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POLICY CENTER
— OF NEW JERSEY —

MORE SHODDY RESEARCH FROM JERSEY JAZZMAN AND NEW JERSEY POLICY PERSPECTIVE

ISSUE UPDATE

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JULY 14, 2020

MORE SHODDY RESEARCH FROM JERSEY JAZZMAN AND NEW JERSEY POLICY PERSPECTIVE

Mark Weber, Ph.D., is at it again, authoring another shoddy report that makes claims that are unsupported by the research presented. A public school teacher and NJEA member, Weber is also an active blogger going by the name of Jersey Jazzman. As might be expected, he is reliably anti-charter school, anti-education reform and pro-NJEA. In fact, Weber spoke at the NJEA's 2016 convention and paid NJEA ads figure prominently on his website.

Weber currently serves as a Special Analyst for Education Policy for New Jersey Policy Perspective (NJPP), a pro-public-sector, pro-public-union think-tank that advocates for progressive policies. NJPP receives substantial funding from the NJEA, so Weber's role there is unsurprising. What is surprising is that for an organization that claims its research is "evidence-based," NJPP would twice attach its name to such sub-standard, non-evidence-based work.

Sunlight Policy Center of New Jersey (SPCNJ) believes that research should indeed be evidenced-based, particularly if it is used to advocate for public policies, as NJPP does. Legislators, opinion-makers, journalists and the general public should be able to rely on research to be factual, academically rigorous and supportive of its conclusions. This is certainly the standard that SPCNJ seeks to meet. All policy think-tanks, including NJPP, should be held to the same standard.

Previous Flawed Research on a Teachers' Wage Gap

SPCNJ previously critiqued a flawed 2019 report by Weber for NJPP that purported to prove that a pay-gap existed between New Jersey public school teachers and private-sector workers ("[New Jersey's Teacher Workforce, 2019: Diversity Lags, Wage Gap Persists](#)"). In it, Weber:

- Used faulty methodology to understate the value of the pension benefits that teachers receive as part of their overall compensation.
- Cited sources that compared New Jersey's public-sector pensions and their costs with public-sector pensions in other states, which are *totally irrelevant* to a supposed pay-gap between teachers and private-sector workers in New Jersey.
- Aggregated the lower wages of *private* school teachers into his calculations and yet his study claimed to prove a wage gap for *public* school teachers.
- Made assumptions that cannot be assumed – such as that all college degrees have the same economic value, which of course they do not.
- Cherry-picked the data from his sources. Weber cited a report for national pay-gap data but ignored the report's New Jersey-specific data, which showed that New Jersey teachers actually had a wage and compensation *advantage* over private-sector workers.

Upon close inspection, the research report cited by Weber undermined his entire case.

(For the full analysis, see SPCNJ's blog "[Shoddy Research Does Not Help the Cause of New Jersey's Teachers](#)").

These flaws rendered Weber's conclusions invalid. His report did not meet the evidence-based standard that NJPP sets for itself. Teachers, policy-makers and New Jersey citizens are ill-served by such shoddy research.

More Flawed Research on a Decrease in Teacher Candidates

And yet Weber and NJPP have done it again.

Weber recently wrote another flawed report for NJPP, "[New Jersey's Shrinking Pool of Teacher Candidates](#)," on the causes of a significant decline in the number of teacher candidates in New Jersey. SPCNJ agrees that there has been a real and worrisome decline in the number of teacher candidates, and that New Jersey's education system needs a large pool of qualified teacher candidates. **This makes it all the more important to determine its causes by rigorous, statistically sound research. But Weber does not do this.** Instead he provides sub-standard work based on his suppositions and unproven assertions, which read like a list of ills worthy of the NJEA's Communications Division.

The new report is fundamentally flawed from the outset because **it cites no fewer than ten times Weber's previous, flawed report on the supposed pay gap.** Even though he proved no such thing, Weber calls teacher pay-gap figures "indisputable" and uses them prominently in his argument that inadequate compensation is a major reason for a declining pool of teacher candidates.

Building off this unsupported premise, Weber then assumes that if teachers' compensation had kept pace with that in other sectors, people would be enrolling as teacher candidates at similar rates as in the past. In this framing, a smaller pool of teacher candidates is "a clear indication that teaching is not as attractive a career option as it once was."

Even if Weber had proved there was a teacher pay-gap, which he did not, there is more to career attractiveness than simply the amount of compensation. As [NJLeftBehind pointed out](#), there are many reasons why today's generation of young people might not find a career in public school teaching appealing. Today's Millennials and Gen Y/Zers opt for career mobility rather than stability and change jobs more frequently than previous generations. Public school teachers' forced unionization and uniform, rigid pay structures make for a stable but inflexible work environment that benefits long-serving teachers, which may not appeal to young adults seeking flexibility and mobility. So it's not at all "clear" that compensation is the driver of these career decisions. Yet Weber simply asserts it.

Getting into the data, Weber shows that the number of those who enroll in teacher preparation programs is down from 21,410 in 2009-10 to 7,950 in 2017-18. But in

2009-10, only 29.7 percent actually completed the programs – that is, *seven out of ten enrollees did not complete the programs*. Weber does not even consider whether this astonishingly low completion rate has something to do with the decline in enrollees. Or that a large percentage of New Jersey’s teacher prep programs [receive very low grades in national rankings](#).

