

Teacher Pay: U.S. Ranks 22nd Out Of 27 Countries

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By Jack Jennings

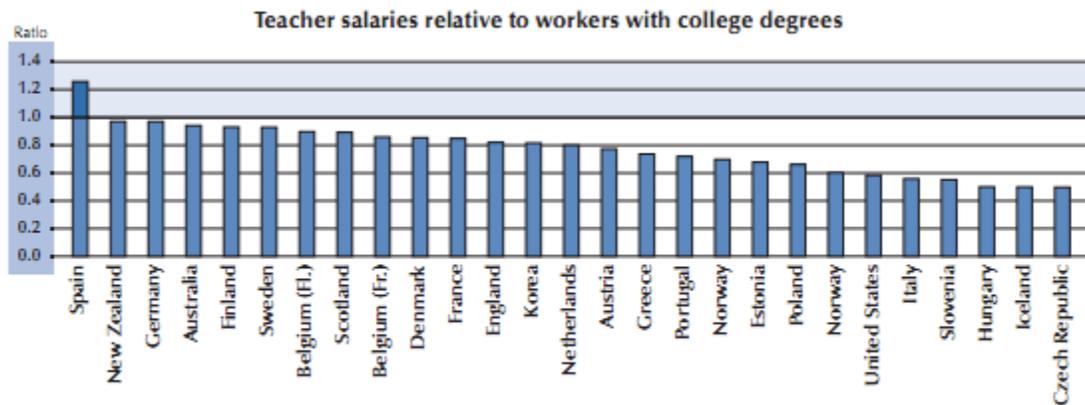
A few weeks ago, yet another study showed American students being outpaced in mathematics achievement by students in other countries. In "[Teaching Math to the Talented](#)," published in the winter 2011 edition of *Education Next*, researchers from Stanford and Harvard compared U.S. math achievement at the advanced level with that of 56 other countries. They found that American students ranked about in the middle. Other international studies of core subjects have similarly concluded that U.S. students perform around or somewhat above the average for participating countries.

What has *not* received sufficient attention is a comparison of the salaries paid to teachers in the U.S. and countries -- and whether there could be a connection between salary levels and student achievement.

A few months ago, the widely respected Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development released [Building a High Quality Teaching Profession: Lessons from Around the World](#), which analyzes how high-performing countries have created highly professional and effective teaching forces. Included in this report is a telling chart which shows that American teachers are paid less than teachers in many other countries.

For each participating nation, OECD calculated the ratio of the average salaries of teachers with 15 years' experience to the average earnings of full-time workers with a college degree. The U.S. [ranked 22nd out of 27 countries](#) on this measure. In the U.S., teachers earned less than 60% of the average pay for full-time college-educated workers. In many other countries, teachers earn between 80% and 100% of the college-educated average.

Figure 1.1



Countries are ranked in descending order of the ratio of salary after 15 years of experience/minimum training to earnings for full-time full-year workers with tertiary education aged 25 to 64 (latest available year).
Source: OECD, *Education at a Glance 2010*, Table 3.1 (continued).

To address this issue and make teaching in the U.S. more attractive, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has called for teacher salaries that start at \$60,000 and eventually rise to \$150,000 -- far higher than current teacher pay in nearly all U.S. school districts. Clearly, compensation is not the only reason why people do not go into teaching, but it is a major consideration. As Secretary Duncan said [in a speech](#) to the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards on July 29:

Money is never the reason why people enter teaching, but it is the reason why some people do not enter teaching, or leave as they start to think about beginning a family or buying a home. Today, too often the heart-breaking reality is that a good teacher with a decade of classroom experience is hard-pressed to raise a family on a teacher's salary.

Last year, McKinsey & Co, a major market researching firm, concluded that the U.S. was not attracting enough higher-performing college students to teaching. (See [Closing the Talent Gap: Attracting and Retaining Top-Third Graduates to a Career in Teaching.](#)) To make U.S. teacher salaries competitive with those of other careers open to top students would mean paying teachers around \$65,000 to \$150,000 a year. McKinsey found that three high-achieving countries recruit *all* of their teachers from the top third of the academic talent pool. In the U.S., by contrast, top-achievers account for 23 percent of all new teachers and just 14 percent of new teachers in high-poverty schools.

Secretary Duncan, OECD, and others who have studied how to improve the quality of our nation's teaching force have rightly called for a comprehensive approach that will lead to greater professionalization of teaching. On one hand, teachers must have greater autonomy similar to other professionals, and they must have the tools, resources, and support needed to be professional. On the other hand, there must be much greater rigor in admitting people into teaching and in determining who should stay in the profession. Higher salaries are a fundamental, indispensable ingredient for both new and veteran teachers.

The quality of the teacher is the most important school-based factor in determining how well a student will do academically. Common sense tells us this, and research, such as the Tennessee longitudinal study, has confirmed it.

If teachers are so important, why don't our schools attract and keep the best teachers? We have many good and dedicated teachers, but not always the best. A major reason is that we aren't willing to pay excellent teachers what they deserve. Further, we aren't willing to make other changes to ensure a high-quality teaching force.

It is difficult to advocate for higher salaries for teachers during these hard economic times, but we aren't going to make long term progress economically if we don't have a better educated citizenry. Business leaders have been saying this for years. Paying teachers higher wages and getting and retaining good teachers is integral to achieving that goal.