

Investing in Educators:

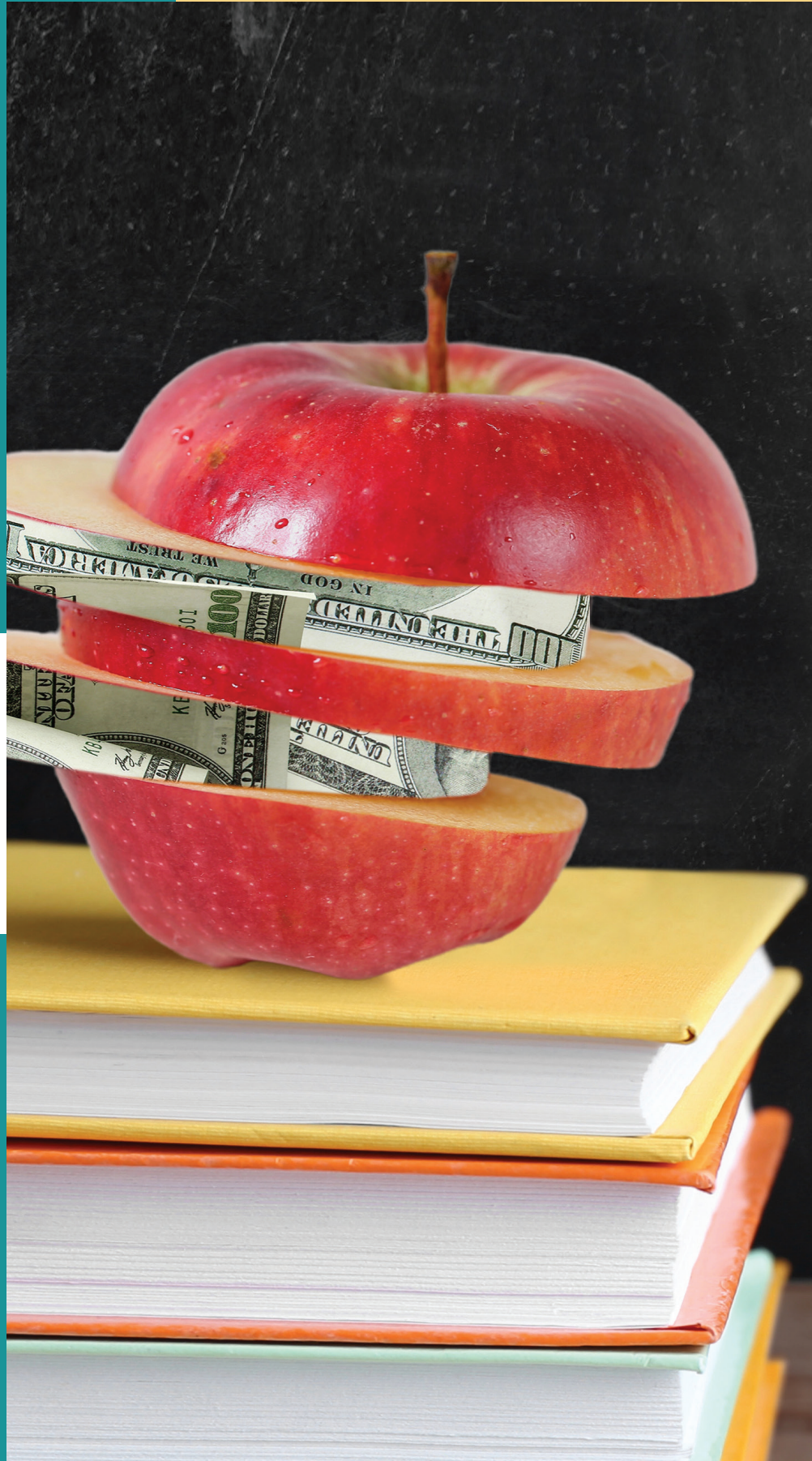
The Imperative of Differentiated Pay for Teaching in Hard-to-Staff Assignments and Specializations

By Charles Barone, Ph.D. and
Andrew Epifanio, Ed.M.



