

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Three Lessons from the 2018 Teacher Strikes (So Far)

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Teacher strikes and walkouts have disrupted student learning in states across the country this year. To date, teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, Arizona, Colorado, and Puerto Rico have closed classrooms.<sup>1</sup> Teachers in other states are now considering similar protests.<sup>2</sup>

Disgruntled teachers are demanding that state lawmakers increase education spending and teacher pay.<sup>3</sup> Yet in most states, school districts ultimately determine teacher salaries, not state lawmakers.<sup>4</sup> Even when state lawmakers increase education funding, examples demonstrate that teacher pay does not always improve.

As the potential for more strikes looms, there are three lessons from the 2018 strikes so far:

**1. Strikes and Walkouts Interrupt Student Learning and Send Parents Scrambling.** Even parents who support the teachers' demands say that school closures are hard on families. Reuters reported that the Oklahoma walkout earlier this month tested "the patience of parents, many of whom support the labor action."<sup>5</sup>

Parents who cannot take their children to work must look for child care. One West Virginia news outlet reported: "A few parents told us they weren't sure what they're going to do. Especially if it goes longer than this week, that will be very difficult."<sup>6</sup>

"As if moms and dads don't have enough to worry about as the school year draws to a close, they're now sorting through frantic emails, texts and calls from their local schools, trying to figure out what to do," wrote an Arizona columnist.<sup>7</sup>

Other parents were concerned that the lost class time would hurt students on the state and advanced placement tests scheduled later this semester.<sup>8</sup> Parents of children with special needs are also worried. An Arizona father of a child with autism said, "My child just started talking, and now there's going to be a setback because someone wants more money."<sup>9</sup>

**2. School Districts—Not State Lawmakers—Are Ultimately Responsible for Teacher Salaries.** Disgruntled teachers have demanded that state lawmakers increase state education spending, but it is the school districts that have the last word on teacher pay, even in states with minimum pay scales. State officials in more than a dozen states set statewide teacher pay scales, including three states that have seen strikes already: West Virginia, Kentucky, and Oklahoma.<sup>10</sup>

Statewide teacher salary schedules in these states "only dictate minimum salaries that school districts must provide to their teachers."<sup>11</sup> According to the Education Commission of the States, most districts exceed this minimum level. School districts, then, are responsible for salary adjustments above the minimum.

For example, Goldwater Institute research finds that Tempe Elementary School District (TESD) in Arizona receives 25 percent more per student in taxpayer funds than Alhambra Elementary School District (AESD, 20 miles from Tempe), but TESP pays teachers 30 percent less than AESD.<sup>12</sup> "If Arizona teachers and the public have a gripe with elected

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officials, the elected officials they should be targeting with this anger need to be their locally elected school district governing boards,” says Goldwater Education Director Matthew Simon.<sup>13</sup>

**3. Tax Increases Do Not Guarantee Higher Teacher Salaries.** Oklahoma lawmakers raised taxes to pay for teacher raises in light of the April

walkout.<sup>14</sup> Arizona lawmakers have already extended a sales tax that helps pay for schools, and the teacher union may put a measure on the ballot this fall asking voters to pay higher taxes to increase school spending.<sup>15</sup> Kentucky legislators overrode the governor’s veto of a tax increase to spend more on schools.<sup>16</sup> Yet district budgets can derail even the best-intend-

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3. Cano, “Arizona #RedforEd Teacher Walkout: What We Know Now.”
4. Michael Griffith, “State Teacher Salary Schedules,” Education Commission of the States, March 2016, <https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/State-Teacher-Salary-Schedules-1.pdf> (accessed April 30, 2018).
5. Heide Brandes and Lenzy Krehbiel-Burton, “Oklahoma Parents Fret Over Childcare, Testing as Teachers Strike,” Reuters, April 12, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oklahoma-education-parents/oklahoma-parents-fret-over-childcare-testing-as-teachers-strike-idUSKBN1HJ1AR> (accessed April 30, 2018).
6. Dan Klein, “Many Parents Support Teacher Strike, Some Scramble,” WSAZ News Channel 3, February 21, 2018, <http://www.wsaz.com/content/news/Many-parents-support-teacher-strike-some-scramble-474765113.html> (accessed April 30, 2018).
7. Jon Gabriel, “Gabriel: If Arizona Teachers Strike Now, It’s a War Against Parents, Not Politicians,” Arizona Central, April 24, 2018, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/opinion/op-ed/2018/04/24/arizona-teacher-strike-red-ed-war-against-parents-not-politicians/545675002/> (accessed April 30, 2018).
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11. Griffith, “State Teacher Salary Schedules.”
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14. Dale Denwalt, “Oklahoma House Passes Tax Bill, Teacher Raise,” *The Oklahoman*, March 26, 2018, <http://newsok.com/oklahoma-house-passes-tax-bill-teacher-raise/article/5588485> (accessed April 30, 2018).
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16. “Kentucky Lawmakers Override Budget Veto in Win for Teachers,” *The New York Times*, April 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/us/kentucky-budget-veto-teachers.html> (accessed May 1, 2018).

ed spending increases. In Kentucky, the state's largest school district, Jefferson County, is swollen with non-instructional staff. A 2014 audit found 369 administrators earning more than \$100,000 a year.<sup>17</sup> The district had three times as many administrators than comparable districts in other states.<sup>18</sup> Another audit is due this year, and some have called for the state to assume control of the district. Such examples can be found around the country.<sup>19</sup>

In Arizona, the percentage of education spending that districts use for classrooms is a controversial topic because of state audits tracking a decrease in instructional spending, "while the percentages spent on all other operational areas have increased."<sup>20</sup> So far, the lawmakers' proposal to increase teacher salaries and end the current strike does not "require districts to spend the money on teacher pay raises."<sup>21</sup>

## Recommendations

- **Teachers and state lawmakers should hold school districts accountable for school budgets.** School district audits should make administrator salaries publicly available, especially for districts that ask voters for budget overrides, or before votes on bonds to pay for new buildings. A nationally representative survey finds that adults underestimate how much is spent per child in

public schools by \$4,000.<sup>22</sup> When told how much taxpayers spend, support for funding increases drops by 15 percentage points.

- **Evaluate and pay teachers based on job performance, not last-in, first-out policies.** Ten states determine teacher layoffs based all or partially on seniority.<sup>23</sup> The National Council for Teacher Quality studied 100 large school districts and found that 75 use seniority as "the primary determinant for layoffs."<sup>24</sup> Basing teacher evaluations and pay increases on job performance instead of seniority will help attract new applicants and prevent less-effective teachers from remaining on the job. Employees should see raises for good performance, not just because they spent another year on the job.

## Conclusion

The 2018 teacher strikes focused attention on state lawmakers' decisions, but in most states, school districts have the last word on teacher salaries. Meanwhile, school closures put working families in a bind.

When state lawmakers do increase education spending, teachers do not always see higher salaries. Rather than increasing taxes, lawmakers should simplify school funding formulas and make it easier

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for educators and the public to determine where and how school districts spend taxpayer money. Then policymakers and educators can focus resources on the real goal: helping students succeed.

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