

NCTQ Square-Off:

Are Teachers Underpaid?

Two economists tackle an intractable controversy

Michael Podgursky vs Lawrence Mishel

Over the past year, two economists—Michael Podgursky, currently Middlebush Professor and Chairman in the Department of Economics at the University of Missouri-Columbia, and Lawrence Mishel, President of the Economic Policy Institute in Washington, D.C.—have been debating whether or not teachers are adequately paid, at least compared to other professionals with comparable training. The debate heated up with an article that Podgursky wrote for *Education Next* in 2003, entitled “Fringe Benefits” (<http://www.educationnext.org/20033/71.html>), in which he argued that when one took into account teachers’ shorter work year and workday, their average hourly pay was greater than that of comparable professionals. Podgursky also asserted that the most useful standard of comparison for public school teacher salaries—the salaries of private school teachers—was inexcusably left out of studies conducted by teachers’ unions.

In the fall of 2004, Mishel—along with his colleagues Sean Corcoran and Sylvia Allegretto—shot back with a study that vigorously disagreed with Podgursky’s findings. In *How Does Teacher Pay Compare? Methodological Challenges and Answers*, (http://www.epinet.org/content.cfm/books_teacher_pay) Mishel and his colleagues claimed that teachers earn

less than workers in comparable fields. They also claimed that teachers do have more non-wage compensation than other professionals, but that the difference in benefits makes little difference in comparisons of total compensation.

Mishel is joined here by his colleague Sean Corcoran in his responses to Podgursky.

After reading our scholars’ positions, tell us who you think has the edge—if anyone—by entering your vote in our online ballot. If you have any comments, we urge you to email us at jcastle@nctq.org. Particularly witty or informative comments will be posted on our website.

1. The biggest problem in trying to make pay comparisons between teaching and other professions is taking into consideration teachers’ shorter work year. Dr. Mishel, you assert that given this problem, that the fairest way to compute teachers’ pay is to look at their annual wages and then compute an hourly wage. You specifically state that one shouldn’t assume that all teachers consider it a benefit or a positive tradeoff to work only ten months a year. Dr. Podgursky, you assert that the fairest way is to use weekly wages, and that one of the reasons many teachers enter the profession is the increased vacation time. Actually, aren’t both of you



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right?

Podgursky:

In comparing compensation between two occupations, economists try to hold the amount of work time roughly the same. For example, if we compare the annual earnings of doctors to lawyers, the assumption would be that on average the annual hours of work are about the same. However, if we compare the annual earnings of public school teachers to other professionals, that assumption is not correct. The annual hours of work are very different. Public school teachers usually have contracts of around 38 weeks in length, whereas other professionals are on 52-week contracts. Thus the annual hours of work are very different for the two groups.

In my paper I used weekly pay for teachers while they are under contract. The Bureau of Labor Statistics also publishes estimates of hourly pay as well. I have used these in earlier articles. However, comparing the hourly pay of teachers and non-teachers just sets off an unproductive debate about the number of hours teachers work at home versus other professionals. I don't consider self-reported hours of work at home for either teachers or non-teachers to be very reliable. Thus I stick to something that can be measured objectively—annual weeks under contract.

Corcoran and Mishel:

We are pleased that Podgursky agrees that comparisons (which presume that teachers work fewer weekly hours, as he has done in earlier research) of hourly wages between teachers and other professionals are not particularly useful. As we discuss later, there's solid evidence that teachers work as many or more hours per week as other college graduates. We would also agree that comparisons of weekly pay are probably the best pay interval for comparison purposes, with one important point of contention: how to treat summers "off."

Economists tend to view teachers' summer months as a "compensating differential" for a lower annual rate of pay. However, as we argue below, there are reasons to believe that having a nine-month contract may be an economic disadvantage to many teachers (or potential teachers) because they are not able to find as much summer work as they want, or as much work at their normal rate of pay during the summer months as they might like. Also, many teachers are required to undertake professional development and prepare classrooms and materials during the summer. If so, a measure of weekly pay understates the pay disadvantage of teachers.

In addition to different evaluations of how to treat the summer months, Professor Podgursky's measure of weeks worked (needed to derive weekly wages from annual wage data) is different for teachers than for other professionals, thereby creating an apples-to-oranges comparison. His data on weeks worked are not based on 'contract' weeks but 'scheduled' weeks, which for teachers excludes time off for holidays and vacations. Professionals are largely considered to work 52-week years, which must include holidays and vacations (how else could they be considered to have worked 52 weeks?). Podgursky's claim that teachers' work year is 38 weeks long, with three and a half months 'off' in the summer, is just plain incorrect. The Bureau of Labor Statistics expert on the NCS data has acknowledged this difference, writing: "because the published NCS wage estimates do not reflect entitlements and the work years of teachers are so dissimilar from most other professional occupations, I would only use the annual salary estimates from NCS to compare teacher pay with the pay of other professionals."

2. Actually, it seems like teachers no longer take the summer off as much as they used to—that teachers who want to work usually can find work in their school district. How does the increased

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availability of summer employment impact each of your arguments?

