

WAKE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM (NORTH CAROLINA)

SUMMARY

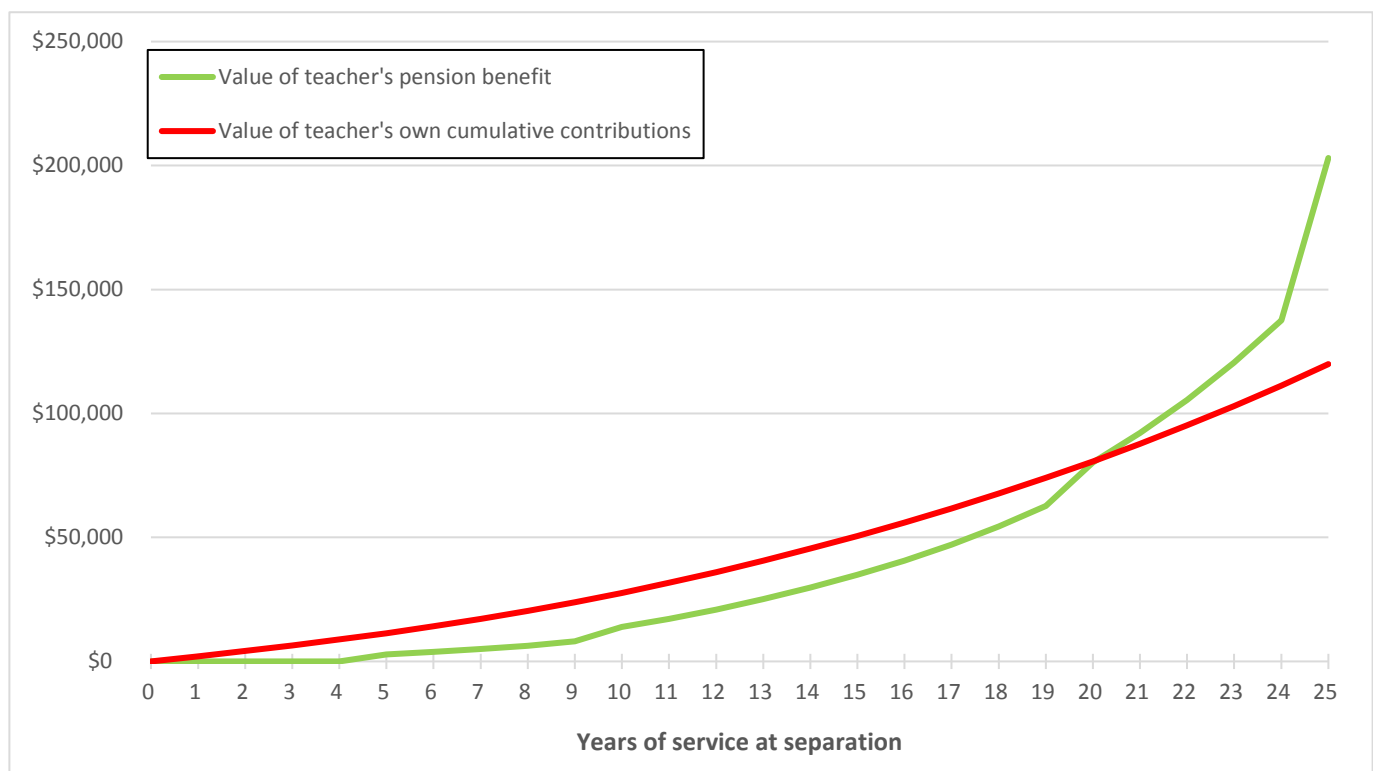
Wake County Public School System teachers enroll in a traditional defined benefit plan under the North Carolina Teachers' and State Employees' Retirement System. In Wake County, the crossover point occurs after 21 years of service, meaning that until that point the value of what a teacher would receive in pension wealth after she retires is *less* than her cumulative contributions. This is shorter than the national median crossover point of 27 years for the defined benefit plans in this study, but still longer than the career of the majority of American teachers.¹

About the District	
Students	153,534
Teachers (FTE)	9,869

About the Retirement Plan	
Type	Defined benefit
Coverage	All public employees
Active members	317,906
Total members	600,378

Sources: Enrollment: NCES (2013–14). Retirement plan membership: [Urban Institute](#) (membership as of December, 2011; includes all public employee members)

Figure 1: A new teacher in Wake County must remain in the pension system for 21 years before she realizes a return on her contributions



Note: Calculations assume inflation of 2.5 percent, a real interest rate of 2.5 percent, and a female teacher first hired in FY13 with an entry age of 25.

