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Pennsylvania's embarrassing teacher pay gap

By Colin McNickle

While Pennsylvania public education advocates and teacher unions constantly complain about inequities in school funding and the need for ever more money, the president of the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy says gross differences in teacher salaries have been given short shrift.

"The issue of huge pay disparities ought to make social justice-, union-advocate legislators from the rich districts very uneasy," says Jake Haulk, president of the Pittsburgh think tank (*in Policy Brief Vol. 17, No. 44*). And there are steps that should be considered to remedy the problem, he adds.

Calling the teacher pay gap among the commonwealth's districts "astounding," Haulk says the current school funding system and past iterations cannot address such disparities in any meaningful way.

"Teacher pay disparities arise primarily as a result of the wealth and income differences that determine the tax bases across the state's 500 school districts," says Haulk, noting teacher pay also differs to varying degrees based on cost-of-living variables and years of experience.

And even though the commonwealth provides most of the money spent by poorer districts and a relatively small share of revenue per student for wealthy districts, "the teacher pay gap among the highest-paid and lowest-salary districts are enormous nonetheless," he notes.

To wit, and based on state Department of Education data for the 2016-17 school year, Pennsylvania's average teacher salary was \$66,265. Out of 500 districts, 184 had pay levels at or above the statewide average while 316 were below the average. The average of the former was \$73,802, the average of the latter was \$57,864. That represents a gap of \$15,938, or 27.5 percent, Haulk notes.

There were 56 lower-salary districts with average pay that ranged from 20 percent (\$53,000) to 40 percent (\$35,720) below the all-district average, he adds.

Haulk found the most extreme pay gap between the Lower Merion school district, which raises the most per-student revenue from local taxpayers and pays teachers an average of \$99,235, and the Turkeyfoot Valley Area district, where teachers averaged \$35,720.

That means Lower Merion teachers were paid 2.7 times more than Turkeyfoot Valley teachers (and a commensurately larger benefit package), the think tank scholar notes.

Then there's this metric: Pennsylvania's top 10 teacher pay districts had an average salary of \$92,382 that would rank far higher than any state's average pay. But the lowest 10 teacher pay districts had average salaries of \$43,649, ahead of only Mississippi and South Dakota.

"The teachers at the top 10 pay districts earn 2.11 times more than the teachers in the 10 lowest salary districts," Haulk says. That is, the top 10 earned \$2.11 for each \$1 paid to the bottom 10. A comparison of the top 25 to bottom 25 districts shows the ratio is \$1.90-to-\$1.

And, interestingly, Haulk found several of the highest-paying districts, and some paying well above average, are not in wealthy areas. Among those in Western Pennsylvania – Plum (\$81,075); Indiana Area (\$83,148); Armstrong County (\$73,246); Belle Vernon (\$74,324); and United, Indiana County (\$70,573).

"Clearly, the disparities in teacher pay across Pennsylvania school districts are astounding," Haulk says. "And yet the teacher unions are virtually silent regarding this embarrassment."

Haulk notes that during contract bargaining, teacher unions (organized by district) regularly use salary and benefits in nearby districts with higher pay to justify higher compensation.

"But why do we not hear more from the statewide union leadership and the pro-teacher union legislators about the egregiously large pay gap that exists between mostly wealthier schools and poorer area schools?" Haulk asks.

The Allegheny Institute president says it's one thing for per-student revenue to be 35 percent higher in the top 25 pay districts compared to the lowest 25. But for teacher pay to be almost twice as high borders on scandalous.

"Where is the outcry from the Pennsylvania State Education Association and the Pennsylvania Federation of Teachers that purportedly represent teachers across the commonwealth?" Haulk asks.

And, for that matter, while it's easy to understand why legislators representing higher teacher pay districts sit on their hands – they don't want to rile the teacher unions – Haulk asks where the outcry is from legislators representing those low-pay districts.

Haulk says a number steps should be considered to remedy teacher pay disparities. Wealthy districts could be given the option of becoming independent, eschewing state financial support -- becoming financially independent though still required to meet state academic standards.

Another option could be staying in the state system but freezing or reducing per-pupil expenditures over several years until they reach parity with the statewide average.

“Unless this scheme, or something similar, is adopted, the wide disparities in teacher pay and per-student funding will persist and even get worse,” Haulk says. “At some point, teacher union bargaining will have to be done on a statewide basis to avoid the situation where district unions ratchet-up costs by using other districts’ pay as bargaining chips.”

Colin McNickle is a senior fellow and media specialist at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy (cmcnickle@alleghenyinstitute.org).

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<p>Allegheny Institute for Public Policy 305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.* Suite 208* Pittsburgh PA 15234 Phone (412) 440-0079 * Fax (412) 440-0085 E-mail: aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org</p>
