

# Teacher Pay and Master's Degrees

By Ben Velderman

RALEIGH, N.C.—North Carolina's long-standing practice of handing out 10 percent pay raises to teachers when they earn their master's degrees is about to come to an end.

**E**ducators who want to qualify for pay raises—sometimes referred to as a “master’s bump”—will need to have their degree in hand by April 1, 2014. North Carolina teachers who already received raises for holding an advanced degree will be “grandfathered in.”

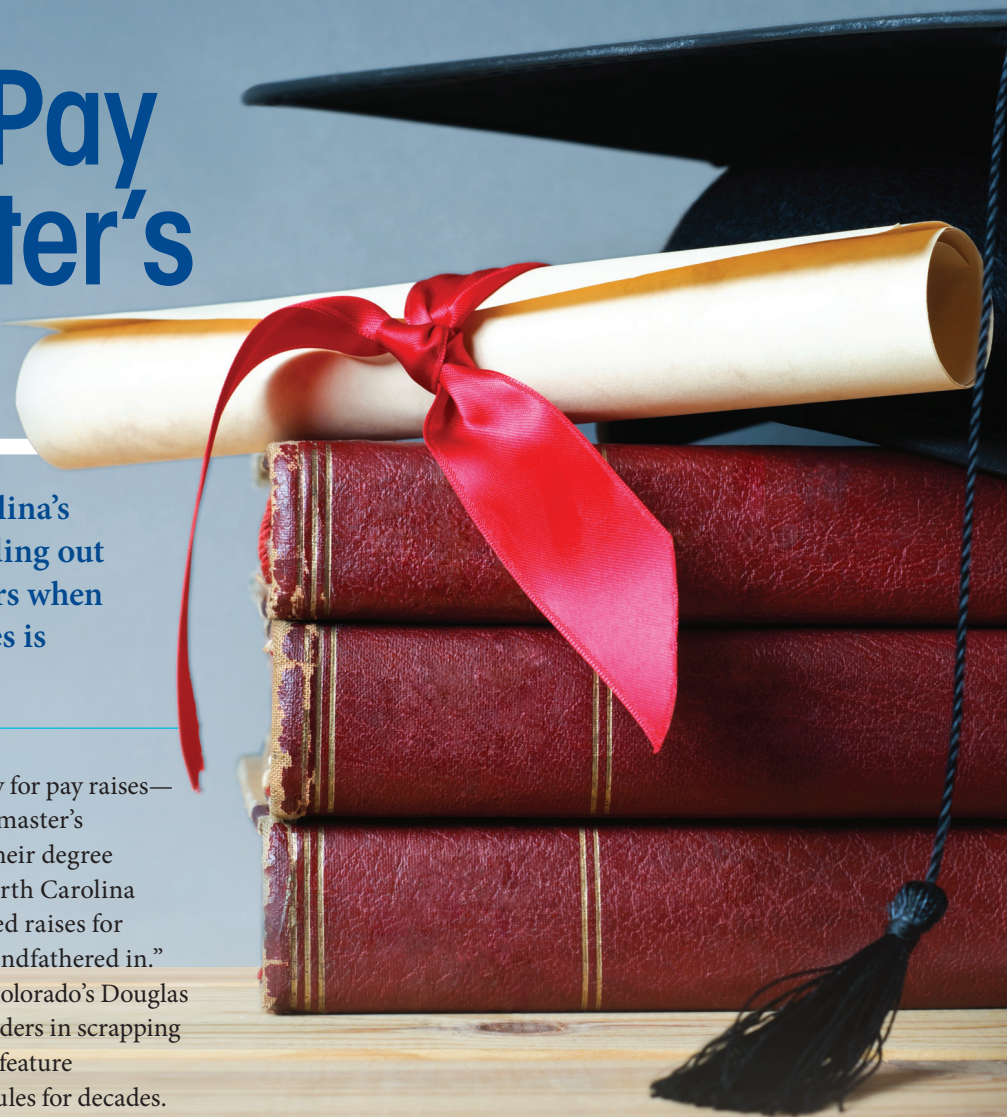
North Carolina joins Wisconsin and Colorado's Douglas County School District as the nation's leaders in scrapping the practice, which has been a dominant feature of teacher union-negotiated salary schedules for decades.

