

SCHOOL REFORM PROPOSALS: THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

TEACHER UNIONS AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

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Research Quality

Only 17 prominent studies have looked at the relationship between teacher unions and achievement. The 12 studies that reported favorable union effects are generally more methodologically sound than those that found harmful effects. Studies that reported favorable effects used more extensive statistical controls and were often conducted at the student level. In contrast, studies reporting harmful effects were conducted at the state or district level, which, due to aggregation, are more prone to error.

Research Findings

Claims Against, For Unionism: Critics note that unions raise the costs of education; make it more difficult for principals to remove ineffective teachers; and lead to more conflicted relationships among teachers, principals, and district administrators. Proponents observe that unions have improved compensation and security for teachers, led to more formal school structures, and secured smaller class sizes and more instructional preparation time.

Negative Findings for Unions: Two studies blamed teacher unions for declining college entrance scores from the 1960s to 1980. A reanalysis concluded greater state unionization led to *higher* state SAT scores, and one study reporting negative effects on college entrance scores is more mixed in its findings than in its conclusion. Increased state unionization led to decreased scores on the Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT) in another study; the actual evidence is more ambivalent. A Milwaukee study linking unionism to disappointing achievement from 1964 to 1996 failed to account for demographic changes. A study finding unionized districts had greater high school dropout rates omitted data that might have changed its findings.

Positive Findings for Unions: Several studies found math, economics and SAT scores in unionized schools improved more than in non-unionized schools. Increases in state unionization led to increases in state SAT, ACT, and NAEP scores and improved graduation rates. One analysis attributed lower SAT and ACT scores in the South to weaker unionization there.

Differential Union Impacts on Lowest, Highest Achievers: While unionism boosted achievement for most students, the very lowest- and very highest-achieving students actually fared somewhat worse in unionized schools.

Differential Union Impacts on Race, Gender: African-American seniors in unionized schools scored higher on the SAT than those in non-unionized schools. Minority students had larger high school math gains in unionized schools than those in nonunion schools. Minority students experienced smaller math gains in mostly white unionized schools compared with mostly white nonunion ones, but in schools where most students were minorities, minority students had higher gains in unionized schools than in nonunion ones. Unionism lowered the probability of dropping out of high school for men but not for women.

Administrative Flexibility: Union contracts often constrained the flexibility, but not necessarily the effectiveness, of administrators.

Why Unions Raise Achievement: This has not been widely studied. Instructional standardization follows unionization and particularly helps middle-range students. Unionization may transform schools into more effective, tightly-coupled organizations.

Consensus Findings: Unionism does not appear to lower student achievement for most students in public education, but rather leads to modestly higher achievement, and possibly enhanced prospects of graduation from high school. Favorable student outcomes hold for students from the fourth-grade level through high school. The very lowest- and very highest-achieving students fared somewhat worse on standardized tests in unionized schools, however.

Remaining Research Questions

How and why do unions raise achievement? Are gains from unionism worth associated costs?

Recommendations

- Policy makers should view teacher unions more as collaborators than as adversaries.
- Policy makers and school districts should reconsider current union proposals for educational improvement. Given the empirical evidence, unions have a solid track record of supporting policies that boost achievement for most students.
- In unionized school districts, policy makers should direct particular attention to programs for very low- and high-achieving students, and should ensure that appropriate resources and specialized curricula are available.

The foregoing is a summary of a chapter in the book *School Reform Proposals: The Research Evidence* (Information Age Publishing, 2002), edited by Alex Molnar. The full chapter can be viewed at:

http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps/EPRU/documents/EPRU_2002-101/Chapter_10-Carini-Final.pdf