Show Me the Money

Media coverage, ongoing teacher strikes, and presidential candidates on the campaign trail point out the harsh reality when it comes to teacher pay: In many parts of the country, it’s not what it should be.

AST SEPTEMBER, TIME MAGAZINE ran a story called “I’m a Teacher in America.” Focused on teacher pay, the issue offered three different covers, each featuring a photo of a current teacher and a few lines of text explaining what that teacher was doing to stretch paychecks and make ends meet. There were second jobs, renting small apartments — even donating blood plasma to cover an electric bill. Inside, the story further documented the financial reality for many public school teachers across the country: skipping doctor visits, ignoring broken teeth, stretching out $20 for spending money after bills are paid, driving with a broken windshield or calling in sick when the car is out of gas, praying that the aging car battery holds up a bit longer, missing out on a friend’s wedding, not registering a kid for Girl Scouts because there’s a fee. Not having kids at all because they are so expensive.

Some of these scenarios might seem extreme — and they certainly aren’t the reality for all 3.2 million teachers working in public schools across America, especially in areas where school-based jobs are the most steady jobs in town — but these scenarios point to a problem that casts a dark shadow over this country: Given what’s at stake, teacher salaries are not what they should be. Not by a long shot. In fact, accounting for inflation, teachers are actually making less than they used to, despite a growing and more diverse student population and higher-than-ever expectations for what students should be achieving.

Perhaps it’s no wonder then that there have been nearly a dozen teacher strikes in cities and states across the country since the beginning of 2018, starting with West Virginia’s Red for Ed walkout. In places like Arizona, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Washington, California, and, more recently, Denver and West Virginia (again), teachers and supporters took to the streets, pushing for a range of demands: smaller class sizes; more nurses, counselors, and support staff; less severe disciplinary measures for students; overall school budget increases. There was also one common ask that was part of nearly every protest: higher pay for teachers.

The public, for the most part, has been supportive. A 2018 PDK poll found that 73 percent of Americans surveyed said they would back up teachers in their community if they went on strike for more money, and 78 percent of public school parents — those most affected by walkouts — agreed. The poll also found that 66 percent believe that teacher salaries in their communities are too low; just 6 percent say they are too high.

So if a huge majority of people surveyed say they support higher salaries for teachers and would get behind them if they walked out over the issue, then why are teachers forgoing doctor’s visits and donating blood plasma just to stay afloat? If lifting teacher pay has become a major talking point on the presidential campaign trail by Democratic hopefuls like Kamala Harris, Beto O’Rourke, and Elizabeth Warren, then why are teachers in 17 states, like South Dakota, Mississippi, Oklahoma, West Virginia, and Colorado, paid less than $50,000 a year on average and teachers in another 19 states paid in the $50s, according to the most recent figures released by the National Center for Education Statistics?

It’s a complicated issue, starting with the bottom line — school funding. Even though many states have increased K-12 funding since the end of the 2009 recession, including a 4 percent increase last year, according to the Center on the Budget and Policy Priorities, average teacher pay in 39 states declined between 2010 and 2016. The increased funding in some states has been used to pay down pension obligations, hire new staff, and rehire staff previously laid off, with teacher paychecks seeing little change.

But beyond bottom lines, there are also other reasons why pay has stayed low. ARIELLE ROCHELIN, ED.M. ’13, a fifth-year social studies teacher at Campbell High School in Smyrna, Georgia, says society’s perception in this country about what it means to be a teacher is one of them. Yes, as surveys show, the public generally supports teachers, she says, but often only in theory.

“Teachers don’t feel seen or appreciated. The words come out empty when there’s no action,” she says. “If people really valued and understood what it took to be a teacher, the pay would follow.”

Part of that understanding is that we think we know what it means to be a teacher because we’ve all been students, and what we think is that teaching can’t be that hard. It’s why it wasn’t uncom-
This last point, says Doris Santoro, an associate professor of education at Bowdoin College, contributes to the sense of demoralization she found when she talked to experienced teachers for her book, *Principled Resistance*.

