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Teachers in US Education

Based on the work of Nora Gordon and Paul E. Peterson

“What We Know About Our Schools,” an essay by Nora Gordon and Paul E. Peterson, includes an examination of the role of teachers in the US education system, highlighting issues related to teacher quality, compensation, and preparation.

Key Points on Teachers

1. Teachers are the most important publicly funded school resource affecting academic achievement. Their effectiveness demonstrably affects students’ scores on standardized tests and long-term outcomes, such as college attendance and earnings.
2. Despite the importance of teacher quality, teacher compensation systems are poorly designed to attract and retain high-quality teachers.
3. Most districts pay public school teachers according to “step and lane” schedules based on years of experience and educational attainment. These structures are inefficiently rigid and poorly aligned with teacher effectiveness.
4. Teacher effectiveness, as measured by student test score performance, improves sharply between the first and second years, with clear additional gains over the next four years. After five years, little achievement gain from additional experience is observed.
5. Attainment of a master’s degree does little to enhance a teacher’s ability to increase student performance, yet most districts reward this degree with higher pay.
6. The standard salary schedule provides slow growth in monetary rewards for beginning teachers, potentially contributing to high turnover rates within the first five years.
7. Teacher shortages are concentrated in certain areas, such as math, science, special education, and English as a second language, where potential educators have more remunerative alternatives.
8. Teachers’ unions have generally been successful in fighting deviations from the standard “step and lane” salary schedule, precluding compensation based on teacher performance, grade level of students, subject matter taught, or social composition of school.

**Based on “What We Know About Our Schools,” by Nora Gordon and Paul E. Peterson,
at www.hoover.org/fact-based-policy-program.**



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