



Guidance: Teacher Signing Bonus

In April, state schools Superintendent Ryan Walters announced a new teacher signing bonus program to recruit new teachers to the profession and bring back teachers who may have left the state or profession. This guidance created by the OSSBA team is intended to provide clarity to school districts. It will be updated as more information becomes available.

Q: Who is eligible to receive a signing bonus?

- A certified teacher who meets all the following requirements:
 - Did not teach in an Oklahoma public school during the 2022-2023 school year;
 - Is certified in (prior to 2023-2024 school year) *and* will teach at an Oklahoma public school in one of the subject/grade eligible categories:
 - A certified teacher with less than three years of experience who will teach prekindergarten, kindergarten, first grade, second grade, third grade or special education; or
 - A certified teacher who previously retired or left the profession who will teach prekindergarten, kindergarten, first grade, second grade, third grade or special education; or
 - Certified teachers moving to Oklahoma from another state who will teach prekindergarten, kindergarten, first grade, second grade, third grade or special education.
 - Agrees to teach for five years in a public school in one of the above-listed identified shortage areas.

Q: Are there additional eligibility criteria to consider?

The following employees who worked in a public school during the 2022-2023 school year may be eligible to participate in the program.

- Certified substitute teachers/tutors who worked in a school during 2022-2023 are eligible if they meet the certification and employment criteria.
- An emergency certified teacher who obtains a non-emergency teaching certification to teach prior to the 2023-24 school year may qualify if they meet the certification and employment criteria.

- An employee during the 2022-2023 school year who participates in the paraprofessional pathway or bootcamp pathway working towards a master's in special education will be considered "new" to the profession if they obtain a provisional special education teaching certificate prior to the 2023-2024 school year and meet the employment criteria.

Q: How much is the bonus for eligible teachers?

(updated 5/22/23) The one-time bonus ranges from \$15,000 to \$50,000 and is based on years of teaching experience, certification area, whether the teacher is moving to Oklahoma from out of state and whether the teacher will be employed in a rural district or high-poverty school. Please see [this chart](#) for details.

Q: How do I know if my school is considered rural or high poverty and able to offer a higher bonus amount?

High Poverty

SDE has defined high poverty as a school with a free-reduced lunch rate of 50% or higher. You can find the SDE low-income schools report [here](#).

Rural

(updated 5/22/23) SDE said a *district* must be defined as rural by the National Center for Education Statistics. You can find a downloadable spreadsheet with information on districts [here](#).

Q: How are the bonuses funded?

The state Department of Education has said it is using one-time federal COVID relief funds and federal special education funding to underwrite the bonuses. The money will be distributed to districts, which will then issue the bonus payment to SDE-approved teachers. See below for more details on the application process.

Q: How does the signing bonus application process work?

- Teachers must complete the application on the SDE website by **May 31, 2023**. SDE may open a second round of applications on July 1 if unobligated funds remain.
- SDE will verify the application information and contact both the teacher and school district with additional instructions.
- The local school board must have approved the teacher's employment and the teacher's background check must be completed before the district will receive the funds.

Q: What are the district's obligations as part of this program?

- A school district contacted by SDE regarding an applicant for the signing bonus should follow the agency's instructions for verifying employment.
- The school district will be responsible for receiving the bonus funds from the SDE and then making the bonus payment to the employee, less state taxes and FICA withholdings. (SDE cannot pay the employee directly).
- **OSSBA recommends the district sign an agreement with the employee regarding the bonus before issuing payment. [See sample agreement.](#)**
- Employees approved for the signing bonus are subject to the same contract and due process laws that apply to all teachers in Oklahoma.
- The district is obligated to attempt to recoup a prorated amount of the bonus if the employee becomes ineligible within the five-year agreement period.
- If the employee leaves the district where they first became eligible for the program and becomes employed by another district while still meeting the program eligibility criteria, the fiscal responsibility for ensuring the teacher completes the agreement transfers to the new employing district.

Q: Is the district fiscally responsible for any portion of the signing bonus?

No. The signing bonuses are funded through remaining American Rescue Plan federal relief funds and IDEA Part B, Other State Level Activities. The award of signing bonuses remains contingent upon the availability of those funds. There is no local matching requirement for the bonus, although OSSBA's legal team believes schools will be responsible for paying any increase in the employer's payroll tax burden that results from the increased pay to the employee.

Q: Does the signing bonus program affect a participating teacher's contract?

No. Employees approved for the signing bonus are subject to the same contract and due process laws that apply to all teachers in Oklahoma. OSSBA recommends the district sign an agreement with the employee regarding the bonus before issuing payment. [See a sample agreement.](#)

Q: How is the signing bonus paid out to the employee?

It appears that the bonus will be paid out as a lump sum once approved by the State Department of Education. Because the payment is a one-time incentive, it will not be considered "compensation" for purposes of due process and a subsequent reduction in pay will not require a hearing. (See 70 O.S. § 18-114.9(A)). Employees will be responsible for any increased state or federal tax burden that they may encounter as a result of the large upfront payment.

Q: Under what circumstances might a teacher who received a signing bonus lose eligibility for the program?

- The teacher moves to a teaching position in the same district or a different public school district that no longer meets the eligibility requirements.
- The teacher leaves the state and/or the education profession.

Q: What must a district do if a teacher becomes ineligible?

SDE says the district has the responsibility to recoup a prorated portion of the bonus (20% per year). Given the amount of the bonuses, a district may need to pursue recovery in court. **The district would keep repaid/recouped funds.**

Q: Are charter schools considered public schools for the purposes of this program?

Yes. Charter schools are public schools.

Q: Can my district promote this program as part of our teacher recruitment efforts?

Absolutely! Make sure any marketing language notes that receipt of the bonus is subject to SDE approval and meeting all program requirements. A template district-level advertisement for the stipends program can be personalized and downloaded [here](#).

Q: Are teachers who fit the criteria, but have already signed a letter of intent for next year, eligible for the stipend?

Yes! If your district has hired a teacher who meets the requirements for next year, contact them and encourage them to apply for the stipend before the initial May 31 deadline. The online application can be found [here](#).

Q: Is there a limit on how much bonus money can be paid to one district?

SDE says it reserves the right to cap bonuses at \$150,000 per district. *We have asked for additional details on this aspect of the program.*