



Contact:

Public Affairs Dept.
202/879-4458

EMBARGOED UNTIL:
12:01 a.m. Thursday, July 15

Montana's Beginning Teacher Salary Lowest in the Nation

Washington, D.C.—Montana ranked last in the nation for its 2002-03 beginning teacher salary of \$23,052, according to the annual teacher salary survey released by the American Federation of Teachers on Thursday.

Montana ranked 47th in the nation for its average teacher salary for the 2002-03 school year, at \$35,754, up 4 percent from the previous year. Montana placed last, or 51st, for its average beginning teacher salary for 2002-03, at \$23,052, up 3.2 percent. The AFT estimates that Montana's starting salary for the most recent school year, 2003-04, was \$23,790.

Regionally, Montana was outpaced by neighboring Idaho, which was 32nd, at \$39,784; and Wyoming, which was 42nd at \$37,789, North Dakota was 49th at \$33,869.

Across the country, teachers' salaries remained relatively stagnant while their share of health benefits rose at all-time high rates, making it difficult to attract and keep good teachers at a time when they are increasingly needed, the report said.

Nationally, the 2002-03 average teacher salary, which is the most recent figure available, was \$45,771, up 3.3 percent from the previous year. The average beginning teacher salary was \$29,564, up 3.2 percent from the year before. But AFT's report noted that teachers' share of health insurance costs spiked an average 13 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"Exorbitant health insurance costs are taking an intolerable bite out of already inadequate teacher salaries. Teachers are being asked to do more, shortages persist in the most challenging areas to teach, yet compensation packages are insulting," said AFT Secretary-Treasurer Edward J. McElroy.

Furthermore, the AFT noted, superintendents' average salaries are as much as four times higher than teachers' average pay. "States and school districts are crying poverty when it comes to teachers' pay yet somehow find money for extravagant administrator salaries," McElroy said.

California led the nation with the highest average teacher salary for 2002-03, at \$55,693. South Dakota had the nation's lowest average teacher salary, at \$32,414. Alaska led the nation with the highest average beginning teacher salary for 2002-03, at \$37,401. Montana had the nation's lowest average beginning teacher salary, at \$23,052.

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The AFT represents 1.3 million pre-K through 12th-grade teachers; paraprofessionals and other school-related personnel; higher education faculty and professional staff; nurses and healthcare workers; and federal, state and local government employees.