Take a look at Figure 1. The green line is the value of a teacher’s pension wealth should she separate from the system after a given number of years of service. (She would not start receiving pension payments until she reaches the age of retirement eligibility, even if she leaves the system before that.) Where the green line jumps quickly away from \$0 represents the time at which she vests. The red line shows the value of the total amount she has contributed to the system up to that point. Where the red line lies above the green, the teacher’s contributions are worth more than her benefits. In other words, her “net benefit” is negative. Where the green line is higher than the red, her benefits are worth more than her contributions and her net benefit is positive. In Wake County, a new teacher must stay 21 years to reach the crossover point (where the green line crosses the red) and receive any return on her contributions after retirement. Exact figures are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Let’s take a look at how this plays out should a teacher choose to separate from the system at different points.

WHAT IS THE CROSSOVER POINT?

This study asks: how long must a new teacher wait until the value of her retirement benefits exceeds the value of her contributions (the “**crossover point**”)?² A new teacher begins contributing a percentage of her salary to her retirement system the day she receives her first paycheck. The idea is that, over her career, she and her employer will make contributions to prefund her benefit and, when she leaves the system, she receives retirement benefits. The total benefit the teacher receives after she leaves depends on the plan’s parameters and provisions, among other factors.

In a traditional **defined benefit** (DB) plan, retirement benefits take the form of pension payments made periodically for the rest of her life after retirement. The pension benefit is based on a formula: the number of years of service in the system, multiplied by an average of her final years’ salaries, times an accrual factor, which is a percentage generally around 1 percent to 2.5 percent. In order to receive any retirement benefits, a teacher must be vested in the system, meaning she has stayed long enough that she’s eligible for a pension when she leaves. Vesting periods generally range from three to 10 years. A teacher can only begin to receive benefits once she reaches retirement eligibility, a condition usually determined by some combination of the teacher’s age and years of service.³ The *total* value of the retirement benefit the teacher receives under a DB plan—her **pension wealth**—depends on the yearly benefit, plus her age at retirement and life expectancy.⁴ Before the crossover point in a DB plan, a teacher’s expected lifetime retirement benefit is worth less than what she contributed over her career. After the crossover point, her benefit is worth more than what she contributed. The longer it takes a new teacher to reach the crossover point, the longer it takes for her to realize any return on her contributions.

In a **defined contribution** (DC) plan, retirement benefits are equal to what the retirement account is worth: her and her employer’s contributions, plus any gains (or losses) from investment performance over time. She typically can transfer the balance of her account to another retirement system, withdraw it completely as a lump-sum amount, or draw down balances as periodic payments (less taxes, should she leave early). In a DC plan there is no crossover point, and the value of her benefits will always be greater than her contributions (assuming the investment gained value over time).

A **hybrid plan** combines elements of both DB and DC plans. A teacher’s total benefits are equal to the balance of her retirement savings account plus whatever pension benefits she is eligible for. Depending on the specific terms of the plan, there may or may not be a crossover point.

In all three cases, to calculate the crossover point we compare the value of a teacher’s contributions with her expected benefits.⁵ While the concept of retirement “benefits” implies a positive return on contributions, the analyses presented in this study show that, in order to reach the crossover point and receive a true benefit, new teachers in many of the nation’s largest districts must remain in their retirement system for 20 or 30 years—or more. These teachers, usually enrolled in traditional DB plans, are financially penalized if they leave at any point before the crossover. Moreover, they cannot enroll in a different system that would give them larger, or more short-term, benefits. New teachers in DC plans, and most of the hybrid plans we consider, do see a return on their contributions even early in their career.

EARLY CAREER

A Wake County teacher who leaves after **three years** of service (or at any point before the vesting point of five years) is not eligible to receive pension benefits at all, because she has not vested (Table 1). Her pension wealth is zero, and after three years she has contributed \$6,470 into the retirement system.⁶ (In reality, should this teacher separate from the system before she vests, she can only take a refund, which may or may not be credited with interest.)

Table 1. At key points in a teacher's career, what is the value of her pension? What is the value of her contribution? And what is the difference between the two?

Age	Years of Service	Value of teacher's pension benefit (A)	Value of teacher's cumulative contributions to date (B)	Net benefit (A-B)
28	3	\$ 0	\$ 6,470	-\$ 6,470
40	15	\$ 34,949	\$ 50,599	-\$ 15,650
46	21	\$ 92,128	\$ 87,755	\$ 4,373
50	25	\$ 203,044	\$ 119,912	\$ 83,132

MID-CAREER

If she leaves the system with at least **five years** of service, she has now vested and is eligible to start receiving pension benefits once she reaches retirement age.⁷ Say she separates from the system after 15 years—the average experience of a teacher who leaves the profession.⁸ Her pension wealth is \$34,949, but at this point she has contributed a total of \$50,599. Not only has she not yet reached the crossover point, but her pension wealth is worth nearly \$16,000 less than her cumulative contributions.

