

Successful Teacher Negotiations

by Dennis L. Farrell, MEd.

I was raised in Michigan, with a strong union family background. I have been a member “in good standing” of Michigan Education Association (MEA), National Education Association (NEA), United Auto Workers (UAW) and International Society of Skilled Trades (ISST). I have always been a working member in union communications, negotiations, recruitment and as an organizer. I grew up with the belief that *collective negotiations* would always be to the benefit of the represented member. After all – if it wasn’t – why belong? I knew it was always right to belong, and to negotiate for fair and equitable (as in high) wages.

Moving to the right-to-work state of Tennessee forced me to rethink some of what I have *always known*. Here I found people who chose not to belong to a union. Here I found people who chose not to enter into collective negotiations. And, these people are not the idiots that I thought they might be.

Well, enough about me – what about these negotiations? Common sense tells me that teachers must be making more because of negotiations. But, then I read the comments of Alveda King, Educator and niece of Martin Luther King, Jr.,

“Teacher pay has barely moved up for a generation. ... it was in the early 70s that the unions infiltrated the teaching trade.” Yet, overall education spending has boomed. King adds, *“Had the NEA and AFT simply kept our share of the education pie where it was in 1970, then today, the average teacher salary would exceed \$65,000.”*

This created for me cognitive dissonance, which required an answer. I knew that to find answers I needed data. I believe in the truth of what Lord Kelvin said,

“When you measure what you are speaking about and express it in numbers, you know something about it, but when you cannot express it in numbers your knowledge about it is of a meager and unsatisfactory kind.”

Or as Sherlock Holmes said, *“It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data.”* (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)

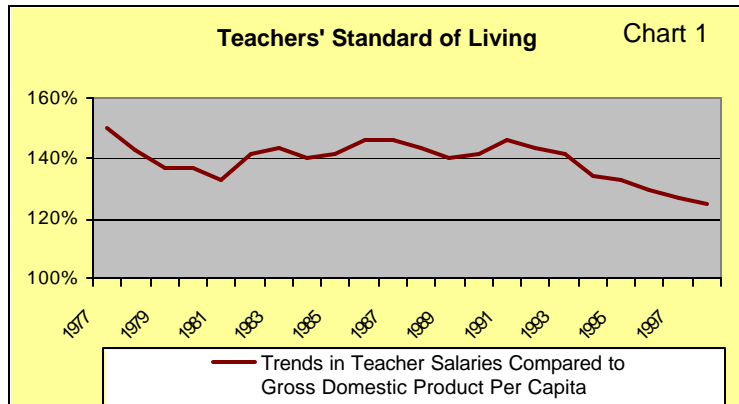
Collective negotiations became legal in Tennessee for the 1977-1978 school year. Some systems chose to negotiate and some chose not to negotiate. Here, in a right-to-work state, we can find answers.

The purpose of this report is to share the answers with anyone who is willing to read with an open mind.

Two time periods will be used for this report:

1. 1977-1978 to 1997-1998 The first 20 years of negotiations
2. 1991-1992 to 2000-2001 The most current decade

This study is focused on wages and includes the professional staff, but not the executive staff. “Teachers” means classroom teachers and does not include Principals, Assistant Principals, Attendance Teachers, Supervisors, School Psychologists, School Social Workers, Special Education Psychologists, Special Education Principals, Special Education Supervisors, Secretaries, Bus Drivers, Cafeteria or Custodial Staff.



This study begins by looking at national trends (shown in Chart 1) and comparing them to the Gross Domestic Product Per Capita. This number best represents the national average standard of living and will be used throughout the study to maintain consistency.

Since negotiations began, teachers' wages have dropped from about 150% of the national average to 125%. This trend is disturbing since

teaching is not an average job. It requires a 4-year degree plus additional study and completion of a cumbersome certification process. After two decades of "successful negotiation", teacher pay has reached the lowest standard of living in the last forty years.

I next investigated the big picture of education in the United States.

