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Teacher Compensation, Workplace Motivation, and Public Education Policy: Evidence from Alberta, Canada.

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Abstract

Teacher compensation is an important public-policy and workforce issue because pay, benefits, workplace support, and recognition shape how educators experience and sustain their work. This study examines how primary and secondary school teachers in Alberta perceive compensation structures, workplace motivation, and benefit packages, and considers the implications of those perceptions for public education policy and workforce sustainability. The study uses a descriptive mixed-source design combining questionnaire data from 21 Alberta teachers with secondary evidence on teacher earnings, education-sector financing, staffing, and working conditions. The analysis is guided by Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, used as an interpretive framework for distinguishing compensation and working conditions from recognition, responsibility, and other potentially motivating features of work. Findings indicate that most respondents perceived little or no change in their pay structure, while many reported increased stress, workload pressures, and limited classroom support. Respondents identified improved vision and dental coverage and stronger workplace recognition and support as areas for improvement. Recent Alberta evidence similarly documents workload intensification and concerns about teacher well-being and sustainability. The study contributes a context-specific descriptive account that connects teachers' reported compensation experiences with workplace conditions and the public-policy environment in Alberta. Given the small, convenience-based sample, the findings are not statistically generalizable to Alberta's teaching workforce; rather, they identify patterns and policy questions for further investigation. The article concludes with implications for pay progression, workplace recognition, classroom support, benefits, and workforce-sensitive education funding.

Keywords: teacher compensation; workplace motivation; Herzberg two-factor theory; education policy; workforce sustainability; Alberta

Introduction

Teacher compensation is both a human resource issue and a public-policy concern. In publicly funded education systems, decisions concerning wages, benefits, staffing, workplace support, and funding influence the ability of schools and school boards to recruit, motivate, and retain qualified educators. Compensation therefore extends beyond salary to encompass the broader employment relationship through which public institutions recognize professional contribution and sustain the education workforce. Research on teachers' work also indicates that job satisfaction is related to important

professional outcomes, including turnover intentions and other dimensions of teacher functioning (Wartenberg et al., 2023).

In Alberta, the relationship between public funding and education-sector employment is particularly important. School-board revenues have historically depended heavily on government funding, while salaries and benefits constitute a substantial component of education expenditure (Government of Canada, 2020). At the same time, more recent Alberta evidence shows that teachers face significant workload, classroom-complexity, and well-being pressures. OECD TALIS 2024 results for Alberta report high levels of work-related stress and working hours, while Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) research documents workload intensification, limited support, and concerns about retention (Alberta Teachers' Association [ATA], 2024, 2026; OECD, 2025). These developments reinforce the need to examine compensation alongside the wider employment conditions in which teachers perform their work.

This study examines teacher compensation and workplace motivation among primary and secondary school teachers in Alberta through three related dimensions: pay structure, motivational practices, and benefit packages. The study addresses a gap in the existing discussion by bringing these dimensions together in a small Alberta teacher sample and explicitly connecting teachers' reported experiences to public financing and workforce sustainability. The contribution is therefore descriptive and contextual rather than causal: the study does not estimate the effect of compensation on motivation or retention, but identifies patterns in teachers' perceptions that can inform subsequent research and policy discussion.

The study addresses the following overarching question: How do primary and secondary school teachers in Alberta perceive their compensation structures, workplace motivation, and benefit packages, and what do these perceptions imply for public education policy and workforce sustainability? Three descriptive sub questions operationalize the inquiry: (1) How do respondents perceive changes in their pay structures? (2) What forms of workplace motivation and support do respondents report receiving or lacking? and (3) Which benefit improvements do respondents identify as desirable? These questions correspond directly to the three constructs examined in the questionnaire.

The study is guided by the expectation that teachers may experience limited improvement in direct compensation despite changes in workload, instructional demands, and workplace support. It also expects that teachers' motivational preferences may extend beyond direct pay to include recognition, classroom support, and improved benefits. These expectations are interpreted through Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory rather than treated as causal hypotheses. The framework provides a way to examine whether the study's descriptive patterns are consistent with a distinction between employment

conditions that may prevent dissatisfaction and work characteristics that may support motivation (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1968).

