

West Virginia's Teachers Are Not Satisfied

Despite the governor's offer to raise their salaries, the state's educators remain on strike, saying that the real problems remain unaddressed.

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MARTINSBURG, W. Va.—Although West Virginia governor Jim Justice on Tuesday at last signaled an end to the standoff that has kept all the state's public-school employees and students out of classrooms for a week, teachers remain on strike and schools are still closed. After a town-hall circuit throughout the state, the Republican governor at a press conference on Tuesday evening said he'd agreed to raise teachers' salaries by 5 percent—and throughout Wednesday it appeared as though the strike had ended and that classes would resume Thursday. But teachers and their supporters insist the pay raise doesn't suffice.

That increase, which would satisfy one of the teachers' unions' demands, would mark a sizable improvement from the 2 percent raise they were originally going to receive this year and from salary stagnation they'd previously experienced since 2014.

But the teacher dissatisfaction continues. First, there is a process hurdle to clear: West Virginia's legislature still has to approve the proposed increases, which also include a 3 percent raise for other school personnel. And beyond the legislative uncertainty, the bottom line is that teachers across the Mountain State's 55 counties say the raise does little to assuage the bigger concerns that propelled them to the picket lines in the first place.

Teachers in West Virginia stressed to me on Tuesday that the salary issue pales in comparison to the key problem that prompted the walk-out: the rising costs associated with the state's health-insurance system, the Public Employees Insurance Agency, typically referred to by its acronym PEIA. "[People] see us out here and think it's money—they think it's only about the pay raise. It is so not about the pay raise," Annette Jordan, a teacher at Hedgesville High in Berkeley County, told me as she picketed in front of the school's campus along Route 9. Holding a sign that read, "I'd take a bullet for YOUR child but PEIA WON'T cover it," she explained that because of structural changes to the health-insurance system, her family's monthly premiums would more than double starting July 1. An agreement hasn't yet been reached on PEIA; Justice said on Tuesday that he's going to appoint a task force to "try to look for solutions and a permanent fix" for the health-insurance system.

Jordan and others also pointed to what they described as a wholesale attack on the teaching profession—through legislation proposing to lower qualifications and to eliminate seniority protections—in explaining the reasons for the statewide walk-out. In part because of how little West Virginia pays its teachers—[\\$45,622 on average](#) in 2016, making it 48th in the country for educator salaries—districts have had to lower the hiring bar to fill vacancies. A sizable percentage of the instructors who've been hired for full-time teaching positions [lack conventional certification and training](#): Close to four in 10 instructors teaching math courses for students in

grades 7 through 11, for example, are not fully certified. Meanwhile, teachers haven't had a statewide salary raise [since 2014](#).

West Virginia has in recent years grappled with [a budget deficit](#) and a weak economy that Justice and policymakers have said hamper their ability to increase teachers' pay and to fully fund PEIA. But critics [argue](#) that politicians' resistance to taxing coal, natural gas, and manufacturing corporations is to blame for the lack of funds.

Educators say these realities help explain why West Virginia ranks so poorly compared to other states when it comes to its educational performance. The state [received a C-](#) in *Education Week's* 2017 report card on school quality, and it got one of the worst grades in the nation in the analysis's "[chance for success](#)" category, which uses various metrics to "look at the role of education in promoting an individual's chance for success over the course of a lifetime."

As soon as Justice announced the 5 percent raise, teachers and their supporters were quick to worry that the upshot of the latest development could be business as usual. "We're highly skeptical that this [pay-raise announcement] was meaningful," Audra Slocum, a West Virginia University assistant professor of English education who collaborates with a lot of K-12 teachers, said in an email on Wednesday. "Rather, it was a clear attempt to disrupt the momentum of the teachers."

Others suggested that the move was evidence of how disingenuous Justice had been earlier in the week, when he indicated in his town-hall appearances that the state would struggle to fund even a 2 percent increase. "Teachers are frustrated that on Monday governor Justice said, in so many words, 'too bad.' But by Wednesday afternoon, he'd found enough funding" to meet the salary demands, said Karla Hilliard, an English teacher at Spring Mills High School in Berkeley County. Governor Justice's office did not respond to a request for comment Wednesday.

Overall, teachers say they're concerned that, absent a genuine, comprehensive shift in how West Virginia treats them and other K-12 employees, school quality will continue to suffer—and with it the health of the state as a whole. West Virginia's [shrinking GDP](#), among other factors, has contributed to severe brain drain, and educators told me schools could be key to abating that trend and reviving the state's economy. "You are not going to be able to attract the jobs, the companies, the multinational corporations that West Virginia needs to be competitive without a strong educational system in place. ... Companies are not going to want to come in and have their companies educate their children in a terrible [education system]," said Craig Arch, a special-education teacher at Spring Mills High who identified himself as politically conservative.

Improving the quality of the education system is all but impossible without skilled teachers who feel they're valued—and who are paid like it, they argue. And as much as they love West Virginia—a deeply felt fidelity to the state was evident throughout my conversations with teachers, almost all of whom were born and raised in the state—the temptation of better pay and benefits elsewhere is often hard to withstand. Some estimates suggest there are more than 720 teacher vacancies statewide.

"We don't have to move to make more money—we can cross the bridge right over here and be in Maryland, and drive right down the road and be in Virginia. We've got other options without a long commute, that's for sure," said Rebecca Lindsey, a kindergarten teacher at Widmyer Elementary School in Morgan County, in the state's Eastern Panhandle. That's a last resort for the area's teachers, she said, but it could be the only option if West Virginia's politicians continue to show they don't "care for our people."

Politicians “are fussing about test scores,” Lindsey continued. “Well, you need to put qualified educators in the classroom if you want your test scores to go up.”

Jessica Salfia, an English teacher at Spring Mills High School in Berkeley County, emphasized that educators had been striking on behalf of all state workers who are affected by the PEIA’s rising costs. “The fight is not over,” she told me on Wednesday, noting that it would continue in earnest with the upcoming elections in November. “Every 2018 candidate needs to make fixing PEIA a major focal point of his or her campaign.”

Indeed, as frustrated as teachers remain, they’re optimistic about their ability to achieve change in the long term—and that’s largely because of the solidarity they have built, as well as the outpouring of community support. As I drove from picket line to picket line on Tuesday, almost every passing truck honked its horn in support of the demonstrating teachers. “Overall, I think teachers have learned a lesson themselves—that being united and 55 Strong is powerful and has forced change,” Spring Mills High’s Hilliard said. “Although there’s still unrest, we’ve taken a step in the right direction.”

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