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Report

Students or Salaries? How Unions Choose School Board Candidates

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Executive Summary

School boards remain one of the most powerful forces in American education, helping to set curricula, evaluate teachers, and direct hundreds of billions of dollars in education funding. Yet teachers' unions play an outsized role in determining who serves on these boards.

If the interests of teachers are perfectly aligned with those of students, then there may be no reason to worry about union dominance in school board elections. But when these interests collide, union power likely encourages boards to prioritize the needs of adult employees over students.

This report analyzes the nature of union power in school board elections, and in particular, how unions decide which candidates to support. Its key findings include:

- Union electioneering success is not simply a product of union mobilization. Rather, union endorsements increase voters' support for union-backed candidates by 6 percentage points.
- The union seal of approval buoys candidates' electoral prospects because voters believe union-favored candidates hold shared interests on important education issues.
- However, voters are largely mistaken about what union endorsements convey and what drives endorsement decisions. For example, union support for incumbents is unrelated to academic achievement gains. Instead, the only consistent predictor of union support for incumbents is whether the district raised salaries for senior teachers prior to an election.
- The divergence between what union endorsements mean and how voters interpret them have troubling implications for democratic accountability and board-based governance. Groups wishing to counteract union dominance will need to find ways to ensure that ordinary voters are aware of the actual policy priorities of union-backed candidates.

Introduction

Though voter turnout in school board elections is typically low and most school board meetings are lightly attended, school boards remain in the vanguard of education delivery: helping define graduation requirements, select curricula, and evaluate teachers. In the aggregate, school boards help spend hundreds of billions of dollars each year, and the downstream impact of their policy decisions shapes academic-achievement outcomes and long-term quality-of-life indicators.[1]

When it comes to selecting who will serve on the nation's school boards, teachers' unions play an outsized role. Several studies, for example, show that the unions' preferred candidates win roughly 7 out of every 10 contests[2] and that earning a union's "seal of approval" packs a bigger electoral punch for candidates than either incumbency[3] or district academic achievement gains.[4]

If, as unions often claim, the interests of teachers and students perfectly overlap, then union influence could lead to better education policy. "Teachers want what students need" is a favorite mantra of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president Randi Weingarten.[5] Union locals also tend to make similar claims. Prior to Washington State's 2022 school board elections, for example, a union leader there explained that "as educators, we need a school board that understands what our students and schools need. That's why it's critical that each of us [vote for union-endorsed candidates]."[6] In 2023, the president of an AFT union local in Lockport, New York, responded to criticism of his union's endorsements by insisting that they were made "because [of these candidates' belief] that student success is found when parents and teachers work together."[7]

But when these interests collide, union power likely encourages school boards to prioritize the needs of adult employees over students. The debate over reopening schools for in-person learning during the pandemic provides one compelling example.[8] Another salient example is the process of negotiating collective bargaining agreements (CBAs). Research shows that school boards composed of more union-endorsed members adopt more union-friendly contracts.[9] At best, these more restrictive contracts increase costs without offsetting gains in student achievement.[10] At worst, more restrictive CBAs have been shown to weaken student achievement[11] and cause schools with more disadvantaged students to employ less capable teachers.[12] As the president of the Lockport, New York, Parent Teacher Association, who was not supported by the union, asked rhetorically:

> Who's at the bargaining table for the kids when you have a board member that has a family member or their wife that's a teacher?… Who's fighting for the kids? If I was on the board and my husband was in the teachers' union, and I could vote for something that's going to better our household. Who would not? I'm not even blaming [the union]. I'm saying that it shouldn't be done because it's kids who lose out.[13]

While these sorts of impassioned claims provide anecdotal rhetorical evidence for both sides, a more data-driven look at the causes and consequences of the union premium in school board elections is needed. To that end, this report draws on a variety of evidence from several academic studies to show that:

- Union electioneering success is not simply a product of union mobilization. Rather, union endorsements increase voters' support for union-backed candidates by 6 percentage points.
- The union seal of approval buoys candidates' electoral prospects because voters believe that union-favored candidates hold shared interests on important education issues.

- However, voters are largely mistaken about what union endorsements convey and what drives endorsement decisions. For example, union support for incumbents is unrelated to academic-achievement gains. Instead, the only consistent predictor of union support for incumbents is whether the district raised salaries for senior teachers prior to an election.

- The divergence between what union endorsements mean and how voters interpret them have troubling implications for democratic accountability and board-based governance. Groups wishing to counteract union dominance will need to find ways to ensure that ordinary voters are aware of the actual policy priorities of union-backed candidates.

