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EDUCATION

They could make more, but Knox County Schools custodians are in it for the kids



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Knox County Schools custodians have demanding work in big buildings, cleaning bathrooms and tidying classrooms. Their pay, in many cases, is just above the federal poverty line for a family of four. They're understaffed, too, and the district is looking for solutions.

But there are they are, day after day, year after year, keeping our public schools functioning and tidy. What keeps them going every day is love, and a community-focused mindset. They see their jobs as a way to give back.

"The job itself is a service. No kid deserves to go to a nasty school. It should be clean," said Benjamin Everett, who has worked at South-Doyle High School for nine years.

Knox County Schools custodial starting pay is \$12.20 to \$21.36 an hour, depending on experience, while Amazon has [\\$20 an hour average pay](#) for warehouse workers, with a \$15 an hour minimum.

The school district's median pay for custodians, about \$15.95 an hour, works out to just over \$33,000 a year. That's not much north of the [federal poverty level](#) for a family of four. The pay is below Knox County's median individual income of about \$37,000 a year, according to [U.S. Census data](#).

Yet many stay with the work.

They clean schools, of course, but also serve myriad roles. The younger kids lean on custodians for a few moments of emotional support when they're having a hard day. And custodians like Everett are even mentors of sorts. He shares advice with students about their first jobs.

"A lot of kids, they come up and ask me to be their dad," said Eric Scott, a custodian at Cedar Bluff Middle School. "They're all my kids."

Scott sometimes buys the kids candy bars or even Christmas presents for those who might be going through something a "little tough" at home, he said.

Robert Fletcher, who works at Cedar Bluff Pre-K, makes sure to give students birthday cards and loves seeing their smiles in return.

Those moments serve as motivation after a long day.

Finding solutions on pay

For other KCS custodians, the pay and physical demands of the job have them looking elsewhere. Knox County Schools has about 400 custodial positions, and 75 of those were unfilled through the first week of December.

Since the start of the 2023-24 school year, the district has had from 84 to 108 openings at its peak.

Six schools in the district have 50% or more of their custodian positions open, Assistant Superintendent of Operations Garfield Adams told the school board earlier this month.

Administrators are looking for solutions.

This year, Knox County Schools raised custodial salaries by 12%. Last year and the year before, the pay was increased 8% each year. District officials know there's still work to do.

Administrators **commissioned a compensation study** – at a cost of \$123,500 – that will guide future pay scales for the district.

The district's benefits package helps with recruiting, said Lori Hall, the KCS maintenance operations supervisor. "We have had a very significant increase in our starting pay as well over the last couple years."

The custodians say the increases are barely keeping up with similar jobs in the area.

"That isn't going to get us anywhere," Everett said, "not with the way inflation is going."

Working a second job on top of cleaning schools is not possible for many because of the demands on their bodies and schedules.

Everett said KCS allows custodians to work a second job, "but with the way the hours are, having a second job is kind of impossible."

"I get home with just enough time to get a quick dinner and put the kids to bed," Scott said. His wife also is employed by the school district as a cafeteria worker.

After paying for the basics, "there's nothing left," he said. At times, "you have to start picking out food or bills. I pick food."

Facing challenges beyond pay

An elementary school, with anywhere between eight to 25 classrooms and eight to 15 bathrooms, has two to four custodians. High schools have six to nine custodians assigned, Everett said.

Cleaning a classroom can take anywhere between five to 20 minutes, Everett said. When his colleague is out sick, he ends up working 16-hour shifts.

"We haven't been fully staffed at the high school, probably since 2018, maybe 2019," Everett said. Everyone blames the COVID-19 pandemic for the staffing shortage,

but in his experience, it started even before that.

The district, faced with a critical shortage of custodians earlier this year, [hired Duncan & Sons' Building Maintenance for \\$1.04 million to cover a few months' of work.](#)

The contract called for hiring 50 custodians for 17 schools with the district paying the company \$24 an hour per custodian, though not all of that went to the workers.

The day the contract started, a number of district's custodians walked out, Fletcher said, because the contracted staff was being paid more money than the district's own staff.

"It was outsourcing *lite*," Everett said.

In the month the contract was announced, eight Knox County Schools custodians resigned, which is a number that's in line with previous years, said KCS spokeswoman Carly Harrington.

Contracted workers help but sometimes made the job a little harder, the custodians said. The temporary workers weren't given keys and had to be escorted around, managed by someone else.

"You had to babysit them all night long," Fletcher said.

Leading up to the contract, the custodians said they were told their jobs were not going to be outsourced, Everett said.

Managers told them "the things we want to hear to keep cleaning," Everett said.

Now once again, the district contracting with the private company for a deep cleaning during the winter break.

"The reason we're using Duncan & Sons is because they've already been vetted through the background check process with our HR department," Adams said.

Custodians want leaders to hear their concerns

A group of custodians worked on a petition to demand better pay and better working conditions, and got support from about 100 of their peers, Everett said, but the efforts have stagnated.

"If we don't raise the pay, we're never going to get anyone," he said. "The amount of teachers and parents who think we make more than we actually make is insane."

Roberta Dennis, who has been a custodian with the district for 10 years, spoke with some parents to gauge their interest in signing the petition.

"They were saying, 'Who can we call?' because you know you all are worth more than that," Dennis said. "They were saying, 'Can we put some money in?' ... Different parents were just very concerned and they were like, how do you make it? They were asking if they can give us some food, something they can take care of."

Back when the starting pay was about \$10 an hour, parents assumed it was at least \$15 an hour because so many private companies had moved to that, she said.

"Some people said you all could go flip burgers and make more than what you'll make here," Dennis said.

The custodians who spoke to Knox News worry about retaliation in the form of a change in school assignments that would force them to drive far from where they live, or being assigned to night shifts.

"They need to come down from downtown and walk in our shoes," Fletcher said, referring to KCS administrators.

A typical day in the life of a custodian

The job involves clearing up the cafeterias, classrooms, auditoriums and bathrooms, and taking out the trash.

On a given day, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the work meant walking about 20,000 steps a day, Scott said.

"Now I'm averaging about 18,000 a day," he said. "I go through shoes like crazy."

Cleaning the bathrooms is an especially important and never-ending task, Fletcher said, especially for the young kids and kids with disabilities.

It feels like a "revolving door," he said.

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