

# *American Teacher*

A Film By  
**Vanessa Roth**

81 minutes, color, HD, English, USA, 2011



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## **Advance Praise for *American Teacher***

“This is an important film that raises important questions about America’s teachers. It should spark a much-needed conversation.” – *Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education*

“It was moving, overwhelming and made me love (even more) all the teachers out there doing what I think is the toughest job.” – *Sarah, [Isabel Allende’s blog](#)*

“Empathetically narrated by Matt Damon, [this] engaging pic is nicely assembled in all departments.” – *Dennis Harvey, [Variety](#)*

“Powerful—‘How long can we let this go on?’ you wonder—and could generate some important conversations... As one of the teachers featured in the film said in a panel discussion after the preview, ‘I think it’s about time there’s a film like this.’” – *Anthony Rebola, [Education Week’s Teaching Now blog](#)*

“Their stories will make your heart drop, but their unwavering strength is uplifting and their stories need to be out there. This film is a remarkable platform for them. *American Teacher* goes inside and beyond the classroom and shows that quality education starts with great educators—but it must start by making things better for them.” – *Karen Datangel, [Karen-On](#)*

“Captivating...shows, through gripping portraits like Benner’s, why we must value our nation’s educators more by paying them more.” – *[ABCDE Blog](#)*

“*American Teacher* exposes the reality of any normal teacher’s life, calls for action, and raises some important questions.” – *Isabel Allende*

## **Synopsis**

*American Teacher* is the feature-length documentary created and produced by Vanessa Roth, Nínive Calegari, Dave Eggers, and Brian McGinn. The film includes a musical score by Thao Nguyen and is narrated by Matt Damon. The film chronicles the stories of four teachers living and working in disparate urban and rural areas of the country. Their stories are told through a mixture of footage and interviews with students, families, and colleagues, as well as the teachers themselves. By following these teachers as they reach different milestones in their careers, our film tells the deeper story of the teaching profession in America today.

One featured character, Jonathan Dearman, was an influential teacher at San Francisco's first charter high school, Leadership High. For many years he was a "wall" for students to lean on, but he was forced to leave the profession due to his inability to support his family on a teacher's salary. Throughout the film, Jonathan speaks candidly of his love for teaching and commitment to his students, while numerous student and family interviews reflect the painful loss felt by Leadership High School when Jonathan finally left the field of teaching because he could not afford to stay.

The picture develops further through the parallel narratives of Erik, Jamie, and Rhena. Erik, a history teacher in Texas, coaches three sports teams and works a second job selling stereos while struggling to maintain a middle-class standard of living for himself and his family. Interviews with his students and colleagues describe the invaluable efforts and influence Erik brings to the classroom, while emotional interviews with his family outline their frustrated support for a father who struggles to find time to share with them. Jamie, an elementary teacher in New York, shows the difficulties of balancing the responsibilities of her career as a teacher with those of pregnancy, a newborn child, and additional tutoring she undertakes to support her family. And Rhena is inspired to enter the field of teaching despite the many suggestions from those around her to use her degree for a more prestigious and lucrative career. After several years of teaching and

living at home, she competes for an opportunity to work at the Equity Project Charter School, where teachers earn a base salary of \$125,000.

The film's narrative unfolds through a mixture of interviews and animation, each highlighting different facts and perspectives concerning the big sacrifices of our nation's teachers, and how these demands force many of our great teachers out of the profession. Interwoven among the four narratives are interviews with prominent reform leaders within the field of education, including Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, several Teacher of the Year recipients, and Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond. Featured stories, interviews, and facts demonstrate the impact teachers have on the success of their students, and the increasing difficulty in attracting and retaining quality teachers for our nation's schools.

While all research proves that teachers are the most important school-based factor in a child's future success, almost two-thirds of our nation's teachers divide their time between teaching and second jobs. *American Teacher* goes further than simply stating that our system is broken, by shining a light on various positive reform efforts in the country. Looking at schools and districts paving the way for change, the film aims to demonstrate that by making the teaching profession the financially attractive, prestigious, and competitive profession it deserves to be, our country can and will build a dedicated force of teachers, who not only inspire and challenge students to live up to their potential, but who grow in their profession to shape whole communities.

