



TEACHERS ARE STRIKING. NEPC FELLOW TERRENDA WHITE EXPLAINS WHY



In the past year, teachers in more than half a dozen states have participated in strikes protesting conditions such as low pay, large class sizes, and inadequate funding. National Education Policy Center Fellow [Terrenda White](#) has been studying the walkouts. White, an assistant professor of education policy and practice at the University of Colorado Boulder, is a sociologist and former elementary school teacher, whose previous work has examined topics including the impact of choice on instructional practices, teacher turnover at charter schools, and racially diverse charters. “We know historically that it is social movements that change laws and policies as well as culture and entrenched forms of power,” White says in a recent University of Colorado Boulder School of Education “Ed Talk” entitled [What if Teacher Walkouts are Just the Beginning?](#) (Inspired by Ted Talks, Ed Talks are the school’s biannual series of short, community-oriented presentations on hot topics on education.) In the Q&A below, White sheds light on the walkouts themselves as well as the broader social context of the strikes. She explains what the movements do and do not have in common, examines outcomes, considers their impact on students, and predicts which states may experience strikes next.

Q: Why did teachers start walking out last school year? Why then?

A: *Last school year, we saw six statewide walkouts, and also one walkout from charter school teachers in Chicago who were unionized and demanded changes by their network, which was the nation’s first charter strike. In the six walkout states—West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, Colorado, Arizona, and North Carolina—there was a shared frustration with low teacher salary and inadequate funding, which had not been restored to pre-recession levels of funding in some states or did not reach national averages for per-pupil*

spending in the country.

*I'm not sure why the walkouts happened when they did, but it's interesting that they occurred in politically conservative states with the sparsest reputations for labor militancy and in some cases states that flouted union-centric organizing on the part of teachers. And, remarkably, the walkouts occurred before the Supreme Court's summer decision, *Janus v. AFSCME*, which weakened the capacity of all public sector unions to collect agency fees from nonunion members. So the pre-*Janus* walkouts eased the fears of many like myself who worried that teacher activism would be muted by the threat of *Janus* or by a conservative-leaning Supreme Court. But, oddly enough, the walkouts in conservative states provided a blueprint for what future organizing might entail for teachers in the rest of the country post-*Janus*.*

Q: How have the desired outcomes of the walkouts compared to the actual outcomes?

A: *Most would argue that the outcomes of the walkouts have been mixed, but I think it hinges in large part on which dimensions of change people are looking at. I think about the outcomes from three angles, including immediate gains in material resources or conditions for teachers and schools, gains in public opinion or support for the plight of teachers and their concerns about the organization of our public schools, and long-term gains via substantive change to policy or funding structures. Teachers have voiced desires to foster change in all of these areas, so it's important to weigh the outcomes of the walkouts in a multifaceted way. I'll briefly walk through all three.*

In terms of outcomes related to immediate gains in salary, more funding, and better working conditions, the outcomes have indeed been mixed but with clear successes. In West Virginia and Oklahoma, we saw early victories for teachers, including pay raises, including for paraprofessionals, support staff, and other state employees, as well as additional funding for schools. Arizona teachers also won pay increases and more funding for support staff, infrastructure, technology, and textbooks. However, support for more counselors and librarians was limited. While Kentucky teachers lost ground in terms of a pension reform bill passed by the governor, they were nonetheless able to put pressure on lawmakers to override the governor's veto of bills for more per-pupil spending. In Colorado, things were much more complicated, since the state legislature effectively can't pass a statewide bill increasing spending for schools without voter approval. So while teachers demanded pay raises and more funding (including the state's mandated provision to keep pace with yearly inflation), we saw victories at local levels but not statewide changes to funding structures. North Carolina teachers wanted a multiyear plan to increase teacher salaries over time, as well as more per-pupil funding and more support staff. Since there had been a number of pay raises in recent years, the walkouts there signaled deeper concerns about leadership and the direction of education policies. For instance, NC teachers voiced concerns that state leaders lacked respect for teachers as professionals, by ending tenure and pay increases for teachers with Master's degrees, by removing caps on class size, and by increasing levels of spending on charter schools. I think that in NC we saw larger policy conflicts emerge between teachers and district leaders, such as the expansion of charter schools, which is a similar policy concern among LAUSD teachers who recently went on

