

A rising tide lifts **ALL** boats

No teacher seeking a full-time position in New Jersey today would accept a starting salary of \$18,500. But in 1985, 80% of districts had starting salaries below \$18,500, with some districts offering as little as \$10,600. So when New Jersey set \$18,500 as the statewide minimum salary for teachers, it was a major step forward.

Signed into law by Republican Gov. Tom Kean with NJEA's strong support, the legislation created the highest mandatory starting salary in the U.S. But some long-time NJEA members at the time resented the boost in pay for early-career educators who "walked in the door" earning a salary they had worked years to attain.

This month's cover story about the campaign to bargain starting salaries of at least \$60,000 may lead some of today's veteran educators to feel the same way veteran educators did in 1985.

Bob Willoughby, a now-retired NJEA staff member was a leading champion of the 1985 law because he knew that higher starting salaries benefited teachers across the guide from the first year to the last. Knowing this, he helped launch NJEA's "\$40K Right Away" within a decade of the "eighteen-five" law. Now retired for nearly 10 years, educator salaries are still his passion—today he believes starting salaries should rise "to six digits with no decimal places." He also sits on the board of The Teacher Salary Project (teachersalaryproject.org). The reason he believes in higher starting salaries boils down to basic math.

To understand the significance of the \$18,500 law in 1985 on all teacher salaries—and a starting salary of at least \$60,000 today—it is important to understand the relationship between the lowest salary on the salary guide and the money it generates for future settlements.

When a local association negotiates, for example, a 5% pay raise, the dollars associated with that percentage are calculated from the actual dollars the district spent on

salaries in the previous year. The higher the total amount spent on salaries in a given year, the more dollars a 5% settlement yields.

The sudden increase in minimum salaries across the state in 1985 was matched by a sudden increase in the total amount of dollars each district spent from its budget for salaries. Thus, subsequent settlements yielded more dollars to be distributed across the various steps of salary guides from top to bottom.

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When an educator at the top of a salary guide retires, the amount of money a district spends from its salary budget decreases. With that reduction, the dollars yielded from a negotiated percentage decreases. The greater the distance between the highest salary and the lowest salary, the greater the reduction in dollars generated from a negotiated percentage. If fewer dollars are generated, there is less money available for distribution anywhere on the guide, including the top step. That's why it is in the interest of veteran staff members to raise the minimum salary as high as possible.

The same holds true for the salaries of educational support professionals—which is why salary achievements like those made by the Atlantic County Special Services Bus Drivers/Aides Association are vital in setting the pace for the entire school team. (See Page 25.)

Since 1983, minimum salaries for teachers have consistently outpaced inflation because of the bargaining power of local associations supported by NJEA. Had minimum salaries increased at a rate equal to the consumer price index, with no new minimum salary in 1985, the average minimum salary in 2021-22 would have been approximately \$41,850. Instead it is \$56,370.

In 1983, New Jersey's average teacher salary ranked 14th in the nation. In 2021-22, New Jersey's average teacher salary ranked among the highest at \$78,407. The money generated from higher starting salaries benefits everyone on the salary guide. Indeed, a rising tide lifts all boats. 🇺🇸