Our country is facing a remarkable opportunity right now, with almost half of our teachers eligible for retirement in the next ten years. Who do we want to take their places? The personal stories of Jonathan, Jamie, Erik, and Rhena portray the proud accomplishments and frustrating sacrifices of teachers nationwide, and will hopefully inspire a cultural shift to value effective teachers nationwide.

## **Filmmakers' Statements**

### **Vanessa Roth, Director and Producer**

I have two daughters, an eighth-grader and a fifth-grader, and I have a baby boy on the way. Just like all my friends with kids, school choice and the quality of my kids' education is a central issue in our family life. We've debated whether an urban, suburban, or rural environment would be better, whether class size matters, and what about school resources? Do we home-school, go public or private, charter or "specialized"? No matter the setting, I, like all the parents I know, want my kids' education to help them become engaged and curious critical thinkers who are lifelong learners.

While raising my kids, my work has also brought me into schools around the world where I have had the chance to spend lots of time exploring different approaches to teaching and learning and delving into the day-to-day life of both "failing" and "high-achieving" schools. What I've loved most about this work is that I have been able to witness the staff and students that make up our education system.

And what I have been most struck by, both as a mom and as a witness to the schools I've traveled to and filmed in, is that as much as all the debate around what makes the best learning environment is valid and important, the most defining piece of a kid's day, or year, is the teacher(s) in front of him or her. I'm lucky that the kind of work I do gives me the freedom to also be a very involved parent, but even with the amount of time I get to spend with my kids, they spend just as much, or more, with their teachers. Teachers not only affect what our kids learn in books, what they retain, and how they score on tests, but also how they look at the world, and who they become. I can't imagine a more important role in a person's life.

So when Dave Eggers and Nínive Calegari came to me about making a film with them about the need to change the way we value teachers in our society, I immediately said yes. The opportunity to make a film that shows the reality of the daily lives of teachers across the country was a gift, and to have a chance to make that film with two people I admired so much work was truly inspiring. I also got the opportunity to get to know the teachers in the film and really sink my teeth into the heart of the education debate. I was able to fully understand how not only the teacher in front of my children is a critical factor in their lives, but also how the need for our cultural and educational policies to value teachers as true professionals is an urgent issue that goes to the heart of our democracy.

I hope that with the great talents of our editor and co-director Brian McGinn and our composer Thao Nguyen, with the passion of Matt Damon who came on as our narrator, and with the incredible trust given to us by the teachers in our film, *American Teacher* becomes a catalyst for giving our teachers the value and support they so truly deserve, so that our kids grow up to be the educated, critical thinking, engaged adults that we want and need them to be.

– Vanessa Roth

## **Nínive Calegari, Producer**

Even though I've watched our film countless times, unexpected moments *still* make me cry. This summer, during a screening at a teachers' conference, I got teary watching a former English teacher named Gretchen Weber describe moving her two thousand novels from basement to basement in the hopes that she might still someday go back into the classroom. I couldn't help but think of the boxes of original lesson plans and primary document materials in my own basement—like Gretchen, I keep them just in case I ever go back. Teaching wasn't ever just a job for me; it was a way of life, and it shaped the way I still think about the magnificence and fragility of our democracy, an honest day's work, creating community, and being responsible for other people.

After receiving my master's in Education and my teaching credentials, I taught in three different settings: a large urban public school, a large suburban public school, and a tiny public charter school, San Francisco's first. There were huge differences in these settings in terms of resources: I was laid off from my first job due to a budget cut combined with our union's "last in, first out" requirement; the second school was in a wealthy suburb with plenty of resources and meaningful professional training; and the charter school didn't even have a building until a few weeks before the start of the year.

What the three schools had in common, however, were superb faculties. I marveled at the teachers at those three schools: How David Sondheim knew the souls of every kid in the halls of Drake High. The way Jonathan Dearman brought an entire music department to our under-supplied charter school. The eye-popping science experiments that Sarah Kerley designed on a limited budget and with scrappy materials. I could go on and on.

