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Teachers Unions and Management Partnerships

How Working Together Improves Student Achievement

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Introduction and summary

For more than a decade, the debate over public school reform has created friction between teachers unions, administrators, school boards, parents, policymakers, and other stakeholders in public education and has fueled disagreements over how to improve the quality of teaching and learning for children. While many factors make consensus elusive when it comes to school reform, a key obstacle to finding agreement around educational improvements and bringing such improvements to fruition is ideological policy divisions.¹

Yet within some districts and schools, union leaders and school administrators have found an alternate path to reform—one that is based on building strong relationships that facilitate collaboration among educators and is focused on teaching quality and educational improvement for students. This report explores the impact of school-level, union-management, institutional partnerships on teacher collaboration and student performance. Moreover, it offers strong evidence for this alternative direction to the policy debate on public school reform by analyzing the role of union-management relations in educational quality.

Tests can reveal deficiencies in student knowledge but can offer little more beyond alerting parents and teachers to a problem. Union-management partnerships, because they are problem focused, can take the critical next steps and help drive thinking about ways to increase student learning. These types of partnerships are designed to use collaboration among educators to find solutions to gaps in student achievement and then effectively implement those solutions because those closest to the problem—with tacit knowledge of it—are key stakeholders in the improvement process.

An earlier report for the Center for American Progress, “Reforming Public School Systems through Sustained Union-Management Collaboration,”² examined cases of school reform that resulted from collaborative partnerships between teachers unions and administrators working together in innovative ways to improve

teaching quality and student performance. That report analyzed these cases to identify the common elements that all districts with long-term union-management partnerships shared in common. This current report looks deeper into these partnerships to examine the patterns of collaboration that occur within schools between teachers and administrators to see how they affect student performance. This report takes an organizational perspective, looking at schools as systems and examining school governance, patterns of communication and collaboration, teacher participation in decision making, and industrial relations. Particular interest is paid to the way teachers work with each other and how union representatives work with principals at the school level.

This latest study finds that:

- **Formal partnerships help improve student performance.** The quality of formal partnerships between teachers unions, administrators, and teachers at the school level is a significant predictor of student performance, as well as performance improvement, after poverty and school type are taken into account.
- **Partnerships lead to more extensive communication between teachers.** Higher-quality, school-level teacher-administrator partnerships predicted more extensive school-level collaboration and communication around: student-performance data; curriculum development, cross-subject integration, or grade-to-grade integration; sharing, advising, or learning about instructional practices; and giving or receiving formal or informal mentoring.
- **More extensive communication improves student performance.** More extensive communications around: student-performance data; curriculum and integration; instructional practice; and mentoring all predicted large and significant gains in student performance or performance improvement.
- **Partnership leads to more frequent and informal communication between union representatives and principals.** Finally, the quality of partnerships predicted different communication patterns between union building representatives and principals, with the communication in high-partnership schools becoming more frequent and less formal than the communication in low-partnership schools.

This study contributes to our understanding of the value that union-management partnerships can bring to organizational performance by creating a positive climate for teacher collaboration, which leads to innovation and an infrastructure for problem solving. Over the past decade, education researchers have encouraged greater levels of professional collaboration among teachers as a means to improve student achievement.³ However, little is currently known about the institutional antecedents to professional collaboration, particularly in the context of public education. This report targets school-level union-management partnerships as potential catalysts for professional collaboration in public schools.

Furthermore, this research sheds light on the impact that school-level union-management partnerships and teacher collaboration can have on student performance. Based on the findings of this report, if policymakers and educators want to create and support more long-term partnership arrangements in U.S. school districts, they should undertake the following initiatives:

- Provide incentives for districts to establish union-management partnerships and collaborative approaches to the development of curriculum and instructional practice, teacher evaluation, professional development, mentoring, and peer review.
- Provide technical and financial support to districts that are willing to pilot partnerships and innovative collaborative approaches to improving teaching quality and student performance.
- Build learning networks of professional educators across districts with extensive experience in partnerships and collaborative approaches to school improvement, and link them with inexperienced districts that are looking for best-practice models and support.
- Create state-level institutions to offer leadership training and skill development in union-management partnerships and collaboration.
- Convene state and regional conferences to highlight best-practice partnerships and collaborative approaches to school improvement and provide technical assistance.
- Support research on collaborative school reform efforts that have produced results, and share the findings widely.

As unions, teachers, and administrators continue to see the value of collaboration and deepen their work together on the design and implementation of our education systems teaching and learning can be more effective and efficient.

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