“We’re not doing it anymore”: Analyzing teachers’ perceptions of power on their stated decisions to strike

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Cody Sibley, Author
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Abstract

The overall reduced funding from public education in the United States has sparked a backlash across the country. Citing inadequate resources, low pay, and an inability to control the direction of their classroom, teachers in seven states (West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, Colorado, Arizona, North Carolina, and Washington) halted instruction time to redress their grievances. To further understand the commonalities of this teacher movement across the different states that witnessed teacher strikes, I used a comparative, method of agreement case study approach, choosing the most different cases in terms of partisan composition of state governments and structural differences of the public education system. The structural differences include average teacher salaries and per-pupil spending, and it also includes whether teachers struck against their districts or state government. Based on these criteria, I conducted 9 semi-structured interviews with 11 public school teachers who went on strike in Oklahoma and Washington, and I used the political process theory to understand the ways in which they construct their stated reasons for conducting strikes and for understanding how they say they conceive power dynamics within public education. Through these interviews, themes of deprofessionalization, decreased teacher autonomy, and perceptions of lacking trust from people in positions of power emerged from the interviews. Policy recommendations are provided to address the stated grievances of the public school teachers who conducted strikes.
Introduction

The labor movement in the United States is reviving. In 2018, the number of workers involved in work stoppages reached its highest levels since 1986 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019), and 90 percent of these work stoppages occurred in the education, health care, and social service industries (Bureau of Labor Statistics, Feb. 9, 2019). The two largest work stoppages in 2018 were statewide teacher walkouts in both Arizona and Oklahoma (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Further, teachers across six states (West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, Colorado, Arizona, and North Carolina) conducted statewide teacher walkouts against their state legislatures in 2018 (Karp & Sanchez, 2018), and teachers in Washington state conducted regional strikes against 14 local school districts in 2018 (Will, 2018).

Major news outlets across the United States wrote about the teacher strikes in 2018, and the teachers they interviewed cited low pay and inadequate state spending on public education as the reason for these strikes (Hess & Martin, 2018). To put funding levels in perspective, I included data on teachers’ salaries and per-pupil expenditures from 2009-10 to the most recent state-level expenditure data available from the National Center for Education Statistics, 2015-16. Dollars are adjusted for the 2015-16 school year, and states are arranged by the percent change in average annual teacher salary (adjusted for inflation). (SEE APPENDIX A)

As shown, most of the states that conducted teacher strikes in 2018 had been defunding or stagnating funding from public education since the Great Recession to at least the 2015-16 school year except for Washington state. In fact, according to the table, Washington was the only state in 2018 that witnessed both teacher strikes and increased funding in teacher salaries and per-pupil expenditures. In terms of funding, therefore, Washington is an outlier, which may suggest that the underlying issues regarding these teacher strikes may go beyond the usual reasons of merely
wanting an increase in pay and resources, thus warranting a further understanding of the underlying issues regarding the teaching profession in these states.

Barring any major policy shift regarding education funding, this downward shift in public education funding is reflective of an overall neoliberalizing of public education, a phenomenon, according to Hursh (2016) of privatizing most public goods and restructuring existing governmental organizations to be more responsive to market-based pressures. For education policy, this phenomenon comes in the form of cutting costs for public education, the creation of charter schools, and the increase of standardized tests to create an outcome-based education market for parents and students (Hursh, 2016). Further complicating this phenomenon is the role of power and government structure in these teacher strikes. As public employees, public school teachers are employed by the state, meaning that their overall profession, the compensation and resources they receive, and the manner in which they are allowed to do their jobs is controlled by public officials. Teacher strikes, then, represent a policy failure, and it is in the interest of policymakers to better understand how teachers perceive their jobs and why they say they conduct strikes. Further, most of the teachers in 2018 conducted statewide strikes against their state governments (Karp & Sanchez, 2018), while teachers in Washington state conducted regional strikes against 14 local school districts in 2018 (Will, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this research is to explore the factors beyond funding that teachers say influence their job satisfaction and stated reasons for conducting strikes.

Literature Review & Theory

Neoliberalism: Its Definition

Before going any further, I must operationalize a term that will come up throughout this research project and has relevance to education policy at large: neoliberalism. I must emphasize that I am not advocating for or against the idea of neoliberalism. Rather, I am providing a working definition for a term that, as Nonini (2008) indicated, risks being used to refer to any societal
context associated with contemporary capitalism because of the term’s frequent usage. As such, the idea of neoliberalism could run the risk of being too vague to define or use for analyses of the social world. Terry Flew (2014) conducted a content analysis on the use of the term neoliberal in academia, and he found the term to generally be used as a negative connotation for describing all societal issues. Interestingly, Flew (2014) also found that, despite researchers using the term neoliberalism for identifying political and policy issues, his content analysis found that said researchers did not often incorporate formal politics and formal political parties into their research.

For the purposes of this research, I will use Flew’s definition of neoliberalism (2014). According to Flew (2014), neoliberalism is a “project of institutional transformation in the face of path-dependent national capitalisms.” In other words, the neoliberal ideology sees capitalism as a social force to promote societal goals (Flew, 2014). The market, according to the neoliberal ideology, is the most effective force at promoting socially-optimal outcomes, and policies should be structured to favor markets (Flew, 2014). Neoliberals would structure institutions to promote competition, even at the expense of other goals (Flew, 2014). In education policy, for example, charter schools are seen as a market-based solution to improve educational outcomes for students, with the belief that the increased choices for families will force schools to compete against each other, thus forcing them to innovate education practices. However, the increased choices allow families to segregate themselves (Garcia, 2008). The neoliberal would say that the individual freedom to choose schools should be prioritized over a limited choice approach to desegregate schools. In summation, neoliberalism is the ideology that markets can most effectively provide public goods, and the role of government is to structure institutions so they can provide public goods in a market-based system. Neoliberal policies come with their own normative claims, as outlined by Flew (2014):

1. Free enterprise should serve as a model for society at large.
2. Legal/regulatory frameworks should promote markets and competition rather than restricting them in the name of other societal goals.

3. Social policy should support rather than correct markets.

4. Judicial activism should limit discretionary actions of state power.

The purpose of this section was to operationalize neoliberalism using Flew’s (2014) definition and conceptualization of neoliberalism. According to Flew (2014), neoliberalism is a set of policy goals aimed at transforming institutions to function like private-sector entities. I must emphasize that the purpose of this section was not to advocate for or against the ideology of neoliberalism. Rather, it was to operationalize a working definition for a phenomenon that has embedded itself into education policy. In the following paragraph, I will describe how the neoliberal ideology has transformed public education in the United States.

**Neoliberalism & Education Policy**

Education policy has been particularly impacted by the neoliberal ideology through programs like school choice, standardized testing, and stagnation of public financing of public schools (Brathwaite, 2017). The central idea of improving education, according to the neoliberal ideology, is to use the market-based idea of competition to improve educational outcomes, with said outcomes being measured by standardized test scores. A pure neoliberal education system would look like publicly-financed, privately operated schools competing for students. These schools would show demonstrate their value via measurable outcomes, and families would choose the schools with outcomes that best reflect their needs.