I witnessed firsthand how these creative, warm, hilarious, and intelligent teachers made sincere connections with students and provided inspiring lessons day after day, but I knew the outside world didn't see what I saw, and I often felt and heard a very different impression about our profession. In 2003 I was thrilled to team up with Daniel Moulthrop and Dave Eggers to attempt to address this lack of awareness, and we wrote a book collecting vivid depictions of teachers' lives. We interviewed hundreds of teachers about the complexities of their work, their passions for their profession, their frustrations with public conceptions of their value, and their financial struggles to make it all possible. We talked with people who said they would have loved to go into teaching, but didn't want to be undervalued professionally or scraping by financially. We also examined schools that had raised their teachers' salaries and saw good results: increased applications for openings, increased teacher retention, increased graduation rates, and, yes, increased test scores. The book was well received, and yet, I wanted to speak to people beyond the educational community. *American Teacher* is our attempt to bring these stories to a wider audience.

At the moment, we have a rare opportunity to fundamentally shape the future of the teaching profession. Over half of our nation's teachers will be eligible to retire in the next ten years, and we can take advantage of this shift in personnel to spark a cultural shift as well. We have to make teaching a desirable profession, with fair pay, opportunities for professional growth, and acceptable conditions. I want to live in a country where college

students stay up at night wondering if they will be successful enough to become a teacher, the same way they worry about getting into medical school.

Many people tell me that teachers aren't motivated by money, and there's a lot of truth to that; for many teachers, the job itself is the real reward. But that view overlooks the many long-term consequences of undervaluing a profession. Many college students want to teach but can't see a financial and professional future in it. Of those who do take the leap, over half have to work second jobs outside the classroom. We can't ask teachers to take a vow of poverty and then expect miraculous results. If we want a different future for our kids and grandkids, we need to give education reform the time, attention, and money that it demands and deserves.

As we take this film from city to city, I often think about all those boxes of lesson plans stashed in my basement. I'm still in touch with many of my former students, but I miss the challenges and excitement unique to being in charge of a classroom of young people. I know many of my old colleagues feel the same way. For all of them, and especially for all the recent graduates currently considering the profession, I hope this film helps build support for vital change. Our kids and our country deserve the most talented, dedicated teachers available who can stay and thrive in the profession—and those teachers deserve our respect and fair pay.

**- Nínive Calegari**

## **Dave Eggers, Producer**

My mom was a teacher, and a lot of my good friends from high school and college became teachers. One of my best friends was a teacher in San Francisco when we were both in our twenties and living in the city. She lived down the street from me, and we would see each other often, and she would talk about her job, her students, her school. She was easily the most passionate and accomplished adult among all of us twenty-somethings. I was happy for her, and for the students who had her as a teacher.

But then, after about four years teaching, she had to quit. She couldn't afford it. She had loans, she had expenses. She was living with a roommate in a small apartment, couldn't afford her own place, couldn't afford a car, couldn't afford most of the things she needed. So she quit to sell educational software, and eventually went into real estate.

So that was a lesson to me. Great teachers, born teachers, were leaving the profession because of the salaries and conditions. And over the years, through our 826 National centers, I've met dozens of other young teachers who were inspiring, gifted, and who left the profession. In most cases, it wasn't just about the money. But money drives a lot of co-factors, like prestige, autonomy, and respect.

So Nínive Calegari, Daniel Moulthrop and I put together the book *Teachers Have It Easy: The Big Sacrifices and Small Salaries of America's Teachers*, allowing the teachers to tell their stories, what they love about their job and what makes their job unnecessarily difficult.

After the book was published, a documentary seemed like a natural extension of the story. We could reach new audiences and update the stories of some of the teachers profiled in the book.

The fun part was how we found Vanessa Roth. One of the students at 826 Valencia, our tutoring and writing center, heard we were thinking about making a documentary, and the next week she happened to see Vanessa's film *Third Monday in October* at a film festival. She came back to us and said, "I know the perfect person!" And so we called Vanessa, and she was indeed the perfect person.

There were other great connections with the 826 Valencia community along the way. When we needed help with the editing and filming of the movie, I thought of Brian McGinn, who used to take workshops at 826 when he was a teenager. I knew he'd gone to film school and was living in LA. I got in touch, and he became the movie's editor and co-director.

The film's music was created by the great Thao Nguyen, and there's an 826 connection there, too. We'd been fans of her music for a while, and one day I saw her in the center after school. She'd become a tutor and we didn't even know it! So she was a natural choice to compose the music for the film.

