


FORUM

Even More Is Required: Confronting the Teacher Pay Crisis in the United States

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Abstract

Low and stagnant teacher pay has been a perennial issue in the United States public school system since the early decades of the nineteenth century. Women teachers, then as now, confronted the issue head-on by organizing together. For example, women primary school teachers in Boston, Massachusetts successfully petitioned for more pay in 1835, but an emerging policy to pay women less ensured that such victories would be few and far between. Nevertheless, we can draw two critical lessons from these women teachers and their petition. First, a broader understanding of historical context and gendered narratives about labor is necessary to confront the teacher pay crisis today. Second, sharing teachers' stories from the past now can help shape policy debates on teacher pay, turning a crisis into a new vision for the teaching profession.

Keywords: teachers; teacher pay; gender discrimination; petitions; Boston; American Teacher Act

A ten-second viral video posted to social media depicts a man of color walking down the sidewalk. His leather jacket is zipped up against the cold. A white woman huddles on the sidewalk as a bus rumbles by. He stops in front of her and places a five-dollar bill in the paper cup she holds out. Surprised, she clarifies, "Oh, I'm not homeless! I'm a teacher." The man responds with empathy, "Ooh-wee," and adds ten dollars. The teacher, rather sheepishly, nods in thanks and slips the money into her coat pocket. "This is really heartbreaking," wrote one commenter after watching the video.

This video clip spotlights at least one critical problem in the United States: low pay for K-12 teachers.¹ Educators today and across American history have experienced this all-too-common challenge with compensation. The underrecognized reality is that teachers have struggled to increase their wages, resulting in a growing wage gap, and

¹According to the National Education Association, the average starting teacher salary in the United States in 2021–2022 was \$42,845. During that same period, the nation counted over three million public school teachers. National Education Association, *2021–2022 Teacher Salary Benchmark Report*, April 2023, 1, https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/2021-2022-teacher-salary-benchmark-report_0.pdf.

some live in poverty, including facing homelessness, despite their full-time labor. For instance, in March 2023, Laura Leonard, a high school teacher in Nashville public schools, spoke to the media about just this fact: two of her faculty colleagues were living without shelter. In recent years, Leonard's school district invested a reported \$67 million to raise teacher pay, which started at a yearly salary of \$46,271 in 2021 and then increased to \$50,046 in 2023.² Local initiatives to improve teacher remuneration—like Nashville's, which was long overdue and far too gradual in terms of time and pay bumps—are nevertheless steps in the right direction.

Providing a historical perspective on salary discrepancies in education enables us to trace how past narratives about the value of teaching live on and linger in the present. For centuries, teachers have campaigned for salaries that properly account for the knowledge and skills they possess, and the energy and time they devote to the profession. Too often it falls on teachers themselves to make the case for higher pay. Consequently, they are put in a position to continually explain and defend their work and worth, even though more effort is required of them each year.

The persistent problem of low teacher pay dates back to the first few decades of the United States' founding, when public education was inchoate. Schools were informal, and teaching children was not yet a bona fide profession. Many viewed school teaching as a temporary job that a young man might take until something more lucrative came along. Moreover, educational reformers classified men as particularly ineffective teachers to young children. The so-called father of American public education, Horace Mann, wrote, "A man superintending a nursery is like an elephant brooding chickens."³ For this and other reasons, the general public complained about lazy and unreliable teachers in the classroom. Amid rapid social changes, such as industrialization and westward expansion, many men left the field.

