



Do L.A.'s Teachers Deserve a Raise?

Some do, some don't.

By: Larry Sand - December 12, 2013

Teachers rallied last month outside the Los Angeles Unified School District's downtown headquarters to demand a pay raise, which they haven't received since 2007. Do they deserve one? In Los Angeles, a first-year teacher earns \$45,637, while a veteran's pay tops out at \$98,567. At the same time, the median annual salary of 25- to 34-year-old workers with college degrees is \$44,970. And the average teacher works between six-and-a-half and eight hours a day, 180 days per year, while other college-educated workers work more than eight hours a day and 240 days a year. Comparing apples with apples, teachers do pretty well.

The myth of the undercompensated teacher was eviscerated in 2011 by Andrew Biggs, a researcher at the American Enterprise Institute, and Jason Richwine, a former policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation. Their study found that, comparatively, teachers are overpaid. As they point out, teachers enjoy perks like extensive health-care and pension packages that aren't counted as income. Workers switching from non-teaching to teaching jobs "receive a wage increase of roughly 9 percent, while teachers who change to non-teaching jobs see their wages decrease by approximately 3 percent." When all is taken into account, write Biggs and Richwine, "teachers actually receive salary and benefits that are 52 percent greater than fair market levels."

Though teachers in Los Angeles haven't received an *across-the-board* raise in nearly seven years, they do get incremental yearly pay adjustments throughout most of their careers. As a result of the industrial-style, step-and-column pay structure, most teachers find more money in their paychecks simply by showing up at school every September. They also get "salary-point credit" by taking extra classes and workshops, despite conclusive research by Stanford-based economist Eric Hanushek showing that these classes have no effect on student learning. The set-up in Los Angeles is particularly egregious because, unlike teachers in most California school districts, teachers in the City of Angels don't have to take classes in the area they teach to get the benefit. The union contract merely stipulates that for coursework to qualify for salary-point credit, it must be "directly related to subjects commonly taught in the District." Thus, a Kindergarten teacher could take a class on the Protestant Reformation and receive salary credit for it because it's a subject taught in the district—not because she has any plans to teach it. Or an American history teacher could take a class in functions and sites of secretion of digestive enzymes and also get a bump in pay. In any event, taxpayers are paying \$519 million every year for these useless salary hikes.

The United Teachers of Los Angeles and many of its members hold their collective-bargaining agreement sacrosanct, but is it really working to teachers' benefit? According to the National Council on Teacher Quality, the answer is no. In fact, using the NCTQ statistics, the Thomas F. Fordham Institute's Mike Petrilli finds that, "Teachers in non-collective bargaining districts actually earn *more* than their union-protected peers—\$64,500 on average versus \$57,500." Petrilli adds that "there is some evidence from the NCTQ data that non-collective bargaining districts drive a harder bargain when it comes to health care." He also points out that collective-bargaining districts focus on seniority, protecting various benefits associated with longevity, rather than pushing for higher pay. This tradeoff clearly benefits older teachers at the expense of younger ones.

Another glitch associated with collective bargaining is "wage compression," which occurs when the salaries of less effective teachers are raised above the market rate, with the boost offset by reducing the pay of more productive instructors. In a 2010 Cato Institute report, Andrew Coulson cited earlier research from Caroline Hoxby and Andrew Leigh: "Pay compression increased the share of the lowest-aptitude female college graduates who became teachers by about 9 percentage points and decreased the share of the highest-aptitude female college graduates who become teachers by about 12 percentage points."

Teachers in Los Angeles and elsewhere need to come to grips with reality. In terms of salary, teachers' unions have positioned their members as low-tech factory workers—interchangeable widgets of equal effectiveness. That great, good, mediocre, and incompetent teachers are paid the same simply because they log the same number of years in the classroom or take the same meaningless classes is shameful. Good teachers are treasures and should be compensated accordingly. All of L.A.'s teachers are demanding a raise, but only the best really deserve one.