The hope for the film now is to share the stories of actual teachers: what the job is really all about, how hard it is, and how many of the things we assume we know about the profession aren't quite right. We're in an unprecedented age of scrutiny for teachers, and much of the debate is shrill and misinformed. We're hoping the movie presents a clear, sober picture of the lives of teachers, and can hint at a roadmap for improving conditions and retention.

– **Dave Eggers**

## **Filmmaker Bios**

### **Producer/Director**

Vanessa Roth is an artist and advocate whose documentary films have won every major award for documentary filmmaking, including an Academy Award and an Alfred I Dupont-Columbia. Her work has been theatrically released; broadcast nationally on PBS, HBO, the Discovery Channel, A&E, and the Sundance Channel; screened at hundreds of film festivals; used in colleges and universities across the country as training for lawyers, social workers, journalists, and fellow filmmakers; and shown on Oprah, NPR, and as part of the Youth Inaugural Events in Washington D.C. Her films include *Taken In: The Lives of America's Foster Children*, *Close to Home*, *Aging Out: Schools of the 21st Century*, *The Third Monday in October*, *9/11's Toxic Dust*, *Freeheld*, and *No Tomorrow*.

### **Producer**

Nínive Calegari is a veteran teacher with almost ten years' experience in the classroom, including experience in both charter schools and large comprehensive high schools. She is the cofounder and former executive director of 826 Valencia, and most recently served as the CEO of 826 National, a literacy nonprofit that galvanizes volunteers in eight cities to support teachers and help students improve their writing skills. The program has been duplicated in thirty smaller satellites worldwide. She is also the founder of The Teacher Salary Project, the non-profit that created the film *American Teacher*. She holds a Master's Degree in Education in Teaching and Curriculum from Harvard's Graduate School of Education, and is a co-author of the *New York Times* bestselling book *Teachers Have It Easy: The Big Sacrifices and Small Salaries of America's Teachers*. She is an advisory board member of the George Lucas Educational Foundation and a recipient of Edutopia's 2007 Daring Dozen award for being one of twelve people "reshaping the future of education."

### **Producer**

Dave Eggers is the author of six books: *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, *You Shall Know Our Velocity!*, *How We Are Hungry*, *Teachers Have It Easy: The Big Sacrifices and Small Salaries of America's Teachers*, *What Is the What*, and *Zeitoun*. He is the founder and editor of McSweeney's, a quarterly magazine and book-publishing company, and is cofounder of 826 Valencia, a nonprofit tutoring, writing, and publishing organization with locations in eight cities across the country. His work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Esquire*, and *The Believer*. In 2004 he co-taught a class at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, out of which grew the *Voice of Witness* series of books, designed to illuminate contemporary human crises through oral history.

### **Co-Director/Editor**

Brian McGinn is a director and editor. Before co-directing and editing *American Teacher*, he edited and produced the documentary *The Frozen City*, which was broadcast on ESPN and CurrenTV, and screened at the AFI, Cleveland and Florida Film Festivals in 2008. He is currently in post-production on a film about the man with the most Guinness Records ever for Danish Film Ins. and Channel 4. His online comedy has tallied over two million views, and been featured on Gawker, Wired, Adult Swim, MySpace, FunnyOrDie and Wholphin. McGinn graduated from Duke with a degree in English in 2007.

## **About the Cast**

### **Erik Benner**

Erik Benner has been teaching Texas history for fifteen years in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Benner, now forty years old, grew up in the small Texas town of Haslet, just a few miles north of Fort Worth. He graduated from the University of North Texas in 1996. He is the proud father of two beautiful daughters, Victoria, age eighteen and Addison, age five. Benner and his family currently live in Keller, Texas.

### **Jonathan Dearman**

Jonathan Dearman is a lifelong San Francisco resident who has worked in real estate and education for the past twenty years. As a lifelong learner and educator, Jonathan has worked on education non-profits and school boards while running his family-owned real estate business since leaving the teaching profession in 2002. Jonathan is now looking to combine two of his passions, education and music, in a community project for young people in his neighborhood.

### **Jamie Fidler**

Jamie Fidler has been teaching for eleven years. She went to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst for both her undergraduate and graduate degrees. When Jamie isn't in the classroom or working at her second or sometimes third job, she is working to fight against teacher layoffs and budget cuts to public schools. Jamie lives in Brooklyn, New York with her husband David and her daughter Charlotte.