Corcoran and Mishel:

We're not aware of any major changes in teachers' summer work patterns over the years. However, we believe there are several important issues to consider in regard to summers, all of which point to the difficulty of interpreting a teacher's summer as leisure time that can be valued (in dollars) at the same rate that she earns during the normal school year. First, it seems to us that many teachers—or potential teachers—might wish to work more than they now are able to during the summer months (i.e., sign a longer contract), although we wish there were some studies of this. Second, we know that teachers who do choose to work during the summer—at school or in a second job—are rarely compensated at the same weekly rate that they earn during the school year. According to the 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey, roughly 1/3 of K-12 teachers worked during the summer of 1999. Of those that taught summer school (about 14 percent of teachers), mean earnings for these activities were about \$2,200. Of those that worked outside of school (about 21 percent), mean earnings were \$3,500. Compared to a mean academic year base salary of \$39,680, the average teacher working over the summer earned only an additional 5-8 percent over her base year salary.

Finally, even when teachers elect not to take a second job or teach during the summer, they rarely have the summer "off." Most teachers are required to or choose to do a great deal of work during the summer months, whether preparing class materials or participating in professional development. A look at the work year reported by teachers in the Current Population Survey is suggestive. Many teachers—roughly two-thirds—report working a 50-52 week year. This may reflect a rise in teachers working during the summer (at school, or

in a second job), or it may simply suggest that teachers view their teaching career as a year-round job. In our view, when it comes to recruiting and retaining quality teachers, the perception of the profession's work requirements to current and prospective teachers may be as important (if not more) than any debate over contracted work time.

Podgursky's comparison of teacher pay to other professions is based on hourly wages (or weekly wages) and implicitly assumes that the shorter scheduled work year of teachers is neither an advantage nor a disadvantage. To the extent that 'summers off' is an economic disadvantage, then our comparisons of weekly wages and Podgursky's comparison of hourly or weekly wages understate the pay disadvantage of teachers.

Podgursky:

The vast majority of public school teachers do not work in the summer and there has been no tendency for that to change over the last decade or so. In 1987-88, 32.5 percent of teachers reported working for pay during the summer. In 1999-00 (the most recent available data), the percentage was virtually identical (34.5 percent).

Unfortunately, the SASS data reported by Dr. Mishel and his collaborators provide no information on the number of days worked by teachers during the summer, only whether they worked and total summer earnings. Of the 35 percent who worked, all we know is that their average earnings were roughly \$3,500. However, we do not know if they earned this in two days or twenty days.

Dr. Mishel opines: maybe the typical teacher really wants to work more hours in the summer at the school year rate of pay but such opportunities are not available. However, this is entirely speculative; he presents no evidence on this point. Perhaps it is the case that some teachers would prefer ten percent more hours for ten percent more

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pay. By the same token, other teachers may prefer ten percent fewer hours for ten percent less pay. For example, consider the many female teachers who take off part of a school year without pay to have a baby.

The bottom line is that teachers are perfectly aware of the fact that they have summers off when they choose to become teachers. Clearly, they prefer that combination of pay, benefits, and time off to their alternative options. Not surprisingly, that is why we find so many women with children choosing teaching at some point in their work lives.

3. Dr. Mishel, you developed a rather sophisticated approach and arrived at sixteen professions that you consider comparable to teaching, based on your judgment that previous efforts by Podgursky and others were unfair to teachers. Your list includes accountants, journalists, nurses, and computer programmers. Why is this new list fairer?

Corcoran and Mishel:

We have never said anyone's choices of comparison occupations were "unfair." The only comment we have made on other comparisons (including those in the AFT's annual salary report) is that the choice of occupations is usually arbitrary. Often, the choice is simply dictated by the available data. In Podgursky's recent comparisons he has relied on a comparison of teaching to other occupations that require a college degree (but no degree past a B.A.). This did not seem appropriate to us, as nearly forty-five percent of teachers have a master's degree, whereas only twenty-two percent of other college graduates are similarly educated.

In our recent book, we used data on the skill content of occupations to identify which occupations are 'comparable' to teaching. We did so by using some new data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) that measures ten varieties of skills or

job content (e.g. knowledge requirements, complexity, physical demands, supervision received) in 426 detailed occupations. BLS provided a total skill rating based on the federal job evaluation system; we developed an additional market-based rating for each occupation based on how these skills are observed to be remunerated in the market.

Based on these job evaluation and market ratings, we identified sixteen occupations that were comparable to teachers, including eight sizable occupations: accountants/auditors, reporters/editors, computer programmers, registered nurses, inspectors, vocational counselors, personnel specialists, and clergy. We found that teachers' weekly wages were 12 percent below those of these 'comparable occupations,' and have fallen considerably relative to these professions since the early to mid-1990s. That's a finding that we think shows up no matter what data one uses.

