

## WU WILLAMETTE WEEK

### Superintendents in Oregon's Largest School Districts Bridle at Giving Striking Workers Unemployment Benefits

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**A picket during the Portland teachers' strike of 2023.** (Brian Brose)

By [Joanna Hou](#)

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Eight superintendents from Oregon's largest school districts wrote a letter Friday to members of the Oregon House of Representatives, urging them to oppose one of the most hotly contested bills this session: Senate Bill 916.

The bill has the backing of unions across Oregon and, as currently amended, would require employers to pay unemployment benefits to striking workers after two weeks (this is one week of ineligibility followed by a standard waiting week). The provision has particularly strong implications for public education because, while private employers' payroll taxes fund Oregon's Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund, thus cushioning the bill's impact, public employers like school districts don't

pay into this trust and would shoulder the full cost of unemployment benefits. The bill passed the state Senate in late March.

The superintendents represent the Beaverton School District, Bend-La Pine Schools, the Gresham-Barlow School District, the Hillsboro School District, the Medford School District, Portland Public Schools, Salem-Keizer Public Schools, and the Tigard-Tualatin School District. In [their letter](#), the superintendents write that the passage of SB 916 would come at a particularly fragile time for Oregon schools, as many face budget deficits in upcoming years.

“We must share the serious financial strain and administrative burden this bill would place on school districts—especially during a time of profound fiscal uncertainty,” the superintendents wrote. “The core of our concern is simple: every public dollar intended for education must be spent in a way that directly benefits students.”

*WW* reported in February on warnings from organizations like the Oregon School Boards Association of the possible consequences of the bill’s passage. Education lobbyists who’ve opposed the bill [say they worry](#) it would encourage longer strikes and take money away from students. In the two states with similar bills to SB 916, New York and New Jersey, teachers are prohibited from striking.

Legislators have made some adjustments to SB 916 since then, including a notable one for school districts. Under the amended text, benefits school employees receive during strikes would count toward total compensation. “The district shall deduct from the employee’s future wages the amount of benefits received,” it reads. In other words, districts would not be required to pay employees more than their salaries.

But the superintendents write that while they appreciate the amendment, it “raises serious implementation concerns.” They write that their districts may not see reimbursements for unemployment benefits for months following a strike, exacerbating cash flow issues.

Amid budget planning season, they warn that these “new and unplanned” costs would likely come with consequences to students, including shorter school years, increased class sizes, or reductions in other support services.

“With limited state resources available this session and looming cuts to federal education funding, we are bracing for a difficult year of tough, heartbreaking choices and constrained budgets,” they wrote. “In this environment, any policy that increases district expenses—no matter how well-intended—risks further diverting critical resources away from students and classrooms.”

A spokesperson for the Oregon Education Association, the statewide teachers’ union, did not immediately respond to *WW*’s request for comment. OEA leaders have previously said the bill is necessary because it will give teachers the financial means to support themselves while on strike, ensuring they can engage in fairer negotiations with the school districts for which they work.