

American Teacher

A Film By
Vanessa Roth

81 minutes, color, HD, English, USA, 2011



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Advance Praise for *American Teacher*

“This is an important film that raises important questions about America’s teachers. It should spark a much-needed conversation.” – *Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education*

“As we watch the individuals in *American Teacher* struggle with the burdens the system places on them, it's hard not to feel like crying, both for them specifically and for our national culture.” – *Kenneth Turan, Los Angeles Times*

“The film is a rebuttal of sorts to the pundits and politicians who are eager to battle unions and write teachers off as the over-protected recipients of Cadillac benefits, extended summer vacations and low expectations.” – *Anna M. Phillips, [New York Times](#)*

“Empathetically narrated by Matt Damon, [this] engaging pic is nicely assembled in all departments.” – *Dennis Harvey, [Variety](#)*

“It quickly knocks down the idiocy often voiced by right-wing television commentators that teachers are goof-offs who work six-hour days and take three months off every year. The director, Vanessa Roth, follows several teachers through their long days at school and into their personal lives, where low pay is a constant worry that affects marriages and contributes to an alarming turnover rate.” – *Neil Genzlinger, New York Times*

“*American Teacher* succeeds in reframing education's abstract ideological battles in terms of kitchen-table realities.” – *Kristina Rizga, [Mother Jones](#)*

“What makes the film more than just a cheerleading countermove is the towering amount of research it contains: historical data tracing the profession from being the domain of men to largely that of women, and the cynical economic ploy behind the shift; terrifying figures on the rates of those fleeing the profession as well as the looming crisis of a mass retirement of elderly teachers; the sobering numbers of teachers living at the poverty level and/or holding down a second job.” – *Ernest Hardy, [The Village Voice](#)*

“It compellingly shows how we lose many of our best teachers, and suggests how we can change this pattern.” – *Mark Phillips*, [Washington Post Answer Sheet blog](#)

“*American Teacher* exposes the reality of any normal teacher’s life, calls for action, and raises some important questions.” – *Isabel Allende*

Synopsis

American Teacher is the feature-length documentary created and produced by Vanessa Roth, Ninive Calegari, Dave Eggers, and Brian McGinn. The film includes a musical score by Thao Nguyen and is narrated by Matt Damon. The film chronicles the stories of four teachers living and working in disparate urban and rural areas of the country. Their stories are told through the mixture of footage and interviews with students, families, and colleagues, as well as the teachers themselves. By following these teachers as they reach different milestones throughout their careers, *American Teacher* tells the deeper story of the teaching profession in America today.

One of the featured characters, Jonathan Dearman, was an influential teacher at San Francisco's first charter high school, Leadership High. For many years he was a "wall" for students to lean on, but he was forced to leave the profession due to his inability to support his family on a teacher's salary. Throughout the film, Jonathan speaks candidly of his love for teaching and commitment to his students, while numerous student and family interviews reflect the painful loss felt by Leadership High School when Jonathan finally left the field of teaching because he could not afford to stay.

The picture develops further through the parallel narratives of Erik, Jamie, and Rhena. Erik, a history teacher in Texas, coaches three sports teams and works a second job selling stereos while struggling to maintain a middle-class standard of living for himself and his family. Interviews with his students and colleagues describe the invaluable efforts and influence Erik brings to the classroom, while emotional interviews with his family outline their frustrated support for a father who struggles to find time to share with them. Jamie, an elementary teacher in New York, shows the difficulties of balancing the responsibilities of her career as a teacher with those of pregnancy, a newborn child, and the additional tutoring responsibilities she is forced to undertake simply in order to support her family. Finally, Rhena is inspired to enter the field of teaching despite many suggestions from those around her to use her degree for a more "prestigious" and lucrative career. After several years of teaching and living at home, she competes for an

opportunity to work at the Equity Project Charter School, where teachers earn a base salary of \$125,000.