Neoliberalizing education, a phenomenon that has been occurring for quite some time now, has certain implications. First, because of the impracticalities of testing students on everything they know, those creating standardized tests determine which subjects and standards on which to
test students (Hursh, 2016). Due to this predetermination of tests, educators teach students based on subjects determined by those standardized tests. In doing so, teacher autonomy is decreased, and education is limited to rote memorization rather than exploring topics with unknown answers (Hursh, 2016). Second, the marketization of education implies that school choice exists, which may not be the case in every jurisdiction. In places where choice does exist, neoliberalism would assume that parents have complete and informed information on the performance of each school in their area (Brathwaite, 2017). In places where school choice does not exist, the neoliberal ideology would make the argument that the only school in said jurisdiction would hold monopoly power and thus could not possibly provide education at an adequate level. Thus, those students (in mostly rural areas) are disadvantaged and mostly unsavable.

Third, the neoliberal ideology would say that teacher salaries should be tied to how well their students perform on standardized tests, ignoring that the socioeconomic status of students impacts how they perform on standardized testing, which is out of most teachers’ control (Croizet, 2004). These high-stakes standardized tests is a product of deprofessionalizing the education profession, which leads to demoralizing the education profession, leading to lower job satisfaction (Wronowski & Urick, 2019). The socioeconomic factors contributing to test scores, reduced funding from public education, and the taking away of teacher autonomy leads to situations where teachers are held responsible for outcomes largely out of their control, thus leading to possible frustration and dissatisfaction with the education system.

In this section, I operationalized neoliberalism and connected it to education policy in the United States. In the following section, I will review previous studies on teacher strikes and public-sector strikes overall to help inform me on gaps in the literature regarding this movement.
Strikes: Causes and Impacts

Teacher strikes have been a well-documented phenomenon and research topic dating back at least to the late 1960s (Cole, 1969; Blendinger, 1970; Olson, 1984), suggesting this profession has a rich history of collective action. Cole (1969) found that teachers were more likely to strike when they receive support from colleagues, but being under cross-pressure decreased the likelihood of striking. Specifically, teachers who feared sanctions because of strikes were less likely to do so, even when they supported the strike efforts (Cole, 1969). Falk, Grimes, & Lord (1982) found that teachers were more likely to strike if they were dissatisfied with their jobs and were members of professional organizations for teachers. They also tended to be white, more unionized, and generally had more teaching experience than teachers who did not strike (Falk, Grimes, & Lord, 1982). Generally, teachers who conduct strikes wanted higher salaries, more classroom materials, smaller class sizes, and more teacher input in the curriculum (Falk, Grimes, & Lord, 1982), suggesting that the want for teacher professionalization is not necessarily a new phenomenon, but it is a phenomenon that has been unaddressed or reoccurring for quite some time.

Going beyond teacher strikes, strikes in the public sector are largely seen as more of a political demonstration than private-sector strikes, most likely due to the fact that concessions gained from public-sector strikes come from publicly-financed resources (Burton, & Krider, 1970). Further, Burton & Krider (1970) attest that public employees have the role of maintaining societal order, and public employee strikes can lead to deterioration of that order. In the context of teachers, teacher strikes have been linked to decreased test scores for students (Baker, 2011). Of course, as implied above, focusing solely on student test scores is a neoliberalist way of thinking about education and schools.

In addition to test scores, schools are also institutions students go to when their parents are working, and schools provide structure to students. Thus, when teachers go on strike, families are
having to find last-minute child care plans. If they’re unable to do so, students go unsupervised, which can lead them to situations where students have more leisure time to engage in bad behavior and criminal activity (Anderson, 2014). Jaume & Willén (2017) also found that teacher strikes can have long-term impacts on students, such as decreased incomes later in life, higher unemployment rates, and a decrease in skillsets relative to students who did not have teachers participating in strikes. Given these impacts on both student well-being and student test scores, governments have a vested interest in implementing policies to prevent teacher strikes from occurring.

Teacher Job Satisfaction

As mentioned earlier, Falk, Grimes, & Lord (1982) found that overall teacher job dissatisfaction was positively associated with the likelihood of teacher strikes at statistically significant levels. Given the profession’s history of striking and its current attrition rate (Chang, 2009), teacher job satisfaction has become an important focus area (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; McInerney, Korpershoek, Wang, & Morin, 2018; Xia, Izumi, & Gao, 2015). A teacher’s influence on school-level decision-making is considered to be one of the most powerful indicators of job satisfaction (Shen Leslie, Spybrook, & Ma, 2012), and their relationships with their colleagues is considered to be a more statistically significant factor in their satisfaction levels than their students’ behavior (Xia, Izumi, & Gao, 2015). Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2011) concur in this finding, noting that a sense of belonging and shared values is positively associated with job satisfaction.

Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2011) also found that a sense of belonging and emotional exhaustion were more explanatory than school conditions for job satisfaction. Liu & Ramsey (2008) found that salary was not linked to teacher attrition or job satisfaction, further highlighting the value teachers place on autonomy and a sense of belonging. Further, as teachers are public employees, they are more likely to be motivated by a calling to public service and a sense of altruism than they are by salary (Van de Walle, Steijn, & Jilke 2015). This motivation further highlights the need to
look more deeply at the teacher strike wave in 2018, as the wrong policy prescription to addressing teacher grievances could lead to teacher strikes going unprevented. So far, I have operationalized neoliberalism in education policy and reviewed previous literature on teacher strikes. The following section will outline the theory I use for my research, the political process theory.

**Political Process Theory**

As mentioned in the literature review, teacher strikes and public-sector strikes overall are inherently political in nature because any concessions won come from public resources, and those are seeking coalitions and allies from political actors (Burton & Krider, 1970). As such, the teacher strike movement of 2018 may be best viewed through the social movement framework called the political process theory. The political process approach to understanding social movements is based on the rational choice model where actors calculate possible outcomes before making decisions, and they then choose decisions based on what they believe will result in their desired outcome (Ruggiero & Montagna, 2008). This theory particularly focuses on external factors such as the political environment and institutional structures of places where social movements take place (Ruggiero & Montagna, 2008). Ruggiero & Montagna (2008) also said that individuals may pursue social movements to advance a cause rather than protest against something, and these actors may take action when they find an opening in their political environment. In fact, Meyer (2004) found that political openness is one of the most important aspects of understanding how social movements flourish in some contexts while they squander in others.

In addition to an opening in the political system, a coalition or working political structure needs to be present in order for a social movement to spark (Caren, 2007). In other words, individuals need some sort of organizing institution present for the social movement to take place. For some social movements, this institution may take the shape of clubs or organizations. For
teacher strikes specifically, the teachers’ unions seem like an obvious institution used for organizing teachers for a cause.

In the context of the teacher strikes in 2018, this theory would suggest that teachers felt as though those making decisions were receptive to their cause, and they conducted strikes because some event may have led to a crack in the political environment. This would then suggest that, despite teachers generally being part of the Democratic Party’s coalition, the teachers that conducted strikes in states controlled by Republicans may have witnessed an event that led atypical coalitions in US politics. This research will seek to better understand that atypical coalition.

This section outlined the political process theory, the theory used for this research project. In order for a political social movement to occur, political parties in power need to be receptive to that movement, and receptiveness may stem from an event leading to a crack in the political system. In addition to a major event leading to a spark for the social movement, individuals need an organizational structure to successfully demonstrate and execute their social movement. This theory will help to frame the findings and overall structure of this research project.

So far, I have introduced the topic to be studied, provided a literature review of past studies on a similar topic, and I have outlined the political process theory used for this research project. The next section will outline the methods I used to conduct my research.

