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## The Law of Supply and Demand Does Not Apply to Teachers

By [Walt Gardner](#) on October 21, 2015 7:09 AM

Free-market enthusiasts assert that salaries for workers are stagnant because of a lack of jobs ("[No Wonder Growth Has Been So Anemic](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 16). When the job market is strong, wages and benefits rise because employers must compete to fill the openings. But this explanation does not apply to teachers.

Although there is a documented shortage of math, science, bilingual and special education teachers to fill positions in these fields, salaries for these teachers have not risen. Free-marketeers argue that this situation exists solely because teachers' unions demand equal pay for *all* teachers regardless of their specialization or the need for their services. They say that teachers' unions increase the cost of labor without increasing its value. But there is value in what teachers in all fields provide.

Without unions, teachers would be at the mercy of the vicissitudes of the economy. For example, a 2013 study by the Council of the Great City Schools found that about half of large city school districts now have a shortage of teachers for English Language Learners, or will have in the next five years ("[Schools Look to Puerto Rico in Search of Bilingual Teachers](#)," The Pew Charitable Trusts, Oct. 13). If the law of supply and demand held, then salaries for such teachers would rise. But they haven't.

I acknowledge that this situation is largely the result of the refusal of unions to allow for differentiated pay. Yet if unions yielded, what would happen if the demand for ELL teachers diminished the next year or the year after? Would these teachers then be required to take a cut in salary or be laid off? I see the problem as a trade-off. Something has to give. Expecting teachers to accept salaries that fluctuate from year to year depending on the composition of student enrollment is going to make the profession even less attractive.