The film's narrative unfolds through a mixture of interviews, personal footage and animation, each highlighting different facts and perspectives concerning the big sacrifices made by our nation's teachers, and how these demands are forcing many of our greatest teachers out of the profession. Interwoven among the four narratives are interviews with prominent reform leaders within the field of education, including Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, several Teacher of the Year recipients, and Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond. The film's stories, interviews, and facts illustrate the impact great teachers have on the success of their students, as well as the increasing difficulty in attracting and retaining quality teachers for our nation's schools.

While all research proves that teachers are the most important school-based factor in a child's future success, almost two-thirds of our nation's teachers divide their time between teaching and second jobs. *American Teacher* goes further than simply stating that our system is broken. It shines a light on various positive reform efforts throughout the country while looking at schools and districts paving the way for change. The film aims to demonstrate that by making the teaching profession the financially attractive, prestigious, and competitive profession it deserves to be, our country can—and will—build a dedicated force of teachers, who not only inspire and challenge students to live up to their potential, but who grow within their profession to shape whole communities.

Our country is facing a remarkable opportunity right now. With almost half of our current teaching force eligible for retirement in the next ten years, we are faced with a pressing question. Who do we want to take their places? The personal stories of Jonathan, Jamie, Erik, and Rhena portray the proud accomplishments and frustrating sacrifices of teachers nationwide, aiming to inspire a dramatic cultural shift to value our nation's effective teachers.

Following several sold-out premiere screenings in eight major cities across the nation—including New York to Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles—*American Teacher* is currently being widely promoted through the support of community-led screenings across the country. Working in partnership with Microsoft Partners in Learning, The Teacher Salary Project has had, to date, over 500 screening requests throughout all 50 states. The film has been shown to lawyers, congressional staffers, the team at HP; it has been featured on Capitol Hill, at 17 educational conferences, as well as to education and community activists and leaders nationwide. The message of *American Teacher* is aimed at everyone in America invested in the success of our education system, our students, and the future of our nation's democracy and economy.

Filmmakers' Statements

Vanessa Roth, Director and Producer

I have two daughters, an eighth-grader and a fifth-grader, and I have a baby boy on the way. Just like all my friends with kids, school choice and the quality of my kids' education is a central issue in our family life. We've debated whether an urban, suburban, or rural environment would be better, whether class size matters, and what about school resources? Do we home-school, go public or private, charter or "specialized"? No matter the setting, I, like all the parents I know, want my kids' education to help them become engaged and curious critical thinkers who are lifelong learners.

While raising my kids, my work has also brought me into schools around the world where I have had the chance to spend lots of time exploring different approaches to teaching and learning and delving into the day-to-day life of both "failing" and "high-achieving" schools. What I've loved most about this work is that I have been able to witness the staff and students that make up our education system.

And what I have been most struck by, both as a mom and as a witness to the schools I've traveled to and filmed in, is that as much as all the debate around what makes the best learning environment is valid and important, the most defining piece of a kid's day, or year, is the teacher(s) in front of him or her. I'm lucky that the kind of work I do gives me the freedom to also be a very involved parent, but even with the amount of time I get to spend with my kids, they spend just as much, or more, with their teachers. Teachers not only affect what our kids learn in books, what they retain, and how they score on tests, but also how they look at the world, and who they become. I can't imagine a more important role in a person's life.

So when Dave Eggers and Nínive Calegari came to me about making a film with them about the need to change the way we value teachers in our society, I immediately said yes. The opportunity to make a film that shows the reality of the daily lives of teachers across the country was a gift, and to have a chance to make that film with two people I admired so much was truly inspiring. I also got the opportunity to get to know the teachers in the film and really sink my teeth into the heart of the education debate. I was able to fully understand how not only the teacher in front of my children is a critical factor in their lives, but also how the need for our cultural and educational policies to value teachers as true professionals is an urgent issue that goes to the heart of our democracy.

I hope that with the great talents of our editor and co-director Brian McGinn and our composer Thao Nguyen, with the passion of Matt Damon who came on as our narrator, and with the incredible trust given to us by the teachers in our film, *American Teacher* becomes a catalyst for giving our teachers the value and support they so truly deserve, so that our kids grow up to be the educated, critical thinking, engaged adults that we want and need them to be.

