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Teacher’s Salaries: Increase or Merit Pay

 Education is all around each and every one of us. Neurosurgeons, CEO’s, and even the cashier at McDonald’s all went to school at some point. Whether they graduated from a prestigious college or never made it through high school, we have all had to interact with a teacher. Even once we are out of school we still encounter a different form of teachers. Our parents, trainers at our job, or even friends teach us new things we never knew. In the end though, it all begins somewhere with either an elementary, jr. high, or high school teacher. With teachers having an impact on everybody’s life at some point they are still greatly underpaid for how important their work is.

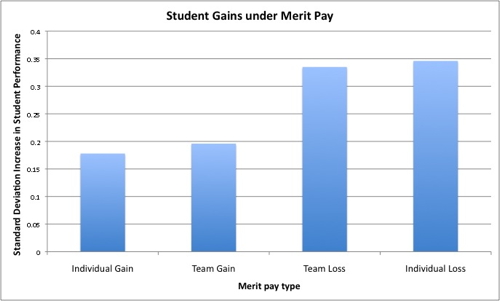
Teacher in Classroom. *Forbes.com* 2011

According to an article in *The New York Times* by Dave Eggers and Ninive C. Calegari the average starting salary of a teacher is $39,000 in 2011 (par. 5). As Eggers & Calegari points out “the average teacher’s pay is on par with that of a toll taker or bartender” (par. 5). Yet at the same time David Jackson of *USA Today* reported that President Obama said in a radio address “there’s no one more important to that education than the person at the front of the classroom” (par. 9). Our own president believes that teachers are the most important people in the society, but yet they are paid as much as a bartender. This raises the question about which is more important, ensuring our children are properly educated so America can continue to compete or being able to properly mix a long island iced tea? Teacher’s salaries are currently being addressed in our nation with many different solutions being presented.

 But should we increase how much teachers are paid because if teachers love their job then money shouldn’t be an issue, right? This is the position that State Senator Shadrack McGill has taken. In an article by Amanda Peterson Beadle for *The Progress* she reported that Senator McGill said, “these teachers that are called to teach, regardless of the pay scale, they would teach. It’s just in them to do. It’s the ability that God give’em. And there are also some teachers, it wouldn’t matter how much you would pay them, they would still perform to the same capacity” (par. 4). Even though it does take a special person to be able to teach children of any age, this statement is far from correct. As much as teachers love their job, nobody would do it for free. Somebody who is being properly compensated for their job is going to be much happier in their job and less stressed than the one who is underpaid. Even the best teacher probably would not be willing to continue their job if they were told they would not be getting paid enough to support themselves and their family. Teachers are being asked to do more today than they have ever done in the past. Increased classroom sizes, standards, and having to pay more out of their own pocket for school supplies are all things that teachers are now experiencing in the 21st century. So if we are to increase teachers pay across the nation what is exactly the best way to do that? There has been many different suggestions put out there but there is one that is currently being considered above anything else, Merit Pay.

State Senator Shadrack McGill, *Opposingviews.com* 2012

Merit Pay is a form of pay for performance in the teaching world. With Merit Pay teachers would be paid for how well they are doing in the classroom based on different criteria like “evaluations by administrators and peer reviews. In some cases, student achievement scores determine a percentage of performance pay” (Weldon par. 19). With Merit Pay it would help eliminate the issue of tenure in the teaching world. Rose Garrett of *Education.com* states, “academic tenure refers to a policy which gives professors and teachers a permanent contract” (par. 2). Garrett also points out that “teachers that have tenure cannot be fired unless for “just cause”, such as severe misconduct or incompetence, and even then cutting through the red tape can be extremely difficult” (par. 2). Another issue with tenure is that the worst teachers can be getting paid more than the good teachers .A teacher could constantly have low performing students but still be getting paid the highest due to their tenure. At the same time a teacher who has small tenure but high performing students will still get paid low. Along with eliminating tenure there are other pros to Merit Pay that have been thrown out there.

Ensuring that the appropriate teachers are being compensated properly is of course one of the main pros about Merit Pay. It could also give them the incentive to work harder because they know that if their performance is not up to par in the classroom then they will not be getting paid. With teachers working harder in the classroom it could also increase the quality of education for the students, as teachers will be doing their best to ensure they are providing the best education possible. Dylan Matthews of *Washington Post* reported on a study that was conducted by Harvard’s Roland Fryer, University of Chicago’s Steven Levitt, John List, and UC San Diego’s Sally Sadoff in July of 2012. In this study teachers were divided up into individuals and were then set into groups that would work together. They found that when the teachers were offered any form of incentive the classroom performance was significantly higher than the group that did not receive any incentive. The teachers who were given money upfront and then were told they would have to pay back what they did not earn had the highest achieving students out of the entire study.