Why Unions Have Outsize Power in School Board Elections

Popular accounts of union dominance in school board elections center on the overwhelmingly low turnout in these contests.[14] If most voters stay home and teachers' unions can mobilize their members more than any other constituency, then a small but highly mobilized and motivated group of voters—in this case, teachers and their kin—can form a pivotal voting bloc, helping elect union-backed candidates.

But teachers and other school employees represent a small share of the electorate, even in the lowest-turnout elections.[15] And research shows that the elderly (childless adults)—who are hardly a natural ally for teachers—turn out disproportionately in these school board elections.[16]

To be sure, teachers may exercise influence through other channels, including providing financial support and engaging in labor-intensive campaign activities such as door-to-door canvassing, that can give an edge to their preferred candidates in close races. However, it is unlikely that votes of teachers themselves can explain the fact that union-backed candidates win 70% of all contested school board elections.

In a pair of recent studies, the author of this report (Hartney) teamed up with Ohio State University political scientist Vladimir Kogan to test an alternative explanation for union power in school board elections.[17] Specifically, the Hartney-Kogan research team conducted a series of survey experiments to see whether providing voters with information about whether a particular candidate was endorsed by the local teachers' union increased their willingness to support the union's preferred candidate.

First, Hartney and Kogan asked a sample of real San Diego voters whom they intended to support in their city's upcoming school board elections. Voters who were surveyed were first provided with short biographies of each board candidate. Some of these voters were then randomly selected to receive information about the endorsements made by the San Diego Education Association. The results were an unambiguous win for the unions. Giving voters information about the union's endorsement increased support for the union-backed candidate by 6 percentage points. While this effect was concentrated among Democrats and voters who viewed both teachers and unions positively, there was no group in the city's electorate for whom the union endorsement weakened a candidate's support.

Hartney and Kogan next carried out a conjoint experiment to test the appeal of several different candidate attributes (alongside the union endorsement) with a national sample of voters. Once again, this experiment revealed that voters prefer teachers' union–endorsed candidates, with the effect size rivaling that of shared partisanship (among Democrats). What's more, the union endorsement moved voters more than similar endorsements issued by local newspapers and business leaders.

But *why* did voters prefer union-backed candidates? Elsewhere on the survey, the research team asked voters which of the hypothetical candidates they evaluated would be most likely to: (1) raise teacher salaries, (2) raise student achievement, and (3) be responsive to parents. Here's where things got interesting. Voters said they *believed* that the candidates endorsed by the teachers' union would be the ones most willing to prioritize all three policy goals. In other words, not only did voters think that union-favored candidates would focus more on increasing teacher salaries: they also said they fully expected these same candidates to do more to raise student achievement and respond to parents' concerns.

The important takeaway is that teachers' unions dominate local school board elections for two principal reasons. One, their power is partly because they can use their superior resources to mobilize their supporters in low-turnout elections. Two, an equally important and overlooked aspect of their electioneering success is the ability to translate the public's latent trust for teachers into support for union-preferred school board candidates.

What Motivates Unions to Engage in Political Advocacy

Unions may be effective at persuading ordinary voters that their preferred candidates will look out for the best interest of all stakeholders, but is there any evidence to believe that this rosy picture is true? What does prior research say about the motivations of union political advocacy?

Unions are typically portrayed as either rent-seeking organizations that narrowly pursue their members' own self-interest[18] or as advocates for the common good of all education stakeholders.[19] Of course, depending on the nature of the issue at hand, unions may engage in broader advocacy campaigns that further the interests of both their members and other stakeholders in the public at large.[20]

For their part, union advocates tend to argue that labor's political activity maximizes the likelihood that education policy and practice will include the perspective of classroom educators. In their view, this is also good for students. For example, Leo Casey, a former vice president at the United Federation of Teachers, argues: "The common good of educators that teachers' unions pursue is largely congruent with the educational interests of the students whom they teach. The working conditions of teachers are, in significant measure, the learning conditions of students, and so improvements in the work lives of teachers generally translate into improvements in the education of students."[21]

In contrast, union critics say that such political advocacy is more motivated by "rent-seeking." Because unions focus on their occupational interests, their political advocacy will often result in suboptimal education outcomes. "Asking if teachers unions are a positive force in education is a bit like asking if the Tobacco Institute is a positive force in health policy or if the sugar lobby is helpful in assessing the merits of corn syrup," the Heritage Foundation's Jay Greene reasons.[22]

In a similar vein, Stanford University's Terry Moe emphasizes that teachers' unions:

> represent the job-related interests of their members, and these interests are simply not the same as the interests of children. . . . It is not good for children that ineffective teachers cannot be removed from the classroom. It is not good for children that teachers cannot be assigned to the schools and classrooms where they are needed most. It is not good for children that excellent young teachers get laid off before mediocre colleagues with more seniority. Yet these are features of . . . schooling that the unions fight for, in their own interests.[23]

Some prior research does show that teachers recognize that their occupational interests as education professionals differ from the interests of their students. For example, in my own book, I report on the results of a survey experiment that I conducted with Wisconsin teachers back in 2012.[24] All participants were shown a list of six different political advocacy organizations[25] before being asked to rank the organizations from the most to least reliable education policy advocate for *either* teacher interests *or* student interests. Although all participants were given an identical list of organizations to evaluate, half of the sample were asked to evaluate the groups based on their commitment to "teacher interests" while the other half were asked to rank the groups that best represented "student interests."

