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February 19, 2024

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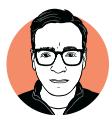

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Why not pay teachers $100,000 a year?

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(Tara Jacoby for The Washington Post)

Adam DiPerna always had to hold it in.

As a Spanish teacher at Gerald G. Huesken Middle School in Lancaster, Pa., he'd arrive in his classroom at 7:10 a.m. each day and cannonball into a morning that left no time for a bathroom break. He'd teach back-to-back-to-back-to-back classes until his lunch period, 27 minutes during which he also had to heat and eat the food he'd brought from home, email parents about problems and absences, and field questions from students. After school, he coached wrestling, advised the student council and chaired the GHMS world language department. Work, from grading papers to preparing lessons, spilled into the evenings and weekends he wanted to spend with his wife and three kids.

For his efforts, DiPerna — with a Bucknell University diploma and a master's degree in education — earned less than any college graduate he knew. So, last year, after a decade and a half in the classroom, he quit teaching to take a job as a sales representative at a large packaging company, trading a life of conjugated verbs for a new life of corrugated cardboard. "I wanted to be a public servant," DiPerna, 42, told me. "I did not get into teaching to make a lot of money. But I also didn't get into it to barely scrape by."

He earned more in his first partial year as a paper salesman than in his 15th year as a top-rated teacher. "I get paid more money," he said. "And I can listen to the call of nature."

DiPerna's gain is America's loss. Four years after the onset of the pandemic, students across the country are still struggling. Test scores are falling. Absenteeism is rising. Meanwhile, about 44 percent of U.S. schools face a teacher shortage.

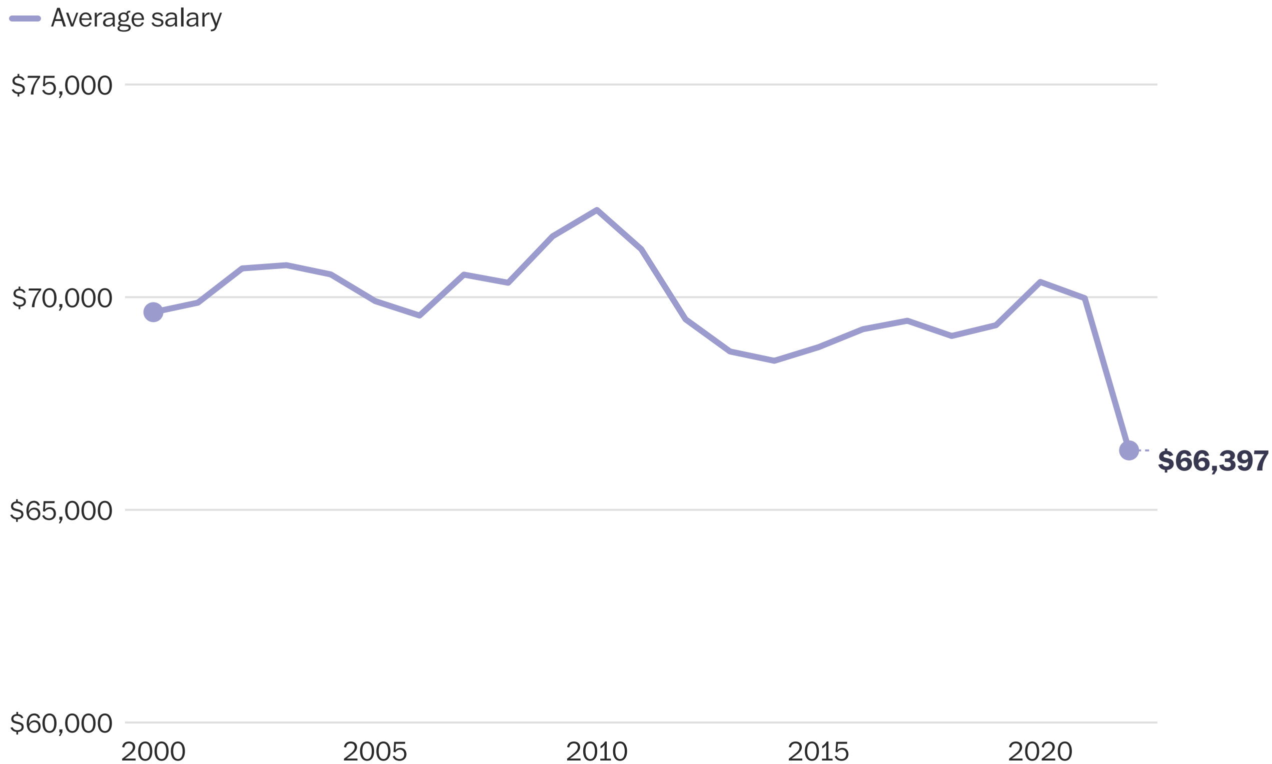
If we're serious about hanging on to capable educators, and attracting new ones, we should start treating them like true professionals. And one place to begin is compensation.

