



The case for competitive compensation: It's time for more than a COLA

We must ensure that every Washington student has the opportunity to learn from caring, qualified and committed educators. Providing professional compensation is key to attracting and retaining high quality teachers and support staff.

The 2015 legislative session is our best opportunity in a generation to increase funding for public education, including compensation and smaller class sizes. The good news is that we have the Supreme Court, the law and voter support on our side.

Professional compensation is more than a COLA. It includes competitive pay, affordable health insurance and secure retirement benefits. Related to its McCleary funding decision, the Washington Supreme Court declared "there is nothing more basic than adequate compensation."

- Providing competitive pay, health benefits and retirement is crucial to recruiting and retaining the most talented workers in any profession – including public education. Professional compensation helps ensure all students have caring, qualified and committed teachers and support staff to guide their way.
- During the Great Recession, educators and other middle-class workers have been hit hard. Wages have stagnated, health care costs have increased and retirement benefits have been weakened. Many public school employees are taking home less money every month.

Let's be clear: A COLA is not a raise. It is a cost-of-living adjustment. Because the Legislature has failed to fund COLAs for the last six years, educators have lost 12 percent in buying power. Gov. Inslee has proposed a mere 3 percent COLA next year, which is not enough. Here's why:

- Going six years without a state COLA means an experienced teacher has lost a cumulative \$27,000, and it would take an immediate salary increase of \$8,500 to bring that teacher's salary to what it would be if the COLA had not been suspended. A typical classified employee has lost \$11,700 and would need a \$3,800 increase to bring her salary to where it should be.
- The Legislature has not increased K-12 employee health care funding for the last five years, yet healthcare costs have risen considerably. As a result, educators are paying more out-of-pocket, and in many cases, their take-home pay has decreased. Increased pension contributions also are reducing net pay.
- Tweaking the COLA won't even offset the health care cost increase for most educators. Gov. Inslee's budget makes things even worse – offering NO increase in health care funding for K-12 school employees. Yet Inslee proposes increasing monthly health care funding for each state employee (including legislators) to a level that is nearly \$200 higher than that of a K-12 worker. The state should fund K-12 employees' health care insurance at the same amount state employees receive. Going backwards on health care is exactly the wrong direction if we want to attract and retain high-quality educators.



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In Olympia and at local bargaining tables, it is time to step up for professional compensation – wages and benefits that are competitive with similar professions so we can attract and retain high-quality educators:

- Make measurable progress towards a professional salary for educators that is comparable with professions that require similar education and training
- Improve higher education faculty and staff salaries by authorizing community and technical colleges to bargain local funds for faculty salary increments
- Fully fund the educator cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs) required by current law (voter-approved I-732)
- Increase funding for active and retired educators' health and pension benefits
- Explore innovative legislative options to increase total compensation in recognition of increased demands and expectations within the education profession

Did you know?

- In nearly every category, K-12 school employees earn less than our counterparts in comparable professions that require similar experience and education. The state's own recommendations call for increasing K-12 salaries by \$2 billion based on a study of comparable professions. This is based on the state's own Compensation Technical Working Group report and recommendations, which were commissioned in response to the McCleary court case.
- Under the state's comparable wage recommendations, state funding for the average full-time, 12-month education support professional's salary would increase from \$32,328 to \$49,413, and state funding for a starting teacher's base salary would increase from \$34,048 to \$53,008. (These numbers are from the state salary report and have been updated for inflation.)
- When adjusted for regional cost-of-living differences, an annual NEA research report shows that average teacher pay in Washington is 42nd out of 50 states. And Washington's average teacher pay is the lowest among the West Coast states.
- In its McCleary decision, the state Supreme Court noted that state officials admitted state funding for educator compensation is not adequate: "Testimony revealed that the State allocation for salaries and benefits fell far short of the actual cost of recruiting and retaining competent teachers, administrators, and staff."

What you can do:

Talk to your colleagues. Contact your legislators by email, phone or in person. Tell them if, in one day, the Legislature can find \$8.7 billion in tax breaks for Boeing, it can find the revenue to fund public education.

Visit WEA's political action HQ, www.OurVoiceWashingtonEA.org, for action information.