



# New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences



Issue 6 (2016) 34-38

Selected Paper of 2nd Global Conference on Contemporary Issues in Education(GLOBE-EDU 2015) August 27-28, 2015,

The University of Chicago Chicago, USA

## **What Role does the Teachers' Union in Wisconsin have on Student Achievement?**

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### **Suggested Citation:**

Happel, T. (2016). What Role does the teachers' union in Wisconsin have on Student Achievement?. *New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences*. [Online]. 06, pp 34-38. Available from: [www.prosoc.eu](http://www.prosoc.eu)

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Gul Celkan, Middle Georgia State College, USA

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### **Abstract**

Wisconsin has had mandated membership in its teacher's union for all public school teachers since 1959. In 2010, Wisconsin's teachers' unions have been under discussion when the new governor came into office and signed Act 10 into law, which allowed all public school teachers to have a choice in membership. Much debate, discussion and furor has surrounded this legislation. The purpose of this paper considers the impact the teacher's union has had on student achievement according to unionized and non-union teachers and the state standardized assessment.

**Keywords:** Wisconsin; teacher's union, student success; WKCE; non-union; student achievement; math; reading; 8th grade

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## 1. Introduction

Teachers' unions have been an integral part of the fabric of the American public school system since the mid-1800's (Moe, 2011). Focusing on working conditions, collective bargaining, working hours, and classroom expectations (Hoxby, 1996), teachers' unions worked to equalize the profession with other professions such as factory workers (Lovenheim, 2011). To date, there have been a limited number of studies done on the impact of teachers' unions on student achievement at a national level (Hoxby, 1996; Carini, 2002, 2008a, 2008b; Milkman, 1997; Eberts, 2007; Eberts and Stone, 1987; Garden, 2012; Kerchner, 2004; Lovenheim, 2009). There have been even less studies done at a regional level (University of Dayton Law Review, 2012; Lovenheim, 2009; and Nixon, 2011). To date, there were three studies found which review these effects at a state level (Borland and Howsen, 1992; Lang, 2015; and Lindy, 2011). This researcher hopes to add to the minimal state-level data with this proposed study.

With the growth and eventual mandated membership into the union for all Wisconsin public school teachers, teachers' unions became a significant source of power for legislation affecting what and how children were taught in public schools (WEAC, 2012). Through the union's support of various political candidates and lobbying, the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) affected federal and state legislation through their membership. The National Education Association (NEA) chronicles this growth and philosophy development on their web-site (2014), using it to organize and affect student environments at school.

In this research, this author would like to effectively introduce the teacher's union in Wisconsin, and how legislation affected student achievement by exploring both union and non-union educator views on the impact of the union on student achievement. Scores on the state-wide standardized assessment will be included in the discussion.

## 2. Purpose

Because it is not known what role the Wisconsin teacher's union has in public school student achievement in reading and math, the proposed research will attempt to offer an insight to this phenomena and resolve some of the gaps in the literature. First, the current literature focuses solely on union impacts on academic achievement in public schools from a national standpoint. The research at the state level is limited, as mentioned earlier. Nixon, Packard and Dam (2011) offered conclusions on regional impacts and included some state-by-state comparisons but did not focus on any one particular state. This information led this researcher to consider a focus on one state. Wisconsin was chosen as it has been in the national focus of the teachers' union since the state Governor signed Act 10 into law in 2011 (Wisconsin State Legislature, 2011). The introduction of this legislation raised many questions about the necessity of the teacher's union in the state, leading this public school teacher to investigate the research surrounding this topic, and found more research was needed to offer the use of local data to accept or reject the question *What role does Wisconsin's teachers' union have in public school student achievement?* Considering the personal and real-life stories of teachers who teach in public schools, and have been or are current members of the union, the gap in knowledge which contemplates the charge of the union and student achievement may close.

## 3. Methodology

From the phenomenological question, there derives several questions. This research hopes to address the perceptions of union and non-union teachers alike. After talking with the named professionals, the research will also incorporate WCKE (Wisconsin Concepts and Knowledge

Exam) data and legislation surrounding educational goals and approaches from 1992-2013. This data will only serve to induce further discussion surrounding the originating question. In other words, it is meant to further the knowledge base of the participants and possibly encourage them to consider their responses. The WKCE and education legislation is imperative here as this was the seminal state assessment from 1992-2013. Assessment and legislation need to align to further the discussion and information base for the participants, should the need arise during the interview stage of data collection.