Why not pay America's teachers a minimum salary of $100,000 a year?

The average annual salary for public school teachers during 2021-2022 was $66,397, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, a nearly 8 percent pay cut, in inflation-adjusted terms, from a decade ago. Salary isn't the only reason educators exit the profession. But whether they work in suburban New York or rural Mississippi, teachers earn significantly less than they could in other fields.

What do teachers make?

The estimated average salaries of teachers in U.S. public elementary and secondary schools, adjusted for inflation.



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

The Economic Policy Institute, a left-leaning think tank, calls this difference the "teacher pay penalty." EPI calculated that, in 2022, teachers earned only 74 cents on the dollar compared with comparably educated professionals. The right-leaning Hoover Institution reached a similar conclusion in its 2020 report on educator compensation, showing that, even adjusting for factors such as talent and experience, "teachers are paid 22 percent less than they would be if they were in jobs in the U.S. economy outside of teaching."

Nothing against actuaries (median salary: $113,990), but isn't helping a first-grader learn to read as valuable as assessing insurance premiums on your Hyundai Elantra?

The Why Not? Project

Help us deliver a jolt of adrenaline to the American imagination!

Share your bold, unexpected idea for improving our country, our organizations or our lives. We read every submission and will select the most intriguing ideas to explore in future columns.

For all the education fads of the past 50 years, researchers have found that what matters most for student learning — more than reducing class size or handing out iPads — is a high-quality teacher. One study by Harvard University economist Raj Chetty and his colleagues determined that students with effective teachers in fourth grade were more likely to attend and graduate from college as young adults and to earn more than their peers during their careers.

Some states and localities have attempted to address the compensation problem with complicated pay-for-performance schemes that award teachers bonuses hinged on student test scores. The results of those efforts have been iffy at best, scandalous at worst, said Barbara Biasi, a labor economist at Yale University. But her research has found that raising base pay for effective teachers, a simpler solution, deepens student learning and keeps good teachers on the job. Higher base pay also reduces dropout rates and narrows the achievement gap between White and Black students, as well as White and Hispanic students, according to other studies.

Raising teacher pay is also the rare 2024 policy proposal whose support spans the ideological divide. Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) has introduced legislation requiring a federal minimum teacher salary of $60,000 per year. Tennessee, led by Republican Gov. Bill Lee and an overwhelmingly Republican legislature, last year approved a law raising minimum teacher salaries in the state to $50,000 by 2026.

But those well-intentioned initiatives are "take two aspirin and call me in the morning" remedies. We need a defibrillator — a serious jolt to awaken the patient from a near-death experience. A $100,000 base salary would deliver that shock.

It would also jolt public budgets. Many ideas we'll explore in this "Why Not?" project would save money. This one is pricey.

A back-of-the-envelope calculation: If it requires about $35,000 per teacher just to raise average pay to six figures, and the United States employs more than 3 million public school teachers, the total cost would be north of $100 billion. Are you feeling defibrillated?

Although that figure represents just 5½ weeks of Medicare spending or well under half the Pentagon's weapons budget, it's still a massive annual sum. The federal government, which supplies about 7 percent of K-12 funding, shouldn't finance the whole cost. It could establish a matching program to share the burden — say, $50 billion from the federal pot, $50 billion from states and localities. But that $100 billion would also likely mean raising taxes. Biasi and other scholars I spoke with questioned whether taxpayers would be willing to foot the bill.

That's why this hefty pay raise comes with two strings attached.

First, a longer school year. Eliminating summer break might spark a national uprising among 8-year-olds and tourism-industry executives. But the nine-month school year is a relic. (Not many kids in Anacostia or Bethesda spend July tending the soybean crop and preparing for harvest.) Professionals work year-round. Teachers should, too. A longer school year could also reduce summer learning loss.