

The Gap Between Teacher Pay and Other Professions Hits a New High. How Bad Is It?



Teachers are paid less than their college-educated peers in other professions—a trend that’s only getting worse over time.

That’s [according to a new analysis by the Economic Policy Institute](#), a nonpartisan think tank supported partially by teachers’ unions. The institute has been tracking the “teacher pay penalty” for 18 years, and in 2021, it reached a new high: Teachers earn 23.5 percent less than comparable college graduates.

In other words, on average, teachers earn 76.5 cents on the dollar compared with what college graduates earned working in other professions.

Teachers generally do get better benefits—namely retirement plans and health insurance—than other workers, but it’s not enough to fully offset the wage penalty, the analysis finds. When benefits are factored in, the total compensation penalty was 14.2 percent in 2021.

“Are we really attracting the best and the brightest into teaching?” said Sylvia Allegretto, a research associate with EPI and the author of the report. The findings, she said, have serious implications for recruitment and retention.

School district leaders and policymakers have been sounding the alarm that there’s a strong need to

bring new teachers into the profession. One new analysis conservatively estimates that there are more than 36,500 teacher vacancies across the United States and the majority of states are experiencing teacher shortages.

Yet teacher-preparation enrollment has been declining steadily by about a third in the past decade, which some experts attribute to the low pay and perceived lack of respect.

“You have to do something very bold and sustained to really start reversing these trends that are making the teaching profession unattractive even for students who want to be teachers but choose not to because they know ... this is the lay of the land,” Allegretto said.

The wage gap did shrink slightly in 2019, after teacher walkouts in a half-dozen states spurred state legislatures across the country to pass pay raises. But the trend reversal was short-lived.

“We’ve seen this before—once in a while, you see it getting better but usually only for a year or so, and then the trend downward continues,” Allegretto said.

The wage trends vary by gender

The EPI analysis uses data from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. The report tracks weekly wages to account for the fact that many teachers don’t work over the summers. The researchers controlled for factors like age, postgraduate education level, state of residence, and race/ethnicity.

In 1960, female teachers actually had a 14.7 percent wage premium compared to other similar workers, since teaching was one of the few careers available to women.

“Teaching was a captive labor pool of educated women because women faced huge barriers [in other professions],” Allegretto said. “That’s no longer the case.”

As more career opportunities opened up to women, the teacher pay penalty widened, and in 2021, female teachers had a 17.1 percent wage penalty.

Meanwhile, the wage penalty for male teachers, compared with other male college graduates, was a record 35.2 percent in 2021.

“You see why men aren’t entering the profession,” Allegretto said. Just 23.5 percent of teachers are men, even though advocates say male teachers can be important role models for boys.

