

# Q&A: Eleanor Goetzinger

## *A veteran teacher reflects on the Oklahoma strike*

**ON APRIL 2, 2018**, teachers in Oklahoma walked out of their classrooms to demand better pay and more school spending. Their nine-day strike, the first of its kind in Oklahoma since 1990, closed schools in some 200 districts and ended only after the legislature agreed to raise teachers' pay by an average of \$6,100, to be paid for by new consumption and fuel-production taxes. Oklahoma's statewide strike was one of six that took place this spring. Martin West, editor-in-chief of *Education Next*, spoke with Eleanor Goetzinger, a veteran educator who participated in the Oklahoma strike.

**Martin West:** For you, what were the best moments of the strike?

**Eleanor Goetzinger:** I've worked in various education positions throughout Oklahoma. So when I went out there the second day, I saw teachers I've known and worked with over the past 23 years, and it was just like a reunion, all of us coming together in order to make Oklahoma a better place for children to learn. It was probably one of the most empowering experiences I've ever had in my life.

**MW:** The formal list of demands was extensive, encompassing issues beyond teacher pay. What were the most important issues at stake during the strike?

**EG:** Money, of course—money getting into the classrooms would be very nice. I've been in education for more than 20 years, and I cannot even remember the last time I saw a new textbook in our school system. Curriculum impacts instruction, and it's a domino effect, so it basically comes down to academic achievement for children. It's very frustrating, because class sizes are getting larger because they can't hire more teachers, and teachers are basically hanging on by a thread, so it's been very, very challenging.

**MW:** Were you happy with the resolution of the strike?

**EG:** It was actually bittersweet. We all knew that we wanted more textbooks and supplies that go directly for the children, especially those in inner-city schools. Teachers purchase so many things out of their own pockets. So the teachers are going to make more, but my educated guess is that they will be buying more for their classrooms, because the money is not coming from the legislature. It's not coming through like we want it to.

**MW:** How much of the strike was motivated by grassroots sentiment, and how much depended on union organization and support?

**EG:** That's a very good question. At the time of the teachers' strike, my perspective was that it was definitely grassroots-related. Afterwards, though, I kind of felt like it was a way for the unions to sign on more teachers. I really felt, at the end, that the Oklahoma Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, and the Professional Oklahoma Educators [a nonunion organization of school employees] should have collaborated. We kind of felt like each union was driving its own agenda instead of getting together for the betterment of all the teachers. [Collaborating] would have been a lot more meaningful [than having] three entities with three agendas.

**MW:** During the strike, what kind of response did you get from community members?

**EG:** I would wear my Oklahoma educator T-shirt to the grocery store, and men would tip their hat, or women would nod at me out of gratitude for what I do. I heard a lot of stories of teachers wearing their shirts at a restaurant and [having] their bill paid. I think a lot of my fellow Oklahomans didn't

know how challenging it was in schools to meet the needs of children, [whether] in general education or special education. So to me as an educator, that was very reaffirming, because we usually don't get that much support.

**MW:** One of the interesting things about the Oklahoma strike is that it was statewide rather than targeted at a particular district. How did the Oklahoma City Public Schools as an organization stand with respect to what you as employees were doing?

**EG:** They couldn't have been better at dealing with this. I know several board members, I've talked to them, and they were very [supportive]. They were not pressuring the teachers to go back. We were really grateful for that, and it helped teacher morale.

*This is an edited excerpt from an Education Next podcast, which can be heard on [www.educationnext.org](http://www.educationnext.org).*



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