Methods & Data Collection

Choosing my cases

The purpose of this research is to understand how factors beyond funding can influence teachers’ stated perceptions of their profession and their stated reasons for conducting strikes. I chose to study teachers who went on strike because the strikes are representative of an underlying perceived issue in their profession. As the chart in Appendix A demonstrates, some states reduced
funding and saw no teacher strikes, while at least one state increased funding and still witnessed teacher strikes. As the literature review suggests, teacher strikes themselves are not unusual; in fact, they are an often-studied phenomenon. What made these strikes unusual were the chain-like reaction across the statewide strikes (Karp & Sanchez) and the fact that Washington witnessed both increased funding and teacher strikes (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics). The chart showing in Appendix A demonstrates that some states reduced funding from education but witnessed no teacher strikes. While those cases may make for an interesting study, it is reasonable to assume that the teachers who conducted strikes will have strong opinions of those they struck against, thus warranting further exploration.

To understand how what factors beyond funding influenced the Washington teachers’ stated perceptions of their professions and their stated reasons for conducting strikes, I used the Millian Method of Agree approach to this phenomenon, in which two different cases have similar outcomes (Vannoni, 2015). Therefore, I wanted to choose cases with as much political and structural variation as possible. In doing so, I am able to explain away the partisan differences that may result in different education policies. Further, while most of the teacher strikes in 2018 happened against their state legislatures (Karp & Sanchez, 2018), the Washington strikes were regionalized, district-wide strikes (Will, 2018), suggesting that the stated grievances for conducting these strikes might not be easily solved by simply devolving education policy power down to the local level. To parse the differences and come to common themes that unify the way teachers talk about their professions, I chose to compare Washington, a state with regionalized strikes with a Democratic trifecta at the time of the strikes, to that of a case with a statewide strike under a unified Republican government (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2018).
### Partisan Composition of States that Conducted Strikes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Governor</th>
<th>Upper Chamber</th>
<th>Lower Chamber</th>
<th>Party Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>53.33% R</td>
<td>58.33% R</td>
<td>Republican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>51.43% R</td>
<td>56.92% D</td>
<td>Divided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>71.05% R</td>
<td>63% R</td>
<td>Republican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>70% R</td>
<td>62.50% R</td>
<td>Divided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>83.33% R</td>
<td>71.29% R</td>
<td>Republican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>53.06% D</td>
<td>51.02% D</td>
<td>Democrat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>64.71% R</td>
<td>63% R</td>
<td>Republican</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: National Conference of State Legislatures, 2018*

I wanted to compare Washington strikes against strikes in a Republican-controlled state for a couple of reasons. First, in terms of funding levels, states with Democratic trifectas generally spend more on K-12 education than states with Republican trifectas (Shin & Webber, 2014), warranting an explorative research into the political and value-based differences that may contribute to these funding discrepancies. Second, given the highly partisan era of the 2010s, analyzing how this partisan era has impacted perceptions about education and teachers’ professions could give a broader generalization on how partisanship impacts our policies.

I chose Oklahoma to compare against Washington’s teacher strikes because, in addition to Oklahoma having the most Republican-dominated state government of the states that witnessed teacher strikes, Oklahoma also reduced funding from public education more than most other states over the 2009-10 to 2015-16 school year.

**Research Approach**

This research relies upon qualitative data to understand the teacher strikes that took place in the selected cases. First, I used purposive sampling methods, reaching out to teachers who
participated in strikes or walkouts to interview them about their experiences with the strikes and walkouts. I used publicly-available work emails to contact teachers, and a total of 11 teachers responded with a willingness to participate. Overall, I conducted a total of 9 semi-structured interviews with 11 public-school teachers. Seven of those interviews were one-on-one, and two of those interviews were two-person interviews. Six of those teachers taught in Oklahoma, and I conducted those interviews via Skype or phone conversation, and five of those teachers taught in Washington, with those interviews taking place in person. Because the nature of research project is studying the teacher strikes, many of the teachers who agreed to partake in the study were local union leaders. While this sample may not be entirely representative of all teachers in Washington and Oklahoma, the fact that these teachers agreed to be interviewed indicates that they had strong opinions on the topic and wanted to talk about them. Further, as the political process literature suggests, social movements need institutional frameworks to be successful, and unions are the institutions in which labor and specifically teachers conduct their social movements (Caren, 2007). For a better understanding of the teachers I interviewed, I provide a table of their demographics below, focusing specifically on their status as union leaders. I also include their political party affiliation if they mentioned it in the interviews. (SEE APPENDIX B)

After conducting the interviews, I transcribed the data and coded for common themes. Each of the semi-structured interviews lasted for roughly an hour long, where we covered topics such as the political dynamics of their states, their work environment, and the logistics of the strikes.

I also initially collected letters to the editor form major newspapers in both states regarding the teacher strikes, and I conducted informational interviews with leaders from both the Oklahoma Education Association and the Washington Education Association. The information from the letters to the editor helped to form the direction of the research. Specifically, I used the letters to the editor to understand how public opinion was being portrayed in each case. While the letters are not explicitly quoted or mentioned in the findings, they helped me to frame my questions for
the teachers, and they helped me to ask further probing questions to the teachers. The interview from the OKEA and WEA, as mentioned, were informational and designed to merely guide my research topics. Much like the letters, I used these informational interviews to know which documents to research for my findings and where to find information regarding the major events in both cases.

To better understand how lawmakers’ background shaped their decisions when it comes to public education funding, I used Project Vote Smart to collect information on lawmakers’ party affiliation, occupation, and educational attainment. I ultimately opted not to use lawmakers’ educational attainment for this research. While analyzing the educational attainment of lawmakers would be interesting for an analysis of their class background, such information is beyond the scope of this research. Given the diverse range of occupations in the legislature, I condensed occupational choices into two categories: private-sector employment and public-sector employment. Van de Walle, Steijn, & Jilke (2015) found differences in attitudes between those who choose to work in the public sector and those who choose to work in the private sector, which is why I found it appropriate to condense occupational choices in that way. I should note that not every legislature had information on their educational background or occupation. I omitted those legislatures from this comparison.

