

My kids don't have school today, and I'm cheering for their teachers

School closures are difficult and disruptive. But this is how public protest works.

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My kids are out of school today. It's the ninth unplanned day off since January—six snow days, two days off after a tornado ripped through town and destroyed three schools in the district, and now today.

Today, there's a huge rally for educators in the state capital as the legislature opens its new session, and thousands of teachers are there instead of in class. It's not a strike; organizers of the rally were careful to encourage teachers to request personal time to attend, and so many did that there just weren't enough substitutes available to keep the schools open. The same is true for districts across the state.

As a parent, the disruption in the schedule is annoying. But I'm glad that the teachers are able to go, and I'm glad that the rally there is garnering so much attention.

I know that's easy for me to say. I have a flexible job and plenty of paid time off. My kids are tired of getting schlepped to work with me or their dad, and we're tired of it too, but it's mainly an inconvenience. For some parents, no school today means a smaller paycheck at the end of the month. Thankfully, community centers and after-school programs made plans to open all day, and a number of schools are serving lunch to anyone who needs it. But it's still not easy for many families. I know it was a tough decision for the teachers and the school district to make the call to close.

But this is how public protests work: they disrupt the system enough that the system has to pay attention. In the last few months we've seen a wave of teacher protests that closed schools in West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Arizona—and led to real change in those states. Earlier this week, the new Poor People's Campaign

kicked off 40 days of public demonstrations in state capitals across the country, calling for a sweeping response to systemic racism and poverty. One needs only to read the headlines from Gaza to appreciate anew our right and ability to peacefully protest the things we think are wrong, to speak up about the things that need to change.

And at least here in North Carolina, the way we fund public education needs to change. [As the Century editors pointed out last month](#), education is a public good, designed for the benefit of all of us. Like the right to free speech, public education is a bedrock of our society. We can't have a participatory democracy without quality public education available to everybody. We all do better when our schools do well.

The pay scale for teachers in North Carolina ranks among the lowest in the nation, [one of the things educators at today's rally are calling on legislators to change](#). I'm not sure why our culture values some professions over others, why in general, accountants and IT people make more than teachers. It's not because they work harder or have more degrees. Teachers wipe noses and bandage scraped knees and clean up bodily fluid I'd rather not think about. They balance a huge range of learning styles and they deal with cranky parents and they only get 20 minutes for lunch. They practice lockdown drills and imagine how they will protect the children if someone comes in with an AR-15. They do all this while teaching kids how to read and do calculus and be good citizens. A pay increase to get our teachers at least to the national average hardly seems unreasonable.

The North Carolina teachers are also calling for increased numbers of nurses, social workers, and counselors. Public schools are one of the ways we make sure that nobody falls through the cracks. Sometimes school is the only place where a kid gets a full meal, or a family has access to a social worker or a nurse.

A solid, well-rounded education ought to be the great equalizer in our society. There are other factors involved, to be sure: poverty, health care, and racism, to name the thorniest. But why not start with what we know we can do? Why not make teaching a competitively compensated profession that attracts our best and brightest minds? Why not equip our schools with well-trained counselors and social workers who can help families in crisis? Why not improve school infrastructure so kids can learn in safe buildings with new technologies and the supplies they need?

Why not pour our best resources into educating a new generation of creative innovators and critical thinkers?

The tension around funding public education, like many of the things we fight about most, is rooted in a mindset of scarcity. We seem to be afraid that there won't be enough to go around, which reveals where our priorities lie: Are we after what's best for me and my kid? Or what's best for all of us as a whole?

Perhaps we ought to stop thinking in terms of limited resources and start thinking about what we really value.

If we want to continue to live in a democracy where we have some say in how we are governed, then we ought to ensure unfettered access to public education of the highest quality. If we want to call ourselves followers of Jesus, who asks us to serve the poor and the marginalized, then we had better create systems that don't leave anybody out. If we want to worship a God of abundance and not scarcity, then we have got to trust that there is enough to go around.

When the tornado ripped through town last month, the outpouring of donations and support for the damaged schools was incredible. Volunteers showed up in droves to help set up new classrooms. School supplies arrived by the busload. We know the value of schools. We know the value of teachers. We know how important it is—to our democracy, to our communities, to our very humanity—to provide our children with safe places to learn and grow. Our state budgets should reflect those values.

So while I'm figuring out how to occupy my children today, I'm also cheering on the teachers in Raleigh. I don't know where we'd be without them.