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A Lesson on English

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Teaching at the High School Level in the USA

by Sara Tusek

“Becoming a High School teacher can be one of the most rewarding and difficult ventures you will ever undertake. High School students need mentors to fulfill every facet of their lives.

They are young, highly impressionable and at a point in their lives when their actions are beginning to have consequences on the rest of their lives.

They need high school teachers to help direct their energies in positive directions. Their teachers need to be able to help them learn the valuable skills necessary for success after high school either in vocational settings or for further education.

A quality high school teacher needs to be able to teach the same skills in a variety of different ways in order to accommodate every style of learner.

Lastly, a quality high school teacher needs to have the demeanor of an individual who sincerely cares for each student's success.”

<http://www.teacher-world.com/teacher-education/become-high-school-teacher.html>

The brief introduction in the box on the left to teaching in high school touches on several key points of great difference between teaching in high school and in college (see *ALOE November 2008*, “*Teaching in College*,” for more information).

- High school teachers are role models and mentors for their students; college teachers are not held responsible for their students’ moral and ethical behavior.
- High school teachers need to be versatile in using various teaching methods to reach students with different abilities; college teachers present material as they are best qualified to do, and students are expected to make any necessary adjustments in order to learn.
- High school teachers must exhibit empathy and compassion; college teachers must exhibit mastery of their subject (it’s interesting to note that subject mastery is not included in the high school teacher’s description).
- High school teachers are expected to become closely involved in their students’ lives, providing more than just instruction in their subject area. Teachers coach, sponsor, and guide students in both curricular and extracurricular activities.

Here are the basics prerequisites you need to fulfill in order to be qualified for **high school teaching certification**. Be sure to explore the options available in your state, as each state has its own standards. Some states have reciprocity with other states for teacher certification.

- Possess at least a bachelor's degree in the subject that you want to teach.
- Complete secondary teacher preparation, consisting of about 1.5 semesters (18 hours) coursework and a student teaching assignment, where you will be observed and coached while developing and refining your basic teaching skills.
- Pass Teacher Competency Examinations (general knowledge and subject-specific), usually prior to your student teaching experience.



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Sara and Jarda Tusek with Klaus

"A Lesson on English" is a series of short lessons created for people who want to become fluent in conversational English. The lessons are practical and useful for students learning English in a traditional classroom setting or on their own.



Teaching at the High School Level

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WORKWEEK, SALARIES AND UNIONS

In addition to teaching 6-7 classes per day, high school teachers are expected to be in charge of or assist in at least one after-school activity. Teachers coach sports, sponsor clubs and community service organizations, take students on field trips to conventions, fairs and competitions, and organize tournaments for everything from math to science to debates.

The typical school day for a teacher is 8 hours, with a short lunch (20 minutes or so) and perhaps a free period for planning (grading papers, making copies, writing lesson plans), though the planning period is often taken up by meetings with parents and school administrators.

Add to this 40-hour week the time spent in extracurriculars, grading papers (especially for English teachers) and preparing for the next day's lessons, and teachers end up with a 60-80 hour workweek. In return, teachers get holiday breaks and, of course, summer break (unless they need to teach summer school to supplement their salaries).

As for salaries, the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that median annual wages of secondary school teachers ranged from \$47,100 to \$51,180 in May 2008; the lowest 10 percent earned \$30,970 to \$34,280; the top 10 percent earned \$75,190 to \$80,970. According to the American Federation of Teachers, beginning teachers with a bachelor's degree earned an average of \$33,227 in the 2005-2006 school year.

In 2008, of the majority of secondary school teachers belonged to unions—mainly the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association—that bargain with school systems over salaries, hours, and other terms and conditions of employment. Unions make sure that teachers have good health care and retirement programs, to compensate for their low salaries (compared with salaries for business and professional careers).

CHALLENGES AND REWARDS

The greatest challenges of teaching high school, ironically, are not usually found in problems with students. More often, there are conflicts and tensions that involve other teachers, administrators and parents. Teachers have significant responsibility for their students' achievements and are called to task for most failures in the classroom. This seems fair, as teachers have regular, direct contact with students and therefore have a great impact on them.

However, high school teachers often don't have the authority to enforce their rules in their classroom and are frustrated because of what they see as interference from administrators who want to please parents, and parents with unrealistic ideas about their children's abilities and school-related efforts. Abrupt and arbitrary changes in school policies and curricula can make teachers feel that they have little say over what happens in their classroom.

The sheer weight of daily responsibility for the education and welfare of 150 or so students can become a burden. While it's inspiring to know that they are so influential, it's also draining to feel the constant pressure to be at one's best, every minute of every day. This pressure can lead to "teacher burnout" among highly dedicated teachers.

The rewards of teaching high school are immense and enduring. The relationships between teachers and students can last a lifetime; a teacher's influence on the development of a school can be part of the foundation of the school's success into the future. The low pay, necessity to juggle many tasks at once, vulnerability to criticism from many corners and periodic bouts of self-doubt ("am I a good teacher?") caused by the professional isolation and lack of strong leadership in many schools are offset by the pleasure of knowing and helping young people as they form their life goals and prepare for adulthood. High school teachers shape the lives of young people, for better or worse; teaching high school is a calling, not just a job.