

TEACHER STRIKES
Testimony of Pearre Dean
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HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
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Good afternoon, my name is Pearre Dean and I am Deputy Director of Public Affairs at the Commonwealth Foundation, Pennsylvania's free-market think tank that crafts free-market policies, convinces Pennsylvanians of their benefits and counters attacks on liberty. Most importantly, I am a proud parent of two sons currently in the Pennsylvania school system and taxpayer.

Today's topic, teacher strikes, is an affront to parents, children, taxpayers and liberty. Ultimately, it diminishes the ability of five -18-year olds to get a consistent, uninterrupted and superior public education in an increasingly competitive global market.

Pennsylvania has the dubious distinction of being the teacher strike capital of America, continually putting students in the crossfire between teacher unions and school boards during contract negotiations. Since 2004, Pennsylvania's strikes have accounted for more than half America's public school strikes.¹ That is, more teacher strikes have occurred in Pennsylvania than the other 49 states combined. The Keystone State averages about 12 strikes a year since the passage of Act 88 in 1992.² In the 2009-10 school year, there were eight school strikes by teachers and employee unions affecting 34,900 children's classroom education.³

It is unacceptable that school children be held hostage while teacher unions negotiate taxpayer-funded salaries and benefits. The six-week Bethel Park teacher strike, which ended last fall without an agreement, should be seen as a wakeup call for the need to enact legislation, similar to that of most other states, that bans teacher strikes.

Starting in 2010, Bethel Park school board and union officials' contract negotiations, which went into a non-binding arbitration, failed to reach an agreement that the district could

¹ Pennsylvania School Boards Association, <http://www.psba.org/lib/images/SLNews/2010salarystudy-chart8.jpg>

² Pennsylvania School Boards Association, <http://www.psba.org/lib/images/SLNews/2010salarystudy-charts1-2.jpg>

³ Pennsylvania School Boards Association, <http://www.psba.org/issues-advocacy/issues-research/contracts-strikes/school-employee-strikes.asp>.

afford. Now, Bethel Park parents, who last year protested against the teacher strikes, are waiting to see if the classes start on Sept. 12 as planned or if teachers will once again hit the streets in protests.

The Bethel Park district ranks in the top 10% of property taxes in the state. Education spending has increased by 11% since 2000, yet enrollment in Bethel Park has gone down by almost 8% over that same time.⁴ Bethel Park's average salary is \$58,978 and teachers have been entitled to 4.1 percent annual pay and benefit increase for the last four years, contributing less than one percent toward their health insurance costs.⁵

We don't want what happened in Bethel Park to become the reality for parents and students of Philadelphia; but without action from the legislature it likely will. The Neshaminy school district has been operating under an expired contract that provides generous compensation for teachers that costs taxpayers \$78 million. Neshaminy teachers are among the highest paid teaching staff in the state, with base salaries that range from \$42,552 to \$95,923. And teachers don't put a dime towards their health care premiums --taxpayers pay 100 percent.⁶

This is an insult to those who fund these premiums, the taxpayers; not because they find their teachers unworthy, but because those from the private sector live with the reality that they must contribute to their benefits. Public sector employees should reflect the realities of their communities not live outside them and certainly not demand to live above them.

The Neshaminy Federation of Teachers has already threatened striking to ensure the new contract continues to provide lavish compensation, despite the fact that the school district has a \$5 million deficit this year.⁷

Teacher strikes, without consequences, provide union officials an edge at the bargaining table to leverage—using children as pawns—compensation packages that school districts can no longer afford. Under the current system, working families are punished first during the strike as they must find childcare, with little or no notice, for an unknown time, and will be further be

⁴ Information provided from OpenPA.gov, http://www.openpagov.org/education_revenue_and_expenses.asp.

⁵ Delco Daily Times, *Time for state to make teacher strikes illegal*, November 18, 2010.

⁶ Get Real Neshaminy!, http://www.getrealneshaminy.com/neshaminy_budget.htm.

⁷ Get Real Neshaminy!, http://www.getrealneshaminy.com/neshaminy_budget.htm.

inconvenienced by make-up exams and a late school year. And if the school board approves a more generous contract, parents likely will be hit again with higher property taxes.

Only 12 states allow their public school teachers to strike. They are Alaska, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Illinois, Louisiana, Minnesota, Montana, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Vermont.⁸ In March, Wisconsin became the most recent state to prohibit teacher strikes, and fine school employees who do go on strike. Allowing government employees to strike makes little sense. While parents would face legal ramifications if they prevented their child from attending classes for weeks, teachers can interrupt classes in order to negotiate taxpayer-funded compensation packages.

While everyone in attendance and testifying today would certainly speak to the importance of education as a public good, this importance is undercut by allowing interruption of children's education over disagreements about money for adults.

In fact, school employees do not even lose pay for striking in Pennsylvania, which is one reason why Pennsylvania leads the nation in the number of strikes. Outlawing teacher strikes—fining school employees for each day they strike—could be a first step to improving the public education system in the commonwealth.

While Act 88 reduced the number of strike days by mandating 180 days of instruction to be completed by June 30, striking teachers have very little to lose. Even a limited ability to extend the school year means they can still make close to 100 percent of their pay. That's not a luxury striking workers in other industries enjoy.⁹ Loss of pay is a deterrent from striking in other occupations in the public and private sector. Auto workers, grocery clerks and construction workers take a financial hit and are less likely to strike. Many unions have established strike funds which pay worker who choose to walk the picket line anywhere from \$8 to \$25 a day. But with the price of gas and food today, it does not go far to supporting a family.

⁸ Allegheny Institute for Public Policy, alleghenyinstitute.org/education/teacherstrikes.html.

⁹ Stop Teacher Strikes in Pennsylvania, http://www.stopteacherstrikes.org/index.php?pr=Strike_Potential.

By contrast, states that prohibit teacher strikes exact stiff penalties for breaching the ban. Employees in Florida risk getting fired and unions receive fines for damages up to \$20,000 per strike day. In addition, the union has to wait a year to be certified again. The penalties are so severe that only one strike occurred between 1975 and 1987. In Iowa, an employee violating the ban on strikes is charged with a simple misdemeanor, which carries a fine of \$50 to \$500, or a maximum of 30 days in prison. In Maryland, a strike means unions lose representation for two years and dues deductions from employees' paychecks for a year.¹⁰ Wisconsin's Act 10 enacted this year not only forbids teacher strikes but teacher unions are only permitted to negotiate for salaries, not benefits or paid sick days.¹¹

This year, contracts in 130 school districts expire, and so far only nine school districts have settled on contract agreements.¹² Another 42 districts are at risk of immediate strike because they are operating under expired teacher contracts. These represent hundreds of thousands of school children who are threatened with missing school for weeks on end from strikes.

We should not allow striking teachers to turn our children's education into a mere bargaining chip. It's time for Pennsylvania to put our children above the system and ensure that kids, and not salaries and benefits, are the focus of education in Pennsylvania.

¹⁰ Allegheny Institute for Public Policy, <http://www.stopteacherstrikes.org/AlleghenyInstitute.pdf>.

¹¹ Allegheny Institute for Public Policy, <http://alleghenyinstitute.org/component/content/article/9/746.html>.

¹² Pennsylvania School Boards Association. "Weekly Negotiations and Strike Status Information." August 18, 2011.