The authors would like to thank the following individuals for their advice, guidance, and input: Dan Goldhaber, Ph.D.; Marguerite Roza, Ph.D.; Douglas Staiger, Ph.D.; Hannah Putman, M.A., M.S.; Katherine Bowser, Ph.D.; Patricia Saenz-Armstrong, Ph.D.; Julie Sugarman, Ph.D.; Jill McLaughlin, M.A.; Nicole Fuller, M.Ed.; Saashya Rodrigo, Ph.D.; Prateek Dutta, Ed.L.D.; Rianna Saslow; Nicholas Munyan-Penney, M.A.; James Murphy, Ph.D.; and Janette Martinez, MPA.

While we are deeply grateful for their contributions, all opinions, omissions, and any remaining errors are our own.



Investing in Educators:

The Imperative of Differentiated Pay for Teaching in Hard-to-Staff Assignments and Specializations



2	Executive Summary
6	Introduction
6	Reasons to Provide Differentiated Pay for Hard-to-Staff Assignments and Specializations
7	<i>Equalizing Access to High-Quality Teachers</i>
9	<i>Promoting Fiscal Equity</i>
10	<i>Alleviating Domain-Specific Teacher Shortages</i>
14	<i>Reducing Churn and Instability</i>
14	Evidence for Differentiated Pay for Hard-to-Staff Assignments and Specializations
16	Infrequency and Inadequacy of Differentiated Pay for Hard-to-Staff Assignments and Specializations
19	Comparing Teaching and Nursing
19	<i>Parallels between Teaching and Nursing</i>
21	<i>State of Pay</i>
21	<i>Methodology</i>
22	<i>Findings</i>
25	<i>Implications</i>
26	<i>Limitations and Future Considerations</i>
29	Conclusion
30	Endnotes
44	Appendix A: Summary of Studies on Differentiated Pay for Hard-to-Staff Assignments and Specializations in Teaching
47	Appendix B: Summary of Examined AFT Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs)

Executive Summary

School districts across the country face difficult and urgent choices regarding how to recruit and retain an effective educator workforce—simultaneously navigating chronic domain-specific teacher shortages, declining student enrollment, budget-induced layoffs, and lagging student outcomes. As education leaders grapple with such pressures, strategic approaches to staffing and compensation—such as those seen in a parallel field, that of nursing—offer hope and point to a path forward.

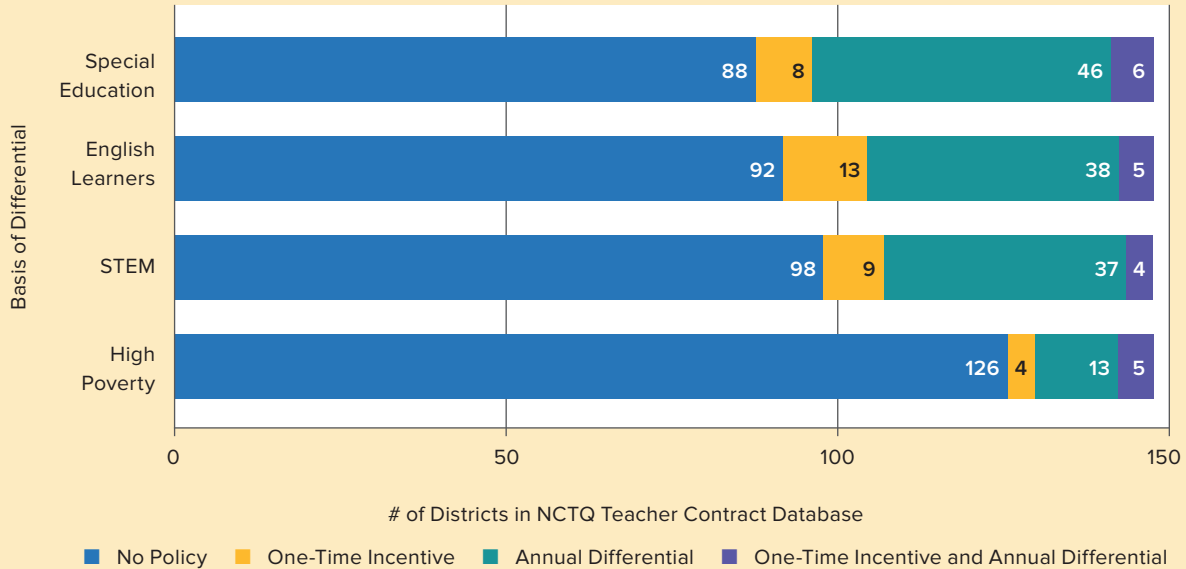
Differentiated pay for teachers in hard-to-staff assignments and specializations—i.e., **extra compensation for teachers in schools with high concentrations of low-income students and domains like special education, English Learner and bilingual education, and STEM**—holds great promise as a strategy to address some of the most persistent teacher workforce challenges that affect student outcomes:

