

POLICY NOTE

Union executives may use strikes to close Seattle schools over pay demands

By Liv Finne, Director, Center for Education

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Key Findings

1. Teachers in Seattle are paid on average \$72 an hour, including benefits.
2. The workers who pay their salaries are paid on average \$44 an hour, including benefits.
3. Union executives are using the threat of illegal school strikes to demand higher pay.
4. The current compensation system for teachers is not fair to teachers or students.
5. Washington Policy Center recommends discarding the rigid wage ladder, and doubling the pay of the best teachers.
6. Teacher pay is also limited by the hiring practices of the Seattle Public Schools, where only 49 percent of employees are teachers.

Teachers average \$72 an hour, while workers who pay their salaries average \$44 an hour

Background

This summer officials at 250 of the state's 295 school districts are renegotiating work contracts with teachers and other school personnel. The WEA teachers union wants up to 21 percent more money for teachers and 37 percent in pay raises for non-teachers.¹ WEA executives say they will close the schools by calling more school strikes this fall, although teacher strikes are illegal under state law. Given the threat of disruption, officials in 24 school districts have already agreed to double-digit pay increases.²

Union executives are claiming the levels of pay and benefits that taxpayers provide to teachers in Washington state are unfair and should be higher. Naturally, union executives want their own members to receive more money from public budgets, but that does not mean current pay levels are unfair or too low.

Union executives have targeted schools in six districts for strikes. These are schools in Seattle, Kent, Kennewick, Mukilteo, Evergreen (Clark County), and Washougal.

Even in wealthy Seattle, officials see the union's money demands unreasonable. As Seattle Public Schools Deputy Superintendent Stephen Nielsen says, "We don't have the money to do that."³

Seattle

The WEA union is demanding that Seattle Public School officials provide pay increases of 18 percent to its members.⁴

1 "Schools chief Reykdal says there's no cap on educator pay raises this year," Our Voice Blog, Washington Education Association, July 31, 2018 at <https://www.washingtonea.org/ourvoice/>.

2 "Click the icons to see pay raises WEA members negotiated in each district," Washington Education Association, at <https://www.washingtonea.org/ourvoice/pay-benefits/2018-local-settlements/>.

3 "Seattle Public Schools is back at the negotiating table for teacher contracts. Here's how it's going so far." Dahlia Bazzaz and Neal Morton, *The Seattle Times*, July 12, 2018, at <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/education/seattle-public-schools-is-back-at-the-negotiating-table-for-teacher-contracts-heres-how-its-going-so-far/>

4 "Seattle Public Schools is back at the negotiating table for teacher contracts. Here's how it's going so far." Dahlia Bazzaz and Neal Morton, *The Seattle Times*, July 12, 2018, at <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/education/seattle-public-schools-is-back-at-the-negotiating-table-for-teacher-contracts-heres-how-its-going-so-far/>

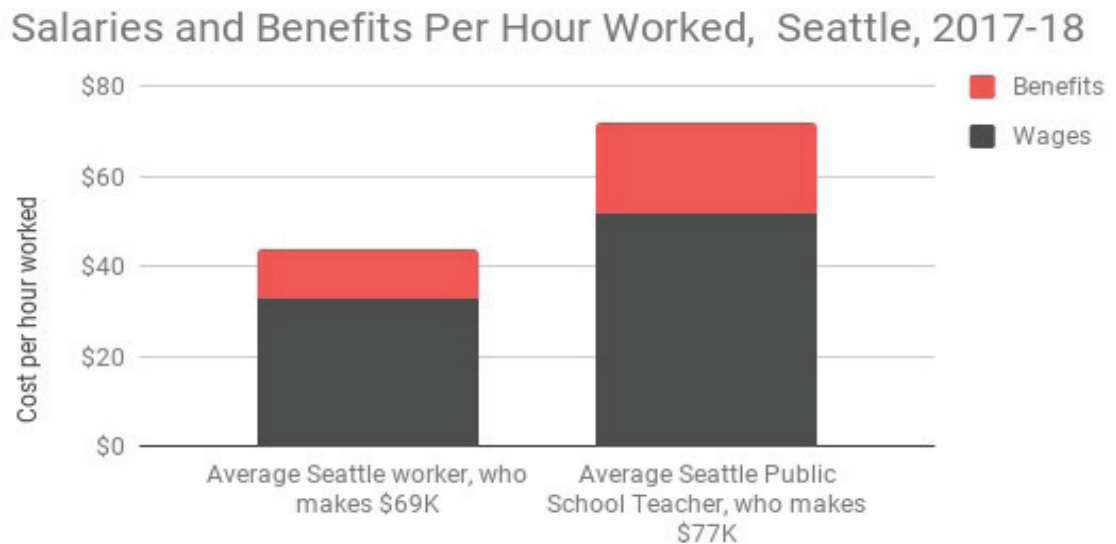
The WEA knows the state of Washington has dramatically increased funding for public schools. State spending on K-12 schools has increased from \$12.9 billion in 2009 to \$22.6 billion today. This is an increase of 75 percent, nearly doubling over the last ten years.

