

# Newton teachers should end illegal strike

There's a mediation procedure in Massachusetts law for public sector unions and municipal employers to resolve their differences. The teachers in Newton should use it, instead of leaving students in the lurch.

By **The Editorial Board** Updated January 30, 2024, 4:00 a.m.



Hundreds of striking Newton teachers and supporters rallied outside Newton City Hall on Jan. 19

The Newton teachers strike has lasted for seven days as of Monday, and is increasingly taking a toll on the district's 12,000 students — especially its **most vulnerable**. It is not appropriate to hold the education and wellbeing of those students hostage to a dispute

among adults any longer. The teachers ought to end the strike, return to the classroom, and resolve their disputes with the Newton school committee over the negotiating table.

Tensions have been building for more than a year, with the Newton Teachers Association accusing the district of failing to negotiate a new contract in good faith after its old deal expired, and the district saying the union has made unrealistic financial demands. The union went on strike on Jan. 19. Strikes by public sector workers are illegal in Massachusetts, and a state judge has fined the union \$425,000 so far.

This being Newton, there are plenty of highly articulate partisans on both sides. And spreadsheets — lots of spreadsheets.

Teachers, whose pay averaged \$93,000 in 2020-2021, are [seeking larger raises than the school committee has proposed](#), and a new requirement to have a social worker in every building. There are also some differences over class size and hours for classroom aides. The city's position has been that the union's demands are so expensive they would require the city to make layoffs. Cities, unlike the federal government, can't just mint money, and Newton voters [defeated a proposed tax hike that would have put more money in the city's coffers only last year](#).

But whether you take the city's side or the union's, the bigger picture here is that a strike is not how such a disagreement should be hashed out, because it causes too much collateral damage.

The strike is disrupting routines across Newton, but the burden falls especially hard on students with disabilities and their families. Seven days may not seem like much, but parents of special education students have started complaining to the state about missed instruction time. "Being out of class means missing valuable time with trusted aides, teachers, and therapists, and the structured routine that school provides," the Globe's Deanna Pan reported on Friday. Almost one in five students in Newton are special education students, according to state data.

The strike also creates challenges for working parents and those who may not be able to afford child care. Despite the city's tony reputation, about 13 percent of students are from low-income families, meaning plenty of Newton families can't afford to just ride out the strike by sending their kids skiing for the week.

The city — and the teachers themselves — ought to be worrying about rich families for a different reason, though. For some of those families, already wary of public schools after the pandemic disruptions, an illegal strike could be the last straw that pushes them to switch to private schools. Falling enrollment wouldn't help anyone, and Newton shouldn't take the excellent reputation of its schools for granted.

Instead of a strike, the better way for the union to resolve its differences with the district is by completing the [procedure laid out in state law for navigating labor impasses for public employees](#). Mediation began [over the summer](#), and was still ongoing when the

union went out on strike this month. To nudge the union, the judge overseeing the case should resume escalating the fines until the teachers come back to work.

And ultimately, if the state process still doesn't deliver the result the union wants, the teachers do have one last recourse: elections. Newton's current leadership hasn't been willing to make the kind of layoffs that would be necessary to pay the teachers what they want, and its electorate wasn't willing to raise taxes last year. The union and its supporters can push for another override vote, or try to elect new leaders with different priorities. That's how democracy works. But in the meantime, schools need to reopen, teachers need to teach — and students need to learn.

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