- **Access to High-Quality Teachers:** Teacher quality is inequitably distributed. Schools with higher proportions of low-income students and students of color tend to be staffed by less experienced and underqualified teachers.
- **Fiscal Equity:** Because of seniority-driven pay and placement policies, schools with high proportions of low-income students receive less funding per-pupil than do their more advantaged counterparts.
- **Domain-Specific Teacher Shortages:** There are well-documented and pervasive teacher shortages in high-poverty schools and special education, English Learner and bilingual education, and STEM roles.
- **Churn and Instability:** Teacher turnover directly impacts student achievement and disproportionately affects already disadvantaged students, with higher turnover rates in Title I schools and those serving more students of color.

“
Despite the rationale and evidence for differentiated pay, however, the strategy is quite uncommon in teaching.”

Research indicates that differentiated pay for teachers in hard-to-staff assignments and specializations can help both to ameliorate these problems and boost student achievement. *Despite the rationale and evidence for differentiated pay, however, the strategy is quite uncommon in teaching.* In a review of 148 teacher collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) from large school districts, less than half (41%) of contracts included language about differentiated pay for special education teachers and less than 1 in 6 (15%) had language about it for teachers in high-poverty schools. Even where language was present in the teacher CBAs, the differentials offered were usually nominal and often restricted behind opaque bureaucratic approval processes.

Most large school districts offer no pay differentials for hard-to-staff assignments or specializations



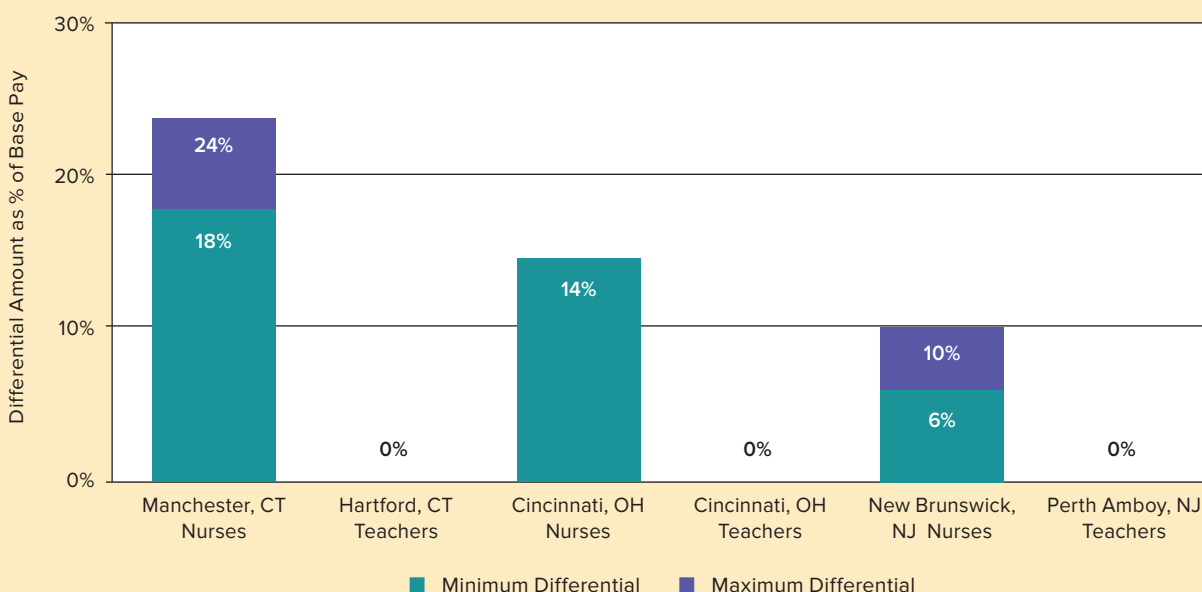
Data source: [NCTQ Teacher Contract Database](#)

