



# Teachers Are Scared to Go Back to School. Will They Strike?



Local teacher Lisa Vaaler joins other teachers as they hold a #Return2SchoolSafely Motor March protest Wednesday, July 15, 2020, in Phoenix. Several Arizona teachers voiced fears about returning to school in a state that continues to be ravaged by the coronavirus. —AP Photo/Ross D. Franklin

By Madeline Will  
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As the start of the school year approaches—and the pandemic rages on—many teachers are reaching a breaking point. They're scared to go back inside school buildings. They're frustrated with state guidance, which they feel **leaves more questions than answers**. And they feel like their voices are not being heard in the push to reopen schools.

As decisions are being made around them, some teachers are starting to speak up to protect their health or even lives. And given that the teacher workforce has shown in recent years that it can organize on a large scale—and **get results**—the big question now is whether reopening plans could spark widespread activism.

Already, teachers in Texas and Arizona have protested a return to in-person classes. The Florida Education Association filed a lawsuit against the state to try to block the "unsafe reopening of schools." Meanwhile, tweets calling for a national teachers' strike have garnered tens of thousands of retweets, as teachers weigh their options.

"Teachers like myself feel like we're being thrown into the fire, and I don't think there's an amount of [personal protective equipment] that can be given to ease that angst," said Patrick Harris, a middle school teacher in Detroit who would support a national day of demonstration. "Every teacher wants to be able to go back to school, ... but we want to go back to school without feeling like we're putting our lives at risk."

There's a brewing sense among educators that a collective job action could be necessary "to show the nation we are on the same page," he said.

Over the past couple years, teachers have organized strikes and walkouts in more than a half-dozen states and at least five big cities to fight for higher wages and more school funding. Even so, any labor action on a national scale would be "wholly unprecedented," said Jon Shelton, an associate professor in the department of democracy and justice studies at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, who studies teacher strikes.

In most of the country, teacher strikes are illegal. And even in the 15 states where strikes are legal or not covered by statute or case law, teachers still have to follow a process before they go to the picket lines. Strikes are typically the last resort in a contract negotiation process between the local teachers' union and the district, after negotiations and mediation fail.

"There's virtually no state where there's just an unqualified right to strike," Shelton said.

See Also: [Teacher Strikes: 4 Common Questions](#)

Some of the statewide strikes, walkouts, and mass demonstrations in the last couple years were sanctioned by the teachers' unions, but others were grassroots actions, driven by social media. In some of those states—including West Virginia, where the movement began with a nine-day strike in 2018—striking is illegal.

In 2018, "what it boiled down to was a community of teachers saying, 'If we're going to have a seat at the table, if anybody's going to hear our voices and our concerns, this is the way we can be heard,'" said Karla Hilliard, a West Virginia teacher. "I feel like there is similar momentum nationwide right now."

If a critical mass of teachers refuses to work, the laws against striking won't matter, Shelton said—it will be impossible to punish that many teachers. But if a national or state movement is spotty, with only a handful of teachers from certain districts protesting, then participating teachers could be in legal trouble.

Coordinating any kind of national collective action "would be very complicated, given the patchwork of laws and school systems we have," Shelton said.

Still, he added, "we are dealing with unprecedented times."

## List of Demands

In their own jurisdictions, teachers' unions are already wielding their influence to push back against schools reopening. In Los Angeles, the district announced it would not reopen buildings this fall after the United Teachers Los Angeles said that 83 percent of its members had voted against returning to in-person instruction.

The Chicago Teachers Union has called for remote learning to continue this fall, with its attorney telling reporters that the district could not force teachers to return to work. The district has not finalized its plans for the fall semester but has said a hybrid-learning model of both in-person and virtual instruction would be the most likely scenario.

The union has presented the district **with a list of demands for a return to the classroom**, including widely available PPE, school nurses in every building, class sizes of no more than 12 students, a moratorium on teacher evaluations, extra supports for students with disabilities, and options for high-risk staff to work remotely. The CTU is also pushing for social-justice measures, such as housing security, paid sick leave for parents, and financial support for undocumented students and families. The district can pay for these demands by redistributing the money that currently goes to school police, the CTU has said.

"We are going to unite with parents and other unions to present the strongest legal, labor, and political front to protect our schools and each other," CTU President Jesse Sharkey **wrote in a letter to members**.

In Texas, where Gov. Greg Abbott has pushed for in-person instruction, **teachers held a sit-in protest** last week at the state Capitol to urge the governor to reconsider. Zeph Capo, the president of Texas AFT, **told the news site Reform Austin that teachers are desperate enough to consider anything**, including a strike—despite the fact that striking is illegal in Texas, and teachers could lose their retirement funds and their licenses.

"There's a point that you get to where you risk it all because conditions get too bad," he said. "If you're not around to enjoy your retirement, what good does it do?"