This subtle shift—from asking teachers who best represents their interests to asking about students' interests—resulted in a 22-percentage-point decrease in the number of teachers who rated their unions the most reliable education policy advocate in Wisconsin. Sensibly, teachers who were asked which group best represented the interests of students were three times more likely to identify the state's Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or the state's school boards association.

These results are especially telling because the surveys were conducted amid Scott Walker's controversial gubernatorial recall election, in which their unions were on the front lines defending their vision of public education in Wisconsin. If ever there were a time when teachers would cling to their unions and identify them as pursuing the best interest of all education stakeholders, it would have been in Wisconsin in 2012. But even at that moment, teachers still recognized that teacher and student interests are not, in fact, one and the same.

So if teacher and student interests don't always overlap—something that even teachers are prone to admit—how then should we expect union electioneering in school board races to work? Will unions be more motivated by a focus on students' or teachers' interests? Or will their electioneering efforts be more tightly linked to occupation-specific incentives? Below, I introduce a new research strategy that can empirically assess whether unions act more like rent-seekers or advocates of the common good when they engage in political advocacy.

Research Design: Evidence from School Board Elections

Unions succeed in school board elections in part because voters *believe* that union-backed candidates will prioritize student achievement more than nonendorsed candidates. But are voters correct? Do unions prioritize student academic achievement by looking at the progress that kids are making academically in their district when they decide whether to support incumbent school board members' reelection campaigns? Or do unions mainly focus on the willingness of school boards to provide salary increases to their members?

In a previous report, I introduced an original data set of teacher-union endorsements for three of the nation's four largest states—California, Florida, and New York—and used it to quantify the electoral success of union-backed candidates over the last few decades.[26] Here, I revisit these same data (now updated through 2022) but use them to assess whether unions make endorsements to promote teacher or student interests. In all the analyses that follow, my empirical approach is straightforward: I examine whether union support for incumbents hinges more on self-interest or altruistic student-centered factors.

I begin by looking at a national sample of endorsements, where I have access to information on rates of in-person learning and academic learning loss during the pandemic. I then turn to data from California school board elections, on which I will primarily focus because the data include information on union endorsements for the same districts over time, along with information on each district's academic progress and teacher salaries. I then supplement these data with Florida endorsement data (where I have information on district achievement but not on salaries).

Altogether, these various data sets support a common finding: teachers' union endorsement decisions are, on average, driven by self-interest (often pecuniary considerations), not by improvements in student achievement.

Key Findings

Nationally, unions were less likely to support incumbents who reopened schools

First, I examine union endorsement decisions across a national sample of school districts. To obtain information on union support for incumbent school board members in the aftermath of the pandemic, I rely on a national survey of school board members that I fielded in early 2023 (N=5,154 board members).

