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Just the teacher facts

ANTHONY DAVIES & JAMES R. HARRIGAN | Saturday, July 29, 2017, 9:00 p.m.



Stephanie Strasburg | Trib Total Media

Trib photo

Politicians know that if you repeat something often and earnestly enough, people will come to accept it as true. This is a lesson that has not been lost on Pennsylvania's teachers, many of whom have presented themselves as overworked and underpaid for so long that taxpayers no longer question the assertion.

The facts, however, are a matter of public record. And they tell a different story.

According to the 2015 Pennsylvania Department of Education database, the median salary for the 51,164 full-time, non-special-ed elementary school teachers in Pennsylvania is \$62,765. Yes, that means that half of Pennsylvania public school teachers make less than that amount. But it also means that half make more.

By comparison, the median wage among Pennsylvania workers in general is \$36,670. On the surface, public school teachers are doing quite well relative to their fellow Pennsylvanians.

Below the surface, it turns out they are doing even better. Statewide, the median salary for all workers with bachelor's degrees is about \$47,000, versus \$56,463 for similarly educated public school teachers. Public school teachers with graduate degrees have a median salary of \$68,174, which is around \$4,000 higher than that of Pennsylvania graduate degree holders in general. And this last group includes doctors, lawyers, and college professors.

The assertion that Pennsylvania teachers are poorly paid doesn't pass the laugh test.

But what of being overworked? To be sure, teachers have difficult jobs to which they are dedicated. But that is not the issue. The question is whether they work more or harder than everyone else.

Subtracting a two-week paid vacation, a typical full-time hourly worker puts in 2,000 hours during the year, and a typical salaried worker puts in almost 2,500. How does that compare to teachers? To account for morning preparation and after-school activities, assume the typical teacher works 10 hours per school day. To account for conferences, training days and the like, assume 200 work days per year, not the 180 days schools are required to be open. That puts teachers at 2,000 hours per year — the same as full-time hourly workers and less than salaried workers, neither of whom have the job security of tenure.

It turns out that teachers do better still after their careers are over. According to state pension fund rules, a teacher with 35 years of service could be eligible for an annual pension payment of around 78 percent of the average of his last three years' salaries. The median teacher earns roughly \$79,000 per year in those last three years. This yields an annual pension of around \$62,000, plus another \$18,000 in Social Security retirement benefits for a total of \$80,000 per year.

Comparatively, the median U.S. retired household (age 65 to 74) has an annual income, including Social Security retirement benefits, of just over \$47,000. But, the median retired household has 1.65 people living in it. On a per-person basis, the median U.S. retiree has an annual income of around \$29,000.

Whether teachers deserve higher pay is a worthy question. But if they do, it would be because they are producing exceptionally educated and skilled students. It would not be because they are overworked and underpaid — no matter how many times that claim is repeated.

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