strike for six days. Lastly, we saw teachers in Acero charter schools push for (and win) sustained pay increases for teachers over time that are on par with pay scales in the Chicago Public Schools, as well as caps on class sizes, and pay raises for paraprofessionals. Also of note, the Acero teachers demanded actions on the part of the network that would protect immigrant students (and designate the schools as sanctuary schools). These demands are significant given the expansion of charters in communities of color where large proportions of students are from non-dominant backgrounds, including immigrant children and children of immigrants. The charter teachers also won important improvements to working conditions, such as reduced workloads and duties.

Changes in public opinion due to the walkouts appear positive. Results from a [survey](#) of over 4,000 adults, released by Education Next, found increased public support for pay raises and school expenditures between 2017 and 2018 (after the statewide walkouts in May). In the six walkout states, 63% of respondents favored pay increases for teachers, compared to 47% the previous year. The trend held regardless of whether respondents were informed or uninformed about the average teacher salary in their state, with both groups showing increased support for pay raises between 2017 and 2018. Similar trends were found in terms of support for spending levels in local public schools, with an increase of 7 percentage points between 2017 and 2018.

Despite favorable public opinion, the big challenge remains—how to convert the public’s favorable opinion about their local schools and schoolteachers into statewide changes in policy and spending structures. For instance, education journalist and author Dana Goldstein [noted](#) that after the midterm elections, not only did voters in some conservative states and swing states vote down initiatives to increase state taxes for schools, many voted for ballot measures that will make it harder to do so in the future. In Colorado, this trend played out pretty clearly, with voters approving a majority of local initiatives to increase funding for public schools and school construction, yet rejecting a major ballot initiative to increase funding for schools statewide (Amendment 73). While the local victories are important, the absence of widespread reform contributes to inequitable resources and opportunities for all students.

On a more positive note, the most promising outcomes for long-term change in education policy (and in public policy generally that will support students and families) were the unprecedented number of teachers who ran for public office at local, state, and national levels, and won! It’s hard to nail down the exact number, but [reliable estimates](#) put the number of teachers (who were currently teaching) who ran for political office last fall at 177, of which 43 won their races. Most ran as Democrats. Political victories were in four of the walkout states (Arizona, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and West Virginia). So I think that speaks volumes concerning the momentum that last year’s walkouts had on teacher political involvement and future policymaking.

Q: How, if at all, do the conditions that teachers are protesting impact students?

A: Many of the conditions that teachers are aiming to improve are conditions that make the profession more attractive, according to [survey work](#) by the Learning Policy Institute (LPI). When attributes of the profession are rated highly unattractive, the greatest harm

is to our most vulnerable students, including students with special needs, English language learners, students in poverty, and students from historically marginalized backgrounds. This is because “teacher attractiveness,” according to LPI’s research, is closely tied to “teacher equity,” which includes the equitable distribution of high-quality, experienced teachers across districts and schools. While some could argue that the problem of inequitable distribution of high-quality teachers has been a longstanding problem both within and across districts, research tells us that these inequities are only worsened in contexts where the attractive qualities of the profession are in decline, including wage competitiveness, working conditions, job security, and teacher retention. When these qualities are diminished, not only does it foster chronic teacher shortages, but the burden of those shortages are felt most by students who are already disadvantaged. Hence, when state and district leaders fail to make teaching attractive, they also undermine equity goals.

Poor working conditions also undermine teacher diversity goals as well. In the past decade we’ve seen teachers of color exhibit higher rates of turnover and attrition than white teachers, despite reporting a strong desire to work with students of color and with students from historically marginalized backgrounds. Teachers of color, however, are often recruited to work in schools with poor working conditions and that are otherwise hard-to-staff. Despite their strong commitments, teachers of color also care about (and deserve) adequate working conditions, competitive salaries, and other indicators of professional status and respect.

