



A Union of Professionals

AFT Teachers

Becoming a Teacher



Becoming a Teacher

New teachers overwhelmingly say they love what they do. They say it allows them to contribute to society and help others. And they would choose teaching again as a career, if they had the choice. If you have a genuine interest in helping children realize their dreams, and want to play a part in improving our society, then read on to find out how to become a teacher!



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Why teach?

Most teachers will tell you that teaching has many rewards. For starters, teachers directly affect the lives of the students they teach. Think about how much time students spend in school; most of that time is spent with a teacher. For some, teachers are among the most memorable people in their lives. Likewise, some students make a big impression on their teachers; it is gratifying for a teacher to watch a student develop and achieve academically, socially and—eventually—professionally. You may hear this often, but it's true: Teachers are directly responsible for educating future generations.

Beyond the satisfaction of preparing students for successful lives, teachers have a stimulating job that requires making quick decisions, dealing with interesting people from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, mastering and conveying essential and often complex subject matter, and advocating both for children and for quality education.



What do teachers do?

Just because you've been taught by many teachers doesn't mean you know what it takes to be a teacher. Teachers are responsible for many things that happen inside and outside a classroom. Their primary job is to instruct students and facilitate learning, which is hard work. It requires engaging with students in specific subject areas using a variety of teaching techniques, maintaining a safe and orderly classroom, developing lesson plans, assessing student progress, and interacting with parents and other members of the community. And that's just the beginning!

The school day and beyond: Generally, teachers arrive at school before students do, to prepare for the day's lessons. During regular school hours, teachers facilitate learning, instruct and supervise students. When students leave at the end of the school day, teachers keep working. They plan for the next day. They meet with parents, principals and other teachers. They evaluate student work—homework, tests, projects and papers. Many are also involved in other school-based activities, such as coaching a sports team, supervising a club or leading the school band.

Most students are on summer break from mid-June until late August. Although teachers aren't teaching every day during this time, many still work—teaching summer school or participating in professional development conferences, trainings, or fellowships in order to increase their skills and knowledge.





How much do teachers earn?

Districts pay most public school teachers based on their level of teaching experience. Many receive additional pay based on the amount of education they have beyond a bachelor's degree. In many districts, those with master's degrees make about twice as much as those with bachelor's degrees. Average salaries are always changing, but the average teacher salary in the 2006-07 school year was \$51,009. It takes teachers about 14 years to reach the average salary level.

Of course, salaries can vary a lot depending on where you teach; some places cost more to live than others.

- Among state averages in 2006-07, the highest average teacher salary was \$63,640, while the lowest was \$34,039.
- The average beginning teacher salary in 2006-07 was \$34,229.
- A few teachers—in some of the highest paying districts in states like California, Michigan, New York and Pennsylvania;



and with more than 25 years of experience, advanced degrees and additional school responsibilities—make over \$100,000.

For more information on teachers' salaries, benefits and other trends, visit www.aft.org/salary.

How do I become a teacher?

Teacher education programs: Each state sets its own requirements for becoming a teacher. The process for meeting these requirements is called “licensure” or “certification.” College or university teacher education programs prepare teacher candidates to meet the state’s requirements. In general, all teacher education programs include three components: required course work for the subject and grade level you

want to teach; courses on how to teach (called “pedagogy”); and clinical experience, which is many times referred to as “student teaching.”

Certification: Once you successfully complete your teacher education program, you still will need to become certified or licensed in the state in which you want to teach. Nearly all public schools and some private schools require teachers to be certified. Every state certifies its own teachers, so the requirements vary from state to state. Generally, however, you must complete an accredited education program, with a major in the subject area you plan to teach, and you must pass a state test such as the widely used PRAXIS exam or a basic-skills test. Once you are certified, you are initially qualified to teach in that state’s public schools. Most licenses and certificates are granted on a “provisional” basis, which means they are valid for a certain amount of time—most of them between three and five years. In order to qualify for a “permanent” certificate or license, each state has additional requirements, such as obtaining a

higher degree, completing additional course work or taking another test. For certification information in your state, visit www.aft.org/tools4teachers/becoming.htm#licensure.

Reciprocity: Teachers certified at an accredited college or university in one state may be allowed to transfer their teaching certificate to another state. This is known as “reciprocity.” Usually, a state will require teachers who were licensed elsewhere to meet any local requirements for certification within a specified period of time. For information about reciprocity, visit www.ncate.org/public/reciprocityGraduates.asp?ch=154.

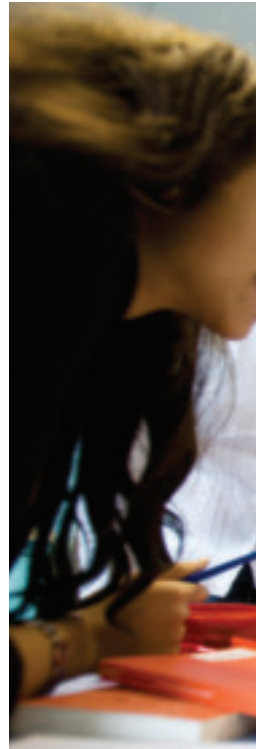
What can I do now to prepare for a teaching career?

