PS1 for 12/18/86#IS RAISING TEACHERS' SALARIES THE ANSWER?#

An exchange of letters in the journal (BF)Education Week(end BF) pinpoints the perennial controversy about teachers' salaries. There seems to be a widespread assumption that teachers are underpaid, and certainly a concerted effort is being made by teacher unions to sell the public on the notion that raising teachers' salaries should be the first step toward solving whatever problems we have in the public schools.

It started with a news report about an opinion poll among teachers which purported to prove that we are facing a teacher shortage because teachers are leaving their profession to take higher-paying jobs. A school superintendent then wrote in to say that those who complain about low teacher salaries fail to point out that teachers work only a 180-day year, whereas most other Americans work a 250-day year. That's quite a difference.

An angry teacher then wrote back to say he was ""appalled'' at this argument, but admitted that ""of course teachers' salaries don't look so bad if you calculate them on a daily or hourly rate.'' Then he went on to describe how teachers moonlight in the summer to augment their annual income.

According to the National Education Association (NEA), the current average classroom teacher pay is $25,257 per year, which the NEA describes as 7.3 percent higher than last year and the fifth year in a row that the increase has surpassed inflation. This figure is competitive with comparable annual salaries received by men and women who have non-scientific college degrees and work a full year.

The NEA admits that teacher salaries nationwide have risen more sharply in the last two years than at any time since the 1950s. In the District of Columbia, the average teacher's salary is $33,990.

When teachers compare their salaries with others who earn more annual income, they fail to mention several key factors. First, whereas teacher contracts call for work on 175 to 184 days per year, with 180 days the average, most other Americans work a 250-day year, and those in business for themselves

often work a 300-day year in order to earn their higher income. The 70+ free days per year enjoyed by teachers, which can be used for leisure, family, or moonlighting, are a tremendous job benefit which most Americans simply do not enjoy.

Second, when teachers complain about being underpaid, they forget to mention their expensive fringe benefits, including teacher retirement, health and welfare benefits, leave benefits, extra pay for extra duty, unemployment insurance, and workers' compensation. Like most government employees, teachers' retirement systems are generally much more generous than the retirement benefits available to private sector employees.

Nationally, teachers' fringe benefits average about 22 percent of salary, whereas the comparable figure for all workers outside of teaching is 19 percent. In some states, including California, New York and Michigan, teachers' fringe benefits are 35 percent of salary.

Third is the matter of tenure. While it is practically impossible to put a dollar value on this benefit, just ask anybody who has been laid off how much he thinks it would be worth to have the right not to be laid off or fired.

Fourth is steady employment. The teacher who wrote the angry letter compared his pay to plumbers and mechanics, but they enjoy their good wage only when they are working, and they do not have a contract for a 180-day work year.

Would increasing teachers' salaries improve the quality of schools and turn out a better product? Teachers in private schools are paid substantially less, and receive less in fringe benefits, than public school teachers.

Yet it is common knowledge that private schools often turn out a better product than public schools. If they didn't, they would disappear because nobody would pay for a product if he can get a better product free.

Some people will accept a lower salary if they enjoy better working conditions. It is not at all clear that working conditions for teachers in private schools are better than in public schools because class size is often larger in private schools, and private school teachers are far more subject to

the prying eyes of parents and the policy dictates of the school administration.

If the NEA would use its $108 million annual budget toward the goal of improving education rather than demanding more taxpayers' dollars, its statements would fall on more receptive ears. Instead, and most unfortunately, the NEA convention resolutions support a leftwing activist agenda: tax-funded abortions, sex clinics in schools, gay rights legislation, opposition to defense spending, and fighting parents' rights and private schools every step of the way.