While several small studies have found that children are less likely to get and spread the coronavirus, a **large new study from South Korea** found that children between the ages of 10 and 19 can spread the virus just as much as adults. Children younger than 10 transmit the virus to others less often, but there is still some risk.

In Arizona, which has emerged as a hot spot for COVID-19 cases, teachers are asking Gov. Doug Ducey to push the start of in-person classes to at least October. Ducey, who recently said Arizona will be **"opening for learning"** this fall, has already delayed the start of in-person instruction from early August to at least Aug. 17.

Last week, **hundreds of teachers drove around their towns** in cars painted with slogans like, "Remote learning won't kill us but COVID can!" and "Don't make me choose between my students and my health." Many of the teachers were wearing their Red for Ed shirts that were a hallmark of the state's six-day strike in 2018.

And on Monday, the Florida teachers' union, with the support of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, **filed a lawsuit** against Gov. Ron DeSantis and other state leaders, arguing that there is no safe way to reopen schools during a resurgence of the coronavirus. The Sunshine State has emerged as the global epicenter of the pandemic, but in-person instruction is mandated for the fall.

When asked about teacher activism on a press call with reporters, AFT President Randi Weingarten said, "Given the circumstances in the last few weeks, and what we've seen in places like Arizona and Florida and other places, we can't rule anything out anymore."

## Garnering Support

One big question for teachers weighing a protest is whether they will have the support of parents and the community. Many parents, overwhelmed with balancing their jobs and supervising remote learning, are eager for their children to return to school. And **pediatricians' groups have said it's dangerous** to keep students home for too long, given schools' role in providing meals, social-emotional support, and socialization.

"You are heard when you go on strike, and it is a very effective method of communicating with leaders and decisionmakers, but it's a really sensitive time—I worry about our community and our parent support," Hilliard said.

The West Virginia strikes in 2018 and 2019 were successful, she said, in part because the parents and community stood behind teachers.

"Now, it's different," she said. "People seem to be very divided on the issue of COVID-19, on the issue of masking. ... You have to think about your community and continuing that very important partnership with them."

Haily Korman, a senior associate partner at Bellwether Education, **who has called for a national teacher strike**, said teachers would be more effective in garnering support if they kept their message simple: They're putting their health and safety at risk by going back to school, and they need states and districts to take adequate precautions.

"I think part of what complicates the conversation around a teacher strike in this moment is there are teachers' unions who want to use this moment as leverage to request many more things beyond just the physical safety of school staff in facing this virus," she said. "That feels opportunistic for folks. It undermines your credibility."

Shelton, however, noted that parents generally have positive relationships with teachers, and that those might have improved after parents got a firsthand look at the work teachers do while kids were home this spring. Parents took to social media to praise teachers and say they deserved more money.

And in many places with recent strikes, including Arizona and Chicago, teachers can say that they've fought for students before, Shelton said. Many of those protests **centered on students' needs** rather than solely bread-and-butter issues, like wages and health care.

That gives teachers a little more goodwill with parents, Shelton said: "Parents are advocating for them because they've been advocating for their kids for a long time."

Staff Writer *Evie Blad* contributed to this article.

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Linda Weide · 2 days ago In the Johns Hopkins chart comparing deaths per 100,000 people, the US is number 3, and South Africa is number 12. South Africa had phase one of their return to school plan in June. What happened is that they had to close 968 schools that were 2,400 teachers and 1,260 learners tested positive for COVID-19. That is what happened when 2 grades returned to school, grades 12 and 7. They have had very low attendance since parents are offered the option of schooling on line, if not perhaps it would be higher. They certainly did not send all of the children back full time at once. The teacher's union leader met with the Department of Basic Education there and discussed that their schools had reopened under the assumption that students would not have great risk, but some were very ill, and 3 have lost their lives. MoreTherefore South Africa is a better place to look at than countries like Germany, Denmark and South Korea who are not even on the chart I looked at. These are not small numbers. With 2 grades returning they had a high number of transmissions enough to shut down schools. I think we should be gathering more data before we tell teachers and parents that things are fine. In any case, by these sorts of numbers we see the virus that will not go away, it will have new vectors to spread just like it does in bars where social distancing is affected by alcohol, and in schools social distancing will be affected by children forgetting and not being able to follow the rules. Schools are supposedly opening up so parents can have child care to go out to work, which means that the virus is going to spread more and children may not get very sick, but they will be vectors for spreading it. Who are the likely receptors? Their teachers and their parents. Well, parents get to choose whether they want to take the risk. Teachers should too. Otherwise reopening schools in the USA which is breaking records for the number of new cases will just turn into a "kill the teachers" mandates. Teachers are protesting because they say, "Teachers Lives Matter!"

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