

Teachers Unions:
A Help or Hindrance in diminishing Income Achievement
Gap

Washington and Lee University

Laura Steitz

Dr. Beckley

Poverty 423

April 19, 2012

Educational Achievement

The National Center for Education Statistics defines the education achievement gap as occurring, “when one group of students outperforms another group of students, and the difference is statistically significant,”¹ As noted in trend data from the National Assessment of Education Progress, a difference of 20 points on math and reading standardized tests translates to a gap of two grade levels.² Therefore, the 25-point gap between Hispanic and Caucasian fourth grade reading scores, and the 27-point gap between black and white fourth grade reading scores, are without a doubt statistically significant.³⁴ These statistics reveal the harsh role of race achievement gap in education. A disproportional number of minority families fall below the poverty line: In 2009, only 9.3% of white families were below the federal poverty line, while 22.7% of black families and 22.7% of Hispanic families had the same fate.⁵ Therefore, the racial achievement gap relates directly to the disparity in achievement of low SES students. The consequences of income inequality on educational achievement reveal an even bleaker picture than that of race: when comparing the testing scores of a child at the 90th wealth percentile, and a child at 10th percentile, the

¹ The National Center for Education Statistics. “Achievement Gaps” Washington, DC: 2011. Web. Apr. 2012

² *Education Week*. "Achievement Gap." July, 2007: Web. 3 Apr. 2012.

³ Hemphill, F. Cadelle, and Alan Vannerman. “Achievement Gaps; How Hispanic and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress” National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. Washington DC: 2011. Web.

⁴ Hamilton, Linda, and Alan Vannerman. “Achievement Gaps; How Black and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress” National Center for Education Statistics. U.S. Department of Education, Washington DC: 2007: Web. Apr. 2012

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. *Table 715. Families Below Poverty Level and Below 125 Percent of Poverty by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1980 to 2009*. Web.

“income achievement gap” is evident.⁶ This gap has increased 30-40% in the last 25 years, making it now double the black-white achievement gap.⁷

The NAEP tracks the background information of students, teachers, and schools to allow analysis of student achievement relative to the poverty level of public schools. The amount of students eligible for free or reduced lunch indicates the poverty level of a public school. In 2005, the average score on the fourth grade mathematics assessment decreased as the percentage of students eligible for the school lunch program increased.⁸ Students in high poverty schools (schools in which 75% or more students participate in the school lunch program) scored an average of 221 on the fourth grade mathematics test; whereas students attending low-poverty schools (schools with 10% or less students participating in the school lunch program) scored an average of 255 on the same assessment.⁹ These statistics do not bode well for the approximately 15 million children reported as living below the poverty level by the 2010 US Census.¹⁰ The discrepancies in educational achievement for minority and low SES children hold deeper significance when considering the effect achievement has on educational attainment, and thus life outcomes.

Educational Attainment

⁶ Reardon, Sean. "The Widening Academic Achievement Gap Between the Rich and the Poor: New Evidence and Possible Explanations." *Stanford University*. 2011. Web. 3 Apr. 2012. 8

⁷ Reardon, 1

⁸ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. "The Condition of Education 2006", Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006: Web. Apr. 2012

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau. *Table 712. Children Below Poverty Level by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1980 to 2009*. 2010. Web.

Data illustrate poor academic achievement as a consistently strong predictor of high school dropouts.¹¹ This predictor is even stronger for low SES students: In 2009, the dropout rate of students living in low-income families was 5 times greater than the rate of their peers from high-income families, 7.4% v. 1.4%.¹² The breakdown of high school dropouts also indicates a discrepancy amongst minority students: 17% of Hispanics dropped out of high school in 2010, 9% of blacks, and 5% of whites.¹³ Without a high school diploma, an individual's opportunities are severely limited; specifically in terms of economic income, crime rates, health.

Data indicate that high school dropouts earn less than half the income of those with a college degree: the average individual with a bachelors degree makes \$56,665, whereas the average person without a high school diploma makes only \$20,241 per year.¹⁴

However, income is not the only factor affected by educational attainment, research proves that levels of schooling significantly affect likelihood of arrest.¹⁵ Mentions of poor academic performance and weak attachment to school often arise in biographies of delinquents and adult criminals.¹⁶ The correlation between low-education men and crime is often attributed to the diminishing economic opportunities available for unskilled

¹¹Battin-Pearson, Sara and Michael Newcomb. "Predictors of Early High School Dropout: A Test of Five Theories" *Journal of Educational Psychology* 92. 3 (2000): 569

¹² NCES

¹³ U.S. Census Bureau. *Table 270. Public High School Graduates by State: 1980 to 2009*. 2010. Web.

¹⁴ U.S. Census Bureau. *Table 231. Educational Attainment by Selected Characteristics 2010*. 2010. Web.

