

TEACHERS' PAY CONTINUES TO SLIDE

Latest data show pay gap widening between public school teachers & other professionals



At a time of national debate over ways to improve the performance of America's schools, a new report reveals a trend that undermines chances of reaching that goal: a large and growing pay penalty for those who choose to become public school teachers. Over the last decade, the teacher pay gap increased 10.8 percentage points—from a 4.3 percent shortfall for teachers in 1996 to 15.1 percent in 2006.

[*The Teaching Penalty: Teacher Pay Losing Ground*](#), published today by the Economic Policy Institute, provides a detailed analysis of trends in teacher pay. In 1960 women teachers had an annual wage advantage, of 14.7 percent compared to other similarly educated women. This annual pay difference was reversed to a 13.2 percent annual wage *deficit* by 2000.

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The study, by Sylvia Allegretto, Sean Corcoran, and Lawrence Mishel (see bios below), also compares teachers' weekly pay to that of a core group of occupations with similar educational and skills requirements: accountants, reporters, registered nurses, computer programmers, clergy, and personnel officers. The teacher pay penalty translates to weekly earnings that are, on average, about \$154, or 14.3%, lower than those of people in the comparable occupations. (Because teachers' annual work schedule is so different from that of other professional occupations, the report compares wages earned for a week of work as a more appropriate comparison.)

The teacher pay penalty cuts across all 50 states, although its size varies. The gap exceeds 25 percent in 15 states (AL, AR, AZ, CO, DC, KS, LA, MO, MS, NC, NH, OK, TN, TX and VA), and is less than 10 percent in only five (MT, ND, RI, VT and WY). There is no state where teachers' weekly wages are equal to or greater than those of similar occupations.

Particularly ominous for attempts to *retain* good teachers is the study's finding that the penalty is severest among the most experienced teachers. For early-career teachers (age 25-34), today's pay penalty is only slightly larger than in 1996 (a change of 0.5 percentage points). The brunt of the widening pay gap has fallen on senior teachers (45-54), whose pay deficit within their age group has grown by 18.0 percentage points among women (who comprise the vast majority of teachers) since 1996.

"Teachers are the single most important ingredient in educational success – and it's important for schools to compete for and keep the best qualified teachers," said Mishel, "but this widespread and systemic devaluing of teaching sabotages those efforts. If you deliberately set out to design a plan to drive away your most experienced teachers, this would be a good way to do it."

The teacher pay disadvantage grew markedly during the latter half of the 1990s. While earnings of college graduates, on average, increased by 12.7 percent, teachers' earnings did not grow at all.

"Teacher compensation seems to be prosperity-proof," said Allegretto. "Even in a period of solid economic growth, high employment, and rising wages, teachers were left behind."

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Some critics, while acknowledging the existence of the pay gap, argue that this gap isn't so much of a problem since teachers' lower pay is outweighed by more generous health insurance and pensions. The authors examined that claim and found that taking total compensation into account would have narrowed the pay gap by just three percentage points in 2006 (from 15 percent to 12 percent), and would not have altered the general trend.

The teacher pay gap is, to a great extent, a problem schools should have seen coming, as the study's breakouts of trends by gender show. From 1996 to 2006, the pay gap for male and female teachers grew pretty much in tandem – from a 0.7 percent to a 10.5 percent deficit for women and from a 15.1 to 25.5 percent shortfall for male teachers.

“The teaching penalty among men has for a long time made it harder to attract men to the classroom, but as long as there was a more-or-less captive audience of highly qualified women teachers to fill the void, the problem could be ignored,” said Corcoran. “Now that women have better-paying opportunities, schools are under the gun to make pay competitive if they want to attract and keep the best qualified teachers.”

Even earning an advanced degree yields only a small improvement in the gap. Among those with a bachelor's degree only, teachers earned approximately 12.2 percent less than their peers in other occupations in 2006, while the gap between teachers and non-teachers with a master's degree was almost as large, 11.3 percent.

The study offers the most thorough examination to date of the trend in relative teacher pay. In addition to breaking out data by gender, seniority, and education, the authors examined and compared their results, which are based on decennial Census data, to results from other researchers. They found broad consensus on the fact of a teacher pay disadvantage that has grown over time. The only exceptions, they report, are the work of two researchers who based their findings on certain Bureau of Labor Statistics' data, which the BLS itself advises on its own web site is not appropriate to this task.

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