



# The impact of teachers' unions on educational outcomes: What we know and what we need to learn



Joshua M. Cowen<sup>a,\*</sup>, Katharine O. Strunk<sup>b,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> College of Education, Michigan State University, 116-F Erickson Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824, United States

<sup>b</sup> University of Southern California, United States

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 6 February 2015

Revised 17 February 2015

Accepted 22 February 2015

Available online 4 March 2015

### JEL classification:

I20

J5

J51

J58

### Keywords:

Economics of education

Teacher unionization

## ABSTRACT

In this paper we consider more than three decades of research on teachers' unions in the United States. We focus on unions' role as potential rent-seekers in the K-12 educational landscape, and specifically how teachers' unions impact district and student outcomes. We review important methodological improvements in the identification of union impacts and the measurement of contract restrictiveness that characterize a number of recent studies. We generally find that the preponderance of empirical evidence suggests that teacher unionization and union strength are associated with increases in district expenditures and teacher salaries, particularly salaries for experienced teachers. The evidence for union-related differences in student outcomes is mixed, but suggestive of insignificant or modestly negative union effects. Taken together, these patterns are consistent with a rent-seeking hypothesis. We conclude by discussing other important union activities, most notably in the political arena, and by noting that recent changes in state laws pertaining to teachers and teacher unions may provide context for new directions in scholarship.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Teachers' unions, perhaps more than other public sector unions, have remained controversial since their early inception in the 1850s. Although teachers' associations were originally intended to advocate and provide support for members, they have evolved into highly active and influential players in local, state and national contexts. Teachers make up 26.6% of state- and local-public sector workers and are unionized at a higher rate than many other public sector workers (Sanes & Schmitt, 2014). The two major teachers' unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), have grown from just 700,000 members in 1957 to a combined membership of over 4 million educators

and education support providers. In fact, the NEA today is the largest labor union in the United States. The two teachers unions spend more than any other public sector union on federal lobbying activities.<sup>2</sup>

It is not just their size and political power that make teachers' unions important for focused study. Teachers' unions play an active role in setting school district policy through their role as collective bargaining agent for teachers in the 45 states (plus the District of Columbia) that require or permit teachers' unions to collectively bargain with district administrators. The resulting collective bargaining agreements (CBAs, or contracts) regulate nearly every aspect of teachers' work and school operations, which has led one scholar to note that union contracts are the most important policy document governing school district operations (Hill, 2006). CBAs regulate education policy regarding teacher salaries and benefits,

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 517 355 2215.

E-mail addresses: [jcowen@msu.edu](mailto:jcowen@msu.edu) (J.M. Cowen), [kstrunk@rossier.usc.edu](mailto:kstrunk@rossier.usc.edu) (K.O. Strunk).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 213 740 2190.

<sup>2</sup> Data retrieved February 2014 from the Center for Responsive Politics, [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org).

teacher assignment and transfers, teacher evaluations, class size, grievance procedures, leaves, association rights, student placement, instruction and curriculum, layoffs, preparation periods and non-instructional duties and more (Goldhaber, 2013; Moe, 2009; Strunk, 2012, 2014). Although teachers' unions cannot bargain on behalf of public school teachers in the five states in which collective bargaining is explicitly prohibited they may still have a voice in district-level policy-setting (Fowles & Cowen, 2014).<sup>3</sup> The two major teachers' unions have local affiliates in every state, and often work as professional associations in non-union locations, helping teachers to understand their rights, advocating and lobbying for teachers' interests and taking action in local and state-wide elections.

Although teachers' unions are central actors in the provision and governance of public education, the literature on teachers' unions remains relatively thin, with myriad unanswered questions. However, the research base on teachers' unions has improved dramatically over the past two decades. In particular, recent studies have brought about two methodological innovations in the study of the impact of teachers' unions on education outcomes, in both the identification of plausibly causal union impacts and in the measurement of union strength. As unions continue to occupy center stage in policy debates over public education—for example in electoral contests in states like Wisconsin and California, and in battles over regulations for which unions have advocated and fought such as tenure and due process—it is important to return to the literature to determine what is and is not known about the impacts of teachers unions on education outcomes.

