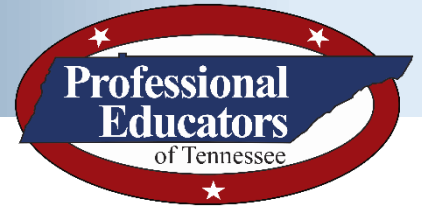


EDITORIAL

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Teaching Has to Be Worth Choosing

When I started teaching in the early 2000s, my district received 80 applications for each opening. Today, schools are asking a different question: How do we get people to accept the job?

I taught in elementary schools for 17 years before moving into higher education to prepare future teachers. From both sides, I've watched the profession become harder to enter and harder to remain in. The reasons are familiar: growing demands, shrinking autonomy, and compensation that often can't compete with other careers.

Teaching has also become more tightly managed. Standards and high-quality instructional materials can help students, but teachers are increasingly told not only what to teach but also how and when to teach it. That leaves less room for professional judgment—the very judgment teachers develop through experience.

Experience matters. New teachers bring energy and potential, but they need time and support to build their skills. When veteran teachers leave, schools lose mentors, institutional knowledge, and instructional expertise. New teachers have fewer colleagues to learn from. Administrators respond with increased oversight and scripted procedures, which can drive away the capable teachers who remain.

The cycle feeds itself: low retention means fewer experienced teachers; fewer experienced teachers mean more supervision; and more supervision makes the job less attractive.

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.

Starting pay is just one piece of the puzzle. In some districts, a teacher may earn about \$80,000 only after decades of experience and additional education. Graduate degrees can cost thousands of dollars yet add relatively little to annual pay. A \$20,000 degree that brings a \$1,500 annual raise takes more than 13 years to recover, before taxes or interest.

SUMMARY

"Today, schools are asking a different question: How do we get people to accept the job? The cycle feeds itself: low retention means fewer experienced teachers; fewer experienced teachers mean more supervision; and more supervision makes the job less attractive. We need to make teaching a career that people actively choose and want to stay in."

I now work with future teachers, many of whom are bright, capable, and committed. But teaching is a harder sell when it offers modest pay, limited autonomy, and intense public scrutiny. We can't expect people to accept poor working conditions simply because they care about children.

As fewer people enter teacher-preparation programs, districts have fewer applicants. In some places, hiring is no longer about choosing the strongest candidate from a deep pool; it's about finding someone willing to take the job.

We need to make teaching a career that people actively choose and want to stay in. That means substantially better compensation, stronger support for early-career teachers, and room for experienced educators to exercise their judgment.

Higher pay won't solve every problem, but without it, we'll keep struggling to attract and retain the people schools need.

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Natalie Beach is the president of Professional Educators of Tennessee.

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