

Their earnings are converging with the national average, but are higher than in Alaska's private sector

More than 8,000 public elementary and secondary school teachers taught in Alaska during the 2000-2001 school year. This is approximately three percent of the state's total employment, making teaching one of Alaska's largest occupations. This article looks at current statistics for teachers in Alaska and the U.S.

Average U.S. teacher salary catching up to Alaska

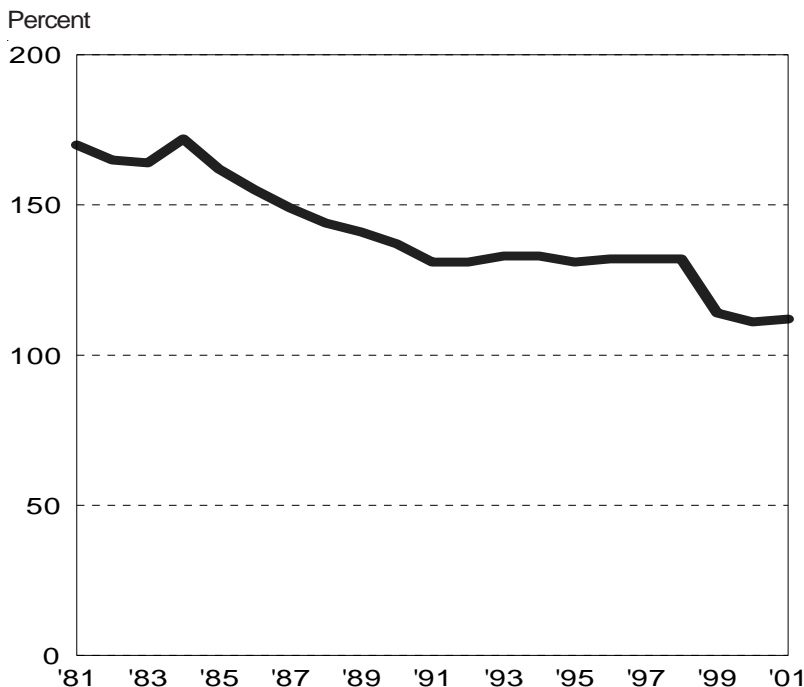
In the mid-1980s, Alaska was flush with oil revenue and the state's teachers were making 170 percent as much as the national average teacher salary. (See Exhibit 1.) Since then, however, the gap has narrowed significantly, and by the 2000-2001 school year Alaska teachers made about 111 percent as much as the national average. (See Exhibits 1 and 2.)

Until the 1990-91 school year, average teacher salaries in Alaska were the highest in the country, but by 2000-2001 eight states had average salaries higher than Alaska's. (See Exhibit 2.) Average teacher salaries in Connecticut are now more than \$5,000 higher than in Alaska. On the other hand, the average teacher in South Dakota makes about \$18,000 dollars less than the average Alaska teacher.

Not coincidentally, many of the states with the highest average teaching salaries are also the states that benefited most from the booming economy of the mid to late 1990s. Alaska teachers' salaries have not risen as much partly because Alaska's economy did not experience such dramatic growth.

Alaska public schools differ from other states in that the majority of their funds come from the

1 Average Alaska Teacher Salary As percentage of national average



Sources: Alaska Department of Education and National Center for Education Statistics

Average Teacher Salaries Ranked by state – 2000-2001 **2**

state budget, rather than from local tax dollars. As oil revenue has declined, budgetary pressures have kept teacher salaries flat in Alaska, while those in other states grew during a record-setting economic expansion that put extra money into state budgets.

Consequently, the U.S. average for teacher salaries grew 31.5 percent in the decade from school year 1990-91 to school year 2000-01. During that same decade, Alaska teachers' average salary grew just 10.9 percent, last among all states and the District of Columbia. (See Exhibit 3.)

Teachers' salaries high relative to private sector

Despite losing ground to other states, Alaska teachers' salaries have outpaced private sector salaries in the state during the last decade. Only Rhode Island and Pennsylvania rank higher in the pay ratio of teachers to occupations in the private sector. (See Exhibit 4.) What's more, Alaska teachers have moved up the list in recent years, from having the sixth highest ratio in 2000 and only the twenty-ninth highest a decade ago.

