



JEOPARDIZING OUR FUTURE

The Cost of Underfunded Public Education

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Teaching is one of the foundational occupations in any society. As a profession, public school teaching can be chaotic, because the teacher has no choice regarding who is coming through their classroom door and in what state on any given day. Maybe the students come from safe, well-resourced homes. Maybe the students come from violent situations where food insecurity is common. Regardless of the environment, teachers are bound by law and professional ethics to instruct all students in their care to the best of their ability with the resources provided to them by the school district or what they have provided themselves. Public education is structured in such a way that public school teachers are completely at the mercy of the electorate and their chosen public officials regarding funding, standards, curriculum, and materials. This relationship, however, is most glaringly obvious in the case of teacher salaries in the public sector.

Public school teacher salaries are set by each respective district, which receives its revenue from federal, state, and local sources. Each state has its own formula for allocating education funds. In Louisiana, for example, per pupil spending is determined by the Minimum Foundation Program (MFP) formula, which is developed by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and approved or rejected by the state Legislature in an up or down vote annually. The MFP consists of four levels. A key component of the MFP is the weighted student membership count

under level 1 funding, which increases funding to a district based on its enrollment counts of specific groups such as English language learners, low-income students, special education students, and gifted and talented students. As a whole, per pupil spending is a combination of federal, state, and local money with the poorer parishes receiving a larger share of their per pupil expenditures from the state, whereas locally generated money makes up the majority of their respective per pupil expenditures in wealthier parishes.¹ Education funding is a favorite place for fiscal hawks to trim budgets.

Public education is a site of constant partisan bickering, and, often as a result, funding suffers from periods of stagnation. This has profoundly affected teacher salaries everywhere and has created a national teacher shortage.² Regarding the national teacher shortage, a 2019 report of the Economic Policy Institute explains,

A shortage of teachers harms students, teachers, and the public education system as a whole. Lack of sufficient, qualified teachers and staff instability threaten students' ability to learn and reduce teachers' effectiveness, and high teacher turnover consumes economic resources that could be better deployed elsewhere. The teacher shortage makes it more difficult to build a solid reputation for teaching and to professionalize it, which further contributes to perpetuating the shortage. In addition,

Figure 1: Average Public School Teacher Salaries by Gulf South States and the United States: 2016-2017 (Grades K-12)



the fact that the shortage is distributed so unevenly among students of different socioeconomic backgrounds challenges the U.S. education system's goal of providing a sound education equitably to all children.³

As education intersects with so many other areas of social concern, the impact of teacher shortages will aggravate other disparities such as race and poverty. The first districts to be harmed by the shortages are the poorer districts, which often serve students of color and low-income communities.

Figure 1 shows the average salaries for K-12 public school teachers in the Gulf South states of Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas, and the national average.⁴ According to 2016-2017 data from the National Education Association, the average teacher salary for all the Gulf South States falls below the national average (\$58,950) in the following order from highest to lowest: Texas at \$52,575, Louisiana at \$50,000, Florida at \$49,407, Alabama at \$48,868, and Mississippi at \$42,925. The subsequent teacher shortages, brought on in part by this low pay, cause districts to employ more under-credentialed and uncertified teachers in classrooms with more students, despite evidence showing that smaller class sizes are better learning environments.⁵ Even within a given state, teacher salaries may vary substantially. Wealthier districts are able to attract seasoned teachers with better pay, while the poorer districts are forced to rely on minimally experienced or uncertified teachers who have higher attrition rates.⁶ As an alternative to bringing in a greater number of less-qualified faculty, some districts opt to increase class sizes, which only serves to create barriers for students who need smaller class sizes and the individualized learning it allows.

One cannot merely appeal to a sense of responsibility to attract and retain teachers. In a country where the cost of living continually rises, both lawmakers and constituents will have to accept two non-partisan truths—you get what you pay for and public education is not free. If the United States still wishes to pursue its ambitious goal of providing all of its residents with a quality elementary and secondary education, then the policymakers and citizens must consent to allocate the required money. A school system's ability to perform its function depends on the resources at its disposal. Well-funded schools are able to meet a wide range of student needs, provide access to current technology, and provide differentiated instruction and services in a well-maintained setting. Underfunded schools can do little of this. Well-paid teachers can work wonders in the classroom. Poorly paid teachers do what they can as they try to eke out a standard of living befitting a person whom the society has entrusted with its most valued resource: its children.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Retrieved from <http://www.labudget.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/LBP-K-12-Report.pdf>
- 2 Sutcher, L., Darling-Hammond, L., & Carver-Thomas, D. (2016). A coming crisis in teaching? Teacher supply, demand, and shortages in the US. *Learning Policy Institute*.
- 3 Garcia, Emma, & Weiss, Elaine. (2019). The teacher shortage is real, large and growing, and worse than we thought. *Economic Policy Institute*.
- 4 National Education Association, 2016-2017.
- 5 Schanzenbach, D. W. (2014). Does class size matter? National Education Policy Center.
- 6 Sutcher, et. al. Op.Cit.