In what follows, we first review the current context in which teachers' unions are operating and discuss theoretical motivations for union activity. We then review the literature that has traditionally informed research and policy about teachers' unions, focusing on the methodological limitations in earlier work and more recent innovations in both the identification of union impacts and the measurement of bargaining strength. Next, we review the extant literature on the relationship between unions and student and district outcomes. We close by discussing how these trends may be extended and enhanced by studies exploiting new changes to union-related policies nationwide, arguing ultimately for an increased focus on teachers' unions in economic and policy analytic research.

## 2. The current context for teachers' unions and collective bargaining in the United States

As noted above, teachers' unions have grown in both size and political stature over the past half-century. In spite of, or perhaps in part due to unions' presence in the political arena, many recent reform efforts intended to improve the quality of teaching in American public schools have targeted teachers' collective bargaining rights as well as areas of legislation that safeguard teacher protections fought for by their

unions. States have begun to weaken teacher job security and change seniority provisions that have historically guided teacher assignment and transfer. Traditional tenure protections are also being diminished across the country: 11 states now make teaching effectiveness (rather than experience) the preponderant criterion for attaining tenure and nine more states are including student performance among those criteria. Teacher ineffectiveness is now grounds for dismissal in 20 states (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014b). Where legislative action has failed to materialize, reformers are turning to the judiciary. In California, for example, a group of students backed by school reformers has sued the state in an attempt to remove seniority protections during layoffs and limit teachers' due process and tenure protections (Medina, 2014). In June 2014, the California Superior Court ruled that these “challenged statutes impose a real and appreciable impact on students' fundamental right to equality of education and that they impose a disproportionate burden on poor and minority students,” essentially violating the equal protection clause of the California Constitution (Vergara v. State of California, 2014, p. 8). The ruling is now being appealed by the state and the two teachers' unions, who asked to be named as co-defendants in the case. A similar lawsuit has been filed in New York (Wright v. New York, 2014) and others are being discussed in states around the country.

More fundamentally, policymakers across the country are acting to restrict unions' fiscal and membership resources. Twenty-six states now limit or prohibit teachers' unions' ability to collect membership dues from teachers who do not expressly consent to paying such agency fees (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014b), and multiple court cases are surfacing that aim to reduce teachers' and other public sector unions' abilities to collect membership dues from employees who do not choose to join them. The U.S. Supreme Court recently ruled in *Harris v. Quinn* (Case No. 11-681) that, in some cases, public employee labor unions cannot require employees to pay membership dues (Estlund & Forbath, 2014). In California, *Freidrichs vs. California Teachers' Association* (US District Case No. SACV 13-676-JLS) is challenging the California Teachers' Association's right to require teachers to pay union dues. The U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals has ruled that the case should be passed on to the U.S. Supreme Court, where many believe the more conservative judiciary may overturn the precedent-setting *Abood vs. Detroit Board of Education* (Supreme Court Case 75-1153) 1977 decision that originally legalized unions' rights to collect “fair share” (Fensterwald, 2014).

At the federal policy level, large initiatives such as waivers to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Race to the Top and the Teacher Incentive Fund have incorporated requirements that directly counter long-held union-supported protections. Elements of these three federal programs require the creation of large data systems that link teachers to their students, teacher evaluation systems that expressly calculate teacher performance in part based upon their students' achievement, and systems that tie teacher compensation to their classroom performance rather than solely to experience and educational credentials. In short, teachers' unions, along with other public employees, are facing clear challenges not only to their closely held policy priorities but to their existence itself (Freeman & Han, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> In 15 states bargaining is permissible but not required. In these states whether teachers negotiate collectively is determined at local district levels; whether bargaining includes wages, working hours, conditions such as class size, dismissal policies and teacher evaluation varies considerably between these states (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014a).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/354361>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/354361>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)