Podgursky:

The EPI report uses a set of job descriptors to define a group of jobs "comparable" to teachers. This exercise is similar to the notion of "comparable worth" that some feminist researchers took up a decade or so ago. The latter proceeded to compare "female-dominated" jobs to "comparable" jobs dominated by men and made analogous arguments for pay equity.

The problem is that there is little economic basis for either exercise. The EPI researchers conclude that occupation X is "comparable" to teaching. However, do you know any teachers who quit to become physical therapists or "forestry and conservation scientists"? I have never encountered an undergraduate student who said, "I'm thinking about becoming either a school teacher or an architect." They make much of the "objective" basis for their exercise. It is true that they use numbers, but these numbers are economically problematic.

What matters from an economic point of

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view is how people's choices change when relative prices change. If people buy more chicken when the price of beef goes up, we say that chicken and beef are substitutes. In that sense they are "comparable," not because they look the same or have the same nutritional value. Beef and buffalo may be more similar from a biological point of view than beef and chicken. However, if a rise in the price of beef leads consumers to switch from beef to chicken more than they shift to buffalo, the former is the relevant comparison.

Similarly, when the relative pay of teachers goes up, where do the new teachers come from (or what outflow is reduced)? The EPI researchers present no data on teacher mobility between occupations, i.e., the substitution rate between two occupations.

Another problem is that the EPI approach treats all teachers, regardless of field, as having the same "comparable" occupations. Surely the relevant comparative occupations for a high school chemistry teacher differ from those for a second grade teacher or a music teacher. We know that labor market conditions differ greatly by teaching field.

A number of very good empirical studies show that teacher labor markets are localized. Thus the relevant non-teaching opportunities (careers) for a chemistry teacher in NYC may be very different from those for a chemistry teacher in Springfield, Missouri.

Finally, the EPI researchers ignore what is clearly the closest substitute for public school teaching, namely, private school teaching. Survey data show that substantial fractions of teachers in either sector have experience in the other sector. As I show in my paper, the pay and benefits of private school teachers are far below those of public school teachers, even when we focus on teachers in non-religious schools that have a program emphasis like tradi-

tional public schools.

4. Most notably, Dr. Mishel, you assert that on average teachers work a longer workweek (43.9 hours) than the combined average workers in those sixteen professions (42.9). What evidence do you have that teachers work longer weeks than those other professionals?

Corcoran and Mishel:

We were struck initially by the unusually low number of work hours attributed to K-12 teachers in the National Compensation Survey (the employer-based data used by Dr. Podgursky), which found that elementary teachers work, on average, 36.5 hours per week and secondary teachers work 37.1 hours per week. In contrast, other white-collar occupations are reported to work about forty hours per week, or roughly 9 percent more than teachers. This gap in reported weekly hours is one reason that Prof. Podgursky's analysis of hourly wages vastly understates the teacher wage gap.

We found that the hours reported by teachers themselves in the Current Population Survey (43.5 and 43.9 hours per week, respectively) were much higher than those reported in the NCS. Teachers—or any workers, for that matter—may tend to overstate their own work hours when asked. But there is little reason to think that teachers are more likely to overstate their hours than other professionals.

We found that the disproportionately low teacher work hours in the NCS can be attributed to the fact that school district employers are asked to report 'scheduled' work hours. This ends up being the hours of the scheduled workday excluding lunch and breaks. The longer workweek reported by teachers themselves reflects time on site beyond the scheduled hours and work at home grading papers and preparing classes. In contrast, employers of white-

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collar workers typically report a standard forty-hour workweek, which is not very informative either.

To further investigate the apparent discrepancy in work hours between employer and worker-reported data, we consulted other available data on teacher work hours. In the Schools and Staffing Survey, for example, public school teachers report an average of 37.9 scheduled hours per week in school and another 11.9 hours per week interacting with students before and after school, planning, and grading. Perhaps the most persuasive data are the recently released Bureau of Labor Statistics time-diary data (based on detailed diaries kept by respondents) showing that teachers have weekly hours comparable to those of other college-educated workers.

Podgursky has been dismissive of hours data based on self-reporting. However, it seems far more suspect to rely on differences in scheduled hours, as Podgursky does. We think it is best to treat teachers as having the same workweek as other professionals, which is why we have chosen to compare teachers' weekly wages to those of other workers.

Podgursky:

On the contrary, I can think of a variety of reasons why teachers might overstate their weekly work hours compared to other professionals in a household survey. As I note below, the concept of home work time is very poorly defined, hence susceptible to manipulation and recall bias. Clearly many teachers feel that they lack sufficient status and recognition as professionals. Since their on-site hours are relatively short compared to other professionals, some teachers may consciously or unconsciously inflate the amount of home time they report as work in order to justify their desire for higher status. Or suppose it is the case that all professionals tend to overestimate their home hours of work for any particular task done at home. Then

any profession that has more tasks done at home will produce a greater inflation of hours. Alternately, the bias may simply be a function of the amount of time spent at home. Suppose on average all professionals claim that ten percent of home time is "work." If a lawyer works 60 hours a week on site and a teacher works 35 on site, there are simply fewer home hours to attribute to "work" for the former.

