

## The Average Teacher Spends \$479 a Year on Classroom Supplies, National Data Show

By Madeline Will  
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This school year, Taylor Milburn has spent \$500 to stock her 2nd grade classroom with supplies, and another \$600 on activities and games from a resource-sharing site. She spends \$10 a week on paper towels and disinfecting wipes, and about \$30 every other month on color ink cartridges. She just shelled out another \$35 for a pizza party to celebrate her students' progress in reading—and the list goes on.



Taylor Milburn, a 2nd grade teacher in Durham, N.C., spent the summer shopping at thrift stores and online to complete her classroom library. —Taylor Milburn

“It’s either me buy it, or [my students] not have that experience, and I always

choose for them to have that experience, even if it’s at my own family’s expense,” said Milburn, who teaches at a high-poverty school in Durham, N.C.

She doesn’t receive any reimbursement from her school. And Milburn isn’t alone: In the 2014-15 school year, 94 percent of public school teachers spent their own money on classroom supplies without reimbursement, according to a [just-released analysis of federal data](#).

On average, these teachers spent \$479, according to data from the 2015-16 National Teacher and Principal Survey, a nationally representative sample survey of teachers and principals in the 50 states and the District of Columbia that’s conducted by the U.S. Department of Education.

That’s an increase from the past decade: During the 2006-07 school year, 92.4 percent of public school teachers spent their own money on classroom supplies without reimbursement, [according to federal data](#). The average amount teachers spent then was \$450 (the numbers were not adjusted for inflation).

The new data show that the amount teachers spend on school supplies can vary widely. Forty-four percent of teachers spent \$250 or less, while 36 percent spent between \$251 and \$500. Thirteen percent spent between \$501 and \$1,000, and 7 percent spent more than \$1,000.

The numbers shed some light on a growing sense of anger among teachers, who have been protesting low pay and cuts to school funding across the nation this spring.

“What other job [than teaching] do you have to literally use your own money to do your job?” Milburn said.

Her frustration over spending hundreds of dollars a year on classroom supplies is one of the reasons she’s **protesting at the North Carolina Legislative Building on May 16**, with thousands of other teachers. Her school district, along with about 40 other districts in the state, has been forced to close due to the high number of expected teacher absences.

North Carolina is the latest state to join an **unprecedented wave of teacher activism**. Teachers in Arizona, Oklahoma, and West Virginia have all completed statewide walkouts this spring that resulted in pay increases. Teachers in Colorado and Kentucky have participated in mass demonstrations, too. South Carolina teachers are set to rally at the Statehouse on May 19, a Saturday.

During the protests, many teachers held up signs referencing how they pay for supplies themselves.

The financial pressure on teachers to support classroom needs has increased over the years, said Ann Pifer, the executive director of the nonprofit AdoptAClassroom.org, a crowdfunding platform that lets teachers shop for needed supplies using donations.

“A combination of [low pay and more financial demands] has teachers in large numbers reaching the breaking point,” Pifer said.

### **Which Teachers Are Spending the Most?**

The federal survey found that elementary teachers spent more on average—\$526—than teachers of secondary grades, who spent \$430 on average. Teachers at city schools spent more than teachers in other locales. And more teachers in traditional public schools paid for supplies out-of-pocket than teachers in public charter schools (94 percent compared to 88 percent).

Teachers in low-income schools were also more likely to spend their own money on classroom supplies. Just 86 percent of teachers at schools that had no students eligible for the free and reduced-price school lunch program paid for supplies out-of-pocket, compared to the 95 percent of teachers in schools where three-quarters or more of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Teachers in low-income schools also tended to spend more: The average amount spent in schools with 75 percent or more eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch was \$554, compared to the average amount of \$434 spent by teachers in schools with no or a small number of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.

While the federal survey did not cover what materials teachers are buying out-of-pocket, Pifer said her group’s research shows that teachers registered on AdoptAClassroom.org are mostly buying basic

classroom supplies—like pencils, pens, and paper—as well as food, clothing, and personal-hygiene items for students.

“All teachers, I think, have needs, even teachers in fairly well-off districts,” she said. “In wealthier districts, it’s more, ‘I wish I could do that great science project, I just need a few more materials.’ ... In Title I schools, it’s much more that neither the schools [n]or the families can provide the basics.”

Kate Robinson, a 7th grade English teacher at a public charter school in Philadelphia, estimates that she has spent between \$1,500 and \$2,000 this school year—her first year of teaching. Her school has reimbursed her \$200.

Many of Robinson’s students are low-income. In addition to purchasing supplies for her classroom, she makes sure to stock snacks, in case her students are hungry, and personal items like hair ties, lotion, and lip balm.

“For some of my kids, having a pencil at school is the least of their worries, so I can make it my [responsibility],” Robinson said. “Over the course of time, that becomes an expense, of course.”

And those expenses throughout the year have a personal cost, Robinson said. She sees that spending as part of the reason she will probably work over the summer to supplement her income.

### **A Sense of Obligation**

The new data won’t be surprising to most teachers. And many teachers simply accept their role of purchasing supplies out-of-pocket.

“It’s really important to them that their students succeed and learn and progress, and if some additional supplies is what is needed to make that happen, I think almost all teachers feel like they need to do that,” Pifer said.

Still, as the teacher protests across the nation ignite a sense of urgency around education spending, teachers like Milburn in North Carolina question why they aren’t provided with more money from their state legislature and school districts to cover the cost of some of these supplies.

“For so long, [teachers paying for classroom supplies] has just been one of those implied situations,” Milburn said. “When are we going to say, why? Why should we have to?”