

The Truth About Teachers' Summers



By [Elizabeth Heubeck](#) — July 11, 2024 ⌚ 5 min read



— iStock/Getty

Those who can't do, teach.

This common misperception disregards the many skills that effective teachers bring to the profession: subject matter expertise, management and organization skills, and the ability to give academic and emotional support, teachers and experts who study teachers say. Other cringe-worthy comments about the teaching profession include: Anyone can teach, teaching is easy, and teachers work less than other professionals.

Such notions of teachers' jobs don't stop in the summer. They just shift, generally to remarks about how nice it must be for teachers to have a three-month summer vacation. For most teachers, such a statement rings hollow.

“Many teachers continue to work over the summer: Some teach summer school or tutor students, while others participate in professional learning and development courses to further their knowledge and skills. Many teachers use the time to revise their lessons and prepare for the upcoming year. Some take on paid summer jobs in other fields to supplement their teaching salaries,” said Heather Peske, the president of the National Council on Teacher Quality, a Washington-based research and policy group.

Evidence supports Peske's comments debunking the myth of teachers enjoying a lengthy, languorous summer break.

Here's a glimpse at data that show why a typical teacher's summer break feels far different than the way the public perceives it—including the exhausting nature of the profession, low salaries, and the actual length of teachers' summer vacation.

Long, stressful work hours signal the need to recharge

Teachers work a lot during the school year. During the 2022–23 school year, they averaged 53 hours of work per week, compared to 46 hours for other working adults, according to data from a nationally representative [survey](#) of K-12 public school teachers by the RAND Corp., and a companion survey of other workers. What's more, the survey found that about 25 percent of the hours teachers work go uncompensated, and include tasks like lesson planning or grading.

And teachers [reported an average work week of 57 hours](#) in the 2023-24 school year, according to the nationally representative Education Week State of Teaching survey. Less than half of that time worked was spent teaching, the survey found.

Teachers' work hours are not just long and sometimes uncompensated—they are stressful. RAND also published another national [survey](#) of teachers in which about a quarter of respondents said they were likely to leave their job at the end of the school year. Seventy percent of those who reported considering quitting pointed to the stresses and disappointments of teaching they felt “weren't worth it.”

Given the lengthy hours and stressful nature of teaching, it's not surprising that many educators don't feel able to dive immediately into relaxing summer mode at the end of the school year. Responses to a recent (unscientific) social media poll conducted by Education Week, in which we asked teachers to share personal passions they pursue in the summer, bore this out.

Some respondents did share personal summertime [passions](#) they planned to pursue, such as swimming, gardening, exploring nature, and writing poetry. But about an equal number of responses carried undertones of exhaustion and burnout. Here's a sampling:

“Not enough time in a 6 week summer ... barely time to recover and be excited for the new year.”

—[Peggy B.](#)

“Sleeping, reading, and recovering my mental health.”

—[Jo-Ann M.](#)

Summer means a second income stream for many teachers

Responses from that same online Education Week poll also drove home the fact that, for many teachers, summer represents an opportunity to earn income rather than relax.

“Earning enough extra money to make my salary livable. That's my summer passion.”

—[Michelle Kelley G.](#)

Statistics on the percentage of teachers who take on jobs in the summer months vary. But a recent We Are Teachers survey indicated that [nearly 50 percent](#) of teachers bring in a second stream of income during their summer break.

Some data suggest that early-career teachers are far more likely to take on summer work than their more seasoned professional peers. A 2019 [report](#) by the Pew Research Center found that 32 percent of first-year teachers have a second job in the summer, compared to just 13 percent of veteran teachers who'd been at the job for 30-plus years.

Teachers' starting salaries likely play a role: At \$44,530, the [average starting salary](#) for teachers in 2024 per National Education Association estimates, is significantly lower than starting salary projections for college graduates entering other professions.

For 2024, the National Association of Colleges and Employers [forecasted a range of starting salaries](#) for new college graduates, from \$61,399 for agricultural and natural resources majors to \$76,736 for engineering majors.

The gap persists beyond entry-level salaries. On average, teachers in 2022 made 26.4 percent less than other similarly educated professionals, according to the [Economic Policy Institute](#). And most teachers' summer vacation doesn't allot much time to close the income gap.

Summer break isn't that long, and it's not a complete break

For K-12 students in the United States, [summer break](#) averages 10 weeks. For teachers, it's shorter, since they typically spend a week or so tying up loose ends on both ends of the break.

A poll by We Are Teachers asked 365 K-12 teachers [how long their 2024 summer break will last](#). The majority reported that it's eight to nine weeks. Less than 5 percent of respondents reported having a summer break lasting more than 11 weeks.

Further, most teachers spend at least some time on their teaching job during the summer. The [RAND Corp.](#) surveyed teachers nationwide about their participation in professional learning activities during the summer of 2019; virtually all reported having done at least one such activity during the break. Beyond PD, teachers engage in other informal activities that support their work: purchasing supplies for classrooms, decorating classrooms, and preparing welcome packets for new students, to name a few.

“If we want to advance the teaching profession, we must acknowledge how hard teachers work behind the scenes and debunk narratives that discount their contributions,” Peske said. “To imply that teachers have off all summer dismisses their unseen work to enhance their craft and, ultimately, provide students with high-quality instruction.”

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