More Than Just Pay
Higher salaries will accomplish little without bolder reforms

Are teachers paid too little? This has been more of an assumption than a question in recent decades. Even raising the issue carries the risk of being labeled anti-education. Nonetheless, a few of our intrepid authors dared to tackle the subject in this issue’s pages. They suggest that today’s teachers may be well paid, but that the nation may be undervaluing tomorrow’s teachers.

Today’s teachers are well paid in the sense that recent salary increases have outpaced inflation and stayed in step with the salaries of other educated professionals. So says Richard Vedder in this issue’s forum. Vedder’s claims are backed up by Michael Podgursky, who applies a critical eye to the surveys of teachers’ salaries reported in U.S. Department of Education statistical publications.

However, the nation may be undervaluing tomorrow’s teachers, argues Peter Temin, if we seek the high-caliber workforce of K–12 professionals that the late Albert Shanker envisioned during his decades as president of the American Federation of Teachers (see Richard Kahlenberg’s thoughtful retrospective on Shanker’s contributions to American education). No longer can schools rely on the fact that women have few other occupational choices, or the fact that highly skilled workers are earning more in a technology-driven economy. Martin West and Ludger Woessmann’s analysis of data from 18 nations even suggests that higher pay for teachers might be more effective than reducing class size. The only significant benefits from class-size reduction were found in Greece and Iceland, where teachers are paid relatively low wages and are less educated.

However, simply paying teachers more will yield few benefits unless the recruitment and compensation of teachers are freed from constraints that reward mediocrity. Three snapshots of school life in New York City reveal the degree to which bureaucratic rule-making has undermined excellence in urban schools, especially among teachers. As a parent, Sol Stern was shocked to discover that New York City’s teachers’ contract sets conditions that, in effect, require school leaders to favor seniority over skills and knowledge in the hiring of teachers at Stuyvesant High, one of the city’s premier high schools.

Byzantine licensing rules cause headaches at Bronx Preparatory, one of the city’s most exciting charter school ventures. In our back-page essay, school founder Kristin Kearns Jordan bemoans the precious time and money her teachers must waste fulfilling the state’s mindless course requirements.

Marc Epstein’s tale from inside Jamaica High School is the most disturbing. Here bizarre interpretations of judicial decisions have weakened school authority, giving the worst elements within the school undue influence over the lives of teachers and students alike. No wonder urban schools have done so little to close the black-white test-score gap, a topic that Jens Ludwig deconstructs in this issue’s check the facts.

Of course, students could just leave disorderly schools for better ones, a right guaranteed by the No Child Left Behind Act. But will the schools let them? Not likely, says Ronald Brownstein. Half-hearted efforts at compliance among urban school districts have kept the exodus to just a trickle.

Will the accountability provisions of No Child Left Behind prove more effective? Margaret Raymond and Eric Hanushek investigated state-level trends on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and found that the largest gains were among states that adopted accountability systems during the past decade. The authors’ results differ sharply from those generated by a poorly designed study recently released to embarrassingly extensive media coverage.

Thomas Dee looks beyond test scores to examine the effects of accountability on high-school graduation rates and students’ employment prospects. Using state-of-the-art techniques, Dee finds that earlier standards-based reforms lowered graduation rates but improved students’ employability, especially among black students.

Taken together, these carry a broad message: If sensible disciplinary, choice, and accountability plans were combined with appropriate policies to recruit and compensate teachers, higher teacher pay could yield dividends for students, too.

-THE EDITORS