**Findings**

The purpose of this research is to understand the teachers’ stated perceptions of how the power structures influencing their professions influence their stated job satisfaction and stated reasons for striking. To be clear, this research cannot directly explain why teachers went on strike. I can, however, explain what teachers are saying is their reasons for striking, and I can further explain what they say their grievances are regarding their profession. By exploring teachers’ perceptions of their profession and their stated reasons for striking from two politically different
states, the findings may demonstrate underlying issues regardless of the political party in power, and these findings demonstrate issues beyond the usual funding reasons for conducting strikes. From a public policy perspective, the teachers’ stated grievances with those governing their professions is relevant because those policymakers are directly in charge of setting standards for the teaching profession, they are the ones dictating the compensation of teachers, and they are the ones in charge of diverting resources to classrooms so that teachers have the tools they deem necessary to do their jobs. Essentially, teachers’ job satisfaction is a policy issue, and teachers in both Washington and Oklahoma both said that they do not feel as though the people in charge of their profession truly understand what teachers do, why they go into the profession, and how they can do their jobs more effectively. In both cases, the teachers also said they do not feel as though the people in charge are fairly compensating teachers for their labor, and the teachers in Oklahoma said that they did not feel as though they receive the resources they believe are necessary for their profession. The table below shows the common themes from the interviews in Oklahoma and Washington regarding their stated reasons for conducting strikes. Again, it does not show why the teachers went on strike, but it does show what their stated grievances are regarding their profession.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stated Events and Stated Reasons for Teacher Strikes</th>
<th>Oklahoma</th>
<th>Washington</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Event Prompting Strike</td>
<td>Business-led coalition</td>
<td>State Supreme Court Decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material Reasons for Striking</td>
<td>Pay increases, pupil-teacher ratios, textbook funding, overall resources</td>
<td>Pay increases only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immaterial Reasons for Striking</td>
<td>Career deprofessionalization, standardized testing, work autonomy, lack of recognition and gratitude for their work, power structure that ignores teachers’ input</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As mentioned previously, one of my reasons for exploring the Oklahoma and Washington teacher strikes were the structural and political differences in each state. The Washington teachers
conducted regionalized strikes against their individual school districts (Will, 2018), while the Oklahoma teachers conducted a statewide walkout against their state legislature (Karp & Sanchez, 2018). Because of these structural differences, I coded the interviews for the ways in which they spoke of power and entities governing their profession, which includes both people in power and organizational structure of the education system in each respective state. From that coding, I found the following themes, which will be presented in the table below and will be discussed in greater detail after:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes Found Throughout Interviews</th>
<th>Oklahoma</th>
<th>Washington</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>State Legislature</strong></td>
<td>Perceived not to care about teachers or public education, words like “corporate” and “neoliberal” emerged</td>
<td>Mixed findings, generally perceived as ignorant on education and on having to appease too many groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Governor</strong></td>
<td>Perceived not to care about teachers or public education, unanimous discontent</td>
<td>Perceived as not being involved in strikes, most unaware of his positions on education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>US Department of Education</strong></td>
<td>Unanimous discontent, perceived to be out of touch with public education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School District/School Board</strong></td>
<td>Generally perceived as an ally with teachers against state legislature</td>
<td>Generally perceived as being out of touch with teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Administrators</strong></td>
<td>Mixed findings, generally perceived as having shifting and overbearing expectations of teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Salary Allocation</strong></td>
<td>Statewide model</td>
<td>Statewide model prior to 2018, districts had to craft their own with passage of Senate Bill 6362</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this section, I explained the purpose of my research, which is to understand the teachers’ stated perceptions of how the power structures influencing their professions influence their stated job satisfaction and stated reasons for striking, and I outlined the general findings from my teacher interviews. The general findings indicate that, overall, the teachers in both cases felt as though the governing entities in charge of education and the teaching profession do not fully understand the teaching profession, and the teachers felt as though they are not compensated in accordance with
their perceived value. In Oklahoma specifically, teachers said that they did not feel as though they receive the resources they believe are necessary for their profession. In the following sections, I will go into greater detail the teachers’ perceptions of the different power structures governing their profession and education policy overall. Specifically, I will go into detail the teachers’ perceptions of their state legislatures, governors, school district, school administration, and Betsy Devos. Before going into detail on those topics, however, I will provide background information on the events leading up to the teacher strikes in Oklahoma and Washington. These events provide needed contextual information necessary for understanding the dynamics that played out before the strikes took place.

**Major Events: Step Up Oklahoma and McCleary**

The first striking difference between the Washington teacher strikes and the Oklahoma teacher walkouts was the events and allies that helped to set the legislative agenda for education funding and, ultimately, propelled teachers from both states to conduct job actions. Talks of teacher pay raises in Oklahoma go back to 2016, when the state legislature promised but failed to increase teacher pay in the state (Cohen, 2018). Later that year, the state issued a ballot initiative to increase teacher pay by increasing the state’s sales tax, and that initiative also failed (Cohen, 2018).

Finally, roughly two months before Oklahoma’s legislative session took place in 2018, a group of business and civic leaders in the state formed a coalition known as Step Up Oklahoma (Ellis, 2018). This group’s goal was to reform the state’s budget process and tax system to increase government revenue in what they considered to be a business-centered way (Ellis, 2018). The business leaders sought a broad coalition, so the group included a $5,000 pay raise for teachers to attract the Oklahoma Education Association to join the group (Ellis, 2018). The Oklahoma Education Association was simultaneously pushing for its own plan of a $10,000 teacher pay raise over three years, but it ultimately joined the Step Up coalition, thus putting the idea of a pay raise
on the legislative agenda (Ellis, 2018). However, when it came time for a vote, the tax and budget reform bill backed by the Step Up coalition failed to gather the required 75 percent supermajority needed to pass any funding or tax increases (Jackson, 2018). A few days before the teachers in Oklahoma were scheduled to rally at their state Capitol, the legislature passed a teacher pay raise that averaged to be about $6,000 (Miston, 2018).

Like the teachers in Oklahoma, the teachers in Washington were propelled to strike based on legislative decisions. However, unlike Oklahoma, which was partly touted as a private-sector initiative, funding disputes in Washington began as a state Supreme Court case known throughout Washington as the McCleary decision, and unlike the private-sector initiative in Oklahoma, the coalition that brought about the Supreme Court case was a group of school districts, teacher unions, and parent associations (Network for Excellence in Washington Schools, 2019). McCleary v State of Washington said the state of Washington has a paramount duty to fully fund K-12 education (McCleary v. Washington, 2012). Further, the Supreme Court decision indicated that Washington was not living up to constitutional duty to fully fund education, and in 2015, the state’s Supreme Court began fining the state legislature $100,000 every day for being in contempt with the court’s ruling (McCleary v. Washington, 2015).

In 2017, the state legislature passed House Bill 2242, which fully funded K-12 education by the 2019-20 school year (House Bill 2242, 2017). However, the state’s Supreme Court mandated that the legislature fully fund public education by Sept. 1, 2018 (McCleary v. Washington, 2017). Specifically, the Supreme Court found that HB 2242 did not phase in the salary increase for teachers and support staff quickly enough (McCleary v. Washington, 2017). To satisfy the court’s requirements, the legislature reworked its funding model for K-12 education and passed Senate Bill 6362 in March 2018 (Senate Bill 6362, 2018). This bill, which passed along party lines with Democrats in support and Republicans in opposition, changed the salary allocation model for teachers and support staff (Senate Bill 6362, 2018). Rather than having a statewide salary schedule
for all teachers, the state would instead send a lump-sum of money dedicated to teacher and support staff pay based on a defined minimum teacher salary of $40,000 and a defined maximum of $90,000 (Senate Bill 6362). These minimums and maximums would be adjusted based on a region’s cost of living, and local school districts would get to determine how to structure their own salary allocation models (Senate Bill 6362). Because school districts would, for the first time in recent history, not have a statewide salary allocation model off which to base pay, school districts and unions were forced to renegotiate pay, setting the stage for the teacher strikes that took place in 2018.

This section spoke to the coalitions that helped set the agenda for the teacher strikes in both cases. In Oklahoma, business-led, private-sector coalition brought teacher pay raises to the legislative agenda as part of a strategy to overall statewide reforms to the government structure and tax codes of Oklahoma. Giving teachers a pay raise was originally a means to an end of promoting private-sector initiatives. In Washington, the initiative was a state Supreme Court decision led by teachers’ unions, school districts, and parent organizations. The intention of the Supreme Court decision was to ensure education funding was primarily a state responsibility rather than a district responsibility. The purpose of this section was to provide background information to understand the logistics of the strikes in each case. In the following section, I will go into further details on how the legislatures’ roles in each state contributed to the teachers’ stated decisions to conduct job actions.

