

55 Strong: Lessons from the West Virginia Teachers Strike

Jennifer Berkshire: I'm Jennifer Berkshire

Jack Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider.

Jennifer: Welcome to Have You Heard. Jack: since we were last together in the Have You Heard podcast studio, there has been a lot going on in teacher land.

Jack: In all of teacher land or just on the country roads that you're going to take us home to today?

Jennifer: It may have begun on the country roads of West Virginia, but there are signs that that teacher discontent that lead teachers in West Virginia to walk out of school for nine days is now spreading to other states.

Jack: This is not surprising given what we've seen in terms of a kind of assault on the teaching profession over the past couple of decades and particularly coming to a head around issues of pay and autonomy and the esteem with which teachers were once held versus the now common refrain of "adult interests" that teachers are so often accused of looking out for. It's really brought to head some long standing tensions with regard to the teaching profession. Dan Lortie calls teaching a special but shadowed profession and we see that best in some polling where 70 percent of adults say, yeah, they'd like to see a child or theirs grow up to be a teacher and a similar percentage, about 70 percent, say being a teacher doesn't really require special training.

The fact that Americans view teachers that way leads to some real tensions around these issues of pay and professionalism. Right? But teachers are special, and we value them, at least, you know, we pay lip service to that. But it's a shadowed profession in so far as its prestige has declined markedly over the years. The pay has declined relative to other professions. And so what we're seeing in Virginia Virginia is, I would imagine, only the beginning.

Jennifer: Well, I set out to interview some West Virginia teachers about the strike and I may have gotten a little carried away. I wanted to hear directly from them what they saw as the key issues and what teachers in other states can learn from their experiences. And what I learned was that the strike was about lots of things: spiraling health care costs, a wellness program that teachers found way too invasive, and efforts by Republican lawmakers to prohibit union dues from being deducted from their paychecks. But at its heart the strike was about something pretty basic.

Brianne Solomon: My name is Brianne Solomon. I am a 15 year veteran teacher of art and dance at a public school in West Virginia. I live right outside of Hurricane, West Virginia, which is between Charleston and Huntington, and I teach at Hannan Jr. Sr. High School, which is a 7-12

school that has about 300 students. You know, a basic livable wage should not be something that we have to fight for, being educators. There are teachers in our state with a master's degree that because of the size of their family qualify for food stamps. How does that work? I mean, how is that OK? We're finally saying, hey, you know, enough is enough. We've been for years that "we're going to fix the teacher problem." We're done. Next year is right now.

Angela Nottingham: My name is Angela Nottingham. I am a seventh grade social studies teacher in Huntington, West Virginia, at Huntington Middle School and I teach a ancient civilizations in my seventh grade class. I know a lot of people have said, 'well, you knew what you were getting into when you became a teacher,' or 'you knew what you were getting into when you became a teacher in a poor state.' But that's just kind of ignorant. Nobody gets into teaching to be rich. We get into teaching to change lives, but we also want to do it with respect and we also want to be able to afford our own lives. And the fact that we've sparked I guess a very big labor movement in our state, and now in Oklahoma and Kentucky where they're considering going on strike, I think it shows people that teaching is a profession. It is a labor of love, but it's still a labor and we must respect and honor that pay people what they deserve.

Jennifer: The strike got tons of media attention, but one factor that didn't get enough play was the role that was played by West Virginia superintendents, who closed down the schools in all 55 of the states districts. Here's a teacher named Brian Elliot. He teaches English at Bridgeport High School in Bridgeport, West Virginia. And he talks about why he thinks his superintendent supported the strike and why that mattered.

Brian Elliot: You've got to think superintendents are there to help further education and they can see what's going on in the state. They can see the attacks on public education right now. And they don't want it to happen, obviously. Our superintendent, Dr. Mark Manchin was a teacher and so he knows what it's like to be in a classroom. He can see what the salaries are. He can see that they're not competitive and that people are leaving the state because they have to pay for stuff for their family. They have to support their families, and that's not possible with the pay scale that we currently have. You know, I'm lucky. My wife makes a good bit of money or else I'd be in the same boat.

