



Teacher Compensation: Busting the Myths and Generating Dialogue

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Investing in competitive teacher salaries is vital to efforts to recruit and retain enough excellent and diverse teachers for every student. Because of the expense, teacher salaries quickly become political. It is therefore especially critical to ground the conversation about teacher salary in research and evidence. This brief outlines five common myths about teacher compensation and the research that dispels them. It is intended to support constructive, solutions-focused dialogue and prevent critical policy conversations about teacher salaries from being derailed by stereotypes or anecdotes that are not supported by evidence.

Myth 1: Teachers' workdays are 8:00 to 3:00, and they have summers off.

What does the research say?

The latest nationally representative data on teachers' working hours come from the first annual Merrimack College Teacher Survey, which replaced MetLife's annual Survey of the American Teacher. The 2022 data show that the median number of hours teachers work is 54 hours per week during the school year, with 25 hours spent teaching students directly. For Black teachers, the median number of hours worked is 63 (Kurtz, 2022). According to the survey, "Although the amount of time spent teaching is relatively consistent across categories such as grade level and years of experience, Black teachers and teachers in majority-Black schools report working longer hours and spending less of them on instruction." Unlike other professionals who may work similar hours, teachers are not compensated accordingly. (See Myth 4 for details about compensation.) Although teachers are contracted to work 33 fewer days than are workers in other fields—187 days compared with the typical 220 (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2020)—teachers work well beyond their contracted hours. Outside of their contracted workdays, teachers' evening and weekend responsibilities include planning lessons, grading, attending classes or seminars, revising curriculum, reviewing research, revisiting academic standards, and learning new instructional strategies.

Not only is it a myth that teachers work only from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., but the intensity of their working hours may go underappreciated. Per the National Council on Teacher Quality (2020), "You'd be hard-pressed to find a profession with less flexibility, requiring a 6-hour daily performance before some pretty tough audiences!" The book *Teachers Have It Easy: The Big Sacrifice and Small Salaries of America's Teachers* explains why teachers' working hours are uniquely challenging compared with those of other professions:

A teacher's hour is not comparable to an architect's hour—or the work hours of nearly any other job. Public school teachers often are so busy—keeping 40 students at a time safe and attentive—that they can go six hours at a stretch without a moment even to go to the bathroom. (Moulthrop et al., 2006)

Because of the hours and intensity of their job, K-12 teachers are the most burned-out group of employees in the United States. According to 2022's Gallup Panel Workforce Study, 53 percent of K-12 teachers reported that they are always or almost always burned out at work, far outpacing other groups. For example, the percentage of workers who reported always or almost always being burned out at work was only 35 percent among those working in colleges or universities, 33 percent in government and public policy, 32 percent in retail, 31 percent in both healthcare and law, 28 percent in manufacturing, 25 percent in technology, and 21 percent in finance (Marken & Agrawal, 2022). Another recent study provides further evidence of the increased anxiety symptoms teachers experience compared with other workers—teachers experience 40 percent more anxiety than office workers do and 30 percent more than workers in fields such as law, farming, and even military service do (Kush et al., 2022).

Myth 2: Teaching is not challenging work.

What does the research say?

Teaching is challenging and complex, requiring a unique breadth of skills, disposition, and knowledge. Teaching requires patience, a passion for helping others, outside-the-box thinking, conscientiousness, compassion, flexibility, organization, a sense of humor, and an enormous amount of knowledge and skill. Once thought of as less complex to develop than the technical skills of “reading, writing, and arithmetic,” the skills required for teaching are increasingly valued in other forms of work in nearly every field. In *Elephant in the Classroom: Tracing the Complexity of Teaching by Exploring 13 Competencies and Practices* (2021), Andrew Maxey notes:

Each one of these competencies and practices has great depth and complexity of its own. Every one of them are nuanced enough to support an entire body of research, to sustain an ecosystem of professional learning materials and experiences, and (in most cases) to support the building of entire careers in the study and exposition of that single area. Each part of teaching requires a significant effort to reach something reasonably considered competence, let alone masterful practice.

13 Competencies and Practices That Reflect the Complexity of Teaching

Know students. Know individual students deeply in a range of dimensions and use that knowledge to drive professional decisions.

