Colorado teacher salaries rank well below the national average. The recession is likely to keep them there.

Despite a high cost of living, teacher pay in Colorado has remained on the lower end of the scale. Some worry that amid pandemic stress, more teachers may walk away.

Erica Breunlin
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Center Schools girls' basketball coach and history teacher Jan Vigil passionately gives a pep talk to the team inside the weight room before they go out on the gym floor to practice. (John McEvoy, Special to The Colorado Sun)
When Jan Vigil bought a used truck from his brother-in-law about seven years ago, it had already seen 170,000 miles of road. His odometer now reads 229,000 miles.

The Center High School history teacher, 33, purchased the vehicle because it was affordable. He and his wife, who teaches English at Sangre De Cristo High School in Mosca, live simply with their two young daughters to cover their expenses and stay afloat.

And like many teachers in Colorado, they pick up extra jobs to boost the bottomline. Vigil referees basketball games and is an umpire for baseball games through local recreation leagues or high school leagues during the summer, and both Vigil and his wife, Roxi DeLorenzo-Vigil, coach sports in the district.

“That’s been a good way for us to make ends meet,” Vigil said.

Despite the state’s relatively high cost of living, the highest average salary for Colorado teachers is $53,434 compared with the national average of $61,730, according to a report recently released by the Colorado School Finance Project.

The pay is often far from adequate for teachers, and in an economy weakened by the pandemic, those financial stop gaps are drying up, making the situation more critical. With the state and country in the throes of a recession fueled by the pandemic, teachers aren’t likely to see raises any time soon. That could only introduce another barrier to recruiting and retaining teachers.
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Center Schools girls’ basketball coach and history teacher Jan Vigil passionately gives a pep talk to the team inside the weight room before they go out on the gym floor to practice. (John McEvoy, Special to The Colorado Sun)

It could also create broader economic hurdles for Colorado, which competes against other states for people to add to its workforce, said Tracie Rainey, executive director of the Colorado School Finance Project. The quality of education is one of the factors that families and businesses consider when weighing whether to move to Colorado.

“How long can Colorado remain an economic engine without addressing the funding that goes into its public services and, in this case, education?” Rainey asked.
Rainey says the state lacks a robust and sustainable teacher recruitment system, made more critical as communities try to draw more diverse educators into their classrooms.

Keeping teachers in the workforce long term without that kind of system in place is a shared concern among education leaders and advocates.

But whether a mass of Colorado teachers flock to positions outside education depends, in part, on what happens in the private sector, said Dan Goldhaber, director of the Center for Education Data & Research at the University of Washington and a vice president at the American Institutes for Research.

Goldhaber predicts that teachers’ salaries will stagnate across the country over the next few years. If the broader economy does not recover, he said, then there might not be much disruption within teacher retention, attrition and the quality of the teacher workforce. But if the larger economy roars back in the next year while teacher salaries and employment remain level, he believes that could impact both teacher retention and teacher quality.

A wide range of teacher salaries and little hope for raises

Rainey sees a disconnect between Colorado’s resources and its priorities. The state is considered wealthy and well-educated, and yet it invests little in its educators.

She’s disheartened by teachers’ low wages, especially with how hard teachers have worked to help their students during the pandemic and with how much less they make than many other essential workers.

“How do you look at this and feel that this is fair? And it’s a function of not having enough revenue in the system to be able to pay people a wage that is considered more respectable.”
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The Colorado School Finance Project, a nonprofit organization that provides non-partisan information and data about school finance to policymakers, analyzed salary data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics, the National Education Association and Business.org.

Amie Baca-Oehlert, president of the Colorado Education Association, said salaries were bad before the pandemic.

“This is something that we’ve actually been lifting up for years, just how upside down we are in Colorado,” Baca-Oehlert said, echoing Rainey’s concern with how strong the state’s economy was before the pandemic while teacher pay ranked significantly below the national average.

She noted that it’s one factor that has helped fuel a teacher shortage.

Many of those who are part of the educator workforce have to pick up another job or two just to survive, Baca-Oehlert said. Now, amid the pandemic, some of those side jobs have dried up, she said, while some educators have also become the sole income provider for their family because of spouses or partners having lost work.

Financial struggles among teachers existed prior to COVID-19, Baca-Oehlert said, and “they’re just exacerbated in this environment.”

The union president worries about low teacher pay and the recession adding to the difficulty of recruiting teachers to schools and districts and keeping them there. Teachers have struggled with an unprecedented year of stress and strain, she said, pointing to the possibility that some educators may not
able to make ends meet, some may reach their breaking point and others may decide to forgo starting teaching careers altogether without much promise to sustain themselves financially.

The Colorado School Finance Project identified a few dozen Colorado districts — including Center Consolidated School District 26JT — where the average teacher salary ranges from $31,347-$36,639, the lowest range it identified. Many teachers within that salary range can’t live in the communities where they teach, Rainey said, and many qualify for federal assistance programs.

“They can’t make a living on those kinds of salaries,” Rainey said.

Teachers in metro and resort-town districts are at the higher end of the scale, with Denver, Eagle, Roaring Fork and Aspen educators earning $50,440-$80,329.

She noted the significant variance in teacher pay across Colorado communities. The property values and severance taxes influence district budgets. The large range of teacher salaries doesn’t stem from some districts making decisions that are better than others but is all related to “fiscal constraints,” Rainey said.

The direction that teachers’ salaries head in the future largely depends on how quickly Colorado’s economy recovers, Rainey said. For now, she said, districts are likely to remain cautious with their funds. They don’t want to end up letting people go, especially after working to recruit employees, and they’re trying to create as much stability as they can.

