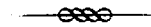


THE
AMERICAN
PUBLIC
SCHOOL
TEACHER



Past, Present, & Future

Darrel Drury *and* Justin Baer

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Paying Teachers Appropriately

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THERE IS A SIMPLE STORY which describes our schools that, on the surface, just does not make sense. It goes like this: teachers are the most important element of schools; we value high-quality schools and want to improve their performance; yet we are unwilling to ensure that teachers' pay keeps up with pay elsewhere in the economy.

The changes in the teacher labor market, particularly as they involve the wage path for teachers, are very obvious to both policy makers and the public. Teachers' wages have not kept pace with those for other occupations (see figure 2.25). The trend in wages almost certainly affects who does and who does not think about teaching as an occupation. And this has been going on for a long time.

Interestingly, the NEA data suggest that over the last fifty years, most teachers entered the profession motivated not by money but by a desire to work with youth (figure 2.20). And just a quarter of those contemplating leaving before retirement cited low salaries.¹ Yet it is difficult to rely on the good intentions of teachers when the temptations of other occupations and jobs loom as large as they currently do.

This commentary builds on the salient parts of this history in order to discuss a range of proposed policy options. An underlying theme is that the current pay structure—based on the single-salary schedule—acts to

turn policy makers away from any substantial increases in teacher pay. As a result, any efforts to improve our schools through attracting and retaining effective teachers are handicapped by eliminating use of monetary incentives.

In the current system we tend to underpay effective teachers while overpaying their ineffective peers, again avoiding use of any monetary incentives to improve the teaching force. We are thus left to hope that the goodwill and strong drive of effective teachers is sufficient to keep them in the classroom and that the poor performance of the ineffective teachers will not be too damaging.

The Central Importance of Teachers

Hundreds of research studies have addressed the question of how important teachers are to the educational process. These studies have approached the issue from a variety of vantage points, but the most relevant involve relating teachers to student outcomes. Two findings emerge. First, teachers are very important. In fact, no other aspect of schools—spending, leadership, curriculum, etc.—is nearly as important in determining student achievement. Second, it is not possible to identify specific characteristics of teachers that are reliably related to student outcomes.

It is important to understand both of these findings, because they relate directly to the subject of teacher salaries. The general finding about the importance of teachers comes from the fact that the gains in learning across classrooms, even classrooms within the same school, are very different. Moreover, year after year, some teachers produce larger gains in student achievement than others. The difference can be radical: some teachers have been found to get one and a half years of gain in achievement in an academic year, while others with equivalent students have been found to get only a half year of gain.² In other words, two students starting at the same level of achievement can know vastly different amounts at the end of a single academic year. No other attribute of schools comes close to having this much influence on student achievement.

The related issue is what makes for an effective or ineffective teacher. Extensive research has found little that consistently distinguishes among teachers in their classroom effectiveness. Most well-documented has been the finding that master's degrees bear no consistent relationship to student achievement. But other findings are equally interesting and important. The amount of classroom experience—with the exception of the first few years—also seems to have no relationship to performance. On average, a teacher with five years' experience is as effective as a teacher with twenty years' experience. But this general result goes even deeper: there is little evidence that conventional teacher certification, source of teacher training, or salary level are systematically related to the amount of learning that goes on in the classroom.

The exception, as noted, is that during the first one to three years of classroom experience, the typical teacher will get better—developing the craft, learning the tasks, and finding ways to help students learn. The existing evidence does not suggest any clear way to provide this experience before entry into the classroom or to alter significantly the adjustments that should be made once that teacher is in the classroom. For example, changes in teacher preparation or more extensive induction and mentoring programs, while plausible policies, have yet to be shown to significantly alter teachers' early career learning.

This quick and necessarily cursory overview of the importance of teacher quality has some direct implications for the pay of teachers. The most important implication to an economist is that we want to pay salaries that are sufficient to ensure that there are high-quality teachers in all classrooms. Salaries are viewed as a way of providing incentives to attract and retain the teacher force that we need as a country. This conclusion, however, is not as straightforward as it sounds given the current structure of schools and labor markets for teachers.

