

10: TEACHER UNIONS AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RESEARCH FINDINGS

While only 17 prominent studies have looked at the teacher union-achievement link, the evidence suggests that unionism raises achievement modestly for most students in public schools. These favorable patterns on unionism include higher math and verbal standardized test scores, and very possibly, an increased likelihood of high school graduation. Although most studies were conducted on high-school students, favorable union effects were also found at the elementary level. At the same time, a union presence was harmful for the very lowest- and highest-achieving students. Research to date is only suggestive as to why unions may improve achievement for most students. Two promising explanations include the possibility that unions standardize programs, instruction, and curricula in a way that benefits middle-range (most) students, and that unions “shock” schools into restructuring for greater effectiveness by improving connections and communication among district administrators, principals and teachers.

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.

10: TEACHER UNIONS AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

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One of the most dramatic events in education over the past few decades has been the rise of teacher unions. Until the early 1960s, virtually no teachers were unionized, i.e., covered by collective bargaining agreements. Today, the National Education Association (NEA) claims 2.5 million members, and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) another 1 million.¹ Given the extensive growth and influence of teacher unions, observers often wonder if unionism affects students' academic performance. Unlike most other topics in this Report, unionism is not typically considered a key factor in promoting greater achievement. In fact, public opinion is split as to whether teacher unionism is harmful or helpful to educational outcomes.² Considering both this general perception and the considerable rhetoric from both critics and supporters of unions, it is surprising that so little research exists on the unionism-achievement link. Still, the overall pattern in the research is increasingly clear; teacher unionism favorably influences achievement for most students in public schools.

TEACHER UNIONISM RESEARCH

DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHER UNIONS

The vast majority of unionized teachers are members of either the NEA or the AFT. The NEA traces its roots to 1857. The NEA, or National Teachers' Association as it was originally known, was formed to provide a collective voice for educators who were concerned about the movement toward centralization in public schools.³ At its onset, the NEA was led not by classroom teachers, but a cadre of educational elites, primarily administrators, who pressed for

the increased professionalization of teachers. In contrast, the AFT was formed in 1916 by rank-and-file teachers with a mindset not unlike that found in industrial unions.⁴ The AFT was granted an American Federation of Labor (AFL) charter membership in 1917, and stayed with the AFL after its merger with the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1955. Despite interest by their members, it was not until the early 1960s that teachers engaged in collective bargaining. The AFT embraced the concept more quickly than the NEA. At first, NEA leadership held that collective bargaining was incompatible with professionalism. The NEA was compelled to alter its position on collective bargaining, however, when it began losing ground to the AFT in the mid-1960s. Due to possible conflicts of interest, administrators were pushed out of the NEA with the onset of collective bargaining. Although serious merger talks began as early as the late 1960s, the two unions have maintained their separate identities.

The proliferation of teacher unions is even more impressive against a backdrop of overall union decline in the United States since the 1960s.⁵ Membership gains were especially strong for teacher unions during the initial expansion of collective bargaining in the 1960s and 1970s. Since the 1980s, membership growth has continued at a more moderate yet steady pace. The expansion of teacher unionism has not been uniform across all regions of the country. Teacher unionization in the South has noticeably lagged that in other regions. Weaker unionization is reflected in state laws on union rights,⁶ as well as in the proportion of teachers covered under collective bargaining agreements.⁷ This weakness for teacher unions in the South parallels that of industrial unions in this region.⁸

WHY UNIONISM MIGHT DECREASE ACHIEVEMENT

In considering whether teacher unions affect achievement, it is helpful to examine why they might do so. There are compelling cases made both against and for unions. Many of these

arguments mirror those put forth regarding unions in general. Whether these differences actually influence student achievement as the arguments assert is an empirical question requiring further exploration.

Critics of unions argue that efforts to improve compensation and working conditions for teachers compromise student achievement. Some common arguments against teacher unionism include:⁹

- Unions raise the costs of education, thereby draining resources away from inputs that raise achievement.
- Unions remove incentives for teachers to improve instruction – for example, by shielding ineffective teachers from dismissal and by tying salaries to seniority rather than merit.
- Increased formalization as a result of unionization hampers principals' ability to manage their schools.
- Unions encourage distrustful relationships between teachers and principals.
- Due to their political clout, teacher unions can block promising educational reforms that threaten union interests.
- Teacher union strikes, or even their threat, disrupt instruction, lower morale, and damage community relations.