“In many states, teachers are required to hold a master’s and a bachelor’s degree. Even where it’s only a bachelor’s, they also have to pass a battery of tests that are themselves expensive,” she says. “There’s definitely a sense of demoralization around the investment I’ve made, and I’m not able to pay my loans back or do the things we’d expect a middle class professional to be able to do.”

Especially when you see other people, in fields that require the same educational investment or even less, able to do more. Lecturer Eric Shed, director of the Harvard Teacher Fellows Program, experienced this as a young teacher in New York.

“I had a couple of buddies working on Wall Street when I was teaching. One guy, on the cell phone with his boss, was getting yelled at. I thought, ‘Wow, that’s a job I wouldn’t want,’” he says. “But on the other hand, another friend helped his mother buy a house. He was paying her mortgage. I couldn’t do anything to help my parents who, at that point, had fallen on hard times. Teaching doesn’t offer that. That’s unfortunate.”

Another factor contributing to low pay is that teaching has long been considered “women’s work” — and therefore a second, less important income in some households.

“When you look at the teaching profession in the United States, most teachers were, and still are, women,” Tarnowicz says. “Historically, women in this country have been denied the full social, economic, and political privileges that other groups have enjoyed. The field of education, labeled as a ‘female career,’ was sentenced to lower salaries to maintain the status quo. I guarantee if education had been labeled a ‘male career’ a century or two ago, we would not be having this conversation.”

That’s exactly what author Dana Goldstein found when she was researching her book, *The Teacher Wars*. Over time, as she told NPR’s *Fresh Air* in 2014, teaching — what she calls “the most controversial profession in America” — moved from being a male “profession” to one more suited for women.

“A lot of people are surprised to learn that back in 1800, 90 percent of American teachers were actually male. And today we know that 76 percent of teachers are female. So how did this huge flip happen?” she said. “The answer is that as school reformers began to realize in the 1820s that schooling should be compulsory, that parents should be forced to send their kids to school, and public education should be universal, they had to come up with a way to do this basically in an affordable manner because raising taxes was just about as unpopu-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current dollars</td>
<td>$31,367</td>
<td>$36,367</td>
<td>$41,807</td>
<td>$47,700</td>
<td>$53,700</td>
<td>$60,950</td>
<td>$59,950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant* 2016–17 dollars</td>
<td>$22,741</td>
<td>$27,741</td>
<td>$33,186</td>
<td>$39,083</td>
<td>$45,083</td>
<td>$51,500</td>
<td>$50,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*A constant dollar, or real dollar value, is an adjusted value of currency used to compare dollar values from one period to another.
lar back then as it is now. So what we see is a sort of alliance between politicians and education reformers in the early 19th century to redefine teaching as a female profession.”

They did this in a couple of ways that ultimately didn’t benefit women, she said. “First, they argue that women are more moral in a Christian sense than men. And they depict men as sort of alcoholic, intemperate, sort of lash-wielding, horrible teachers who are abusive to children. They make this argument that women can do a better job because they’re more naturally suited to spend time with kids — almost on a biological level. Then they’re quite explicit about the fact that, hey, we can pay women about 50 percent as much and this is going to be a great thing for the taxpayer.”

An education reformer at the time, Catherine Beecher, further cemented the low-pay-is-fine argument when she said that men working in schools would be better off employed in the mills, where they could earn a higher wage to support a family, while a “woman needs support only for herself” — a false assumption even then, Goldstein writes, with many working-class wives also laboring on farms, in factories, or taking on piecemeal jobs.

Even Horace Mann, another hugely influential education reformer of the time and the nation’s first secretary of education, glorified the female teacher. “As a teacher of schools ... how divinely does she come, her head encircled with a halo of heavenly light, her feet sweetening the earth on which she treads,” he wrote in 1853 in A Few Thoughts on the Powers and Duties of Woman, a series of lectures intended to “elevate the condition of woman.”

