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A Career in Teaching

Teachers, in a way, have the most important career of all: they educate children so that they can go on and have careers of their own. One might even say that there would be no doctors, lawyers, scientists, businessmen – or any other contributing citizen – without teachers. The teaching profession is just one element of the education system as a whole. In the United States, the majority of teachers are employed by the state government in a public elementary, middle, or high school, but many also work at private institutions of learning. Either way, a teacher's mission is fundamentally the same: to instruct students in a specified subject area in order to produce a skilled and informed citizenry. This paper will focus on the history, requirements, duties, and job outlook of a secondary, or high school, teacher.

History of the Teaching Profession

Education has taken place in most communities since earliest times. Each generation has passed on cultural and social values, traditions, morality, religion, knowledge and skills to the next generation. In the beginning, education was achieved orally and through observation and imitation. The young "learned informally from their parents, extended family and kin" (Teachers). As the customs and knowledge of ancient civilizations became more complex, many skills would have been learned from an experienced person on the job, in animal care, agriculture, fishing, preparation and preservation of food, construction, stone work, metal work, boat building, the making of weapons and defenses, the military skills, and many other occupations (Teachers).

In the modern era, The Revolutionary War was crucial in the improvement of education in America. Franklin, Jefferson, and George Washington himself, spoke passionately about the need for an educated society if America were to become a democracy. This led to an ordinance laid down in 1785, which required towns to set aside land for schools and operate them according to their population count. At that time the vast majority of teachers were male, starting with Puritan preachers in the early 1600s. In 1647, Horace Mann started raising money to open up the first, free, public schools. This was a big step and was unheard of at the time. In 1857 the National Teachers Association was founded (High School). Education for all citizens was legislated and the current profession of the teacher was born. Over the years, teachers became more than just a single adult with a mixed class full of students at every age. The early-1900's saw many new qualifications laid down for teachers and the placing of students by grade level. Today there is mandated education for teachers and much higher standards.

Requirements to Become a Teacher

The route to becoming a teacher is not as easy as one may think. A secondary teacher must graduate from high school, go to college, and obtain a four year Bachelor's degree in whatever subject they wish to teach. In addition, they must attend an extra 1-2 years of college in a Credential Program. In the program, teachers must complete several classes about how to teach, complete at least one semester of student teaching and take several State-required tests testing their knowledge of their subject such as the PRAXIS, the SSAT and the CBEST (Smith). After all of these things, they can receive their credential and are eligible to teach anywhere in the state they received the credential. However, even after all that work, they still have to find their way into a school, which can tend to be difficult since so many teachers tend

to stay in the profession for life and therefore do not create much room for new, upcoming teachers (Teachers).

Most people “think they know what the teaching profession is like, since everyone has had a teacher at one point or another” (Teachers). In reality, however, there are many different types of teachers, and each has a unique, complicated job. There are elementary teachers who teach grades K-8; Secondary teachers, who teach grades 6-12; Special Ed. teachers who teach students with disabilities; substitutes, who fill in for absent teachers, and professors, who teach college. Let’s focus on the duties of a secondary teacher.

At the high school level, teachers usually teach in one major subject area like math, science, English, history, P.E. or the arts. Their many daily responsibilities include making lesson plans, grading papers, disciplining students, keeping attendance, assigning grades, and contacting parents and counselors (Smith). Though a teacher’s traditional day is usually eight hours a day, five days a week with summers and vacations off, most teachers end up working more like ten hours a day, if you include all of the time they spend, planning, collaborating, grading, tutoring and teaching summer school (Smith). Also, many schools have now adopted a year-round schedule where teachers and students attend for all year long for a set cycle, for example twelve weeks on and two weeks off. The schedule depends on the district and the site.

