

# TEACHER PAY IN NORTH CAROLINA: A SMART INVESTMENT IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT



## 2025 Edition Executive Summary

North Carolina's ability to provide high-quality education depends on attracting and retaining excellent teachers. However, low salaries, outdated pay structures, regional funding gaps, and ineffective staffing strategies have contributed to a weakened teacher pipeline, leading to shortages and inequitable access to quality educators.

After steady growth from 2014–2019, inflation-adjusted teacher pay has declined over the past four years. North Carolina now ranks 12th out of 13 Southeastern states in starting pay, while neighboring states like Georgia, Florida, and Alabama have made significant salary increases. Without competitive pay reform, North Carolina risks losing teachers to better-paying opportunities, further deepening shortages and impacting student achievement. Urgent action is needed to keep the state competitive.

Each year, North Carolina public schools hire around

# 8,000 new teachers,

more new hires of bachelor's degree holders than some entire industries, including Public Administration, Real Estate, Arts and Recreation, and Agriculture & Forestry.

Sources: [US Census Job to Job Explorer](#); [NC DPI State of the Teaching Profession Report](#).

NC Average Teacher Pay  
(2023-24)

## \$58,292

NC Average Starting Pay  
(2022-23)

## \$40,136

Sources: [NEA Rankings and Estimates Report 2023-24](#);  
[NEA Teacher Salary Benchmark Report 2022-23](#); [NC DPI Highlights of the Public School Budget, 2022-23](#)

## Key Teacher Pay Challenges

- Inflation has effectively erased the substantial teacher pay increases implemented between 2014 and 2019, leaving inflation-adjusted pay at the lowest level in 30 years (see page 19 of full report).
- Starting pay in North Carolina is not competitive with surrounding states (12th of 13 Southeastern states), contributing to the perception that North Carolina teachers are underpaid, even for the profession (see page 14 of full report)
- The step-and-lane salary schedule, a century-old model, dictates teacher pay without recognizing effectiveness, subject demand, or leadership roles (see pages 8 & 24 of full report).
- On average, teachers gain full competency as a professional in 5-7 years, yet it takes 25 years to gain full base pay (see pages 12 & 26 of full report).
- Further, this structure leaves fully half of all teachers unable to earn a living wage for a family of four with two teacher incomes (see page 12 of full report).
- STEM and special education teachers can earn significantly more in the private sector, making differentiated pay essential for retention (see page 29 of full report).
- Tools that could be strategically used to improve teacher retention and recruitment are not being leveraged. North Carolina's Teacher Supplement Assistance Allotment, provides \$200 million annually but no guidance has been given on how to best use that to fill critical vacancies. (see page 17 of full report).



Since this report was initially published in 2023, North Carolina has made progress towards increasing and modernizing its teacher compensation system, including increasing starting pay, front-loading the salary schedule, and providing state salary supplements for teachers in Advanced Teaching Roles positions. However, there is an urgent need for continued investment as high inflation rates have reduced purchasing power in recent years and as many other neighboring states have significantly increased starting and early career teacher pay.



North Carolina is the first state in the nation to have a statewide strategic staffing policy that keeps teachers in their classrooms while paying them as much as \$20,000 more a year thanks to [Advanced Teaching Roles \(ATR\)](#). This innovative initiative also creates incentives for effective teachers to work in hard-to-staff schools. Currently, about 20% of all schools offer these unique career and compensation opportunities (see page 35 of full report). Scan the QR code to visit BEST NC's ATR landing page.




## Why Does Teacher Pay Matter?

Pay is only one factor that attracts and retains great talent, but it is a significant factor with research showing that even a general increase in pay can improve student outcomes, while strategic investments can increase outcomes even more.

- Strategic investments in teacher pay are linked to larger increases in student achievement than broad, undirected increases in education funding.
- Significant increases in teacher salaries are necessary to recruit highly-qualified teachers to hard-to-staff schools.
- Raising starting teacher salaries increases the aptitude of those entering teacher preparation, resulting in more high-quality teacher candidates.
- Increased teacher pay reduces turnover, with competitive early career pay having an outsized impact on teacher retention.

**26%**  
of first year teachers left the profession in the 2022-23 school year.



*Source: NC DPI State of the Teaching Profession Report*

## Reasons Cited for Leaving the Teaching Profession

**1 in 10**

Lack of Opportunities for Advancement

**1 in 8**

Wanted or Needed a Higher Salary

*Source: NCES National Teacher Follow-Up Survey, 2012-13*

- Teacher pay schedules based upon years of experience and educational attainment disadvantage traditionally marginalized communities by reinforcing systemic inequities in the distribution of highly qualified teachers.
- Leveraging differentiated pay that rewards excellent performance boosts student achievement.
- Using pay incentives to retain high-performing teachers in hard-to-staff schools decreases teacher turnover in those schools.
- Innovative staffing models, such as Advanced Teaching Roles, make the teaching profession more attractive and support the retention of effective teachers seeking additional pay and leadership opportunities.

## Recommendations for Teacher Pay

### Raise the Floor

- Significantly increase starting pay;
- Front-load pay, ensuring that all licensed teachers can support a family;

### Raise the Ceiling

- Implement Advanced Teaching Roles statewide to provide well-paid professional advancement opportunities;
- Develop a meaningful teacher retention strategy for effective veteran teachers;

### Attract & Retain Hard-to-Staff Positions

- Establish competitive, differentiated pay for high-demand degrees like STEM and Special Education;
- Increase or broaden incentives for teaching in hard-to-staff schools; and
- Modify the State Supplement Assistance Allotment to encourage districts to better target funds to fill critical teaching vacancies and retain top talent.



Scan the QR Code to [Access the Full Report](#) and Read the Rest of BEST NC's Teacher Pay Recommendations, Watch an Overview Video, and More!