

Teacher Compensation in Montessori Charter Schools

Key Points

- Compensation is a tool to recruit and retain effective faculty and staff.
- Salary ranges should reflect of region, role, and prior experience.
- Compensation and benefits should also be designed to reward longevity and provide opportunities for growth.

General Principles: A Mission-Driven Value Proposition

Teacher compensation for Montessori charter schools should be designed to attract and retain the best possible teachers, administrators and support staff. The most effective plans will take a holistic view of compensation that blends both fair and transparent structures for financial remuneration with strategic investments in non-financial elements of the work experience, most importantly a healthy school culture and commitment to full Montessori implementation.

Because Montessori schools require both lead and associate/assistant teachers in every classroom, staffing costs are typically higher than in non-Montessori peer schools. While higher-than-average class size may offset some of these expenses, the overall cost-per-classroom most often results in slightly under-market salaries for teachers. At the same time, a staffing structure that guarantees associates/assistants in every classroom is fundamental to both effective implementation of the Montessori pedagogical model and ensuring a pipeline of future teachers.

The value proposition connected to work in a Montessori school (public or independent) revolves principally around the school's ability to provide a workplace that appeals to teachers both professionally and personally, enabling teachers to fulfill their goals as Montessori educators in a positive environment. As a result, compensation structures should be set with regard to the following criteria:

- They should provide growth opportunities for teachers at every stage of their career.
- They should strive to be as competitive as possible with local teacher compensation standards (including local district, charter, and independent Montessori school benchmarks).
- They should be transparent and consistent.

The compensation plan should reflect and support the principles of a Montessori community—a deep respect for the individual and the work, an understanding of the power of internal motivation, and belief that everyone is working their hardest and doing the best they know how. The school offers support to all teachers through coaching and continuing education. If a teacher is truly not willing or able to work at a high level, s/he should be counseled out. This combination of expectation and action builds a strong, positive culture.

Elements of an Effective Compensation Plan

Starting Salaries	Based on ranges of experience and education (rather than specific years)
Cost of Living Adjustments	Increases to maintain standard of living from year to year
Step Increase	A yearly increase to keep former employees' pay on par with incoming employees of similar experience levels
Retention Adjustments	Modest bonuses designed to reward loyalty to the school (optional)

Continuing Education	Includes sponsorship for Montessori training; often requires a commitment from the employee to teach for the school for a minimum number of years.
Stipends	For additional (non-compulsory) duties that are assigned by school leadership and agreed to by the employee
Sick/Personal Leave	That can be accumulated and converted to modest cash payouts
Insurance Benefits	Highly competitive with most other schools
Retirement Benefits	In line with state standards

Base Salaries & Rationale

Role & Experience Level	Starting Salary Ranges		
	Mid-South	Mid-Atlantic	West Coast
All assistants/aides & paraprofessionals	\$19,000 - \$25,000	\$30,000 - \$38,750	20,000 – 31,500
All associate teachers	\$33,000 - \$44,000	\$35,000 – \$42,750	35,000-44,500
Lead Teachers			
0-5 years	\$40,000 - \$51,000	\$50,000 – \$55,000	38,000 – 44,000
6-10 years	\$45,500 - \$56,500	\$52,750 – \$58,500	46,000 – 54,000
10+ years	\$51,000 - \$62,000	55,000 - \$65,000	56,000-61,000

Table 1: Sample Base Salary Ranges

The salary ranges illustrated here are drawn approximately from new Montessori charter schools in Memphis, Tennessee; Washington, DC; and Portland, Oregon. Tennessee ranks 37th out of 50 states in compensation for teachers. The District of Columbia ranks 3rd out of 50, while Oregon ranks 14th out of 50.¹

In this case, the upper ends of these ranges are loosely aligned with corresponding district scales, with the understanding that, in most district classrooms, salaries are for single teachers without co-teacher support. The “bucketing” of salary ranges (rather than a rigid annual step system) gives the school leadership flexibility to exercise professional judgment. The ranges overlap to allow the school to work with incoming teachers who come from an array of backgrounds and to translate their expertise into the base pay scale that considers overall years of experience as well as qualitative differences in level of preparation (e.g. district, Montessori, and/or urban settings). The ranges should be re-evaluated periodically to reflect changes in the cost of living as well as per-pupil funding.

Please see below for some hypothetical examples of how various teacher backgrounds might be translated into base pay offers.

Sample profiles / mix of professional experience and potential base offers:

¹ National Education Association. (2015). *Rankings and estimates: Rankings of the states 2014 and estimates of school statistics 2015*. Retrieved from https://www.nea.org/assets/docs/NEA_Rankings_And_Estimates-2015-03-11a.pdf

Mid-South

- Teacher A has 22 years of experience as a Montessori teacher in both public and independent settings. She also has experience with special education. She is offered \$62,000, plus a stipend for new teacher mentoring.
- Teacher B has 5 years of experience as a high-performing urban charter school teacher. She is offered a starting salary of \$45,000, plus Montessori training/residency (valued at \$10,000) with the expectation of completing Montessori training/residency and working as a lead teacher.
- Teacher C has 15 years as a Montessori teacher in a mix of suburban and urban settings. She is offered \$52,000.
- Teacher D has two years experience as a district teacher. He is offered a starting salary of \$44,000, plus Montessori training/residency (valued at \$10,000) with the expectation of completing Montessori training/residency and serving one year as an associate, with the goal of promotion to lead teacher the following year.