Public Education Policy and Teacher Compensation

Teacher compensation is shaped by the interaction of public financing, institutional priorities, labour-market conditions, and employment policies. In Canada, education is primarily a provincial responsibility, and school boards rely heavily on public funding. Statistics Canada reported that 93.8% of school-board revenue in 2017–2018 came from government funding, with 73.5% of government funding provided by provinces or territories (Government of Canada, 2020). This relationship makes compensation policy inseparable from decisions about public expenditure and education-sector priorities.

Compensation also has a workforce-policy dimension. Teacher salaries and benefits represent a substantial share of education expenditure, while changes in staffing levels can affect workload and classroom support. The evidence reviewed in the original study indicates that educator salaries and benefits had increased over several years, although after accounting for inflation, salary growth did not necessarily translate into increased real purchasing power. These conditions raise a policy question concerning how governments and school boards balance fiscal constraints with the need to maintain an effective education workforce.

Recent Alberta evidence further demonstrates that workforce sustainability cannot be considered separately from working conditions. TALIS 2024 reports that Alberta teachers work substantial weekly hours and experience high levels of work-related stress, while ATA research identifies workload intensification, classroom complexity, and insufficient support as important concerns (ATA, 2024, 2026; OECD, 2025). These sources provide context for interpreting the present study's findings without being treated as direct measures of the 21 respondents' experiences.

Literature Review

Teacher Compensation and Workforce Sustainability

Teacher compensation has implications for recruitment, retention, motivation, and perceptions of occupational value. The literature reviewed in the source manuscript suggests that educators have historically experienced concerns about compensation relative to their education and professional responsibilities. Jacobs and Toch (2021), for example, discussed teacher pay in relation to comparable levels of education and experience. More recent research indicates that teacher job satisfaction is associated with turnover intentions, absenteeism, teacher-student interactions, and other professional outcomes (Wartenberg et al., 2023). Compensation should therefore be examined as one

component of the broader employment relationship rather than as an isolated monetary variable.

Public Financing and Employment Conditions

Public financing decisions influence the resources available for salaries, benefits, classroom support, and staffing. Griffith (2020) observed that school districts typically devote a large proportion of their budgets to salaries and wages. Consequently, fiscal pressure can affect both direct compensation and the availability of support personnel. The evidence reviewed in the original study also described reductions in education-sector support staffing and funding in Alberta, illustrating how public expenditure decisions can affect the employment environment in which teachers work.

Motivation Beyond Direct Pay

Compensation should also be considered alongside intrinsic and relational forms of motivation. The survey findings indicate that teachers' concerns were not limited to salary: recognition, classroom assistance, manageable workloads, and benefit coverage were also important. This pattern is consistent with Herzberg's distinction between employment conditions and motivators such as recognition and responsibility (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1968). Research on teacher rewards also cautions against assuming that financial incentives produce uniform motivational effects (Pham et al., 2021). The present study therefore uses a broader total-rewards perspective in which financial compensation is considered together with workplace recognition, professional support, and benefits.

International and Comparative Evidence

The original literature review also identified international evidence concerning education-sector employment pressures. Griffith (2020) discussed teaching-position losses during periods of economic recession in the United States, while Carvalho and Hares (2020) examined the vulnerability of private and contract teachers in developing countries. Jain et al. (2020) considered teachers' experiences with changes in educational delivery and the role of educational technology. Together, these studies demonstrate that teacher compensation and employment security are influenced by wider economic and policy environments.

Recent Alberta Evidence and the Study Context

Recent Alberta evidence strengthens the contextual relevance of the present study. The ATA's qualitative research on teachers who had left or were considering leaving the profession identified work intensification, classroom complexity, insufficient supports, and concerns about professional conditions as prominent issues (ATA, 2024). OECD

TALIS 2024 data for Alberta likewise report high work-related stress, substantial weekly working hours, and a decline in job satisfaction since 2018 (OECD, 2025). The ATA's 2026 synthesis of TALIS 2024 and its own research describe structural intensification, time scarcity, classroom complexity, and declining professional voice as conditions relevant to workforce sustainability (ATA, 2026). These sources do not establish that compensation causes the reported conditions; rather, they demonstrate why compensation should be examined as one component of a broader employment and policy environment.

