

# In the Strike Zone: New Data to Contextualize the Recent Surge in Teacher Strikes

An Essay for the Learning Curve by Melissa Arnold Lyon  
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In 2018 and 2019, under #RedforEd teacher strikes, teachers in hundreds of school districts in Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and West Virginia walked off the job, demanding higher wages and increased education funding. And from conflicts over school reopenings in 2020 to recent strikes in Minneapolis and Sacramento, this energy for activism has persisted into 2022.<sup>1</sup> These strikes caught many Americans by surprise, garnering new national attention and increasing support for public education, but this kind of labor action never occurs in a vacuum.<sup>2</sup>

During the 11 years between fall 2007 and spring 2019, I find evidence of almost 700 teacher strikes, leading to 63 million student days idle. To construct this new strike database, I worked with researchers from Brown University and George Mason University to systematically search news reports, union websites, and government reports.<sup>3</sup> We defined a teacher strike as a teacher-driven work

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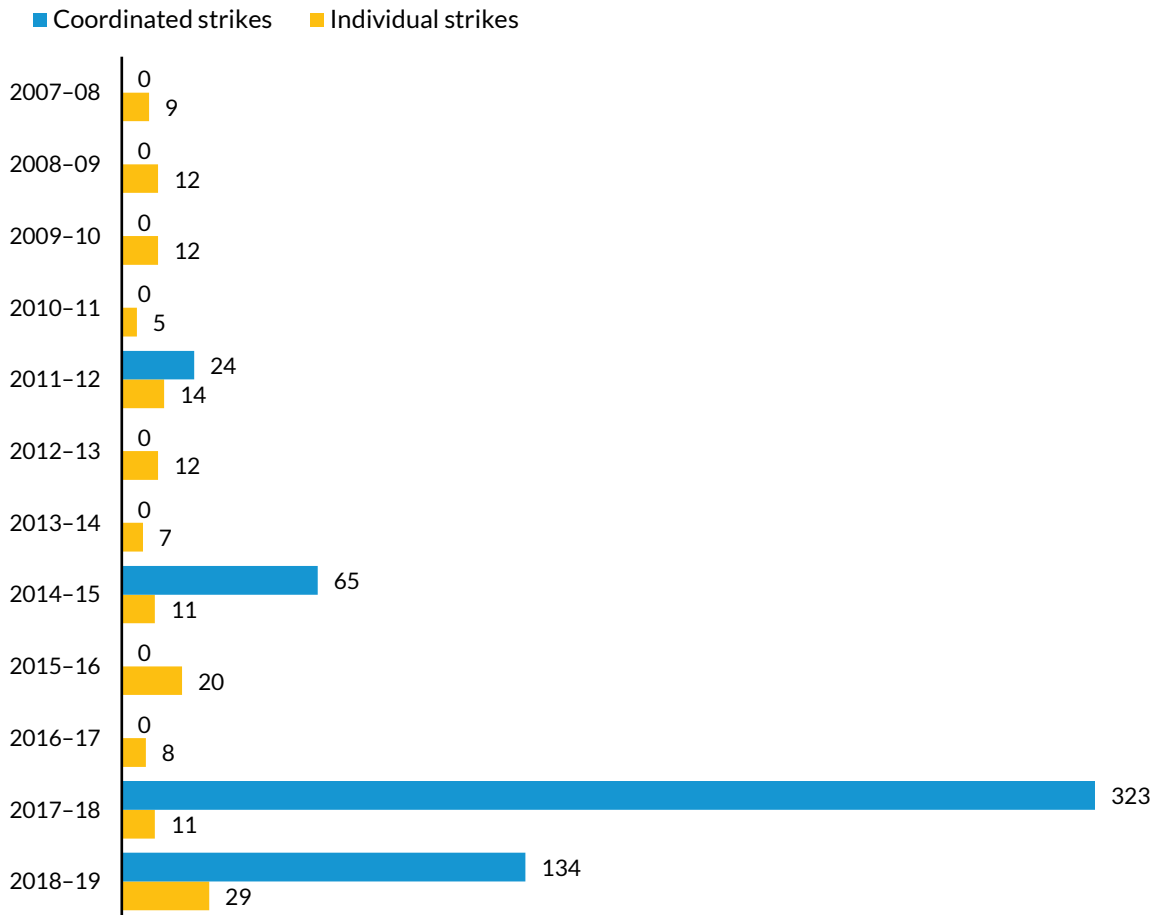
<sup>1</sup> Dana Goldstein and Noam Scheiber, “As More Teachers’ Unions Push for Remote Schooling, Parents Worry. So Do Democrats,” *New York Times*, January 8, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/08/us/teachers-unions-covid-schools.html>; Elizabeth Shockman and Andrew Krueger, “Deal Reached to End Minneapolis Teachers Strike; Classes Expected to Restart Tuesday,” MPR News, March 25, 2022, <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2022/03/25/tentative-agreement-reached-to-end-minneapolis-educators-strike>; and Melissa Gomez, “Sacramento Teachers’ Strike Ends, and Schools Reopen with Tentative Deal to Increase Salaries,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-04-04/sacramento-schools-to-reopen-end-of-strike>.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, “Teacher Strikes Have Changed the Political Landscape across the US,” *Guardian*, November 12, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/commentisfree/2019/nov/12/teacher-strikes-chicago-kentucky-political-impacts>.