From there, there are two pressing reasons for the completion of this study. In light of the research completed surrounding the concepts, theories, and literature relating to teachers' unions and student achievement, it is generally agreed upon that there are too many variables in the data surrounding union impact and there is no general consensus on its affect. Carini (2002, 2008b) discusses a socioeconomic perspective, Hoxby (1996) discusses graduation rates, Milkman (1997) considers minority student achievement, and Lovenheim (2009) examines union certification impacts. All of these unrelated variables leave the field without a definitive answer. Carini (2014) suggests "lethargy" on the implications of research surrounding teachers' unions.

On the other hand, research also shows a positive response for the unions and student achievement. Like the researchers who find supportive data in student achievement and unions, the variables in the opposition is the same. Nationally, a plethora of researchers found unions bind teachers together and that collectivism empowers them to make changes they find necessary for their students (Yusim, 2008). These changes come politically as the NEA and AFT spend an average of 96% of member's dues on legislation with the Democratic Party (Coulson, 2010). This also means the support comes for the teachers over the students (Winkler, Scull, Zeehandelaar, and Fordham, 2012) with the idea that teachers who are "collaborating" (Weingarten, 2011), have "strong teachers unions" (Lott and Kenny, 2013), and have "shared power" (Yusim, 2008), will have the power to enhance the profession of teaching and can develop better school plans which will have a positive, yet indirect, effect on students (Weingarten, 2011).

The above research is focused on a national level, which benefits this discussion at that level, there is still very limited research at a state or regional level. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute wrote a state-by-state comparison of "politics and unions" (Winkler, Scull, Zeehandelaar, and Fordham, 2012). This is a limited example of quantitative analysis done at a multi-state level. As well, Lang (2015) reviewed teachers' unions in Massachusetts and Lindy (2011) looked at collective bargaining laws in New Mexico. An important note is all the studies listed here are quantitative in nature with the exception of the phenomenological report by Nixon, Packard, and Dam (2011), who looked at principals' views on non-renewal of probationary teacher contracts through the scope of union intervention. The need for further phenomenological research is apparent through the dismal findings thus far.

To further the discussion, there are also several studies which indicate a mixed result of the effects of unions depending on the variables within the realm of collective bargaining (Carini, 2003, 2008a, 2008b). None have been found which focus on a state level with mixed results. This constitutes a gap in the research. It also presents a conundrum in the evidence as there is much discussion and dissent in what actually is successful, why, and how. Student achievement on standardized tests has been a focus of much of the research; therefore, this researcher proposes to advance the literature by using this same focus at the state level. The results of this proposed investigation are expected to further scientific knowledge about the role of the public teacher's union in public school student math and reading achievement. Narrowing the scope of research from national to state will give another consideration when looking at unionism state by state.

Current research considers test results such as state-based assessments (Eberts, 2007;

Kurth, 1987; Milkman, 1997; and Nicholson-Crotty, 2012) and others look at teacher-focused inputs such as salary, benefits, litigation, class size (Nixon, Packard, and Dam, 2011), and non-teaching duties (Murphy, 1985). In the current research by Carini (2003, 2008a, 2008b) and other researchers as mentioned above, there is agreement in the field that while unions are the focus of much debate in student achievement, there is also agreement that the methodology is also unreliable in many of the studies. Currently, there is a fair amount of research delving into the idea of unionism and student achievement, but the evidence is not concrete nor consistent (there is a lack of reliability) one way or the other. Carini (2008a) speculates this is because none of the empirical evidence focuses on union legislation. Carini (2014) suggests filtering out this legislation and how that affects student achievement. This study is unique in its perspective as it invites teachers and other educators and legislators vested in the educational process to share their real life experiences in how the union may or may not have impacted student achievement in Wisconsin's public schools. The statements received from interviews will be coded into statistical perspectives and analyzed with the student test scores from the eighth grade WKCE in math and reading. Combine this with a look at WEAC and NEA legislation pertaining to educational practices and a very detailed, personal look at union affects in the state is provided to the field. As well, as previous researchers have been mentioned, this study is a result of the collective suggestion from existing research.

#### **4. Conclusion**

At current publication time, this research is in the early stages of proposal defense for a full doctoral dissertation in organizational leadership, focusing on K-12 education. Upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, in-depth interviews will commence with volunteer teacher and legislative participants throughout the state. WKCE data and NEA legislation will be collected and analyzed to complete the final study and dissertation manual. It is the hope of the author that this publication will allow a follow-up article when those steps are completed.

#### **Acknowledgements**

A special thanks to Carl Happel who encouraged me to achieve more and make a bigger difference. Always my biggest fan until then. As well to Andrea and John Happel who learned quickly to not interrupt my research and writing unless there was blood, broken bones, or fire. I live for you. And thank you to Drs. Mark Duplissis and Robert Carini for their guidance and support.

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