

An Unexpected Effect of Teacher Strikes on How Much Schools Spend



By Mark Lieberman — April 19, 2024

4 min read



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Teacher strikes can be stressful for educators, parents, and students—but they can help spur bigger investments in schools beyond the districts where they take place, newly published research shows.

Researchers Melissa Lyon and Matthew Kraft compiled and analyzed a database of more than 500 teacher strikes that took place in the United States between 2007 and 2018. Then they cross-referenced those districts with data on per-pupil spending and advertising for congressional campaigns, in an effort to determine whether and how strikes affected the political position of K-12 education and spending in the communities where they happened and beyond.

They found that, on average, districts where a strike took place saw increases in per-pupil spending of \$670 within three years of the strike, or a 6 percent increase relative to a generalized estimate of a typical per-pupil expenditure of \$11,195.

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Some of those gains likely came from salary and benefits increases negotiated in the contract district employees were seeking during the strike.

But Lyon and Kraft found evidence that suggests a “spillover effect” as well—all districts in states where a strike took place saw increases in per-pupil expenditures from state funds, whether they had a strike or not. Therefore, localized strikes, the authors conclude, have statewide political reach, often prompting a reaction in state capitols.

“I wanted to conceptualize strikes as something bigger than just these contract negotiation tactics,” said Lyon, an assistant professor of public administration and policy at the University at Albany. “I wanted to think about strikes as this broader political signal that was intended to attract attention and convince people that something is very wrong about what happens in schools.”

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The paper, published April 8 in the online version of the *Journal of Human Resources*, also shows that teacher strikes doubled the likelihood that local congressional candidates mentioned education in their campaign ads.

At their most effective, the authors say, teacher strikes can “publicly signal the need for political and economic changes” in ways that lead to tangible outcomes.

Not all teacher strikes are necessarily created equal, though. Lyon and Kraft, an associate professor of education and economics at Brown University, found that strikes lasting less than a week tended to cause education to take an even more prominent role in political campaigns, and for per-pupil spending to increase even more on average, than strikes that lasted two weeks or longer.

“The longer strikes tend to lead to a sort of political avoidance where political candidates are actually less likely to mention education,” she said. Indeed, candidates in districts that had strikes longer than 11 days were 11 percent less likely to mention education in their political campaigns.

Lyon said she’s still working on a follow-up paper that poses the same questions for strikes between 2018 and the present, including the wave of “Red for Ed” strikes that drew thousands of participants in states like Arizona and West Virginia, where teacher strikes have traditionally been rare. So far, she said, the effects of recent strikes on school funding appear to be similar to, if not greater than, what she’s found previously.

Strikes remain illegal in many places, but still powerful

Thirty-seven states by law prohibit educators from going on strike.

That may change in some places.

Members of the teachers’ union in Clark County, Nev., last September engaged in “rolling sickouts” during an impasse in contract negotiations with their district. A judge eventually ruled the sickouts constituted an illegal strike.

Members of the Clark County teachers’ union are now gathering signatures to solicit voter approval on the November ballot for teachers’ legal right to strike.

It remains to be seen whether the issue will come before voters. For his part, Nevada Gov. Joe Lombardo, a Republican, said in March that he doesn’t believe teachers should be legally permitted to strike.

Meanwhile, a recent push to legalize teacher strikes in Massachusetts failed to gain traction.

But restrictions don’t always prevent educators from walking out over concerns about low pay, challenging working conditions, and even adequate district support for students’ well-being.

School staff in more than two dozen districts, including in major cities like Los Angeles and Portland, Ore., went on strike in 2023, according to the Labor Action Tracker from the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations. Several of those strikes were illegal, including in Andover, Mass., and Camas, Wash.

So far this year, teachers in several districts have gone on strike, including in Flint, Mich., and Newton, Mass. Paraprofessionals in the Port Angeles district in Washington state also went on strike in March.

Lyon and Kraft’s database marks the first comprehensive look at 21st-century teacher strikes. The federal government tracks educator strikes but only counts labor actions that involve more than 1,000 people—and most teacher strikes in individual districts aren’t that large.

Lyon said her research has helped clarify for her that teacher strikes can offer a rare window into the conditions inside school buildings.

They're viewed by policymakers as credible, she said, in part because they are relatively rare, and require significant resources to pull off.

"My main viewpoint into the public schools is through my 5-year-old, who's unreliable at best. He'll tell me there are dinosaurs at school," she said. "Teachers are uniquely positioned at having this information."