Know subject matter. Hold, demonstrate, and expand strong content knowledge.

Demonstrate pedagogical expertise. Understand and enact effective professional practices related to instruction.

Plan for practice. Plan routinely, strategically, and thoughtfully for both short- and long-term action.

Create a learning environment. Act strategically and continuously to create and maintain an environment optimally conducive to learning.

Engage students in learning. Implement activities designed to actively engage students in learning.

13 Competencies and Practices That Reflect the Complexity of Teaching (cont.)

Implement effective strategies. Know which specific instructional strategies work well to support learning and then enact them.

Provide authentic learning experiences. Design and implement learning activities that are meaningful and relevant to students.

Support learning. Identify and provide a wide range of supports to advance student learning.

Monitor learning. Actively and continuously monitor the degree to which students are learning.

Provide feedback. Continuously provide specific, descriptive, individual feedback to students about their learning.

Know and follow laws and policies. Be actively familiar and compliant with relevant federal, state, and local laws and policies.

Reflect on practice. Reflect continuously and deeply on professional practice for the purpose of improvement.

Source. Adapted from Maxey, A. (2021). Elephant in the classroom: Tracing the complexity of teaching by exploring 13 competencies and practices. Rowman & Littlefield.

There are dozens of responsibilities that comprise each of these 13 competencies and practices, from managing relationships among students in healthy ways to teaching across political, social, ethnic, and other differences. On top of this, teachers must be at the ready to make hundreds of impromptu decisions and judgment calls. One researcher estimates that elementary teachers have 200 to 300 exchanges per hour with students, noting furthermore that these are largely unplanned and unpredictable (Jackson, 1990). According to researchers at Carnegie Mellon and Temple University (2013), when the options for improving education are broken down by dimension (e.g., practicing procedures, studying examples), dosage, and student learning needs, there are more than 205 trillion instructional options available for a teacher's consideration.

The complexity required for effective teaching is incomparable with that of other professions. As Professor Lee Shulman (2004), past president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and of the American Educational Research Association, states:

After 30 years of doing such work, I have concluded that classroom teaching . . . is perhaps the most complex, most challenging, and most demanding, subtle, nuanced, and frightening activity that our species has ever invented.

Many teachers may make all of this look easy—so much so that several states have recently stopped requiring even a bachelor's degree to become a classroom teacher of record (Florida Department of Education, 2023; Merod, 2022). But the truth is that not just anybody can teach, and the large majority of states recognize this by requiring not only a degree but also certification that reflects a minimum GPA or basic skills test; subject, and in some cases, pedagogical examination; specific coursework; and clinical experience.

On the other hand, some believe that the challenges and complexity of teaching are so great that only a saint can take on the role—and saints do not need or want professional pay. However, workers in

other challenging “helping” professions, such as medicine and law, are not characterized as saintlike, and they demand salaries that are commensurate with the skill and talent needed to do the job well.

Myth 3: Teachers aren’t in it for the money.

What does the research say?

A simple summary of the research on the impact of salary on teachers is difficult because there are so many different ways in which salary may or may not matter—the recruitment of college (or even high school) students to the profession; the influence of parents on their children’s career choices; the retention of teachers at various points in their careers; the decisions of certified, nonteaching teachers to reenter the classroom—and the impact may depend on the size of the salary increase. However, several meta-analyses and comprehensive reviews of the research on teacher retention show that salaries, in fact, do matter (See et al., 2020; Borman & Dowling, 2008; Guarino et al., 2006). According to Diliberti and colleagues (2021), among teachers planning to leave the field because of the COVID-19 pandemic, 64 percent said their pay was not sufficient to merit the risk or stress of teaching during a public health crisis, making low teacher pay the number one reason for pandemic-related staff departures. Educators for Excellence (2022) similarly found that 78 percent of teachers reported that higher salaries would most likely keep teachers in the classroom.