While opposition to master's bumps seems to be coming only from conservative quarters, there is actually a bipartisan consensus that the practice is out of date and needs to be replaced. It's a safe bet that more states will follow suit in the coming months and years.

The main reason for this opposition is a growing body of research that finds no significant correlation between an educator's level of college degree and his or her effectiveness in the classroom.

That was the key finding of “The Sheepskin Effect and Student Achievement,” a 2012 report from the left-of-center

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## “...graduate-level courses for teachers do little to help educators improve their ‘instructional efficacy.’”

Center for American Progress. In the report, researchers Raegen Miller and Marguerite Roza conclude that teachers with master’s degrees “are no more effective, on average, than their counterparts without master’s degrees.”

A big part of the problem, according to the report, is that graduate-level courses for teachers do little to help educators improve their “instructional efficacy.”

“Some master’s programs double as teacher education programs with curricula that are ‘confusing patchwork’ lacking in rigor and often absent of coursework that a reasonable person might imagine fundamental,” Miller and Roza write.

For example, few education schools train teachers in the science of reading, a key skill in improving student achievement. Add to that the 10 percent of master’s-seeking teachers who take courses only to become school administrators—not master teachers—and it’s obvious why ending degree-based raises is on the radar for education reformers.

Even Tony Evers, Wisconsin schools’ chief, has concluded the impact of a general education master’s degree “is zero on student learning,” according to the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

### A lost opportunity

The other major reason more and more lawmakers and policy analysts oppose degree-based pay raises is because they consume a significant portion of a school district’s budget.

Just a few years ago, Wisconsin and North Carolina were spending \$231 million and \$170 million annually on the raises, respectively.

All told, the nation’s school districts paid out \$14.8 billion in master’s bumps during the 2007-08 school year, according to the Center for American Progress study.

And that amount does not take into account the typical teacher union contract demand that school districts pay some or all of a teacher’s tuition costs for an approved graduate program.

Miller and Roza believe that money represents a “lost opportunity” for schools that could better spend those dollars on programs that actually benefit students.

Instead, they recommend “more complex teacher compensation systems, in which higher pay goes to teachers in shortage subject areas, to effective teachers who support novices or tackle the most challenging assignments, and to teachers with extraordinary instructional impact.”

### No longer worth the investment?

Teachers aren’t the only ones who will have to adjust to the end of degree-based pay raises.

Without those financial incentives, many teachers will simply stop pursuing advanced degrees, which can cost tens of thousands of dollars. That means state universities will have to entice potential teacher-students by offering programs that actually help them become more effective in the classroom, and thus eligible for merit-based raises.

That’s already happening in Wisconsin, where struggling graduate schools of education are refining their course offerings and ramping up their marketing efforts, reports the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

“The dropping of the master’s bump in many districts is also raising new questions about what kind of outside training is relevant to help teachers improve outcomes with their students, and what those teachers...will consider to be worth the investment,” reports the *Journal Sentinel*.

About 55 percent of Wisconsin teachers and 28 percent of North Carolina teachers hold a master’s degree. Those numbers are expected to drop significantly in future years.

It will be interesting to see if this trend against credential-based raises reaches the eight states that currently require educators to hold an advanced degree as a condition of receiving their full professional teaching license, and the sixteen states that require extra pay for teachers with an advanced degree.

Miller and Roza believe state policymakers would be wise to dispense with both policies. “These policies heed a conventional wisdom that’s oblivious to strategic concerns around bolstering the quality of the teacher work force, improving student outcomes overall, and closing achievement gaps between groups of students defined by ethnicity or economic status,” they write. School districts “could and should avoid directing new resources toward them,” Miller and Roza conclude. ■

This article was originally written for [EAGnews.org](http://EAGnews.org).

**Ben Velderman** has written about education reform issues since joining the Education Action Group in 2010. Before that, he worked for two years as a teacher in an alternative middle school. He holds a degree in journalism from Michigan State University.

