

POLICY NOTE

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

By Liv Finne, Director, Center for Education

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Key Findings

1. Teachers in Tacoma are paid on average \$63 an hour, including benefits.
2. The workers who pay their salaries are paid on average \$34 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 Tacoma Public Schools, where only 44 percent of employees are teachers.

Teachers in Tacoma already average \$63 an hour, while workers in Tacoma who pay their salaries average \$34 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 more 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.

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

Even in Seattle, officials see the union's money demands as unreasonable. As Seattle Deputy Superintendent Stephen Nielsen says, "We don't have the money to do that."²

Tacoma

The WEA union is demanding that Tacoma Public School officials provide double-digit pay increases to its members.

The WEA knows the state of Washington has already 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.

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 "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 budget of Tacoma Public Schools has grown from \$322.3 million in 2008-9 to \$470.6 million in 2018-19, an increase of 46 percent, from \$12,000 per student to about \$15,000 per student.³

Average teacher pay in Tacoma is now \$63 an hour, including benefits.⁴ Teachers in Tacoma can earn as much as \$125,000 in salary, plus benefits, or \$96 an hour.⁵

In contrast, the average Tacoma working family that helps pay these salaries makes \$34 an hour, including benefits.⁶

This chart illustrates this sharp disparity in pay between public school employees and average private sector workers:

Salaries and Benefits Per Hour Worked, Tacoma, 2017-18



Yet the current compensation system is still not fair to high-performing teachers, or to students. The best teachers are paid according to a rigid union pay scale which rewards seniority, not merit nor value to students. For example, under this system an elementary physical education teacher with seniority can make \$90,000 a year, while a young high school science teacher makes only \$45,000.

3 "F-195 Budget Overview, Tacoma Public Schools, 2008-9 and 2017-18," School Apportionment and Financial Services, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, at <http://www.k12.wa.us/safs/data/reportformatter.asp>.

4 Average teacher salary in Tacoma \$75,432, plus benefits. "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.

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

6 Average salary in Tacoma, Washington is \$48,568. Source: "Average Salary in Tacoma, Washington," PayScale, accessed August 2018, at <https://www.payscale.com/research/US/Location=Tacoma-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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Teacher pay is also limited by the large number of non-teachers that districts hire. In Tacoma Public Schools, for example, only 44 percent of employees are teachers.⁷

Washington Policy Center recommends discarding the rigid seniority-based wage system and doubling the pay for the best teachers.⁸

Conclusion

Teachers deserve good pay for their important work of educating children. Far from being “unfair,” state-reported data shows teachers already receive nearly double the pay that typical Tacoma 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 family 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 fund their salaries.

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

7 “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> and “F-195 Budget Overview, Tacoma Public Schools, 2017-2018,” School Apportionment and Financial Services, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, at <http://www.k12.wa.us/safs/data/reportformatter.asp>.

8 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.