See the wage penalty by state

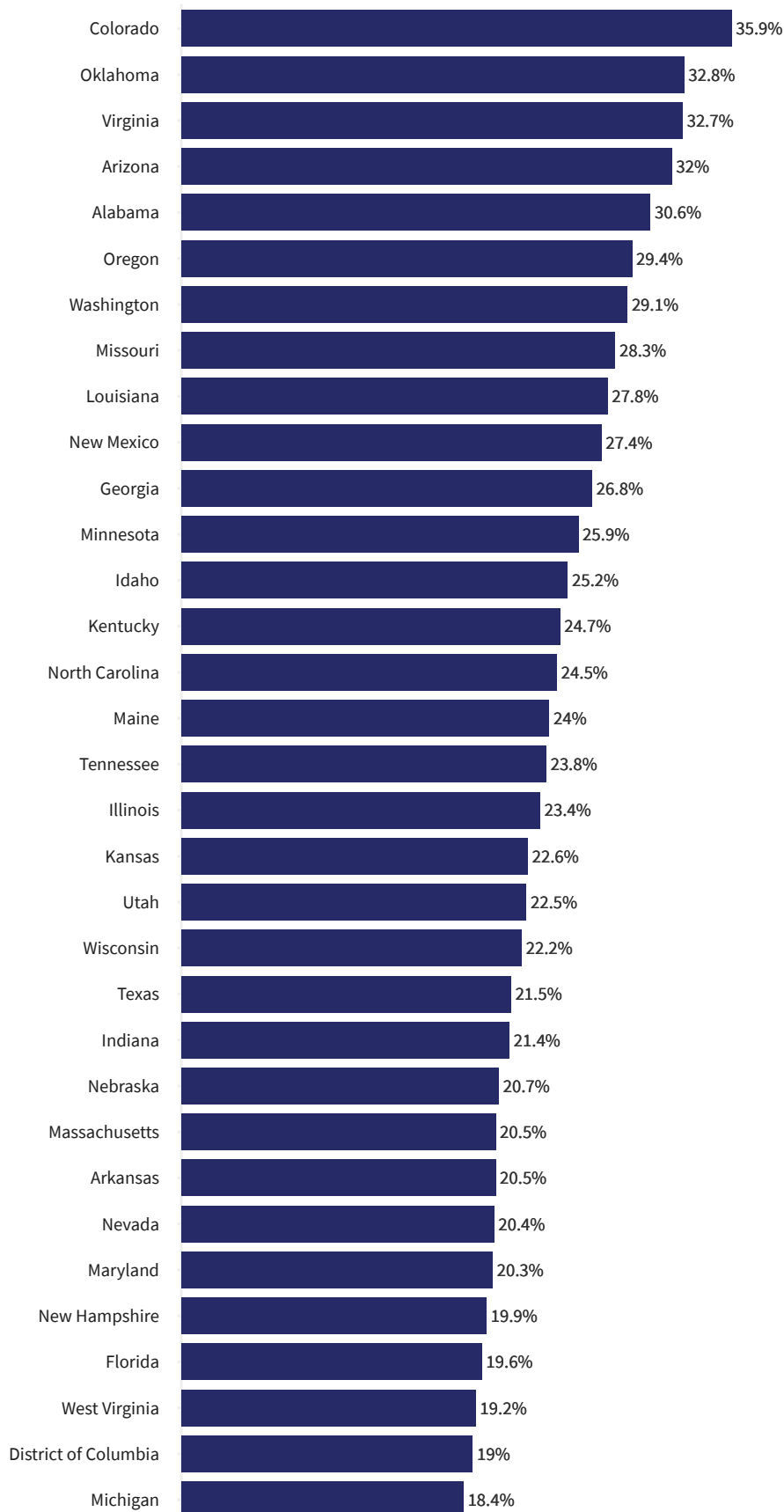
To estimate the wage gaps by state, researchers pooled six years of federal data, from 2016 to 2021, to come up with big enough sample sizes. (This analysis does not include benefits.)

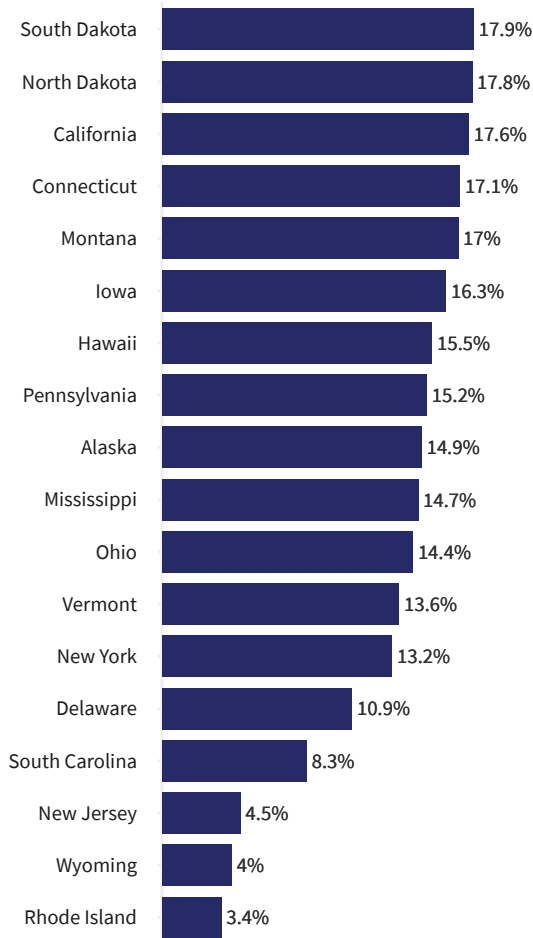
In every state, and the District of Columbia, the relative weekly wage of teachers is less than their college graduate counterparts in other professions.

Rhode Island, Wyoming, and New Jersey have the smallest wage penalties, each under 5 percent. Colorado, Oklahoma, Virginia, Arizona, and Alabama have the highest wage penalties, all above 30 percent.

The teacher weekly wage penalty is greater than 20 percent in 28 states

Teacher weekly wage penalty, by state





Note: Figure shows state-specific regression-adjusted weekly wage penalties for public school teachers (elementary, middle, and secondary) relative to their college-educated, nonteaching peers.

SOURCE: Economic Policy Institute, 2022