# The State of Teacher Retention in Urban Schools

Experts agree that teacher retention is one of the biggest challenges facing urban school districts. Everyone knows that an aging teacher work force will lead to projected shortages in the years to come, but, worse still, some studies estimate that as many as 50 percent of newer teachers are leaving the classroom after just five years. In light of the crisis, a study by The New Teacher Project (TNTP) aims to identify the reasons teachers leave, and to promote long-term strategies for empowering a successful teacher work force.

According to TNTP researchers, the best and worst teachers leave urban schools at strikingly similar rates. The nation's fifty largest districts lose approximately 10,000 effective teachers each year. Meanwhile, about 40 percent of teachers with more than seven years of

quality, many schools are suffering. According to the report, the results of these policies create a “revolving door” for educators in high-need communities where good teachers feel chronically underappreciated.

Among the report's key findings:

- The study's urban school districts lost their most successful teachers at a rate comparable to the attrition of the least successful teachers.
- Teachers who experienced two or more different recruitment/retention strategies—including advancement opportunities, regular performance feedback, and public recognition—said they planned to stay at their schools nearly twice as long as other teachers who received no feedback or incentives.
- In one of the districts studied, only a fifth of the lowest-performing teachers were encouraged to leave, while more than a third were given incentives to stay.
- Irreplaceable teachers were much more likely to stay at schools with a strong instructional culture in which principals set strong performance expectations for them.

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experience are considered less effective at advancing academic progress than the average first-year teacher.

The report contends that most principals and administrators successfully identify the high-performing teachers but fail to establish incentives for the teachers who do prove to be successful—otherwise known as the “irreplaceable” teachers. Researchers suggest that due to the system's inherent inability to link retention strategies to teacher

While the study's finding that teachers who feel undervalued tend to leave may seem logical, TNTP stresses that the real way to combat the issue is by instituting large-scale education reform. Among the policy suggestions, TNTP recommends paying the best teachers six-figure salaries; requiring principals to set goals for retaining effective teachers; and dismissing teachers who are underperforming. The study's authors argue that together these strategies could also raise the rigor and respect of the teaching profession as a whole. ■



# Arkansas Member Reflects on Tenure as Current Teacher of the Year

**A**li Weimer currently serves as the 2013 Arkansas Teacher of the Year. Instead of working in her classroom this year, she works as a teacher advisor to the Arkansas Department of Education. Prior to this, Weimer taught kindergarten for seven years at Avondale Elementary School in the Marion School District, where she will return next school year. Weimer was recently honored by President Obama at the White House for her work. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Early Childhood Education and a Masters of Science degree in Educational Leadership. Weimer is recognized for her authentic parental involvement strategies and her use of brain-based teaching techniques to increase student engagement.



## What has been a highlight of you being Teacher of the Year?

Wow, where to begin? There have been so many highlights of being Teacher of the Year. Meeting President Obama in April in a special White House ceremony honoring the National and State Teachers of the Year will forever be an awe-inspiring experience for me. However, I would have to say that an unexpected highlight for me was representing Arkansas at International Space Camp in July. I expected it to be fun. However, what I didn't expect was to get into it as much as I did. I actually got to meet some of the engineers that built the Saturn V rocket that took all of the crews to the moon. While there, I also got to meet several astronauts, including Hoot Gibson. I even met Homer Hickam, the author of the book *Rocket Boys*. When I got home, I was so pumped I rewatched the movie *Apollo 13*. Actually having experienced a simulated lunar mission made the movie really come to life for me. There is no doubt that I will cherish these two once-in-a-lifetime experiences for the rest of my life.

## What specific responsibilities do you have in this role?

In July, I became the "active" Arkansas Teacher of the Year. My responsibilities this year include working in-residence with the Arkansas Department of Education in a number of ways: 1) serving as an ambassador for all Arkansas teachers; 2) providing professional development programs for other teachers statewide; 3) enhancing and promoting the Arkansas Teacher of the Year program; 4) attending all State Board of Education meetings as a nonvoting member and 5) representing the state in the National Teacher of the Year (NTOY) competition.