<sup>3</sup> We conducted a series of systematic Boolean searches on Google and ProQuest for each month between July 2007 and July 2019. We cross-referenced and expanded the dataset with administrative data from a dataset created by journalists at *Mother Jones*, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers websites, and state affiliate websites. We found evidence of 696 teacher strikes, which we measured at the district level. We then calculated days idle by multiplying the duration of the strike by the number of students in the district. This process approximates the “days idle” identification used by the Bureau of Labor Statistics but uses students instead of workers (see Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Major Work Stoppages in 2021,” news release, February 23, 2022, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/wkstp.nr0.htm>). By definition, this creates an upper bound of student days idle, given that all schools in the district may not close.

stoppage resulting in the closure of at least one school in a district, including both legal and illegal strikes,<sup>4</sup> walkouts, sick-outs, and other work stoppages.

**FIGURE 1**  
**The Number of Coordinated Strikes Increased after 2017**



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**Source:** Author’s compilation.

**Notes:** Teacher strikes are defined as teacher-driven work stoppages resulting in the closure of at least one school in a district, including both legal and illegal strikes, walkouts, sick-outs, and other work stoppages. Strikes are measured at the district level within years.

<sup>4</sup> Strikes are typically thought of as closely related to collective bargaining, occurring after collective bargaining negotiations have stalled. But this type of teacher strike is illegal in 35 states. Many states banning teacher strikes have therefore experienced teacher work stoppages referred to as “walkouts” or “sick-outs” as part of an implicit effort to avoid the penalties of illegal strikes. This nomenclature and strike illegality often do not matter in practical terms, particularly when punishments for illegal strikes are severe. For example, firing all striking teachers and revoking their certification is a punishment for striking in some states, but this is impractical when large portions of teachers engage in a strike.

Teacher strikes have increased in recent years, with 497 strikes taking place during the 2017–18 and 2018–19 school years alone (figure 1). Most of these were part of coordinated efforts across districts within a given state (e.g., the #RedforEd strikes of 2018). Though the coordinated strikes in 2018 and 2019 received national attention, they are not the first of their kind. Coordinated strikes across districts also occurred in 2012 (Wisconsin) and 2015 (Washington). Overall, 546 of the 696 teacher strikes were coordinated strikes, whereas the other 150 took place within individual districts.

