

My opinion

Teachers are not overpaid

A basic rule of good mental health is not to compare yourself to others. So I must be crazy to talk about whose job is harder — mine or yours — and who's overpaid or underpaid.

First, I acknowledge that almost everyone I know is a hard worker. I think we all do the best job we can do. Sure, I know a few slackers, and I have done my lazy-boy routine on occasion. But seriously...

Recently, the Wall Street Journal ran a piece saying teachers are overpaid compared to certain other professions. The article said public school teachers are paid \$34.06 an hour by national average, according to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. But averages have a funny way of covering up local realities and inconvenient truths.

I have taught school off and on since 1968, and I have friends who have been doing it just as long. We share war stories, horror stories, and tales of woe. In my checkered career, I also have toiled as a prison researcher, limousine driver, railroad bartender, political campaigner, and newspa-

per reporter, so I think I know a little bit about stress on the job. The only high-stress thing I haven't done is to have kids. But I have been married — does that count?

Teachers put in long, hard hours in the classroom, then are expected to spend many more hours of unpaid overtime preparing lessons, grading homework and tests, and attending after-school events, school board meetings, and in-service seminars. Teachers also are exposed to students' viruses and neuroses — so like doctors and nurses, they are out sick a lot. With their relatively low pay and the skyrocketing cost of living, many schoolteachers can't enjoy summers off the way they used to. Now they have to work summer school to make ends meet.

You can't know that teaching is hard labor unless you volunteer in a classroom for a day or two just to get a feel for it. In the inner city as well as in the suburbs, teachers have to play cop and social worker to unruly, disrespectful, spoiled kids (both rich and poor kids defy authority, partly because their parents don't discipline them or engage with them in any meaningful way). The simple math of cramming too many kids into a small room makes school stressful and hazardous for teachers and students.

Of course, all service professions (doctors, nurses, cops, teachers, social workers, airline attendants, customer service reps) are stressful because of the pressures of dealing with

difficult patients, students, clients, and customers.

Small businesses that struggle to get by also feel the pain. I empathize with all entrepreneurs and self-employed workers. I am one myself, and I know the fear of uncertainty, of working without the safety net of paid benefits or job security. All you have to rely on is your own sense of the market and your clients' goodwill. It is scary fun to freelance.

Even office work is stressful. I used to feel it when I worked as a full-time salaried employee. That's why I appreciate working for myself at home — no crazy bosses, no birthday parties for people I don't know, no corporate mind-games, no clockwatching, no silly rules and regulations that infantilize adult workers.

Most white-collar workers are compensated for overtime work with pay, paid time off (comp time), or other perks, so although I feel for my colleagues who still “work for the man” in stuffy cubicle farms, I know that their work is not as difficult as that of teachers, who are vastly underpaid and undervalued for all that they do for our children and for society in general. Just ask yourself: Would I want to do their job?

Teachers produce the fundamental legacy of our culture — the next generation of voters, and their knowledge and values. No pay is too high for that service.

— John Maybury