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For the Love of the Profession: Teacher Salaries in Maine

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Educating children remains a top priority of most Americans. Although people agree on the importance of high quality schools, obtaining sufficient funding to sustain the educational system is often difficult. This lack of support is especially apparent when examining teacher salaries. Although teachers are our most valuable assets, too often, they are not being compensated for their contributions to quality learning environments. Consequently, it has become more difficult to convince the "best and brightest" individuals to pursue careers in this field, which is evident in the problems of recruiting and retaining teachers in the state of Maine. An examination of the current status of teacher salaries in Maine compared to other professions speaks to this issue.

Based on statistics provided by Maine's Department of Education (1998-1999), the average starting salary of teachers in the state is \$22,513. After five years of experience, the average wage increases to \$25,952. Fortunately, these numbers can improve with more advanced education. Starting teachers with a master's degree earn on average, \$24,962; after five years of teaching, that pay is raised to \$29,044. In comparison though, physicians with three to five years of experience earn \$204,170 (Goldberg, 1999). Data from the 1997 Maine Department of Labor indicate that the average teacher salary (across experience levels) is \$17,210 for preschool teachers, \$30,040 for kindergarten teachers, \$32,620 for elementary school teachers, and \$31,750 for secondary school teachers. Other professions that require similar amounts of training receive much greater compensation; computer professionals earn between \$25,350 (for programmer aides) to \$46,380 (for systems analysts). Similarly, engineers' salaries range between \$45,250 and \$53,580 depending on area of specialization. Furthermore, it is possible to earn comparable salaries (to teachers) in jobs that require much less formal education. For example, construction workers earn \$22,500 on average, while skilled laborers such as electricians, drywall installers, and brick masons are paid considerably more. Interestingly, bus drivers were paid an average wage of \$22,710 in 1997, although school bus drivers only received \$19,690 (Maine Department of Labor). While this discrepancy might be due to the differential work schedules of these individuals, it still seems to imply that working with children is somehow less valued. In general, these numbers paint a bleak picture for individuals interested in pursuing teaching as a career.

Furthermore, obtaining an education is not cheap; in 1996-1997, the annual costs for public colleges averaged \$6,534, while private colleges totaled \$18,071. To pay for these rising expenses, increasing numbers of students are acquiring student loans. Recent statistics from the U.S. Department of Education indicate that nationally approximately 38% of students are reliant on loans, resulting in a total of \$4,041 borrowed per year. The average debt in 1995-1996 for undergraduates was \$12,000 at public institutions and \$14,300 at private colleges, producing monthly loan payments of about \$163. Master's degree students possessed an average of \$18,250 in loans, resulting in approximately \$250 in monthly payments (American Council on Education, 1997). These amounts (which continue to increase) represent a sizable percentage of teachers' starting salaries.

Most people who choose to become educators acknowledge that they will “not become rich”; rather they report that they work for the love of the profession. Nonetheless, there is an important distinction between “becoming rich” and earning enough money to live. A recent article in the Bangor Daily News (Seavey, November 1, 1999) suggests that the current salaries earned by new teachers in the state may not be sufficient for survival. A study entitled “Getting by in 1999: Basic Needs and Livable Wages in Maine” conducted by Christopher St. John and Lisa Pohlmann at the Maine Center for Economic Policy shows that the minimum annual salary “just to get by” is \$17,750 for a single individual and \$23,732 for a single parent with one child. Comparing these numbers to the starting salaries earned by teachers demonstrates that an unmarried teacher will barely be able to afford basic expenses such as food, rent, and utilities (and a single parent will be below this threshold). When you add the additional expense of student loan payments, which become due six months after graduation, it is easy to see why many teachers become frustrated and simply cannot afford to teach in Maine. In sum, it is unfair to expect well-educated, intelligent people to continue to seek out jobs as teachers. Despite people’s genuine interest in contributing to children’s welfare in the state, teachers cannot afford to do so at the expense of their own livelihood.

Goldberg, J.H. (1999, September 20). Doctors’ earnings make a stride. Medical Economics.