State Legislature, Governor, & The Statewide Salary Allocation Model

As mentioned, the previous section spoke to how the different coalitions, with Oklahoma having a business-led coalition and Washington having an education-based coalition, set the agendas for teacher pay raises and overall education funding. While the Washington coalition first went through the state Supreme Court to force the legislature to have the state fully fund education, the Oklahoma coalition went directly through the legislature as an attempt to raise teacher pay and
give an overall reform to the state government structure and tax code. In both cases, however, the legislature was still in charge with designing the structure for education funding and for determining whether teachers would receive resources at all. Teachers in both Washington and Oklahoma felt as though the legislatures did not care about their concerns, citing powerlessness and a misunderstanding from the legislature on what teachers actually do to help students. This section will go into further details on the political and government structures in each case, and it will explain the teachers’ perceptions of their state government.

When asked about their state legislatures and people in power, the teachers interviewed identified those individuals as the cause of the deprofessionalization of their career. In both states, the teachers did not feel trusted by their state legislatures to make decisions regarding their profession.

“For a lot of people, we say teaching is our mission, and teaching is my mission, but teaching is also my profession. And I should be treated like a professional, not a missionary.” Oklahoma middle/high school English teacher

While none of the teachers said that they went on strike specifically for this reason, worker autonomy and professionalization were major themes that came across essentially every interview. Over-reliance on test scores, a perceived lack of respect for the profession, conversations with family and friends about their “long breaks” and “short work days” came up across interviews. In both states, they blamed their state legislature for passing laws and policies that they feel devalue their profession. Teachers in Oklahoma and Washington both showed signs of frustration and irritation with the increasingly relaxed certification requirements for newer teachers. In Oklahoma, this practice is known as “emergency certified teachers.”

“I have a friend who is emergency certified this year, and she chose kindergarten because that was her favorite age to babysit. She has now quit and moved to Las Vegas and is a show girl. I mean we’re friends! But I told her going in like, ‘you are not prepared for this! You are...what can I do to help you? Because you are going to go in and it’s going to be hard.’ And she was crying every day before school and every day after school. Hated her
job, and she ended up leaving. And then they got to find another teacher to fill that spot. It’s the worst!” Oklahoma Kindergarten Teacher 2

“Washington state is so desperate for teachers that they’re fast-tracking people into the classroom, so if you have a BA and you’re in a low-income area, an area that people don’t want to work, they’ll put you in the classroom before you’re certified and you can work on your certification.” Washington High School English Teacher 1

As a result of neoliberalizing education, teacher autonomy and professionalization has been on a decline (Gibbons, 2018). The state’s interest in education is based on measurable outcomes like test scores, and the state seeks to increase those test scores by trying to create as controlled an environment as possible so that students can get the scores the state wants (Gibbons, 2018). Curriculum is then scripted and set at the state level and is set by areas they designate as lacking.

“It makes my blood boil. Treating them as less than people. I want stupid standardized testing to go away so we can actually focus on bringing out the strengths in all students, not just what we think they should excel in.” Oklahoma district-wide music teacher

Standardized testing, as mandated by the state legislature, was a major point of contention for most every teacher interviewed. They shared the belief that standardized tests drive the education system in the United States. At least two teachers interviewed, however, did not necessarily share the same levels of disgust as the music teacher. The middle school teacher from Oklahoma said she wants her state to adopt common core standards so that her state’s standards would be more in line with that of other states. Washington English teacher 1, while not denying that teachers form their curriculum around state testing, did not necessarily find that practice to be an issue.

“The other part of that that drives me crazy is ‘Well stop teaching to the test.’ Shouldn’t I be teaching what I’m going to test? Or should I be teaching something different than what I’m going to test? Isn’t that the point of the test at the end of the unit? To see what you’ve learned? Well, aren’t I supposed to....so I’ve never understood that motto.” Washington High School English Teacher 1
Washington English Teacher 2, while saying she wants to maintain accountability in the school system, said that one of her major issues with lawmakers setting education standards is that they often do not fully understand the standards they set. She gave an example of how lawmakers wanted schools to emphasize reading comprehension and increase nonfiction reading. However, she felt frustrated with the fact that lawmakers decided to increase nonfiction reading by swapping fiction and novels for biographies and scientific texts in her English classroom.

"Whatever you test is what is emphasized in the classroom. So if I’m testing reading nonfiction, suddenly kids are drilling nonfiction and multiple choice, if that’s the way that we test them, and that’s insane. That’s not how we learn."

Me: So would you have test scores at all?

"You see. Because this is the catch 22. Right? We need to be accountable, of course we need to be accountable. And if we don’t test the children, then how are we held accountable? But if we don’t tie graduation to the tests, the kids don’t care. They take the tests, and it looks like our schools are failing when kids are just going blah blah blah blah."

Washington English Teacher 2

From the teachers’ perspective, test scores seem to be drivers for how they must set their curriculum. While the teachers spoke of some of the perceived advantages of standardized testing, issues of tests being too much of a focus emerged throughout the interviews. Further, the interviewees believe that most of their influence on students is not captured in the test scores, nor do they believe that their influence is measurable. Upon further probing, the teachers talk about suicide prevention, ensuring students are fed, and getting students to talk to them about life issues as some of what they view to be immeasurable outcomes. These teachers are taking on roles akin in social workers in addition to their roles as educators. In other words, these teachers are acting as mentors for these students, yet they feel as though their legislature values them only to the extent that their students pass standardized tests.

Despite the frustration with lawmakers setting perceived uninformed policies surrounding education, the teachers in Washington seemed to invoke more sympathy toward their legislatures
than the teachers in Oklahoma, saying that, while the legislature has generally made ill-informed decisions on regarding public education, they said they understood that the legislature could not possibly know everything about education policy.

“I’ve gone up and lobbied plenty, and everybody’s at their door saying “give me a piece of the pie. Give me a piece of the pie,” so I feel like they try to do the best, but again, it’s probably like the ocean. Everything’s moving all the time, and I might think this is a good decision today, but I don’t see the ripple effects or things that happen, the waves that come crashing down.” Washington Middle School Social Studies Teacher

Of course, despite the sympathy toward the legislature, the teachers interviewed in Washington still said they blamed their state legislature for some of the issues with their profession, and two of the teachers used phrases like “kicking the can down the road” to describe how the legislature modelled the funding scheme for the teacher pay raises. Specifically, prior to the McCleary decision, Washington had a statewide salary allocation grid to determine teacher pay, which was based on educational attainment and years of experience, and school districts were able to increase local taxes to add to the teacher pay (Senate Bill 6362, 2018). The teachers called this addition to the salary allocation model “tri-pay.” With the passage of Senate Bill 6362 (2018), the state did away with the statewide salary allocation model and instead gave each district a lump sum of money based on a minimum teacher salary of $40,000, a maximum of $90,000, and a mid-career salary of $70,000 (Senate Bill 6362, 2018). Further, instead of allowing districts to raise their own taxes to increase teacher salaries, the state legislature chose to restrict districts’ abilities to raise taxes, and the state instead created what’s called “regionalization,” in which parts of the state with higher costs of living were given more money to pay teachers. The legislature’s decision to do away with the statewide salary allocation model forced districts to renegotiate contracts with teachers’ unions, so, even though the funding became the state’s responsibility, the legislature
made structuring the teacher pay to be the responsibility of districts, thus “kicking the can down the road.”