The policy of paying women teachers less than men emerged in the nineteenth-century United States just as teaching children became a formal, respectable career. By the 1830s, community opinions of teachers gradually shifted into a positive light, in part because of the common school reform movement, which aimed to adopt a common curriculum, renovate school buildings and facilities, and establish teacher training and regulation. The departure of male teachers, coupled with the professionalization and formalization of teaching, coincided with the recruitment of women into the profession.⁴ No doubt gender played a role in this change. Educational reformers like Catherine Beecher believed that women's socialized nature as caring, nurturing,

²Justin McFarland and Sydney Keller, "We Have Homeless Teachers': Metro Schools Educators Want More Pay," Fox 17 WZTV Nashville, March 1, 2023, <https://fox17.com/news/crisis-in-the-classroom/nashville-middle-tennessee-high-cost-of-homelessness-education-pay-raise-google-tiktok-facebook-instagram-we-have-homeless-teachers-metro-schools-educators-want-more-pay-davidson-county-wilson-williamson-rutherford-local-news>.

³Horace Mann, *A Few Thoughts on the Powers and Duties of Woman* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1859), 27.

⁴The scholarship on women in the teaching profession is plentiful. For a few studies on the nineteenth-century United States, see Madeleine R. Grumet, *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); Joel Perlmann and Robert A. Margo, *Women's Work? American Schoolteachers, 1650-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001); Geraldine J. Clifford, *Those Good Gertrudes: A Social History of Women Teachers in America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

and easygoing individuals made them well suited to the classroom. In his 1838 report as Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, Mann seemingly encouraged male-dominated school committees to capitalize on these gendered stereotypes by paying talented women teachers less. “And is it not an unpardonable waste of means, where it can be possibly avoided, to employ a man, at \$25 or \$30 month, to teach the alphabet, when it can be done much better, at half price, by a female teacher?” he asked.⁵ By the late nineteenth century, women made up the majority of American teachers—just as they do today.⁶

Despite chronic low pay, diaries of women teachers in the nineteenth century demonstrate their deep commitment to educating children and youth. The emergence of teacher training colleges—then called “normal schools”—saw women actively taking classes to earn teaching licenses. For some, teaching meant adventure and a sense of independence. Others regarded it with the confidence of conviction, even as a holy calling. Some felt immense pride shaping the next generation. For Charlotte Forten, the first Black graduate of Salem Normal School in Massachusetts, teaching promised to “pay [her] debts,” financial and personal.⁷ In 1856, good news came when she was hired to teach at Epes Grammar School in Salem, earning \$200 a year. Still in disbelief, she wrote in her diary, “Again and again I ask myself—‘Can it be true?’ It seems impossible. I shall commence to-morrow.”⁸ When the Civil War broke out, Forten decided to move to South Carolina to expand the impact of her teaching and work with recently emancipated Black Americans. For Black women, teaching was—and perhaps remains—a way to uplift the race.

As a group, even the earliest of women teachers did not endorse or accept low pay. Encouraged by increasing community support for public schools, some teachers moved to the South and Southwest to take advantage of slightly higher wages while others organized local campaigns to increase their compensation.⁹ Gathering on October 7, 1835, a collective of women teachers in Boston’s primary schools discussed, wrote, and adopted a series of resolutions advocating for a salary increase from \$200 per year to \$250.¹⁰ They then presented their demands in the form of a petition to the all-male Boston Primary School Board. Signed by more than fifty teachers, the arguments in

⁵Massachusetts Board of Education, *First Annual Report of the Board of Education Together with the First Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1838), 28.

⁶“Are Women Fairly Paid? Some Startling Facts and Figures,” *Good Housekeeping* 4, no. 3 (Dec. 11, 1886), 64.

⁷Charlotte Forten Grimké, “Journal One,” entry dated April 2, 1856, in *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, ed. Brenda Stevenson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 154.

⁸Grimké, *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, 158.