Jennifer: Virtually everyone I talked to told a similar story, but as to the question of whether it was the teachers or the administrators who really started this ball rolling, this teacher had no doubt.

Tiphani Davis: My name is Tiphani Davis. I teach twelfth grade English at Morgantown High School in Morgantown, West Virginia. Superintendents have seen that it's more difficult to find qualified people for positions, or they're having to put in long-term subs or uncertified teachers in the classrooms. And they've seen that they've been asked to do more with less on a yearly basis. And I think that once they became aware that we were unified and that this was actually a movement that was going to happen, essentially a grass-roots movement that was created by social media, that they stood next to us. They've seen firsthand what the budget cuts have done

and they've seen firsthand what happens when you have a teaching position in a county where the salary is not enough to sustain a family, or it's not enough to pull people into your community. I think that they've seen people leave and they've seen how hard it is to fill positions and they've seen kind of a degrading of education in West Virginia. And we all kind of stood up and said, enough is enough.

Jennifer: Jack—I'm curious about whether as you listen to this, if you're surprised by the role that superintendents played in West Virginia. I'm thinking about the new breed of hard charging superintendents; people like Michelle Rhee, who we've had on this program, for example, who often position themselves as being openly antagonistic to teachers.

Jack: One of the reasons that superintendents would have supported teachers here is that superintendents, of course, have a stake in keeping good teachers in the classroom. And of course one of the things that we've seen over the years is that because teachers, generally speaking, are not paid commensurate with their education and skill level, that they've remained in the profession for other reasons that bring them satisfaction, including stability, autonomy, and the feeling of social utility. And as these things have come under attack in the last decade or two—attacks on teacher tenure, the standards and accountability movement that has undermined teacher autonomy, the rhetoric around teachers and their quote unquote adult interests undermining their sense of social utility—we've seen more and more teachers not only feeling less satisfied in their work, but actually leaving the profession. And of course this is something that makes the work of superintendents harder. So, you know, I'm not surprised at all. We have some of the lowest paid teachers in the country who are then being supported by their superintendents who realize that they need to take action in order to keep those teachers in the classroom.

Jennifer: OK. So we've got a little insight now into why West Virginia superintendents supported the strike, but what you probably didn't hear is the lengths they went to to demonstrate that support. Here's teacher Brianne Solomon again.

Brianne Solomon: The support we have is kind of breathtaking. I mean all of our superintendents, every single county, 55 superintendents, went to the capital on Saturday, locked arms and sat in the Senate Gallery and said: "our teachers aren't going back until they get what they deserve."

Jennifer: In the media coverage of the strike, there were lots of references to West Virginia's unique labor history, but the teachers I talked to almost all cited more recent history: the 1990 teachers strike in which the state's superintendents kept the schools open.

Heather Holland: My name is Heather Holland and I teach third grade at Hurricane Town elementary in Huntington, West Virginia. It's amazing to me, not only that we stayed together as far as teachers and service personnel and state employees, but that we had the support from each and every one of our superintendents in each county. I have some friends who I teach with

that they were either part of the strike back in 1990 or they had friends and parents who were part of the strike. Then it was a true strike with picket lines and it was a very difficult time. For us to be able to have the privilege of our superintendents, all 55 of them, saying: 'we're not gonna do that to you all. We're going to shut down our schools. We're going to make sure our kids were safe. We want you to go do the work that you need to do and then when they hear you, we'll get back to work in the classroom.' It was just really inspiring for them to support us in that way.

Jennifer: Almost everyone I talked to had some memory of just how divisive the 1990 strike was. Some have parents who went on strike while their colleagues crossed picket lines, divisions that never really healed. And a lot of those teachers who walked out of Virginia Virginia schools this time around were students back in 1990.

