



Contact:

Public Affairs Dept.
202/879-4458

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Oklahoma's Teacher Salaries Among Lowest in the Nation

Washington, D.C.—Oklahoma ranked 50th in the nation for its average teacher salary in 2002-03, according to the annual teacher salary survey released by the American Federation of Teachers on Thursday.

Oklahoma's average teacher salary for 2002-03 was \$33,277, up 1.2 percent from the previous year, placing it 50th in the nation. Oklahoma ranked 33rd for its average beginning teacher salary of \$27,684, up 1.7 percent from the year before. The AFT estimates that Oklahoma's average starting pay for the most recent school year, 2003-04, was \$28,570.

Regionally, Oklahoma's 50th place for average teacher salary was worse than its neighbors: Texas was 30th, at \$39,972; Kansas was 39th, at \$38,030; and Arkansas was 44th, at \$37,536.

Across the country, teachers' salaries remained relatively stagnant while their share of health benefits rose at all-time high rates, making it difficult to attract and keep good teachers at a time when they are increasingly needed, the report said.

Nationally, the 2002-03 average teacher salary, which is the most recent figure available, was \$45,771, up 3.3 percent from the previous year. The average beginning teacher salary was \$29,564, up 3.2 percent from the year before. But AFT's report noted that teachers' share of health insurance costs spiked an average 13 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"Exorbitant health insurance costs are taking an intolerable bite out of already inadequate teacher salaries. Teachers are being asked to do more, shortages persist in the most challenging areas to teach, yet compensation packages are insulting," said AFT Secretary-Treasurer Edward J. McElroy.

Furthermore, the AFT noted, superintendents' average salaries are as much as four times higher than teachers' average pay. "States and school districts are crying poverty when it comes to teachers' pay yet somehow find money for extravagant administrator salaries," McElroy said.

California led the nation with the highest average teacher salary for 2002-03, at \$55,693. South Dakota had the nation's lowest average teacher salary, at \$32,414. Alaska led the nation with the highest average beginning teacher salary for 2002-03, at \$37,401. Montana had the nation's lowest average beginning teacher salary, at \$23,052.

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The AFT represents 1.3 million pre-K through 12th-grade teachers; paraprofessionals and other school-related personnel; higher education faculty and professional staff; nurses and healthcare workers; and federal, state and local government employees.