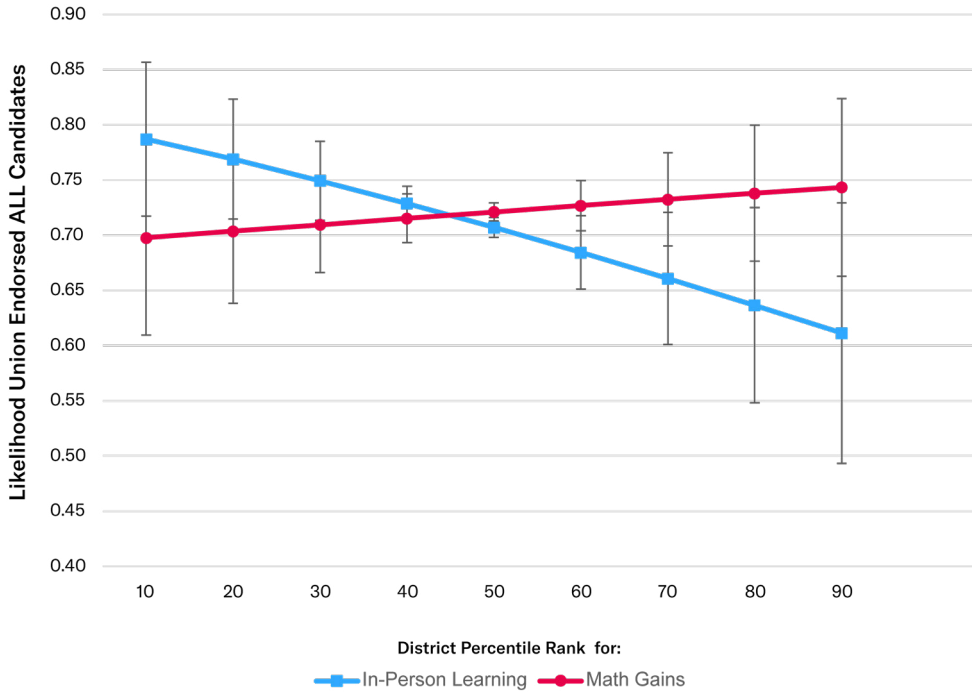
In the survey, I asked board members to characterize the support that incumbents received from the local teachers' union in their district's most recent school board election. I focused on the districts where board members uniformly reported that their union either endorsed "all of the incumbents" seeking reelection or none of them. Since these school board elections were some of the first post-Covid elections (November 2022), they provide a unique opportunity to observe how unions evaluated the performance of incumbents during a time when student and employee interests clearly diverged. Remote learning was quite clearly the unions' preferred mode of instruction, given that it posed zero risk to educators. However, it was also clear that remote learning had exacerbated learning loss for students.[27]

Figure 1 shows which of these two factors predicted union support for incumbents in the aftermath of Covid. Specifically, the figure shows how much a district's gains/losses in math achievement (between 2019 and 2022) and in-person learning (in 2020–21) explain subsequent union support for incumbent candidates. Achievement and in-person learning rates are both plotted in percentile ranks (relative to the nation's average district).

The analysis includes state fixed effects and demographic controls for district partisanship, racial composition, and size. The results are consistent with self-interested union political advocacy. Although incumbents in districts that minimized student learning loss were marginally more likely to receive more union support at the ballot box, the result was not statistically significant, and therefore indistinguishable from zero. The effect that was statistically significant, by contrast, was that unions were far less likely to support incumbent school board members who reopened schools for in-person learning more reliably during the 2020–21 school year.

Figure 1

Unions were less likely to support incumbents who prioritized in-person learning. Incumbents who minimized learning loss are no more or less likely to earn union support.



Source: Author's original survey of school board members in January 2023 combined with two separate data sets. For district instructional modes during the 2020–21 school year, see: Emily Oster, "COVID-19 School Data Hub, School Learning Model Database." For changes in student achievement, see: Sean Reardon et al., Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA2022 2.0).

California Analysis

Turning to California, I examine union endorsements issued in roughly 2,500 school board elections between 1998 and 2022. The process of gathering union endorsement data and the details of the representativeness of the endorsement sample are discussed at length in previous published work.[28] Suffice it to say, however, that while the districts analyzed here are not perfectly representative of all California school districts, they collectively represent the districts that educate 9 out of every 10 public school students in the state.[29]

Using these data, I test whether unions support or oppose incumbents based on the "pocketbook" concerns of their members (the rent-seeking hypothesis). To probe this possibility, we can examine patterns of teacher union support for incumbents alongside changes in teacher salaries within school districts over time.[30]

Meanwhile, to test the claims made by advocates of the common-good unionism perspective, we can examine patterns of support for incumbents seeking reelection alongside changes in student academic achievement during an incumbent's tenure. Since levels of student achievement tend to be influenced by a host of socioeconomic factors that are beyond the control of elected school board members, changes in achievement over time *within the same district* capture the degree to which students improve from one year to the next and provide a more useful way to isolate district performance and aspects of achievement that may be related to policy decisions made

by local boards. Importantly, I consider multiple measures of student achievement, including a district's growth on the state's high-stakes accountability ratings, math and English/language arts proficiency rates, and improvements in raw scaled scores.[31]