This take on teaching as a pious act best done by nurturing, halo-wearing females could explain why, even today, teaching is often seen less as a career for a well-prepared professional and more as a moral calling — a distinction often used as rationale for low pay, at least in the United States. It also dismisses the fact that teachers earn college degrees, many have advanced degrees, and all take ongoing professional development. The resulting teacher gap — the percentage teachers are paid less than comparable workers — even hit a record 18.7 percent in 2017. According to the Economic Policy Institute, “teachers in every state are paid less on average than other similarly educated workers.” States with the biggest gaps are three that saw walkouts this past year: Arizona (36.4 percent), North Carolina (35.5 percent), and Oklahoma (35.4 percent).

“I feel deep frustration when we classify this job as a calling,” Rochelin says. “You can understand that this is a special profession, a calling, but you can also acknowledge that it should be paid well. We should value it all the more for that reason.”

Teachers, she says, shouldn’t be shamed for wanting a higher salary. “The expectation is that you’re lesser a person when you’re making requests about pay when the stakes are so high. Aren’t you doing this for the children?”

Calegari felt that disconnect when she was teaching. “I thought, I have the greatest job in the world, seeing other people grow. It’s so fulfilling. The problem is, teachers are considered second-class citizens,” she says. “I would often go to a cocktail party and tell people that I’m a teacher, and they would say, ‘Oh good for you.’ No, it’s not good for me — it’s good for our society. I’m not doing this as a ‘good for you’ but because it’s incredibly vital.”

Tarnowicz says teachers often internalize this. “Many times I feel I am expected to make sacrifices because it has become the norm in education. It’s almost as if people say, ‘Well you chose to be a teacher,’” she says. “There’s a martyr complex in education. Who can take on the most afterschool activities? Who can craft the most engaging activities with all the bells and whistles? Who is reaching out to the highest percentage of families? These all require sacrifice, especially of time.”

He says he sees a parallel between these expectations and those imposed on mothers. “This idea of sacrifice is directly dependent on the gender norms we set in our society. These beliefs have been deeply embedded in our country’s culture and systems — including our education system. As a social studies teacher, I no longer believe in coincidences. You don’t see issues like this in the more traditionally male-dominated fields.”

Yuan says he teaches because he loves it, but that doesn’t mean any teacher should take a vow of poverty. (Beyond low pay, 94 percent of teachers spend $500, on average, each year for their own classroom supplies, according to a 2018 Department of Education Survey.) After graduating from the Ed School and after teaching in Texas, where he was making just under $60,000 a year, Yuan considered private schools or teaching abroad, where the pay can be much better, especially in countries like Luxembourg, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, and Spain. He decided to take a job teaching ELA and debate in New York City at The Equity Pay Charter School, a publicly funded, one-of-a-kind school that recruits highly qualified teachers and pays them $125,000 a year to start — yes, this is not a typo — plus bonuses after the second year. The school started in 2009 with the belief that teachers matter to student achievement and to attract the best teachers, you have to value and invest in them, starting with a professional wage.

“I thought, how can I make more money doing what I love?” he says. “We’re supposed to be an honorable profession. When I was at the Ed School, we held something called EdTalks. One thing I said was teachers shouldn’t have to make the choice between making a difference and making a living.”

Which is why many teachers take on those second jobs or find other ways to live. According to Education Week, nearly one in five public school teachers have second jobs during the school year, half outside the field of education.

Rochelin says she’s lucky she hasn’t had to find a second job (although she did become chair of her department, taking on additional work for $100 extra — a month). Her salary, just under $50,000 a year, is livable for the state of Georgia, she says, but barely. “It’s something I can make work, but I budget and I have a safety net with my family. But I’d like to get to a point in my life where I’m not living paycheck to paycheck. It’s easy to think sometimes that I could go into another career and make more money and not have to count every penny, and I’d be able to do things I’d like to do, like travel.” She says many of her colleagues have to supplement their incomes, taking on coaching jobs, tutoring, even orchestrating the school’s complex bus schedule.

