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How the teacher pay raise formula could worsen Seattle's inequity

by Marguerite Roza

Much of the debate over teacher salaries at the heart of the Seattle teachers' first contract-related strike in 30 years is focused on what percent raise teachers should receive. That's a missed opportunity.

Neither the Seattle School District nor the Seattle Education Association, the teachers' union, is taking on a critical underlying issue: the built-in inequities across schools created by the district's outdated, traditional pay scale.

Here's how it works. Seattle's salary schedule awards "step and column" increases associated with years on the job and degrees earned. A teacher with a master's degree and 15 years' experience makes \$79,788, some \$22,000 more than her peer who also holds a master's but has only five years' experience. Of course, wages in many fields increase with experience, but teaching has more heavily back-loaded pay—meaning a disproportionate share of earnings comes late in a career. Such salary policies can result in uneven spending across schools, when teachers with more experience are clustered in some schools, while other schools are filled with mostly more junior teachers.

How does this play out in Seattle? In the south end, where district data show poverty is greatest, the average teacher at Rainier Beach High School earns \$60,673. Traveling north, salaries rise steadily until you reach the district's northernmost high school, Ingraham, where average teacher pay is \$78,898. In Seattle, more experienced, better-educated teachers flock to the wealthier schools and take a disproportionate share of the district's state and local monies with them. The result? The district spends a greater chunk of its base salary dollars on schools with the lowest needs. That's an equity problem.

The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights has asked superintendents to address these inequities in districts where they persist. But in Seattle, the only options on the negotiating table simply exacerbate the problem. The two sides are battling over the magnitude of an across-the-board percentage cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) increase. At first blush, these percentage raises may seem to be the fairest way to divvy up new salary dollars. Every teacher gets the same *percentage* raise. But the system fails to spread *dollars* evenly. In other words, these fixed-percentage increases will further widen the spending gap between schools with more experienced teachers and schools with less experienced teachers. The district's pay offer at press time includes a 14.66 percent COLA raise over three years, yielding an \$8,000-a-year boost for a teacher with five years' experience. A peer with 15 years' experience stands to see a roughly \$11,000 increase. This steers a greater portion of the district's new monies into schools with more veteran teachers—schools that not so coincidentally enroll the most affluent students. A school with 50 more-senior teachers would garner \$150,000 more in new dollars than a school with 50 more-junior teachers. Is this what equity looks like? Some Seattleites may ask whether all this really matters. Just take a look at the higher teacher turnover rates in the south end to better understand how pay policies can hardwire inequities into our schools.

Rather than tussle over what number to plug into a fixed-*percent* raise, Seattle leaders could contemplate delivering COLAs in fixed-*dollar* increments (say every teacher gets a flat \$9,500) that would at least yield a more even distribution of dollars across schools. This move could help the district in the long run, dishing out a bigger slice of the new-money pie to teachers in the early years of their career—when teacher turnover is highest.

Better pay earlier in a career may help draw new teachers into the profession, especially highly qualified candidates with other (better-paying) career prospects. And early-career teachers are often financially strained at a time of life when they are starting to raise families and looking to buy a home. Striking Seattle teachers have expressed frustration with finding themselves increasingly priced out of the city's booming housing market.

Cities like Denver are overhauling their teacher pay systems and reducing these inequities. Seattle leaders could look beyond their own boundaries and be more thoughtful about how to deliver teacher raises.

To be clear, Seattle teachers deserve a raise and higher pay. But as both the district and the teachers' union profess a desire for greater equity for students, it's time to acknowledge how the pay raise options on the table simply make the equity problem worse.