

How Underpaying Public School Teachers Disproportionately Harms Women

Katherine Mellen Charron, NC State University

My mama grew up poor in North Carolina. She was a senior at Drexel High School in 1959 before her family moved into a modest two-bedroom brick house that had indoor plumbing. But Mama also grew up in a state that provided pathways to security in an insecure world, namely through public education. She was the only one in her family to go to college, where she acquired a professional skill set to support herself in the future. Eventually, that future included me, and a marriage that meant for the only time in her adult life Mama did not have to work. Then came divorce. I soon realized that Mama and I had gone from being comfortably middle class to occupying a much shakier economic status. Our daily security now depended on her job as a public school teacher.

It would be dishonest for me to suggest that I grew up poor. Rather, it's the precariousness of our situation that confronts more women and children today. In North Carolina, 43% of working mothers are the family breadwinner while 1 in 5 women live below the federal poverty line. For working mothers like mine, whose income *is* the family wage, the line separating economic security from poverty remains a thin one. And policy decisions over the last year have exacerbated their troubles.

Often missing in conversations about our state's public schools is the reality that education is a predominantly female profession, one that employs nearly 3.7 times more women than men. According to 2012-2013 figures, women outnumber men in every type of job in public schools with the exception of technicians and skilled crafts. 76,011 women and 19,135 men teach. All told, 139,441 women, compared to 37,708 men, work in our public schools.

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Mama and I were lucky back in the 1980s. Foremost, Mama did not have to worry about losing her job. In May 2012, the Department of Public Instruction reported that since the 2008-2009 school year, budget cuts have resulted in the elimination of 17,278 positions; 35% of these were teachers and 33% were teaching assistants. Had Mama been among these—or the 6,167 people laid off—and unable to find work, she would have had to collect unemployment. Due to HB 4, signed by Governor McCrory in February 2013, instead of receiving \$530 a week, she would collect \$350 and for a shorter amount of time.

Those teachers who have kept their job still face significant economic hurdles. 2010 was the last time they received a raise, though it was offset for most by an increase in health insurance premiums. A proposed pay raise recently announced by Governor McCrory targets starting teachers at the bottom of the pay scale and, if approved by the legislature, will amount to a 14% increase over two years. Yet it provides absolutely nothing for approximately 65,000 veteran teachers like Mama. Meanwhile other, seemingly unrelated, budget changes have increased the tax burdens for lower income people and the middle class. One of these came in HB 82, signed in March 2013 by the governor. When Congress created the Earned Income Tax Credit as part of tax reform in 1986, President Ronald Reagan called it “perhaps the biggest anti-poverty program in our history.” HB 82 lowered the EITC from 5% to 4.5% in 2013 and eliminates it thereafter, which will affect nearly 907,000 families. We need to know how many of them live in female-headed households and work in our public schools.

I think most North Carolinians are like my grandparents, who believed that in return for hard work and respectable living, you earned a just reward: or a two bedroom

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house with indoor plumbing. But the course charted by our current state leaders suggests they have an altogether different vision. It is relatively easy to imagine how the crippling of our public schools—via decreased funding for pre-K, increased class sizes, and reduced state funding of textbooks from \$68 per pupil in 2007-2008 to \$15 per student in 2013-2014, to name just a few—will impact our children’s potential to succeed. Much less visible are the collective economic consequences of the new state budget that disproportionately affect women *now*. For behind all these numbers are stories of individual women working and trying to rear their children; people like Mama and me. If there is much to celebrate in our state’s past, exactly how much economic insecurity for women and children will we tolerate in its future?

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