## How has this opportunity shifted your view of education?

I loved teaching before my award and I still love teaching

"...despite the negative images the news often displays about teachers, overall teaching is still a very honorable profession; one that is viewed by many to be admirable."

now, even though I am not in the classroom this year. I also know that my heart will continue to be in the classroom, even after this year is over. However, I have come to learn how much more critical it is that I stay aware of the educational issues that surround our state and this nation. As a classroom teacher, teaching my heart away day in and day out, it is very easy to develop tunnel vision. Before this award, I spent the majority of my time focused on what education looked like in my classroom for my students. This is extremely important, don't get me wrong. But, through receiving this award, I have been reminded that while the students in my classroom are a priority, so are all of the other students in our current education system. Staying aware of issues/trends in the education world and using your voice to speak for students, as a whole, is also instrumental. This opportunity has really showed me the importance of not only focusing on my current reality (my classroom) but also remembering to keep the bigger picture in mind as well.

### What have you learned in this job?

I have learned in this job that there are a lot of people out there who want what is best for kids. I have learned that, despite the negative images the news often displays about teachers, overall teaching is still a very honorable profession; one that is viewed by many to be admirable. I have learned that there are some extraordinary teachers in our great state of Arkansas. I have had the pleasure of meeting amazing educators all across this state who are doing things every day in their classroom that would blow your mind (in a good way)! I have also learned that Arkansas is doing a lot of things right in the educational world. I have been very proud of our state, in terms of how it treats/values/honors the Teacher of the Year program. I am used and recognized by the Arkansas Department of Education as an invaluable member to their team. There has not been one person that I have encountered that does not want to hear my opinion or help me accomplish my goals I have for set for this year.

### What can you say to encourage other teachers?

My advice to other teachers is to find ways every day to keep your dream alive, the dream you had when you first got into education, the reason you wanted to become a teacher. For me, the dream was to change the world one child at a time. But, what I have found is that sometimes, it becomes so hard to keep the dream alive when you are getting slapped in the face by the harsh reality that is life in the classroom. It is so easy to get bogged down with everything that is wrong in the world of education.

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However, the way I keep the dream alive is by remembering daily to celebrate what is right in the world of education. For me, what is right in the world of education is the students I serve. My advice to teachers: come up for air from time to time and sit back and marvel at your students. Open your ears to really listen to what your students are saying; don't just hear them. Open your eyes to truly witness and take in what your students accomplish on a daily basis; don't just see them. All too often, we, as teachers, are so distracted by our daily agendas—what we have to teach, how many papers we have to grade, how many emails we must respond to, how many lesson plans we have to finish—that we miss all the good stuff. One thing I do to keep my dream alive even in the midst of my toughest reality is that I set up an “atta girl” file. This file is simply a collection of pictures, letters, drawings, emails, cards, etc. that I have received from my students and their parents over the years telling me about how I have positively impacted their lives. I don't look at it every day. But rather, I pull it out when I have had one of those days. Teachers, you know what those days are. Those days I am ready to throw in the towel, those days that I feel I have failed one or all of my students, those days where I feel that this job is just too big for me. On the days when I am dealing with the toughest realities of teaching, I open up my file and am reminded how I am fulfilling my dream. I am changing the world, one child at a time.

### How has the Arkansas State Teachers Association (AAE state chapter) contributed to your job?

As a member of the Arkansas State Teachers Association, I have been shown tremendous support by my regional director, Allison Greenwood. Allison visits my school often, keeping members informed/involved in what is going on with education around the state. She even made a special trip to my school in May to host a celebration party in my honor with my coworkers. ■

# New SAT Results Show No Change in Average Scores

**S**AT scores remained flat for students in the class of 2013, with just 43 percent performing well enough to be considered college-ready—the same proportion as last year, according to new results issued Thursday.

Yet, African-American and Latino students in this year's graduating class saw slight gains. Also, a record share of students taking the college entrance exam (46 percent) were minorities.

Overall, 15.6 percent of African Americans in the class of 2013 who took the exam met or exceeded the College Board's college-ready benchmark, compared with 14.8 percent in 2012. Among Latinos, 23.5 percent reached that level, up from 22.8 percent the previous year.