The Pattern of Salaries

Perhaps the most noticeable aspect of teacher salaries is how dramatically they have fallen over time, in relative terms. Teaching has always been a highly skilled occupation, with teachers among the most

educated of the population in most localities. It has also, particularly in the post-World War II period, been a female-dominated occupation. The status of teachers was clearly reflected in salaries at the beginning of World War II. Compared with the earnings of other male college graduates, the average male teacher's salary was slightly above the fiftieth percentile in 1940. That of the average female teacher was close to the seventieth percentile of other college-educated females. But then came the fall. Male teachers' salaries dropped precipitously to the bottom third of the earnings distribution for male college graduates over the next several decades, and those of female teachers were below average during the 1960s and close to the relative male position by 1990.³

This trend in salaries is mirrored by other metrics. While it is somewhat difficult to trace general measures of achievement and ability over time, it appears that teachers are drawn from the lower tiers of college graduates, and that the best are not the ones going into teaching.⁴

How could we simultaneously place high value on teachers and their role in society and yet let their pay slip so badly against others in the economy?

Two factors are important in answering this question. First, by most accounts, the skills needed to be an effective teacher are not necessarily those needed to be successful elsewhere in the economy. This statement is difficult to document with any precision, in part because we do not have any clear description of what skills are needed to be an effective teacher. Nonetheless, we do not find that pure measured achievement or ability of teachers, although closely related to earnings elsewhere in the economy, is all that closely related to student outcomes.⁵

Second, the current structure of teacher pay—the single-salary model that pays all teachers with the same experience and degree level the same amount—almost certainly works to hold down teachers' salaries. As described previously, the factors that determine pay are unrelated to effectiveness in the classroom, as are individual teachers' salaries. According to the NEA data (figure. 2.27), very few teachers report an opportunity to earn more for teaching in a shortage subject area, for working in a more challenging school, or for improving student performance.⁶ These facts, which defy most public and policy-maker sentiments, act as a drag on overall salary increases.

Policy Alternatives

Most people in society believe that salaries are roughly related to the economic value put on different workers. While the salaries of some professional athletes or celebrities may keep us from accepting this as a universal truth, it is nonetheless the case that the overall compensation pattern across the economy seems reasonable to most people. Economists interpret this alignment of salaries and productivity of individuals as a natural outgrowth of a competitive economy. The logic is straightforward. If one firm does not pay a worker a salary that matches her value in terms of output, a competing firm will. If the firm pays the worker too much for her value, it will not be competitive with other firms and will risk going out of business.

Teacher labor markets, however, differ. Salaries are determined by collective bargaining between teacher organizations and their employing school districts. School districts will not go out of business if they pay the wrong amount. But, being public organizations, schools are always subject to political forces, and the goals for quality of schools depend on governmental decision making. As a result, teacher salary decisions are only partially driven by the economic forces that underlie salary determination in private, competitive industries.

The political nature of the teacher salary process also invites a wide-ranging discussion about the appropriate way to determine teacher pay. Some would argue from basic principles of fairness. Others would attempt to relate salaries to other, competitively determined wages. Still others would focus first on the overall quality of schools that is desired and use that discussion to suggest what is needed in terms of teacher salaries.

This discussion follows from the perspective of an economist whose primary interest is the role of quality education in determining outcomes—both individual outcomes and outcomes for the nation. One overarching theme is that individuals gain considerably from high-quality education, in terms of college completion, occupational attainment, lifetime earnings, and overall health, among other things. A second theme is that the nation as a whole benefits in terms of a

well-functioning democracy, a civil society, and a wealthy society that enhances the well-being of individuals.

One implication of the economist's perspective is that many policies—including those that enhance teacher pay—can be justified if they improve the quality of schools, because both individuals and society gain. This really describes a simple benefit-cost framework in which gains from improvement can be weighed against the costs of any change. The other side of this model, however, is that policies that do not improve educational quality will confer no benefits and thus, if they cost something, will yield costs that exceed benefits.

With this perspective in mind, it is possible to consider a variety of policy ideas that have received some currency.

Restore the Relative Pay of Teachers

Given the previously documented drop in teacher salaries over the past half century, an obvious starting point of many policy discussions is how to reverse some or all of this decline. This discussion is most typically framed in terms of average teacher salaries, and the policy option in large part involves a percentage increase in pay to close the gap with former earnings levels.

The policy arguments are generally phrased in terms of attracting new people into the teaching profession: if teaching salaries were as competitive today as they once were, similarly talented people would be attracted to the profession. This argument rests heavily on assumptions that may or may not be true: that the new people attracted to teaching would have skills that are better than those recently employed in the profession and that schools will choose and retain the better teachers from the expanded pool of applicants.