It should be emphasized, however, that Alaska's high ranking has as much to do with the state's private sector salaries remaining flat relative to the rest of the country in the last decade as with any actual increases in teachers' salaries. In fact, the 2000-2001 school year was the first time in five years that the average teacher salary actually increased. (See Exhibit 5.) Average salaries decreased the previous four years due mostly to higher-paid teachers accepting retirement incentives as discussed below.

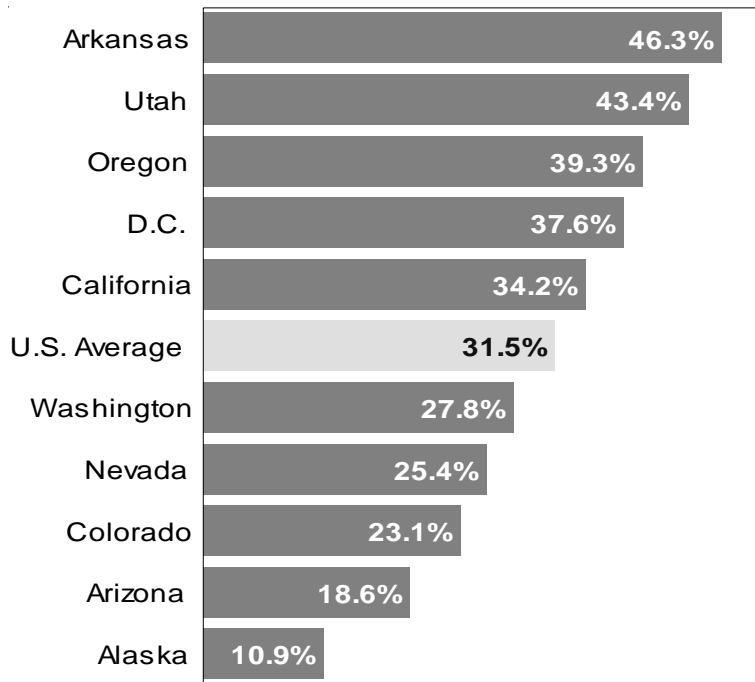
Beginning salaries still highest in the nation

For new teachers, however, there's still no better place than Alaska to begin a career if salary is the principal consideration. The average salary for beginning teachers in Alaska (with BA degrees

Rank	State	Total Teachers	Average Salary	Percent of U.S. Average
1	Connecticut	42,512	\$53,507	123.7%
2	California	299,897	52,480	121.3%
3	New Jersey	98,395	51,955	120.1%
4	New York	216,000	51,020	118.0%
5	Michigan	95,200	50,515	116.8%
6	Rhode Island	11,272	50,400	116.5%
7	Pennsylvania	114,700	49,528	114.5%
8	District of Columbia	5,000	48,488	112.1%
9	Alaska	8,136	48,123	111.3%
10	Illinois	128,817	47,865	110.7%
11	Massachusetts	79,473	47,789	110.5%
12	Delaware	7,466	47,047	108.8%
13	Maryland	53,673	45,963	106.3%
14	Oregon	27,900	44,988	104.0%
15	Nevada	17,838	44,234	102.3%
	U.S. Average	57,908	43,250	100.0%
16	Indiana	59,728	43,000	99.4%
17	Ohio	113,000	42,892	99.2%
18	Minnesota	56,000	42,212	97.6%
19	Washington	51,164	42,143	97.4%
20	Georgia	93,636	42,141	97.4%
21	North Carolina	80,390	41,496	95.9%
22	Wisconsin	61,285	40,939	94.7%
23	Hawaii	10,785	40,536	93.7%
24	Virginia	82,616	40,247	93.1%
25	Colorado	42,100	39,184	90.6%
26	Texas	274,345	38,359	88.7%
27	New Hampshire	14,019	38,301	88.6%
28	Vermont	8,710	38,254	88.4%
29	Florida	133,545	38,230	88.4%
30	South Carolina	44,449	37,938	87.7%
31	Alabama	47,527	37,606	87.0%
32	Tennessee	56,971	37,413	86.5%
33	Idaho	13,900	37,109	85.8%
34	Kentucky	40,746	36,688	84.8%
35	Arizona	44,562	36,502	84.4%
36	Iowa	34,203	36,479	84.3%
37	Utah	21,500	36,441	84.3%
38	Maine	17,000	36,373	84.1%
39	West Virginia	20,337	35,888	83.0%
40	Kansas	33,010	35,766	82.7%
41	Missouri	64,000	35,091	81.1%
42	Arkansas	29,025	34,729	80.3%
43	Wyoming	6,895	34,678	80.2%
44	Nebraska	20,939	34,258	79.2%
45	Louisiana	50,366	33,615	77.7%
46	New Mexico	20,078	33,531	77.5%
47	Montana	10,290	33,249	76.9%
48	Oklahoma	42,120	32,545	75.2%
49	Mississippi	30,782	31,954	73.9%
50	North Dakota	7,713	30,891	71.4%
51	South Dakota	9,296	30,265	70.0%