Moreover, Weber does not address whether there may have been *too many* teacher candidates in the past. He does mention this as an “open question” at the end of the report, but nowhere does he even attempt to answer that important question, which is an odd omission for a report on the decrease in teacher prep candidates.

At the heart of Weber’s argument is a list of complaints about changes in state education policies that occurred contemporaneously with the decline in enrollees: higher costs for teachers’ pensions and health benefits; new teacher evaluation systems that weakened tenure protections; increased the use of standardized test scores and required additional work from teachers; and the adoption of the PARCC standardized tests and increased time devoted to testing.

Weber claims that these policies resulted in an increase in the number of hours worked by teachers: “It is likely this is, at least in part, a result of the policy changes listed above.” Weber goes on to conclude that “these policies likely contribute to working conditions that make it difficult for teachers to thrive. New Jersey’s teachers have been increasingly underpaid relative to similarly educated workers and have seen an erosion of their benefits while the demands of their jobs have grown.”

Where is the proof that any of these policy changes had an impact on the number of enrollees in teacher prep programs?

The fact is that Weber offers *no direct proof* that any of these policy changes negatively influenced the number of enrollees – proof such as surveying actual teacher candidates and discerning their views. Instead, he simply states that the enactment of these policies occurred contemporaneously with the decline, which does not constitute proof of causation. In making such a claim, Weber erroneously relies on a well known logical fallacy (the Latin is *cum hoc ergo propter hoc*) that is contrary to a fundamental statistical precept: “correlation is not causation”. **Causation must be proved, not simply assumed as it was by Weber.**

Moreover, Weber ignores the fact that a number of these policies – such as the use of student test scores in teachers’ evaluations or the adoption of PARCC – have been greatly reduced or even eliminated under Governor Murphy and yet the decline in enrollees continued, suggesting something else is at work.

As for an increase in hours worked, Weber cites data that provides very weak support for his argument. It turns out that the actual increase in hours worked was miniscule: from 41 hours in 2009 to 41 hours and 42 minutes in 2016, and increase of 1.7 percent over seven years. This compares with a current average of 43.6 hours for non-teachers. And

where is the proof that this miniscule increase caused students not to enroll in teacher prep programs?

It turns out that a major reason for the decline in enrollees and completers (responsible for a drop of 27 percent) was the shuttering of the state's Alternate Route Program, which allowed candidates with subject matter knowledge to become teachers without completing a traditional teacher prep program. Yet Weber never considers whether the resulting drop in enrollees was related to Alternate Route teacher candidates not wanting to enter and pay for traditional teacher prep programs rather than the changes in education policies Weber blames.

Weber also notes that New Jersey is not alone: the decline in enrollees and completers is occurring across the nation. But if that is the case, doesn't that cut against the idea that New Jersey-specific policy changes were responsible? Weber considers none of this.

Weber's Research Is Flawed and So Are His Conclusions

Among them:

1) Teacher compensation must rise.

Fact check: This is based on his previous, flawed work on a supposed teacher pay gap. **As SPCNJ showed, Weber's previous report did not establish that there is a pay gap, so this is an unsupported conclusion.**

2) "[S]hore up the teacher pension system and stop degrading teacher healthcare benefits."

Fact check: Shoring up the finances of the teacher pension system may be a good idea but **Weber offers no proof that this has anything to do with a decline in enrollees.** As for healthcare benefits, Weber again cites his previous, flawed report but upon close inspection **that report does not document any "degrading of teacher health care benefits."** These are also unsupported conclusions.

3) Improve the state's level of appreciation and regard for its educators. "The surest ... way to boost teacher morale is for elected officials to show respect for teachers by acknowledging the importance of their work, giving them a seat at the table when decisions are made about education policy, and refraining from unfairly blaming them for New Jersey's fiscal troubles."

Fact check: **Weber offers no proof for this assertion, and he makes it despite the fact that the NJEA-supported Governor Murphy has done exactly what Weber suggests.** Certainly the NJEA has not complained about Murphy's stance towards teachers. So why has there been a continued downtrend in enrollees after Murphy was elected? Again, there must be something else at work, yet Weber ignores this entirely. This, too, is an unsupported conclusion.

Is Weber's Work Simply NJPP-Branded Support for the NJEA's Policy Agenda?

In the end, once again, Weber's research is deeply flawed and fails to support his conclusions. His two reports for NJPP leave the impression that he starts with the conclusion he wants to reach and then presents the "research" selectively, as needed. But he relies on unproven assertions, insufficient research, and ambiguous data that altogether fail to support the desired conclusions. **One is left to wonder whether NJPP has any standards at all.**

But perhaps this is missing the point. Given that this is now two shoddy reports, one cannot help but think that neither Weber nor NJPP really cares if the research isn't sound or doesn't support the conclusions. **The point appears to be to provide some veneer of academic credibility to the policy agenda of their mutual patron, the NJEA.** Higher pay, less accountability, stronger benefits and greater respect read like the NJEA's lobbying agenda.

However, the report's biggest failing is that it does nothing to advance our understanding of the actual causes of the decrease in teacher candidates. Academic researchers and policy think-tanks exist to provide fact-based, statistically sound research to inform public policy. By putting out research and conclusions that do not meet his standard, **Weber and NJPP obfuscate rather than clarify the problem.**

Weber and NJPP are of course free to do as they please, but what they are presenting isn't bona fide academic research: **it looks more like NJPP-branded support for the NJEA's policy agenda.**

Our elected leaders, opinion-makers and the public at large should see it for what it is.