

## Book Review

### Teachers Have It Easy:

The Big Sacrifices and Small Salaries of America's Teachers  
By Daniel Moulthrop, Ninive Clements Calegari, & Dave Eggers  
New York: The New Press, 2005

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One afternoon while perusing the local bookstore, a book cover caught my eye. There it was, in bold capital letters: *TEACHERS HAVE IT EASY*. I immediately marched over to the book. Who on earth would write such a thing? Having been a teacher for 18 years and counting, I knew nothing could be further from the truth. Then I read the rest of the title in smaller print: *The Big Sacrifices and Small Salaries of America's Teachers*. I felt myself let out a sigh of relief, then immediately purchased the book. Finally, someone has said it!

There have been many scholarly studies concerning the personal and financial sacrifices teachers make, but few of the studies are read by the public. As a result, there are many misperceptions about the lives of teachers. The authors of *Teachers Have It Easy: The Big Sacrifices and Small Salaries of America's Teachers* have written a book for everyone, not merely those in the field of education. Authors Dave Eggers, Ninive Clements Calegari, and Daniel Moulthrop describe the hard and painful truth about teaching using authentic teachers' voices punctuated with hard-hitting data. The format is reader-friendly and its use of narrative is powerful and engaging. The skillful weaving of research data into the stories makes reading facts and figures palatable and enjoyable.

The authors begin with the argument that not only does the educational system need to change, but also the way the system is viewed

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needs to change. If not, schools will suffer the consequences of low teacher pay in three ways:

- (a) Many who could enter the profession will not;
- (b) Thousands of great young teachers leave early in their careers;
- (c) Low pay has a debilitating effect on morale.

In addition, the reader will encounter a bar graph that compares teacher salary to the salaries of various other professions', such as engineering, computer science, accounting, business, and sales. Teachers' salaries are by far the lowest.

### Dispelling the Myths

We have all listened to friends, relatives, neighbors, and acquaintances not involved in education give their opinions about the teaching profession. The teaching profession is characterized by many myths. Some of these myths are teachers have a great hourly wage, teachers get summers off, and the job is comparable to other professions with similar pay scales.

The myths held by the general public about teaching are dispelled in this book. The authors effectively tackle each of these assumptions with a great deal of data. Personally, I think I am going to make copies of this portion of the book to carry with me in my purse. When I have conversations with folks who believe these myths about teaching, I will merely hand them a copy.

### Authentic Voices

While powerful, the heart of this book is not found in the facts and figures. The significance of the book is found in the countless heartbreaking stories of teachers who cannot afford to stay in teaching, including those who work multiple jobs to remain in teaching while earning a decent wage, and those who must neglect their own families to make ends meet while trying to do the best possible for their students. Some of the stories are unbelievable, and include accounts of teachers who work second and third jobs at various retailers, restaurants, bartending, cutting lawns, and delivering newspapers. The list is endless. Even with the extra jobs, teachers are often unable to buy homes. Many rent or have roommates. Many more live far away from the schools at which they teach.

The issue of teacher pay leads to the next set of stories in the book, which are stories of teachers and their living conditions. The stories tell of teachers needing the financial help of their extended families, living in government-subsidized low-income housing, renting without being

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able to save for a home, or relying on the income of a spouse in order to own a home. Then there is the difficulty of raising a family in such circumstances. Again, these stories are heartbreaking, yet this is the truth that teachers live, and the truth the public must hear.

### You're A Teacher? Well, Good for You!

Are there social costs in choosing to teach? Absolutely. Society's jaundiced view of the profession only adds to the problem. Through the voices of teachers, the authors illustrate many of the social costs, which include the relative standard of living for teachers is the lowest it has been in 40 years, the public see teachers as "givers," and families are often disappointed when a child chooses teaching as a profession. While teachers are expected to be intelligent and highly qualified, they are treated as second-class citizens. The authors make a very important point in this section of the book, which is people in general feel teaching is not actually challenging and anyone can teach with little or no training.