Source: U.S. Department of Education

3 Growth in Teacher Salaries 1991 – 2000



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics and American Federation of Teachers

only) is more than \$3,000 higher than in any other state. (See Exhibit 6.)

Offsetting higher beginning salaries is the high cost of living. According to the 2001 American Chamber of Commerce Research Association (ACCRA) survey, Alaska has four of the top twenty most expensive urban areas in the country: Juneau, Kodiak, Anchorage, and Fairbanks. In rural Alaska the cost of living is substantially higher. Food costs for a family of four are almost \$300 more a month in Bethel or Nome than in Anchorage, for example.

So why do beginning teacher salaries rank higher in Alaska even as average teacher salaries have fallen relative to other states? Faced with shrinking state revenues in the last decade, Alaska offered significant statewide retirement incentives to its teachers with the most seniority (and highest salaries). A large number of them accepted and were then replaced by newer teachers at the lower end of the pay scale. The result was a lower average teacher salary.

4 Teacher Salaries vs. Private Sector Earnings In selected states

State	Average Teacher Salary	Private Sector Avg. Earnings	Pay Ratio Teachers to Private Sector	Rank		
				2000-2001	1999-2000	1990-1991
Rhode Island	\$50,400	\$31,210	1.61	1	1	1
Pennsylvania	49,528	33,609	1.47	2	2	5
Alaska	48,123	33,478	1.44	3	6	29
Montana	33,249	23,197	1.43	4	5	8
Nevada	44,234	31,387	1.41	5	7	4
U.S. Average	43,250	35,305	1.23	–	–	–
Missouri	35,091	31,599	1.11	46	43	46
New Hampshire	38,301	35,242	1.09	47	44	36
Texas	38,359	35,695	1.07	48	50	47
Massachusetts	47,789	45,045	1.06	49	46	37
Colorado	39,184	37,552	1.04	50	49	38

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics and American Federation of Teachers

A related factor is the difficulty Alaska has retaining teachers in rural areas. Many village residents tell stories of how little time some new teachers stay. Alaska's population is generally more migratory than the U.S. average, which contributes to more turnover and a smaller percentage of Alaska teachers reaching the higher pay levels that come with seniority.

Efforts to retain rural teachers

Rural Alaska school districts have always struggled to attract and retain enough quality teachers. Historically, the state has been able to offer significantly higher salaries than other states, but as the salary gap has narrowed in the last decade, applications have fallen and the problem has become more acute.

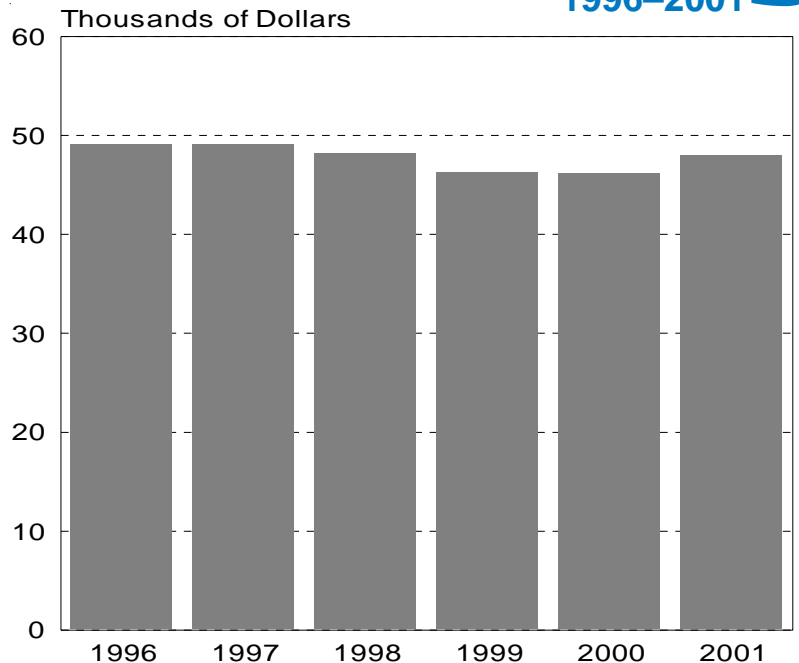
With less monetary enticement to offer, school administrators in rural districts have attempted to attract applicants by emphasizing the other rewards of teaching in Alaska's unique rural communities. Among these are the solitary beauty of the landscape and the richness of the culture. Successfully attracting teachers, however, is only the first hurdle; the second is retaining them.

