



EPI REVIEW RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT STUDY LINKING TEACHER COLLECTIVE BARGAINING TO POORER LABOR MARKET OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS



It is an intriguing finding for a study: In *The Long-run Effects of Teacher Collective Bargaining*, economists Michael Lovenheim and Alexander Willén conclude that children in states that permit teachers to collectively bargain end up earning and working less than their peers in non-union states. The study was presented earlier this year at the meeting of the American Economic Association and then republished through NBER and promoted in a host of conservative media outlets: *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial page, *The 74, Reason*, Rick Hess Straight Up (in *Education Week*), and *Education Next*.

The problem is, it may not be true, according to a [recent review](#) by economists Emma García and John Schmitt of the Economic Policy Institute. Writing for EPI's blog, García and Schmitt identify three main flaws with the study:

- 1. The path from cause to effect is long and torturous:** For most of the analysis, Lovenheim and Willén determine whether students were exposed to collective bargaining based upon whether their birth states permitted the practice. Yet García and Schmitt point out that some students might have moved away, or attended non-unionized schools. They also note that states that ban collective bargaining have more in common than their approach to unionization. For example, 11 Southern states that prohibit collective bargaining also share characteristics such as age structure of the population, type of employment available, income distribution, climate, and rapid growth.
- 2. The outcomes are puzzlingly inconsistent:** For example, the study finds that collective bargaining impacts earning, yet not educational attainment—which happens to be one of the most important predictors of earnings, García and Schmitt write. Also, for reasons that are not clear, collective bargaining impacts the earnings

of men but not women, and is much larger for Black and Hispanic males than for Whites and Asians. “The different gender-specific and race-specific results suggest that the findings may actually point to contemporary features of state labor markets, rather than educational experience two or three decades earlier,” García and Schmitt suggest.

- 3. The findings do not fit with other research results:** For instance, in an earlier NBER publication, [economist Eunice Han](#) has linked teachers’ unions to better teacher quality, higher levels of teacher retention, more frequent firings of sub-par teachers, and lower student dropout rates.

The EPI reviewers conclude:

How and why teacher unions impact student outcomes and how these impacts are transformed in the long run are important questions to be addressed. But we will learn little about them unless research produces conclusions and recommendations that are based on thorough technical and conceptual frames—ones that do not ignore what is already known on the issues (or, if unaligned, clearly explain why), and that offer a more balanced and rigorous insight.

To read the full review, [click here](#).

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NEPC Resources on Teacher Unions

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