But this raises a deeper issue. The policy discussions generally presume that *all* teacher salaries, not just those of new teachers, will be raised. It is unlikely that the existing teachers will teach any differently if paid a higher salary. They might stay in the profession somewhat longer, although the rate at which teachers with five or more years' experience exit teaching is already quite low. Yet if the policy is meant

to attract better teachers in the future, reduced exit rates of current teachers make the process of upgrading teaching staff slower and more expensive.

Without some assurances of improved achievement—and, more particularly, improved achievement commensurate with the expenditure—this type of policy has little political appeal and little likelihood of even partial enactment.

Compare Salaries to Those of Other Professionals

A variant of the previous policy discussion argues that the right way to set the salaries of teachers is to use the market salary for professionals in the open economy. At its heart, this is simply one notion of how to determine a salary level, but it is generally unrelated to any arguments about the relative advantages and disadvantages of alternative occupations. To the extent that the overall compensation levels of teachers would be raised by this policy, it is subject to the same discussion as the previous arguments about restoring relative pay.

There is one aspect of this approach that does have specific relevance, however. It is unclear precisely which professional occupations would provide an appropriate comparison. If the standard is privately employed professionals—say, lawyers, doctors, and accountants in private employment—a feature of the comparison is the overall structure of employment. Most private professionals have their salaries set much more in line with their individual productivity, and, consequently, these occupations have much larger discrepancies in earnings and noticeably higher employment risks than are found in teaching. Thus, even if the comparison set of alternative professions were clear, the appropriate way to compare salaries under different employment conditions is not.

Differentiate Salaries by More Characteristics

Going in a different direction, another set of proposals addresses the single-salary structure itself and considers how different teachers are paid. The politics of pay currently prevent large salary increases that

are unrelated to performance. Better alignment between teacher salaries and performance would likely open the door to overall increases in teacher compensation.

The version of this policy that is very commonly discussed, and found in a range of existing contracts, proposes to broaden pay from the traditional experience and degree matrix to include details of a teacher's preparation, professional development, and other objective measures of teachers. The strength of this approach is that objective differences are used to set differentiated salaries. The weakness is that the characteristics typically discussed have not been reliably validated against classroom effectiveness. Thus, this approach does not surmount the basic stumbling block to overall increases in teacher salaries.

Pay for Specialties or Location

The labor market for teachers works against the backdrop of the rest of the economy. Many teachers can easily find employment outside of education, and the external demand for individuals with particular specialties affects the ability of schools to hire those with specialized knowledge. For example, the impact on hiring math and science teachers has been recognized since the launching of *Sputnik*. Filling certain specialties—notably math, science, foreign languages, and special education—is perennially difficult when schools pay all teachers the same. If schools are concerned about having high-quality teachers in shortage areas, they must recognize the competitive environment that exists. At the same time, simply paying higher salaries to recruit staff in these shortage areas does not necessarily ensure that effective teachers will be attracted.

A similar concern relates to staffing specific schools. Schools serving concentrated disadvantaged populations tend to be located in worse neighborhoods than those serving more advantaged students, generally provide more challenging teaching experiences, and have a number of other characteristics that adversely affect working conditions. Yet teachers in these schools are paid the same as teachers in schools with superior environments. As a result, teacher turnover in the most needy schools is greatest.

Pay for Performance

History teaches us that there are few easily measured factors that correlate with classroom effectiveness. If we are interested in classroom performance, there simply are no real alternatives to making judgments about the ability of individual teachers to raise student achievement. Clearly, this conclusion is not one that has been embraced by teachers' unions, largely because it introduces a subjective element into the retention and pay of teachers.

Herein lies the big trade-off. If parents, taxpayers, and politicians cannot be convinced that increasing salaries will yield improved student outcomes, the political process will consistently yield minimal pay increases. Teacher salaries will likely continue to fall relative to earnings outside of teaching. This is a consequence of insisting that ineffective teachers be paid the same as effective teachers. Reversing this outcome, however, will require teachers to backtrack on the long-held principle that "a teacher is a teacher is a teacher."

There is a compromise position. The evidence today indicates that the typical teacher is quite good. At the same time, there is little disagreement that a small proportion of teachers in the current workforce is unacceptable. It turns out that those at the bottom of the teacher quality distribution—consistently and accurately identified as such by everybody in the schools—cause real damage.⁷ Moreover, if they have tenure, they are frequently allowed to stay in the classroom, something that does not happen in high-performing school systems around the world.⁸ A compromise position would be to remove ineffective teachers from the classroom and pay the remaining effective teachers substantially higher salaries.

