



Guidance: Oklahoma Teacher Empowerment Program

Updated September 12, 2023

In the spring of 2022, Governor Kevin Stitt signed HB 4388, creating the Oklahoma Teacher Empowerment Program. Designed to retain quality teachers, the program offers matching funds to districts that select teachers for advanced-, lead- and master-level certificates and then use local dollars to increase their annual salary by at least \$3,000.

This guidance created by the OSSBA team is intended to provide clarity to school districts about this new opportunity. It will be updated as more information becomes available.

Q: What is the Oklahoma Teacher Empowerment Program?

The Oklahoma Teacher Empowerment Program (OTEP) allows the state Department of Education (SDE) to establish advanced, lead, and master teacher certificates – with minimum salary increases for the corresponding certificate levels. The goal of the program is to retain quality teachers in the classroom – encouraging them to be mentors to their peers, rather than leaving the profession or moving to administration to earn a greater annual salary.

Q: UPDATED How is the program funded?

OTEP requires 50/50 matching funds from the district and the state. The state's portion is funded by the Oklahoma Lottery Commission. This year, there is \$22.58 million set aside for OTEP.

Q: What is the minimum salary increase for each certification level?

Teachers selected for eligible district programs will receive the following increases annually for each designation:

- Advanced – Minimum \$3,000 from the district with a \$3,000 state match
- Lead – Minimum \$5,000 from the district with a \$5,000 state match
- Master – Minimum \$10,000 from the district with a \$10,000 state match

Q: Are other financial incentives available?

Yes. OTEP also emphasizes the need for quality teachers in (1) economically disadvantaged schools where 40% or more of the students qualify for free- or reduced-meal assistance and (2) districts that serve less than 1,000 students. Teachers who are granted an OTEP designation and serve in one of these areas can also earn a one-time stipend:

- Advanced - \$1,500
- Lead - \$2,500
- Master - \$5,000

Q: Who decides which teachers are eligible for the designations?

Districts select the criteria for the teacher designations; however, all plans must include the following components to be considered for approval:

- Teacher observation
- Out-of-classroom time
- Student performance

Districts may also incorporate additional factors, including:

- Student surveys
- Teacher leadership responsibilities
- Teacher mentorship responsibilities
- Family surveys
- Demonstration of district core values
- Teacher peer surveys
- Contributions to the broader school community

[Page two](#) of the SDE guidance provides a sample plan that districts can choose to use.

Q: UPDATED Do districts have to apply for the program to receive the funds?

Yes. Districts must submit their designation plan to SDE for approval, after it is approved by their local board of education. According to the State Department of Education, the application window is now open and will remain open until further notice. A second application window will open prior to the spring semester.

Information regarding the Single Sign-On application can be found [here](#). Guidance about the grant process, including how to report the names of designated teachers and what to do after the funds are allocated, can be found [here](#).

Q: Do districts designate teachers annually?

Yes. Teachers must be designated each year to continue to receive the increased salary.

Q: How long are advanced-, lead- and master-level certificates valid?

These higher-level certifications must be renewed every five years, just like a standard certificate. According to SDE officials, if the teacher is not selected for advanced-, lead- or master-level designation by a district in consecutive years, then the certificate will serve as a standard Oklahoma certificate until it expires at the end of the five-year period. The renewal cost for these three levels will be the same as a standard certificate.

Q: Does every certified teacher qualify?

All certified teachers who meet the district's criteria can be considered; however, school leaders can only designate up to 10% of their teaching staff for the program.

Q: UPDATED Does the state program have financial caps or limitations?

Yes. Funding is offered on a first-come, first-served basis until it is exhausted. Districts are not limited to a maximum salary increase; however, the state match will not exceed \$40,000 per individual teacher for a potential annual raise of up to \$80,000.

Q: What else is required of the teachers selected for the program?

Teachers who receive a designation will be placed in professional development cohorts and provided additional training opportunities from SDE. They will also have additional contract days each year:

- Advanced – 5 days
- Lead – 10 days
- Master – 15 days

Q: Are districts required to participate in the program?

No. Participation in the Oklahoma Teacher Empowerment Program is a local decision.

Q: How should a district determine its criteria?

A district's system must include the following components: teacher observation, out-of-classroom time, and student performance. Beyond these three requirements, the program does not specify a process for selecting criteria. A collaborative approach that includes input from a cross section of district and community representatives is likely to yield the best results for the district by increasing stakeholder support for the program. The criteria should be measurable, and evidence of each teacher's qualification with the criteria must be retained and submitted to SDE.

Q: Do the district-level terms of the program need to be discussed during the teacher negotiation process, if applicable?

Yes, if your district has a Collective Bargaining Agreement with certified teachers, any change to the terms and conditions of employment must be negotiated with the represented group. This would likely include the criteria used to determine each of the three categories of qualifying teachers and the bonus amount.

Q: Can the designation and related salary increase be taken from a teacher once it is granted by the district?

Yes. School districts are not obligated to pay the increase in subsequent years if the designation is removed because the matching funds from the state would not be available. According to SDE officials, because the program ties the salary increase to a specific designation, reducing the teacher's salary would not violate the statute that requires teachers to be paid as much or more than the previous year.

Q: What if a teacher who holds a designation moves to another district?

The new district would determine whether to select the teacher for a designation, based on the new district's criteria.

Q: NEW Are Oklahoma school districts applying for the Empowerment Program?

When completing the 2023 OSSBA Teacher Shortage Survey in August, respondents for nine Oklahoma districts said they had either applied or intended to apply for the program. More have verbally said they plan to research the program and determine the best course of action for their districts.

Q: NEW Can school districts involve teachers in the planning process?

Absolutely. School leaders can gather feedback from and collaborate with their team to develop a plan that will benefit the district as a whole by retaining teacher talent in the classroom and encouraging mentorship for new teachers.