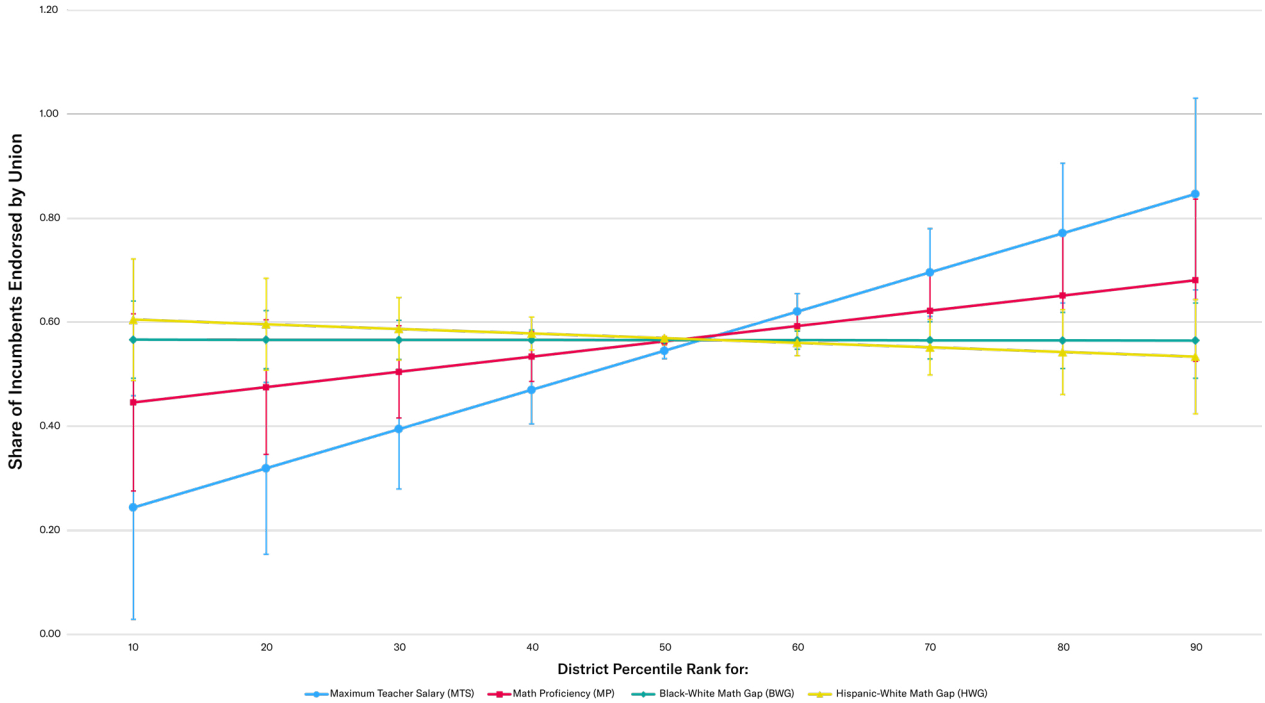
The outcome of interest in this analysis is the proportion of incumbents who are endorsed by the local teachers' union for reelection in each district during a particular election cycle. Specifically, I regress the proportion of incumbents who received the local union's endorsement on the various achievement measures alongside teacher salaries, focusing on the log of the highest salaries listed in a district's salary schedule. Year fixed-effects are included to account for common fiscal shocks, such as recessions and changes in state funding. The analysis also controls for changes in the number of full-time teachers employed in a district. Finally, to account for potentially strategic candidate retirement decisions, the share of incumbents who choose to stand for reelection is also controlled.

Figure 2 shows the headline findings from the California analysis (Table A-1, in the appendix, presents the detailed statistical results). Importantly, incumbents are significantly more likely to receive union support when salaries for the district's most senior teachers increased during their time on the board. For example, a 10% increase in top-of-the-scale salaries is associated with a 10-percentage-point increase in the share of incumbents endorsed. Models presented in subsequent columns in Table A-1 show the effects of different academic achievement measures. In none of these models are student academic achievement outcomes tied to union endorsement decisions. That is, there is simply no evidence for the belief that leads many voters to support union-backed candidates—that unions reward school board members who improve academic achievement outcomes.

As in Figure 1, the factors used here to predict union support for incumbent candidates are measured in percentile terms, such that a value of "75" on the x-axis can be interpreted as the share of endorsements made when districts are at the 75th percentile of a given explanatory variable, holding all other factors constant. The figure provides clear visual evidence for the patterns discussed in the statistical analyses presented in Table A-1. For example, as indicated by the blue upward sloping line, raising senior teacher salaries from the 40th to the 60th percentile increases the share of incumbents the union is predicted to support by 15 percentage points (from 47% to 62% percent of incumbents).

Figure 2

Unions were more likely to support incumbents who increased salaries for senior teachers. However, unions were not more likely to support incumbents that delivered improved student achievement outcomes.



Source: Author's original analysis examining the relationship between union support for incumbent school board members and teacher salaries and student achievement outcomes. Endorsement data: hand-collected by the author; Election information: California Elections Data Archive (CEDA); Achievement and salary data: California Department of Education.