Conclusion

The nation's future very much depends on maintaining and improving the quality of its teaching force. It is hard to imagine that this can be accomplished without using salary and compensation as a central policy tool. But avoiding the use of salary to inform policy is exactly what we have done for several decades.

The consequence of a teacher labor market in which salaries do not respond to performance is a political outcome that is neither in the best interest of most teachers nor the nation. The economic benefits of having a good teacher show that we can afford to pay effective educators substantially more than we do now. The idea of standard six-figure salaries for good teachers is quite feasible today when the value of their impact on students is calculated. But such salaries are not feasible if ineffective teachers must be paid the same. Thus, we find ourselves in a bad equilibrium in which good teachers are underpaid, and, as a result, our public schools end up with less effective teachers than is desirable.

Political forces are currently pushing to introduce more pay for performance, and there is widespread recognition that some differentiation of teacher quality is necessary. The problem is that this approach introduces a subjective element into teacher evaluation and raises a variety of practical questions concerning implementation. We cannot overcome salary problems and problems of teacher effectiveness without developing fair and effective evaluation policies.

Pay for performance has, of course, become a very contentious issue, dividing teachers, unions, policy makers, and the public. It should be recognized that it is not necessary to go to a highly differentiated pay-for-performance system to reap most of the gains. A simple compromise would be a commitment to remove the small number of teachers who fall below a minimum level of effectiveness. If this is done systematically, regardless of tenure, achievement could be dramatically higher, and there would be much less political difficulty in paying teachers an appropriate salary that recognizes their contribution to society.

—❧— A Voice from the Classroom —❧—

I will never forget the night I walked out on my shift at the restaurant. I had been waiting tables there for three years while working toward a master's in education as a full-time graduate student. I never had a problem balancing my time. Working forty hours a week, I still managed to excel in all my courses and keep my stress to a minimum, even during my time as a student teacher.

When I was first hired as a teacher, I had every intention of keeping my waitressing job. I needed something to supplement my teaching income. From August until mid-October I was both a first-year middle school social studies teacher and a server. My teaching schedule was rigorous. I'd wake up at 5 A.M., then commute fifty miles to school. I'd prep for the students' arrival from 7 to 8, teach from 8 to 3, attend meetings and answer e-mails until 4, make the hour commute home and then plan lessons from 6 to 11. On the weekends, I'd put in seventeen hours at the restaurant, working Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights until closing. After my Friday shift, I was usually so exhausted that I would end up sleeping in until 3 or 4 P.M. on Saturday, which only gave me a couple of hours until I had to be back at the restaurant. I planned lessons Sunday mornings, then continued into the late hours after my Sunday shift ended.

I was stressed. The economy was struggling and, as a consequence, business in the restaurant was slow. I started coming to the restaurant with papers to grade during the down times. My general manager would reprimand me. "You're on the clock," he would say. "Put that stuff away." Whenever I would argue that business was slow and I wasn't making any tips, he would find menial chores for me to do. I grew increasingly vexed as I found myself sweeping floors and cleaning windows when I was well aware that I had seventy-five tests to grade and a lesson to plan.

Then, one night, everything came to a head. I was one of the supervisors of the Outdoor Club at school and we were going to explore a bike trail on Sunday. I had been trying for a week to get my Sunday-night shift covered, but no one would pick it up. I had asked each of the other servers, called everyone on the phone tree, and begged management to give me the night off. I had no luck. When I walked into my shift on Saturday night, I was already in an unpleasant mood. I asked my manager one last time if I could have the next night off. Though I had been working there for three years and had never missed a single shift, he still said no. Around 7 o'clock, during the dinner rush, I was back in the kitchen and my manager reprimanded me for my negative attitude. That was when I snapped. I put down the tray of food I was carrying, walked out of the kitchen and continued to walk right out the front door. Needless to say, I was able to attend the bike excursion with the Outdoor Club the next day.

I ended up going back into the restaurant a few days later and quit the professional way. I put in my two weeks' notice. In my letter of resignation, I told my manager the simple truth—that I needed to concentrate on my teaching career. I had come to realize that trying to juggle two jobs as a first-year teacher was not fair to me, nor was it fair to my students.

—Annmarie Noonan
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