In any event, all of this is speculative—neither of us have reliable data on this matter. However, it is largely irrelevant to the debate about relative teacher pay. If we ignore differences between teachers and non-teachers in on-site or home hours of work per week and just focus on weekly earnings, the empirical story about relative earnings remains the same. In the BLS National Compensation Survey, the relative weekly pay of public school teachers compares very favorably with that of other occupations. Rank orderings based on hourly or weekly pay are virtually identical. The big change comes when you take account of the shorter work year of teachers.

5. Dr. Podgursky, you prefer to consider only the hours that teachers work on-site.

Given the particular work environment of teachers—no real office, no telephone, usually no computer—is it fair to only consider the hours teachers are in the classroom and not the time they devote from home?

Podgursky:

In order to measure something accurately in a household survey, the researcher needs to convey to the respondent exactly what he wants to measure. How much chicken did you buy last week? How many cars do you own? What is the highest level of education you obtained? However, I find measures of "home work" very ambiguous. Quite honestly, I don't know how I myself would respond. Certainly, if I'm in front of my home computer typing this response, that's work. But what about the time I am

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mentally composing the response while exercising on my treadmill? Is that work? Or is it half work and half leisure? What about a teacher who is working on her lesson plan while watching TV? How much is work and how much is leisure? Or suppose she's thinking about the next day's lesson plan while washing dishes? I just don't know what is being measured when we ask about hours of work at home. Hours of work on site are more objective and reliable.

Corcoran and Mishel:

First, while the measurement of work hours may be difficult (especially for some professions, like teaching), there is no reason to throw up our hands in frustration. There are systematic ways to measure work hours, as is evidenced by the new BLS time diary surveys. These surveys are based on a detailed accounting by respondents of what they are doing during the day (think of lawyers tracking their work every 15 minutes). Recent data from these time diary studies suggest that teachers work as much as other college graduates each week. Second, perceptions matter. How people feel about their work hours relative to other opportunities may determine their choice to enter or leave teaching. We would find it hard to believe that teachers perceive their jobs as being less time-demanding than the typical professional worker. Third, Podgursky is wrong to think that he has a measure of "work on site." In fact, the NCS measures the time that teachers are scheduled to be at work, less any time for breaks or lunch (employers report that professionals in other occupations work a forty-hour week and do not subtract lunch or breaks). Any time that teachers spend on site before school or after school working on school-related business is not counted.

6. Dr. Mishel, you state that the average fringe benefits computed for the teaching profession are misleading because schools don't pay into social

security. Can you explain what you mean?

Corcoran and Mishel:

The point is frequently raised that teachers have better benefits than other professionals and that this offsets any wage disadvantage teachers face. However, this contention is never accompanied by any evidence to substantiate it. We have examined the employer costs for wages and for every type of benefit for teachers and other professionals from 1994 (the earliest year for which data are available) to 2004. Unfortunately, the "teacher" category in the data from 1994 to 2003 includes all teachers, including university level (though elementary and secondary teachers comprise about two-thirds of this group). We were able to identify that there are some types of compensation that teachers have more of and some that they do not. For instance, teachers receive less premium pay and bonuses than other professionals, though they do enjoy more expensive health and pension benefits.

Teacher pay includes less in payroll taxes paid by employers because some teachers are not in the Social Security system. Overall, teachers do have a larger share of their compensation in benefits—20.2 percent, versus 18.6 percent for professionals. Nevertheless, since benefits are a small share of total compensation—about 20 percent—the small teacher advantage in benefits does not offset the teacher wage disadvantage much at all: we estimate that teachers earn weekly wages 14 percent less than that of comparable workers and that had we used total compensation (wages and benefits) rather than just wages our answer would be a 12.5 percent pay disadvantage. This is evident when we look at data that only includes elementary and secondary teachers in 2004. Our historical data shows that any teacher advantage in benefits has not grown since 1994 and therefore has not offset the growth in the teacher wage disadvantage over the last ten years or so.

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Podgursky:

Public school teachers are almost all covered by defined benefit teacher retirement systems that are very generous. As a consequence, we routinely see teachers retire in their late fifties. Unfortunately, the Bureau of Labor Statistics does not currently release data on public school teachers that would permit a direct comparison with private-sector professional workers on this matter. Data for health and life insurance, however, show that the benefit rate for teachers (9.5 percent of total compensation) is far higher than for private-sector managers and professionals (6.0 percent). See <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/ecec.pdf>.

I have argued elsewhere that we are badly in need of objective arms-length data collection on teacher pay and benefits by either the Bureau of Labor Statistics or the National Center for Education Statistics. This benefits issue is an excellent case-in-point. The Bureau of Labor Statistics collects vast amounts of data on the incidence and type of benefits workers receive in the private sector and in state and local government. Unfortunately, for technical reasons they do not release these data in a way that would permit public school teacher/non-teacher comparisons. Rather than speculating about this matter, we should have detailed data that would permit objective assessment.