Some districts have already had to issue layoffs as a result of the recession, Goldhaber said, noting that national figures reflect a decrease in the number of public school teachers employed.
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It’s too early to know if the current economic downturn is affecting teacher pay differently than the ways previous recessions have taken a toll, Goldhaber said.

During past recessions, teacher pay has tended to stagnate, with consequences extending long beyond the downturn, he said. “Even when the economy picks up, it sometimes takes a little while before state and local revenues recover.”

Additionally, a recession typically doesn’t immediately hit the public sector as hard, he noted, and it’s likely that teachers weren’t impacted as hard by the economic downturn last year as private sector employees. But conditions tend to improve in the private sector before they improve in education, which experiences longer-term impacts.
Goldhaber, like others, is concerned teacher pay could continue to interfere with districts’ efforts to draw teachers to their classrooms and ensure they stay — and what that means for students.

“I hope that if there is a need, as I suspect there is, of belt tightening,” he said, “we do that in ways that reflect the needs of students and the lessons learned from the Great Recession.”

“Driving good people away”

Vigil, who teaches at Center High School, doesn’t live paycheck to paycheck, but there is a reason he has worn the same winter coat for 12 years. He makes about $36,500 a year and his wife earns close to $40,000. They both still are paying off their student loans; he has at least $6,000 outstanding. They have a monthly payment for the van his wife drives and they spend $320 each month on daycare for their younger daughter. What they can save often goes to home renovations.

Vigil said his family is lucky. They purchased their three-bedroom, two-bathroom home in Alamosa seven years ago, when the housing market was much more affordable. He also feels fortunate that health insurance for the whole family costs them less than $100 per month.

Though Vigil is in his eighth year of teaching, he has eyed a career outside the classroom. Vigil, who is also an Alamosa city counselor, ran for county commissioner and lost in the November election by 93 votes. Money wasn’t Vigil’s main motivator — he says he wanted to help people he believes aren’t being represented — but the $77,000 salary “would have been a gamechanger for our family.”

The kids in Center keep pulling the history teacher back to school year after year. Many of them live in the shadow of adversity, facing everything from poverty to drugs to immigration issues to life with a single parent.
“If you can get kids to succeed there, they’re going to be so much better and so much more prepared for life,” he said, his voice cracking with emotion.

His colleague Joe Martinez feels that same tug. The middle and high school physical education and health teacher tells his students that even if he won the Mega Millions jackpot, he wouldn’t give up his role in the classroom.

“I’ve never done it for the money,” Martinez, 38, said. “I love what I do.”

Still, it’s a little discouraging when some of the graduates Martinez has taught end up in fields like welding and earn nearly twice his salary, which is just over $38,000.

Sometimes his mind wanders to thoughts of careers that would be more lucrative, but it ultimately comes down to happiness, he said, and his connections with students create that. He’s one of the teachers who fistbumps kids in the hallway.

“I do it for that,” Martinez, a father of two, said.

Martinez and his wife, an esthetician, are able to cover the family expenses. But most of their money is spent on the essentials — including their mortgage for their Center home, which totals $550 a month, much less than what they would pay if they rented in Alamosa. The family lives about five blocks from Center High School, which helps cut down on gas and wear and tear on their vehicles.

They don’t eat out very much or go on vacations.

Martinez also generates extra income through at-home fitness training with his own weightlifting and exercise equipment, though since the pandemic, he’s been lucky to make $80 or $90 a month. He’s continued to open up his home gym to a few adults during the pandemic. He used to coach high school basketball for the district as well as tutor students after school and open the weight room for a community fitness class the district formerly offered. Having kids of his own means he doesn’t have time for those additional jobs.
“It’s been a lot rougher,” Martinez said. “I don’t have that coaching income to help with things.”

Those kinds of side gigs are a big part of what enables Adam Welsh, a social studies teacher at Skoglund Middle School in Center, and his wife, a secondary school counselor in the district, to get by. While his wife gets paid more money for grant writing, Welsh runs student clubs that add to his income. He said that if he was single, he likely wouldn’t be able to live off the money he earns as a teacher. Currently, he makes less than $33,000.

Adam Welsh, a social studies teacher at Skoglund Middle School and mixed boys and girls’ baseball coach, speaks about his passion for teaching and helping to guide youth in his classroom in front of a Mayan mural. Welsh said he altered scheduled curriculum to spend time with his students discussing the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. (John McEvoy, Special to The Colorado Sun)

Their monthly expenses add up, with a mortgage that costs about $800, car payments that run a few hundred dollars, student loans that total about $400, plus other necessities like food and internet.
Welsh, 30, and his wife don’t live paycheck to paycheck, but it’s close. “We don’t have a ton to put away each month in savings.”

Welsh is pursuing a master’s degree in world history to open him up to teach specialized subjects and to increase his earning potential.

He has a clear message for lawmakers: Teachers do everything they can and deserve to be appreciated with better compensation.

“We put our heart and souls into teaching every day,” Welsh said. “We really do what we can with our own funds, with school funds, with our own time as well as contracted time. I don’t know any teachers that won’t go above and beyond.”

The teachers worry about their district continuing to lose teachers because of pay. Martinez noted that the district has already lost educators to neighboring school districts that have higher pay scales.

Vigil added that rural Colorado districts simply can’t compete with others, particularly larger districts like Denver Public Schools, Jeffco Public Schools and Douglas County School District, which have more money.

“We are literally driving good people away,” Vigil said, “because they are not getting paid their fair share.”
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