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Why U.S. Teachers Work the Most But U.S. Students Stay Average

Ujala Sehgal Jun 25, 2011 15,213 Views Comments (101)

Among 27 member nations tracked by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, U.S. teachers work the longest hours, the *Wall Street Journal* reports. This seems particularly impressive as the U.S. has long summer vacations, and primary-school teachers only spent 36 weeks a year in the classroom, among the lowest of the countries tracked. Yet the educators spent 1,097 hours a year teaching, in the most recent numbers from 2008. New Zealand, in second place at 985 hours, had schools open for 39 weeks a year. The OECD average is 786 hours.

Moreover, the hours from the OECD survey are only the time spent in the classroom. According to data from the comparable year in a Labor Department survey, U.S. teachers work in total an average of 1,913 in a year -- close to the average American's full-time hours, which are 1,932 hours a year. The blog *American Society Today* describes: "This statistic refutes the argument that teachers should be paid considerably less than other workers because 'teachers only work 9 months of the year.'"

One conclusion to be drawn from this is, as the *Journal* writes, "American teachers are the most productive among major developed countries." But it also notes that "student achievement in the U.S. remains average in reading and science and slightly below average in math when compared to other nations in a separate OECD report." Another new report by the Department of Education shows a different "sobering" finding: that since the 1990s, scores in math and reading for Hispanic students have increased but the gap between Latino and white students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress has persisted. The *Daily Mail* points out that Latinos "are the fastest-growing population in the United States, and Latino students are now the largest minority in U.S. schools." In some cases the Latino public school population has surpassed that of whites. U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan responded to

these results by saying that "race and ethnicity shouldn't be factors in the success of any child in America."

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There is something strange about this finding that countries where the teachers work fewer hours produce better educated students. Although the *Journal* does not address this in its article, the issue is energetically taken up elsewhere. To some it is a salary issue. Business Insider reported that in comparison to other developed countries, American educators work the most hours of all industrialized nations, but are the fifth lowest paid after 15 years on the job. Finland, the country ranked highest in international tests, has teachers that work the fifth fewest hours, and are the ninth lowest paid.

Earlier this year, the *New York Times* reported that a study on comparative educational systems placed raising the status of the teaching profession as a top suggestion for the U.S. In the report, it was not nearly an issue of salaries.

"University teaching programs in the high-scoring countries admit only the best students, and "teaching education programs in the U.S. must become more selective and more rigorous," the report said. The problem there, however, is that while the average salary of a veteran elementary teacher in the U.S. was \$44,172 in 2008, higher than the average of \$39,426 across all OECD countries, that salary level was 40 percent below the average salary of other American college graduates. In Finland, by comparison, the veteran teacher's salary was 13 percent less than that of the average college graduate's. Another problem noted was that though the U.S. spends a great deal on education overall, "American schools spend disproportionately on other areas, like bus transportation and sports facilities." These are all exceedingly difficult problems to solve, but they offer significant insight into the present education paradox.

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