Some of the differences suggested above between unionized schools and their non-unionized counterparts have been documented. For example, that teacher unions raise the costs of education, especially teacher salaries, is well established.¹⁰ Some studies have reported that unionism made it more difficult for principals to remove ineffective teachers.¹¹ And in some studies, unionism was linked to more conflicted relationships among teachers, principals, and

district administrators.¹²

WHY UNIONISM MIGHT BOOST ACHIEVEMENT

While the higher costs associated with teacher unionism are confirmed, supporters of unions assert that these additional costs are a worthwhile investment, i.e., educational gains are worth the higher costs. Several of these arguments assume that unions ultimately enhance teacher instruction. Teacher interests and educational needs of children are not viewed as incompatible, but in fact, intertwined. Others hold that unions should make schools more effective organizations. Some common arguments for teacher unionism include:¹³

- The higher salaries and benefits associated with unionism attract and retain superior teachers.
- Unions offer teachers a greater sense of professionalism and dignity.
- Unions provide teachers with a collective “voice” to express ideas and concerns.¹⁴
- Unions enhance teacher morale and job satisfaction
- Unions support practices purported to boost student achievement, e.g., smaller class sizes and designated instructional planning time.
- Unions “shock” management, schools, or both, into becoming more effective organizations.

As with arguments against unionism, some of the differences suggested above between unionized schools and their non-unionized counterparts are documented. For example, teacher unions have attained many of their bread-and-butter goals such as greater compensation and security.¹⁵ Evidence suggests that school structures become more formalized after unionization.¹⁶ Several studies show that unionized schools tend to have smaller class sizes¹⁷ and teachers who engage in more instructional preparation time.¹⁸

RESEARCH ON ACHIEVEMENT

Despite the considerable scrutiny of teacher unions, and speculation on why they might affect student achievement, few empirical studies exist. While the studies scrutinized here may not reflect the entire population of empirical work, the 17 selected have been the most widely cited. In contrast, consider that there are literally hundreds of studies on factors covered in other chapters in this report. Still, despite the relatively small research base, there is an emerging consensus in the literature that teacher unionism favorably influences achievement for most students, as measured by a variety of standardized tests. These patterns hold at both the elementary and high school levels. Fewer researchers have looked at whether unionism affects the probability of graduation from high school – while the findings are somewhat mixed, the bulk of the evidence points toward a small positive impact of unions. In addition, some studies have examined unions’ impact on educational attainment, as measured by high school graduation or dropout. Despite the overall pattern of favorable union impacts, five studies have reported that unionism depresses educational outcomes. As will be seen in the next section, several of these studies reach questionable conclusions given their analyses.

Research: Unions Decrease Achievement

Two of the three studies with negative union findings attempted to explain the decline of college entrance scores from the 1960s until 1980. Teacher unions seemed a plausible culprit due to their rapid development over this same period. Accordingly, Kurth tested whether several factors were responsible for changes in state Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) scores between 1972 and 1983.¹⁹ He concluded that unionism was more responsible than any other factor for declines in state SAT scores (both math and verbal). Kurth’s work did not go unchallenged.

Nelson and Gould of the AFT, citing measurement and methodological problems in Kurth's analysis, reanalyzed the same data and concluded just the opposite – that greater state unionism led to higher SAT scores.²⁰ As others have pointed out, this research debate is inconclusive.²¹

Peltzman conducted a similar study on state SAT and ACT (American College Test) scores from 1972 to 1989.²² Curiously, he analyzed the NEA and AFT memberships separately – in essence, testing not a general effect of unionism, but particular union effects. Summarizing his findings, Peltzman reported: “I found that the growth of teacher unions has contributed to the student test score decline.”²³ Indeed, Peltzman's study is often cited as one that found harmful union effects. Upon closer inspection, however, Peltzman's results are more mixed than he suggested. As noted by others,²⁴ Peltzman's analysis finds that greater NEA strength *boosted* scores from 1972 to 1981, while greater AFT strength contributed to declines in scores. Given that the NEA had a much larger share of teachers under collective bargaining than the AFT, the overall union effect over this period should be considered mixed or even positive. During the period from 1981 to 1989, Peltzman found that stronger NEA and AFT unionization lowered scores. Peltzman's work has been further criticized on methodological grounds,²⁵ such as whether he included appropriate statistical adjustments, especially measures of family background that are strongly linked to achievement.²⁶