⁹See, for instance, Kim Tolley, *Heading South to Teach: The World of Susan Nye Hutchinson, 1815-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

¹⁰“Teachers of the Primary Schools [1835],” Boston City Council - Dockets Mayor & Board of Aldermen, 1836 I-P 0051-0070, in City of Boston - Office of the City Clerk Archives & Records Management Division, Boston, MA. It is likely that only white women primary school teachers attended this meeting since primary schools were sometimes racially segregated. Moreover, Susan Paul, a Black primary school teacher in Boston at the time, did not sign this petition. For more information on Susan Paul, see Lois Brown, “Out of the Mouths of Babes: The Abolitionist Campaign of Susan Paul and the Juvenile Choir of Boston,” *New England Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (March 2002): 52-79; and Kabria Baumgartner, *In Pursuit of Knowledge: Black Women and Educational Activism in Antebellum America* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), chap. 6.

this petition resemble those put forth today in support of higher teacher pay: teachers' ever-expanding responsibilities, changes in classroom curricula, and the overall increase in the number of students served.

This petition laid bare the evolving responsibilities and duties of women teachers amid the common school reform movement. Public education expanded as great technological, political, and social change, from the Second Great Awakening to the financial Panic of 1837, swept across Jacksonian America, affecting children and youth. School committees floated plans to enlarge classrooms and build more primary schools, but their faculty—including female teachers who possessed high moral character and sufficient knowledge to teach subjects such as reading, writing, arithmetic, and geography—did not see their wages increase. Not only did these educators have to teach seventy or more children in a single classroom, but they had to perform demanding practical tasks such as tending the fire for heat in notorious New England winters. Boston's primary school teachers thus appealed to the Primary School Board, asking them to consider teachers' newfound "labour and expenses."¹¹

The Boston teachers' petition also explained the shifting nature of teaching itself and the ways rapid social change compelled them to respond in real time in the classroom. Primary school curricula soon went beyond common subjects to encompass character education, which included instilling values like hard work, honesty, and discipline in the children within their care. As the academic and social standards of public education expanded, more groups embraced public schools, especially the elite and, later, some immigrant populations. Teachers sometimes had to adapt lessons to fit these changing demographics. They noted in particular the need to add "the task of civilization" to their curriculum. Still, they did not shy away from this work. Instead, they regarded it as foundational. The Boston primary school teachers wrote:

We take the raw material, or as we might say the rough soil, and reduce it to a state fit for the seed, which we cast in, and leave, for others to reap the harvest. We do not complain that we have too much to do, we wish to do all that is required of us, as far as lies in our power, to the acceptance of our employers, but we do wish for a just remuneration for our Labour.¹²

Framing the issue of teacher pay as a matter of workers' rights was not only a strategic measure to sway the Primary School Board. It also conveyed how women teachers played an outsized role in maintaining one of our most valued democratic institutions: the public school. Likewise, teachers demonstrated an awareness of the gender pay gap when they asked the Primary School Board "whether it is right that we though females, engaged in an humble, yet exceedingly trying employment should be kept so far behind all other teachers of public schools."¹³ Their *femaleness* did not justify being paid less.

About a month later at a quarterly meeting, the Primary School Board reviewed the teachers' petition and voted unanimously to forward it to the Boston City Council.¹⁴

¹¹"Teachers of the Primary Schools [1835]," 1.

¹²"Teachers of the Primary Schools [1835]," 2.

¹³"Teachers of the Primary Schools [1835]," 2.

¹⁴Joseph Milner Wightman, *Annals of the Boston Primary School Committee, from Its First Establishment in 1818, to Its Dissolution in 1855* (Boston: Geo. C. Rand & Avery, 1860), 161.

In February 1836, the mayor and board of aldermen approved the teachers' petition for a salary increase to \$250 per year, finally remunerating women's labor.¹⁵ The number of women teachers employed in Massachusetts public schools continued to grow, from 3,591 in 1837 to 4,700 by the 1844-1845 school year. By that time, Horace Mann reported that teacher compensation was "regularly though slowly advancing" throughout the state. But he admitted that "the salaries and the social consideration bestowed upon teachers, furnish so little inducement to enter the profession."¹⁶ Stagnant and low pay, by then, had become a norm.

