



Who's to Blame for Stagnant Teacher Salaries?

Published on *Show-Me Institute* (<https://showmeinstitute.org>)



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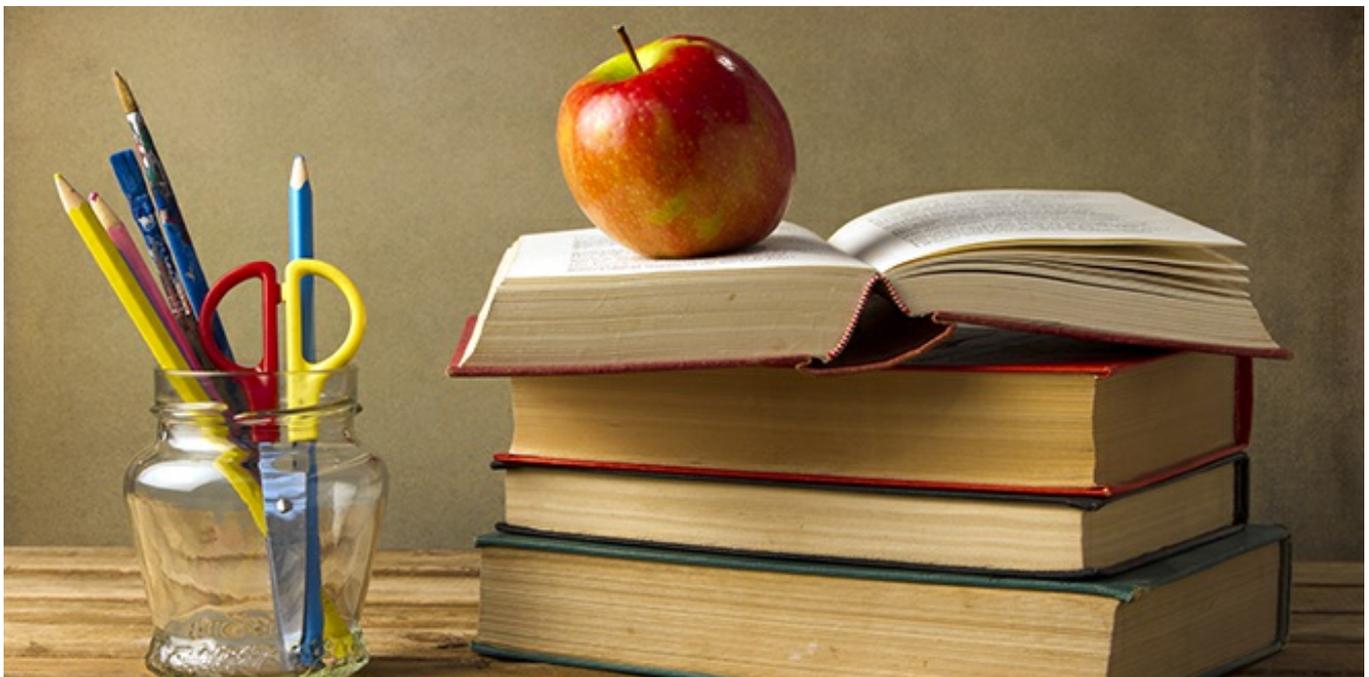
Last spring, in what has been referred to as a “smoke ‘em if you’ve got ‘em” moment, teachers in four states staged [walkouts](#) to protest low wages and low spending on education. They did so just before an expected Supreme Court [ruling](#) that could cut into the power of teachers’ unions, so it made some sense that they would flex their muscles ahead of the ruling.

It’s not hard to understand why teachers are angry. In Missouri, the average [teacher salary](#) in 2000 was \$51,100 (in 2016 dollars) and in 2016 it was \$48,300. But the question is: Who should they be mad at? Can the folks in Jefferson City give raises to all Missouri teachers? They cannot. In most Missouri districts, school boards negotiate with the local teachers’ union to determine salary schedules. So somewhere along the line, even as spending per student increased from \$8,900 to \$10,500 (both in 2016 dollars), higher teacher salaries have gotten lost.

One important factor has been the growth in staff since 2000. Since that time Missouri’s public school enrollment had a net increase of [4,250](#) students, but public school *staffing* increased by 5,500 individuals, about half of whom were teachers. That’s right—there have been more adults hired to teach and run schools than there have been new students. I’ve written quite a bit about [legacy costs](#) (pensions and buildings) consuming more and more education dollars, but staffing increases are a huge driver of lower teacher salaries—the payroll money is being spread among more and more employees.

In 2015, the average pupil/teacher ratio in Missouri was about [14](#) :1, and the average spent per student was [\\$10,500](#) . This means that about \$150K was spent to run the average classroom. If I were a teacher and only about 30 percent of what was spent in my classroom went to my salary, I'd want to know where the rest went, and why. I'd also like the option to bump my class size up to 15 or 16 students if I were able to keep the increased funding.

I'm not second-guessing staffing decisions, but school districts have to make tradeoffs between hiring more staff or paying teachers more—and they seem to have chosen the former. If teachers don't like that, they need to go to the actual decision makers—school boards and superintendents, maybe even those who represent them at the table—and demand something different. And if they're paying dues to their local union to do their negotiating for them, they may want to consider how that's working out for them.



About the Author



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Susan Pendergrass was Vice President of Research and Evaluation for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools before joining the Show-Me Institute. Prior to coming to the National Alliance, Susan was a senior policy advisor at the U.S. Department of Education during the Bush administration and a senior research scientist at the National Center for Education Statistics during the Obama administration. She earned a Ph.D. in Public Policy from George Mason University.

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- [1] <https://showmeinstitute.org/blog/accountability/who%E2%80%99s-blame-stagnant-teacher-salaries>
- [2] <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/04/25/602859780/teacher-walkouts-a-state-by-state-guide>
- [3] <http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-biz-janus-private-sector-ramifications-20180709-story.html>
- [4] https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_211.60.asp?current=yes
- [5] https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_203.20.asp?current=yes
- [6] <https://showmeinstitute.org/blog/public-pensions/retirement-house-cards>
- [7] https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_208.40.asp?current=yes
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