The two studies discussed so far focused on academically superior students – those who took college entrance exams. To gain insight into how unionism might affect students of lower achievement, Peltzman conducted a second study.²⁷ Specifically, he studied applicants to the United States military who completed the standardized Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT) – most of whom never attend college. He tested whether changes in state unionization from 1971 to 1991 led to changes in state scores. Peltzman concluded that increased unionization decreased

state scores. In addition, the negative effects of unionization held for two particular student populations: African-Americans and those who scored in the lowest quartile. As in Peltzman's earlier work involving college entrance exams, these findings are more mixed than he concluded. In particular, stronger unionization was not associated with lower test scores over half of the period (the 1970s). However, increased unionization was associated with lower scores during the 1980s, but even then, not for all measures of unionization examined.

Fuller, Mitchell, and Hartmann examined trends in the Milwaukee Public School District from 1964 to 1996.²⁸ Milwaukee's teachers first unionized in 1964, and the authors attempted to link the union's presence to subsequently disappointing student achievement. Unlike other studies on the unionism-achievement link discussed in this chapter, this one does not control for possible confounding factors. The switch to unionism certainly was not the only change in the district over the 32-year period that might have affected achievement. For instance, changes in student demographics alone might have been responsible for the disappointing test scores. The authors themselves noted that the proportion of disadvantaged students served by the district increased dramatically over the period. The authors are unable to make a compelling argument that unionism was responsible for declining achievement during the period.

While Fuller and associates looked at test scores, Caroline Hoxby's research covered high school dropouts. Hoxby found that unionized districts had higher dropout rates than non-unionized districts from 1970 to 1990.²⁹ Of the five studies examined in this section, Hoxby's may offer the strongest evidence, although like the others, it too can be challenged on methodological grounds. In particular, Hoxby reported that she analyzed 10,509 school districts, and asserted that her sample constituted 95% of all districts in the United States in 1990. Given that there were 15,552 school districts in 1990,³⁰ Hoxby's research only covered 68% of the

districts, not the 95% that she reported. It is not clear why nearly one in three districts were lost. More important, the missing districts were likely fiscally dependent districts, the bulk of which are located in strongly unionized Northeastern states. This is a potentially critical omission that may completely change her findings, particularly given the small gap in dropout rates that she found. Albert Shanker, the late President of the AFT, asserted this very critique of Hoxby's study in the *Wall Street Journal*.³¹ In her response, Hoxby offered rebuttals to nearly all of his points, but did not offer a clarification on the missing districts.³²

Research: Unions Boost Achievement

The studies mentioned in the prior section focused on achievement at either the state or district level. For example, Kurth looked at state SAT scores, while Hoxby examined district dropout rates. Some have argued that state-level analyses are appropriate since this is where educational policy originates, including laws on collective bargaining.³³ Others have used the district level as a “natural” unit of analysis. Still others have argued that the impact of unions should be measured precisely where learning occurs – at the student level. Indeed, studies of unionism at the state or district level clearly have merit. However, if studies using highly aggregated levels of analysis are not conducted carefully, they are more prone to erroneous conclusions about student achievement than studies conducted at the student level.³⁴ Many of the studies that find favorable effects of unionism are conducted at the student level.

In contrast to the five studies that find harmful effects of unionism, 12 prominent studies (including Nelson and Gould) report generally beneficial effects of unionism. In general, the studies that report beneficial effects of unionism are more methodologically sound than those that report negative findings. In particular, studies that report beneficial effects tend to employ more extensive statistical controls, thereby increasing our confidence that the findings are real.

These studies are organized below as to whether they were conducted at the student or state level. Each study is summarized to provide insights into the issues, student outcomes, and notable findings.

Student-Level Research

In their pioneering study, Eberts and Stone looked at the improvement in standardized math test scores of fourth-graders over a school year in both unionized and non-unionized schools.³⁵ Overall, they found that students in unionized schools improved more than counterparts in non-unionized schools. Others have reported similarly favorable findings for unionism at the student-level:

- 1) Milkman on high school sophomores into their senior year on a standardized math test;³⁶
- 2) Grimes and Register on high school seniors on the SAT;³⁷
- 3) Grimes and Register on high school seniors on the Test of Economic Literacy, a standardized test of mastery of economics;³⁸
- 4) Zigarelli on high school sophomores' improvement on a composite standardized test (vocabulary, reading, writing, and math) into their senior year;³⁹ and
- 5) Argys and Rees on eighth-graders' improvement through their sophomore year in high school on a standardized math test.⁴⁰

Others have considered whether unionism has favorable effects for all types of students. Eberts and Stone found that unionism had different impacts on students depending on their achievement level (as measured by a pretest).⁴¹ For middle-range fourth-graders, unionized schools raised scores higher than in non-unionized schools. However, the very lowest and the very highest achievers actually fared *worse* in unionized schools than in non-unionized ones.

