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States, strikes, and teacher salaries

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Teachers' demands in strikes across the country have varied, but there's no question that low salaries are among the chief complaints. As the press tries to put these pay issues into a national context, it has almost exclusively relied on the [average teacher salary](#) in the state as the point of comparison. While useful, that data point can be quite misleading, as we'll explain here.

First, the landscape. Teacher salaries vary among districts in every state. In [14 states](#), including several of the 'strike' states, the state establishes a 'minimum salary schedule.' Another nine states set a single minimum salary for teachers, with all of the remaining states leaving pay entirely up to their districts. Still, even in the 14 states with state schedules, districts are allowed to use some local funds to supplement the salaries dictated by the state.

The average salary figures that the press is reporting have included both the state and district contributions—in other words, the actual salaries. However, these average numbers, while useful for providing a simple comparison point, obscure important differences among districts in a state. First, they mask how much lower, and indeed higher, salaries are in some districts in the state compared to the average. Second, the average masks what teachers earn over the span of a full career, depending on their district.

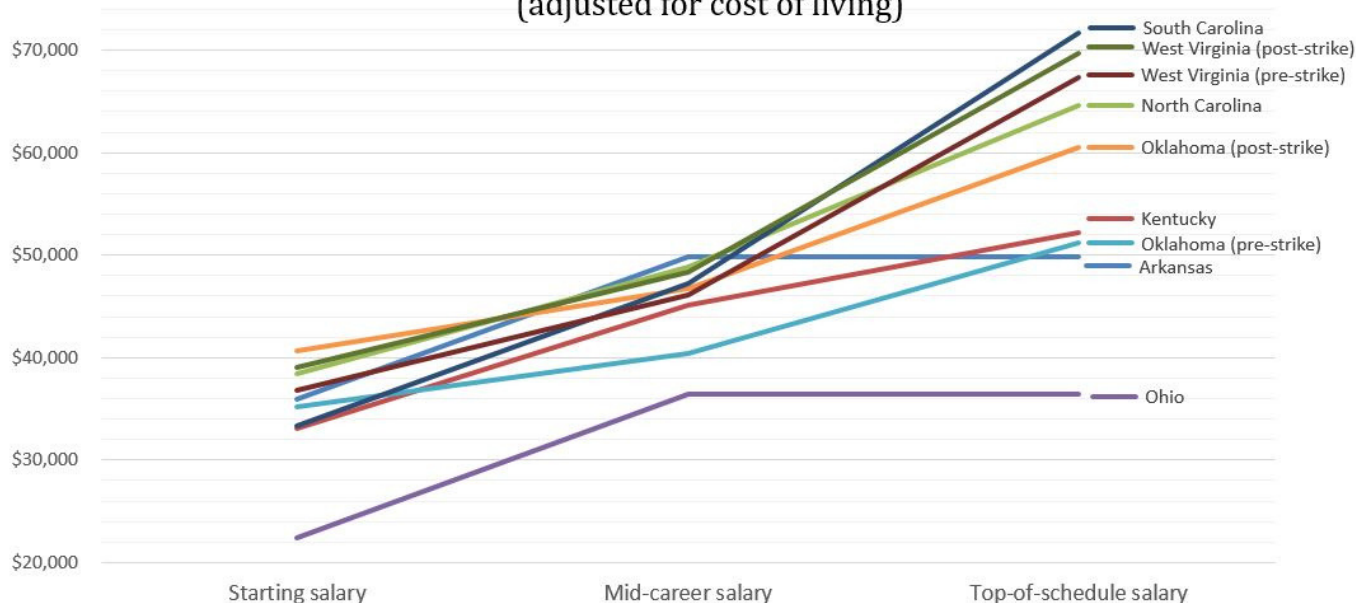
To provide some additional insight into what's motivating these strikes, we look at the salary data for 10 states¹ that make salary information available for all of their districts. These data allow us to look at what teachers in each district earn—not just the average in the state. Our sample includes Kentucky, Oklahoma, and West Virginia, all strike states.

What do states require districts to pay teachers?

First, it's useful to look at the role state salary schedules play in determining actual salaries. Here are seven states with a minimum salary schedule for teachers. Included are the changes that occurred after strikes were settled in Oklahoma and West Virginia. Each is adjusted for cost of living, but none of the data include what districts may be adding by way of supplements.