Meanwhile, the analysis shows *no* statistically significant impact when manipulating the three student-achievement indicators shown in Figure 2. For example, the difference between a district scoring at the 40th percentile compared to the 60th percentile on math achievement is associated with a trivial and statistically insignificant 4-percentage-point increase in union support for the incumbents. What's more, there is no evidence that unions reward board members for lowering the achievement gap (the difference in educational performance between advantaged and disadvantaged students). Despite a great deal of progressive rhetoric about racial equity, unions do not appear to reward school boards that close racial achievement gaps. Specifically, there is no difference in support for incumbents depending on how much progress is made in closing either the black–white or Hispanics–white achievement gaps in California.

To examine the robustness of the California findings, a separate analysis in Table A-2 replaces teacher salaries with superintendent salaries. The intuition here is simple. If some unobserved factor (besides self-interest) explains the relationship between higher teacher salaries and greater union support for incumbents, we would expect to see the same correlation between other (non-teacher) district spending and union endorsements. However, since teachers' unions are not directly concerned with administrator pay, if self-interest explains the relationship, we should not see a link between the generosity of superintendent pay and union support for incumbent candidates. The results of these placebo tests (shown in Table A-2) confirm this expectation, with none of the coefficients on superintendent salaries significantly predicting union support for incumbents. *Only teacher salaries predict union support for incumbents*.

Some might argue that unions are simply playing the long game. In other words, by helping elect boards that invest more in teachers, over time, districts (and eventually students) will benefit from attracting and retaining more effective teachers. But this reasoning rests on faulty logic. First and foremost, it does nothing to address the fact that teachers' unions have decided not to reward incumbents with a proven track record of raising achievement. Second, prior research on the relationship between the generosity of teacher salaries and student achievement is rather mixed.[32] Although some studies find a link between teacher pay and student achievement, the most plausible mechanism for this effect is that better salaries can, in certain circumstances, help attract and retain stronger teachers. But I find that unions only reward school board incumbents who bump pay for the most *senior* teachers in their district. Raising salaries for the oldest segment of the teaching workforce is unlikely to encourage more talented college graduates to choose teaching as a career. Moreover, given how long it takes for most teachers to reach the top of the salary schedule, those who do are unlikely to switch careers. Raising pay for these teachers, therefore, is not likely to move the needle on teacher retention. In other words, even when pay can be used as a lever to improve teacher effectiveness, the effects will be concentrated among younger teachers, not the oldest veterans who are unlikely to leave.[33]

Florida Analysis

Finally, because teachers' unions are especially powerful in California, I also examined the dynamics of endorsement decisions in Florida to test the overall robustness of my findings. The Florida data include information on union endorsements in school board elections between 2010 and 2022. Unfortunately, the state of Florida does not provide comprehensive data on district salary schedules. Moreover, even if Florida had salary schedule data, it would be of questionable use since the state began requiring districts to adopt performance-based pay in 2014, making it difficult to generate apples to apples within-district salary comparisons.[34]

Fortunately, the Florida Department of Education does provide a highly salient measure of districts' academic progress each year: academic report cards with A–F letter grades. These data can be used to assess whether and how much unions reward incumbents for their demonstrated ability to improve or maintain high academic outcomes for students under the state's accountability system.

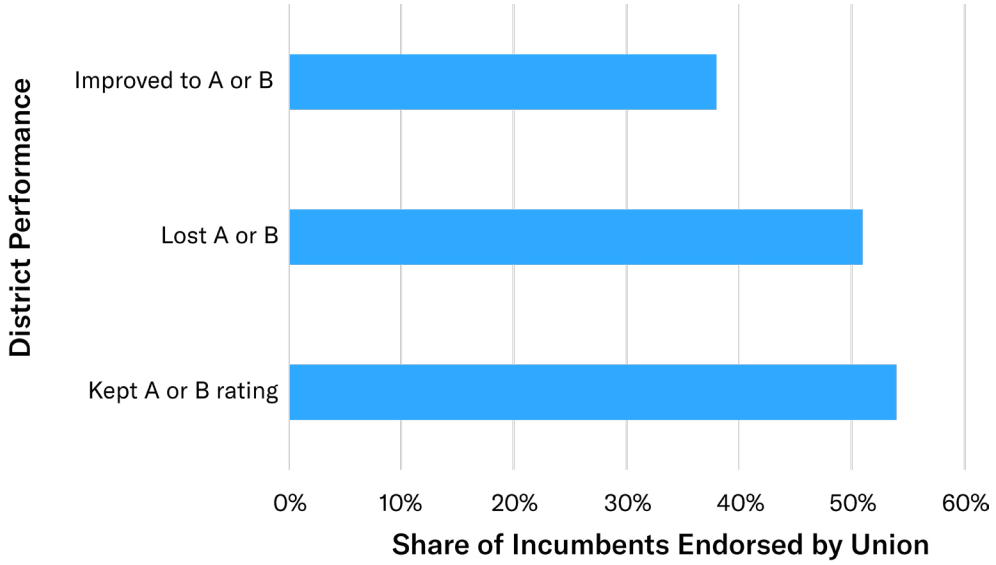
Florida's local teachers' unions issued endorsements (supporting or opposing incumbents) in 172 district-year combinations between 2010 and 2022. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, district report cards were not issued in 2020, thereby reducing the number of district-year observations in my analysis to 158. **Figure 3** shows quite clearly that, overall, unions did not reward incumbents for improving the state's academic rating of their school district.