Student Gains under Merit Pay, *Washingtonpost.com* 2012

The program would also ensure that the best teachers are staying with teaching. Knowing that they will be recognized for their hard work, and not based mainly on years teaching, could help retain new teachers. Even with these different pros for Merit Pay there are also cons/questions that have been discussed as well.

With any form of pay for performance programs you are going to have some form of competition. If you offer up some form of incentive to people, and it is an individual incentive and not a team incentive, then it is likely that people will compete with each other. This can be a problem within the school as teachers could stop working together to help ensure that all students are receiving the best education possible, especially if one teacher has problems with a particular student. Evaluations being part of the Merit Pay process is another concern that has been raised. Same criteria from district to district or state to state, subjectivity, and fairness are all worries about evaluations as part of Merit Pay. Also who would set the standards to receive Merit Pay? Would it be left up to Department of Education in D.C. or up to each state? This could cause major problems especially if it was left up to the states because teachers could flock to a state where the qualifications are easier than other ones. Another concern is that there could possibly be a shortage of money. If too many teachers qualify for Merit Pay, and not enough money, then who would get the incentive? These are just a few of the cons/questions that have been brought up about Merit Pay. Though Merit Pay is one option to help increase teacher’s pay, there is another solution that has been brought up as well.

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|  | **Teacher** | **Computer Programmer** | **Public Accountant** | **Registered Nurse** |
| **Average starting salary of jobs with similar responsibilities and training** | $ 30,377 | $43,635 | $44,668 | $45,570 |

*The National Education Association* recently reported that the average starting salary for a teacher fresh out of college is $30,377 while other college graduates who enter different fields with the same responsibilities and training start much higher than teachers.

Eggers & Calegari state “teachers make 14% less than professionals in other occupations that require similar levels of education” (par. 5). Instead of Merit Pay being implemented, raising the overall starting salaries of teachers has been suggested. John Rosales wrote in an article for the *NEA* that to have a quality pay system “it should begin with professional level starting pay” (Rosales par. 9). In a recent poll of college students by McKinsey it was found that 68% would consider teaching if the average salary was raised to over $65,000(Eggers & Calegari par. 15). By increasing the starting salary of teacher’s pay it would start teachers off much higher and pay them on level with other professions that require the same amount of education. By doing this the brightest college students would be more attracted to the teaching profession. Having the brightest students could lead to an increase of the quality of education in the classroom for younger students. These proponents of changing the starting salary of teachers may think that this is the best route, but there are also some questions that need to be addressed.

Senator McGill points out, by increasing teacher’s salaries “you are going to attract people who are not called, who don’t need to be teaching our children” (Beadle par. 5). This would have to be addressed because teaching children all day does take a special kind of person ensuring that the proper people are teaching is essential. Another concern is if we are going to start teachers at the same level of other professions than would they be held to any higher standards or having set principles like doctors or lawyers. Opponents say teachers shouldn’t get paid more because they get summers off and don’t work the standard 8-10 hour shift. However, teachers put in an extraordinary amount of time outside of the classroom, including the summer time. How much should the starting salary be? Even though there are pros and cons to both options for changing how teachers are paid I feel that there is one that would be the better option for everybody.

Teachers are considered one of the most important professions for the future of our nation. Even the doctors, lawyers, and CEO’s have all started out with a teacher teaching them how to add 2+8 and understand consonants and vowels. As the years go on we are never going to lose a need for teachers as our children will always have to be educated so we can continue to have doctors, lawyers, computer programmers, police, fireman, and even McDonald’s cashiers. If we are to help ensure that teachers are properly compensated for their vital job, then we need to increase the starting salary of all teachers.

Increasing the starting salary of teachers we can ensure that teachers are properly compensated for their time and effort they put into teaching. It could also attract the brightest minds to teaching, as they would know that they would be making a good salary in a world that is struggling with jobs due to a global recession. Even though Merit Pay is an option that does have many different benefits, there are too many concerns that need to be addressed while at the same time there is too much ambiguity that comes from Merit Pay. Increasing starting salary for teachers does have concerns but they are concerns that are more easily addressed than the concerns of Merit Pay.

With teachers having so much influence over children, ensuring they are properly compensated for their work is an issue that needs to be resolved. Teachers cannot be asked to provide more in their own classroom, while taking on more students, and at the same time having to support their families. Merit Pay and increasing teacher’s salaries are both options on the table to fix this problem, but both come with pros and cons. Teachers are vital to America’s future in an increasingly more competitive world. We need to come to a decision about how teachers should be paid. If we don’t then we may lose our best teachers to different jobs and our future students may not get the best education possible. Without this top level education America could lose its competitive advantage in the world.

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