As mentioned above, teachers in both Washington and Oklahoma felt as though the legislatures did not care about their concerns, citing powerlessness, lack of money, and for Oklahoma specifically, not matching the political party affiliation of those in power as reasons for the legislature not trusting teachers.

“I still think we are going through a bad spot politically because there is no check on the Republican Party, and it’s obvious that they will continue to push school choice and continue to support charter or private schools.” Oklahoma High School History Teacher

This negativity toward the Republican Party was prevalent in interviews in both states, except for the alternative high school teacher in Oklahoma, who identified as a registered Republican. She, however, called herself a moderate and did not speak favorably of Oklahoma’s legislature. Other teachers used words like corporate, business friendly, conservation, and capitalist to describe the legislature in Oklahoma.

According to Verdant Labs, 79 percent of teachers identify as Democrats (Democratic vs. Republican Occupations, 2016), which could explain some of the negative reactions toward the Republican-controlled Oklahoma legislature. However, teachers in Washington also shared dissatisfaction with their legislature, which was controlled by the Democratic Party at the time of the teacher strikes. Two of the Washington teachers interviewed were not asked about the legislature, and one of the teachers felt empathetic toward the state lawmakers, saying they had too many coalition groups to be able to appease everyone. For the teachers who shared negative opinions toward the legislature, however, they used phrases like playing politics, not asking professionals, and being more interested in power.

“Even politicians who say ‘oh no no! Test scores are not that important.’ When they talk about failing schools or they talk about ‘oh our schools are declining,’ they are basing it
solely on test scores. And that is ridiculous, especially when the tests change so much.” Washington High School English teacher 2

This teacher viewed the legislature as perpetuating the notion of conforming education to state testing. Both she and the alternative high school English teacher in Washington showed signs of frustration with the notion that their lawmakers care more about looking at test scores than about listening to teachers on how to improve the education system in their state.

The alternative high school teacher in Oklahoma linked the occupational background of the Oklahoma legislature to the discontent between teachers and the legislature. Many of the legislatures’ backgrounds, according to this teacher, are in the private sector. This private-sector background, she explains, could explain why the legislature was more concerned with increasing teacher pay than about increasing classroom funding. According to this teacher, in the minds of the legislature, salary increases would incentivize teachers to work harder at improving outcomes for students, and thus an increase in classroom funding would be irrelevant. While not every teacher articulated the issues of raising pay instead of classroom funding as clearly as the alternative high school teacher, many of the teachers shared the sentiment that increasing pay or that thinking of public education through the lens of the private sector would not be sufficient in addressing their grievances, with some thinking that framing the pay raise as a solution would be counter-productive.

“I just don’t think that just increasing teacher pay is going to fix anything. But what it does do is change the general public’s perception of teachers. Because, I feel like most of the way we were portrayed was...they just want a salary increase. And if we get our salary increase and we’re still asking for more money, it’s then, you got this connotation of greed and things like that. And I feel like if we just keep increasing salary, it’s going to make it harder for us to get classroom funding.” Oklahoma middle school English teacher

“I would agree that almost every person thinks there should be a change. And I’m glad that people are at least thinking about it. Which, the more people that think about it ideally should also mirror the more politicians that think about it. Will that be a positive or
negative thing? I don't know because our politicians are so corporate.” Oklahoma music teacher

To better understand the occupational backgrounds of the state lawmakers, I used data from Project Vote Smart to break down the occupational background of legislatures by political party affiliation. Comparing the occupational types of legislative members by party identification is useful for a couple of reasons. First, public-sector employment is a more service-driven, extrinsically-motivated profession than private-sector employment (Van de Walle, Steijn, & Jilke, 2015). It could then be inferred that a political party in power comprised of members with more public-service backgrounds could understand the grievances brought about by public school teachers more so than those with private-sector backgrounds. Second, because political parties in power are often the ones making decisions, comparing the parties in power makes sense for this research. The results are shown in the table below.

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<th>Upper Chamber: Partisan Composition &amp; Occupation Type</th>
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*denotes political party in power

Based on the information provided, the legislative bodies in both states were mostly comprised of individuals who worked in the private sector. The lack of public-sector employees
making legislative decisions means that the perspective in which policies are created come from that of the private sector, in which simply increasing salaries may be enough to increase productivity in their respective industries (Van de Walle, Steijn, & Jilke, 2015). However, this line of thinking may not be sufficient for improving public education. Many of the factors that contribute to student test scores and student performances, such as outside learning, home life, and socioeconomic statues, are outside of teachers’ control (Baker et. Al, 2010). Therefore, increasing teacher pay alone may not be enough for improving education, nor is it enough to keep teachers from striking, as indicated by previous literature (Falk, Grimes, & Lord, 1982).

Teachers in Oklahoma said that they have not received a cost-of-living adjustment to their salaries for the last 10 years, and overall reduced funding from public education has deprived them from resources they need to properly do their jobs and educate students. Specifically, they spoke of the lack of textbook funding and crowded classrooms, and every teacher spoke of the poverty in their districts, which they said prevents them from raising resources outside of the state-level funding. In fact, despite the Oklahoma legislature approving an across-the-board pay raise for teachers in Oklahoma right before the scheduled walkout, these teachers still rallied at their state Capitol. The teachers in Oklahoma were quick to explicitly say that their strikes were “for the children.”

“I can make the decision to go find something else if I need to, but my kids are stuck in this system until they’re 18. And for a lot of them, free education is the only option. And so, in the end, we’re hurting our kids way more than we’re hurting anybody else. And so, I think most teachers in the state would make the same argument. We didn’t do it for ourselves. We did it for our kids.” Oklahoma middle/high school English teacher

In Oklahoma, teachers said pay increases were indeed a factor in their decision to strike, but they also said they wanted an increase in per-pupil funding and classroom resources. While the teachers in Washington also invoked language suggesting their passion and career choice was
“for the children,” those teachers said they were explicitly striking for pay increases, largely because they said the legislature sent money to districts specifically for pay raises.

“The legislature sent a certain pot of money, and they sent it for technology years past, and they sent it for other things, and this was year that they said, ‘Now we are sending this pot of money for teacher salaries. That what it is for.’” Washington high school English teacher 2

It is important to note that, while the legislature sent money to increase funding for education, they did so under the order of the state court system in Washington. Had the state Supreme Court not mandated that the legislature increase funding for public education, it is unclear whether the legislature would have increased funding on its own (McCleary v. State of Washington, 2015) (McCleary v. State of Washington, 2012). Because of the McCleary decision, school districts in Washington have been seeing an infusion of money in the years prior, thus the teachers said they did not need to strike for the same reasons as the teachers in Oklahoma (Engrossed House Bill 2242).

The teachers in Washington said they went on strike strictly due to pay increases. In Oklahoma, the teachers interviewed said that they continued their plan to strike because they were striking over per-pupil funding and classroom resources, with some saying they’d be willing to choose that over a pay raise.