**TABLE 1**  
**Half of Districts with Coordinated Strikes Are in the South**

	Nonstriking districts	Districts with individual strikes	Districts with coordinated strikes
<b>Share of districts, by region</b>			
Northeast	22%	47%	0%
Midwest	36%	29%	5%
South	22%	2%	50%
West	19%	22%	45%
<b>Share of districts, by urbanicity</b>			
City and urban	6%	19%	24%
Suburban	21%	51%	23%
Town	18%	12%	22%
Rural	54%	17%	31%
<b>District count</b>	<b>18,724</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>449</b>

Source: Common Core of Data.

Notes: Estimates are from district averages across all years of available data from 2007–08 through 2018–19. Data are presented at the district level, so districts with multiple strikes are counted only once. If districts had both coordinated and individual strikes, they are counted as coordinated.

To understand the context and characteristics of these strikes, I combined the new strike data with school district characteristics and finance information available in the Urban Institute’s Education Data Portal. Nearly half of individual district strikes took place in the Northeast, whereas *not one* of the coordinated strikes did (table 1). In contrast, coordinated strikes tended to take place in the South (Kentucky, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia), where teachers’ unions have historically been weaker. Coordinated strikes were also more evenly distributed across district types (e.g., rural or urban), with almost one in three districts experiencing coordinated strikes in rural areas. In contrast, individual strikes tended to take place in suburban areas.

TABLE 2

### Districts with Individual Strikes Have Fewer Guidance Counselors, and Districts with Coordinated Strikes Have Fewer Support Personnel

	Nonstriking districts	Districts with individual strikes	Districts with coordinated strikes
Number of students	2,748	17,734	10,438
<b>Staffing</b>			
Teachers per student	15	16	17
School administrators per student	309	350	336
Support personnel per student	111	104	120
Guidance counselors per student	531	634	614
<b>Student characteristics</b>			
Special education	15%	16%	14%
English language learner	5%	7%	6%
White	74%	67%	66%
Native American	3%	0%	5%
Hispanic	14%	16%	18%
Black	8%	12%	9%
Asian	2%	4%	2%
Student-age population in poverty	18%	16%	20%
<b>District count</b>	<b>18,724</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>449</b>

**Source:** Common Core of Data.

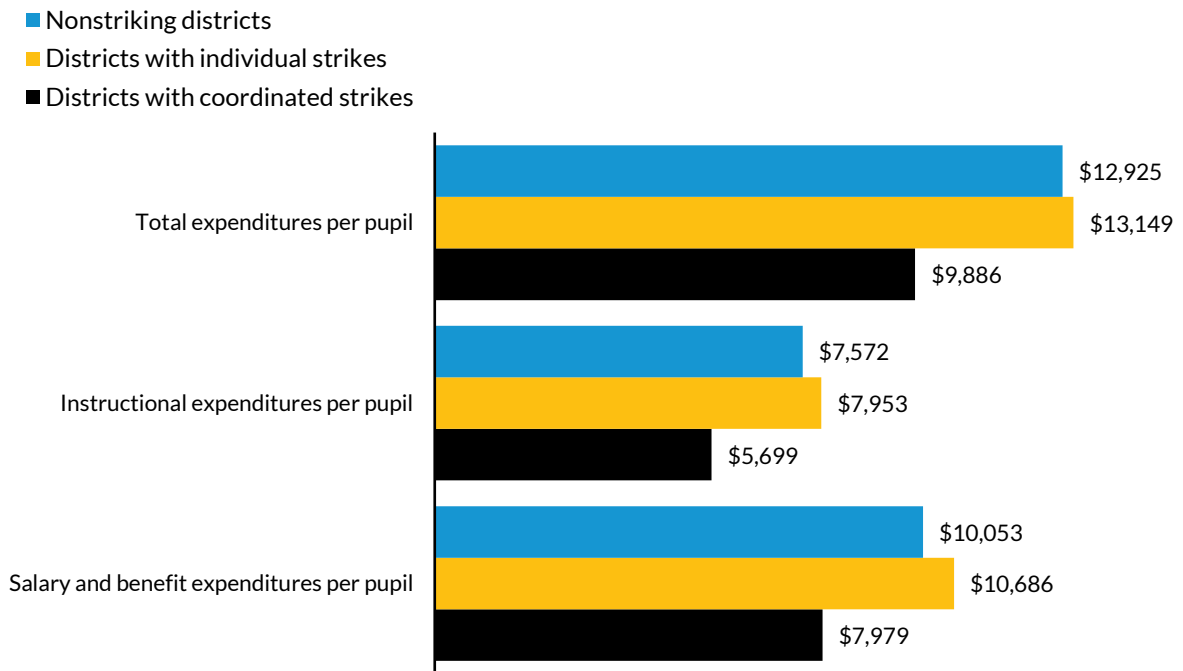
**Notes:** Estimates are from district averages across all years of available data from 2007–08 through 2018–19. Data are presented at the district level, so districts with multiple strikes are counted only once. If districts had both coordinated and individual strikes, they are counted as coordinated.

