Only Shortage Bonus Only Growth Bonus Shortage + Mentor Bonus
Growth + Shortage Bonus Only Mentor Bonus All Three Bonuses

2024 Bonus Recipients - 2,937 total

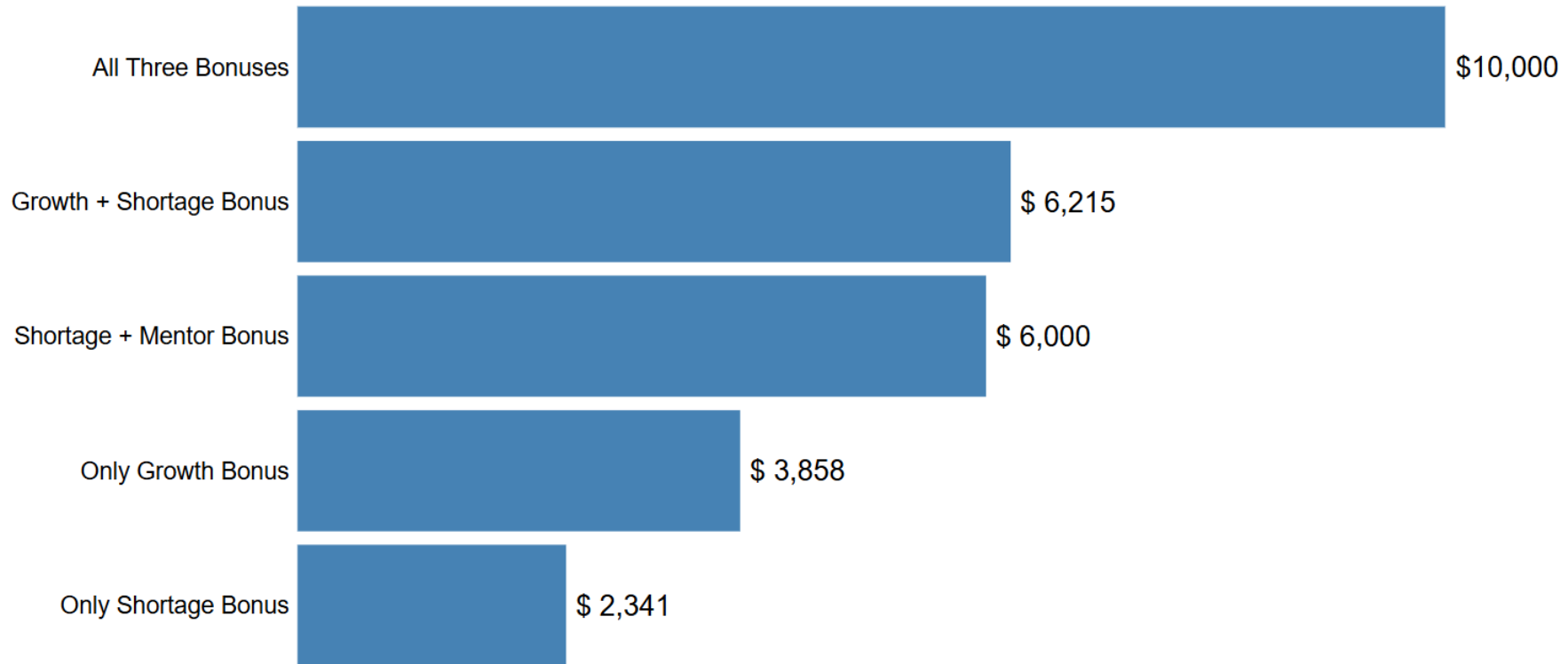


2025 Bonus Recipients - 4,283 total



Educators who earned bonuses in multiple categories received the largest bonuses

2025 Average Bonus Amount by Category



Merit Incentive Modules in LEA Insights



Human Capital Tab

Merit Incentive Recipient List

- Launched in May 2025
- Used by superintendents to verify the following:
 - Recipients met the definition of a teacher
 - Recipients were not under TESS incentive support status at any point in the 24-25 school year
- Tells the merit incentive category for each recipient and total bonus amount

COMING SOON: Merit Incentive Module Phase II

- Launch ASAP (August 2025)
- Will allow districts to see all the details as to why or why not a teacher was eligible for 2025 merit incentives
 - Were basic eligibility requirements met?
 - In what categories did a teacher have the potential to receive an incentive?



Excellence in Teaching Fellowship Program

- A new initiative designed to connect, support, and reward high-performing teachers
- Select 2025 merit incentive recipients will be invited to apply
- Participants will participate in virtual convenings every other month that will feature guest speakers and create opportunities to meet peers from across the state.
- Fellows will also receive training and support so they can engage in a range of public-facing activities such as writing articles or columns, speaking at events, and hosting visitors in their classrooms.
- Fellows will receive \$500 every three months, or \$1,500 in total. *These funds are in addition to the funding received in merit pay.*



More Questions?

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Visit the [Arkansas Merit Incentive Fund](#) webpage for more information.