Melissa Agee: I am Melissa Agee and this is my 23 year of teaching. I've been at St Alban's High School in St. Alban's, West Virginia for 18 years, and I have taught ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth grade English. I also teach Latin and the handful of other classes. We knew that not all the teachers were striking in 1990. We were very aware that some teachers crossed the picket line and we felt that tension among the staff members, especially when we all came back to school. The governor back then closed school for three days to give everybody time to calm down and to try to come back and get on the same page with their students, but we could still sense that tension.

I also felt a little bit betrayed. I was enrolled in two AP classes, and there's a test at the end. There's a pretty significant cost for that test and I had paid that myself out of my pocket. This was about a month before those AP tests, and was a little upset that my AP teachers felt that the strike was more important than teaching me. In retrospect, having understood now the significance of what they were fighting for, it makes a lot more sense. Today, had we not had the support of our superintendents, I would have chosen to stand out on the picket line rather than teach my students.

Jennifer: The fact that those 55 superintendents decided to stand with the teachers this time meant that there was none of the division that tore schools apart back in 1990. In fact, some of the teachers I spoke to said that this strike knit their schools closer together. Here's Bridgeport High School English teacher Brian Elliot again.

Brian Elliot: Our superintendent, at least in my county, Harrison County, was unbelievably supportive of our efforts. He went above and beyond, not only calling school, but also ensuring that no extra-curricular activities were done on our campuses. That way the teachers wouldn't have to cross the picket line for the students in those instances, which really helped with the solidarity because now you don't have certain people that are crossing and then you get fighting in between the faculty. Honestly, I think our faculty are closer knit now because we stood out with each other. I just started here like last year, so I talked to some teachers that I hadn't even

talked to yet. And so we actually became friends a little bit. So it kind of helped us bond more as a faculty.

Jennifer: I heard lots of stories like that about teachers who leaned on each other, or brand new teachers who bonded with veterans during long days at the state capitol. And what makes these stories all the more remarkable is the teacher strikes are illegal in West Virginia as they are in many states. These teachers were taking a big risk by walking out. But because there are so many vacant positions in West Virginia schools, the teachers were betting that they couldn't really be fired. Here's a teacher talking about the situation at his school.

Greg Cruvey: I'm Greg Cruvey I teach at Southside K-8 in War, West Virginia. I'm a middle school social studies teacher. I like to joke and tell people that I'm a recovering math teacher. I spent five years in this school teaching middle school math and I liked social studies a lot more. Math is fun, but I like social studies better. I would like to say this about the West Virginia teachers strike. One of the problems that we've had is that people think that we're out there whining and crying because we wish we had more money. I work in a building with 32 teaching positions and 11 of those positions are vacant. They are filled with people who are either long-term subs. Very nice people. Uh, we have a retired personnel director who is 75 or 76 years old, working in a classroom because we can't find somebody else for our vacant math position.

We have people working in special ed that are giving it their all. We've got a guy who is an accountant and he wants one day to be a special ed teacher, but at the moment he's just an accountant working as a substitute teacher and so we've got these long-term substitutes and we've got people who had been placed on emergency permits and are becoming teachers while they teach. And what we need is highly qualified individuals in these spots, and that's what we have been fighting for. We have been fighting to fill the 720 some odd vacancies statewide that we don't pay enough to fill.

Jennifer: Jack—I want to bring you back in here. We did an episode a while ago with economist Gordon Lafer who painted a really bleak picture of the future of teaching. He argued basically that the corporate agenda for education Means deprofessionalizing teaching: paying teachers less and weakening the credentials for who can teach, getting rid of pensions, etc. But it seems like by making teaching a job that no one wants to do, the deprofessionalizers have almost ended up giving more leverage to the people who are still teaching.