An individual who is considering teaching high school should be someone who is not only educated in their subject area, but also skilled at dealing with young minds. Teachers often must multi-task and have to be able to “put on a show” for several hours each and every day. This takes energy and a positive attitude. Often times, teachers must also motivate students who are not, so the stamina involved is great. Teachers need to be “thick-skinned” as there will always, inevitably be at least one student who disagrees with them or challenges their authority

on some level (Smith). In fact, teaching is such a difficult career that 28% of first-year teachers quit before they begin their second year in the career (Teaching).

Public school teachers are employed by their school district, which receives government funding. Therefore, they are state employees and are affected by state legislation, such as budget cuts, grants, and propositions. Private school teachers are not employed by the state, and thus not as vulnerable to state spending, but their salaries are generally lower than the average public educator's (Benson). A teacher's salary depends on two things: their education and their experience. Most public school secondary teachers in California start out at about \$34,000 a year. Their pay goes up for every year they teach and every credit of college classes they take beyond your Bachelor's Degree (Benson). A teacher who has a Master's Degree usually starts higher on the pay scale and might make more like \$42,000 to start. At the highest end of the scale, if a teacher has a masters or doctorate degree and has been teaching in the same district for twenty or more years, they can make up to \$85,000 annually.

Teacher's pay can also be affected by the Teacher's Union Contract. Teacher's unions are one of the strongest unions of labor that still exist in America today. In California, for example, the California Teachers' Association is a "force to be reckoned with" and is responsible for bargaining with the school district to ensure pay is equitable and up-to-the-times (Smith). Most public school teacher salary increases have been the result of a teacher's union's petition (Smith).

The benefits of becoming a teacher are many. Most teachers love the freedom their job gives them to try out new, creative ideas. Teachers are usually content with their job because they feel they are "making a difference" (Benson). Also, teachers have many vacations that line up with vacations of most children; so, if they choose to have kids of their own, they can spend

vacations with them. Teachers also receive full medical and dental benefits and a well-developed retirement plan with little to no co-payment. This means they pay virtually nothing for medical expenses.

The job outlook for teachers is very stable. There will always be a need for educators as long as there is a need for students to be educated. Job security is also a major advantage for those pursuing this career. In most districts, after three years of teaching, a teacher can acquire *tenure*. Tenure protects teachers from getting fired or losing their job and ensures they can stay at their school as long as they wish so long as they do not commit any type of improper misconduct. The unions protect these rights. In tough economic times, teachers who are tenured are guaranteed a job somewhere in their district, thus preventing them from layoffs that may be occurring in other industries (Smith).

The drawbacks to being a teacher are basically the emotional and physical drain. Secondary teachers often feel like teaching “envelops their life” and takes up most of their spare time (Benson). Also, teachers are often under a lot of pressure from parents, administrations, the district and themselves. They want to do what is best for their kids, but they also must meet State Standard requirements, discipline unruly students and “try to make everyone happy” (Benson). Most of the time, teachers feel like they are never doing everything right (Teachers).

As far as society goes, teachers are a huge contributor to making our world run smoothly.

Without education, our society would not even be as advanced as it is today. In addition, teachers can also end up being a type of mentor or counselor to their students which not only gives them a better education, but helps them make healthy life decisions and therefore become better citizens overall.

In conclusion, teachers DO make a difference, but it takes a lot of hard work and patience to get there. They have to pass several hurdles which include: securing a four-year degree, passing many tests, and obtaining a specialized credential. Then, teachers must find a position, which is tough in these economic times. Once hired, teachers still face low pay, discipline challenges, more trainings, and potential budget cuts. Teachers must really love what they are doing to be successful in their career. Still, teachers have a once-in-a-lifetime chance to lead meaningful, creative, never-a-dull moment lives. I think that, despite the challenges, I would thrive in this career. I love to be busy and multi-task, I love being around people, I have a lot of patience, and I think it is a noble career. After researching the field, I realize that I will need a four year degree in a specific subject-area, and that I will need to devote a lot of time afterwards to a teaching credential program. It is worth it to me, though, because I believe that behind every successful doctor, lawyer or politician there is usually, at least one caring and well-meaning high school teacher.

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