



Are we getting what we pay for?

Higher teacher salaries don't always mean higher scores

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With a variety of important purchases, it may be said, you get what you pay for.

But in some suburban schools, that's not always the case.

School districts in Lake, McHenry, Cook, DuPage and Kane Counties typically pay their teachers thousands more than the state average, but results on standardized tests aren't necessarily correspondingly higher.

According to 2009 state report card data released today, Illinois, on average, pays its teachers \$61,402 each year. In 90 suburban districts, that average is \$66,356, according to a Daily Herald analysis.

Some make much more.

Maine Township High School District 207, Liberty-Vernon Hills District 128, Northwest Suburban High School District 214 and Palatine District 211 all pay teachers more than \$90,000 a year.

But in terms of achievement, 49 high-paying suburban districts failed to meet federal No Child Left Behind bench marks this fall. One-third failed two years in a row.

Yet seven of the 10 lowest paying districts in the suburbs, with salaries ranging from \$46,389 to \$50,522, all met standards this year. Only two of the top 10 highest paying districts, with salaries ranging from \$85,448 to 94,205, did.

Of course, there are uncontrollable variables that affect performance.

A particularly bad testing year, for instance. An influx of new, more challenging students. Or the failure of a single subgroup, which, according to No Child Left Behind, can prevent an entire school or district from meeting bench marks.

And the test itself. Because of differences in rigor between the tests given to elementary and high school students, far more Illinois elementary districts than high school districts meet standards each year.

But variables also affect pay.

Compare East Maine District 63 in Niles and Des Plaines District 62.

Both districts have similar student populations, and similar numbers of white, black and Hispanic students.

Both last year and this year, both districts' composite scores on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test were within two points of one another. Yet District 62's average teachers salary is \$12,000 more.

How is this possible?

A recently released report suggests that teachers all too often are treated, in its words, like widgets, or interchangeable car parts, leading to easier tenure, fewer dismissals than necessary and unearned pay bumps.

Furthermore, says Andrea Evans, professor of educational leadership at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, "so much of teachers' pay is tied to what the districts are able to pay and how those contracts are negotiated."

"The Widget Effect," published this summer by nonprofit think-tank The New Teacher Project out of Brooklyn, New York, looked at 12 districts' ability to assess teacher effectiveness. Among them were Chicago Public Schools, Rockford and Elgin Area School District U-46.

The report found that poor performance by teachers often goes unaddressed, with less than 1 percent of teachers receiving unsatisfactory ratings by administrators, even in schools that fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress again and again. Half of districts surveyed, including U-46, did not dismiss a single tenured teacher for poor performance in the past five years.

In Illinois, it's not hard to imagine why.

State law requires only one evaluation per year for nontenured teachers, and one evaluation every two years for tenured teachers. As part of those respective evaluations, only one classroom observation of no set time length is required.

"I think a portion of our teachers would acknowledge that the evaluation system is broken," said Audrey Soglin, director of the Illinois Education Association.

Soglin agreed that a number of districts' systems don't adequately address poor performing teachers.

"The study was groundbreaking for the outside world, but internally, we knew of the problems," she said.

According to a Daily Herald analysis, the districts that did not make Adequate Yearly Progress in 2008 or 2009 paid the highest average salary this year, \$69,441.

That was followed by the districts that failed in 2008 but passed in 2009. Districts that passed both years only made \$63,929, on average.

In U-46, 77 percent of the administrators surveyed for the report said tenured teachers were generally performing at an unsatisfactory level.

But none were dismissed, and very few faced corrective action.

Salaries and progress

Average 2009 teacher salaries and salary increases at suburban schools, by Adequate Yearly Progress status.

For school districts* that ...

- Did not make AYP in '08 and '09

Avg. salary: **\$69,441.55**

Percent change from 2008: 3.91%

- Made AYP in '08, but did not in '09

Avg. salary: **\$62,885.87**

Percent change from 2008: 2.91%

- Did not make AYP in 08, but did in '09

Avg. salary: **\$65,064.42**

Percent change from 2008: 3.32%

- Made AYP in both '08 and '09

Avg. salary: **\$63,929.00**

Percent change from 2008: 3.26%

* For districts in Daily Herald coverage area

Source: Daily Herald analysis of Illinois State Board of Education data

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"I think the evidence is pretty clear. The old evaluation system didn't work," Elgin Teachers Association President Tim Davis said.

A new evaluation system is now being phased in. Based on Charlotte Danielson's 1996 book "Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework For Teaching," the evaluations are structured around administrators measuring whether students are engaged in their classroom. Teacher mentoring and open dialogue between administrators writing the evaluations and the teachers being evaluated are also key components.

The Illinois Education Association regards Danielson's model as one of the best, Soglin said.

Naperville Unit District 203 adopted a system based on Danielson's methods in 2001.

President Dave Griffin said evaluations take a "tremendous amount of time," but he believes the system works to effectively keep teachers on track.

In Naperville, Griffin said, there's no "excellent" rating for nontenured teachers. Several classroom observations are required in each review. A teacher mentoring program is mandated.

District 203 has made Adequately Yearly Progress since 2005.

Still, there's nothing in Naperville's evaluation system - or U-46's - that links teacher pay with student scores.

"I don't think we're ready in U-46 for that," Davis said. "I'd want to make sure there's great integrity in the process before I go there."

A teacher contract completed last week in New Haven, Conn., does tie teacher pay to student performance.

"This shows a willingness to go into areas that used to be seen as untouchable," Education Secretary Arne Duncan told The Wall Street Journal.

NIU's Evans says she believes contracts tied to student performance are possible in Illinois, but it will take a lot of work at the bargaining table.

"It goes back to this being a local issue. How local contracts are negotiated, how local administrators hold their districts accountable," she said. "It's fair for the public to say we expect more. We're paying a lot. Are we getting what people in other high-paying districts are getting? All of this is local."

With more districts across the suburbs this year finding themselves in budget holes and failing to meet rising bench marks, now could be as good a time as any to begin those conversations, Evans suggested.

Elgin Area School District U-46 expects to be \$53.5 million in the hole come June.

Superintendent Jose Torres called some of the theories of the Widget Effect report "radical" and "exciting," acknowledging that a more critical look at tenured teachers' performance, for instance, could yield savings.

With negotiations for the December 2010 teachers contract beginning this spring, Torres said he believes it is unlikely the new evaluation system will be used as a bargaining tool.

"I just don't see the (teachers) union coming to the table, wanting to use this in bargaining yet. Especially in light of the current financial situation," he said.

At an average of \$94,205, District 207 has the highest-paid teachers in the Daily Herald's coverage area, along with a \$17 million budget hole. Superintendent Ken Wallace declined to comment.