HANNAH PANG, ED.M.’00, has been teaching math for 12 years at Sepulveda Middle School in the Los Angeles Unified School District and participated in the city’s six-school-day teacher strike in January. She says she’s not great at budgeting but, like Rochelin, has learned to be thrifty.

“I get by, by having the mindset that I need to be careful how I spend,” she says. “For seven years I had a roommate who paid rent that helped to supplement my income. She has since moved out, and I have noticed things being tighter financially after not being able to collect rent from her. I have dreamed of being able to change the cabinets in my kitchen and the floors in the condo that I own, so a few years ago I started putting aside money for this, but there is not enough to do this right away.”

Thinking about the future when you’re a teacher and living check-to-check is something Shen learned the hard way when he began teaching high school social studies in his 20s.

“When I first started teaching, I wasn’t tremendously materialistic, so I didn’t have a need for a lot of money,” he says. At the time, his family was also able to help financially if needed be. “These two things made the pay issue not a tremendous one. When I was 22, when I made $30,000 a year, when my rent was cheap, when I had a roommate, when I wasn’t thinking about a family, I was thinking, ‘You don’t take money to your grave. You look at the impact you had.’ In hindsight, being in my 40s now,” — and still teaching — “I’m starting to try to save for a house, and I’m still paying back my loans. It’s a tough trade off to ask teachers to make.”

It’s no wonder that in last summer’s PDK poll of 1,042 adults, including 515 parents of school-aged children, 54 percent said they would not want their children to become a teacher — an 11 percent point increase since the last poll in 2014. Inadequate pay and benefits topped the reasons why (29 percent), followed by student behavior (12 percent), and teaching as a thankless job (6 percent). JOSHUA STARR, ED.M.’98, ED.D.’01, president of PDK, told Education Week that these results are troubling.

“I feel like there’s a narrative that has been created about public schools in our country that is not helpful,” he said. “We can’t have it both ways. You can’t say, ‘Yeah, education is great, but I don’t want my kid to become a teacher.’... It’s problematic for our country.”

Yuan’s family felt exactly this way when he decided to go to Harvard — and continue working as a teacher. In his EdTalk, he recalled the day he got his acceptance email from the Ed School.

“I was ecstatic, and naturally the first person I wanted to call was my dad, and I did,” he said. “But I didn’t get ‘that’s my boy.’ No, not even a ‘good job, son.’ Instead, my dad had only one thing to say: ‘Why would you go to Harvard to be a teacher?’”

To anyone working as a teacher, the answer would be, that’s exactly why you go to Harvard, or any other college. As the research consistently demonstrates, going back to the 700-page 1966 Coleman Report, commissioned by the U.S. Office of Education, the most important factor in student performance — beyond curriculum, beyond the school building, beyond family experience — is high-quality teachers. A more recent Stanford University study found that teachers have higher cognitive skills, and their students perform better in math and reading, in countries that pay teachers more.

As Rochelin says, “My educational philosophy is we hire good teachers and leave them alone.” And follow-up with a paycheck worthy of their hard work.

And it’s possible to do both. As Ellen Behrstock Sharratt, vice president of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and on the board of the Teacher Salary Project, notes, continuing to pay teachers so low “is a public perception issue and a political will issue.” (Despite recent candidates talking about teacher pay on the campaign trail, the issue has been championed by politicians going back to the 1960s, when Richard Nixon and John Kennedy backed increases during their debates.)

But real action on this teacher pay can happen, Behrstock Sharratt says. For example, in Singapore, a country touted for high student academic marks, teacher pay was once low and the profession wasn’t highly respected, she says, until the government, realizing in the early 2000s that they needed a more educated population, got the public and politicians onboard, raised teacher salaries, and in turn made the field more competitive.

“They took all the things we talk about here in the United States and requested the money, got the money, and put a plan in place,” Behrstock Sharratt says. “It can be done if you have the political will.”