

Education

Teachers shelling out nearly \$500 a year on school supplies, report finds

By **Moriah Balingit** May 15 at 12:25 PM

Pencils, pens, crayons, construction paper, T-shirts, snacks and, sometimes, a pair of shoes: The costs add up for public school teachers who reach into their own pockets for classroom supplies, ensuring their students have the necessities of learning.

Nearly all teachers are footing the bill for classroom supplies, an Education Department report found, and teachers in high-poverty schools spend more than those in affluent schools.

The report, prepared by the National Center for Education Statistics and released Tuesday, is based on a nationally representative survey of teachers during the 2015-2016 school year. It found that 94 percent of teachers pay for classroom supplies, spending an average of \$479 a year. About 7 percent of teachers spend more than \$1,000 a year.

The report was released as Arizona, Oklahoma and West Virginia continue to feel the aftershocks from teacher protests over low pay and cuts to school spending that shut down schools for days.

The cost can be especially burdensome for teachers who make meager salaries and live paycheck to paycheck. Even in places such as Oklahoma, where educators are among the lowest-paid in the nation, teachers still reach in to their pockets to make up for budget shortfalls that have stripped resources from schools. One Tulsa teacher last year [resorted to panhandling](#) to pay for school supplies.

Teresa Danks, who teaches at Grimes Elementary, grabbed headlines when she stood under a freeway overpass holding a sign that read, “Teacher needs school supplies! Anything helps. Thank you!”

Danks, who has been a teacher since the 1990s, said she has long paid for school supplies out of her own pocket. But the number of needy children seems to be growing, she said, and her purchases have gone far beyond glue sticks and crayons. She spent several hundred dollars buying winter clothing for a student who had none, and buys birthday cupcakes for children whose parents cannot afford them. Grimes Elementary has so many children who qualify for free meals that the school gives them to all students.

“Teachers have been doing this from the beginning of time,” Danks said. “It’s just getting hard because the pay isn’t keeping up with the cost of living and the need is getting greater and greater.”

According to the federal report, elementary school teachers spent an average of \$526, more than high school teachers. But no group shelled out more than teachers at schools with a high number of students living in poverty. Teachers who worked at schools where more than 75 percent of children qualify for free meals spent an average of \$554 annually for supplies.

Nationally, more than half of public school students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, a rough proxy for poverty. And with the number of poor students growing, families are less able to furnish supplies for classrooms or for their children than they were in the past.

The practice is so widespread that schools have come to rely on educators furnishing their classrooms. Congress in 2002 passed a measure giving teachers a \$250 tax deduction for classroom supply spending.

Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine), who helped create that deduction, said last year that the deduction represented a “small token of appreciation” for teachers.

“At virtually every school, I have met teachers who are spending money out of their own pockets to benefit their students,” Collins said.

A GOP tax proposal threatened to eliminate the deduction, but after an outcry Congress preserved it. Now, House Democrats are sponsoring an effort to expand the deduction to \$500. Rep. Anthony G. Brown (D-Md.) said expanding the deduction is critical in an age when teacher pay in many states has stagnated.

“In spite of tight classroom budgets, limited education resources and low pay, educators take hundreds of dollars out of their pockets to purchase supplies for their students to ensure every child has the resources they need to learn and succeed,” Brown said Monday in a news release. “Increasing this deduction acknowledges the importance of their work, is a small ‘thank you’ for the counselors, principals and teachers who make financial sacrifices to benefit their students, and helps achieve the outcomes we want for all our kids.”

 **62 Comments**

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