

Problems with North Carolina Teacher Pay: Unionization and the Solution to Years of Inequity

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Introduction

In what world does 80.8 cents equal a dollar? This is the reality that teachers have dealt with in their profession for many years. According to the Economic Policy Institute, public high school educators in the United States earned 19.2% less than other collegiate-educated workers. This issue is extremely prevalent in the state of North Carolina. Many factors contribute to the issues of teacher pay in North Carolina, such as cost of living, and place of residence heavily contribute to the disproportionate gap in pay. North Carolina is a non-unionized state. Many of the issues with teacher pay stem from the lack of teacher unions. To fix this current flaw in teacher pay, I propose that North Carolina legislators ratify the right-to-work law and make North Carolina a unionized state so that teacher unions can lobby to accommodate for teachers in North Carolina public schools.

North Carolina is weak in terms of teacher pay. While the projected average salary is \$54,000, there is an air of misinformation and hyperbole in that statement. The main issues present within North Carolina's legislation of teacher pay are the lack of master's and doctoral benefits and the lack of compensation for experienced educators. Due to these issues, I suggest North Carolina become unionized and abolish the right-to-work laws. Unionization has proven to help teachers establish teacher pay unions in other states and diminish the gap between the top 10%. With the rapid decrease in teacher retention, these issues must be taken seriously to continue educating the younger generation.

North Carolina Wage Weakness

As a state, North Carolina is trailing in teacher pay and teacher benefits. One of the leading factors is that

North Carolina is a non-unionized state. According to Lichtenstein's *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*, "States with labor unions work to improve conditions for workers that promote individual, family, and community well-being" (Hagedorn et al. 2016, p.989-995). "Only 3.1 percent of the employed population of North Carolina are members of unions" (Stacker, 2021). The reason for this is North Carolina is a right-to-work state. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, "A 'right-to-work' state is a state that has enacted legislation that guarantees that no individual can be forced as a condition of employment to join or pay dues or fees to a labor union." Justia, a website specializing in legal information retrieval, stresses that right to work doctrines allow employees to have the choice of membership, but also in turn "prevents union security between employers and unions." This lack of security is one of the leading causes for low union membership in North Carolina. The lack of security pushing residents of North Carolina away from unions is inadvertently taking them away from benefits of improved working conditions, higher pay, job security, and reduced discrimination in the workplace.

Teacher Salary in North Carolina

In North Carolina, teachers make an average of about \$54,000 a year (Pogarcic, 2021). According to ZipRecruiter, "the average salary in North Carolina is \$54,247 a year." Typically, most state employees are paid on payment plans. These payment plans outline a minimum and maximum salary with different levels of knowledge outlining the increased salaries (North Carolina Office of Human Resources, 2018). Instead of aligning teacher wages on the same scale, teacher wages in North Carolina are based on a salary schedule. According to the Del Norte Unified School District:

A salary schedule (also known as a pay scale) is a system that determines how much an employee is to be paid as a wage or salary, based on one or more factors such as the employee's level, rank, etc.

This schedule has teacher salaries starting at 35,000 with their first year of teaching. These salaries continue to grow with each year of experience, ultimately leaving teachers with twenty-five or more years of experience at \$52,000. These salaries can be bolstered with master's or doctorate degrees but only amount to about \$5,200-7,700 more annually. Master's and doctorate degrees are very expensive. According to the Education Data Initiative, the average cost of a master's degree is about \$66,340; doctorate degrees are about \$114,300 (Hanson, 2021). More specifically, master's degrees in education are about \$55,200, and doctoral degrees clock in at around \$86,298 (Hanson, 2021). With North Carolina teacher pay, the cost of a higher education degree is about double or triple the compensation they receive. Due to these numbers, many teachers are falsely led to teach in North Carolina with a promise of a salary higher than the scheduled pay indicates. North Carolina promotes an average salary of \$54,000, and puts our state in a position where the majority of teachers are paid about \$2,000 under the average of the state. We can solve the issues of underpaid educators and below average state pay by becoming a unionized state. Becoming a unionized state would allow for teacher unions to appropriately advocate for higher teacher pay and ultimately call out North Carolina legislation for their inconsistency in presented salary information.

