

How High Is Teacher Pay in Oklahoma?

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When it comes to teacher pay in Oklahoma, here's a familiar refrain: Oklahoma has one of the lowest average salary levels for public school teachers in the nation, and we need to pay more to compete for the best.

And here's another one: Compared to other professionals, teachers are woefully underpaid, and that needs to change.

Unfortunately, assertions like these are often based on very simplistic analyses, like state salary rankings that ignore cost-of-living differences, or cross-profession salary comparisons that don't adjust for hours worked.

To determine whether Oklahoma teacher salaries are nationally competitive, or understand how they stack up across the labor board, one needs to adjust for such critical factors. Once that is done, one gets a much more accurate picture of how well, on a relative basis, Oklahoma educators are paid.

So where do Oklahoma teacher salaries stand compared to those of other states? Perhaps the most widely cited ranking is published by the National Education Association, the nation's largest teachers union. In its most recent ranking, for the 2007-08 school year, Oklahoma placed 42nd out of 50 states and the District of Columbia, with an average salary of \$43,551. To put that in perspective, California had the highest average salary at \$64,424, South Dakota was the lowest at \$36,674, and the national average was \$52,308.¹

Of course, the cost of living varies widely from state to state. Considering that Oklahoma has one of the lowest costs of living in the nation, it should be of little surprise that when teacher salaries are adjusted to reflect relative purchasing power, state rankings change significantly, with Oklahoma much higher. Setting Oklahoma at one on a cost-of-living index for all states and the District of Columbia, and adjusting salaries accordingly, moves Oklahoma from 42nd to 19th on the salary list (with the average salary remaining at \$43,551). Illinois has the highest adjusted salary at \$55,283, Hawaii is lowest at \$28,996, and the national average is \$42,203.² California's salary drops from its unadjusted average of \$64,424 to \$41,692.

So how are Oklahoma teachers paid compared to similar professionals in the state?

Using the most basic measure of payment-annual wages-teacher pay is above the state average for all occupations. According to the latest U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment Statistics survey, in May 2008 the mean annual wage for all occupations in Oklahoma was \$34,920. Elementary and secondary school teachers, by

contrast, had mean annual wages of more than \$40,000.³

The position of teachers' salaries changes when they are compared to lines of work with similar professional requirements. An analysis in Education Week's 2008 Quality Counts compendium, which used data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, revealed that public school teachers in Oklahoma earned 82 cents for every dollar earned by workers in 16 comparable occupations, including accountants, computer programmers, and occupational therapists. Nationwide, public school teachers earned a median salary of \$44,690 while members of the other professions earned \$50,784.⁴

Of course, simple annual salary data do not furnish a full portrayal of teachers' monetary compensation, in large part because they do not account for actual time worked. With school calendars featuring many built-in breaks, and school days averaging around just 6.5 hours in length, it is reasonable to expect that teachers work fewer hours for their salaries than do other professionals.

Recent analyses of Bureau of Labor Statistics data taken from the National Compensation Survey confirm this. Looking at 2001 data, economist Richard Vedder compared teachers' hourly earnings to those of numerous professionals and found that nationwide, teachers out-earned architects, mechanical engineers, biological and life scientists, and several other professionals. In 2000, the average hourly wage for a job defined as a "professional specialty" by the BLS was \$27.49, while the average wage for elementary-school teachers was \$28.79, secondary-school teachers \$29.14, and special-education teachers \$29.97.⁵ Using 2005 NCS data, the Manhattan Institute's Jay Greene and Marcus Winters examined hourly teacher pay and arrived at similar findings. They discovered that the average public school teacher made \$34.06 per-hour in 2005, 11 percent more than the average professional specialty and technical worker.⁶

These analyses, while making more meaningful comparisons than simply looking at straight salaries, are still not wholly satisfactory, primarily because they may over-count time worked by other professionals. Sean P. Corcoran and Lawrence Mishel of the Economic Policy Institute note that NCS data count paid time off such as vacations and holidays as hours worked for most professionals but not teachers, who are paid for roughly a 180-day year that does not include holidays and paid vacations. Greene and Winters do not adjust for this, according to Corcoran and Mishel, inflating non-teachers' hours actually worked. A better measure, they argue, would calculate non-teachers' hourly pay using only days worked and excluding paid vacation and holidays.⁷

Doing for Oklahoma what Corcoran and Mishel suggest still demonstrates what others have found nationally: after adjusting for time worked, there is much greater comparability between teacher and other professional pay than is indicated by annual salaries. Using OES data from May 2008, a comparison of average teacher salaries—including private school teachers, who get paid nearly 40 percent less than public school teachers⁸—and a few professions included in the Quality Counts data bear this out.

In Oklahoma, the lowest average hourly earnings for non-special education, non-vocational, kindergarten, elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers accrue to kindergarten instructors, who earn \$27.85. That figure was derived using 183 days (the high end among several Oklahoma districts), 7.5 hours per day, and a mean annual wage reported by OES of \$38,230. In comparison, accountants and auditors, registered nurses, insurance underwriters, and computer programmers earn hourly wages of \$27.26, \$27.02, \$24.84, and \$31.33, respectively. Those figures were produced by dividing the mean annual wage for each job as reported by the OES by actual hours worked, or 240 days a year (52 weeks a year, five days a week, minus ten days of paid vacation and ten paid holidays) for eight hours a day.⁹ Only computer programmers, it turns out, made more per hour than the lowest-paid subset of teachers.