### **Rhena Jasey**

Rhena Jasey taught for six years in the South Orange/Maplewood School District where she grew up, attending the public schools and graduating from the local public high school there. She earned her BA from Harvard University and holds an MA in Elementary and Early Childhood Education and an MEd in Educational Leadership, with a concentration in Public School Leadership, both from Columbia University. Rhena pursues her interest in public education policy issues by participating in programs and panels that address issues of urban education and currently teaches at the Equity Project Charter School (T.E.P.) serving Washington Heights in New York City.

## **Credits**

**Director and Producer:** Vanessa Roth

**Producers:** Nínive Calegari, Dave Eggers

**Co-Director/Editor:** Brian McGinn

**Additional Editor:** Livio Sanchez

**Associate Producer:** Emily Davis

**Music:** Thao Nguyen

**Graphics/Animation:** Stefan Nadelman

**Sound:** Jack Norflus, Jeff Edrich

**Sound Mixer:** Steve Shepherd

**Featuring:** Erik Benner, Jonathan Dearman, Jamie Fidler, Rhena Jasey

**Camera:** Dan Gold, Steven Milligan, Arthur Yee, Rich White

## Select Press

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/la-et-american-teacher-20110930,0,7613779.story>

# Los Angeles Times

## What the 'American Teacher' has to teach us

*The U.S. education system is shedding teachers at an alarming rate. This documentary, directed by Vanessa Roth and narrated by Matt Damon, delves into the problem.*

By Kenneth Turan, Los Angeles Times Film Critic

*September 30, 2011*

It's titled "American Teacher," but this unsettling look at what's wrong with our culture's attitudes toward that beleaguered profession could just as well have been called "The Vanishing Americans."

That's because our education system is shedding teachers at an alarming rate. As narrated by [Matt Damon](#), this [documentary](#) tells us that 20% of teachers in urban area schools leave every year, with 46% of teachers nationwide quitting before their fifth year. With more than half of our teachers eligible for retirement within the next 10 years, we are looking at serious trouble.

It's trouble not only because educating young people is crucial to our economy and our democracy but also because studies of the subject invariably come to the conclusion that the Gates Foundation, headed by [Bill Gates](#), did: "Having great teachers is the very key thing."

Given that individuals continue to be drawn to education in the abstract, why aren't young people lining up to actually teach? As directed by doc veteran Vanessa Roth, "American Teacher" answers this two ways, by talking to experts and by looking closely at the lives of four teachers.

Reason 1 for the lack of teachers is that, almost against reason, commentators on networks such as [Fox News](#) and in films such as "[Waiting for Superman](#)" have consistently demonized the profession.

As [Dave Eggers](#) and Ninive Calegari, two of the film's producers, wrote in a New York Times op-ed piece that likened teachers to soldiers, "When we don't get the results we want in our military endeavors, we don't blame the soldiers. We don't say, 'It's these lazy soldiers and their bloated benefit plans! That's why we haven't done better in Afghanistan!' No, if the results aren't there we blame the planners.... No one contemplates blaming the men and women fighting every day in the trenches for little pay and scant recognition."

That lack of basic respect is joined by a litany of other difficulties: lack of support from the education system, especially in terms of training; long hours that never quit and low salary.

Teachers, we are told, make 14% less than other similarly educated professionals.

As a result, if you count coaching and advising in the mix, 62% of teachers have to take second jobs to make ends meet. And it's not just the money that matters: As one expert says, "Money has a catalytic effect." In other words, if salaries went up, perceptions about the profession would change as well.

In addition to laying out these general principles, "American Teacher" shows how they apply to the personal and professional lives of:

**Erik Benner.** A seventh-grade history teacher in Keller, Texas, Benner grew up in a trailer and teaches in part to show his students that education offers hope for all. Having to take time-intensive second and third jobs has a major effect on his family life.

**Jonathan Dearman.** A rare African American teacher in his San Francisco high school, Dearman is proud of being a role model for his students but faces pressures to leave the profession for the family real estate business.

**Jamie Fidler.** A second-generation educator who teaches first grade in [Brooklyn](#), N.Y., Fidler is a dedicated professional who has difficulty balancing being a new mother with the demands of her job.

