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Thousands of teachers in Washington state strike over salaries

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(Reuters) - Nearly 80,000 students in Washington state were unable to attend the first day of school this week as thousands of teachers went on strike seeking higher salaries, teacher's unions said.

Educators in seven school districts in southwestern Washington were on strike as early as mid-August and the number of walkouts was expected to rise, according to the Washington Education Association, which represents teachers in the state.

Teachers seeking enhanced education funding also have walked out in recent months in West Virginia, Arizona and Oklahoma.

More Washington educators would walk out next week. Teachers in Seattle - the state's most-populated city - on Tuesday gave their union authority to call for a strike unless a contract deal is reached before classes resume there on Sept. 5, according to the Seattle Education Association.

Seattle Public Schools officials said the district backs educators and believes it has provided them with fair and competitive salaries, but it said on Wednesday that it must also manage its budget to provide services for students.

“We must balance our desire to support our educators while at the same time sustaining critical services and programs students need and families expect,” Seattle school officials said in a statement. “Even with offering every state dollar, starting in 2019-20 the district is projecting a budget shortfall that will grow over time.”

Contract renegotiation began in most of Washington’s 295 school districts, which serve more than 1 million students, after state lawmakers this year approved an additional \$1 billion hike for educators’ salaries for the upcoming school year, according to the Seattle Times.

The Vancouver Education Association union said its proposal for salary increases only includes the money specifically allocated by the state for salaries and that it would not negatively impact students.

“School districts across the state have already settled fair contracts,” the Vancouver union said on its website. “We are currently in the midst of a statewide educator shortage crisis. We cannot afford to have our highly qualified teachers leave for other, more competitive districts.”

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