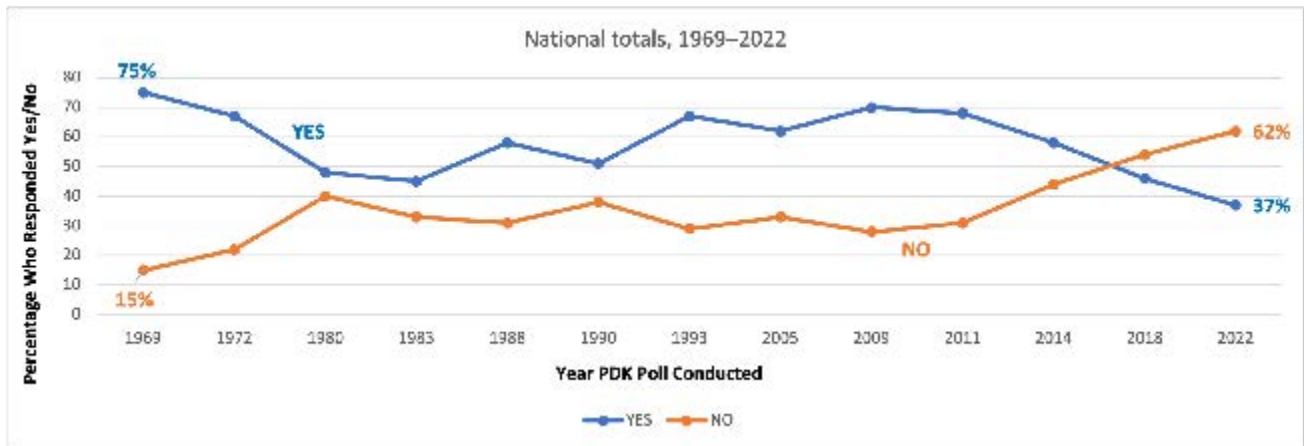
According to the Teacher Salary Project’s 2021 survey of 1,166 teachers,

- 45 percent of teachers do not believe their current salary is sufficient to keep them in the classroom in the medium-to-long term. An additional 21 percent are not sure whether their salary is sufficient to retain them in the teaching field.
- 91 percent believe low teacher salaries are a contributor to teacher shortages in their local schools, with 59 percent stating that salaries greatly impact local teacher shortages and 32 percent stating that salaries contribute somewhat to the teacher shortages. (Sherratt et al., n.d.)

Even among those who do stay in teaching, only 7 percent strongly agree that their salary is fair for the work they do. An additional 18 percent slightly agree that their salary is fair, bringing the total to 26 percent, down from 35 percent in 2011 (Kurtz, 2022).

Moreover, potential future teachers are not becoming teachers because of the money. The 2022 PDK Poll of the Public’s Attitude Toward the Public Schools found that 62 percent of parents do not want their children to become teachers (Figure 1; PDK International, n.d.). This is an all-time high, and salaries are the number one reason why. (The second and third reasons are the stress and high demands of the job and the lack of respect and notion of teaching being a thankless job, respectively.)

FIGURE 1. PARENTS’ RESPONSE TO SURVEY QUESTION “WOULD YOU LIKE YOUR CHILD TO BECOME A TEACHER?” SINCE 1969



Sources: Adapted from PDK International, 2018, *The 50th Annual PDK Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools: Teaching: Respect but dwindling appeal*, p. K8, https://pdkpoll.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/pdkpoll50_2018.pdf and PDK International, n.d., *The 54th Annual PDK Poll: Local public school ratings rise, even as the teaching profession loses ground*, <https://pdkpoll.org/2022-pdk-poll-results/>

On the issue of low teacher pay, college students agree with their parents. McKinsey & Company’s market research on the career aspirations of “top-third” college students found compensation to be the largest barrier to their going into teaching rather than into their preferred career (Auguste et al., 2010). As Table 1 shows, 13 percent of top-third college students believe that they would be rewarded financially if they were to do well as a teacher compared with 75 percent who believe the same of their preferred occupation. Similarly, 17 percent believe teaching pays appropriately for the skills and effort they would bring compared with 72 percent who believe the same of their preferred occupation. Only 33 percent believe they could support a family as a teacher compared with 81 percent who believe the same of their preferred career. And just 10 percent believe teaching offers a competitive salary compared with 65 percent who believe the same of their preferred occupation.

