

Evidence Says That Students Do Better In Schools With Strong Teachers' Unions

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In the current anti-union climate in the U.S., there may not be any group of unions that has been singled out for more criticism than teachers' unions. Unions such as the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) have been blamed by politicians, think tanks, and the public for everything from low student achievement to

blocking proposed education reforms.

However, despite claims from some quarters that unions are a large part of the problem with American public education, there is ample evidence that teachers' unions are a vital piece of the education puzzle, and that students benefit from their existence.

The right likes to depict teachers' unions as "old style" labor unions: monolithic and intransigent, with union locals taking orders from national "union bosses,"

ready to strike and disrupt a school district at a moment's notice. A Harvard University study by Professor Susan Moore Johnson found that nothing could be further from the truth. Johnson says:

“Many people think that national unions dictate school practice. They don't realize how much is determined at the local level when contracts are negotiated. Contracts, each of which is locally negotiated, establish pay and working conditions — hours, class size, and evaluation — for teachers. Collective bargaining provides a legal, structured process in which local unions and management can develop reforms, such as peer review or performance-based pay.”

So contrary to what anti-union politicians would like the public to think, union locals play a vital role in working with school districts to create reforms at the district or even the building level. In fact Johnson and her colleagues at Harvard interviewed 30 union local presidents from six states, and reported that they were surprised to find that “most presidents at the local level were not robotically focused on the traditional union agenda of better pay, better benefits, and better conditions.”

According to Harvard doctoral student Morgaen Donaldson, who worked with Johnson on the study:

“I was surprised by how much variation there was in the presidents' views. In some instances, presidents of unions in adjacent districts had diametrically opposed positions on innovations in teacher pay or how aggressive to be with management. This study taught me that there really is no monolithic teachers union. Policy and practice are made daily in districts and through relationships among local leaders.”

During the 2011 labor strife in Wisconsin caused by Governor Scott Walker's attack on public employee unions, union opponents such as state senator Glenn Grothman claimed that "strong unionization" had hurt Wisconsin students and had caused a drop in NAEP (National Assessment Of Educational Progress) test scores. Union supporters questioned Grothman, pointing out that Wisconsin students consistently performed better on the SAT and ACT tests than do students in the five states that at that time prohibited collective bargaining for teachers: South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Texas and Georgia.

Angus Johnston, a history professor at the City University of New York, took a look at the numbers cited by Grothman and Wisconsin democrats, and came to the following conclusion:

"Yes, Wisconsin has great schools, with great outcomes. Yes, states without teachers' unions lag behind. Yes, that lag persists even when you control for demographic variables. Yes, that difference seems to rest less on the quantifiable resources that unions fight to bring to the classroom than on the professionalism, positive working environment, and effective school administration that unions foster."

And yes, Virginia, (and Texas, Georgia, and North and South Carolina) unions do work.

Finally, it is important to make note of how better pay and working conditions that are often brought about through the efforts of teachers' unions help schools. Think about how many times you have heard the comment that "Company A" has to offer a "competitive compensation package" to its top officials in order to "keep the best and brightest." This same logic should apply to teacher salaries, but you never hear any public education critic stand up and announce that teachers are often

paid uncompetitive salaries and that education would improve if schools would only offer higher pay to attract and keep highly qualified teachers. In fact, even though public education requires highly trained individuals, teachers' starting salaries lag behind those of other fields with similar training requirements.

According to the NEA, the average starting salary for American teachers in 2011-12 was \$35,672. (It is worth noting that out of the states listed above that prohibit collective bargaining by teachers, only Virginia offers a starting salary that is above the national average.) CNNMoney.com reported in 2011 that the average starting salary for new college graduates was \$50,034.

The evidence is plain: schools and students are helped by teachers' unions. Those unions are far from the way they are depicted by their detractors, and in many areas are actively involved on the local level, working with administrators and school boards to improve education.

The author is a retired teacher and a proud 29 year member of the NEA.

Read more: <http://www.addictinginfo.org/2013/09/01/evidence-says-that-students-do-better-in-schools-with-strong-teachers-unions/#ixzz2eLh3nVL4>