Jack: There's a real irony that you've pointed out. Organizing a statewide teachers strike is really difficult. In fact, the first statewide teacher strike wasn't until 50 years ago in Florida, so it took almost 70 years from the first city-wide strike to get to the first statewide strike. And what we're seeing is that it really takes an assault on the profession to bring teachers together like this. And we have seen over the last 20 years a real change in the way teachers are perceived. So these numbers are six years old at this point because Metlife stopped doing its survey of the American teacher in 2012. But that last year they found that teachers were less satisfied than ever with their work. That was the lowest level of satisfaction they found in two decades of doing

that survey. And they found that those teachers who continued to be highly satisfied with their work had jobs that they felt were secure and felt that they were treated as professionals by members of the community. So those are two key leverage points that we've seen in terms of really pushing teachers to the brink here.

Jennifer: Just in the time that we've been working on this episode, the teacher rebellion in West Virginia has spread to Oklahoma, Arizona and Kentucky. The teachers I interviewed said that they are amazed that their strike is now inspiring colleagues in other states, but they're not exactly surprised.

Rebecca Diamond: I'm Rebecca Diamond in Wayne County, West Virginia. I teach second grade at a K-5 school, called Kellogg Elementary. I've taught second grade for six years, but this is my nineteenth year teaching in West Virginia. Oh my gosh. To know that other states are looking at us and thinking, 'you know, we deserve that too. We deserve better for our students. Why are we not standing up for ourselves? If West Virginia, you can do it, why can't we do this in Oklahoma? We're 40 ninth and teacher pay so we deserve better and then you think of Mississippi who is 50th and you wonder what they're thinking like, gosh, we deserve this as well.'

This is something that is going to change not only for West Virginia, but I believe for the entire world to look at us and think, 'you know, look what these teachers are doing. Look what these servers personnel are doing. Look what these public employees are doing. They are actually standing up for what they believe is the right thing to do and we need to do the same thing.' I'm so proud of Oklahoma for finally, you know, looking at West Virginia and thinking, 'why are we 49th. I mean, why are we the next to the lowest paid in the 50 states in the United States? And we can't do better.' I mean, Gosh, they're asking for a \$10,000 raise.

Jack: One of the things that we've seen over the years in education I think is worth observing here, even though we primarily see it in higher education, we certainly see it in k-12. Education does not respond to cost cutting technology the way that other sectors do. The relative cost of education has gone up over time in the same way that the relative cost of dental work has gone up over time. You can't have a robot do your fillings just like you can't have a robot educating your children. And this is really exacerbating a long standing tension, which is that it costs a lot to do the kinds of human improvement work that we want teachers to do with students in classrooms. And yet teacher salaries are constrained by local and state taxes, and particularly by the unwillingness of taxpayers to increase the burden on themselves, to pay for education. And so what we're really seeing here is a kind of end around with regard to the cost of education. It's often happening through healthcare, through pensions, through other ways of trying to lower the cost of education.

Jennifer: We did a recent episode about the history of student walkouts and the powerful lessons that students learn when they take action and when something. So I thought it would be appropriate to wrap up this episode by hearing from one last West Virginia teacher who's been

thinking a lot about what her middle school students learn from this strike that shut down all of the state schools for nine days.

Erica Rodeheaver: My name is Erica Rodeheaver and I teach eighth grade English at South Middle School in Morgantown, West Virginia. I think when we go back, there'll be a lot of conversations with our kids about why we did that. I'm in the middle of a civil rights unit, so this is a fantastic time for this to happen because of the conversations that can occur in our classroom and the learning. The kids have not only heard us talk about grassroots movements, but they have now actually experienced one and seen how one works.

Even though we do have our union sort of heading it up, it really was not started by them. It was started by the people. Our students are seeing how even though you have this small voice and you're just one person that you can enact change. You don't have to have a lot of money—teachers are very poor—but we have been able to take something that looked insurmountable and we've been able to overcome it. It's just the perfect teaching opportunity. And as a teacher, you're always looking for those moments where kids don't just hear you just talk about something, but see you do it, and lead by example. So we're really excited to get back in our classrooms.