Mid-Atlantic

- Teacher A has 22 years of experience as a Montessori teacher in both public and independent settings. She also has experience with special education. She is offered \$65,000, plus a stipend for new teacher mentoring.
- Teacher B has 5 years of experience as a high-performing urban charter school teacher. She is offered a starting salary of \$49,000, plus Montessori training/residency (valued at \$10,000) with the expectation of completing Montessori training/residency and working as a lead teacher.
- Teacher C has 15 years as a Montessori teacher in a mix of suburban and urban settings. She is offered \$60,000.
- Teacher D has two years experience as a district teacher. He is offered a starting salary of \$51,000, plus Montessori training/residency (valued at \$10,000) with the expectation of completing Montessori training/residency and serving one year as an associate, with the goal of promotion to lead teacher the following year.

West Coast

- Teacher A has 22 years of experience as a Montessori teacher in both public and independent settings. She also has experience with special education. She is offered \$61,000, plus a stipend for new teacher mentoring.
- Teacher B has 5 years of experience as a high-performing urban charter school teacher. She is offered a starting salary of \$44,000, plus Montessori training/residency (valued at \$10,000) with the expectation of completing Montessori training/residency and working as a lead teacher.
- Teacher C has 15 years as a Montessori teacher in a mix of suburban and urban settings. She is offered \$61,000.
- Teacher D has two years experience as a district teacher. He is offered a starting salary of \$39,000, plus Montessori training/residency (valued at \$10,000) with the expectation of completing Montessori training/residency and serving one year as an associate, with the goal of promotion to lead teacher the following year.

Step Increases

Yearly step increases recognize that experience gained in the school is equivalent to experience gained prior to joining the school and keeps present employees' pay on par with incoming employees of similar experience levels. Using the salary ranges above, a yearly step increase of 2% would get current staff

members to approximately the same salary each year as they would be offered if they were entering the school from outside.

Retention Adjustments: Rewarding Longevity

Some school communities feel that a retention bonus offers an affordable means of recognizing teachers' commitment and longevity. Tying this into the three-year cycle for students can be a symbolic show of the importance of each three-year commitment. To avoid the tax penalties associated with bonuses, vesting schedule on a retirement account can also be used to incentivize retention.

Continuing Education: Opportunities for Growth

Opportunities for continuing education in the form of Montessori training, specialized workshops, conferences, or school-related travel should be made available to staff members as a form of investment in both individual growth and community cohesion. While these investments do not, directly, increase a teacher's salary, they demonstrate professional respect, contribute to overall job satisfaction and support both morale and performance.

Stipends: Opportunities for Extra Responsibility

Additional salary stipends (approximately \$500 to \$2,500) may be available annually to teachers for certain responsibilities, such as division (i.e. grade level) chair, testing coordinator, Saturday school/family event coordinator, model teacher/coach, etc. Teachers may be able to apply for these roles annually or periodically as designated by the school leadership. Both performance and 360-degree feedback can be taken into account in assigning these roles. To support equity and avoid stipend-creep, it is best to develop and share a transparent system for categorizing these responsibilities and their respective stipends.

Convertible Sick/Personal Leave: Rewarding Attendance

Employees receive 10 sick/personal days per year. Staff absences always detract from student learning. As a small school with a unique mission and teaching approach, staff absences take a uniquely large toll on the program. To thank teachers for using the minimum number of days possible, one tactic is to allow employees to bank up to 20 days. (Sick leave needed beyond 20 days in a single year should fall under short- or long-term disability coverage requiring medical verification.) At the end of each school year, staff can be reimbursed a token amount (\$20 - \$50) for each day over the 10 that can be carried forward to the next year. (In order to avoid an incentive to miss days at the end of one's last year, this benefit should apply to all staff, not just those returning). Alternately, to avoid large payouts at the end of the year, paid time off (PTO) can be accrued gradually in proportion to time worked. For example, staff could accrue the equivalent of one day of PTO for every 20 days worked.

Another way to incentivize attendance is to create a pool of money to pay for substitutes at the beginning of the year. Money can be drawn from this pool to pay for substitutes as needed throughout the year, with any remainder at the end of the year divided up among teachers and distributed as a bonus.

Allotted sick/personal days and policy around accrual should be benchmarked against local schools and policies. The goal is to at least meet, if not surpass, other schools.

Health Insurance

Health insurance can be set up traditionally and benchmarked against area schools in determining what percentage of the premium the school will cover (typically anywhere from 50 – 80%). If employees are purchasing their own plans, a Flexible Spending Account (FSA), 105 plan, or 125 plan can be used to set aside pre-tax dollars for this purpose.

Disability Insurance

As the school matures, a goal should be to set up both short and long term disability policies that would provide employees and the school with financial protection for longer instances of leave. In the meantime, it may be possible to offer employees optional plans that they can purchase if interested at no cost to the school.

Life Insurance

This can be offered to interested employees as an option to purchase individually.

Retirement

All employees should have the opportunity to participate in a retirement plan. In some states, charter schools may be required to participate in a state retirement system. In others, schools have more choices. For example, a school may choose to pay 9% to a pension for certified teachers (may be available through the district or a private vendor) and match up to 5% into a 401(k) for non-teaching staff. Again, benchmarking with other area schools is helpful in offering a competitive retirement benefit. Employer contributions to a 401(k) or similar plan can also be used to incentivize longevity, with employees receiving the maximum possible employer contribution after a set number of years of service.

Signing Bonuses

Signing bonuses can be used as a one-time amount to help teachers relocating from other areas or organizations. They are a symbolic welcoming gesture, help offset transition costs and may encourage employees to accept the offered salary. Alternately, this bonus can be paid as a relocation stipend to reduce tax burden. A school leader can exercise his/her professional judgment in determining the appropriate size of this bonus for any potential hire.