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory: Theoretical Underpinnings

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory provides the study's theoretical anchor. The theory distinguishes between hygiene factors, which concern the conditions surrounding work and can contribute to dissatisfaction when inadequate, and motivators, which are more closely associated with the content of work, achievement, recognition, responsibility, and growth (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1968). The framework is relevant because the present study does not treat compensation as synonymous with motivation. Instead, it examines compensation together with workplace support, recognition, and benefits.

The theory is operationally relevant to the study's three constructs. Pay structure and benefits are examined primarily as employment conditions that may shape dissatisfaction or perceptions of institutional fairness, while workplace recognition and support are considered as relational and job-context factors that may complement financial compensation. The framework therefore guides interpretation rather than statistical testing. For example, respondents' reports of limited change in pay alongside increased workload and limited classroom support can be interpreted as evidence of a gap between employment conditions and the motivational experience of work; however, the study does not claim that Herzberg's theory is empirically confirmed by the sample.

This theoretical positioning also accommodates the mixed evidence on teacher compensation. Research on teacher rewards has not established a simple or uniform relationship between financial incentives and teacher outcomes (Pham et al., 2021). More recent synthesis indicates that teachers' job satisfaction is associated with turnover intentions, absenteeism, teacher-student interactions, and other professional outcomes, reinforcing the importance of examining work conditions alongside compensation (Wartenberg et al., 2023). Herzberg's framework thus provides a coherent lens through which the study can interpret why respondents may identify both compensation-related and non-monetary workplace changes as important.

Methodology

Research Design and Rationale: This study used a descriptive mixed-source approach combining primary questionnaire data with secondary research. A descriptive design was appropriate because the research questions ask how a defined group of Alberta teachers

perceived pay structure, workplace support, and benefits rather than seeking to estimate causal effects or test a population-level theory. The mixed-source approach allowed the study to place respondents' perceptions within the wider policy and financing context of Alberta education. Primary data provide direct evidence of respondents' experiences, while secondary sources provide contextual evidence concerning teacher earnings, school-board revenues and expenditures, staffing, and working conditions.

Survey Instrument and Constructs: The questionnaire was administered through Google Forms and comprised compensation and demographic questions, short-answer items, multiple-choice items, and 7-point Likert-scale items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The instrument was developed for the present exploratory study and was organized around three constructs derived from the research questions and literature: (1) pay structure, concerning perceived changes in compensation; (2) workplace motivation and support, concerning employer recognition, motivational support, and classroom assistance; and (3) benefits, concerning perceived changes and preferred improvements in benefit coverage. The open-ended questions provided an opportunity for respondents to describe workload, stress, classroom support, and benefit concerns in their own words.

Sampling and Participants: Recruitment occurred through community social-media groups, specifically Facebook groups, using a convenience-based approach. The final sample comprised 21 teachers working in Alberta. Respondents varied in teaching experience, specialties, grade levels, and school characteristics. Because recruitment was non-probability based and the sample was small, no claim is made that the respondents statistically represent Alberta's teaching workforce. The sample was therefore treated as sufficient for exploratory descriptive purposes rather than as a basis for inferential population estimates.

Instrument Quality, Analysis, and Use of Secondary Sources: The questionnaire was not presented as a validated psychometric scale, and the study did not conduct a formal reliability coefficient or factor-validation procedure. This limitation is important because the purpose of the instrument was descriptive exploration rather than development of a generalizable measurement scale. Responses were analyzed descriptively by examining response patterns across the three constructs, while open-ended responses were reviewed for recurring themes concerning workload, stress, classroom support, recognition, and desired benefits. No causal or inferential claims are made. Secondary sources were used to triangulate and contextualize the primary evidence by providing information on teacher salaries, public education financing, staffing, and broader working conditions. Because these secondary data come from different periods and sources, they are used as contextual evidence rather than as directly comparable observations with the survey responses.

Methodological Alignment The study's design therefore follows a direct chain from research questions to constructs, questionnaire items, descriptive analysis, and interpretation. The pay-structure sub question is addressed through respondents' reports of compensation change; the workplace-support sub question through reports of motivational support, classroom assistance, stress, and workload; and the benefits sub question through reported benefit changes and preferred improvements. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory provides the interpretive framework for considering how these employment conditions and recognition/support experiences relate to workplace motivation, without implying causality from the descriptive data.