TABLE 1. TOP-THIRD COLLEGE STUDENTS’ VIEWS OF TEACHING AND ALTERNATE OCCUPATIONS

Rank	Attribution	% who agree/strongly agree that TEACHING rates highly	% who agree/strongly agree that PREFERRED OCCUPATION rates highly
1	Attracts the type of people I would want to work with.	39	77
2	I would be proud to tell people this was my job.	66	95
3	Would be challenging in a satisfying way.	59	91

Rank	Attribution	% who agree/ strongly agree that TEACHING rates highly	% who agree/ strongly agree that PREFERRED OCCUPATION rates highly
4	Would provide high-quality training and support to help me improve my performance on the job.	40	80
5	Would allow me to work in a well-resourced, professional environment.	33	85
6	If I were to do well in this job, it would be rewarded financially.	13	75
7	Pays appropriately for the skills and effort I would bring.	17	72
8	There are opportunities to continue to advance professionally in this career.	35	87
9	I could support a family with this career.	33	81
10	Offers a salary that would increase substantially over the next 7 to 10 years.	18	71
11	People in this job are considered successful.	37	85
12	My family would be proud to tell people I had this job.	69	92
13	This job offers a competitive starting salary.	10	65
14	My supervisor in this job would create a positive work environment.	49	65
15	My supervisor in this job would help me improve my performance.	37	72

Source. Adapted from Auguste, B., Kihn, P., & Miller, M. (2010). Closing the talent gap: Attracting and retaining top-third graduates to careers in teaching (Exhibit 5, p. 27). McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/-/media/mckinsey/industries/public%20and%20social%20sector/our%20insights/closing%20the%20teaching%20talent%20gap/closing-the-teaching-talent-gap.pdf>

Teachers who are certified but not teaching also value sufficient compensation. The Regional Education Laboratory Midwest recently surveyed 9,842 teachers who are certified but not teaching in a Michigan public school (Lindsay et al., 2021). About one third of those surveyed reported that higher salaries would motivate them to consider entering or returning to the teaching profession and that higher salaries are the highest-rated priority of all factors. Looking nationally at teachers who have left

public school teaching, the Learning Policy Institute found that two thirds rated an increase in salary as extremely or very important to their decision to return (Podolsky et al., 2016).

According to USA Facts (2022), the average public school teacher salary in 2021 was \$65,090, more than \$10,000 below the average pay for all full-time, year-round workers (\$75,203). In 19 percent of school districts, teachers' highest earning potential is below \$60,000 (National Education Association, 2022). In a study of 90 large school districts, the National Council on Teacher Quality found that in about half of the districts (48 of 90), teachers with a master's degree never earn as much as \$75,000; in about three quarters of the districts (76 of 90), teachers with a bachelor's degree never earn \$75,000. On average, it takes 24 years for a teacher with a master's degree to reach a salary of \$75,000 and 27 years for a teacher with a bachelor's degree (Saenz-Armstrong, 2021).

These numbers suggest that it is true that teachers are not "in it for the money." But despite existing pressures on or inclinations of teachers to be purely altruistic in their profession, teachers do make financial-based decisions.

Myth 4: Teachers are paid well when retirement and benefits are considered.

What does the research say?

Teachers are paid a greater share of their compensation in the form of pensions and benefits than are other workers. But even when these benefits are taken into account, a compensation gap persists. According to the Economic Policy Institute, although the weekly teacher wage penalty (i.e., how much less teachers earn than do other comparable college-educated workers) is 23.5 percent, the penalty shrinks to 14.2 percent when benefits are considered, a gap that has widened from just 2.7 percent in 1993 (Allegretto, 2022).

Only teachers who teach in the same state for decades benefit from the teacher pension system. According to Aldeman and Rotherham (2019), half of new teacher hires stay in the profession long enough to receive any pension at all, one third of teachers receive pensions that are less than their own paid contributions from their teaching salary, and only one fifth of teachers receive full pension benefits.

Recent research by McKinsey & Company finds that compensation (including benefits) is the number one reason educators cite for considering leaving (48 percent) and for why they left (42 percent). Among these educators, 69 percent believe their total compensation does not reflect their qualifications and efforts, and 65 percent state they cannot live comfortably off these earnings (Bryant et al., 2023). Indeed, midcareer teachers with 10 years of experience (who are the head of a household of four) are eligible for public benefits programs in 43 states, including Washington, DC; in 28 states they are eligible for five or more public benefits programs (Boser & Straus, 2014). It is very difficult to argue that compensation is satisfactory—with or without benefits—when this is the case.