Also, consider the impact of the recent policy focus on market mechanisms to attract competitive teachers or to incentivize current teachers. These policies, including various forms of merit pay, including lower base salaries and large bonuses tied to student outcomes, can shift attention away from working conditions in many districts. The policies should therefore be contextualized and reexamined in terms of their impact on other dimensions of teacher work life that aid or undermine teacher satisfaction, including job stability, levels of collegiality in schools, administrative support, decision-making, and corresponding investments in other meaningful resources that teachers find important.

Q: How, if at all, do teacher walkouts impact students?

A: It may be too early to know how, if at all, the walkouts have impacted students. When teachers go on strike, there is a legitimate concern about the disruption of instructional time for students, especially for students who are behind academically or for families with limited resources to access safe, high-quality childcare. In this vein, it’s important to learn from the strategies of teachers in the walkout states. I particularly found that Oklahoma teachers had a strong ground game with coordinated supports for students during their walkout, including nutrition workers who converted cafeterias into mobile food delivery systems and who packed nearly 17,000 sack lunches for delivery to more than 30 community centers, city parks, and churches during the walkout. They also had a network of teen volunteers who organized group activities for young children in libraries and youth centers, offering games, sports, and tutoring.

But beyond loss of instructional time for students, and the need for safe childcare during walkouts (if children aren’t themselves participating in the walkouts), I think research

should explore more closely the impact of the walkouts on students' perceptions of civic engagement. Also, given teacher shortages nationwide, there's an essential need to recruit students early on to think about teaching as a worthwhile profession. How might witnessing teachers engage in political activism and public demonstration shape young people's views of the teaching profession? There's a [letter](#) from a teacher (Hayley Breden) who participated in last year's walkouts, which I find pretty powerful, because her letter is to future educators about why she walked out (not because she hates her job, but because she loves her students and thinks they deserve more). In fact, my hunch is that many students might be heartened, even emboldened, to pursue teaching in these moments of activism, particularly youth of color who themselves have participated in walkouts in the past several years with Black Lives Matter and other social movements. In my own work, this is something that my graduate students and I are exploring in Denver, Colorado.

Q: To what extent, if any, are the teacher walkouts connected to the student walkouts/activism following the Parkland school shootings? [if at all?]

A: I'm not sure whether the teacher walkouts were related to the Parkland walkouts. Nonetheless, I found it heartening that during the UTLA strike, the city's Black Lives Matter chapter came out in support of the teachers there. Perhaps as the strikes move to large urban districts, where youth of color have long been engaged in activism, including education justice campaigns against the closure of public schools in their communities or the school-to-prison pipeline, we'll see more connections between teacher activism and youth activism. As it stands, however, I unfortunately don't see strong connections between the two, in terms of shared organizing strategies, or shared visions of what social justice, critical democracy, and equity should look like in a diverse society.

Q: To what extent are walkouts in one state sparking walkouts in other states? Do you have any predictions of states where walkouts may happen soon?

A: Yes, in the third week of the new year, we saw teachers in Los Angeles Unified School District go on strike. After six days, on the very Wednesday that their strike ended, teachers in Denver, Colorado announced that they too had voted to go on strike. As teachers in large urban districts, both groups serve students who are predominantly Black and Latinx, and have pushed for more resources and better salaries. There are important differences, however, in the teachers' demands. The United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) brought attention to the lack of viable professional supports in their schools, such as librarians, counselors, and nurses, and the problem of large class sizes. Moreover, a major point of concern for UTLA was the direction of education policies on the part of district leaders, including the expansion of charter schools, which they viewed as stretching resources and contributing to privatization in public education. After several days of protest, it appears that UTLA won increases in teacher salary, smaller class sizes, and an investment in different reform models outside of charter schools, such as the [community schools model](#).

For teachers in Denver who are members of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA), demands included more stable and competitive pay scales, larger base salaries and a substantive revision to the district's performance-based compensation system, known as ProComp.

