

Alabama teacher salaries unchanged for ten years

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Alabama teachers' salaries have remained stagnant for ten years. In addition, the salaries teachers currently earn are worth even less due to steadily rising living expenses. When considering inflation, the average salary for an Alabama teacher is seven percent lower now than it was during the 1999-2000 school year. Between 2009 and 2017, the value of a teacher's salary dropped by nine percent against the rate of inflation.

In March, Alabama Governor Kay Ivey signed into law a 2.5 percent cost-of-living increase for the state's K-12 teachers. The raise, which will go into effect in October, marks the first cost-of-living increase Alabama's teachers have seen since 2008.

Amy Marlowe, the assistant chief of member advocacy and outreach for the Alabama Education Association (AEA), was quick to assure reporters for AL.com that the state's teachers appreciate the miniscule pay raise; however, she said that she doubted it would be "enough" for teachers, who have endured stagnating wages and low morale after years of attacks upon education spending in the state.

"I think teachers are a sleeping giant right now," Marlowe told AL.com. Had legislators not assured teachers that another raise would be granted in 2019, she said, "I think we would have had a hard time containing them."

Marianne Hayward, the president of the Jefferson County chapter of the Alabama Federation of Teachers (AFT), acknowledged the militant mood among the rank-and-file. Speaking to AL.com, Hayward speculated that the raise represented a political ploy by state lawmakers during an election year—lawmakers who have probably nervously watched news of teachers' strikes in other states. "I think we've been desensitized to think 'oh thank you so much for 2 percent,'" Hayward said. She noted a "strong

undercurrent" of discontent among AFT members. Between the low pay and the deteriorating working conditions, Hayward remarked, "They're going to reach a breaking point."

Hayward recounted many of the complaints common to teachers throughout the country: poorly funded schools, spending their own limited funds on classroom supplies, and a "lack of respect for the teaching profession."

She said that many teachers in the AFT are forced to work two or more extra jobs to pay their bills. "You've got some who do a lot of little jobs, like doing something for the church or working the concession stand at the ballpark. Then you've got the others who have to rush to leave school in a hurry to get to a Walmart job or some kind of retail job. And then when they come home at night, they still have to grade and be back at school at seven in the morning."

Amy Marlowe expressed similar situations faced by AEA members, adding that many of them are struggling to pay back student loans.

Earlier this year, as the state senate voted on the pay raise, Senator Clyde Chambliss told reporters that the raise had been "a long time in coming. It's been 10 years since we had a cost-of-living adjustment for state employees. That being said, we've had some difficult waters economically between then and now."

Chambliss' carefully chosen words tiptoe around the ugly truth of Alabama's political priorities, which is evidenced by the fact that this is the first raise teachers have received since the Great Recession. Alabama law expressly prohibits collective bargaining or strikes by teachers; the fact that even such a modest increase was approved by legislators who have happily shot down previous proposals for teacher raises signifies the growing fear that laws alone will not be enough to

stave off unrest amongst the state's educators, who must contend not only with low wages, but with savage austerity in school budgets.

In April, the Brookings Institution used data from the states where teachers have gone on strike to predict which states would most likely see strike action by teachers. Michael Hansen, the author of the Brookings Institution's report on teacher strikes, identified four key factors that have contributed to the strike waves: low average teacher salaries in comparison to the national average, reductions in inflation-adjusted teacher salaries since the onset of the Great Recession, reductions in per-pupil spending since the onset of the Great Recession, and state-determined salary schedules.

Nationally, Alabama teachers rank 37th for salary. It is one of 15 states in which a minimum salary is set by the state, which tends to keep salaries lower statewide. Since 2008, per-pupil spending has decreased by 21.60 percent. Of the states where widespread teacher strikes have occurred, only Arizona—where per-pupil spending has decreased by 36.6 percent—has had a greater decrease.

AL.com concluded its article with another statement from Hayward. Based upon the concerns enumerated by AFT members, she told the periodical, no single factor would likely be, in and of itself, the tipping point for Alabama's beleaguered teachers. "It's just going to be all these little snowflakes that come together that cause the avalanche," she said.



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