

We Shouldn't Call Teacher Salary Hikes 'Raises'

By Derek W. Black May 4, 2018

Commentary



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Increases in teacher pay are long overdue

In recent months, [teachers have organized strikes and walkouts in Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and West Virginia to protest low salaries, reduced benefits, and insufficient school resources](#). The protests have led to some substantial increases in school funding and pension contributions, but it is the increases in teacher salaries that are catching the most public attention. The raises—some immediate, some in the works—started at 5 percent and may jump to as much as 20 percent.

The size of these raises ought to disturb the public not because teachers

appear to be reaping windfalls, but because they reveal just how dismissive states have been toward education in recent years. And pay hikes alone do not mean states will change their underlying commitment to education. Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey, for instance, [supports a 20 percent pay raise for the state's teachers by 2020](#), but also touts a school voucher referendum that could drain millions of dollars out of the public education system.

Many teachers feel the increases in education funding that states are offering are still far short of what's needed. And while much of the public agrees, there are those who think 15 percent or 20 percent raises for teachers are just too much. Social media is afire with critics who want teachers to stop asking for more money and just get back to work.

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But these increases should not be called raises. They are not pats on the back for a job well done, cost-of-living adjustments, or estimates of teachers' market value. Instead, they are closer to compensatory damages.

The full picture of what states have done to public education over the past decade, and to teachers in particular, is shocking. Teachers' mistreatment stretches well beyond low salaries to include changes to tenure, union rights, retirement benefits, and teacher-evaluation methods, not to mention difficult working conditions and supply shortages. North Carolina, for example, which is a right-to-work state, [eliminated the possibility of tenure for new teachers](#). Nearly [20 other states have weakened](#) tenure rights in recent years, according to a 2015 essay by Richard D. Kahlenberg in *American Educator*. And [most states still rely too heavily on students' standardized-test performance in teacher evaluations](#).

While the [average U.S. teacher makes close to \\$60,000 every year](#), salaries

have been stagnant or falling nationwide, with a 4 percent decrease on average between the 2008-09 and 2017-18 school years. Meanwhile, the average teacher in states such as Oklahoma and West Virginia, where teachers have been protesting, made just over \$45,000 per year before the protests. Compared with their peers in neighboring states, teachers in these states have been underpaid for a decade.

That some state leaders have acquiesced to teachers' demands for substantial salary increases is a testament to how bad education policy has been over the past decade. Far fewer people are pursuing careers as teachers—[all 50 states and the District of Columbia have reported shortages in at least one area](#)—and the problem may only get worse. State leaders can't be so blind as to think that their decisions haven't contributed to the problem.

Many states have had the capacity to treat teachers fairly for years but often chose to spend their cash on tax cuts for corporations and wealthier individuals.

This raises the serious question of whether states are committed to public education. All 50 state constitutions [explicitly mention obligations to support a robust public education system](#). Education is special in this respect. State constitutions make no mention of support for health care or infrastructure, for example. Nor do they mention low tax rates. In other words, education is not merely the first among equally important competing programs; it's a constitutional obligation states must fulfill before anything else.

The latest salary increases demonstrate that states have done everything but put education first. Until they do, teachers, parents, and students should continue to protest.

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