My prediction is that future walkouts will include other large urban districts, similar to LAUSD and Denver Public Schools, which have undergone educational reforms related to charter expansion and so-called portfolio management models. While these reforms are exciting to district leaders, they are also associated with chronic teacher turnover in newly created schools and an overall sense on the part of district teachers that viable resources are increasingly fragmented and scarce. I would not be surprised to see teachers in Oakland, Memphis, and Detroit launch major walkouts in the next year or so. I also think we'll see more charter teachers like those at Acero form unions and engage in bargaining and strikes to better control and improve their working conditions.

Q: What do the walkouts have in common? How are they different?

A: For the most part, the walkouts last year had a common occurrence in so-called "red" states with Republican leadership, or in swing states with mixed or divided leadership from both political parties at different branches of government. To some extent, the walkouts therefore brought attention to the consequences of austerity measures and tax cuts on the part of conservative leadership in those states. This is changing, however, as walkouts are shifting to traditionally "blue" states with large urban districts. Future walkouts will likely expose divisions within the Democratic party, in terms of leaders at various levels who support greater funding for public education but also support growth of charter schools; in places like LAUSD, those two positions put the politicians partially in the union's camp, and partially opposed to the union's position that charter expansion has undermined resources for teachers in district schools.

Q: Are there alternative ways for teachers to accomplish their goals other than walking out?

A: Yes, while walkouts command a great deal of attention and have resulted in important gains for teachers, I think long-term policy changes and cultural shifts in how the public views teachers and the purposes of public education will require additional and alternative forms of strategizing. I think it's beneficial for teachers to learn from, and perhaps partner with, community organizations and social justice groups where parents, youth, community members, and workers in other sectors have waged formidable battles for living wages, for working conditions, and for control of public institutions.

Q: In what way, if any, are the teacher walkouts of today rooted in teacher activism of the past?

*A: The walkouts today can and should leverage what we know about teacher activism in the past. I'm currently reading Elizabeth Todd-Breland's new book, *A Political Education: Black Politics and Education Reform in Chicago since the 1960s (2018)*. She examines multiple struggles, strategies and ideologies within Black communities for quality education. She includes an important analysis about the history and evolution of the Chicago Teachers Union and the plight of the city's teachers (many of whom are Black), and who linked their labor disputes with political leaders and district officials to broad policy concerns about the growth and misuse of standardized testing, the growth of privatization in public education, and the lack of equity and racial justice in the city overall. Importantly, in my*

view, teachers in that city bridged an often false (though sometimes true) divide between the concerns of teachers and those of everyday students and families. I think teachers participating in walkouts today would do well to borrow a page from that city's history of teacher activism.

Q: Where do you see the teacher walkout movement going? What do you think the long-term impacts will be, if any?

A: I'm not sure where the walkout movement is going, but I am quite hopeful about the future. I see a number of radical possibilities, not only for the teachers but for the labor movement more broadly in this country, which needs a serious rebirth. Here again I lean on the existing work of labor scholars and historians, as well as journalists who provide substantive grounding for where the labor movement has been and how it might strategize to move forward. The [work](#) of Rachel Cohen, a freelance journalist, is pretty insightful about future organizing strategies for teachers, including "rights-based" legal strategies that leverage the constitutional rights of teachers as citizens to strike and to bargain collectively. There are also seeds of a more global teacher movement that Mary Compton and Lois Weiner [write](#) about in their work on teacher labor, particularly among teachers in countries whose schools and work lives have been disrupted by similar austerity policies or educational reforms that have been borrowed and extended across nation-states by powerful organizations, think tanks, and leaders. Ultimately, I think we have to consider what the long-term impact of the walkouts means for the next generation of teachers, including the young students right now who are watching their teachers mobilize on their behalf for more resources, more power, and more respect. Let's hope they've been inspired by seeing their teachers participate in democratic deliberation and decision-making, and as agents of change in difficult times.

NEPC Resources on Teacher Unions

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