One of the reasons teacher turnover is high in rural Alaska is because most teachers are either from the lower forty-eight or from Alaska's urban areas. They are usually unprepared for the harsh climate, isolation, and cultural differences in rural communities. The average turnover rate in rural districts is 20 percent compared to seven percent in urban districts. St. Mary's School District posted a 178 percent turnover in 2000.

In one effort to curb turnover, University of Alaska Fairbanks has crafted the Rural Educator Preparation Partnership Program (REPP). REPP's goal is to train teachers from rural areas, so they can obtain teaching certificates without having to leave their communities.

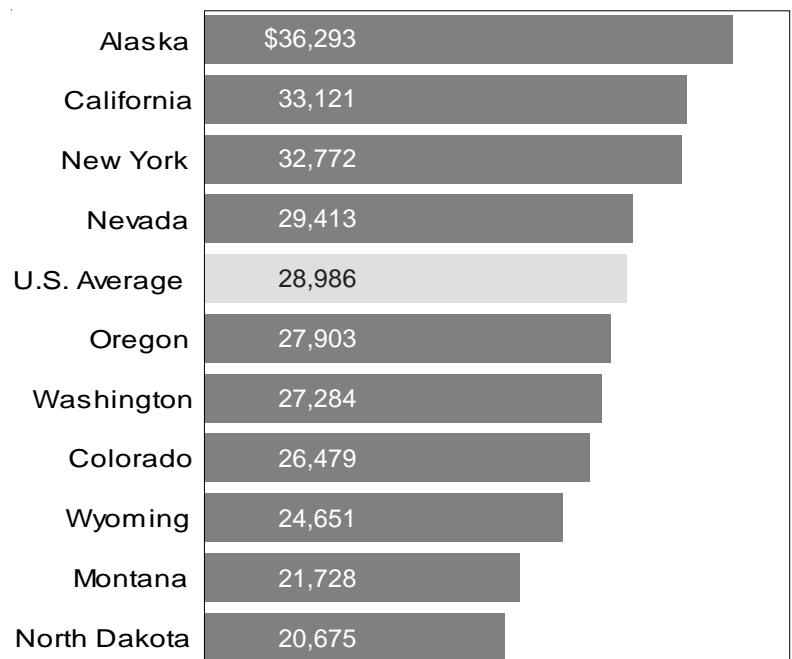
Residents with bachelor's degrees complete a year-long student teaching internship in a rural

Average Alaska Teacher Salaries 1996-2001



Source: Association of Alaska School Boards

Beginning Teacher Salaries Alaska leads in 2000-2001



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics and American Federation of Teachers

school under the guidance of a mentor teacher. After successfully completing the year they are recommended for type A teaching certificates. Since its inception in 1996, REPP has graduated 51 elementary school interns and 29 secondary school interns.

A federally funded program at University of Alaska Southeast is also tackling the problem, with specific emphasis on training Alaska Natives to be teachers. The program provided 23 full scholarships in 2001 to Native students pursuing bachelor's or master's degrees in education at UAS.

These and other efforts to train more Alaska Natives as teachers are important for many reasons. Alaska Natives make up about 23 percent of the public school population, (see Exhibit 7) yet less than five percent of the teacher population. In rural areas the proportion of Native students is much higher. For example, Native students are 98 percent of enrollment in the Bering Strait

School District and 96 percent in the Annette Island School District. More Native teachers—especially those who grew up in rural areas and are likely to stay—may reduce the dropout rate for Native students, which is disproportionately high.

