

[tennessean.com](https://www.tennessean.com)

Average teacher pay in Tennessee: How does your district stack up?

7-9 minutes

- This year's base salary for teachers is \$40,000 in Tennessee.
- Oak Ridge Schools came out as the highest average weighted salary for licensed educators, while Overton County had the lowest.
- Tennessee lands at 42nd nationwide for teacher pay.

How much teachers are paid for their increasingly challenging jobs has been a topic of contention, especially as inflation has reached historic highs.

Tennessee ranks in the middle among Southeastern states when it comes to average teacher salaries. The state outpaces Mississippi, West Virginia, Arkansas, Louisiana and Florida, according to [2021 estimates from the National Education Association](#). But salaries in the Southeast are low compared to other regions with higher costs of living. Tennessee lands at 42nd nationwide.

"Tennessee sort of trailing in the Southeast has been one of the drivers behind some of the policy conversations in the last couple of years about trying to make an investment in increasing teacher pay," Jason Grissom said. Grissom is a professor of public policy

and education at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College. "You don't want to be in a position where you're losing really qualified people to these competing states that you share borders with."

The Tennessean has compiled the average salaries for teachers, principals and superintendents at every district in the state using state data.

In Tennessee, the required base pay rose this year and many counties implemented raises to recognize the issues at hand.

DIG DEEPER: [2021 Tennessee teacher salaries](#)

The minimum salary for teachers — the amount paid to licensed instructional personnel with a bachelor's degree and zero years of experience — across every public school district in Tennessee is set annually by the State Board of Education. This year that amount is \$40,000. In 2021, it [was \\$38,000](#).

Some state and federal dollars go toward teacher salaries, but local districts and county governments decide how much of their local funds to use and set the final pay scales.

"The state is not providing a spending plan. They're simply providing allocations," Christopher Candelaria said. Candelaria is an assistant professor of public policy and education at Vanderbilt University. "So ultimately, the district has the flexibility to be able to think how they want to allocate the salaries."

Tennessee's school districts are diverse in terms of average household incomes and education levels, and whether they're metropolitan, suburban or rural. So it's difficult to compare districts with an "apples to apples approach," Candelaria said.

Research shows different districts draw different types of teachers.

Some attract more "home-grown" teachers who graduated from local schools. Some employ teachers with a lot of experience. Because public school teachers' salaries depend heavily on their years of experience, the average salary at a district that attracts more experienced teachers with lots of training would skew higher than that of a district with less experienced teachers who have less training.

[The State Board of Education each year releases districts' average salaries](#) that are weighted to account for teachers' experience levels. The latest numbers are from the 2020-21 school year.

That year, Oak Ridge Schools paid the highest average weighted salary at \$58,585. Oak Ridge is located near Knoxville was one of 50 districts with an average weighted salary above the state's average salary. Their unweighted average was \$71,862.

Overton County Schools in the Upper Cumberland region of Tennessee had the lowest weighted average salary at \$41,999. The district was accompanied by 90 other Tennessee districts with weighted averages below the state's average salary. The unweighted average salary there was \$47,064, the third lowest in the state.

Overton is a rural county with a population of just over 22,000 people. Around 3,100 students attend its school district this year, according to Donnie Holman, a longtime teacher who took the helm as superintendent in early 2021.

Holman is an Overton County native whose family owns a farm that dates back to 1859. He raises Black Angus cattle as well as being superintendent.

Last year, he and district leaders worked to provide raises with a

focus on experienced teachers.

"We had some veteran teachers in the district who basically had not gotten a pay raise in years and years," Holman said. "It appears that sometimes in years past the money that was sent to the district for a pay raise may have been used just to raise the minimum."

Overton County's administration successfully awarded raises, but so have other districts across the state as inflation endures and the cost of living in Tennessee's several fast-growing areas rises. Competing with larger districts like Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, which approved raises and cost of living adjustments over the last two years, and [Knox County Schools](#), which provided raises for its teachers for the 2022-2023 school year, can be tough.

Small, rural districts like Overton County also compete with their neighbors. In bordering Putnam County, where Cookeville is located, the average weighted salary for the 2020-2021 school year was \$46,328.82. In the 2021-2022 school year, the base salary at Putnam was \$39,794 for teachers with 0-5 years of experience. The base salary for this year has increased to \$43,386.

The increase in base pay since last year at Overton was the same as the state's minimum, going from \$38,000 to \$40,000.

While counties would like to pay their teachers more, that's easier said than done.

"The biggest challenge is just getting the money," Holman said.

"We don't have a Walmart and in districts that do have a Walmart, that's a huge money-making venture for the county."

Individual community labor markets, demographics and priorities influence how much a county allocates toward teacher pay. A district may weigh a pay raise against hiring more teachers or tending to another budget item.

The process of deciding pay is complex, especially as schools become more than just a place to learn, according to Grissom. Schools are now often expected to provide social services, health services, nutrition and more.

"If the resources don't keep pace with expectations, well, then the money has to come from individual budget items," he said. "I think it's not a stretch to say that creates increasing challenges for districts to prioritize compensation.

Researchers look at the benefits of raising teacher pay in two buckets: attracting a talented group of people into teaching and retaining them in the profession, Grissom said.

"Teaching is already a hard job, but then there are additional stresses that have come with the pandemic... If you're not increasing pay enough to offset the stresses that are coming with those challenges, you're going to see people leave the workforce."

To learn more about your county's pay scales, [visit the Department of Education's page](#) featuring this year's salary schedules. The Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury's "[Mapping Tennessee Education](#)" is a handy [K-12 dashboard](#) breaking down each county's demographics, average daily attendance, average salaries, revenue and more.