I also examined school resource differences across striking and nonstriking districts.<sup>5</sup> Districts with and without strikes had similar student bodies (table 2). But districts with individual strikes had notably fewer guidance counselors per student. Districts that participated in coordinated strikes had fewer school support personnel (e.g., cafeteria workers and bus drivers) per student. This trend persists with expenditures, which were similar in districts with individual strikes and nonstriking districts but substantially lower for districts with coordinated strikes (figure 2).

<sup>5</sup> Some may reasonably be concerned about the validity of comparing nonstriking districts with striking districts, which are concentrated in particular states and can encompass all the districts in a given state. But given the complexities between legal and illegal strikes, there is no other clearly defined comparison group that would be preferable.

FIGURE 2

Expenditures Are Consistently Lower in Districts with Coordinated Strikes



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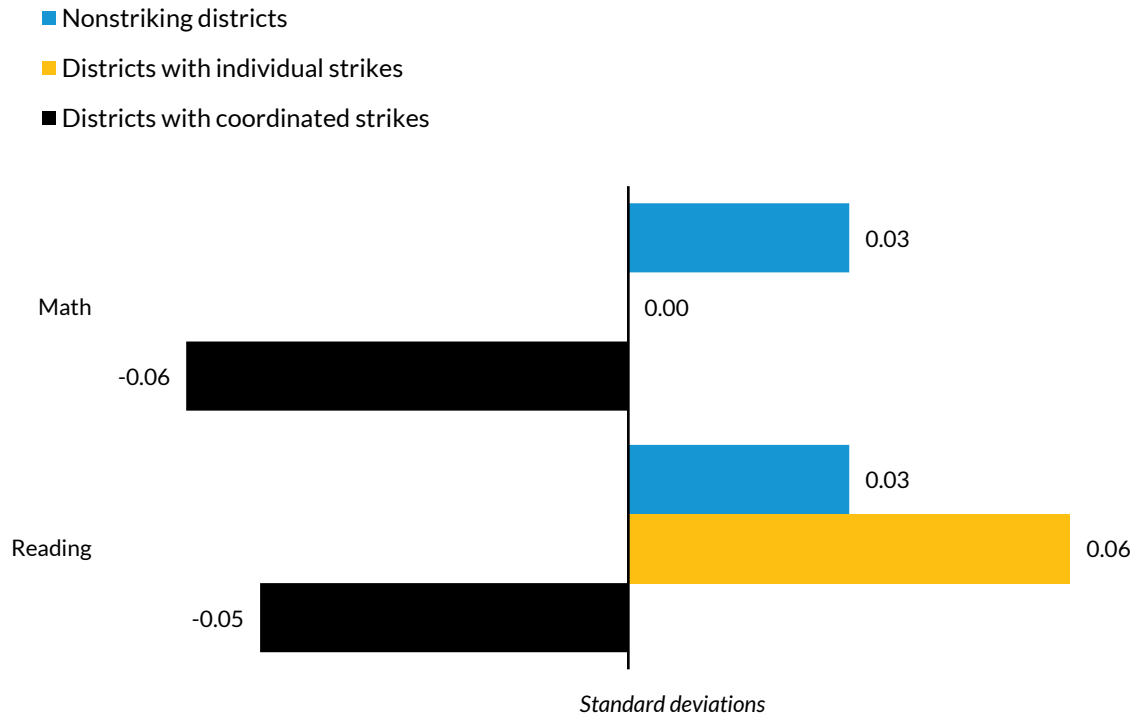
Source: Common Core of Data.