For example, while unions supported 54% of incumbents who kept their district at an A or a B report card rating, they endorsed a nearly identical 51% of incumbents who presided over a district that lost their A or B rating (i.e., dropped from an A to a B or from an A/B to a C). More troubling, only 38% of incumbents whose districts *improved* to an A or a B received the teachers' union endorsement in their reelection campaign. It is worth noting, too, that these simple descriptive patterns—showing no link between district academic improvement and union support for incumbents—are robust to more elaborate statistical analyses using continuous (rather than discrete letter grade) measures of performance alongside district demographic controls.

In sum, the patterns in union endorsement decision-making seen in California are hardly isolated to just that state. On average, across two states and a national sample, there is no evidence that unions reward incumbent school board members based on how well they improve student academic achievement.

Figure 3

Union support for incumbent school board candidates unrelated to changes in districts' academic ratings



Note: Figure displays teacher-union support for incumbent school board candidates in relation to the letter-grade change during an incumbent's tenure (four years) prior to their reelection campaign. Sources: Endorsement data: hand-collected by the author; Election information: Florida School Boards Association; Student achievement data: Florida Department of Education

Conclusion

The findings in this report shed new light on the causes and consequences of teacher-union influence in school board elections. First, contrary to conventional wisdom, unions don't simply dominate these elections because they can organize and mobilize their own members at the polls. Instead, ordinary voters often help union-favored candidates get across the finish line because these voters are mistaken about what union endorsements convey and which criteria factor into unions choosing their preferred candidates.

To summarize, I have shown that teachers unions are far *more likely* to endorse incumbent school-board members in districts that:

- Increased salaries for senior teachers in the year prior to their reelection
- Kept in-person learning to a minimum during the 2020–21 school year

Alarmingly, I have also shown that while these very same unions claimed to be acting in the best interests of students, they were *not more likely* to support incumbents in districts that:

- Lowered achievement gaps between white and black students
- Lowered achievement gaps between white and Hispanic students
- Kept learning loss at bay during the Covid-19 pandemic
- Produced higher student achievement rates across the board

Third, the divergence between what teacher-union endorsements mean and how voters interpret them have troubling implications for democratic accountability in public education. Research has long shown that low-cost information like endorsements can be important determinants of voter decision-making in low-salience elections.[35] However, voters' perceptions must be accurate for these cues to improve (rather than impede) democratic accountability.

Recent studies show that these conditions do not hold when voters are uninformed about where interest groups stand relative to their own preferences.[36] Such is the case in education policy, where voters wrongly assume that union endorsements signal shared interests on outcomes important to voters.

Unfortunately, although there are compelling reasons to think that partisan, on-cycle school board elections would diminish the unions' current mobilization advantage, these reforms in isolation will not address the separate aspect of union influence uncovered here. One of the Hartney-Kogan experimental studies referenced earlier, for example, found that the union premium is equally large in both partisan and nonpartisan contexts. So, absent an informational campaign that raises awareness about the reliably different priorities of pro- and antiunion candidates, teachers' unions will continue to easily parlay the public's latent trust for teachers into support for union-preferred candidates.

So, what can and should be done?

The best disinfectant is probably sunlight. More specifically, education-reform advocates must address the low-salience information environment that characterizes most school board elections. Three potential ideas stand out.

First, the sort of new parent advocacy groups that have emerged in the aftermath of the pandemic can provide a new institutional vehicle for holding union-backed candidates to account and informing voters about the differences between a "students-first-agenda" and the commitments that union-endorsed candidates must make to curry union support.

Second, in states with teacher collective bargaining, laws that provide for more transparency in the bargaining process could help bring attention to the positions taken by school board members vis-à-vis the union. Typically, these contracts are negotiated in secret, which means ordinary citizens cannot monitor or publicize the dealmaking that may compromise or give away the independence of board members. Board members who are more sympathetic to the union in negotiations than the public would prefer may be able to obscure those sympathies later when they run for reelection because there is no formal record or outside group monitoring the process.

