

Commentary

## No, Teacher Strikes Do Not Help Students

In walking out, teachers are using students as leverage

By William J. Bennett & Karen Nussle

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There is a fundamental problem in education that has been on vivid display recently: confusion about whom our schools exist to serve. Our public school system exists to give our children a foundation in literacy and numeracy and to help them become informed citizens. It is not the purpose of the public schools to use children as leverage for the gains of others.

Only that base misconception could drive mass school closures and disruptions right

in the midst of a critical time in the school year. Only that misconception could lead adults to go on strike, thrusting chaos and untenable choices on the most vulnerable families least able to cope with abrupt changes in the routines of their children.

We strongly believe in the importance and honor of great teaching and teachers. We believe policymakers should set budgets so that the best teachers are attracted and retained. Those decisions must be made at each state and district level.

We strongly disagree that adults in our public schools should use systematic disruption of students and families—that is, strikes or walkouts—as a tactic to secure financial outcomes. There are several basic reasons for this:

First, abrupt school closure interrupts and damages the progress of students. We either believe that school and teaching time matters, or we do not. Teaching time does matter, and we should be very reluctant to interrupt it. Strikes (and walkouts) do exactly that. When coal miners strike they lay down their equipment. When teachers strike, they lay down their students' minds.



Nikee Onken, center, a teacher from Douglas County, Colo., leads supporters during a teacher rally on April 26 in Denver. —David Zalubowski/AP

Second, teachers want us to treat them as professionals. To be treated as such, they must act as such. Certainly, individuals and groups have every right to seek changes to their compensation or pensions. But to do so in a manner that damages both students and the critical role public schools play is the antithesis of professionalism. No other professionals have a summer in which they can pursue their financial goals or other endeavors.

Let's be honest and recognize that the past weeks have not been about serving students, but rather pursuing financial ends, thus hurting the cause of professionalism. There is a time, place, and manner for these fiscal discussions. Strikes during the school year are not it.

Finally, many publicly stated "demands" associated with these strikes and walkouts do not withstand review. In Kentucky, teachers are angry at their state's current governor when their anger should be directed at the pension-fund board that set policies rife with selfish abuse and headed to collapse over the course of decades. The current leaders are left to stabilize the situation. In Colorado, state legislators do not set teacher salaries—that is the role of the local school boards. But the walkout organizers in Colorado clearly think they can maneuver a sweeter deal through disruption, regardless of the consequences for the state's children and families.

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In any system of limited resources, competing demands, and employees desiring more money, friction is inevitable. People speaking out for their financial interests and what they perceive to be the interests of their group is appropriate. But, attempting to create leverage through educational and family disruption by going on strike is not honorable.

It's ironic that these same education leaders fear family choice as the major threat to public education. Perhaps they should examine how their own actions are eroding public trust in an institution so vital to our nation and our future. In doing so, they are driving people to be against public schools.

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