¹⁵ Pettit, Becky, and Bruce Western. "Mass Imprisonment and the Life Course: Race and Class Inequality in U.S. Incarceration." *American Sociological Review*. 69. (2004): 151-169. Web. 4 Apr. 2012

¹⁶ Pettit, 153.

workers.¹⁷ Health is also strongly correlated with educational attainment. Studies report that adults with low educational attainment are more likely to die prematurely from cardiovascular disease, cancer, infection, lung disease, and diabetes.¹⁸ High school graduates tend to live 6-9 times longer than high school dropouts.¹⁹ Poor educational achievement is the trigger that sets a student down the path of poor quality of life; weak education achievement increases the likelihood of a student dropping out of high school, and poor educational attainment creates poor life outcomes in terms of income level, probability of incarceration, and poor health. Therefore, the causes of poor educational achievement for impoverished children must be acknowledged, and reformed for all children to have an equal opportunity for a good life.

Causes of Achievement Gap

The culprits for the discrepancies in educational achievement and thus educational attainment include: families and environmental stress, and quality of education. The economic pressure faced by disadvantaged families creates high levels of psychological distress in poor parents, which creates conflicts in marriage and punitive forms of parenting.²⁰ Parenting in this stressful and discouraging environment can cause severe harm to a child's development, and thus affect their education. Along with poverty comes poor living conditions: Lead poisoning, asthma, and unsafe housing structures can cause

¹⁷ Pettit, 160

¹⁸ Alliance for Excellent Education. "Healthier and Wealthier: Decreasing Health Care Costs by Increasing Educational Attainment." Washington DC, August 2006: Web. 4, Apr. 2012.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ M Magnuson, Katherine, and Elizabeth Votruba-Drzal. "Mobility and Its Consequences" *Changing Policies, Changing Poverty*. Ed. Maria Cancian and Ed. Sheldon Danziger. Ann Arbor: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009. Print. 156

learning disabilities, hyperactivity, and behavioral disorders for children living in poverty; children face these risks even in their poorly funded public schools.²¹ Girls in particular are often times coerced to perform the unpaid work of babysitting, house cleaning, errand running, etc. in their households due to the working hours of her parents.²² Because of this labor, homework often becomes a low priority, and truancy is a likely outcome. Living in violent neighborhoods is a frequent woe for poor families. High crime rates and risk factors such as abandoned lots, and inadequate municipal services can cause asthma, posttraumatic stress disorder, and anxiety for children at a young age.²³ Studies report that children of low SES have considerably higher levels of stress hormones than other children.²⁴ These stress hormones impede the cognitive abilities and achievements of impoverished children.²⁵ While family dynamics and neighborhood environments can negatively effect the intellectual development of a child, they are not the sole factor in the abhorrent gaps in achievement and attainment for low SES children.

This paper focuses on the quality of schools as a cause and solution for the gaps in achievement and attainment for impoverished and minority children. Three causes are perceived as the culprits for the horrific performance of children in high-poverty schools include: the lack of resources for schools serving the poor, teachers and administrators of disadvantaged schools who lack the skills and knowledge necessary to improve the quality of instruction, teachers and administrators do not accept accountability for their

²¹ Books, Sue. *Poverty and Schooling in the U.S.: Contexts and Consequences*. Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2004. Print. 41

²² Books, 44

²³ Books, 45

²⁴ Magnuson, 156

²⁵ Ibid.

teaching.²⁶ Many theories about educational inequality revolve around the productivity, or lack thereof, of teachers. Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the focus of federal accountability has been on diminishing the inequalities of American education system; a disproportional amount of this accountability has been placed on educators. The law requires schools to test children in grades 3-8 every year, and mandates severe consequences for schools that do not show steady progress towards a goal of 100% student proficiency on state assessments by the year 2014.²⁷ Many critiques of NCLB claim that, ironically, this law leaves many children behind and even encourages students to drop out. One critique argues, “*Expecting every child to succeed is one thing, requiring that success is another.*”²⁸ With the added pressure on teachers from the federal government, comes the increased scrutiny of teachers unions. Many critics argue that unions are a major barrier to school reform. This paper explores the role of union power and influence in reducing the achievement gap of low SES students through the policies of seniority, teacher tenure, teacher compensation, and teacher working conditions.

Teacher Quality

How can schools close the achievement gap? The answer is through effective teachers. Multiple studies report that teacher quality is the single most impactful school factor on educational achievement.²⁹ Constant exposure to effective teachers has been

²⁶ Jacob, Brian, and Jens Ludwig. "Improving Educational Outcomes for Poor Children." *Changing Policies, Changing Poverty*. Ed. Maria Cancian and Ed. Sheldon Danziger. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009. Print. 267

²⁷ Books, 115

²⁸ Books, 115

²⁹ Alliance for Excellent Education. "Policy Brief: Improving the Distribution of Teachers in Low-Performing High Schools" Washington, DC, 2008: Web. 1, Apr. 2012.

proven to close the achievement gap and overcome learning obstacles of low SES students.³⁰ But, what makes an effective teacher? How do we attain and retain these professionals?