The New York City-based College Board, which administers the SAT, released the results for 1.7 million test-takers on Sept. 26. This total represented a drop of about 4,400 in the number of students taking the exam from the class of 2012. Participation had grown every year since 1990, except for a slight dip between 2005 and 2006.

David Coleman, the president of the College Board, said he is concerned about the volume of students taking the SAT but emphasized that the organization's deeper obligation is to providing opportunity.

"We are not counting the number of tests kids take. We are counting the number of opportunities kids actually pursue to advance [themselves] forward," he said in a phone call with reporters on Tuesday. "That is

a newly developed focus within this College Board and everything we do."

This year, ACT' Inc. reported 1.8 million high school students took its college entrance exam, following a rise of 22 percent over the past five years. In the same period, SAT test-takers grew by 6 percent.

The College Board announced earlier this year that it will be changing its exam in 2015 to more closely reflect the new Common Core State Standards and what is taught in the classroom, a move welcomed by many college admissions officers.

## Taking Rigorous Courses Helps

Among SAT test-takers this year, the mean score was 496 in critical reading, 514 in math, and 488 in writing, exactly as it was in 2012 and generally consistent with performance in the past five years. The College Board set a combined 1550 as the benchmark score that it determined students needed to likely make a GPA of B- or higher as college freshmen.

Overall, 43 percent of test-takers met the threshold, with 52.7 percent of white students and 60.2 percent of Asian students scoring at least 1550 in the class of 2013.

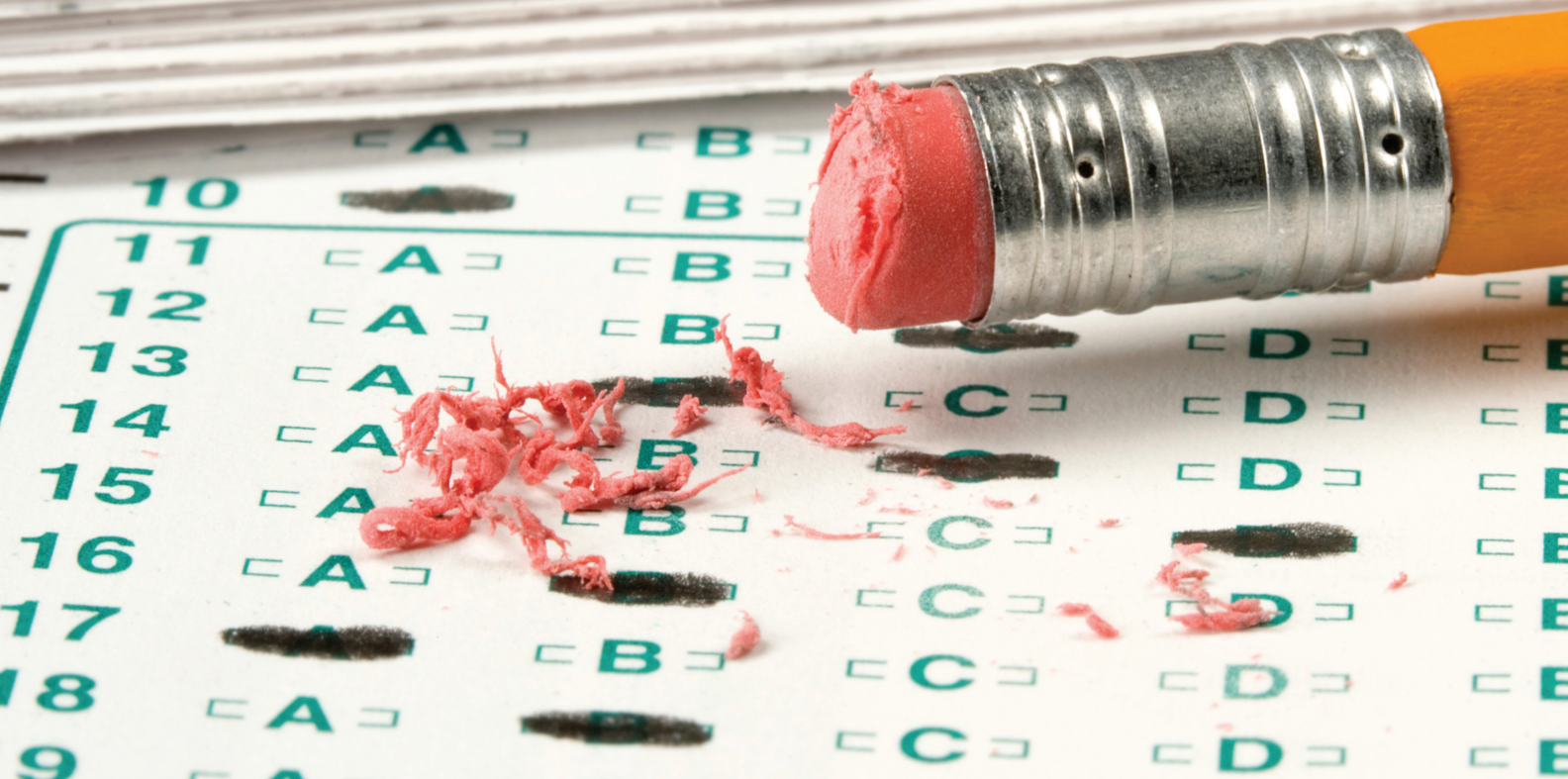
While wide racial gaps persist, performance by some underrepresented minorities improved, including African Americans and Hispanics.

