

## Hours after West Virginia teachers strike, lawmakers drop measures expanding charter schools and private school vouchers

Teachers pledged to remain out on Wednesday to ensure the bill's demise.

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Educators in West Virginia, whose walkout a year ago inspired teacher revolts from coast to coast, succeeded in killing legislation Tuesday that would have brought charter schools and private school vouchers to their state, successfully pressuring lawmakers just half a day into a strike.

At the state capitol in Charleston, hundreds of protesters wearing red shirts cheered after the House of Delegates voted to table the bill. Teachers pledged to remain out for another day to ensure the state Senate, which wrote the charter school and private school voucher provisions, does not resurrect the bill.

"It's . . . clear we cannot trust the leadership in the Senate," said Fred Albert, president of West Virginia's branch of the American Federation of Teachers. "That's why we are staying out one more day to make sure this is a dead bill."

The dramatic turn of events demonstrated the enduring power of educators in West Virginia, even though the state's right-to-work laws have sapped power and authority from labor unions. The education bill teachers sought to kill would have given them a raise, but they still voted last week to authorize a strike.

"It's an historic day in West Virginia. However, we are member-driven and we will listen to our members, and our members will tell us which action we take from here," West Virginia Education Association President Dale Lee [told the Charleston Gazette-Mail](#).

A year ago, West Virginia teachers walked out to protest their low salaries, which ranked near the bottom of teacher pay nationwide. After nine days off the job, [they won a 5 percent raise](#). Their success sparked teacher protests in other states, including Oklahoma and Arizona, where teachers pressed conservative lawmakers into raising taxes and teacher salaries.

[\[West Virginia teachers, whose protests sparked a nationwide movement, prepare to walk out again\]](#)

This year, teachers in Los Angeles, the nation's second-largest school system, went on strike to press administrators to hire school nurses, counselors, librarians and teachers to alleviate overcrowding that had pushed class sizes above 40 students in some schools. But the striking educators also protested charter schools, which had drawn students, resources and classroom space from traditional public schools.

[\[As long as it takes': Los Angeles teachers go on strike in nation's second-largest system\]](#)

The Los Angeles walkout marked yet another fight between teacher unions and charter schools, whose backers include Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, the conservative Koch brothers and wealthy philanthropists. Charter school teachers typically do not belong to unions.

This year's battle in West Virginia also involved charter schools. A legislative package that included a 5 percent pay raise for teachers was amended by the state Senate to include provisions to create charter schools and education savings accounts, a type of school voucher.

The education savings account program would have put taxpayer dollars on debit cards for eligible families to use for private school tuition and other education services. The accounts would be for students with special needs and students seeking to leave their public schools because of bullying. The money for the accounts would have been drawn directly from the education budget.

State Senate President Mitch Carmichael said the proposals would give families unhappy with local public schools a way out.

"Comprehensive education reform that will improve student performance, provide parental choice and empower teachers is coming — because parents, taxpayers, and job providers want our broken public education system fixed now," [Carmichael tweeted Monday](#).

He said he was deeply disappointed over the decision to table the bill and panned teachers for their decision to strike.

"Thousands of families across the state had their fundamental right to educational freedom usurped by the will of those who cling so desperately to the status quo and the empty promises by those who pressure them to defend it," [Carmichael tweeted after Tuesday's vote](#).

Carmichael is deeply unpopular among teachers, and some suspected he wrote the bill to punish teachers for walking out last year. His office did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Echoing the criticism heard in Los Angeles, West Virginia union leaders accused state lawmakers of siding with corporate, out-of-state interests who want to privatize public schools by backing charter schools and a voucher program. They pointed to state lawmakers who allowed charter backers to speak at length during a legislative hearing but gave far less time to teachers who were testifying.

"We're left no other choice," said Albert in announcing the strike Monday night. "Our voice has been shut out."

Chris Atkins, a physical education teacher in Jefferson County, W.Va., said he was pleased the bill was defeated. But he remained concerned about teacher health-care benefits, one of the animating issues of last year's strike. Teachers' health-care expenses have risen significantly, and last year state lawmakers pledged they would find a way to control health-care costs. The escalating costs mean Atkins, who has multiple sclerosis, cannot afford some medications that could help alleviate his condition.

"I don't know if we're completely done because we still don't have a fix for the insurance," Atkins said Tuesday afternoon.

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