“I would have picked the funding because I feel like it would have made my job a lot easier because now I do get a little more on my paycheck each month, but nothing has changed in terms of the resources that I have at school or the book money that I need for my department because we can’t get new books and things like that.” Oklahoma middle/high school English teacher

She hesitated before making that statement, acknowledging that her perceived position of privilege, in which she has little student debt and lives in a dual-income household, allows her to make that hypothetical decision. However, other teachers interviewed for this research concurred with her sentiment that their schools and districts were grossly underfunded.
The teachers interviewed did not limit their grievances with their state governments to the legislature. In fact, despite the issues with their state legislatures, nearly all think that they “at least try to do the right thing.” This notion was especially evident among teachers in Washington. In Oklahoma specifically, teachers shared a universal distrust for their governor at the time of the walkouts, Mary Fallin, who made the following statement regarding the teacher strikes:

“Teachers want more, but it’s like kind of having a teenage kid that wants a better car.” (Sanchez, 2018)

When I brought up this quote, many teachers responded sarcastically with “Where’s my car, Mary?” One of the teachers described how they turned that phrase into a fundraising gimmick, in which teachers held car washes and used that money for supplies for the strikes. They used words like “out of touch” and “disrespectful” to describe their governor at the time, and many of the teachers attested to the fact that her approval rating was lower than then-President Barack Obama’s at the time of the walkout.

As for Washington, when asked about their governor, the teachers were unable to provide an answer regarding his position on the teacher strikes that took place. One of the English teachers in Washington said she was “embarrassed” that she did not know his position on the strikes, and others were simply unable to give an answer on his position.

The purpose of this section was to describe the teachers’ perceptions of their state legislatures and governors regarding their profession and public education. In Oklahoma, the teachers said that the state legislature had been reducing funding from education funding for the last 10 years, and they said they conducted statewide walkouts to protest the overall underfunding of public education in addition to their perceived low salaries. In Washington, the teachers had received funding because of a mandated court decision, so they said their strikes were about their salaries. However, teachers in both cases invoked grievances beyond material resources and pay.
They said they felt undervalued and deprofessionalized by their state legislature. However, because the legislature in Washington directed the salary allocation decision to the strike districts, teachers in that state had to strike against their districts for more funding, while the concentration of power in the state legislature in Oklahoma prompted the teachers in that case to strike against their state government. In the next section, I will briefly explain the relationship between teachers and school districts in both cases and teachers and the school administration in both cases.

**District Leaders & School Administration**

One of the major differences between Washington and Oklahoma was their perception of school district leaders. In Oklahoma, school districts across the state closed schools so that teachers could strike against the state government without facing any legal issues, as the teachers noted that striking is technically illegal for public employees in Oklahoma. If the teachers in Oklahoma had issues with their school districts, they did not make such grievances known in the interviews. In fact, they spoke rather highly of their districts.

Washington teachers, however, expressed a more adversarial relationship with their districts. The strikes in Washington were against individual districts rather than the state. While the teachers emphasized with district leaders. These leaders had to redo salary allocation models and had to divide an infusion of money among their staff (Senate Bill 6362, 2018). Further, because of the new restrictions on local funding in the state, teachers said they understood that district leaders wanted to save some of the extra money received from the state, so they would not have to make budget cuts later. Still, tension between districts and teachers were prevalent in the interviews.
One of the teachers, a union representative, recalled her time bargaining with her district. They sent her and her bargaining team to mediation, where she said they used verbally abusive language against her and her team.

“I think I have PTSD from having a mediator who would come in and just say horrible things to us. One of his comments was pretty much like ‘you’re just gonna disrespect them for this much longer? You might as well just go home!’” Because there were 3 groups of us bargaining, and he was like “teachers you might as well just go home!” At that point, I had packed up my stuff. My teammates looked at me and was like “we’re not really going home,” but it was that bad. He would come in and….it was crazy. He was trying to get us emotional and to move, and so he was trying to get every trick in the book, and some of them I think were a little bit on the crazy side.” Washington middle school social studies teacher

While other teachers did not go into those levels of depth regarding the bargaining decisions, they said they felt disrespect and betrayed by their school districts. While the middle school social studies teacher describes her current relationship with her district as “working,” they said they felt as though these strikes wounded their communities.

The last increase in funding, according to the teachers interviewed, was supposed to be used for teacher pay raises. However, each teacher interviewed said their districts were unwilling to allocate all the recent funds from the legislature to teacher salaries, in part because of projects budget shortfalls in subsequent years.

“Well they projected a shortfall in their funding for I think...they were projecting to be in the red like I think this upcoming year. But the thing is, when you look at the funding, there were going to be some short-term kind of pipelining, but overall, over the course of years, and it was clearly up. They were clearly not losing money.” Washington high school English teacher 3

The districts were projecting revenue shortfalls in subsequent years, and according to the teachers, those districts were worried that, by promising large salary increases now, they would not be able to afford those increases later. However, the teachers also clearly indicated that,
while they emphasized with the districts’ positions, the funding shortfall was, as one teacher said “not our problem.”

“Yeah I see why you might be feeling that way. It’s our money. Give us our money.”
Washington alternative high school teacher

The Oklahoma and Washington teachers differed on their opinions of their school districts, they nearly unanimously expressed discontent with their administration. One teacher described the job of administrators as “putting out fires,” while others said they focused on the wrong issues. The kindergarten teachers in Oklahoma experienced shifting expectations with their administrators. They felt as though the rules were constantly changing, and they are unsure of their administration’s priorities. The lack of managerial training and experience was a point of contention for many of the teachers as well, saying they felt the approach from administration was too “top down” to be effective, and the Oklahoma alternative teacher cited the administration as a culprit against teachers’ work autonomy. Washington high school English teacher 1 said the administration loses touch in what it means to be a teacher, and she said she has experienced situations where the administration has moved students out of her class without telling her.

“I said, ‘All you did was give my problem to someone else!’ She was like ‘Yeah...I know...’ and they get busy and they completely lose touch with being in the classroom and what that means. They’ll tell you to do something, and you’ll go ‘You know what..’ And that’s been the biggest thing I’ve told new teachers. ‘Well he came and did my evaluation and he said that I need to do this or that. I don’t know how I can do that.’ So I go, ‘So ask him. Have him come demonstrate.’ And they go ‘What do you mean?’ ‘He’s your mentor! He’s supposed to be the person who can do this! So have him come do it.’ Washington high school English teacher 1

The purpose of this section was to explain how the relationships between teachers and their administration and teachers and school districts leaders impacted their stated job satisfaction and ultimately their stated decisions to strike. For Oklahoma, teachers largely regarded school district leaders as an allies for them against the state legislature, and the districts closed schools so the
teachers could rally at the state Capitol for more education funding. In Washington, districts were originally allying with teachers in *McCleary* decision, as mentioned in the first section of this research. However, once districts received money for teacher salaries, the relationship became adversarial and contentious. In both cases, the relationship between teachers and their administration was contentious, thus decreasing their job satisfaction and, accordingly, increasing their likelihood of striking. The last section of this research will discuss teachers’ perceptions of the US Department of Education’s Secretary of Education.

**US Department of Education**

While teachers did not attribute the Secretary of Education as a factor for their decision to strike, I found it important to include her in this research for a couple of reasons. First, teachers spoke of feeling devalued, deprofessionalized, and under-appreciated. They spoke of people in power as being the culprits against their profession, and when asked about their opinions on the Secretary Devos, the teachers interviewed said that she was emblematic of the disrespect they perceive to get from people in power. The teachers’ interviews demonstrated a widely shared bitter contempt for Secretary of Education Betsy Devos. They shared words such as out of touch and rich, and they described her as a “slap across the face to teachers.” Overall, they shared a consensus that she does not meet the qualifications to be in charge of the Department of Education.