**Rhena Jasey.** A New Jersey teacher with a bachelor's degree from Harvard and two advanced degrees from Columbia, Jasey says her friends were frankly aghast that she chose such a low-paying, low-status job as her career.

Not surprisingly, the three countries whose students do best on standardized tests — Finland, Singapore and South Korea — approach the care and recruitment of teachers totally differently than we do.

As we watch the individuals in "American Teacher" struggle with the burdens the system places on them, it's hard not to feel like crying, both for them specifically and for our national culture. As one education authority laments after revealing his son's salary-based job choice, "Something's wrong when selling cellphones is more important to society than being a teacher."

<http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/movies/2011/09/30/2011-09-30-short-takes-american-teacher-sarah-palin-you-betcha-bunraku.html>

NYDailyNews.com  
**DAILY**  **NEWS**

## Short Takes: 'American Teacher,' 'Sarah Palin: You Betcha!', 'Bunraku'

JOE NEUMAIER  
Friday, September 30th 2011

### **AMERICAN TEACHER -- 5 STARS**

*Documentary on U.S. public-school educators (1:25). Not rated. At AMC Empire 25.*

This heartbreaking and essential look into the lives of those who put so much into educating other people's children ought to be seen by anyone concerned about the fate of the public school system, and the nation as a whole. A second-generation first-grade teacher in Brooklyn works 11-hour days while pregnant. A Harvard grad loves her Maplewood, N.J., middle school but heads to a charter school for its livable wage. A dedicated Texas teacher must work long hours at two other jobs, which wind up costing him his family. A California teacher with a gift for connecting to kids is lost to the real-estate broker business.

Director Vanessa Roth's movie, narrated by Matt Damon (son of a public-school instructor), is filled with sobering statistics as officials, parents and students tell of the difference a great teacher makes. Hopefully, these portraits of working people doing our most important job also will make a difference.

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/a-film-on-education-that-gets-it-right/2011/09/27/gIQA1JyH3K\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/a-film-on-education-that-gets-it-right/2011/09/27/gIQA1JyH3K_blog.html)

The Washington Post

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## The Answer Sheet

A School Survival Guide for Parents (And Everyone Else)

Posted at 04:00 AM ET, 09/28/2011

### A film on education that gets it right

By Valerie Strauss

*This was written by Mark Phillips, professor of secondary education at San Francisco State University and author of a monthly column on education for the Marin Independent Journal. In this post he writes about "American Teacher," a new feature-length documentary based on the bestselling book "Teachers Have It Easy: The Big Sacrifices and Small Salaries of America's Teachers," by Daniel Moulthrop, co-founder of the 826 National writing programs Nínive Calegari, and writer Dave Eggers.*

By Mark Phillips

Every policymaker should be required to see the new film "American Teacher," which powerfully reveals the huge challenge that the country faces in attracting and keeping the best teachers to help improve public education.

Director Vanessa Roth's new film, co-produced by Dave Eggers and Nínive Calegari and narrated by Matt Damon, notes that while "most people agree that a teacher is the most important in-school factor to school success," you'd never guess this from what many teachers experience in our public schools.

Instead of focusing on this problem we've gotten lost in misdirected answers and foolish debates about improving public education. The answer is charter schools! The problem is charter schools! Blame the teacher unions! Fire bad teachers! And some movies, like "Waiting for Superman," have fallen into the same traps.

*American Teacher* takes a different approach. It compellingly shows how we lose many of our best teachers, and suggests how we can change this pattern.

The film follows a handful of teachers, each dedicated and highly effective both pedagogically and interpersonally. They are:

\* A first-grade teacher in Brooklyn who works 10 hours every day and who spent \$3,000 of her own money to provide classroom supplies during her first year. (Ninety percent of public school teachers have been found to spend their own money to provide necessary supplies.)

\* A middle school teacher, who has 40 desks in her packed classroom along with with students sitting on cabinets. She says, "I feel like I give everything I have, but it's never enough. ...And if I had three of me I might be able to get it done."

\* A gifted social studies teacher and coach in a Texas school who has a starting salary of \$27,000 and eventually has to take a night warehouse job to help support his wife and two children.

\* A gifted young African-American teacher, with a bachelors degree from Harvard University and a masters degree from Columbia University, who has to explain to family and friends why she chose teaching. "You could do anything! Why teaching?!"