Non-Union States vs. Union States, Cost of Living and Effect on Teacher Pay

Cost of Living is a vital factor in teacher pay among states. According to the Consumer Price Index (2022), "the average yearly spending on all consumer units was \$61,334." There is a stark contrast between states with established labor unions and those whose laws are right-to-work. According to the indexes posted by the Missouri Economic Research and Information Center, the cost-of-living index in non-Unionized states is about 5% less than the national average or about \$58,268 annually. The cost of living in the Unionized states is

about 1.6% above the national average or about \$62,315 annually. The cost of living may be higher in the unionized states, but they also have a higher average teacher pay. According to the salaries posted by the National

Figure 1: Bachelor's Degree Salary Schedule

Monthly Salary	12 Monthly Installments	Annual Salary
\$3,500	\$2,916.67	\$35,000
\$3,600	\$3,000.00	\$36,000
\$3,700	\$3,083.33	\$37,000
\$3,800	\$3,166.67	\$38,000
\$3,900	\$3,250.00	\$39,000
\$4,000	\$3,333.33	\$40,000
\$4,100	\$3,416.67	\$41,000
\$4,200	\$3,500.00	\$42,000
\$4,300	\$3,583.33	\$43,000
\$4,400	\$3,666.67	\$44,000
\$4,500	\$3,750.00	\$45,000
\$4,600	\$3,833.33	\$46,000
\$4,700	\$3,916.67	\$47,000
\$4,800	\$4,000.00	\$48,000
\$4,900	\$4,083.33	\$49,000
\$5,000	\$4,166.67	\$50,000
\$5,000	\$4,166.67	\$50,000
\$5,000	\$4,166.67	\$50,000
\$5,000	\$4,166.67	\$50,000
\$5,000	\$4,166.67	\$50,000
\$5,000	\$4,166.67	\$50,000
\$5,000	\$4,166.67	\$50,000
\$5,000	\$4,166.67	\$50,000
\$5,000	\$4,166.67	\$50,000
\$5,200	\$4,333.33	\$52,000

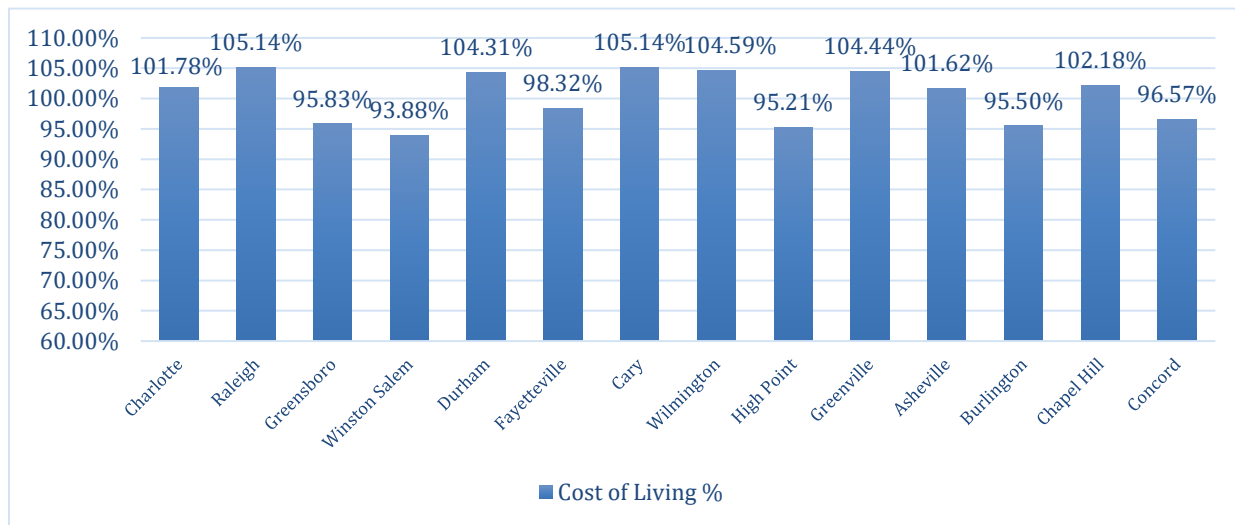
Education Association, during the 2018-2019 school year, on average, teacher pay in unionized states was \$63,726, while non-unionized states averaged \$54,015.