This pattern was corroborated by two studies at higher grades on test improvements in math: 1) Milkman on high school sophomores into seniors,⁴² and 2) Argys and Rees on eighth-graders' into high school sophomores.⁴³

Researchers have begun to examine other student characteristics that might lead to differential unionism impacts, such as race and sex. For example, Grimes and Register found that African-American seniors in unionized schools scored higher on the SAT than comparable African-Americans in non-unionized schools.⁴⁴ In another study that focused on race, Milkman analyzed gains in standardized math scores for minority students between the sophomore and senior years in high school.⁴⁵ He reported that minority students overall had larger gains in unionized schools than in non-unionized schools. Among schools with mostly minority students, minority students showed higher gains in unionized schools. In contrast, among schools with mostly majority students, minority students showed *smaller* gains in unionized schools. In contrast, Zwerling and Thomason tested if unionism had the same impact on women's and men's probabilities of dropping out of high school after the sophomore year.⁴⁶ While unionization lowered the probability of dropping out for men, it did not offer similar protection for women.

State-Level Research

In a study that covered similar territory as those by Kurth and Peltzman, Kliner and Petree found that increases in state unionization from 1972 to 1982 generally led to increases in state SAT and ACT scores.⁴⁷ They measured unionization in two ways; one measure led to higher SAT scores, but another was unrelated. Unlike Hoxby, the authors found that unionization led to improved high school graduation rates. However, like Kurth and Peltzman, it is not clear if or how the authors adjusted raw state scores for the participation rate, i.e., the proportion of students in a state who took the exam. Powell and Steelman demonstrated that using raw SAT or

ACT scores for interstate comparisons can result in misleading conclusions.⁴⁸ States vary widely in their student participation rates. For example, SAT participation rates ranged from a low of 4% (Mississippi and North Dakota) to a high of 81% (Connecticut and New Jersey) in 2000.⁴⁹ When increasing numbers of students take the SAT in a state, that state's score generally drops. This occurs because increasing numbers of lower-achieving students now contribute to the state's score. Thus, states with low participation rates likely have artificially high raw SAT scores, and vice versa. Adjusting for each state's participation rate accounts for the bulk of state differences in SAT scores.⁵⁰ Others have reported that using raw SAT scores underestimates the union effect on SATs;⁵¹ the union effects on SATs reported by Kliner and Petree may then be understated.

In the most recent study at the state level, Steelman, Powell, and Carini found favorable linkages between unionization and state SAT scores in 1993, and ACT scores in 1994.⁵² They also found that greater unionization led to higher eighth-grade NAEP math scores. Like Kliner and Petree, they reported lower dropout rates with greater unionization. To a greater extent than other studies, the authors measured unionization in several ways, and found the same patterns regardless of the measure used. Interestingly, they reported that weak unionization in the South explained much of why the South lagged other regions on the SAT and ACT. However, the authors acknowledged the difficulties of making conclusions based on single point in time. Nelson and Rosen found similar results in a state-by-state analysis on SAT and ACT scores.⁵³ In addition, this study found that greater unionization was associated with higher NAEP scores for fourth-graders.

RESEARCH: WHY UNIONS BOOST ACHIEVEMENT

While there are relatively few studies on the unionism-achievement link, there are even

fewer that have systematically examined *why* unionism appears to boost achievement. Indeed, unions may raise achievement by their association with other factors discussed in this report, such as reduced class size. The most promising explanations to date for unionization's positive effects are: 1) standardization of the school environment, and 2) more tightly-coupled schools.

Standardization of Schools

There is accumulating evidence that teacher unions do, as is generally assumed, produce more standardized work environments.⁵⁴ We focus our attention on how standardization might directly affect the character of instruction students receive. Eberts and Stone find that unionism tends to standardize math instruction and math programs for fourth-graders.⁵⁵ Specifically, students spend less time learning math with specialists, tutors, or in independent study programs in unionized schools. Standardization in the classroom tends to enhance the performance of middle-range students.⁵⁶ Standardization may also lead to the funneling of resources away from specialized programs and techniques that would benefit the lowest- or highest-achieving students. The upshot is that, while standardization may boost achievement of middle-range students in unionized environments, similar gains do not accrue to those outside the middle-range. In fact, the achievement gains of the many may come at the expense of the lowest and highest achievers. Given that disadvantaged students are disproportionately represented among the lowest-achieving students, unionization will likely have disproportionately harmful effects for these students.