– Vanessa Roth

Níve Calegari, Producer

Even though I've watched our film countless times, unexpected moments *still* make me cry. This summer, during a screening at a teachers' conference, I got teary watching a former English teacher named Gretchen Weber describe moving her two thousand novels from basement to basement in the hopes that she might still someday go back into the classroom. I couldn't help but think of the boxes of original lesson plans and primary document materials in my own basement—like Gretchen, I keep them just in case I ever go back. Teaching wasn't ever just a job for me; it was a way of life, and it shaped the way I still think about the magnificence and fragility of our democracy, an honest day's work, creating community, and being responsible for other people.

After receiving my master's in Education and my teaching credentials, I taught in three different settings: a large urban public school, a large suburban public school, and a tiny public charter school, San Francisco's first. There were huge differences in these settings in terms of resources: I was laid off from my first job due to a budget cut combined with our union's "last in, first out" requirement; the second school was in a wealthy suburb with plenty of resources and meaningful professional training; and the charter school didn't even have a building until a few weeks before the start of the year.

What the three schools had in common, however, were superb faculties. I marveled at the teachers at those three schools: How David Sondheim knew the souls of every kid in the halls of Drake High. The way Jonathan Dearman brought an entire music department to our under-supplied charter school. The eye-popping science experiments that Sarah Kerley designed on a limited budget and with scrappy materials. I could go on and on.

I witnessed firsthand how these creative, warm, hilarious, and intelligent teachers made sincere connections with students and provided inspiring lessons day after day, but I knew the outside world didn't see what I saw, and I often felt and heard a very different impression about our profession. In 2003 I was thrilled to team up with Daniel Moulthrop and Dave Eggers to attempt to address this lack of awareness, and we wrote a book collecting vivid depictions of teachers' lives. We interviewed hundreds of teachers about the complexities of their work, their passions for their profession, their frustrations with public conceptions of their value, and their financial struggles to make it all possible. We talked with people who said they would have loved to go into teaching, but didn't want to be undervalued professionally or scraping by financially. We also examined schools that had raised their teachers' salaries and saw good results: increased applications for openings, increased teacher retention, increased graduation rates, and, yes, increased test scores. The book was well received, and yet, I wanted to speak to people beyond the educational community. *American Teacher* is our attempt to bring these stories to a wider audience.

At the moment, we have a rare opportunity to fundamentally shape the future of the teaching profession. Over half of our nation's teachers will be eligible to retire in the next ten years, and we can take advantage of this shift in personnel to spark a cultural shift as well. We have to make teaching a desirable profession, with fair pay, opportunities for professional growth, and acceptable conditions. I want to live in a country where college

students stay up at night wondering if they will be successful enough to become a teacher, the same way they worry about getting into medical school.

Many people tell me that teachers aren't motivated by money, and there's a lot of truth to that; for many teachers, the job itself is the real reward. But that view overlooks the many long-term consequences of undervaluing a profession. Many college students want to teach but can't see a financial and professional future in it. Of those who do take the leap, over half have to work second jobs outside the classroom. We can't ask teachers to take a vow of poverty and then expect miraculous results. If we want a different future for our kids and grandkids, we need to give education reform the time, attention, and money that it demands and deserves.

As we take this film from city to city, I often think about all those boxes of lesson plans stashed in my basement. I'm still in touch with many of my former students, but I miss the challenges and excitement unique to being in charge of a classroom of young people. I know many of my old colleagues feel the same way. For all of them, and especially for all the recent graduates currently considering the profession, I hope this film helps build support for vital change. Our kids and our country deserve the most talented, dedicated teachers available who can stay and thrive in the profession—and those teachers deserve our respect and fair pay.

- Nínive Calegari

Dave Eggers, Producer

My mom was a teacher, and a lot of my good friends from high school and college became teachers. One of my best friends was a teacher in San Francisco when we were both in our twenties and living in the city. She lived down the street from me, and we would see each other often, and she would talk about her job, her students, her school. She was easily the most passionate and accomplished and adult among all of us twenty-somethings. I was happy for her, and for the students who had her as a teacher.