North Carolina Cost of Living and Benefits of Unionizing

As a right-to-work state, North Carolina has a lower cost of living than many unionized states. According to the Missouri Economic Research and Information Center, North Carolina is ranked 25th in the overall cost of living. With a standard deviation of roughly 3.8 percent, the majority of North Carolina communities have living costs that are within 3.8 percent of the average cost of living.

Figure 1 showcases the major cities and their percentages above or below the average cost of living.

Figure 1: Cost of Living in Major Cities in North Carolina



North Carolina could benefit from having teacher unions due to the lower cost of living. The higher teacher salaries in union-based states are due to collective bargaining from labor unions. In an article by William H. Baugh and Joe A. Stone, they "find that teachers covered by collective bargaining [unions] tend

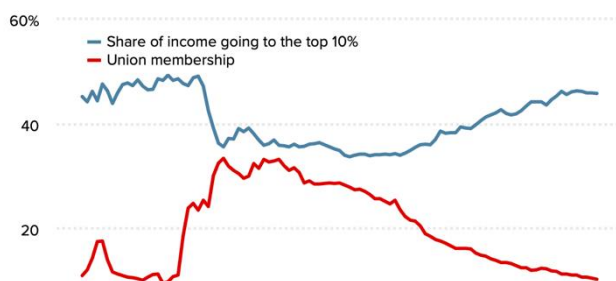


Figure 2: Income Inequality

to earn 5 to 12 percent more than those who are not covered (Eberts, 2007, pg. 181)." If North Carolina becomes a union state, the education system could see more benefits. Unions help to solve disparities between wage gaps as it helps establish income equality. Figure 2 showcases the number of labor unions and the share of income going to the top 10%. As union membership increased, less income went to those in a higher income bracket, and as union membership decreased, more income went to the top 10%.

Using statistics from the United States Census Bureau, Fox Channel 8 computed the wage that would position an individual in the top 20% of North Carolinians. Based on these numbers, it is reasonable to conclude

that civilians would need to earn \$263,026 each year to be in the top 10%. (Martichoux, 2021). The top 10% of earners earn almost 80% more than the average teacher salary of \$54,000. Figure 2 depicts how labor unions can assist in balancing this data. Unions help guard against wage theft, which is defined as "to be paid an effective hourly rate that is below the minimum wage" (Bivens, et al 2017). This costs workers over \$15 billion a year and pushes many families below the poverty line. Unions have ensured that lower-paid occupations provide a living wage. Substitute teachers and teacher assistants are underpaid in relation to the value of their contributions in the classroom. According to ZipRecruiter, substitute teachers and teacher assistants earn between \$9 and \$15 per hour. These earnings are significantly lower than the living wage of \$17 per hour. Unions advocate for these educators to have a higher wage so that

they may continue helping full-time teachers in the classroom. Legislation in North Carolina should allow unions to operate because of how they fix salaries for those with lower incomes and adjust the disproportionate disparity between those with higher earnings.

Fixing the Current System

Teacher pay has been a longstanding issue in the state of North Carolina. The largest problems that plague teacher pay in North Carolina include a lack of remuneration for highly educated and experienced instructors. This exacerbates the income disparity that educators experience compared to the average working

person. To fight this, North Carolina legislation should eliminate the right to work doctrine and try to restore unions across the state to assist teachers. The advantages of teachers joining a union include preventing wage theft, raising pay for substitutes, assistants, and full-time instructors, ensuring job security, and—most significantly—giving teachers the voice they have long yearned for. North Carolina legislation failed teachers by revoking their voice of change, and ultimately resulted in the disparities in pay most teachers see today. Establishing unions will give North Carolina teachers a voice again, allowing them to continue to educate the next generation for years to come.

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