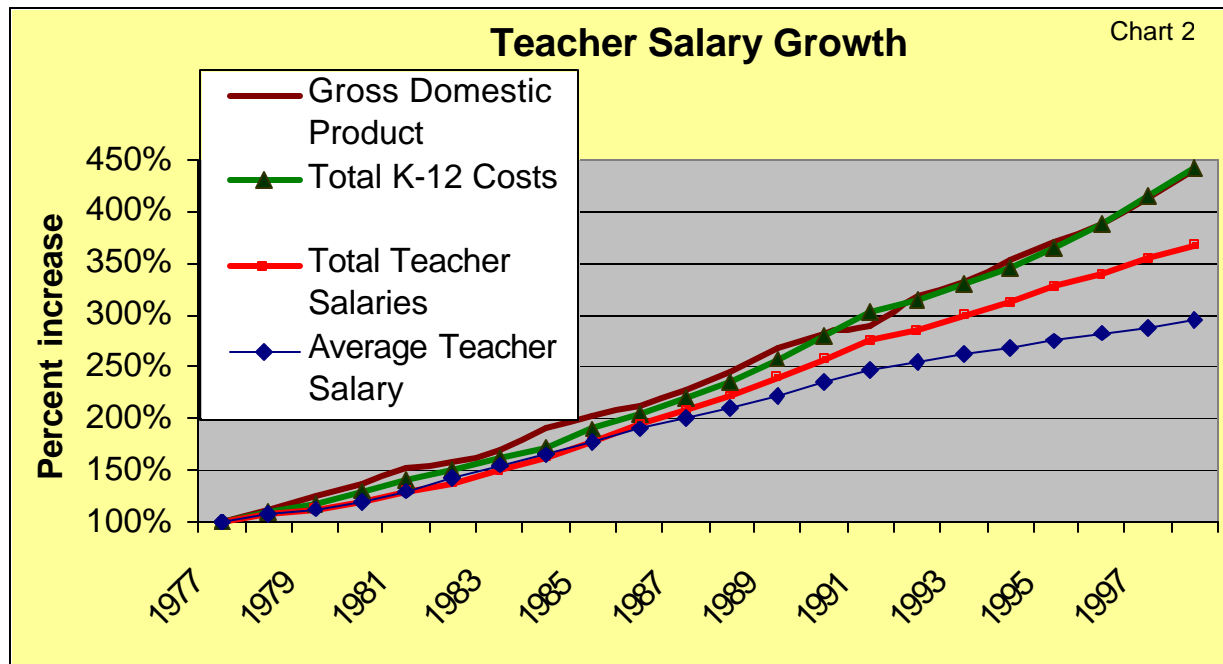


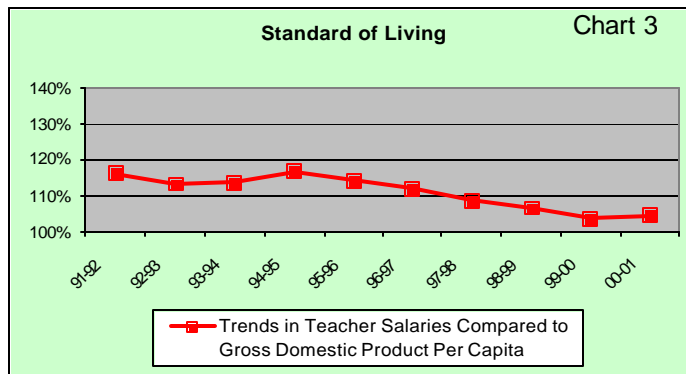
Chart 2 gives a percentage of growth for each item. Gross Domestic Product Per Capita and Total K-12 Cost for the nation track very well together. This tells me that we are continuing to increase spending for education at about the same rate as average wages grow.

The Total Teacher Salaries line, however, tells us that Alveda King was right! Teacher wages have not kept pace with spending!

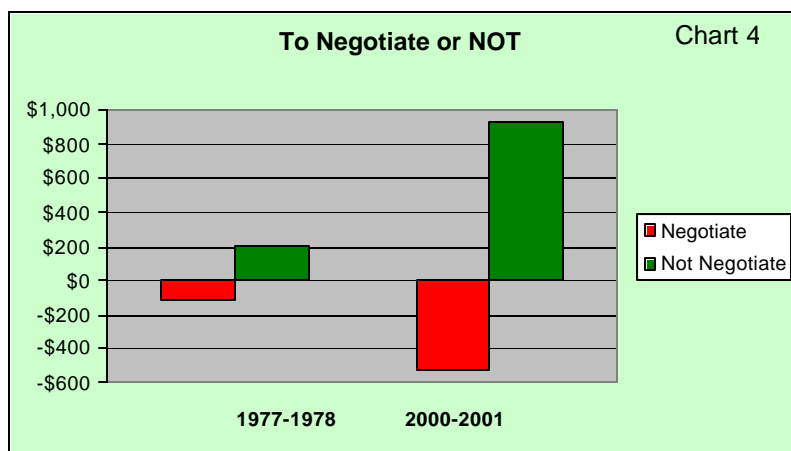
The drop in the Average teacher Salary line is even more compelling. It means that teachers are getting a smaller share of the "education pie". How could this have happened during successful negotiations?

Taking a look closer to home, we look to Tennessee for answers.

Tennessee statistics are even more disheartening. Teachers' standard of living is hardly better than the national average level. (Chart 3) How can it be that such a valuable commodity can be sold so cheaply?