But then, after about four years teaching, she had to quit. She couldn't afford it. She had loans, she had expenses. She was living with a roommate in a small apartment, couldn't afford her own place, couldn't afford a car, couldn't afford most of the things she needed. So she quit to sell educational software, and eventually went into real estate.

So that was a lesson to me. Great teachers, born teachers, were leaving the profession because of the salaries and conditions. And over the years, through our 826 National centers, I've met dozens of other young teachers who were inspiring, gifted, and who left the profession. In most cases, it wasn't just about the money. But money drives a lot of co-factors, like prestige, autonomy, and respect.

So Nínive Calegari, Daniel Moulthrop and I put together the book *Teachers Have It Easy: The Big Sacrifices and Small Salaries of America's Teachers*, allowing the teachers to tell their stories, what they love about their job and what makes their job unnecessarily difficult.

After the book was published, a documentary seemed like a natural extension of the story. We could reach new audiences and update the stories of some of the teachers profiled in the book.

The fun part was how we found Vanessa Roth. One of the students at 826 Valencia, our tutoring and writing center, heard we were thinking about making a documentary, and the next week she happened to see Vanessa's film *Third Monday in October* at a film festival. She came back to us and said, "I know the perfect person!" And so we called Vanessa, and she was indeed the perfect person.

There were other great connections with the 826 Valencia community along the way. When we needed help with the editing and filming of the movie, I thought of Brian McGinn, who used to take workshops at 826 when he was a teenager. I knew he'd gone to film school and was living in LA. I got in touch, and he became the movie's editor and co-director.

The film's music was created by the great Thao Nguyen, and there's an 826 connection there, too. We'd been fans of her music for a while, and one day I saw her in the center after school. She'd become a tutor and we didn't even know it! So she was a natural choice to compose the music for the film.

The hope for the film now is to share the stories of actual teachers: what the job is really all about, how hard it is, and how many of the things we assume we know about the profession aren't quite right. We're in an unprecedented age of scrutiny for teachers, and much of the debate is shrill and misinformed. We're hoping the movie presents a clear, sober picture of the lives of teachers, and can hint at a roadmap for improving conditions and retention.

– **Dave Eggers**

Filmmaker Bios

Producer/Director

Vanessa Roth is an artist and advocate whose documentary films have won every major award for documentary filmmaking, including an Academy Award and an Alfred I Dupont-Columbia. Her work has been theatrically released; broadcast nationally on PBS, HBO, the Discovery Channel, A&E, and the Sundance Channel; screened at hundreds of film festivals; used in colleges and universities across the country as training for lawyers, social workers, journalists, and fellow filmmakers; and shown on Oprah, NPR, and as part of the Youth Inaugural Events in Washington D.C. Her films include *Taken In: The Lives of America's Foster Children*, *Close to Home*, *Aging Out: Schools of the 21st Century*, *The Third Monday in October*, *9/11's Toxic Dust*, *Freeheld*, and *No Tomorrow*.

Producer

Ninive Calegari is a veteran teacher with almost ten years' experience in the classroom, including experience in both charter schools and large comprehensive high schools. She is the cofounder and former executive director of 826 Valencia, and most recently served as the CEO of 826 National, a literacy nonprofit that galvanizes volunteers in eight cities to support teachers and help students improve their writing skills. The program has been duplicated in thirty smaller satellites worldwide. She is also the founder of The Teacher Salary Project, the non-profit that created the film *American Teacher*. She holds a Master's Degree in Education in Teaching and Curriculum from Harvard's Graduate School of Education, and is a co-author of the *New York Times* bestselling book *Teachers Have It Easy: The Big Sacrifices and Small Salaries of America's Teachers*. She is an advisory board member of the George Lucas Educational Foundation and a recipient of Edutopia's 2007 Daring Dozen award for being one of twelve people "reshaping the future of education."

