

What I *Really* Learned in School: Money Talks

More and more teachers regret ever choosing their occupation. In 1961, for example, about 50 percent of teachers reported they “certainly would” teach again. By 1996 that number had tumbled to just 32 percent. And those who said they “probably would not” or “certainly would not” teach again nearly doubled in the same period from about 11 percent to more than 20 percent.

Federal survey data also indicate that about 20 percent of new teachers quit the classroom within three years. Worse, it’s the top undergraduates, as measured by college-entrance exams, who are most likely to quit. What’s behind these figures? Why do an ever-increasing number of our brightest young teachers regret choosing the occupation? And why are the best and the brightest most prone to quit?

There are many reasons. However, as with most things in America, it comes down to money in the end. Consider teachers’ starting pay. In spite of all the hyperbole about schooling being the nation’s number-one priority, many states continue to pay beginning teachers close to poverty-level wages. In 1996–97, for example, first-year teachers in North Dakota were paid an average of just \$18,889 a year. Neighboring South Dakota averaged \$19,820, Mississippi paid the princely average of \$20,264, Utah spared no

expense at \$21,475, and George W. Bush’s Texas let cost be no object at \$24,079. In fact, a total of thirty-one states paid the average first-year teacher less than \$25,000 a year. One is reminded of Richard Nixon’s candid comment, caught on tape, that “Money talks and bullshit walks.”

Given such anemic starting salaries, it’s hardly any wonder that few academically able college students major in education. *Education Week* reports that in 1992–93 fully 30 percent of education majors scored in the bottom quartile on their college-entrance exams. Only half that number in humanities and math and science received similarly weak scores. To make matters worse, education programs are commonly looted of their very substantial income to pay for things college officials value more. Consequently, the crippled programs struggle without the faculty, staff, technology, space, and other resources necessary to run a first-rate, or even second-rate, operation.

Although a new National Education Association study shows that teacher salaries have remained stagnant over the past decade, average salaries for all teachers remain a bit more competitive than beginning salaries. According to *Rankings & Estimates: Rankings of the States 1999 and Estimates of School Statistics 2000*, the average teacher salary ranged from a high of \$51,584 in Connecticut to a low of \$28,552 in South Dakota. However, salaries in two-thirds of the states fall below the national average of \$40,582. And how competitive is that average, anyway? Is it the kind of incentive that will attract and retain the best and the brightest? Let’s see. In the table below are the mean annual salaries of a few of the occupations known to attract some of the very best college students.

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Occupation	Mean Annual Wages
Actuaries	\$65,660
Computer engineers	\$59,850
Dentists	\$93,350
Lawyers	\$75,890
Nuclear engineers	\$68,020
Optometrists	\$65,470
Pharmacists	\$60,090
Physicians and surgeons	\$102,020
Physicists and astronomers	\$69,120
Podiatrists	\$75,200
Veterinarians	\$57,130

(1998 Occupational Employment Statistics)

This list suggests what Americans *really* value. The top four priorities appear to be personal health, a dazzling smile, legal protection, and feet free of corns and bunions. Also note that occupations attracting some of the best and brightest college students make at least \$20,000 more per annum than the average teacher does. In fact, some make more than twice as much.

Note in particular the veterinarians' average wage of more than \$57,000. Let's see how that stacks up against some occupations that help people instead of pets:

Occupation	Mean Annual Wages
Actuaries	\$65,660
Human service worker	\$22,740
Other social workers	\$32,280
Recreation workers	\$19,060
Residential counselors	\$20,510
Social workers, medical and psychiatric	\$34,100
Teachers	\$38,600

(1998 Occupational Employment Statistics)

Low wages aren't the only thing discouraging the best and the brightest from choosing teaching or sticking with it once they start. High achievers seldom have to take on jobs made impossible by lack of resources. Teachers do that all the time. Consider the buildings teachers work in. The National Education Association reports that record enrollments are creating severe overcrowding, with classes placed in trailers and students attending school in shifts. Nevertheless, new schools are not being built in the necessary numbers. So teachers have to make do.

To make matters worse, the average public school in America is now forty-two years old. In fact, 28 percent of them are more than fifty years of age. It's hardly surprising, then, that nearly half the nation's schools lack the electrical and communication wiring necessary for computerization. Nevertheless, Congressional leaders still refuse to permit a floor vote on the bipartisan Johnson-Rangel school-modernization bill (H.R. 4094) despite the fact that they are sitting on top of an enormous budget surplus. Of course, they assure us that education is a top priority. What was that Nixon quote again?

Adequate buildings aren't educators' only missing resource. City and rural schools suffer from such a chronic shortage of funds that they have taken to suing state governments for more money. Meanwhile, years of budgetary shortfalls have created conditions that self-respecting professionals find hard to endure. For instance, a friend of mine took a job as a kindergarten teacher in the School District of Philadelphia. The previous teacher had walked out without cleaning up. So for days in stifling heat, my friend filled box after box with hundreds of pounds of junk while finding mouse droppings and roach powder sprinkled over everything in the storage closet. She carefully piled dozens of boxes of refuse in the hall, only to discover that the janitor refused to remove them. He claimed removing this enormous pile violated the terms of his contract. It sat for weeks.

The promised classroom aide never showed up. The antiquated duplicating machine found in the room was broken and there was no money to fix it. To avoid begging for use of the office photocopier, she had this antique repaired at her own expense. Then it turned out that the paper the school furnished was so flimsy it wouldn't feed through the machine.

Every crayon in the entire school was purple. The tape she used to put the children's names on

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such items as desks and storage cubicles fell off in less than twenty-four hours. (It had been purchased from the lowest bidder, and apparently price was more important than stickability.) The room was stiflingly hot, but she was told doors and windows had to remain shut because they opened on a playground frequented by ne'er-do-wells. The emergency telephone to the main office did not work. (Neither did most of the other emergency telephones in the school.)

The sixty-four children assigned to her morning and afternoon classes brought all of America's problems with them when they came to school. In their neighborhood the percent of low-birth-weight babies is high, the teen birthrate is high, the percentage of high school dropouts is high, the percentage of families with children headed by a single parent is high, the rate of teen deaths by accident, homicide, and suicide is high, and

the percentage of children living in poverty is high. It isn't surprising, then, that several children weren't yet toilet trained, none knew how to hold a pencil or crayon, and a few had been lead poisoned to the point of retardation.

Overwhelmed and underresourced, my friend lasted just two months. Then, exhausted and discouraged, she gave up. What caused this good teacher to leave is pretty obvious, isn't it?

But why were resources so scarce? Like most big-city school districts, Philadelphia is starved for funds year after year. Yet each year state officials ignore the district's frantic supplications. Meanwhile, they slash billions of dollars in corporate taxes and offer state property owners a \$100 tax rebate, which, providentially for them, will be paid right before the November election. Just a fraction of these tax givebacks would balance the district's budget, but they won't get a smell of it. Meanwhile, Philadelphia's city government, which says it absolutely can't scrape up any more money for the public schools, plans to spend more than one billion dollars—yes, that's one *billion* dollars—to build stadiums for the baseball Phillies and the NFL Eagles.

The bottom line is obvious. When it comes to schooling, America talks the talk, but doesn't walk the walk. What was that Nixon quote again?