I was beginning to wonder if negotiations were a benefit or just another “urban legend”. Still there was an opportunity to learn from Tennessee, since we have systems that negotiate and those that do not. Maybe the systems without negotiations are holding the others down. Surely, there must be some salary benefits to collective bargaining.



In 1977-1978 there was a pay differential between those systems which chose to negotiate and those who chose not to negotiate. The 89 Negotiating systems averaged \$114 less per year than state average, while the 50 systems that did not negotiate earned an average of \$203 more than state average. The pay differential is \$317 per year in favor of the systems that do not negotiate. (Chart 4)

After almost a quarter of a century of “successful negotiations” the negotiated systems wages have fallen to an average of \$523 less than the state average. The non-negotiating systems have risen to \$921 more than state average. The pay differential has increased to an average of \$1,444. Teachers in the non-negotiating systems now receive an average of \$1,444 more per year than teachers who chose to negotiate!

The statistics are inescapable: negotiations appear to harm the very people who pay for the activity! This study has forced me to accept the truth that “the industrial model of collective negotiations does not work in the public sector.”

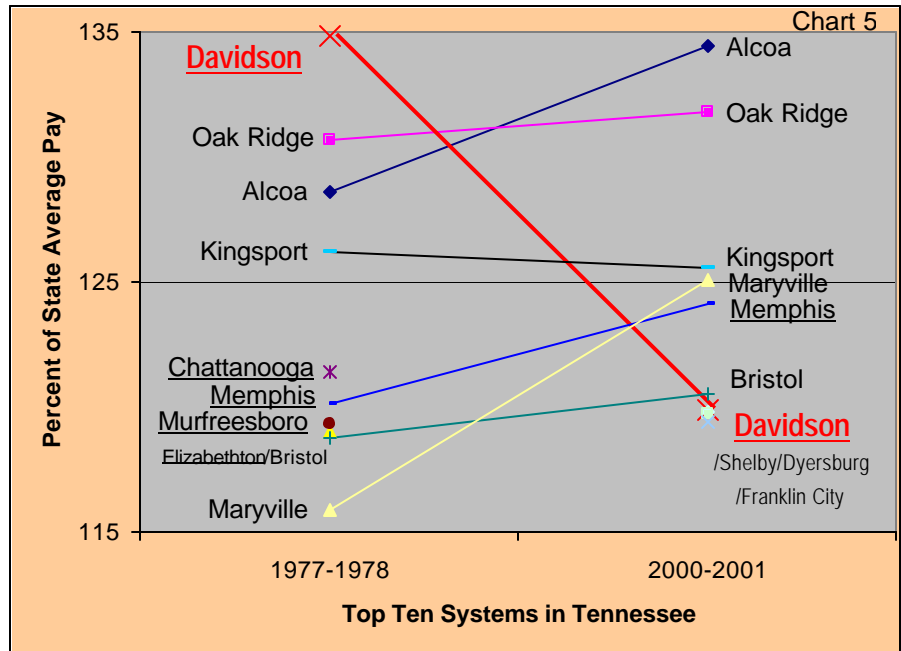
When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. -- Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Bringing the study even closer to home, we now move to one of the largest and most powerful teacher locals in the state –The Metro-Nashville Education Association (Davidson County). At the beginning of negotiations in 1977 metro-Nashville teachers were the highest paid educators in the state. Let’s look at where their “success in negotiations” has brought them today.

Chart 5 shows the top ten school systems in the state at the beginning of negotiations and for the 2000-2001 school year.

The percentage on the left is a comparison with Tennessee teacher average pay.

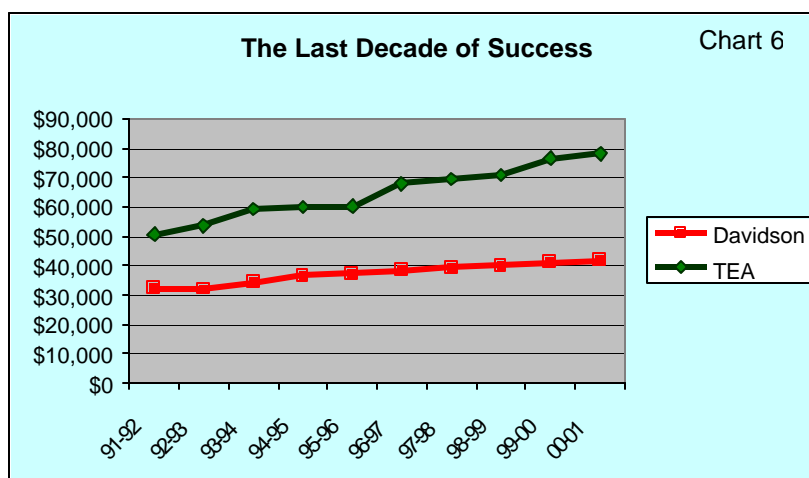
In 1977-1978 Davidson County teachers were paid 134.8% of state average pay. In 2000-2001 their wages had fallen to 119.9%, and their position had fallen from 1st in the state to 7th (only 0.5% away from 10th).



