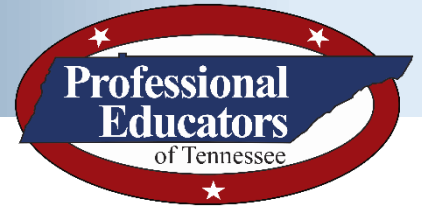


EDITORIAL

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Higher Pay and Higher Standards Belong Together

We can't raise teacher pay without raising the bar, and we can't raise the bar without raising teacher pay. That isn't a contradiction. It's the first step toward a solution.

After 17 years of teaching in elementary schools, I moved into higher education to prepare future teachers. I've seen the profession from both sides: the skills teaching requires, the pressure teachers face, and the difficulty schools have in filling classrooms.

Teaching is learned over time. New teachers need support as they develop classroom management, instructional judgment, and the ability to respond to students' needs. But schools that continually lose experienced teachers also lose mentors and expertise. In their absence, administrators often add procedures and oversight. That may help less-prepared teachers, but it can frustrate capable teachers who don't need micromanagement. The result is a workforce that is harder to recruit, retain, and support.

Pay is part of the problem. Tennessee's minimum starting salary for the 2026–2027 school year is \$50,000, a clear step forward. Since teachers typically work about ten months a year, some equate that salary to \$60,000 for a full year. And \$60,000 is certainly a respectable salary, but it looks less impressive when weighed against the demands of the profession. Teaching requires a degree, specialized preparation, licensure, and ongoing professional development, along with the daily responsibility for children's learning, safety, and well-being.

The issue is not simply how much teachers earn, but whether that compensation reflects everything the job requires of them. In many careers, people with similar education and skills can earn comparable or higher pay with less public scrutiny and fewer constraints on their professional judgment.

But compensation cannot be the entire conversation. If we want teachers treated as highly skilled professionals, we should expect professional standards: rigorous preparation, strong content knowledge, sound instruction, ongoing development, and evaluations that identify both strengths and areas for improvement.

Teachers who are struggling should receive meaningful support. When that support doesn't lead to improvement, districts must be willing to make difficult employment decisions. Not everyone who wants to teach is suited for the work, and earning a license should not guarantee a lifelong job.

That doesn't mean blaming teachers for problems they can't control. Measuring effectiveness is complicated: students arrive with different needs, experiences, and levels of support. Evaluations should account for those realities rather than tying a teacher's future primarily to outcomes beyond their control.

SUMMARY

"Teaching requires a degree, specialized preparation, licensure, and ongoing professional development, along with the daily responsibility for children's learning, safety, and well-being. The issue is not simply how much teachers earn, but whether that compensation reflects everything the job requires of them."

The point is to fairly distinguish between teachers who are thriving, those who are still developing, and those who aren't meeting the job's requirements. It is an important distinction.

Schools can't maintain high standards when they lack qualified applicants to replace an ineffective employee. A stronger applicant pool would give districts more flexibility to hire selectively and uphold high expectations. Better pay can help build that pool; effective preparation and accountability can help ensure students benefit from it.

I hear people argue that teachers deserve higher pay. I agree. I also hear that schools need better teachers. I agree with that, too. These goals don't compete. They depend on one another.

We should make teaching attractive enough for talented people to choose it, and then give schools the support and tools to select, develop, and retain excellent educators. That means valuing teachers' expertise—and expecting them to meet the standards that expertise requires.

We can't raise the bar without raising pay, and we can't justify raising pay without raising the bar. It is time for a solution-focused approach to this ongoing dilemma.

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