This chart makes it look like Ohio is at rock bottom, but that's not actually the case. None of its districts adhere to its schedule (probably because it was last updated in 2001).

State scheduled minimum salary across three career points
(adjusted for cost of living)²



1. Of the ten states we examine, [Arkansas](#), [Kentucky](#), [North Carolina](#), [Ohio](#), [Oklahoma](#), [South Carolina](#), and [West Virginia](#) set minimum salary schedules, [Illinois](#) and [Missouri](#) have minimum teacher salaries, but no state schedule, and [California](#) defers to districts to set salaries.

2. To adjust for cost of living, we used the 2015 state level [Regional Price Parity](#) produced by the Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Table 1 introduces the differences among districts in the same state. Look at the big variations in the percent of districts that do not supplement the state schedule (column two).

Table 1.

	Percent of districts that do not supplement the state schedule	Average district supplement for first-year teachers (range)	Average district supplement for mid-career ³ teachers (range)	Average district supplement for teachers with max education & max experience (range)
Arkansas	10 percent	\$2,939 (\$0 - \$15,866)	\$3,270 (\$0 - \$16,791)	\$9,172 (\$0 - \$32,216)
Kentucky	0 percent	\$7,473 (\$3,150 - \$13,422)	\$6,323 (\$821 - \$19,266)	\$16,012 (\$6,167 - \$40,023)
North Carolina	3 percent	\$2,631 ⁴ (\$0 - \$8,649)		
Ohio	0 percent	\$14,517 (\$5,671 - \$28,353)	\$25,725 (\$8,063 - \$48,986)	\$35,058 (\$8,124 - \$69,071)
Oklahoma	63 percent	\$1,101 (\$0 - \$6,385)	\$1,498 (\$0 - \$8,200)	\$3,493 (\$0 - \$18,003)
South Carolina	3 percent	\$3,035 (\$0 - \$7,809)	\$3,662 (\$0 - \$6,942)	\$7,777 (\$0 - \$18,583)
West Virginia	27 percent	\$2,132 (\$0 - \$6,225)	\$2,376 (\$0 - \$7,365)	\$2,993 (\$0 - \$11,947)

How much do districts add on top of minimum salary requirements?

With a few exceptions, most districts in these seven states provide teachers additional pay on top of the state minimums. In some states, they do so by quite a substantial margin and others not so much. In Ohio, where every district adds a supplement, they range from a low of \$6,000 to as much as \$28,000 for first-year teachers.

Evident in our analysis is West Virginia's [legislated](#) focus on teacher salary equity across its school districts. The state has small salary differences between districts because it identifies the ten districts with the highest teacher salaries, and requires that none of the remaining districts pay anything lower than a ten percent differential. The state legislature established a fund to help struggling districts meet this bar, ensuring less variation between what districts across the state pay their teachers.

Oklahoma is even more striking. Most of its districts (63 percent) stick fast to the state minimum schedule and even if they don't, the supplements are relatively tiny (\$1,100 to \$3,500 on average). Most of the 37 percent of districts that do supplement the state salary schedule add significantly less than districts in other states. This may be in part because [Oklahoma state law](#) does not permit local property taxes to be used for teacher salaries. There are a few notable Oklahoma districts that do add a lot more, such as Crooked Oak district in Oklahoma City with a \$6,400 supplement paid out to first-year teachers and Muskogee, which pays out an \$18,000 supplement to teachers at the top of the schedule.

These data make it clear that action at the state-level, that is, a strike, was the strategic route for teachers in Oklahoma and West Virginia. Teacher pay in those states is in reality primarily driven by the state salary schedule, with districts adding on less money than in other states - and many districts adding nothing at all.

3. Throughout this analysis, a mid-career teacher is a teacher with a master's degree or equivalent units and 10 years of experience, with a few deviations due to data availability. In Arkansas, mid-career teachers have 15 years of experience and in Ohio, they have 11 years of experience. This analysis uses the maximum available salary for a teacher with a bachelor's degree and additional units in Missouri, and the maximum salary for a teacher with a bachelor's degree in Illinois.