This drop of 14.9% represents real money. If their wages had only kept pace with the increase in state average their wages would be $(14.9\% * \$37,431)$ \$5,571 more per teacher per year than they currently receive. What happened to the best-paid system in the state?

Also, in 1977, five of the top ten systems negotiated (their names are underlined). Now only two negotiating systems remain in the top ten. Davidson County appears to be the next system likely to fall from the chart, leaving only one negotiating system

Nevertheless, we continue to hear from union representatives that they have been successful in negotiating for the teachers. Where is this "success"? Who has reaped its benefits?



During the last decade average teacher pay in the Davidson County system has risen from \$32,224 to \$41,700, an increase of 29.4%

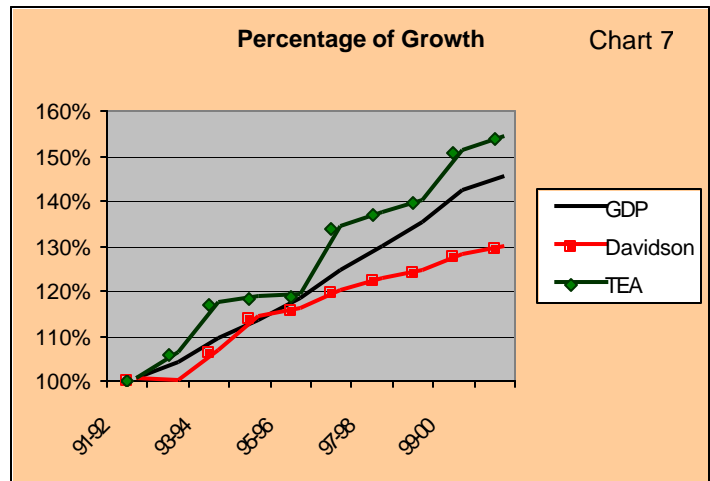
It appears in Chart 6 that the average pay for the Tennessee Education Association (TEA) professional staff has risen more rapidly, going from \$50,753 to \$78,147, an increase of 54.0%

(NOTE: For a direct comparison with teachers this study includes the Tennessee professional staff, but not the executive staff. For TEA this means the professional staffers and does not include the highest paid officials, President, VP, executive director, department heads or support staff.)

To see what this difference means relative to the standard of living, in Chart 7 we look at percentage increases compared to the Gross Domestic Product per capita.

The winners and losers in this situation are obvious. After making comparisons with the GDP it becomes apparent that the last decade has been successful for the professional employees of TEA while sacrificing the pay of the professional teachers they represent.

Looking at the facts with hard data has been a real eye-opener for me. The most difficult part for me was accepting a truism as stated by Stephen Covey,



“Admission of ignorance is often the first step in our education.”

Conclusions:

- > If teacher wages kept pace with GDP they would be much higher.
- > If Davidson County teacher wages kept pace with the state average they would be much higher.
- > Negotiations in the public sector appear to harm the very people who pay for the activity!
- > Typical negotiating systems lose ground compared with the state average.
- > Typical non-negotiating systems gain ground compared with the state average.
- > The professional employees of TEA are successful at improving their own standard of living.

Tennessee is a right-to-work state where all residents have the right of association. Therefore, you have a choice that teachers in many other states do not.

- > Teachers may choose to continue union representation. Knowing as Henry Ford said, *“If you do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always gotten.”* Choosing this route perpetuates the adversarial environment and the results shown for systems that negotiate.

OR

- > Teachers may choose to change to a professional association and work collaboratively in a team as part of a non-negotiating system. Choosing this route ends the adversarial environment and teachers share in the results shown for systems that do not negotiate.

When deciding, teachers should think about this common definition of insanity: *“Insanity is to continue to do what you’ve always done, and to expect different results.”*

Dennis Farrell is currently the Director of Professional Development for Professional Educators of Tennessee and has taught in industry as well as public and private institutions. He has also worked as an international consultant, including work for both the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association leadership. He has degrees in Education from both Michigan State University and Peabody School of Education at Vanderbilt.

Data sources:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Bureau of Economic Analysis
National Income and Product Accounts Tables > Bureau of Labor Statistics
Average Annual Pay By State and Industry Report > United States Department of Education
National Center for Educational Statistics | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > American Federation of Teachers
Annual Survey of State Departments of Education > National Education Association
Annual Internal Survey > Tennessee Department of Education
Annual Statistical Report |
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