**What’s Really at Stake in the Los Angeles Teachers’ Strike**

Can California provide sufficient resources to support an effective public education system? Or will charter schools cripple it?

By Miriam Pawel

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LOS ANGELES — For decades, public schools were part of California’s lure, key to the promise of opportunity. Forty years ago, with the lightning speed characteristic of the Golden State, all of that changed.

In the fall of 1978, after years of bitter battles to desegregate Los Angeles classrooms, 1,000 buses carried more than 40,000 students to new schools. Within six months, the nation’s second-largest school district lost 30,000 students, a good chunk of its white enrollment. The busing stopped; the divisions deepened.

Those racial fault lines had helped fuel the tax revolt that led to Proposition 13, the sweeping tax-cut measure that passed overwhelmingly in June 1978. The state lost more than a quarter of its total revenue. School districts’ ability to raise funds was crippled; their budgets shrank for the first time since the Depression. State government assumed control of allocating money to schools, which centralized decision-making in Sacramento.

Public education in California has never recovered, nowhere with more devastating impact than in Los Angeles, where a district now mostly low-income and Latino has failed generations of children most in need of help. The decades of frustration and impotence have boiled over in a strike with no clear endgame and huge long-term implications. The underlying question is: Can California ever have great public schools again?

The struggle in Los Angeles, a district so large it educates about 9 percent of all students in the state, will resonate around California. Oakland teachers are on the verge of a strike vote. Sacramento schools are on the verge of bankruptcy. The housing crisis has compounded teacher shortages. Los Angeles, like many districts, is losing students, and therefore dollars, even as it faces ballooning costs for underfunded pensions.

California still ranks low in average per-pupil spending, roughly half the amount spent in New York. California legislators have already filed bills proposing billions of dollars in additional aid, one of many competing pressures that face the new governor, Gavin Newsom, as he begins negotiations on his first state budget.

Unlike other states where teachers struck last year, California is firmly controlled by Democrats, for whom organized labor is a key ally. And the California teachers unions are among the most powerful lobbying force in Sacramento.

On paper, negotiations between the 31,000-member United Teachers of Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Unified School District center on traditional issues: salaries that have not kept pace, classes of more than 40 students, counselors and nurses with staggering caseloads. But the most potent and divisive issue is not directly on the bargaining table: the future of charter schools, which now enroll more than 112,000 students, almost one-fifth of all K-through-12 students in the district. They take their state aid with them, siphoning off $600 million a year from the district. The 224 independent charters operate free from many regulations, and all but a few are nonunion.

When California authorized the first charter schools in 1992 as a small experiment, no one envisioned that they would grow into an industry, now educating 10 percent of public school students in the state. To counter demands for greater regulation and transparency, charter advocates have in recent years poured millions into political campaigns. Last year, charter school lobbies spent $54 million on losing candidates for governor and state superintendent of education.

In Los Angeles, they have had more success. After his plan to move half of the Los Angeles district students into charter schools failed to get traction, the billionaire and charter school supporter Eli Broad and a group of allies [spent](https://www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/capitol-alert/article208718649.html) almost $10 million in 2017 to win a majority on the school board. The board rammed through the appointment of a superintendent, Austin Beutner, with no educational background. Mr. Beutner, a former investment banker, is the seventh in 10 years and has proposed dividing the district into 32 “networks,” a so-called portfolio plan designed in part by the consultant who engineered the radical restructuring of Newark schools.

“In my 17 years working with labor unions, I have been called on to help settle countless bargaining disputes in mediation,” wrote Vern Gates, the union-appointed member of the fact-finding panel called in to help mediate the Los Angeles stalemate last month. “I have never seen an employer that was intent on its own demise.”

It’s a vicious cycle: The more overcrowded and burdened the regular schools, the easier for charters to recruit students. The more students the district loses, the less money, and the worse its finances. The more the district gives charters space in traditional schools, the more overcrowded the regular classrooms.

Enrollment in the Los Angeles school district has declined consistently for 15 years, increasing the competition for students. It now educates just under a half-million students. More than 80 percent are poor, about three-quarters are Latino, and about one-quarter are English-language learners. On most state standardized tests, more than one-third fall below standards.

For 20 years, Katie Safford has taught at Ivanhoe Elementary, a school so atypical and so desirable that it drives up real estate prices in the upscale Silver Lake neighborhood. Ivanhoe parents raise almost a half million a year so that their children can have sports, arts, music and supplies. But parents cannot buy smaller classes or a school nurse. Mrs. Safford’s second-grade classroom is a rickety bungalow slated for demolition. When the floor rotted, the district put carpet over the holes. When leaks caused mold on the walls, Mrs. Safford hung student art to cover stains. The clock always reads 4:20.

“I was born to be a teacher,” Mrs. Safford said. “I have no interest in being an activist. None. But this is ridiculous.” For the first time in her life, she marched last month, one of more than 10,000 teachers and supporters in a sea of red.

Monday she walked the picket line outside a school where just eight of the 456 students showed up. Now her second graders ask the questions no one can answer: When will you be back? How will it end?

It is hard to know, when the adults have so thoroughly abdicated their responsibility for so long. Last week, the school board directed the superintendent to draw up a plan examining ways to raise new revenue.

This strike comes at a pivotal moment for California schools, amid recent glimmers of hope. Demographic shifts have realigned those who vote with those who rely on public services like schools. Voters approved state tax increases to support education in 2012, and again in 2016. In the most recent election, 95 of 112 school bond issues passed, a total of over $15 billion. The revised state formula drives more money into districts with more low-income students and English learners. Total state school aid increased by $23 billion over the past five years, and Governor Newsom has proposed another increase.

If Los Angeles teachers can build on those gains, the victory will embolden others to push for more, just as teachers on the rainy picket lines this week draw inspiration from the successful #RedforEd movements around the country. The high stakes have drawn support from so many quarters, from the Rev. James Lawson, the 90-year-old civil rights icon, to a “Tacos for Teachers” campaign to fund food on the picket lines.

If this fight for public education in Los Angeles fails, it will consign the luster of California schools to an ever more distant memory.

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