7. You both used different sources of data to compute teacher pay. Dr. Podgursky uses a source of data resulting from surveys of employers. Dr. Mishel uses a source of data resulting from surveys of households, essentially the employees. Don't each of these sources have problems? How should this information be collected?

Podgursky:

No source of data is perfect. However, data on pay and benefits collected from employer payroll offices is far more reli-

able than self-reported household survey data such as that used in the EPI report. In fact, I show that the self-reported data on "weekly pay" used by the EPI researchers is seriously flawed and greatly understates true weekly pay for teachers.

Corcoran and Mishel:

We've already mentioned a number of the important advantages and disadvantages associated with each source of data. Employers can frequently provide much more precise measures of an employee's scheduled work time, annual rate of pay, and fringe benefits than can workers (rarely will a surveyed employee have knowledge about the cost of his/her benefits to the employer). On the other hand, workers arguably provide a better measure of their actual (or perhaps perceived) work time and actual rate of pay. For example, a restaurant owner might report his wait staff's hourly rate of pay to be \$2.50 an hour; his waiters may report a much higher (tip-inclusive) rate of pay. For purposes of comparing compensation, the employee's report is arguably preferred. As another example, a Wall Street investment bank might report its analyst's workweek as consisting of 40 hours; the analyst herself would likely report the (more realistic) 50-60 hours per week. If I'm considering a career in investment banking, I'm much more interested in the analyst's report of actual hours worked than the payroll office's report of scheduled hours.

For our purposes—and for anyone interested in how teachers' pay compares to that of other professions—what matters is relative compensation. It is on this point that the employer-based data falls short. As we argued above (and as the BLS has confirmed), the National Compensation Survey measures the work time of teachers fundamentally differently from that of non-teaching professionals. This discrepancy makes relative weekly or hourly wage comparisons based on NCS data fundamentally flawed and inappropriate. We argue that

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the household-based Current Population Survey—even with its higher possibility of measurement error—is preferred, as it does not systematically treat teachers differently from non-teachers. The CPS is the best source for understanding historical trends and identifying the teacher wage disadvantage by age and gender. We do not accept that Podgursky's work has shown the Current Population Survey wage data to be "seriously flawed" for use in comparing teachers to other college-educated workers. We have benchmarked the CPS weekly wage data to the CPS annual wage data and find that comparisons of teachers to other college graduates are quite reasonable. Last, we have used employer-based data to examine the fringe benefits of teachers and other professionals.

8. How reliable do you each consider the salary surveys put out by the AFT?

Podgursky:

I have argued that the teacher pay data collected by NEA and AFT are flawed and may not be reliable. Both surveys use estimation procedures for missing data that are not documented. By design, both underestimate actual teacher school year pay by omitting extra duty and various types of bonus pay. I have criticized the U.S. Department of Education for uncritically disseminating these data in publications such as the Digest of Education Statistics and have strongly encouraged the National Center for Education Statistics, the data arm of the Education Department, to start collecting and publishing objective data on teacher pay and benefits.

Corcoran and Mishel:

We would agree that, on the surface, the uncritical use of salary data reported by teachers' organizations that have a political interest in higher salaries and benefits for their members does not make much sense. That said, our own independent analysis of relative teacher compensation—using data which presumably does include supple-

mental and bonus pay (the Current Population Survey)—did not yield dramatically different findings than those of the AFT's recent annual reports on trends in relative pay. The data collected by the AFT on teacher salaries by state has been useful. Making these data more consistent across the states may require a legislative solution, something beyond the AFT's capacity.

We would also agree that the occupations used by the AFT in its salary surveys for pay comparisons are quite arbitrary, based on what data are available, and that they were perhaps even selected with an eye toward overstating the teacher pay gap. This is true of most studies that have drawn comparisons with other professions (the bias often works in the other direction as well). This belief in part motivated our desire to use BLS data to more scientifically (by letting the data do the selection) identify occupations comparable to teaching.

We'd certainly support improved and expanded collection of salary and benefit data. However, since it is critical that the data reflect the pay of non-teachers, it seems better to turn to the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the Department of Labor for these data: they have the necessary expertise. However, we'd be surprised if conclusions change much as a result.

9. You both acknowledge that the profession has lost much of its talent.

Speaking as economists, what would be your primary strategies for recovering at least part of the labor pool that the profession once had nearly exclusive access to?

Podgursky:

Actually, I do not believe that the situation is as dire as you suggest. It is certainly true that women who graduated from college 40 years ago had fewer choices than women do now and more of them entered teaching. However, those teachers have mostly retired. There is some evidence that they have been replaced by teachers

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who have somewhat lower academic skills relative to their non-teacher peers; however, the evidence on this is fairly slender. What we do have solid evidence on is the explosion in the number of female college graduates. In 1960-61 there were 282,173 baccalaureate degrees awarded to men and 211,584 to women. By 2001-02 the number awarded to men had grown by 95 percent to 549,816. By contrast, the number awarded to women grew by a staggering 251 percent to 742,084.

