

# As Teachers Leave Idaho, Districts Hope Higher Pay Will Help Lure Them Back

By [Jessica Robinson](#) • Feb 2, 2015

Share [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [Google+](#) [Email](#)



*Teaching jobs at Heyburn Elementary in St. Maries, Idaho, pay less than at schools across the border in Washington.*

***-Jessica Robinson Northwest News Network***

The starting salary for Idaho teachers is lower than in Washington, Oregon, and three other surrounding states. Superintendents in Idaho border towns say that has left them with shortages.

The salary for a first-year teacher in Idaho is around \$31,000. It doesn't help that St. Maries, a school district in north Idaho, is only 30 miles from Washington, where the teacher starting salary is 15 percent higher and teachers move up the pay scale much faster.

This forces superintendents like Joseph Kren to, as he calls it, "get creative" -- rearranging existing teachers' schedules and hiring people with related job experience through provisional certificates.

"I don't want to discredit the importance of having an educational foundation," Kren said. "You can't just hire anyone off the street. But I'll tell you what, there's times when we're looking for a math teacher [and I'm thinking,] 'Your first name's Matt? Close enough! Let's see if we can get you certified.'"

### **Selling a lower pay scale**

Maybe at one time a school district like St. Maries could list a teaching job in the paper and it would be enough. But Superintendent Kren said those days are long gone.

The recruiting kit Kren takes to job fairs at universities includes two big plastic bins full of dozens of photos of smiling, well-behaved looking students and a 12-foot-wide, 8-foot-tall backdrop.

"We try to make it as colorful as possible, to catch people's eyes," Kren said. He knows that now you've got to be a salesman.

"Because you want good quality people, everybody does," Kren said. "I mean, we're not afraid to say 'Hi, I'm Joe Kren, superintendent. You know where St. Maries is? No, you don't? Oh, man, let me tell you about us.' That type of approach. You cannot wait for them to come to you."

And sometimes he'll get a bite.

"I've had great initial conversations," Kren said. "Then I take out our pay scale. And a lot of times, attitudes change."

One of the largest districts in Idaho, Coeur d'Alene, is across the Washington border from Spokane. Superintendent Matt Handelman said they can attract new teachers, but there is a problem.

"The folks who decide, 'You know, I've done this for awhile, you've trained me well, and now I can go sell my wares elsewhere,' so to speak," Handelman said.

An experienced teacher in another district got a \$13,000 pay hike by moving across the border to Oregon.

And it's not just on Idaho's western border.

### **Average starting teacher pay (2012-13) in Idaho and neighboring states:**

- Wyoming \$43,269
- Washington \$36,335
- Nevada \$35,358
- Oregon \$33,549
- Utah \$33,081
- Idaho \$31,159
- Montana \$27,274

*Source: National Education Association*

## **Not just about pay**

Keith Leppert remembers having a drink one night with some fellow teachers in Idaho Falls. A former colleague who'd taken a job in to the east in Wyoming walked into the bar.

Leppert said everyone wanted to know how it was going over there? And how were the class sizes?

“And you could kind of tell as that conversation's going on -- everybody's in the back of their mind thinking, 'Is this something that I could do’” Leppert said.

A few years later, he did it.

Leppert is now a high school math teacher in Buffalo, Wyoming. And he does get paid \$6,000 or \$7,000 more per year.

But Leppert said money was not the big reason he left his Idaho classroom.

It was about morale.

“It got to the point where teaching was looked on negatively,” Leppert said. “You know at the state level they just didn't care what teachers thought or felt. Education in general, it didn't look like it was going down a road that you really felt like the best interest of students was in mind.”

In 2012, Idaho went through a bitter campaign over a series of laws the legislature passed aimed at reforming education. They included merit pay, limits on teacher contracts, and a plan that threatened to shift funding for teacher salaries to pay for a laptop for every student in Idaho.

Teachers fought it at the ballot box and they won. Voters overturned the laws.

But Handelman said with teachers, the image stuck.

“From what I've seen, the bigger issue than just pay is how teachers are treated or respected, or at least the perception of that,” he said.

## **Help coming from Boise?**

Overall, the number of teachers leaving Idaho for schools in other states has declined since 2009, to 61 last year. However, since 2008, two other things have happened that worry districts. The number of teachers coming into Idaho from other states has plummeted from almost 900 in 2008 to 460 in 2013. And the number of Idaho teachers leaving the profession has tripled.

It's gotten to the point that there's widespread agreement in the capital that something has to change. The question is how.

Idaho's new schools chief Sherri Ybarra held a press conference recently where she discussed her proposals to raise school spending, reduce class sizes and boost to teacher pay.

“The one thing that's wonderful that's coming out of all these conversations is that we are all understand that attracting and retaining high-quality teachers is the basis of every one of our discussions,” Ybarra said.



*St. Maries school superintendent Joseph Kren says he struggles to get enough applications for open teacher jobs.*

***-Credit Jessica Robinson / Northwest News Network***

The Republican chair of a Senate tax committee has threatened to block tax cuts this year unless the state boosts starting teacher pay to \$40,000 a year.

A “career ladder” proposal Republican Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter is pushing would do just that, though through a five-year rollout.

Many details will have to be worked out in the Legislature. But Joseph Kren in St. Maries is optimistic.

“If more money is given to those wages, then perhaps we can attract a few more people,” he said.

Kren doesn't know if the money will be enough to change Idaho's reputation, but he's got a heck of a sales pitch for that.

*Copyright 2015 Northwest News Network*