



VIEWPOINT

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How Well Does Ohio Pay Its Teachers?

By: Matthew Carr

Summary

A new study has found that teachers in several of Ohio's largest cities are among the best paid in the country when adjusted for the relative cost-of-living. Thus, if Ohio wants to draw better teachers to our state we need to offer better incentives, such as merit pay.

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When it comes to education policy in Ohio, there are few areas of widespread agreement. One idea with near universal acceptance is that public school teachers should be paid adequately. But the agreement ends there, as citizens divide over whether this has actually been achieved. A new report from the National Center for Policy Analysis (NCPA) suggests that Ohio is accomplishing this goal.

As anyone who has ever traveled to another country or state knows, the cost of living in a particular area has a significant impact on how much your dollar will reach. In order to compare the purchasing power of teacher salaries, NCPA reviewed the average pay of teachers in fifty major cities across the United States, making adjustments for the cost of living in each city.

Once teacher salaries are adjusted for local costs of living, three Ohio cities rank in the top ten for teacher pay. Cleveland ranks fourth, paying elementary teachers an average adjusted salary of \$51,265. Columbus ranks seventh, paying \$50,291, while Cincinnati ranks ninth at \$48,856. Ohio's big three offered a better compensation package than the high-cost cities of New York City (\$42,662), San Francisco (\$32,663), and Philadelphia (\$46,192).

Ohio's major cities, then, are offering teachers salaries that are competitive with and in some cases better than those offered by other major cities across the country. Even though we offer lower salaries in raw dollars, our lower cost of living means that we are actually offering some of the highest pay in the United States.

Yet the fact that we pay a competitive wage to our teachers has not produced outstanding academic performance by students in these cities. In 2004-2005 Cleveland public schools met 2 out of 23 performance indicators used by the state to determine report card ratings. The Columbus and Cincinnati public schools both met 3.

Given the importance of teachers in raising student performance, we must ask the question, if our relatively high levels of compensation are not bringing us teachers who can enhance student achievement, what else must we do? The solution is to encourage excellent teaching through financial incentives, or what is now colloquially known as 'merit pay.'

History has repeatedly shown that money alone is rarely the solution to public problems. Money can help address a problem, but only if it is spent on incentives that reward success. Teaching in our public schools should be no different; financial incentives count. If we want improvement in our classrooms, we must insist on not only paying teachers adequately, but also paying them in such a way that connects pay to performance.

Our traditional approach of simply offering higher salaries to all teachers has not achieved its intended result of producing higher returns on our investment. While higher salaries may help draw better qualified people into the teaching profession, it still relies on altruism, rather than tangible rewards, for performance. We have offered high salaries without creating incentives for excellence in return.

At the heart of the debate that surrounds merit pay is whether we're going to treat our teachers as professionals or as bureaucrats. The current system of offering rigid pay scales based solely on tenure treats our teachers as though they were bureaucrats working for a government agency. As anyone who has spent time at the DMV knows, such pay systems do not reward performance, and certainly do not penalize poor performance, and the bureaucrats seem all too aware of this fact.

With a merit pay system, we would be returning to the ideal of teachers as professionals. Teachers have to be certified just like doctors and lawyers, but then are not given the opportunity to advance based on merit, or even compensated for special skills (such as teaching in the high demand areas like math and science). By not treating our teachers like professionals we have recreated the DMV in many of our public schools instead of inculcating the values we attach to professional employment in other sectors.

High wages alone will not be sufficient to draw talented professionals into teaching. Instead we need to start implementing measures, such as merit pay, that treat our teachers like professionals, and compensates them like professionals as well. By doing so we can increase the quality not only of those who educate, but also the achievement of those being educated.

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(Matthew Carr is a policy analyst with the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions, a research and educational institute located in Columbus, Ohio. More information on educational issues is available at www.buckeyeinstitute.org. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliation are cited.)

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