If you want to learn more about the teaching profession, start by asking a teacher you know and admire about how he or she became a teacher and why. In addition, many teacher education programs require applicants to have a high grade point average, to have taken classes in the liberal arts, and to submit an application.

While you are in middle or high school, there are ways you can prepare for a college-level teacher education program, including:

- Take challenging courses to be ready for college-level work and study;
- Take either the SAT or ACT college entrance exams;
- Consider where you will attend college; and
- Think about what you would like to teach.

Choosing what to teach, or what field to teach in, is probably the most important decision to make once you decide to become a teacher.



Think about what age students you would enjoy teaching. Also consider the type of content or subjects you want to teach. If you think you would like to teach a variety of subjects, you might enjoy teaching elementary-age students. If you would prefer to specialize in a subject like physics, psychology or Spanish, you might enjoy teaching middle school or high school students.

Supply and demand: Also consider the relative demand for teachers in a particular subject. Some subjects have significant shortages of teachers, but a few subjects actually have an over-supply of teachers. Nationally, subjects such as mathematics, bilingual education, chemistry and special education need more certified teachers. Elementary education, French language and English language arts, for example, have a balanced supply of teachers—there aren't too many and there aren't too few. A few subjects have too many teachers, including health education, physical education, dance education and social studies.



Keep in mind that these categories are based on national averages. The local and regional supply of teachers for certain subjects can vary significantly. For detailed information about teacher supply and demand, by field and region, see the most recent Job Search Handbook for Educators, published by the American Association for Employment in Education, or visit www.aaee.org to order a copy.

Where can I find teacher education programs?

College and universities: To be a teacher, you will need a college degree. Typically, larger colleges and universities will offer four- or five-year programs that lead to certification in fields like elementary education, secondary education, special education or English language learners. These programs provide the most direct and comprehensive path to a teaching career. Some people attend a two-year college, then transfer into a teacher education program at a four-year college; however, not every two-year college meets the requirements of a four-year college.

Online: Also, some colleges and universities offer online courses that prepare teacher candidates. Due to fast growth of online courses, you should carefully research any online program to verify its quality before you decide to enroll.

Alternative certification programs: Depending on location and need, other options may be available for you to become a teacher. Alternative certification programs like Teach for America, and various local teacher fellowships or teacher corps programs, prepare people to be teachers, but vary in terms of quality. The best alternative teacher preparation programs provide potential teachers with the basic subject-matter content and rudimentary instructional delivery skills they need. However, these programs also condense years of preparation into a short time period and may not work for everybody. Most alternative certification programs require at least a

bachelor's degree. For a list of high-quality alternative teacher preparation options, visit www.ncate.org/public/AlternateRouteList.asp?ch=2.

Picking a program: Regardless of the path you choose to become a teacher, keep the following in mind when researching teacher education programs:

- 1. Accreditation:** The program should be accredited by one of the major accrediting institutions in the United States. Most state licensing offices will not recognize your degree or training unless it was completed at an accredited institution.
- 2. Fit:** The program should provide you with course work in areas you might want to teach—i.e., find a school that has the same focus as you do. For example, some schools may have a better reputation in secondary education than in elementary; it is important to choose a program that fits you and your teaching aspirations.
- 3. Clinical program:** The program should provide a strong clinical experience (often called “student teaching” or “mentored teaching”). It is vital for you to practice your skills and knowledge in a real classroom setting with real students. A good clinical experience is not just one with a long timeframe; it also must include professors and courses that help you build and reflect on your experience in the classroom.
- 4. Certification data:** Find out how graduates of the program do on state-administered certification tests and what percentage of graduates receive certification overall. This information indicates how well the program will prepare you to pass any state's certification or licensing standards.
- 5. Reciprocity:** Finally, check into reciprocity agreements your certifying state has with other states. For example, getting certified in New York means you have reciprocity with over 30 other states. Some states have reciprocity with more states, and others with fewer states. This is an important consideration if you are not sure where you will be settling.

For help deciding where to attend college, and for more information about different types of teacher education programs, visit www.aft.org/tools4teachers/directory.htm.

Is there financial aid available to help me become a teacher?

Becoming a teacher takes years of college and lots of hard work. The financial costs can be high. The good news is that there are more opportunities than ever for teachers-in-training and new teachers to reduce their financial burden.

Loan forgiveness: Many college students take on debt in the form of loans. Some financial relief, called “loan forgiveness,” is available if you plan to teach in certain subjects or in schools designated as low-income. Under the Federal Teacher Loan Forgiveness Program, teachers may be eligible for forgiveness of up to \$5,000 if they teach for five years in low-income schools and meet other requirements, and up to \$17,500 if they teach in certain specialty areas such as math, science and special education. You can learn more about these programs at www.aft.org/tools4teachers/federal-programs.htm.

Other incentives: Many states offer their own financial incentives to attract talented people to teaching. These come in the form of grants, loan forgiveness and other financial incentives for committing to teach, often in high-needs areas. For a complete list of programs, state by state, visit www.aft.org/tools4teachers/loan-forgiveness.htm.

This pamphlet touches on the basics of what you should know about becoming a teacher. To learn more, ask a teacher and visit www.aft.org/tools4teachers/becoming.htm.



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