There is no better encapsulation of the problems facing teachers than the story of this teacher, named Rhena, who also exemplifies the best practices and habits of a great teacher. She has great energy, knows her subjects, motivates kids, and works closely with their families. She makes it clear just how challenging and complex teaching is today:

"So little of what I do is ...instructing in the classroom. So much of what I do is in the role of a counselor or a social worker or a parent when they need one, or a friend when they need that. Dealing with all of those other social and emotional and personal issues so we can just get down to the work of learning is a huge part of what... many teachers do that I don't think people always realize."

Certainly most policymakers don't.

Most good teachers work 10 hour days that include early morning tutoring or planning and afternoon tutoring, coaching or club advising. Many have papers to grade at night. They average close to 50 hours a week at school and 15 hours after school. Many work on weekends. And more than 30% also have after school jobs.

The stories of these teachers are in some instances heart-breaking.

The Brooklyn first-grade teacher gets six weeks of maternity leave and then has to go back to work to make ends meet.

The Texas teacher, continually unavailable to his wife and children, loses his family, his home is foreclosed, and he eventually has to take an even longer night job.

Another superb African-American teacher who helped many inner-city students go on to college has to quit to go into the family business because he can't support his family with the low salary. Students use the words "shocking" and "devastating" to describe his departure.

Forty-six percent of all teachers quit before their fifth year, driven from the profession by a combination of low salaries, long hours, a lack of support, and the lack of prestige given to the profession. Almost all leave despite a love for teaching. Almost all miss it. And, of course, many potentially excellent teachers don't choose this as a career because of these same obstacles.

The deputy superintendent of South Carolina nails it when he says: "When you have teachers who have to have second jobs.... teachers that are living at the poverty level. Then I think there is something wrong ... And as a society we need to really change that culture. We need to flip it around to say that being a teacher is the most important job in our society."

Although the film doesn't see this as THE solution to the problem, it introduces us to Zeke Vanderhoek's new Equity Project Charter School in New York City. He pays the best teachers \$125,000, cuts almost all other costs, most of them administrative, and thus gives the kids who need it the most the best teachers possible. Vanderhoek says that the high salaries change the perception of what it means to be a teacher.

As the film shows, Rhena becomes one of 600 applicants for eight teaching positions at this school. She is selected and leaves her traditional public school in New Jersey, a loss deeply felt by the children and parents. But after a number of years of low salary and long hours, this is an understandable choice.

"We still struggle to provide the status, the salaries, the respect, and the training that teaching as a full profession requires and deserves," said Stanford University Professor Linda Darling-Hammond, an expert on teacher training and one of our most prominent educational leaders.

Finally, the film notes that the top-performing countries on international standardized tests in math, science, and reading share a number of characteristics. They selectively recruit for teacher training programs. Training is government funded. The pay is much higher than in the United States. Professional work environments are excellent. And the cultural respect for teachers is very high. In Finland, teaching is the most admired job among top college students. Few teachers leave the profession.

*"American Teacher"* spells out the cost to teachers who stay in troubled, low-paying schools as well as to the students when good teachers leave — and it continually makes the point that the most disadvantaged kids are the ones who suffer the most as a result. But it goes beyond spelling out the problem by showing things that we can do to change the dynamic.

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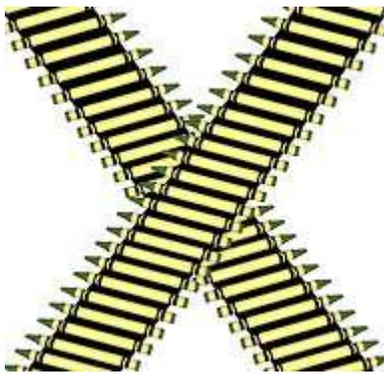
*Op-Ed Contributor*

## The High Cost of Low Teacher Salaries

By *DAVE EGGERS* and *NÍNIVE CLEMENTS CALEGARI*

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[\*Op-Ed Contributor: A New Measure for Classroom Quality \(May 1, 2011\)\*](#)

WHEN we don't get the results we want in our military endeavors, we don't blame the soldiers. We don't say, "It's these lazy soldiers and their bloated benefits plans! That's why we haven't done better in Afghanistan!" No, if the results aren't there, we blame the planners. We blame the generals, the secretary of defense, the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#). No one contemplates blaming the men and women fighting every day in the trenches for little pay and scant recognition.