AT THE CROSSOVER

After 21 years, a Wake County teacher finally reaches the crossover point—meaning her benefits are worth more than her contributions. At that point, she will have contributed a total of \$87,755 into the system and can expect lifetime pension wealth accrual worth \$92,128. Her net benefit becomes positive, though small (\$4,373).

AFTER 25 YEARS OF SERVICE

A 25-year career is longer than most teachers' careers—fewer than one out of four teachers nationwide stays more than 20 years.⁹ After 25 years, a Wake County teacher has a modest net benefit of \$83,132.

Bottom line: North Carolina teachers who start at age 25 under the Wake County Public School System salary schedule must wait 21 years to reach the crossover point. Teachers who exit the North Carolina retirement system early are disadvantaged compared to teachers who remain teaching under the same system much longer—in this case, at least 21 years.

TECHNICAL MATTERS

Retirement System

Teachers working in the Wake County Public School System belong to a traditional defined benefit pension plan in the North Carolina Teachers' and State Employees' Retirement System.

Plan Provisions by the Numbers

Eligibility for pension benefits

- Vesting requirement: Five years
- Normal retirement eligibility requirements (age/years of service): Lesser of 65/5, 60/25, and any/30
- Early retirement eligibility requirements for reduced benefits (age/years of service): Lesser of 60/5 and 50/20

Employer and employee contributions

- Employee contribution rate: 6 percent of salary
- Employer contribution rate: 8.69 percent of salary
- Refundable contributions: employee contributions, with interest

Defined benefit formula

A new teacher's normal retirement benefit is equal to the formula below:

$$\text{Annual benefit} = (1.82\%) \times (\text{YOS}) \times (\text{FAS})$$

Where YOS = number of years of service, and FAS = final average salary, the average of the four highest years of creditable earnings.

Summary of Plan Provisions

Benefits under public pension plans are typically based on a combination of age and years of service. Under normal retirement eligibility requirements, a Wake County teacher qualifies for full pension benefits at any age with 30 years of service, age 60 with 25 years of service, or age 65 with five years of service (whichever comes first). The annual benefit is equal to a teacher's years of service, multiplied by her average salary of her final four years, times an accrual factor of 1.82 percent. A teacher vests into the pension system after five years—meaning after five years of service she qualifies for a pension benefit payable for life, starting at the earliest age that she becomes eligible for normal retirement.¹⁰ The plan does offer reduced pension benefits for early retirement, available at age 50 with 20 years of service or age 60 with five years of service, whichever comes first.

The employer contribution rate is set at 8.69 percent of earnings. The employee contribution rate is set at 6 percent of earnings. Wake County teachers do pay into Social Security.

Assumptions for Computing Pension Wealth

- Entry age: 25 years old
- Gender: female
- Teacher has bachelor's degree for first five years; master's degree for the remainder¹¹
- Survival probabilities from *2007 CDC Life Tables*¹²
- Teacher salary schedule for 2012–13 school year¹³
- Overall rate of return: we use each system's own assumptions for return on investments

Sources: Teacher salary schedule is from district website (or requested directly from the district where required). The salary schedule is supplemented by the district collective bargaining agreement and/or teacher work rules for the 2012–13 school year where applicable/necessary.¹⁴ Retirement plan parameters are primarily taken from a database assembled by the National Council on Teacher Quality, and supplemented where necessary with information from plan documents.¹⁵

Table 2: Benefits, contributions, and net benefit for a representative new teacher in the Wake County Public School System

Age	Years of Service	Value of teacher's pension benefit (A)	Value of teacher's cumulative contributions to date (B)	Net benefit (A-B)
25	0	\$ 0	\$ 0	\$ 0
26	1	\$ 0	\$ 2,060	-\$ 2,060
27	2	\$ 0	\$ 4,215	-\$ 4,215
28	3	\$ 0	\$ 6,470	-\$ 6,470
29	4	\$ 0	\$ 8,830	-\$ 8,830
30	5	\$ 2,882	\$ 11,299	-\$ 8,417
31	6	\$ 3,827	\$ 14,129	-\$ 10,302
32	7	\$ 4,953	\$ 17,124	-\$ 12,171
33	8	\$ 6,347	\$ 20,369	-\$ 14,022
34	9	\$ 8,075	\$ 23,870	-\$ 15,794
35	10	\$ 13,908	\$ 27,632	-\$ 13,724
36	11	\$ 17,170	\$ 31,708	-\$ 14,538
37	12	\$ 20,921	\$ 36,052	-\$ 15,131
38	13	\$ 25,147	\$ 40,647	-\$ 15,500
39	14	\$ 29,852	\$ 45,491	-\$ 15,639
40	15	\$ 34,949	\$ 50,599	-\$ 15,650
41	16	\$ 40,670	\$ 56,004	-\$ 15,335
42	17	\$ 47,094	\$ 61,699	-\$ 14,605
43	18	\$ 54,413	\$ 67,710	-\$ 13,296
44	19	\$ 62,674	\$ 74,040	-\$ 11,366
45	20	\$ 80,295	\$ 80,706	-\$ 411
46	21	\$ 92,128	\$ 87,755	\$ 4,373
47	22	\$ 105,374	\$ 95,174	\$ 10,200
48	23	\$ 120,523	\$ 103,005	\$ 17,518
49	24	\$ 137,600	\$ 111,245	\$ 26,355
50	25	\$ 203,044	\$ 119,912	\$ 83,132