Findings

Respondent Profile

The majority of respondents were urban elementary-school teachers with more than six years of teaching experience. Most respondents worked full time in schools with fewer than 500 students. Most reported annual earnings above $71,000, while five full-time respondents reported salaries in the $61,000–$70,000 range. These characteristics provide context for interpreting the respondents' perceptions of compensation and workplace support.

Pay Structure

The first construct examined perceived changes in pay structures. Respondents generally reported little or no change in their pay structure. The findings therefore suggest a distinction between changes in teachers' work experiences and changes in direct financial compensation. While teachers experienced substantial adjustments in instructional delivery and workplace demands, these adjustments were not accompanied by comparable changes in basic pay.

Workplace Motivation and Support

The second construct focused on motivation and workplace support. Most respondents reported that they did not receive additional motivational support. Only two respondents indicated an increase in classroom support. More than 90% reported having no classroom support during the period examined. Open-ended responses identified stress, burnout, and being overworked as important concerns. These findings indicate that workplace support may be an important complement to monetary compensation in sustaining teacher motivation.

Benefits

The third construct concerned employee benefits. Respondents identified improved vision coverage and greater dental coverage as desirable improvements. The findings suggest

that teachers may value targeted improvements to benefit packages as part of a broader compensation strategy, particularly where salary structures are constrained.

Secondary Evidence on Teacher Compensation and Education Financing

Secondary sources provide a baseline for interpreting the survey findings. Frenette and Handler (2020) reported differences in median earnings across teaching-related fields and between male and female workers. The salary figures reproduced in Table 1 were included in the original study as approximate values.

Bachelor's Degree / Field	Male Salary	Female Salary
Teacher Education and Professional Development, specific subject area	$61,000	$51,000
Teacher Education and Professional Development, specific levels and methods	$60,000	$48,000
Teaching English or French as a second or foreign language	$58,000	$51,000
Special Education and Teaching	$62,000	$50,500

Note. Approximate values adapted from Frenette and Handler (2020).

According to the secondary evidence used in the original study, male teachers in the specified teaching field had a median salary of $59,875, compared with $48,330 for female teachers. The primary survey, by contrast, indicated that few respondents earned below $71,000 annually. The difference between these sources illustrates the importance of considering changes over time when evaluating teacher compensation.

Evidence concerning school-board financing further demonstrates the policy context in which compensation decisions are made. Government funding constituted 93.8% of school-board revenue in 2017–2018, and provincial or territorial funding accounted for 73.5% of government funding (Government of Canada, 2020). The original study also reported that educator salaries and benefits had increased for a fourth consecutive year, while the number of educators had increased by approximately 1.5% since 2016–2017.

After accounting for inflation, however, salary expenditure was reported to have decreased by 0.4%. These figures illustrate the tension between workforce growth, public funding, and real compensation.

Discussion

The findings indicate that teacher compensation cannot be assessed solely by examining salary. Although most survey respondents reported little or no change in their pay structure, many experienced increased stress, heavier demands, and limited classroom support. Interpreted through Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, these findings suggest that compensation and working conditions may operate differently from recognition and other motivating features of work. The study does not test the theory statistically; rather, the framework helps explain why respondents identified both financial and non-financial areas for improvement.

The findings also demonstrate the importance of linking compensation policy to workforce sustainability. Respondents' preferences for improved vision and dental benefits indicate that targeted benefits can complement salary policy. At the same time, the reported lack of classroom support suggests that resources directed toward support personnel may have value beyond their direct financial cost. This interpretation is consistent with recent Alberta evidence showing that workload intensification, classroom complexity, and insufficient support are important aspects of teachers' working conditions (ATA, 2024, 2026; OECD, 2025). The convergence does not establish causality, but it strengthens the case for treating compensation and workplace support as interconnected policy considerations.

From a public-policy perspective, these findings highlight the relationship between public expenditure decisions and the lived experience of public-sector workers. Government funding determines the resource environment in which school boards operate, while institutional decisions determine how those resources are translated into salaries, benefits, staffing, recognition, and workplace support. Teacher compensation is therefore an issue of public-sector governance as well as human resource management. The study's contribution is to connect a small set of Alberta teachers' reported experiences to this broader policy environment while remaining explicit about the limits of the evidence.