One last objection to hourly-earnings comparisons is that teachers work many more hours than are reflected in official time spent at school. They grade papers, plan lessons, and call parents, often after school and on weekends. "Six or seven hours is the 'contracted' workday, but unlike in other professions, the expectation for teachers is that much required work will take place at home, at night and on weekends," explains the "Myths and Facts" page on the website of the National Education Association. "For teachers, the day isn't over when the dismissal bell rings."¹⁰

It is true that teachers often work beyond required hours, but a recent BLS study suggests that even during months when they are teaching, educators work less time than other professionals. According to the study, in which participants logged how much work they did each day and where they did it, teachers worked on average 18 fewer minutes per day than other professionals. And that included only days when the subjects worked—summer and other vacation days were not included in the average.¹¹

Of course, having significant free time enables teachers to earn revenue beyond their salaries. Especially during the summer, many teachers earn additional money by tutoring, managing pools, working at summer camps, house painting, freelance writing, and a variety of other jobs. According to the National Education Association, 45 percent of public school teachers worked during the summer of 2000.¹²

Moreover, according to the BLS, roughly half of all teachers do not work past 4:00 p.m. on any given day, providing additional time that could be used for a second job. And there is evidence that teachers do use time that way: the BLS reports that while 12 percent of other professionals had second jobs while working in their primary occupations, 17 percent of teachers did. So not only do teachers earn more per hour than many comparable professionals when they are teaching, but by working during their significant non-teaching time they can and often do supplement their teaching salaries.

Despite these findings, debates over compensation for Oklahoma teachers will certainly continue. Two important things, however, are now clear: After adjusting for cost of living, Oklahoma teachers get paid well compared to teachers in other states, and Oklahoma teachers get remunerated roughly on par with comparable professionals on an hourly basis. Hopefully, knowing these things will better inform the teacher compensation

debate in Oklahoma.

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¹ National Education Association, "Table 1. Average Salaries (\$) of Public School Teachers, 2007-08," Rankings and Estimates 2008, <http://www.nea.org/home/29402.htm>, accessed May 8, 2009.

² Salary adjustments were made using average salaries as reported by the NEA and adjusting them according to the Missouri Economic Research and Information Center's 4th Quarter 2008 Cost of Living Index, available at http://www.missourieconomy.org/indicators/cost_of_living/index.stm. This appears to be the only readily available state (as opposed to local) level cost of living index, and is based on costs of numerous items including grocery items, housing, and health care.

³ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "May 2008 State Occupational Employment and Wages Estimates: Oklahoma," http://www.bls.gov/oes/2008/may/oes_ok.htm - b00-0000. The figure is for all teachers identified as kindergarten, elementary, middle school, and secondary (not including special and vocational education).

⁴ Christopher B. Swanson, "Teacher Salaries, Looking at Comparable Jobs," *Quality Counts 2008*, pp. 16-18. It is unclear what year the salary data are from. The article suggests the data might come from a 2004 Economic Policy Institute publication, but that is not clear. Since it is the relative value of teachers' salaries to other professionals, however, this should not affect the authors' findings of salary comparability.

⁵ Richard Vedder, "Forum: Comparable Worth," *Education Next*, Summer 2003, <http://www.hoover.org/publications/ednext/3347411.html>.

⁶ Jay P. Greene and Marcus Winters, "How Much are Public School Teachers Paid?," *Civic Report No. 50*, January 2007, www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_50.htm.

⁷ Sean P. Corcoran and Lawrence Mishel, review of *How Much are Public School Teachers Paid?* *Education Policy Studies Laboratory*, February 19, 2007, <http://epsl.asu.edu/epru/ttreviews/EPSL-0702-229-EPRU.pdf>.

⁸ Greene and Winters, Executive Summary.

⁹ The wage data from U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "May 2008 State Occupational Employment and Wages Estimates: Oklahoma. The average

number of paid vacation days and holidays for professionals is from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in Private Industry in the United States, March 2007," August 2007, p. 3, <http://www.bls.gov/ncs/ebs/sp/ebsm0006.pdf>. The average number of days that teachers were required to work was estimated, and the 7.5-hour day was estimated by adding a half hour to the beginning and end of a 6.5-hour school day. Looking at contracted hours for Oklahoma City, Tulsa, and Muskogee schools suggests this a fairly typical day for Oklahoma teachers.

¹⁰ National Education Association, "Professional Pay: Myths and Facts," <http://www.nea.org/pay/teachermyths.html>.

¹¹ Rachel Krantz-Kent, "Teachers' work patterns: when, where, and how much do U.S. teachers work?" *Monthly Labor Review*, March 28, pp. 52-59.

¹² National Education Association, *Status of the American Public School Teacher 2000-2002*, <http://www.nea.org/edstats/images/status.pdf>, August 2003, table 75.