Producer

Dave Eggers is the author of six books: *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, *You Shall Know Our Velocity!*, *How We Are Hungry*, *Teachers Have It Easy: The Big Sacrifices and Small Salaries of America's Teachers*, *What Is the What*, and *Zeitoun*. He is the founder and editor of McSweeney's, a quarterly magazine and book-publishing company, and is cofounder of 826 Valencia, a nonprofit tutoring, writing, and publishing organization with locations in eight cities across the country. His work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Esquire*, and *The Believer*. In 2004 he co-taught a class at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, out of which grew the *Voice of Witness* series of books, designed to illuminate contemporary human crises through oral history.

Co-Director/Editor

Brian McGinn has had his film work featured on ESPN's Sportscenter, Current TV, MySpace, Gawker, Defamer, Wired.com, and Wholphin. His third documentary, *The Frozen City*, which he created, produced, and edited, premiered at the AFI Film Festival in Dallas in 2008, and received an honorable mention at the 2009 Cleveland International Film Festival. Most recently, he worked with Emmy Award-winner Gary Hawkins on a documentary about Thelonius Monk, *In My Mind*. McGinn is a graduate of Duke University in Durham, NC.

About the Cast

Erik Benner

Erik Benner has been teaching Texas history for fifteen years in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Benner, now forty years old, grew up in the small Texas town of Haslet, just a few miles north of Fort Worth. He graduated from the University of North Texas in 1996. He is the proud father of two beautiful daughters, Victoria, age eighteen and Addison, age five. Benner and his family currently live in Keller, Texas.

Jonathan Dearman

Jonathan Dearman is a lifelong San Francisco resident who has worked in real estate and education for the past twenty years. As a lifelong learner and educator, Jonathan has worked on education non-profits and school boards while running his family-owned real estate business since leaving the teaching profession in 2002. Jonathan is now looking to combine two of his passions, education and music, in a community project for young people in his neighborhood.

Jamie Fidler

Jamie Fidler has been teaching for eleven years. She went to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst for both her undergraduate and graduate degrees. When Jamie isn't in the classroom or working at her second or sometimes third job, she is working to fight against teacher layoffs and budget cuts to public schools. Jamie lives in Brooklyn, New York with her husband David and her daughter Charlotte.

Rhena Jasey

Rhena Jasey taught for six years in the South Orange/Maplewood School District where she grew up, attending the public schools and graduating from the local public high school there. She earned her BA from Harvard University and holds an MA in Elementary and Early Childhood Education and an MEd in Educational Leadership, with a concentration in Public School Leadership, both from Columbia University. Rhena pursues her interest in public education policy issues by participating in programs and panels that address issues of urban education and currently teaches at the Equity Project Charter School (T.E.P.) serving Washington Heights in New York City.

Credits

Director and Producer: Vanessa Roth

Producers: Ninive Calegari, Dave Eggers

Co-Director/Editor: Brian McGinn

Additional Editor: Livio Sanchez

Associate Producer: Emily Davis

Music: Thao Nguyen

Graphics/Animation: Stefan Nadelman

Sound: Jack Norflus, Jeff Edrich

Sound Mixer: Steve Shepherd

Featuring: Erik Benner, Jonathan Dearman, Jamie Fidler, Rhena Jasey

Camera: Dan Gold, Steven Milligan, Arthur Yee, Rich White

Select Press

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Op-Ed Contributor

The High Cost of Low Teacher Salaries

By DAVE EGGERS and NÍNIVE CLEMENTS CALEGARI

Published: April 30, 2011

San Francisco



Holly Gressley

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WHEN we don't get the results we want in our military endeavors, we don't blame the soldiers. We don't say, "It's these lazy soldiers and their bloated benefits plans! That's why we haven't done better in Afghanistan!" No, if the results aren't there, we blame the planners. We blame the generals, the secretary of defense, the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#). No one contemplates blaming the men and women fighting every day in the trenches for little pay and scant recognition.

And yet in education we do just that. When we don't like the way our students score on international standardized tests, we blame the teachers. When we don't like the way particular schools perform, we blame the teachers and restrict their resources.