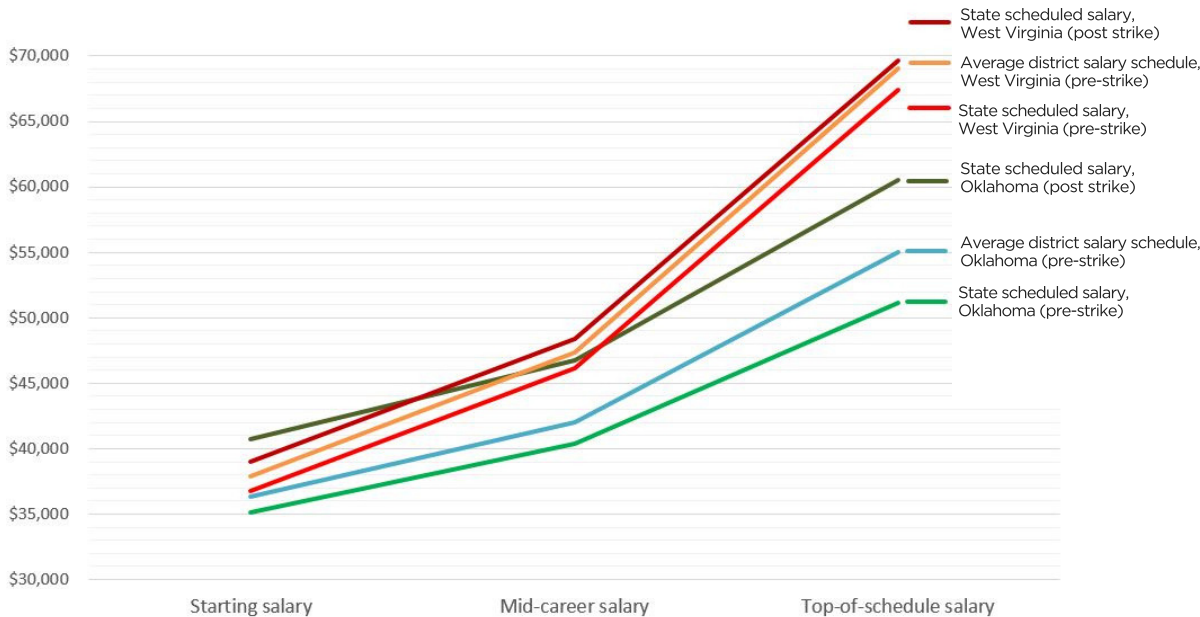
4. Average district supplement across all levels of education and experience.

What did Oklahoma and West Virginia teachers win?

As shown in the chart to the right, teacher action in both states won increases to the state schedule above the current average of district salary schedules, which means that while teachers in some districts and at some steps will see smaller increases than others, average salaries are sure to rise overall.

Interestingly, the state schedule increases won in Oklahoma--before teachers actually went on strike--are more significant than the increases won in West Virginia after the nine-day teacher strike.