Stone has suggested that the differential impacts of unionism by student achievement-level unifies much of the research to date.⁵⁷ In particular, it is consistent with the findings that unionism boosts average standardized test scores when students of all abilities are grouped together. Further, Stone has argued that Hoxby's finding that unionism led to higher drop-out

rates is not necessarily inconsistent with research documenting favorable union effects. The argument is that, with a focus on high school dropouts, Hoxby essentially limited the scope of her study to lower-achieving students. In any case, three other studies discussed previously have reported that unionism did not increase dropout rates.⁵⁸ Stone's proposed explanation also appears consistent with Peltzman's findings that unionism wields negative effects on those who scored in the lowest quartile on the AFQT exam. We might expect that Stone's findings should hold for high-achievers, e.g., those who take college entrance exams. Yet, several studies using college entrance exams (Kliner and Petree, Steelman et al., and Nelson and Rosen) do not find negative impacts of unionism. Stone may still be correct on high-achieving students – given the increased number of students attending college since the 1960s, the average achievement level of the test-taking pool dropped accordingly. Researchers might find that unionism lowers college entrance test scores if test-takers with only the highest achievement-levels were examined.

More Tightly-Coupled Schools

Some scholars have characterized schools as loosely-coupled organizations.⁵⁹ In other words, interactions between principals and teachers are infrequent on a day-to-day basis. Compared to many types of employees in other workplaces, teachers enjoy considerable autonomy and discretion within the classroom. Direct supervision and evaluation by principals is relatively infrequent. The overall quantity and quality of communication may suffer in such an environment. In particular, it may be difficult for principals to communicate and enforce goals with few formal organizational ties. By definition, interdependency is reduced among loosely-coupled school personnel. The exact meaning of coupling may seem diffuse – at this point, there is not complete agreement on exactly what constitutes coupling, or how it should be measured empirically.⁶⁰

One argument discussed earlier was that unions might “shock” schools into becoming more effective organizations. Schools might become more effective if unionization results in tightened couplings, that is, increased connections and interdependencies between district administrators, principals, and teachers. Zigarelli found that compared with non-unionized schools, unionized schools had tighter couplings.⁶¹ Moreover, tighter coupling helped explain why unionized schools had higher test scores in Zigarelli’s study.

In a similar vein, Eberts and Stone found that the time a principal spent on instructional leadership had different impacts on achievement in unionized and non-unionized schools.⁶² Specifically, increased time spent on instructional leadership (defined here as curriculum design, program needs evaluation, and program planning and assessment), led to higher test scores in unionized schools, but *lower* scores in non-unionized schools. It was not that principals in unionized schools devoted more time to instructional leadership. Rather, the time invested resulted in a much greater payoff (positive versus negative) in test scores in unionized schools. Eberts and Stone speculated that greater leadership productivity stemmed from the collective voice function of unions.⁶³ In other words, teachers could communicate their views via formal channels to their principals. Principals, in turn, may have used this feedback to tailor future leadership activities. Clearly, Eberts and Stone’s finding and proposed explanation on instructional leadership are also consistent with the idea of a more tightly-coupled organization.

UNION CONTRACTS AND ADMINISTRATIVE FLEXIBILITY

Even though the effect of teacher unions appears positive overall, there might be aspects of unions that contribute to lower achievement for most students. In particular, provisions of union contracts may reduce administrators’ flexibility to make key decisions – perhaps to the point that effectiveness is compromised.⁶⁴ For example, provisions on greater teacher

participation in decision-making, reduction-in-force (RIF) procedures, involuntary transfer scenarios, guidelines for teacher removal, and maximum class size may well decrease administrative discretion in the allocation of resources, the shaping of the personnel mix, and in rendering policy decisions. A decrease in administrative flexibility may prove especially problematic in rapidly changing environments that require adaptation. Overall, the evidence suggests that union contracts often constrain the flexibility of principals.⁶⁵ However, decreased flexibility does not necessarily mean that principals' effectiveness is also curtailed.