Compare this with our approach to our military: when results on the ground are not what we hoped, we think of ways to better support soldiers. We try to give them better tools, better weapons, better protection, better training. And when recruiting is down, we offer incentives.

We have a rare chance now, with many teachers near retirement, to prove we're serious about education. The first step is to make the teaching profession more attractive to college graduates. This will take some doing.

At the moment, the average teacher's pay is on par with that of a toll taker or bartender. [Teachers make 14 percent less](#) than professionals in other occupations that require similar levels of education. In real terms, teachers' salaries have declined for 30 years. The average starting salary is \$39,000; the average ending salary — after 25 years in the profession — is \$67,000. This prices teachers out of home ownership in 32 metropolitan areas, and makes raising a family on one salary near impossible.

So how do teachers cope? Sixty-two percent work outside the classroom to make ends meet. For Erik Benner, an award-winning history teacher in Keller, Tex., money has been a constant struggle. He has two children, and for 15 years has been unable to support them on his salary. Every weekday, he goes directly from Trinity Springs Middle School to drive a forklift at Floor and Décor. He works until 11 every night, then gets up and starts all over again. Does this look like “A Plan,” either on the state or federal level?

We've been working with public school teachers for 10 years; every spring, we see many of the best teachers leave the profession. They're mowed down by the long hours, low pay, the lack of support and respect.

Imagine a novice teacher, thrown into an urban school, told to teach five classes a day, with up to 40 students each. At the year's end, if test scores haven't risen enough, he or she is called a bad teacher. For college graduates who have other options, this kind of pressure, for such low pay, doesn't make much sense. So every year 20 percent of teachers in urban districts quit. Nationwide, 46 percent of teachers quit before their fifth year. The turnover costs the United States \$7.34 billion yearly. The effect within schools — especially those in urban communities where turnover is highest — is devastating.

But we can reverse course. In the next 10 years, over half of the nation's nearly 3.2 million public school teachers will become eligible for retirement. Who will replace them? How do we attract and keep the best minds in the profession?

People talk about accountability, measurements, tenure, test scores and pay for performance. These questions are worthy of debate, but are secondary to recruiting and training teachers and treating them fairly. There is no silver bullet that will fix every last school in America, but until we solve the problem of teacher turnover, we don't have a chance.

Can we do better? Can we generate “A Plan”? Of course.

The consulting firm McKinsey recently examined how we might attract and retain a talented teaching force. The study compared the treatment of teachers here and in the three countries that perform best on standardized tests: Finland, Singapore and South Korea.

Turns out these countries have an entirely different approach to the profession. First, the governments in these countries recruit top graduates to the profession. (We don't.) In Finland and Singapore they pay for training. (We don't.) In terms of purchasing power, South Korea pays teachers on average 250 percent of what we do.

And most of all, they trust their teachers. They are rightly seen as the solution, not the problem, and when improvement is needed, the school receives support and development, not punishment. Accordingly, turnover in these countries is startlingly low: In South Korea, it's 1 percent per year. In Finland, it's 2 percent. In Singapore, 3 percent.

McKinsey polled 900 top-tier American college students and found that 68 percent would consider teaching if salaries started at \$65,000 and rose to a minimum of \$150,000. Could we do this? If we're committed to “winning the future,” we should. If any administration is capable of tackling this, it's the current one. [President Obama](#) and Education Secretary [Arne Duncan](#) understand the centrality of teachers and have said that improving our education system begins and ends with great teachers. But world-class education costs money.

For those who say, “How do we pay for this?” — well, how are we paying for three concurrent wars? How did we pay for the interstate highway system? Or the bailout of the [savings and loans](#) in 1989 and that of the investment banks in 2008? How did we pay for the equally ambitious project of sending Americans to the moon? We had the vision and we had the will and we found a way.

Dave Eggers and Nínive Clements Calegari are founders of the 826 National tutoring centers and producers of the documentary “American Teacher.”

A version of this op-ed appeared in print on May 1, 2011, on page WK12 of the New York edition with the headline: “The High Cost of Low Teacher Salaries.”

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