Pension wealth, contributions, and net pension wealth for a female teacher who begins teaching at age 25. Ex: After her fifth year of service, her pension benefits are worth \$2,882 (A) and her cumulative contributions are worth \$11,299 (B). Her net pension wealth accrued at this point is -\$8,417, which is her pension wealth minus her cumulative contributions (A-B). All values are adjusted for inflation.

ENDNOTES

- 1 National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, Table 209.10, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_209.10.asp.
- 2 Results are based on the retirement plan's rules as they apply to new hires who began in FY13. Provisions for state-covered plans were obtained from the National Council on Teacher Quality pension database (<http://www.nctq.org/statePolicy/2015/nationalFindings.do?policyIssueId=4&masterGoalId=22>).
- 3 A vested teacher who leaves a DB pension plan before reaching retirement eligibility faces a choice: She can leave her contributions in the pension fund and wait until she reaches retirement age to receive benefits. Or she can "cash out" and immediately receive a refund of what she has contributed up to that point, sometimes with interest. In rare cases, refunds may also include some or all of the employer contributions, potentially with interest, depending on the terms of the plan and whether the teacher is vested. There are also exceptions where a refund benefit is actually less than what the teacher put in. For instance, Illinois keeps 1 percent of earnings for survivor benefits (see <https://trs.illinois.gov/members/pubs/tier2guide/Refunds.pdf>).
- 4 In technical terms, pension wealth is the total expected value of a teacher's yearly stream of pension payments over her lifetime, discounted back to the present and accounting for life expectancy, conditional on the age of separation. See Appendix B.
- 5 The value of a teacher's contribution is the employee's required payment into the retirement system, grown by each system's assumed rate of return.
- 6 "Contributions" here and throughout refer to the value of a teacher's total contributions—the amount she contributes, grown by each system's assumed rate of return.
- 7 Retirement age depends on years of service; see the "Technical Matters" section for more.
- 8 S. Provasnik and S. Dorfman, *Mobility in the Teacher Workforce* (Washington, D.C.: NCES, 2005), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/2005114.pdf>.
- 9 NCES, Digest of Education Statistics, Table 209.10, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_209.10.asp.
- 10 A teacher who opts for a refund receives the total of her employee contributions, with interest. A teacher who leaves the system prior to vesting can receive a refund only; one who leaves after vesting but before retirement eligibility can choose either a refund or deferred pension benefits.
- 11 According to the Beginning Teacher Longitudinal Study, 80 percent of beginning teachers had a bachelor's degree. See NCES, Beginning Teacher Longitudinal Study, <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/btls/cohort.asp> (accessed October 30, 2016). Additionally, given that about 55 percent of the current teaching workforce has a master's degree or higher, but approximately 21 percent of current teachers have five or fewer years of teaching, the analysis assumes that a teacher who remains five years will have a master's degree by that point.
- 12 E. Arias, "United States Life Tables, 2007," National Vital Statistics Reports 59, no. 9 (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, September 2011).
- 13 "Professional growth" credits are not included in salary calculations. First, they cannot be applied uniformly across districts: one district may give teachers a salary increase when they earn, for example, 10 credits, while another may specify a salary increase at 20 credits. Second, there are no data available as to the rate at which teachers earn salary credits throughout their career. As others have demonstrated, however, the provisions governing public pension plans will be the primary determinants of benefit accrual patterns (see R. Costrell and M. Podgursky, "Peaks, Cliffs, and Valleys: The Peculiar Incentives in Teacher Retirement Systems and their Consequences for School Staffing," *Education Finance and Policy* 4, no. 2 (2009), 175–211). Variation in a teacher's earnings path, such as that just described, will likely have limited impact on pension wealth accrual patterns or the timing of the crossover point.
- 14 For example, some districts specify longevity payments in the contract instead of in the salary schedule.
- 15 NCTQ, "2015 Pension Flexibility," <http://www.nctq.org/statePolicy/2015/nationalFindings.do?policyIssueId=4&masterGoalId=22>. Some plan parameters were also independently verified using the Urban Institute's State and Local Employee Pension Plan Database (<http://apps.urban.org/features/SLEPP/data.html>)