

# Teachers' Pay: What On Earth Are We Thinking?

By [Marc Tucker](#) on [September 14, 2017 9:25 AM](#)

The OECD reports that teachers' salaries in the United States **now trail those of workers** with similar education levels by an amount greater than the gap in ANY OTHER country examined by the OECD. They make about 60 cents for every dollar made by others with the same amount of education. And—get this—they work longer hours than teachers in these other countries, too. The teachers who serve our most disadvantaged students make even less than the average teacher.

The rate at which high school graduates are applying to teachers colleges is plummeting. There are teacher shortages all over the country. Experienced teachers are bailing.

Because this is a country that believes in markets, you would think that we would do the obvious. You would think that we would raise teachers' salaries. No. Instead, we waive the already abysmally low licensing standards for becoming a teacher. It does not seem to matter anymore whether the teacher knows anything about the subject she is teaching. Some states, with their gutted entry standards, would have you think that it's perfectly OK for anyone who can fog a glass to teach. Imagine how this makes capable teachers feel.

What is supremely aggravating about all this is that, at the same time we refuse to pay our teachers a decent wage, we gin up accountability systems that pretend that student performance is unsatisfactory because our teachers are insufficiently accountable for their performance. That is pure balderdash.

Even more aggravating to me is the knowledge that the countries that are paying their teachers more are spending less money per student than we are for their schools. This, I know, seems impossible. Eighty-one percent of the school dollar goes to personnel in the U.S. Most of the persons in personnel are teachers. So I can't be right, can I? But I can. And I am because teachers constitute a much smaller portion of the total elementary and secondary education workforce in the United States than they do in the countries that are beating the pants off us with respect to student achievement.

So where are these people if they are not in the classroom? Well, they are in the district central office or are running or staffing special projects or services or just passing papers up and down the system or something else, but they are not regular faculty members in the school.

The United States has the dumbest school staffing system in the world. We refuse to pay our teachers the kind of salaries that would allow us to attract to teaching or even keep in teaching the kind of teachers who could do a great job for our kids. When those people arrive for their first day on the job, we provide them with zip in the way of support. They sink or swim and a great many promptly sink. Many who stay flounder, leaving for greener pastures within five years of their first day teaching. Many who have put up with this system for years are now throwing in the towel.

The cost of replacing these teachers who are going through this revolving door is very high, but we would apparently rather get another underpaid, poorly trained and sparsely supported teacher who also promptly heads for the door than pay more for the kind of teacher our kids really need and support that teacher the way a professional in any other field would expect to be supported.

Observing that this poorly paid, poorly trained, overworked and under-supported person is not doing a great job, what do we do? Instead of paying that person more, providing her first-rate training, giving her the kind of support that a high-status professional routinely expects and reducing her teaching load, we hire a bunch of other people to tell this poor soul what to do and how to do it.

It's astounding. We are surrounded by nations in which the typical high school graduate leaves high school two to three years ahead of our typical high school graduates. We spend more per-student than they do. We know that, apart from the socioeconomic status of the students in the school, there is no single school factor that explains as much of the difference we observe in student performance as the ability of the teacher. Why is it so hard for us to draw the obvious conclusion—that we should be working day and night to pay our teachers the way we pay other workers who have the same level of education and give them professional conditions of work? This should be a no-brainer. Other nations do this. They get much better results at no greater cost than we are now paying for middling results, because they have great teachers who do not need to be told what to do.

Yes, I confess. This is a rant. I am not supposed to carry on like this in the pages of Education Week. But really. This analysis does not require much intelligence or subtlety. It is as obvious as the nose on our face. But we trudge on from day to day, week to week, month to month and year to year as if the cause of our exceedingly dispiriting student performance is a complete mystery. It is not a mystery. It is not the result of impersonal forces beyond our control.

Teachers' salaries started to diverge increasingly from those of workers with comparable education levels in the 1970s. This is not a new problem. It has just gotten slowly worse. Student performance leveled off in the United States in the 1970s. What, exactly, is it going to take to make us wake up and do the obvious?