Recent Alberta evidence should be used as contextual corroboration rather than as confirmation of the present survey results. The ATA's 2024 study and its 2026 synthesis identify workload, classroom complexity, support, and professional sustainability as continuing issues, while OECD TALIS 2024 reports high stress and substantial working hours among Alberta teachers (ATA, 2024, 2026; OECD, 2025). These findings reinforce the article's central argument that compensation policy is embedded within a wider employment system.

Contribution to Scholarship

The revised study makes three bounded contributions. First, it provides Alberta-specific descriptive evidence on how a small group of teachers perceive pay structure, workplace motivation/support, and benefits. Second, it applies Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory as an explicit interpretive anchor for connecting compensation and workplace conditions with recognition and support, addressing the conceptual gap identified in the review. Third, it connects these teacher-level perceptions to public education financing and workforce-sustainability considerations, while explicitly avoiding causal or population-level claims. These contributions position the study as an exploratory Alberta case that can inform larger, more rigorous studies of teacher compensation and motivation.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings support four areas of policy attention.

1. Compensation structures should provide meaningful progression for experienced teachers. Respondents in the older or more experienced group indicated that they had reached salary caps. A flatter progression system may reduce the motivational value of additional experience. More frequent and smaller increases, or alternative recognition mechanisms, could help maintain motivation while allowing policymakers to manage overall expenditure.

2. School boards should strengthen non-monetary workplace support. Recognition practices, classroom assistance, and access to support personnel can complement direct compensation. Such measures may be particularly important where salary increases are constrained by public budgets and where workload and classroom complexity are significant concerns.

3. Benefit packages should be reviewed periodically. Respondents identified vision and dental coverage as areas where improvements would be valuable. Targeted benefits may provide a relatively efficient way of improving the overall compensation package and demonstrating institutional recognition.

4. Education funding policy should consider the relationship among enrolment, staffing, workload, and compensation. Funding increases that do not adequately account for workforce requirements may place additional pressure on teachers. Conversely, staffing and support decisions that reduce classroom assistance can increase workload even when salary structures remain unchanged. Public policy should therefore evaluate education funding through a workforce-sustainability lens.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, the primary sample consisted of 21 teachers recruited through community Facebook groups, limiting generalizability and introducing the possibility of self-selection bias. Second, the survey did not include sufficient demographic variables to permit detailed cross-tabulation, including analysis of gender and differences between public and private schools. Third, the salary scale used in the survey ended at $71,000, meaning that respondents above this level could not be distinguished. Fourth, the questionnaire was designed for descriptive exploration rather than as a validated psychometric instrument; consequently, the study does not report internal-consistency or construct-validation statistics and does not treat the Likert items as a validated composite scale. Fifth, the study combines primary survey findings with secondary evidence from different periods and sources; consequently, the secondary evidence is contextual rather than directly comparable to the survey responses. Finally, the study should not be read as a current estimate of Alberta-wide teacher compensation or as evidence that compensation causes motivation, job satisfaction, or retention outcomes. Future research should use larger probability-based samples, validated measures, richer demographic variables, and longitudinal or mixed-method designs to examine these relationships more rigorously.

Conclusion

Teacher compensation is a multidimensional public-policy issue involving salary, benefits, workplace support, recognition, and the broader conditions under which educators perform their work. The Alberta survey examined in this study indicates that teachers experienced limited change in direct pay while reporting concerns about stress, workload, classroom support, and benefits. Interpreted through Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, these findings reinforce the value of examining compensation alongside workplace conditions and recognition rather than treating salary as a stand-alone determinant of motivation.

The study contributes to the discussion by connecting teachers' employment experiences with public financing and workforce sustainability and by making the theoretical and methodological links among the research question, constructs, data, and interpretation explicit. The evidence supports consideration of pay progression, workplace recognition, classroom support, and benefit coverage within a broader workforce-sustainability lens. Although the small convenience sample limits generalization and the study cannot establish causal effects, it provides a bounded Alberta case and identifies policy and research questions that warrant further investigation.

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