The budget of Seattle Public Schools has grown from \$556 million in 2008-9 to \$955 million in 2018-19, an increase of 71 percent, from \$13,000 per student to \$18,000 per student.⁵

Average teacher pay in Seattle is now at \$72 an hour, including benefits.⁶ Teachers in Seattle can earn as much as \$119,000 in salary, plus benefits, or over \$100 an hour.⁷

In contrast, the average Seattle worker who helps pay these salaries makes \$44 an hour.⁸

This chart illustrates this sharp disparity in pay between teachers and average private sector workers:



Yet the current compensation system is still not fair to teachers, or to students. The best teachers are paid according to a one-size-fits-all union pay scale which

5 “F-195 Budget Overview, Seattle Public Schools, 2008-2009 School Year,” School Apportionment and Financial Services, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, at <http://www.k12.wa.us/safs/data/reportformatter.asp>, and “Seattle Public Schools, Adopted Budget, 2018-19,” Seattle Public Schools, at https://www.seattleschools.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_543/File/District/Departments/Budget/2019%20Budget%20Development/adoptedbudget19.pdf.

6 “Table 19: Certificated Teacher – Duty Roots 31, 32, 33, 34, School District Personnel Summary Profiles – 2017-18 – Preliminary,” School Apportionment and Financial Services, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, at <http://www.k12.wa.us/safs/PUB/PER/1718/tbl19.pdf>.
A typical teachers’ contract is for 180 days, plus 5 days of supplemental TRI pay, for a total of 1480 hours a year. See “Collective Bargaining Agreement Between Seattle Public Schools and Seattle Education Association Certificated Non-Supervisory Employees, 2015-2018,” at http://www.seattlewea.org/file_viewer.php?id=2198.

7 “K12 School Employee Salaries, Washington State,” Office of Financial Management, at <http://fiscal.wa.gov/DVK12Salaries>.

8 “Average Salary in Seattle, Washington,” PayScale, accessed July, 2018, at <https://www.payscale.com/research/US/Location=Seattle-WA/Salary>. A typical worker’s employment contract is for 2080 hours of work a year. Source of private employer benefit costs: “Employer Costs for Employee Compensation for the Regions – March 2018,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor, at https://www.bls.gov/regions/southwest/news-release/employercostsforemployeecompensation_regions.htm.



Liv Finne is the Director of the Center for Education at Washington Policy Center. She is the author of *An Option for Learning: An Assessment of Student Achievement in Charter Public Schools*, which in 2011 reignited the charter school debate in Washington state. She wrote “*Why parents will love charter schools*,” “*Why teachers will love charter schools*,” and many other publications during the 2012 public debate on Initiative 1240, the nation’s first charter school initiative. When charter schools came under attack from the state teachers union, she wrote “*Analysis: Why the state supreme court ruling against charter schools is wrong*.” She is also the author of Washington Policy Center’s widely-read education blog, and of Washington Policy Center’s Education Reform Plan: *Eight Practical Ways to Improve Public Schools*. Liv holds a law degree from Boston University School of Law and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Wellesley College. She retired from civil litigation practice to raise two children and work as business partner for a small business she owns with her husband.

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rewards seniority, not merit nor value to students. For example, under this system an older elementary physical education teacher can make \$90,000 a year, while a young high school physics teacher can make only \$45,000.

Teacher pay is also limited by the current school district system, which hires on average one non-teacher for every teacher. In Seattle Public Schools, for example, only 49 percent of employees are teachers.⁹

Washington Policy Center recommends discarding the rigid wage ladder, and doubling the pay of the best teachers.¹⁰

Conclusion

Teachers deserve to receive reasonable compensation for their important work of educating children. Far from being “unfair,” state-reported data shows teachers already receive nearly double the pay that typical Seattle taxpayers receive.

Unfortunately, public financial data and the spike in school spending since 2008 indicate that for WEA union executives more money is never enough. Receiving higher pay, more benefits, a shorter work year and greater job security than most workers would certainly meet the definition of “fair” for most reasonable people. In fact, teachers on average are paid more today than most of the taxpayers who help pay their salaries.

The WEA’s strike threats can only be accurately assessed in light of how much school teachers receive now. By any reasonable measure, the pay and benefits the public pays to the average school employee is more than fair.

⁹ “Seattle Public Schools, Adopted Budget, 2018-19,” Seattle Public Schools, page 219, at https://www.seattleschools.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_543/File/District/Departments/Budget/2019%20Budget%20Development/adoptedbudget19.pdf.

¹⁰ See Recommendation #4 from “Eight Practical Ways to Improve Public Schools, Revised Edition, 2012” by Liv Finne, *Washington Policy Center*, at https://www.washingtonpolicy.org/library/docLib/Dec._2008_Education_Reform_Plan.pdf.