### Reality Check

So what does it really take to be an effective teacher? The experts, sociologists, psychologists, cognitive scientists, education-policy makers, and professors of education offer what they believe are the elements of effective teaching. The experts indicate teaching is a highly complex art as well as a science. It is not something that merely anyone with a bachelor's degree can do. Teaching requires a wide range of expertise, both academic and social. Teaching is also stressful and requires a high level of energy. It is demanding; teachers have to be "on" at all times.

The reality of day-to-day teaching is told through several teacher testimonials, but the most powerful tool used by the authors is a comparison. Two typical workdays are compared minute by minute—the day of a pharmaceutical sales representative and the day of a high school math teacher. This is another segment of the book that I would like to carry with me ready to give to folks. I actually laughed out loud while reading this chapter of the book. I have worked in education as a paraprofessional, a teacher, and a part-time university instructor. I thought my workday was comparable to those in other professions, but the comparison shows nothing could be further from the truth. The information is organized in terms of a table with columns, with the teacher's day on the left and the sales representative's on the right. The teacher's day starts at 4:00am. The sales representative's day starts at 7:00am. The teacher's column is full, while the other column has a great deal of blank space.

The benefits of the sales representative's job are also highlighted in the comparison, such as a company car, subsidized gasoline, seminars (fully funded by the company), expense accounts, and plenty of time for rest and relaxation. In contrast, the teacher's day is full from start to finish with teaching, preparing materials, tutoring, checking e-mails, grading papers, and meetings. The sales representative's workday ends with his 3:15pm arrival at home. The teacher arrives home at 6:00pm, but brings work home to do after his children are in bed. The comparison makes the life of a teacher concrete and real for the reader.

### Why Do It?

So why do teachers teach? Why do they enter such a profession? The authors devote an entire chapter to this topic. Teachers of all levels and experience share the reasons they stay in the profession and how rewarding the profession can be both emotionally and intellectually. These teachers love their jobs. In contrast, the following chapter explains why good teachers consider leaving the profession. These two very different chapters make an important point: while there are some wonderful teachers who are dedicated and excel at what they do, there are many more amazing teachers that leave the profession. The resulting teacher shortage is hard to fill. Many people, who want to teach, choose not to due to the low pay, lack of advancement opportunities, lack of respect, appreciation and personal safety, and because teachers are often made the scapegoat for the problems of society. The authors make a powerful case. Reform is needed.

### So What Do We Do?

While painting a very real and often depressing view of the teaching profession, the authors also offer hope by describing successful reforms that are making a difference for the better in school districts around the country. These reforms deal with teacher pay and alternative methods of compensation. These reform movements are not without their problems, but the examples illustrate positive changes are occurring. The authors also describe many alternative programs that have been created to address teacher shortages. The programs include recruiting teachers from other countries, implementing public relations campaigns, allowing alternative paths to teacher credentialing, and paying teachers compensation in the form of coupons and discounts in the community. Would these programs be necessary if teachers were paid properly? The authors argue no. While these programs have met with some success,

the authors remind the reader, the more one relies on alternatives, the more one would mistakenly think the problem has been resolved.

### Taking Action

What can teacher educators do? Educators should ensure teacher credential students are entering the profession aware of the economic hardships and personal sacrifices of teaching while working toward change. Reading *Teachers Have It Easy* in teacher education coursework and engaging in meaningful dialogue about the issues is a simple and effective way to begin the process of improving the teaching profession. Furthermore, teacher education and the credentialing process must embrace realistic working conditions so those entering the teaching profession can be advocates of their profession and effect positive change. It is important for credential students to be prepared with a more honest perspective of teaching to not only keep them in the profession, but also ensure they will work to improve it.

Teacher educators must also realize their job does not end once students leave their programs. Teacher educators possess a great deal of knowledge and skills, powerful tools that can be used to improve the teaching profession. *Teachers Have It Easy* is an excellent tool to have in one's tool kit to promote dialogue and action. The authors of *Teachers Have It Easy* have given us an incredible gift that serves as a stepping-stone for effecting positive and significant change in the teaching profession. Someone has finally said it. It is up to us to help spread the word.