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Teachers Strike; Pennsylvania Strikes Out

It should come as no surprise to western Pennsylvanians. The new school year has just started and the region already has its first teachers' strike. The Hempfield Area School District Board (Westmoreland County) rejected a contract proposal from the teachers' union, who then proceeded to vote unanimously to authorize a strike. On September 21 they walked off the job. Anyone familiar with the fact that Pennsylvania consistently leads the nation in teacher strikes by a wide margin will not be shocked to learn of the Hempfield walkout.

Only twelve states allow teachers to strike: Alaska, California, Colorado, Montana and Oregon in the West; Pennsylvania and Vermont in the East; Illinois, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin in the Midwest; and Louisiana in the South. Wisconsin has a unique restriction on its' teachers' ability to strike: Both the school board and the teachers' union have to agree to a strike, before one can take place. According to the Wisconsin association of school boards, the last strike in that state occurred in 1997.

In the 2005 school year Pennsylvania led the country with thirteen strikes. The remaining states combined had only eight—four in Illinois, three in Vermont, and one in Oregon. During the 2004 school year Pennsylvania also led the way with twelve strikes while the rest of the states together had eight. These numbers suggest that something is terribly amiss in Pennsylvania compared to the rest of the nation.

Consider that of the twelve states where teachers are allowed to strike, nine have some sort of required voter referendum control over school tax increases. Only Montana and Louisiana have no required referendum system in place. Pennsylvania has recently enacted a referendum requirement but the law has not been tested and it is unclear if a referendum will ever actually be used to approve a tax increase. Meanwhile, both Montana and Louisiana are Right to Work states and have not been plagued by strikes.

Pennsylvania is unique in allowing teachers strikes with no penalty for strikers, with limited and untested voter referendum control over school spending or taxes and no Right to Work law. This is a formula that should be expected to promote large numbers of strikes. And in practice it has. There is no reason to be surprised that Pennsylvania is the perennial leader in teacher strikes.

Moreover, of Pennsylvania's border state neighbors, only Ohio allows teachers to strike. However, Ohio gives citizens a referendum vote on tax increases-- which limits the payoff for teachers who strike. At the same time, New York not only does not permit teacher strikes, teachers face stiff financial penalties if they walk out. Interestingly, Pennsylvania and Vermont are the only two states in the entire Northeastern part of the country that allow teacher strikes.

Besides being a way to boost compensation above what the free market would determine pay to be for teachers of various qualifications and abilities, strikes and threats of strikes also carry the power to demand very favorable terms for working conditions and evaluation methods and most important, the criteria and procedures for terminating a teacher. All of which taken together reduce managerial control and negatively impact academic performance relative to what it should be for the level of expenditures.

Teachers argue that higher pay leads to better academic achievement. If that is the case then why does Pennsylvania, with the nation's ninth highest average teacher salary, continually rank among the worst in average SAT scores? This is true even when comparing Pennsylvania to states with similar or higher percentages of students taking the exam. No doubt this is a direct result of Pennsylvania's system in which poor performers are protected and great performers get the same pay as weak performers. Mediocrity is guaranteed.

Fortunately, there are many taxpayers who are tired being gouged to foot the bill for spiraling education costs—whether they have children in the system or not, and most do not. According to news reports, had the Hempfield school board accepted the teachers' proposed five-year contract, they would have had to raise taxes by 3 mils every year to pay for the salary increases. No doubt a large faction of the community wants the school board to hold firm in contract talks to fight the tax increases.

Meantime, some legislators seem to have had enough and are offering serious legislation to eliminate teacher strikes. However, even if the legislation is approved and is signed by the Governor, it is only the first in a series of steps that should be implemented to stem the rising costs and improve the academic performance of Pennsylvania's education system. The most important among these is to allow parents to send their students to the school of their choice. Competition has always been recognized as the best way to control costs and improve results. Why should education be an exception? If school districts were forced to compete for students who have options, the education benefits could be enormous.

Pennsylvania has far to go educationally. Eliminating teacher strikes is a great first step on that road. Addressing the imbalance of power in the collective bargaining process could open the door to other major reforms.

Frank Gamrat, Ph.D., Sr. Research Assoc.

Jake Haulk, Ph.D. President

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Allegheny Institute for Public Policy
305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.* Suite 208* Pittsburgh PA 15234
Phone (412) 440-0079 * Fax (412) 440-0085
E-mail: aipp@allegenyinstitute.org