

TEACHER COMPENSATION: FACT VERSUS FICTION

Despite the fact that school districts nationwide are confronting significant teacher shortages, some administrators and legislators still disregard the role professional compensation plays in recruitment and retention, and minimize the complexities of teaching. In fact, according to the Learning Policy Institute, almost 20% of teachers leave the profession because of low pay.¹ Here are facts you can use to counter some of the falsehoods about teacher compensation.

Fiction: Teachers earn as much as comparable professionals for the amount of work they do.

Fact: According to the most recent version of NEA’s Rankings and Estimates, the national average teacher salary is \$59,660.² However, teachers’ economic position has worsened over time. Inflation has eroded most of teachers’ salary increases: Over the past decade, the average classroom teacher salary has increased 15.2% but after adjusting for inflation, the average salary has actually decreased by \$1,823 or 3.0%.

The Economic Policy Institute (EPI) notes that comparable professionals with similar education earn higher salaries. Nationally, teachers earn 19% less than similarly skilled and educated professionals. This “teaching penalty” has increased significantly in the past 20 years – from approximately 2% in 1994 to 19% in 2017.³

Fiction: Teachers are well paid because they have summers off.

Fact: Students have summers off. Teachers spend summers working second jobs, teaching summer school and taking classes for certification renewal or to advance their careers. Teachers are only paid for the days they are contracted to work.

Most full-time employees in the private sector receive training on company time at company expense. Teachers seeking to advance must earn higher degrees or certifications on their own time.

¹ Carver-Thomas, Desiree and Linda Darling-Hammond. *Teacher Turnover: Why It Matters and What We Can Do About It*. Learning Policy Institute, September 2017.

² NEA Rankings and Estimates, 2018. Data for 2016-17 school year.

³ Allegretto, Sylvia and Lawrence Mishel. *The teacher penalty has hit a new high*. Economic Policy Institute, September 5, 2018. Note: EPI’s comparisons are based on weekly earnings.

In addition, the previously cited EPI data compares salaries on a weekly basis, so the false argument about summers off does not change the fact that teachers are underpaid in comparison to other professionals.

Fiction: Teachers only work 6-7 hours per day.

Fact: Teachers work longer than the contracted workday

While seven hours is the contracted workday, teachers must do significant amounts of work such as grading papers and revising lesson plans on their own time, after school and on weekends. As classes become larger and school districts change curriculums, this becomes more arduous. Teachers are often not compensated for before or after school bus duty and other similar responsibilities. Stipends for coaching or advising clubs are modest at best.

Fiction: Teaching is easy so anyone can do it.

Fact: Teachers, like many professionals including accountants and engineers, are trained, certified professionals. They have college degrees plus teaching credentials. Many have advanced degrees and have completed extensive coursework in learning theory and educational practice. For most, teaching is a calling. However, the intrinsic rewards of an educational career should not be used as a rationale for low salaries.

Because of low pay, new teachers often cannot pay off their student loans or buy homes in the communities where they teach. Teachers and other certified educators often work two or three jobs to make ends meet. The stress and exhaustion can become unbearable – forcing people out of their vocation. In addition, harsh evaluation policies, worsening working conditions, and lack of professional support are pushing more teachers out of the profession.

If school districts want their students to have the most professional teachers, they must pay a professional salary.

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