



# The Strikes Keep Coming

*Will districts demand reform in exchange for needed raises?*

**AS THIS ISSUE OF EDUCATION NEXT** goes to press, teachers in the nation's second-largest school system, Los Angeles Unified, have reached a tentative agreement with district officials after a weeklong strike. Teachers in Denver are voting on whether to launch a strike of their own, with negotiations stalled between their union and the district over its pay-for-performance system. This spate of activism follows on the heels of a series of statewide walkouts in early 2018, when teachers in six states took to the streets to demand better pay and more school spending—not to mention the first-ever strike in the nation's charter-school sector, which shuttered the Chicago-based Acero charter network for several days in December.

The turmoil is at once a departure—LA's teachers hadn't walked out in 30 years, Denver's in 25—and utterly predictable; it also may presage a new era of conflict. With the U.S. Supreme Court's 2018 *Janus* decision barring public-sector unions from collecting representation fees from non-members, unions are more eager than ever to display their power to prospective dues payers. At oral argument in the case, the attorney for the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees even warned of an "untold specter of labor unrest throughout the country" if the court were to rule against the union, as it nonetheless did.

And then there's the money: American teachers' take-home pay has been flat for a quarter century and, on average, remains lower after adjusting for inflation than before the Great Recession. In most places that's not because we're investing less in teacher compensation; it's because more and more of that spending is paying for pension and other benefits for teachers long since retired (see "Health Care for Life," *features*, Winter 2019). But young teachers, who have seen their wages stagnate even as their benefits are cut, have good reason to cry foul. The fact that their unions have aggravated the problem by fighting sensible benefit reform will not make the prospect of striking any less attractive.

As tension mounts, those making the case for raising teacher pay can find fresh ammunition in research presented in this issue by Eric Hanushek, Marc Piopiunik, and Simon Wiederhold (see "Do Smarter Teachers Make Smarter Students?," *research*). Looking across more than 30 countries, the three economists demonstrate that students achieve at higher levels where teachers have stronger literacy and numeracy skills—and that it is countries that pay teachers more relative to other college

graduates that tend to succeed in recruiting highly skilled teachers. They also show that, when measured against comparable college graduates in the same country, U.S. teachers' wages rank near the bottom internationally, lagging those of other bachelor's-degree holders by as much as 22 percent. It is little wonder that teaching talent is often hard to find.

As the economists are quick to point out, however, there's no guarantee that boosting teacher pay here would yield a more capable teaching work force. That outcome would hinge on policymakers ensuring that "higher salaries go to more effective teachers"—the ones districts should want to recruit and retain. And whether a substantial pay hike is feasible likely turns on the extent to which districts can find savings elsewhere, for example, by allowing class sizes to creep up or reducing the ranks of non-teaching staff.

From this perspective, the negotiations in Denver and Los Angeles are discouraging. In Denver, negotiations have broken down over a modest district proposal that would better align teachers' pay with their effectiveness by giving master's degrees less weight in compensation decisions. In LA, the union demanded not just better pay but also tighter restrictions on class size and the hiring of additional non-teaching staff. In both settings, union leaders have called for new limits on the growth of charter schools, thereby threatening the sector that has the greatest flexibility to experiment with new forms of teacher compensation and to recruit and retain effective teachers while pushing out those who are not.

Amid a record-long economic expansion, and with wages finally rising elsewhere in the economy, the time is ripe for a hard look at how much American teachers are paid; the unions are right to put the issue on the bargaining table. Yet it will require strong leadership on the other side of the table to ensure that any increments in pay are used to make teaching a more professional, performance-sensitive occupation. If current events are any indication, that may entail enduring an uptick in the number of strikes.

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**MISSION STATEMENT** In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.

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