



Teachers' Collective Bargaining Rights and Race/Class Inequality in Student Performance

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Abstract

A defining characteristic of the era of the “Great Polarization” is the decline the impact of unions on labor market outcomes across a number of sectors of the economy. To the degree that unions promote greater wage equality by supporting incomes near the middle of the distribution, this decline in collective bargaining has contributed directly to rising inequality. In addition to this direct effect, declining efficacy of collective bargaining for educators may have an additional, indirect effect on inequality. If teachers’ unions aid student success (for instance, by supporting the retention and promotion of more able instructors), then any weakening of union rights for teachers may have a negative effect on student outcomes. If these effects are concentrated in poorer or more heavily minority districts, they may exacerbate existing tendencies toward rising inequality.

In this paper, we will examine the effect of teachers’ collective bargaining status on students’ academic performance, both in terms of the level of student achievement and in terms of inequality in student performance. This study will create a unique dataset by merging the School and Staffing Survey (SASS), the School District Finance Survey (SDFS), and data on academic achievement from the Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA) at the school district level. We will use two approaches to identify the effect of collective bargaining on student outcomes. First, using the method of propensity score matching, we will compare average test scores of students from school districts with collective bargaining agreements to those without such bargaining agreements. Second, we will utilize the natural experiment created by legal changes in several states in 2010-11 which limited teachers’ bargaining rights. This change in the legal environment permits a differences-in-differences research design comparing changes in students’ outcomes in states affected by these legal modifications to changes in students’ outcomes in states that were not affected. Because the SEDA data include student performance outcomes that are disaggregated by demographic group, including race/ethnicity, we will be able to examine the role that changes in collective bargaining may play in mitigating (or exacerbating) inequality in educational outcomes across these subgroups. In addition, we will be able to examine the impact of teachers’ unions on inequality in student achievement between more and less advantaged districts.