“Ha! She’s the worst! Isn’t she the worst?! I love that her experience in education is “I’m a rich person who went into a really poor school and decided to help one kid and tutor one kid.” And that’s her background.” - Washington High School English Teacher 2

Secretary Devos, who the teachers described as an advocate for charter schools with no history working in public education according to the teachers interviewed, is a symbol for the deprofessionalization and devaluing of the teaching profession. The teachers detest her for her lack of experience in public education, and they felt as though her position in power further devalues
education. The teachers were clear in that they believe that policymakers should “trust experts” when it comes to classroom decisions, and the fact that teachers do not feel like Betsy Devos is an expert on public education symbolizes that teachers are not listened to at any level of government. The following section is the conclusion and implications section, in which I will provide a summary of my findings for my research and provide implications from these findings.

**Conclusion & Implications**

The purpose of this research is to explore the factors beyond funding that teachers say influence their job satisfaction and stated reasons for conducting strikes. Overall, the findings indicated that teachers feel as though those in power are enacting policies that they feel hurt the teaching profession and education overall more than help it. They feel as though policymakers do not listen to teachers in regard to what is needed to improve their profession and will improve student outcomes.

The teacher strike movement in 2018 was a movement for resources and salary increases on the surface. However, upon further research, the dissatisfaction with teachers’ professions stems beyond material goods and funding. The ability to make professional judgment calls, the ability to build upon students’ strengths and work on their weaknesses as they see fit, has dwindled to the point that teachers feel like they have to remind people that they are professionals. They largely do not feel as though government at any level is properly addressing their grievances. Overall, the teachers said they feel a disconnection between them and people in power.

In terms of political process theory, major events sparked the movements in each case. In Oklahoma, the business-led coalition, though failed, created an opening for the teachers to push for their pay raises and classroom resources. The spark allowed them to unleash their years of stated frustration and feelings of not being listened to in the form of a statewide teacher walkout.
For Washington, the major event that sparked the movement was the state supreme court case involving education policy leaders against the state of Washington. Because of the mandate from the court, the districts received unprecedented amounts of money. While districts switched allegiances once they received the money, teachers still felt an opening in the political system because of the fact that legislators and the court put teacher pay on the agenda. Overall, this study highlights the importance of looking at policy formation through the lens of political process, and it could also further highlight the idea that policy outcomes are the result of social movements.

The Washington teachers and the Oklahoma teachers went on strike against different entities, with the Oklahoma teachers striking against their state government and the Washington teachers striking against their school districts. Essentially, teachers in Washington and Oklahoma went on strike against those who they perceived to be the culprits of their grievances, and they had more positive opinions on entities that allied with them in the movement. In Washington, while the teachers said they had mixed opinions on their state legislatures, their stated opinions on their school districts are largely negative. Even though the legislature did not provide enough funding to maintain the pay increases they sought after, and even though the legislature restricted the ability for districts to raise their own funds, they largely said they blamed the school districts for trying to withhold their pay increases. In Oklahoma, the inverse happened. Teachers said they blamed the state legislature for failing to fund education at the levels they deemed necessary to be effective at their professions, and they allied with school districts to rally against their state legislature. Interestingly, teachers in Oklahoma largely did not talk about asking their districts to raise funds in lieu of the legislature, though given that most teachers said their schools were in impoverished areas, they may have felt their school districts were unable to do so.
In Washington, the teachers conducted regionalized strikes against their districts because they perceived the funding issues to come from their districts rather than the state government. Because the state was forced to increase funding for education and specifically for teacher salaries, the state legislature had to provide what the court deemed as adequate funding for public education. To provide cover, the state legislature devolved the decisions down to the local level between school districts and teachers. However, the teachers in Washington still said they felt undervalued by their districts, which set the stage for the regionalized strikes. In Oklahoma, the state chose to retain education funding power, which meant that teachers had to bargain with state lawmakers for education funding. Coupled with the fact that the partisan leanings of teachers is generally Democratic while the partisan composition of Oklahoma is generally Republican, this set the stage for a contentious fight between lawmakers and teachers. Further, the power of agenda setting rested in the hands of business interests in Oklahoma and in education interests in Washington, which could have further influenced the way in which the strikes played out in each case.

Beyond funding, teachers said felt deprofessionalized. They felt that they cannot make their own decisions, and they do not have the autonomy that other college degree-required professions have. The deprofessionalization of the teaching profession coupled with the different entities having the ability to set the agenda has implications to it. First, the body that is perceived to control the decision-making for funding will generally have an adversarial relationship with whoever wants those resources. While this may not be a profound statement, the Washington case highlights its significance. The Washington legislature retained its power to provide funding for school districts, but it gave up its power to dictate how those funds are allocated for teacher salaries. This may make bargaining more difficult for teachers moving forward, as they will have to first rally against their state government for more money, then they will have to rally against their districts
to bargain. In doing so, the contentious relationship between teachers and districts and teachers and the legislature may grow to be hostile over time. In Oklahoma, the power is almost fully vested in the state legislature, which means that the teachers in Oklahoma are bargaining with individuals removed from the education sector, which may make bargaining difficult, but they may also have fewer contentious fights with their school district. These potentially adversarial relationships without a remedy for mediation could result in more strikes and, ultimately, could hurt students in the long run.

**Policy Recommendations**

To avoid adversarial relationships and to prevent the negative consequences affiliated with strikes, professionalization of the teaching profession is key. Further, for avoiding strikes, it is important to maintain collaborative, working relationships between teachers and whichever institutional body is vested with dictating their resources. As such, a governing board comprised of educators to help make policy decisions for public education may be the best approach if policymakers want to avoid adversarial relationships with teachers. It is important that any hypothetical governing board has authority on par with whichever level of government that is most closely in charge of allocating resources for education. For example, Oklahoma’s hypothetical governing board would work best on the state level. Washington, on the other hand, may need both a state-level governing board for resource purposes, and it may also need regional governing boards for allocating said resources and making said local decisions. To minimize adversarial relationships further, I would recommend that regional boards send delegates to a state-level governing body, so that all decisions are grounded with regard to state, regional, and school-level education policy goals. In addition to this structural policy recommendation, I also recommend the following technical policies:
1. Ensure teachers have the resources they need to teach using the most current practices.

2. Require school administrators to have managerial experience.

3. When measuring schools for accountability purposes, factor in the students’ overall well-being so we can capture a fuller picture of how teachers impact students. This policy would require an increase in funding for school counselors as well.

**Limitations and Further Research**

Because this was an exploratory research on a relatively timely phenomenon, some limitations existed in this study. First, this research only looks at two of the multiple teacher strikes that took place in 2018. While these cases demonstrate that deprofessionalizing teachers can exist regardless of the political party in power, and while, I would conduct further research on the teacher strikes that took place in other states before generalizing these findings to all the teacher strikes in 2018. Future researchers studying this phenomenon should look at levels of autonomy teachers have in each area, and they should compare the funding levels. Finally, while this research does show what two politically different cases had in common regarding the teacher strikes, future researchers should look into why some states witnessed strikes in 2018 while others did not.
References


doi: 10.1146/annurev.soc.30.012703.110545


U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. National Education Association, Estimates of School Statistics, selected years, 1969-70 through 2016-17. (This table was prepared August 2017.)


Appendix

Appendix A: Funding

<table>
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<tr>
<th>State</th>
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<th>Average Salary</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
<th>Per-Pupil Expenditure</th>
<th>15-16 Per-Pupil Expenditure</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
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Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

*Denotes 2018 Teacher Strikes
### Appendix B: Teacher Demographics

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