And yet in education we do just that. When we don't like the way our students score on international standardized tests, we blame the teachers. When we don't like the way particular schools perform, we blame the teachers and restrict their resources.

Compare this with our approach to our military: when results on the ground are not what we hoped, we think of ways to better support soldiers. We try to give

them better tools, better weapons, better protection, better training. And when recruiting is down, we offer incentives.

We have a rare chance now, with many teachers near retirement, to prove we're serious about education. The first step is to make the teaching profession more attractive to college graduates. This will take some doing.

At the moment, the average teacher's pay is on par with that of a toll taker or bartender. [Teachers make 14 percent less](#) than professionals in other occupations that require similar levels of education. In real terms, teachers' salaries have declined for 30 years. The average starting salary is \$39,000; the average ending salary — after 25 years in the profession — is \$67,000. This prices teachers out of home ownership in 32 metropolitan areas, and makes raising a family on one salary near impossible.

So how do teachers cope? Sixty-two percent work outside the classroom to make ends meet. For Erik Benner, an award-winning history teacher in Keller, Tex., money has been a constant struggle. He has two children, and for 15 years has been unable to support them on his salary. Every weekday, he goes directly from Trinity Springs Middle School to drive a forklift at Floor and Décor. He works until 11 every night, then gets up and starts all over again. Does this look like “A Plan,” either on the state or federal level?

We've been working with public school teachers for 10 years; every spring, we see many of the best teachers leave the profession. They're mowed down by the long hours, low pay, the lack of support and respect.

Imagine a novice teacher, thrown into an urban school, told to teach five classes a day, with up to 40 students each. At the year's end, if test scores haven't risen enough, he or she is called a bad teacher. For college graduates who have other options, this kind of pressure, for such low pay, doesn't make much sense. So every year 20 percent of teachers in urban districts quit. Nationwide, 46 percent of teachers quit before their fifth year. The turnover costs the United States \$7.34 billion yearly. The effect within schools — especially those in urban communities where turnover is highest — is devastating.

But we can reverse course. In the next 10 years, over half of the nation's nearly 3.2 million public school teachers will become eligible for retirement. Who will replace them? How do we attract and keep the best minds in the profession?

People talk about accountability, measurements, tenure, test scores and pay for performance. These questions are worthy of debate, but are secondary to recruiting and training teachers and treating them fairly. There is no silver bullet that will fix every last school in America, but until we solve the problem of teacher turnover, we don't have a chance.

Can we do better? Can we generate “A Plan”? Of course.

The consulting firm McKinsey recently examined how we might attract and retain a talented teaching force. The study compared the treatment of teachers here and in the three countries that perform best on standardized tests: Finland, Singapore and South Korea.

Turns out these countries have an entirely different approach to the profession. First, the governments in these countries recruit top graduates to the profession. (We don't.) In Finland and Singapore they pay for training. (We don't.) In terms of purchasing power, South Korea pays teachers on average 250 percent of what we do.

And most of all, they trust their teachers. They are rightly seen as the solution, not the problem, and when improvement is needed, the school receives support and development, not punishment. Accordingly, turnover in these countries is startlingly low: In South Korea, it's 1 percent per year. In Finland, it's 2 percent. In Singapore, 3 percent.

McKinsey polled 900 top-tier American college students and found that 68 percent would consider teaching if salaries started at \$65,000 and rose to a minimum of \$150,000. Could we do this? If we're committed to "winning the future," we should. If any administration is capable of tackling this, it's the current one. [President Obama](#) and Education Secretary [Arne Duncan](#) understand the centrality of teachers and have said that improving our education system begins and ends with great teachers. But world-class education costs money.

For those who say, "How do we pay for this?" — well, how are we paying for three concurrent wars? How did we pay for the interstate highway system? Or the bailout of the [savings and loans](#) in 1989 and that of the investment banks in 2008? How did we pay for the equally ambitious project of sending Americans to the moon? We had the vision and we had the will and we found a way.

Dave Eggers and Nínive Clements Calegari are founders of the 826 National tutoring centers and producers of the documentary "American Teacher."

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