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State Struggles to Keep Teachers' Pay Competitive

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K-12 teachers all across the state receive less than their counterparts in the region.

Story by Pam Kasey [Email](#) | [Bio](#)

A highly qualified school teacher in Jefferson County, with 35 years of service and a master's degree, earned about \$46,000 in 2004.

A similar teacher earned more than \$59,000 in adjacent Loudon County, Va., and nearly \$66,000 in nearby Frederick County, Md.

That's a snapshot of the teacher recruitment and retention problem in fast-growing Jefferson County, where the student body grows at an average 3 percent each year and teacher turnover is 10 percent, according to a 2004 State of the Schools report.

K-12 teachers all across the state receive less than their counterparts in the region. From preschool through high school, the salaries of teachers in West Virginia lag behind those of educators in surrounding states, according to November 2004 data from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Starting with a mean preschool teacher salary of \$20,770 -- lowest in the region -- West Virginia tracked with Kentucky at the kindergarten, elementary, middle and high school levels while lagging far behind Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Virginia.

And the situation is getting worse. From a high ranking of 30th among states nationwide in average teacher salaries in 1993, according to the West Virginia Education Association, West Virginia dropped to 38th in 2003, 43rd in 2004 and 47th in 2005.

A teacher's salary has three components, according to Joseph Panetta, executive director of school finance for the state Department of Education.

The salary is based, first, on the relevant figure from the state minimum salary schedule. Panetta also cited an education-and-experience-based grid of statewide base salary levels updated by the Legislature from time to time, most recently at a special session in September.

Then there's a county supplement in counties that have school levies for teacher salaries.

And there's a state equity portion, based on a 1984 formula aimed at equalizing pay across counties. School levies passed since that time may take teachers' pay in some counties above that of teachers in other counties, Panetta said, but another formula keeps county averages within a certain range.

All of that is part of the state school aid formula -- a public school support calculation that was established in the 1980s, according to Senate Education Chairman Robert Plymale, D-Wayne, and is now under review by a school

aid formula committee chaired by Plymale and by Delegate Thomas Campbell, D-Greenbrier.

"To be honest, when you look at it, we've got to do something more for teacher pay. There's no doubt about that," Plymale said.

"We made pretty significant steps in the special session in September in terms of filling in the gaps," he continued. "However, one of the things that we did not address is the starting pay for teachers, and that is one area that I think we really need to be looking at."

The committee is reviewing everything from property tax collection and reporting to procedures in the other states, Plymale said. Professor Tom Witt at West Virginia University and from Professor Cal Kent at Marshall University are assisting him.

One of the salary issues under consideration is locality pay, he said, the idea that counties with a higher cost of living -- typically places such as Jefferson County that are under heavy salary pressure from outside the state -- could pay teachers more in line with their markets. But beyond county school levies, he said, there's no consensus on a workable approach.

Plymale said he expects the committee to make a few recommendations for the coming legislative session and develop a full range of recommendations for the 2007 regular session.

Some of those recommendations will make important changes to salary levels and structure, he said.

"When you look at our rank in terms of (teacher education and quality), we rank very high, and we want to maintain that," he said. "Part of that is making sure that we get our starting salary up and that we increase teacher pay on a regular basis."

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