Thus, while non-teaching opportunities have opened up for teachers, the number of women with college degrees seeking jobs has expanded dramatically as well. Many of these college-educated women are choosing teaching as a career and many more would consider teaching at a public school at some point in their work lives if we made it easier for them to do so. That's why alternative route teacher training programs that permit talented career changers to enter teaching in an accelerated manner are so important. The New York Teaching Fellows provides an excellent example of a program that selectively recruits female and male career changers of high academic ability to become public school teachers in New York City. Similar programs are sprouting up in other states.

Corcoran and Mishel:

It's true that female college completion exploded over the same period that labor market opportunities for women improved, raising the possibility that the quality of teachers has remained unchanged over time (the "outflow" of top female graduates into higher-paying professions may have been offset by the "inflow" of a much larger pool of top female graduates). However, we disagree on the lack of evidence on this point. In fact, a portion of Dr. Corcoran's dissertation research (2003)—which received an award from the American Education Finance Association—found evidence that while the quality of the average K-12 teacher (as measured

by their own performance on standardized tests) has fallen only slightly since the 1960s, there has been a dramatic decline in the fraction of top-scoring female graduates who choose to enter the teaching profession—those graduates most likely to be lured away by growing labor market opportunities. We don't really know yet how the relative erosion of teacher pay over the last decade has affected quality.

While we can go back and forth on the appropriate measure of relative teacher pay, the evidence seems clear that the teaching profession has not been offering the type of compensation package that attracts the most talented graduates. In the early 1960s, women in the teaching profession often earned more than other female college graduates. Also, forty years ago college-educated women had few job opportunities outside of teaching. Today, the relative pay is worse and there are more competing alternatives. Schools are not able to attract talented teachers with relatively low wages and a work schedule that is compatible with raising a family.

As economists, I believe we have been too quick to wave our hands and claim that the traditional teaching work schedule, with its "summer off," is an adequate "compensating differential" that is appropriately offset by lower annual pay. While the short school year continues to be a selling point for some (there is rarely a shortage of applications for new teaching positions), it seems unlikely that this feature of the teaching profession is valued as much as it once was, at least to our most talented graduates. This is evidenced by women increasingly moving into professions that provide them with higher pay, longer hours, and longer work years. If teaching is to become attractive again to the most talented individuals, we must begin to think of the profession as a year-round job that must compete with other year-round jobs.

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Final Voting Results

Podgursky	59%
Mishel	36%
Neither	5%

READERS' COMMENTS

+ First I must clarify that, in Connecticut, starting salaries for teachers are well within the range of starting salaries of other professionals. A beginning teacher with a BA will earn over \$40,000 in our district next year. The subject of supply and demand was never discussed. When we advertise for elementary education positions, we receive hundreds of applicants. If we need a physics teacher, we are lucky to get any applicants. It would be nice if we could pay physics teachers (or special education or language teachers...) more so that we could attract these professionals. But we cannot. We must pay the physics teacher the exact same thing that we pay an elementary school teacher. If we could raise the starting salary for a physics teacher to \$70,000, we would have no trouble getting the teachers we need.

IF we paid elementary teachers less, less people would go into this profession and eventually their wages would increase as a shortage appeared. Not too many years ago when IT professionals were in short supply, they were receiving large salaries. More people went into that profession. Now many are laid off and salaries have decreased. The market corrects for the oversupply. When my son graduated from college with a degree in biology and went to work (not as a teacher), his starting salary for a full year was much less than a starting teacher would earn (in Connecticut).

I am always amused when I hear arguments about the value of teachers vs. the value of say, pro ball players. The argument being that teachers provide a

more valuable service so they should be compensated at a higher rate. I am not disputing that value; but again, supply and demand does not work that way. If it did, the bottle of water sitting on my desk would be much more expensive than my engagement ring. I need water to survive, the value to me is of a greater benefit to me than a diamond ring.

One final thought: using an accountant as an example, an accountant can work for the state or local government, an accounting firm, or a public corporation. Most professionals have other opportunities. This causes the markets to compete for their services. A teacher, without additional training, is not nearly as marketable and would most likely have to change professions (sales, banking, insurance). This also accounts for lower salaries.

+ The teaching profession is very difficult to compare with other professions, so perhaps we shouldn't bother. It is unique in many ways. Teachers (particularly those new to the profession) spend a significant amount of time developing lessons, preparing their classrooms, meeting with parents, tutoring, attending meetings/professional development and grading papers. Since most don't have much or any paid prep time, this is all unpaid work. Perhaps we need to think of teacher pay in a different light. A strong public education system is in the public good. It is vital for our democracy to survive and thrive. Teachers are the critical element in this equation. Their jobs are therefore more important than lawyers and doctors and other highly paid professionals and they should be paid accordingly.