A teacher shortage?

The most current ten-year forecast calls for a modest 4 percent increase in total teaching positions from 1998 to 2008; however, a large portion of the current teaching workforce is expected to retire in the next decade. As already noted, retention is an ongoing concern. As a result, education officials are concerned about the state's ability to fill all of its expected openings with qualified teachers.

It has always been difficult to attract enough qualified teachers to certain geographic areas. Similarly, there are several teacher specialties for which demand often threatens to exceed supply. (See Exhibit 8.)

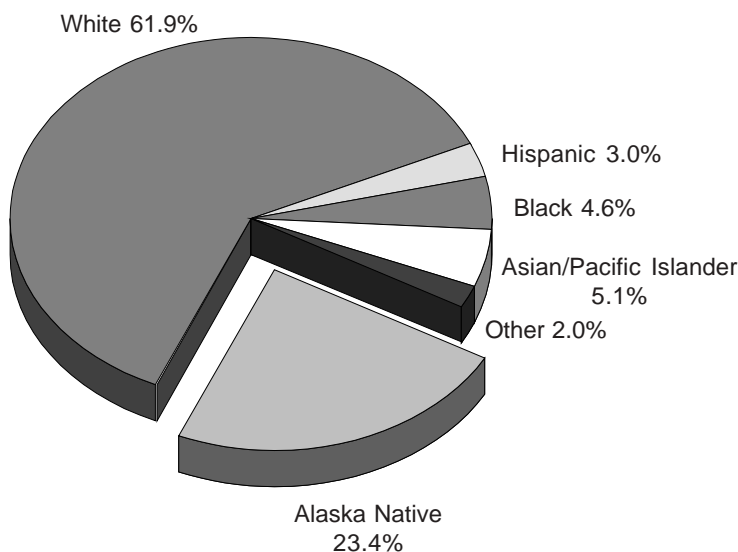
Districts across the state face a shortage of secondary education teachers in math, science and foreign languages. Special education teachers, too, are in high demand at all grade levels. Shortages at the national level are in similar areas.

Education experts believe the shortage may be due to math and science majors being lured away from teaching by higher wages in the private sector. As for special education teachers, the stress and difficulty of the job make it a specialty where retention rates are low, and graduation rates are insufficient to meet the demand.

To address the shortfall, Alaska and other states have been issuing waivers that allow teachers to teach outside their specialty areas. For obvious reasons, waivers are not the preferred long-term solution to the problem.

Alternative approaches to teacher certification are among other possible solutions being explored

7 Alaska Student Enrollment By ethnic group



Source: University of Alaska Fairbanks, Alaska Teacher Placement

in Alaska and throughout the United States. Alaska Senate Bill 86, which took effect July 4, 2001, grants local school districts the authority to hire applicants who hold a bachelor's degree and who have at least five years work experience in the subject area they will teach. Teachers hired under the new law must also enroll in a local mentoring program. The teachers become eligible for certification after teaching for two years.

Many education officials believe such programs may be able to tap a large supply of professionals in technical fields who are interested in mid-life career changes. This could bring potentially significant benefits to students, since teachers coming from other professions have real-world experience and expertise that can be difficult to obtain in academic settings.

Conclusion

Due to relatively stable demographic trends, the number of teachers in Alaska is not expected to grow significantly in the near future. Due to relatively high turnover and retirement, however, teachers in certain specialties and those willing to locate to rural areas will always have job opportunities.

The days when Alaska teachers made dramatically higher salaries than did teachers in the rest of the country are probably gone for good. Just as the Alaska economy has matured and moved out of the boom and bust cycle of the 70s and 80s, teacher salaries have moderated and moved closer to the national average. Despite this trend, beginning teachers still make more in Alaska than in any other state, and Alaska teachers fare well in a comparison with occupations in the state's private sector.

Teacher Shortage, Surplus Areas Alaska in 2000-2001



Shortage Areas

- Special Education
- Math and Physics
- English as a Second Language

Balanced Areas

- Elementary Education
- English/Language Arts
- Social Studies
- French, German, and Classical Languages
- Business Education
- Music Education

Surplus Areas

- Physical Education
- Dance Education

Source: University of Alaska Fairbanks, Alaska Teacher Placement