Changes in state salary schedules, Oklahoma and West Virginia



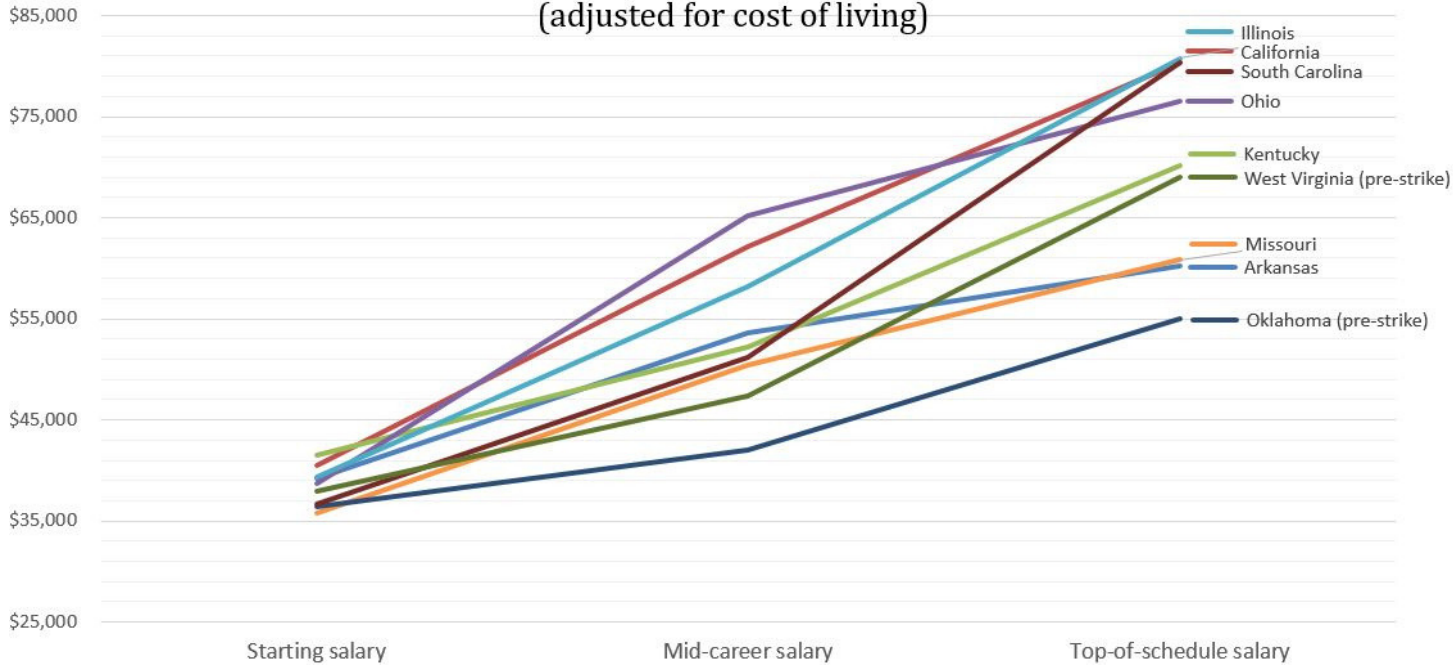
How much do teachers make across their careers?

Most salary schedules pay teachers more as they gain experience and additional education. How much more and when are key factors in how much money teachers make over a lifetime. Having bigger salary increases earlier in their careers means teachers climb to higher levels of pay faster and make more over a career compared to districts with high maximum salaries that take decades of experience to reach. For example, our 2014 report [Smart Money](#) compared Milwaukee and Rochester. Despite the fact that Rochester offers higher starting and ending

salaries, teachers in Milwaukee earn more throughout their career thanks to a faster climb to higher salaries earlier in their careers.

To compare how much teachers make across their careers in different states, we look at the district salary schedules at different points in teachers' careers, averaged across all of the districts in each sample state⁴ and adjusted for different costs of living.

Average district salary across three career points, by state (adjusted for cost of living)



4. North Carolina is not included due to incomplete data.

Again, Oklahoma and West Virginia teachers come out the worst, at least among these ten states. They have the slowest increases in salary from their first year of teaching to the average mid-career salary. In both states, the climb between Year One and the mid-point is less than \$10,000. At \$26,533, Ohio has the largest average early-career salary climb among the ten states in the sample.

How do salaries differ across districts?

To truly understand the nuance in teacher salaries, it's necessary to go beyond the average salary, even if you're looking at different points in a teacher's career. There are major discrepancies among districts in teachers' starting salary, top salary, and all the years in the middle. Districts in the same state don't have to increase teacher pay at the same rate throughout a teacher's career, which means that the state average in most places reflects few teachers' reality.

In our sample states,⁵ starting salaries across districts in each state vary by an average of \$16,116; the variation increases as the years of experience and education levels increase.

Kentucky is an example of a state that's about middle of the pack in our sample in terms of variation between districts. The lowest starting salary in Kentucky is in rural Bell County at \$32,429 while the highest starting salary is \$42,701 in suburban Jefferson County. That's a difference of roughly \$10,000 across districts in one state, even though Kentucky is also a state that sets the minimum salaries teachers must earn. The chart below illustrates the range that exists for starting salaries across all Kentucky districts.

Starting salaries for teachers in Kentucky



Where to go from here?

The big takeaway here is that the understanding around teacher pay needs to expand beyond state averages.

While average salary offers one useful way to look at what teachers make, it obscures much of the nuance that affects teachers--disparities in the pay between new and veteran teachers, a slow climb to the top of the salary schedule that can dampen teachers' lifetime earnings, or inequities in pay between districts.



5. North Carolina is not included due to incomplete data.