When it comes to differentiated pay for hard-to-staff assignments and specializations, the field of teaching is somewhat unique. These types of targeted compensation are much less typical in teaching than in other professions, including those represented by unions. *Differentiated pay for hard-to-staff assignments and specializations is much more common in one parallel profession with union representation, that of nursing.*

This paper provides a comparative analysis of CBAs between teaching and nursing, which share analogous demographics and education requirements. All of the examined contracts are under the American Federation of Teachers, which is the second-largest collective bargaining unit in the U.S. for *both* teachers and nurses. Our analysis suggests that differentiated pay, beyond mere seniority or years of service, appears much more common in the latter field. Moreover, differentiated pay in the nursing contracts tended to be widely accessible and far more generous than similar differentials for teachers.

“
Differentiated pay for hard-to-staff assignments and specializations is much more common in one parallel profession with union representation, that of nursing.”

Unlike teachers, nurses tend to have access to differentials for hard-to-staff assignments



Hard-to-staff assignments in teaching = serving in a high-poverty school
 Hard-to-staff assignments in nursing = evening, overnight, and weekend shifts

Source: Examined nurse and teacher collective bargaining agreements (see Appendix B) as well as follow-up communications with school districts about policy usage (given administrative restrictions in the contracts).

“
This opposition to differentiated pay by CTA and other teachers’ unions belies its ubiquity in other union-represented professions.”

The lack of additional pay for hard-to-staff assignments and specializations in teaching may be due in part to strong opposition from teachers’ unions. Union leaders often claim that deviation from the traditional step-and-lane pay system could create pay inequities or be divisive. For example, in 2023, Claudia Briggs—a spokesperson for California Teachers Association—[stated](#) that “[Differentiated pay] can be very divisive and hard to implement fairly and consistently. And it doesn’t get to the root of the problem.” Briggs isn’t quoted on what she considers to be the “problem” or what would get to root of it.¹

This opposition to differentiated pay by CTA and other teachers’ unions belies its ubiquity in other union-represented professions. Absent an alternative strategy, this opposition perpetuates current inequities and inefficiencies in student opportunities and outcomes. Together, the challenging circumstances faced by our public schools, the available evidence on differentiated pay for teachers, and the prevalent use of such an approach in a parallel field make a strong case for districts and states to leverage differentiated pay as an immediate strategy to help revitalize the educator workforce, reverse declining student outcomes, and equalize educational opportunity.

“

The field of nursing, with its similarities to teaching, offers a lesson on how to move forward: Provide differentiated pay for hard-to-staff assignments and specializations to get the best teachers we have to where we need them most.”



Differentiated pay could be implemented in a number of ways. In this paper, we focus on the role of collective bargaining agreements because that is the most common approach in both education and nursing. At the district level, it could also be: offered as annual bonuses outside of contracts (though negotiation through an MOU or the like may still be required); through increasing school leader autonomy over hiring, staffing, and school budgeting; or, through strategic staffing with diverse educator roles. At the state level, initiatives could include [grant programs](#) tailored to address chronic shortages, [pay scheme flexibilities](#) for qualifying districts, [scholarship programs](#) that cover full tuition costs for teacher preparation programs in exchange for a multi-year commitment to a hard-to-staff assignment or specialization, or even a [sliding scale tax credit](#) for teachers based on the poverty level of the school in which they teach.^{2,3,4,5}

The urgency to recruit and retain effective teachers in the most chronically understaffed schools and classrooms is clear. Schools with high concentrations of low-income students and students of color as well as special education, English Learner and bilingual education, and STEM classrooms continue to experience dire staffing shortages. *The field of nursing, with its similarities to teaching, offers a lesson on how to move forward: Provide differentiated pay for hard-to-staff assignments and specializations to get the best teachers we have to where we need them most.*