For me, as a historian of education, reading the Boston teachers' petition and following its trajectory is a reminder that retrieving the stories of individual and collective voices from the past through documents and objects can offer us a different impression and a new perspective. By the mid-nineteenth century, teaching became synonymous with benevolent, selfless work performed by women teachers who were being paid less, but felt rich ostensibly in the satisfaction of doing good in the world. But the petition from women teachers in Boston in the 1830s demonstrates a flashpoint too: while teaching may well have been work for the greater good, women did not tolerate that as a reason to justify low wages. Rather, they organized and petitioned against low teacher pay, taking the attendant risks of confronting the issue.

Nearly two hundred years later, the video clip mentioned earlier that circulated on social media presents a trope in the greater social narrative that we all immediately recognize: the poor teacher. The issue of low teacher pay exemplifies why studying the history of education matters, revealing how education policy advanced by leaders like Horace Mann in the 1830s not only devalued women's work as teachers at the time, but has had a catastrophic effect on the entire teaching profession ever since. In other words, a policy that began at the local level was perpetuated and became systemic over time. Our present-day problems in education have deep historical roots.

The fact that this issue has persisted for centuries shows that a big, robust, and transformative education policy, informed by the work of historians, is requisite for confronting current labor practices. As low teacher pay reaches crisis levels today, leading to teacher burnout, turnover, and shortages, local and state governments are putting forward initiatives to improve compensation. By last count in 2023, nearly a dozen bills have been passed in various states. A federal minimum salary would go even further. In the House, Representatives Frederica Wilson and Jamaal Bowman, both former teachers and school administrators, have proposed the American Teacher Act, which would encourage states to raise public school teacher salaries to a minimum of \$60,000.¹⁷ Similar legislation has been introduced in the Senate.¹⁸

¹⁵"Municipal," *Boston Evening Transcript* (MA), Feb. 23, 1836, 2.

¹⁶Horace Mann, *Ninth Annual Report of the Board of Education, Together with the Ninth Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board* (Boston: Dutton & Wentworth, 1846), 30, 33, and 35.

¹⁷117th Congress (2021-2022), "H.R. 9566 American Teacher Act," [https://www.congress.gov/bills/117/congress/house-bill/9566?s=1&r=1#:~:text=Introduced%20in%20House%20\(12%2F14%2F2022\)&text=This%20bill%20directs%20the%20Department,elementary%20and%20secondary%20school%20teachers.](https://www.congress.gov/bills/117/congress/house-bill/9566?s=1&r=1#:~:text=Introduced%20in%20House%20(12%2F14%2F2022)&text=This%20bill%20directs%20the%20Department,elementary%20and%20secondary%20school%20teachers.)

¹⁸118th Congress (2023-2024), "S. 766 Pay Teachers Act," <https://www.congress.gov/bills/118/congress/senate-bill/766/all-info#:~:text=secondary%20school%20teachers.,Specifically%2C%20the%20bill%20requires%20states%20to%20establish%20a%20minimum%20annual,to%20comply%20with%20these%20requirements.&text=the%20Teacher%20and%20School%20Leader%20Incentive%20program.>

There is bipartisan support for this legislation, which, if passed, will benefit our nation's current teaching force, keeping educators in the field while also attracting the best and brightest to enter teaching and make it a lifelong career. No longer would teachers have to spend countless hours organizing, writing, and petitioning for a decent salary. Instead, their time and focus would be oriented toward what they trained to do: teach children and youth. Increasing teacher salaries, once and for all, could very well become a turning point to chart a new history for the teaching profession.

Amid the long-standing struggle over wages since the nineteenth century, teachers in the United States have played a vital role in building and maintaining the nation's schools and educating future leaders. As even more is required of teachers, even more can be required of educational historians who have the opportunity, given their knowledge and expertise, to present teachers' stories—not to mention broader stories in education—and make them visible to school administrators, school committee members, policymakers, and others who might feel compelled to challenge narratives that stymie social change and growth today.

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