Third, to help counteract the low-information environment that is characteristic of most school board elections, education reform advocates should try to entice popular state officials to enter the political fray and back their own slate of candidates. This would not only raise the salience of these elections but also increase the likelihood that voters would be given more information

about the priorities of union and nonunion candidates. Electoral reforms that would allow political executives (mayors, governors) to make on-ballot endorsements could be one approach. The most successful example of this strategy being put into practice occurred in late 2022 when Florida governor Ron DeSantis used his popular profile to help a slate of reform-minded school board candidates slash the win rate of union-backed candidates from 70% to 25%.

Appendix

Table A-1

Predicting Proportion of Incumbents Receiving Teacher-Union Endorsement

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
VARIABLES	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**	**Model 5**	**Model 6**
% Incumbents running	0.085	0.098	0.067	0.063	0.039	0.041
	(0.081)	(0.083)	(0.120)	(0.120)	(0.082)	(0.082)
Max teacher salary (log)	**1.016***	**1.073****	**3.845*****	**3.803*****	**1.288*****	**1.292*****
	(0.529)	**(0.525)**	**(1.115)**	**(1.132)**	**(0.481)**	**(0.480)**
Teacher FTE (log)	0.061	0.046	–0.151	–0.164	–0.014	–0.015
	(0.0185)	(0.190)	(0.399)	(0.392)	(0.176)	(0.177)
ELA scale scores (std.)	0.065					
	(0.070)					
Math scale scores (std.)		0.097				
		(0.069)				
API scores			0.001			
			(0.002)			
API growth				0.001		
				(0.004)		
ELA proficiency %					0.006	
					(0.005)	
Math proficiency %						0.005
						(0.004)
Observations	778	733	365	365	804	804
R-squared	0.414	0.415	0.522	0.521	0.439	0.438
District FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Dependent variable is the proportion of incumbents that the local union endorsed for reelection in each district during a particular election cycle. Robust standard errors clustered by school district in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10

Table A-2

Superintendent Salaries Unrelated to Union Endorsements

	(1)	(2)	(3)
VARIABLES	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 3**
% Incumbents running	–0.010	–0.011	–0.000
	(0.065)	(0.065)	(0.068)
Sup. salaries (log)	0.202	0.140	0.208
	(0.174)	(0.174)	(0.181)
Max teacher salary (log)		0.801**	0.917**
		(0.392)	(0.403)
Teacher FTE (log)			–0.042
			(0.129)
Observations	1,138	1,138	1,022
R-squared	0.395	0.398	0.385
District FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sample	Full	Full	Balanced

Dependent variable is the proportion of incumbents that the local union endorsed for reelection in each district during a particular election cycle. Robust standard errors clustered by school district in parentheses.

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Endnotes

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2 Michael T. Hartney, "Still the Ones to Beat: Teachers' Unions and School Board Elections," Manhattan Institute, Oct. 27, 2022.

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5 Randi Weingarten, "Remarks by AFT President Randi Weingarten" (AFT TEACH event, Washington, DC, July 11, 2019).

6 Bellevue Education Association, Facebook post, July 31, 2022.

7 Joseph Cooke, "Candidates Question Lockport Teachers Union Endorsements in School Board Race," *Buffalo News*, May 13, 2023.

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13 Cooke, "Candidates Question Lockport Teachers Union Endorsements in School Board Race."

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15 Vladimir Kogan, Stéphane Lavertu, and Zachary Peskowitz, "Election Timing, Electorate Composition, and Policy Outcomes: Evidence from School Districts," *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 3 (2018): 637–51.

16 See Vladimir Kogan, Stéphane Lavertu, and Zachary Peskowitz, "The Democratic Deficit in U.S. Education Governance," *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 3 (August 2021): 1082–89, which found that most voters do not have children of their own in the typical school board election.

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19 See, e.g., Lesley Lavery, *A Collective Pursuit: Teachers Unions and Education Reform* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020); Richard D. Kahlenberg and Jay P. Greene, "Unions and the Public Interest: Is Collective Bargaining for Teachers Good for Students?" *Education Next* 12, no. 1 (2012): 60–69.

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25 The six organizations shown to teachers in the experiment were: Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC); Wisconsin Federation of Teachers, AFT-Wisconsin; Wisconsin Parent Teachers Association (PTA); Wisconsin Association of School Boards; Republican Party of Wisconsin; Democratic Party of Wisconsin.

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29 Districts in the endorsement sample tend to be larger, more Democratic, and more racially diverse.

30 Since the late 1990s, the California Department of Education has collected information on district salary schedules via "Form J-90."

31 This latter measure is standardized across school districts to have a mean of zero and standard deviation of one in each year.

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36 David E. Broockman, Aaron R. Kaufman, and Gabriel S. Lenz, "Heuristic Projection: Why Interest Group Cues May Fail to Help Citizens Hold Politicians Accountable," *British Journal of Political Science* (May 2023): 1–19.