However, 33.5 percent of American Indians met the benchmark for the class of 2013, compared with 34 percent the year before. Performance among white students was slightly better in 2012, with 53.1 percent meeting the benchmark, while Asians improved with 59.5 percent making at least 1550 in the previous year's graduating class.

African-American, Latino, and American-Indian students made up 30 percent of the SAT takers in the class of 2013, an increase from 27 percent five years ago. In 2009, all minorities comprised 40 percent of SAT takers, and this year they represented an all-time high of 46 percent.

"The key to improving SAT scores and college-and-career readiness is to ramp up the daily work of students across K-12 and increase participation in rigorous high school courses," said Mr. Coleman of the College Board. Students who scored better on the SAT were more likely to have completed a core curriculum in high school or have taken honors or Advanced Placement courses, he noted.





Underrepresented minorities and low-income students were less likely to have taken a rigorous course load, and Mr. Coleman said more needs to be done to improve access.

Jim Hull, the senior policy analyst at the National Association of School Boards in Alexandria, VA, said that the improvement in scores among minority students was significant.

“It’s extremely important from an educational and financial point of view,” he said. “We need more low-income and minority students ready to succeed in college.”

### A ‘Red Flag’

Still, SAT performance is “so low” for minorities and the “gaps are just enormous,” said Christina Theokas, the director of research at the Education Trust, a nonprofit in Washington that promotes equity in education for low-income and minority students.

Ms. Theokas said that while she was encouraged that the College Board is trying to inform students about the need to take challenging courses, she said the schools themselves must have a role in reaching out to all students.

“We need counselors and teachers seeing potential and encouraging all students,” she said. “There are so many students other than this select group [that takes] the SAT.”

Mr. Hull said it’s important that rigorous courses live up to their names. For instance, he noted that the College Board reported that student participation in

calculus rose to 33 percent for the class of 2013 from 26 percent for the class of 2012, yet average math scores for students dropped to 600 from 607 among the students who took that course. Mr. Hull says that raises a red flag that there may be rigor in title only, not content.

To make rigor an expectation in high school, accountability should be tied with postsecondary enrollment and success, said Anne Hyslop, a policy analyst with the New America Foundation, a Washington-based think tank. If most students leaving high school need remediation in college, that’s a strong signal that schools need to change, she said.

Making changes in the SAT to align it with the common core and classroom experience is a great move that should improve access, added Hyslop. “You shouldn’t have to take an SAT prep course to do well on the SAT,” she said. ■

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**Caralee Adams** is a contributing writer for *Education Week*, covering the transition from high school to college and careers. She lives in Bethesda, Maryland.



The Association of American Educators Foundation  
 27405 Puerta Real, Suite 230  
 Mission Viejo, CA 92691-6388

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