Considerable evidence suggests that union contracts constrain principals' autonomy to manage their corps of teachers. In particular, it is difficult for principals to remove incompetent teachers under union contracts.⁶⁶ The procedural hurdles to remove a teacher can be extensive. Further, unions are bound by law to defend members against procedural violations of their contract.⁶⁷ Even successful attempts to remove teachers are typically long and drawn-out processes.⁶⁸ Ironically, the protection of incompetent teachers is considered an obstacle to the professionalization of unions by some teachers.⁶⁹ In addition, principals often express frustration with RIF and involuntary transfer procedures that protect teachers with seniority, instead of those who are most effective.⁷⁰

At the same time, these decreases in flexibility do not necessarily hamper the ability of principals to effectively manage their schools. To the contrary, these decreases in flexibility may provide an impetus to greater efficiency. For example, McDonnell and Pascal report that:

Truly effective principals usually accept collective bargaining and use the contract both to manage their building more systematically and to increase teacher participation in school decision-making. Less effective principals may view the contract as an obstacle to a well-run school and then use it as an excuse for poor management.⁷¹

The particular approach that principals adopt appears to shape their effectiveness in unionized environments. Effective principals are likely those who can capitalize on the tighter

coupling that follows union contracts.⁷² Ironically, while the contract decreases discretion of principals, it simultaneously may strengthen their authority through its emphasis on the application and enforcement of rules.⁷³

The extent to which superintendents are affected by union contracts is less clear. Some suggest that many superintendents are reluctant to oppose contract provisions for fear of losing their job.⁷⁴ Others argue that the authority of superintendents may increase with unionization.⁷⁵ Union contracts tend to centralize relations within districts, which generally enhance superintendents' ability to enforce rules. In some cases, superintendents may use union rules to strengthen their control over principals.⁷⁶

Union contracts also shape the allocation of financial resources, both within and without schools. Eberts and Stone find that contract provisions have a cumulative effect in lowering administrative discretion.⁷⁷ In other words, administrators may be able to compensate for a loss in flexibility in one area by increasing their use of discretion in other areas not limited by the contract. However, as the number of contract provisions increases, administrators will be less able to compensate as they lose flexibility in complementary areas. The number of contract provisions may be interpreted as a measure of contract strength; administrators tend to lose more financial flexibility as the contracts strengthen. With increasing numbers of provisions, administrators direct more money toward instruction, teacher salaries, and benefits, and away from other budgetary considerations.⁷⁸ In addition to shaping the within-school allocation of resources, an increasing number of contract provisions generally lead to larger school budgets, thereby impacting the allocation of resources within communities as well.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The often negative perception of teacher unionism on achievement is misplaced –

unionism does not appear to lower student achievement for most students in public education. Instead, the evidence suggests that unionism leads to modestly higher standardized achievement test scores, and possibly enhanced prospects of graduation from high school. Further, favorable student outcomes hold for students from the fourth-grade level through high school. It is not known if unionism has similar impacts for the very youngest children. However, the favorable effects of unionism do not extend to all types of students. In particular, very low- or very high-achieving students fare worse on standard tests in unionized schools. Disadvantaged children are disproportionately represented among the lowest-achieving students, and may be among those least served by unionism. There is evidence to suggest that unions exert different effects depending on the student's race and sex. But given the small number of studies involved, it is too early to draw conclusions.

There is little research on why unions enhance the scores of most students. Two promising explanations exist, however. First, there is evidence to suggest that unionism standardizes instruction and curricula and directs the flow of resources away from specialized programs. Increased standardization helps students of middle-range achievement, but lowers the achievement of students with distinct needs – the lowest and highest achievers. This standardization mechanism explains two consistent research findings: 1) unionism leads to higher standardized test scores for students overall because it helps most students, and 2) unionism depresses scores of the lowest and highest achievers. Further, unionization may transform schools from loosely-coupled environments into more effective, tightly-coupled organizations.

Clearly, unions are not antithetical to student achievement. Yet considerable work remains so as to better inform policy decisions. First, until the mechanisms by which unions raise

achievement are better understood, it is difficult to know precisely where to focus policy efforts. Second, as is the case with all school reforms, there is the issue of whether the gains from unionism are worth the associated costs. As always, there are other promising vehicles to higher achievement to choose from – as evidenced by other chapters in this report. In fact, future collaboration with teacher unions should enable policy makers to better evaluate other reform proposals.

The foregoing research points to the following policy 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.

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