+ Collective bargaining may or may not result in higher wages on average, but it is interesting that most of the professions mentioned as comparable are largely not unionized. But is average salary important? I would hypothesize

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that the possibility of earning very well at the top end is what attracts many to a profession. Medicine is an interesting example. A general doctor working at a public hospital does not do very well compared to the rest of his profession: maybe \$60,000 a year if he is lucky, \$35,000 if not. But extraordinary doctors in a profitable specialty can make millions, and graduates know that. Lawyers, architects and other private professionals are in similar situations. A junior associate at a B-grade firm will make mediocre wages at best, but a senior partner can do quite well. However, this system relies on offering "tenure" only after many years, and turning over a significant percentage of associates who do not make the grade. In contrast, teacher collective bargaining has led to a system in which tenure happens very early, seniority results in modest increases in salary, and merit is largely unrewarded monetarily. In such a system, there can be no "rainmakers," unlike in the other professions mentioned. However, there is great security. Raising the average pay 20% may attract some more people, but, under this system, folks who want the chance of being recognized monetarily and socially as being in the top of their profession will always have to look elsewhere under this system. I suggest that you will still attract the talent, or lack thereof, when you value early, meritless tenure over competition.

+ My experience is that good teachers work a standard 2,000-hour year in the course of the 37 or so weeks of a standard contract. Podgursky chooses to totally ignore work done by teachers at home simply because he is unable to quantify it. It is not hard to imagine teachers working 2 hours per evening and another 5 hours average on weekends. This gets you 2000 hours per year, without doing anything in the summer, and nearly all teachers do SOME teaching-related work (generally uncom-

pensated) in the summer. The problem is in getting adequate compensation to the good teachers who do put in the hours. There is no program which directs financial rewards to the best teachers. We need one.

+ Since neither side bothered to define "underpaid" relative to any exact standard, there was no winner. Clearly, it is a fact that public school teachers are overpaid relative to private school teachers. Clearly, it is a fact that many individual public school teachers may be underpaid relative to other professions that they could qualify for, where they would receive 52 week jobs, more annual pay but less benefits. So what? Both facts indicate that there is a market at work, in which individuals make choices. The argument I do not see made is that the quality of teachers recruited and retained under the present system is damaging the children. Is it? If not, the system is adequate. If so, will adding pay for the same teachers without changing anything else actually accomplish anything? I'd like to see who would win THAT argument.

+ I am a credentialed teacher, having entered the field in my mid-50s, after a career in industry. I'm also a retired U.S. Army officer. I'm now 60 and am no longer teaching. I gave it up because of the serious disciplinary problems in our modern schools and the dysfunctional educational system. Teaching is a difficult job, although not as tough as others I've had; it also has the potential to provide great job satisfaction, something like the military, where one will certainly never get rich. I agree with Podgursky. I also believe strongly that teachers cannot be compared to those in other professions. With notable exceptions, teachers are the least well-educated and intelligent of any group of so-called professionals in the U.S. It is no accident that SAT scores for those who major in education are

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on the order of 200 points below those in other majors. My daughter, a science graduate, would not dream of being a teacher: she is far better compensated, works with more intelligent people and is treated much better. Despite Mishel's dry academic prose, the fact is that many are attracted to the teaching business specifically because of the fact that they work 3/4 of the year; given this reality, their compensation is easily on par with other professions. Off-work hours? I'm not aware of any serious professional who works only 40 hours per week and does not take work home. I was required to be onsite for six hours [a day] as a teacher. This included lunch and breaks, as well as five 50-minute classes. 250 minutes = 4 hours and 10 minutes. Lesson planning, etc., could be done at home, lounging around in shorts. On an hourly basis (based on the traditional 2,080-hour year), I did very well, something on the order of \$35-40 per hour—as a new entrant. This was far more than new liberal arts graduates in other fields make. Another reason teachers should not be viewed as serious professionals is their strident and vocal support of their unions. Unions and strikes are not usually associated with professionals and it is clear that most teachers care more about pay and benefits than they do about their profession. Yes, it's a tough job and society has failed the teachers by providing an execrable work environment. For example, just once, I'd like to see teachers strike over the quality of the students. Then I'd know they were serious about their "profession." Until then, I won't agree with treating them as true professionals.

- + Actually both scholars are correct. If a teacher takes her job seriously (and I believe most do) the job is definitely underpaid. However, teaching (and this includes the college level) is a job where the employee can do the minimum amount of work and still remain em-

ployed.

Take college teaching. When my husband was a math professor, I knew of several tenured faculty who showed up for their six classes per week and then did little else. In K-12 teaching, there are those who show up for the "contracted hours" (8:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.) and then do nothing else. They do not prepare for class or grade papers. They work 180 days and that is it. Some of these people choose teaching precisely for this reason (lots of time to be with their own kids while earning a full-time salary). Others reason that they are not getting paid for the "extras" so they will not do it. They realize that by shortchanging their job in this way, they are giving themselves a salary (when hours are considered) that is higher than the school administrator's.

However, it is my strong belief that the majority of teachers spend approximately eight hours on campus and another one to two hours at home each night. Many spend either all day Saturday or Sunday getting ready for the next week. Summers are spent "getting enriched" for the next school year. In addition to all the time involvement, the average teacher spends between \$500 and \$4000 each year on books and supplies to supplement classroom materials. For these people, the salary and benefits are definitely not enough. Teaching is "joyful work" and many accept the low wages for the privilege of having such a fulfilling job.