Notes: Estimates are district averages across all years of available data from 2007-08 through 2018-19, adjusted to real 2016 dollars.

Finally, I examined student achievement using district-level data from the Stanford Education Data Archive.<sup>6</sup> Strikes took place in districts that were, on average, lower achieving than other districts (figure 3). Achievement disparities were particularly large for the coordinated strikes, where average math and reading achievement were 0.09 and 0.08 standard deviations lower than in nonstriking districts.

<sup>6</sup> See the website for the Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University at <https://edopportunity.org/>.

**FIGURE 3**  
**Striking Districts Tend to Be Lower-Achieving Districts**



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**Source:** Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA).

**Notes:** Reading and math achievement are measured using SEDA’s geographically defined district grade-year achievement means for all students on the cohort scale. Estimates are district averages across all years of available data from 2008–09 through 2018–19.

This research provides the first account of the nearly 700 teacher strikes that occurred across the country between the 2007–08 and 2018–19 school years. Before the 2017–18 school year, strikes tended to take place within an individual district with demands directed toward school district leadership. These strikes were in districts that were slightly less resourced in terms of staffing but with student characteristics that roughly approximated national averages. But the 2017–18 and 2018–19 school years saw a notable increase in the prevalence of coordinated strikes, which occurred in areas where teachers’ unions have been weaker. Coordinated strikes also occurred in districts where staffing levels, expenditures, and student achievement were substantially lower than in nonstriking districts. Often with the support of district leadership, these coordinated strikes targeted *state-level* (rather than district-level) politics and policymaking.

Because of pandemic-related school closures and shifts to remote learning, we ceased data collection on teacher strikes after the start of the 2019–20 school year. During this time, the nature of teacher strikes shifted, such that definitions that made sense in prior years may no longer be relevant. The politics of teacher activism are changing, and though some transformations may be in response to

concerns about safety during the pandemic, we must not forget that these changes also occur against the backdrop of long-standing structural shifts in education governance, changes to teacher unionization in the *Janus v. AFCSME* decision and state-level labor restrictions, and state budget cuts to education.<sup>7</sup>

*This project is part of an ongoing collaborative study with Matthew A. Kraft and Matthew Steinberg regarding the effects of teacher strikes on student achievement, teacher labor market outcomes, and elections.*

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<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey R. Henig, *The End of Exceptionalism in American Education: The Changing Politics of School Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2013); Jeffrey R. Henig and Melissa Arnold Lyon, "Adaptation Could Bring New Strength," *After the Teacher Walkouts* (blog), *Education Next*, last updated October 30, 2018, [https://www.educationnext.org/adaptation-could-bring-new-strength-forum-after-teacher-walkouts/?fbclid=IwAR04z1aaQA6yvPJ2rILJ8NtOMDRa943OFqu8xHPkR\\_e7ZpWzJvgtyAjply4](https://www.educationnext.org/adaptation-could-bring-new-strength-forum-after-teacher-walkouts/?fbclid=IwAR04z1aaQA6yvPJ2rILJ8NtOMDRa943OFqu8xHPkR_e7ZpWzJvgtyAjply4); and Victoria Lee and Kristin Blagg, "'Equal' K-12 State Funding Cuts Could Disproportionately Harm Low-Income Students," *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, July 31, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/equal-k-12-state-funding-cuts-could-disproportionately-harm-low-income-students>.

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