Finally, as new labor union contracts are negotiated, new teachers are being asked to contribute a larger percentage of their income to a pension fund and receive a lower percentage payout compared

with more experienced teachers in the same city who are working under the same contract. As a result, benefits worsen at a time when they could be used as a recruitment lever.

Even if teachers' health and pension benefits are more attractive than those of many other fields, according to a nationally representative survey conducted by EdChoice (2022), two thirds of the public agree that teachers are undervalued. Regardless of pensions and benefits, if current compensation packages are not attracting and retaining the teachers the country needs, then the packages need to improve.

As one economist put it:

The bottom line on deciding on compensation is whether you're paying enough to get a sufficiently large supply of sufficiently good employees. In other words, if you think we have more great teachers than we need you should be okay with lower compensation rates. Contrariwise, if you think we need more great teachers than we have on board then you should want to raise salaries. (Startz, 2019)

Myth 5: It is simply not affordable to pay teachers as professionals.

What does the research say?

Conversations about teacher compensation often boil down to this myth. The argument is that it is simply not feasible to pay teachers fairly, so we must accept that some children will need to go without the inspiring and effective teachers they need. To be sure, given current funding formulas in most states, a significant increase in teacher salaries would require increasing a local district's budget through higher property taxes passed through local referendums, in some cases matched by an increased investment from the state.

However, the world's top-performing school systems—including those in capitalist economies—do make strategic investments in their teacher workforce. This proves that not only is it entirely possible to pay teachers competitive salaries, doing so is a key strategy for overcoming the challenges of teacher shortages and quality and for performing at the top of the international charts on student performance.

Although there is not research on how or how best to fund significantly higher teacher salaries, there are several examples of how states and districts have managed to do so:

- New Mexico increased teacher salaries by 35 percent from 2019 to 2022, drawing on increased tax revenues from a booming oil and gas industry (Office of the Governor, Michelle Lujan, 2022).
- Maryland identified a means of funding an additional \$3.9 billion per year from the state and \$700 million per year in local appropriations for 10 years to support a statewide minimum teacher salary of \$60,000, among other transformational educational investments. This funding includes a mix of new state revenues through a 2018 ballot measure to direct casino and sports betting revenues to education, new state funding formulas and investments (Maryland Association of Boards of Education, n.d.), and local tax increases of, on average, 0.7 percent in 2023, 1.1 percent in 2028, and 2.9 percent in 2034 (Burch et al., 2022, p. 31).
- In 2016, South Dakota introduced a half-penny sales tax to raise teacher salaries across the state (Ferguson, 2016).

There also may be opportunities to redistribute existing educational resources to where they will make the greatest difference. For example, the book *Getting the Most Bang for the Education Buck* calls attention to the declining proportion of school funding that is spent on teacher salaries. If this proportion were the same as it was in 1970, currently teachers would be paid an average of \$140,000 as opposed to an average of \$65,000 (Hassel & Ayscue Hassell, 2020).

Without making major cuts to other important areas in education, most states' school funding structures dictate that increasing teacher salaries significantly across the board requires increasing district budgets through increased property taxes. But if we invest in teachers, we could reap some near-term cost savings. The following costs will no doubt decline if we invest in hiring effective, fully credentialed teachers who are equipped to direct their time and energy to their students rather than to side hustles to make ends meet:

- Learning Policy Institute (2017) estimates a cost of \$20,000 for replacing each teacher who leaves a school.
- The Center on American Progress estimates that \$1.3 billion is spent annually on remedial college coursework for students (Jimenez et al., 2016).
- One Princeton economist estimates that each year's cohort of high school dropouts costs the United States \$192 billion in lost lifetime earnings and tax revenues (Education Week, 2006).

Our country has managed to find resources for what we consider necessary, and no doubt there are options today for finding ways to increase teacher salaries. According to the 2022 *Education Next* Survey of Public Opinion, support for higher teacher salaries is at its highest level in the survey's 14-year history, with 72 percent of respondents expressing support for increasing teacher pay (Houston et al., 2023).

Although some may argue that state and local communities cannot afford to raise teacher salaries, an equally important argument is that they cannot afford *not to*.

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