So the answer to the question, "Does a teacher make enough money?" the answer would have to be "It depends...."

This is my fortieth year of teaching so I have seen both types of teachers.

- + Thanks for sponsoring this! I enjoyed it very much. I wonder about Dr. Mishel's comparison of average summer earnings for teachers to the average teacher salary

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(question #2). I think it's likely that the teachers who choose to work during the summer are systematically different than teachers in general, which would make this comparison misleading. In particular, I'm thinking that teachers who work during the summer are likely to be younger and therefore also have lower salaries-which would make the summer work more significant than what Dr. Mishel suggests.

- + The comparisons with other professions are where the arguments start to fall apart. From a customer's perspective, if I engage the services of an accountant or auditor, there is a letter of engagement that specifies exactly what services are to be performed, and there are articulated standards as to the quality of the work. If the accountant does not comply, I have the authority to take action - from terminating them to filing suit. I have no such guarantee with a teacher. They enjoy a degree of job security and freedom from personal accountability in their work that is unknown in most all of the professional world. They receive a virtual guarantee of lifetime employment after 3 years on the job, then complain that they are not compensated equivalently to a professional who literally earns his or her keep from one engagement to the next. Loved the debate, though.
- + Does Mr. Mishel have a close family member in the teaching profession? It is difficult to see how an unbiased researcher could otherwise make white black i.e. suggest that three months of complete discretionary time a year is somehow a disadvantage instead of a major selling point. When he says that some teachers do professional development during this time, he neglects to specify that it is completely voluntary and inevitably is undertaken to upgrade teaching status and pay. Here in Ontario, out of 6 and 1/2 hours on the school premises, teachers spend only 4 hours in the classroom, with no other supervisory chores, giving them lots of time to do "preparatory work" or marking. (No nurse can get away with spending 4 hours of her shift on patient care and leave after a couple of hours of paper work). Teachers would have to continue for two hours a night at home just to get up to the average work day and another two hours to achieve the typical professional's day. No mention is made of the fact that marking requirements of written work vary greatly depending on grade, time of year and subject starting with "minimal" for gym teachers and the early grades. Mr. Michel also ignores the pertinent fact that after the first year or two of work, most teachers just repeat the same lesson plans, recycle exams etc. It therefore remains a mystery just what they are doing during two hours in school but outside the classroom daily and additional self-reported hours of work at home? Mr. Mishel's omissions and credulous use of self-reporting show flabby research.
- + 1. I LOVE that you did this debate. The transcript is now probably the best article that exists on teacher pay. 2. Podgursky was like vintage Mike Tyson facing an overweight 10th grader - wasn't even close!
- + The results of your "unbiased" survey are analogous to asking for input on President Bush's performance at the Republican National Convention. You're asking a very specific subset of people for their opinions and the results will undoubtedly be not only skewed but labeled "research" and used. With that said, the one issue that jumped out at me in reading your (valuable--thanks) debate was Podgursky's profound and persistent misunderstanding of the worklife of the average classroom teacher. I'm assuming that his worklife is a mix of teaching classes, research, writing, reading and presentation, and he has some

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control over his teaching assignments and workload to juggle those various responsibilities. Teachers in the K-12 setting also are responsible for collaboration with colleagues to align curriculum, lesson planning (which, with the advent of near-universal technology takes more, not less, time), professional learning to stay abreast of new techniques and materials, and responding to student work (has Podgursky ever read 150 essays on "Silas Marner", written by 14 year olds-with the determination to give each of them constructive feedback that will lead to improved language skills?) The 30-something hours a week that teachers "work" are merely the time they're on stage and interacting with groups of students. To discount home and school preparation and planning time (and the 4-5 reported hours are modest indeed, for an accomplished teacher) not only makes his research faulty, it speaks to his underlying agenda.

- + Podgursky uses more reliable data and does not resort to speculation regarding the two largest points of contention: summers off and workdays. Mishel was on the defensive, used less reliable data sources, occasionally contradicted himself, and resorted to speculative anecdotes. He even went so far (likely by accident) to imply that teachers were not a group of "professionals."
- + Most teachers I know spend the summer preparing for class. In California and other high-cost states, the salaries offered do not allow teachers to be home owners and many people that I know are choosing higher-paying jobs in allied health so that they can afford to have a house.
- + Podgursky's comments clearly demonstrate his agenda - saying things like 'I have never encountered an undergraduate student who said, "I'm thinking about becoming either a school teacher or an architect."' , or 'This exercise is

similar to the notion of "comparable worth" that some feminist researchers took up a decade or so ago.' Podgursky's agenda seems to be clearly aligned with that of the neo-conservative right -- let's take America back to the 1950's, when there were no "feminist researchers," and women stayed home or became teachers. Let's face it - pay does matter, and teachers, as Mishel points out, are underpaid compared to others. By the way, I happen to know a person who is a school teacher AND an architect. Go figure.