A 2004 study examined the strategies and approaches of teachers recommended by their principals due to their referral of one or fewer students per year for learning disabled identification, retention of one or fewer students per year, and their completion of the school year with all students at or near grade level.³¹ These teachers worked at a school in which 40% of students are eligible for the free lunch program.³² The study found four common strategies amongst these high-quality educators: building positive relationships with students and their families, conducting formative assessments of student's skills, integrating learning experiences with students' background knowledge, and creating a positive environment for instruction.³³ These teachers understood the treacherous backgrounds of their students: unstable family life, frequent moving, no private place to store school supplies or do homework, etc. Thus, highly effective teachers try to counteract these issues when creating classroom environment; the rooms are well-ordered, academic and behavioral expectations are consistent, clear pathways are made for movement around the classroom, supplies are easily accessible, etc.³⁴ Teachers who employ these strategies are most effective in keeping students motivation and engaged in school, and therefore most effective in increasing educational attainment for low SES students. In order to lessen

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Howard, Tish. *Poverty is Not a Learning Disability: Equalizing Opportunities for Low SES Students* Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin, 2009. Print. 31

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Howard, 32

the income achievement gap, America needs more of these types of teachers working in low-income schools.

Schools in poorer areas are five times more likely to get inexperienced or ineffectual teachers.³⁵ In lowest performing schools, 28% percent of new teachers had scored in the lowest percentile on the state certification exam; of those remaining in the school a year later, 44% of them had done so. Research dictates that having an ineffective teacher versus an effective one in a single year can equate a loss of more than a year in standard achievement.³⁶ David Haselkorn, Dean of national education programs at Lesley University, states “if you want to understand the root of the achievement gap, it’s the teacher gap that exists between the affluent schools and the less affluent schools.”³⁷ The statistics of poor teacher retention rates in high-poverty schools illustrate the main paradox of American education: the children most in need of a high-quality education, end up with the lowest-quality teachers

Seniority Rule

There are many different explanations for the disparity of qualified teachers between affluent and impoverished schools. Brian Crosby, author of Small Kids, Bad Schools, cites the “seniority” policy of teachers unions as the culprit. In the seniority system teachers with more teaching experience get to choose where in the district they

³⁵ Crosby, Brian. *Smart Kids, Bad Schools: 38 Ways to Save America’s Future*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2008. Print. 78

³⁶ AEE, 1

³⁷ Books, 101

wish to work. Because of this, experienced teachers are not allocated according to the needs of the schools.³⁸ Therefore, the seniority rule requires new teachers to work in the most challenging schools. This policy may account for the results of a 2007 study completed by California State University that found nearly 25% of teachers leave the profession after four years or less.³⁹ One opponent of seniority claims “if teachers cannot be assigned to the schools where they are needed the most, and great young teachers are laid off while mediocre senior teachers are kept...children are the ultimate losers.”⁴⁰ Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan agrees, “If layoffs are based on seniority, that doesn’t help kids. And it particularly doesn’t help the students who need the most help.”⁴¹

Proponents of the seniority rule such as Karen Lewis, president of the Chicago Teachers Union, states that abolishing the seniority rule would aggravate the already massive problem of teacher turnover. According to Lewis, fifty percent of the teachers that enter Chicago Public Schools leave within the first five years. She claims that seniority system “puts the breaks on” the instability of teachers in the public school system.⁴² Thus, Lewis believes that the system of seniority incentivizes teachers to remain in the system. This is not the case; new teachers are much more likely to leave the profession, particularly new teachers in poorer schools.⁴³ New educators working in low-performing schools are

³⁸ Crosby, 78

³⁹ Crosby, 141

⁴⁰ Moe, Terry M. *Special Interest: Teachers Unions and America’s Public Schools*. Washington, D.C. Brookings Institution Press 2011: Print. 192

⁴¹ Abramson, Larry. “Pressure Mounts To Ax Teacher Seniority Rule” *NPR*. March 6, 2011: Web.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Alliance for Excellent Education. “Teacher Attrition: A Costly Loss to the Nation and to the States” Washington DC, 2006: Web. 2, Apr. 2012.

50% more likely to leave the profession than teachers working in wealthier schools,⁴⁴ An abolishment of the seniority system would allow new teachers to gain experience working in schools with better working conditions before entering the challenging environment of high-poverty schools. Increasing the educational achievement of low-performing schools requires educators with the most teaching experience. In order for teachers to gain experience, they must remain in the field; the seniority rule exacerbates the problem of teacher retention by discouraging new teachers. By ending the seniority rule, inexperienced teachers would not be placed in low-performing schools, and high-quality teachers would work to close the educational achievement gap.

To counteract the teacher gap created through the seniority system, reformers suggest a monetary incentive of 25% for outstanding instructors to teach in hard-to-staff schools, and the abolishment of the seniority policy.⁴⁵ The National Education Association supports this idea that teachers in hard-to-staff schools should have a higher salary than those who do not.⁴⁶ While this idea encourages teachers to work in low SES schools, the constraints of seniority districts still exist, and prevent the most important resource in education—teachers—from being used most productively.

Teacher Tenure

Critics of unions argue that unions frequently use their power in ways that conflict with what is best for kids and schools; teacher tenure is one of these conflicts.⁴⁷ Under the

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Crosby, 78

⁴⁶ Koppich, Julia. "Teacher Unions and New Forms of Teacher Compensation" *Kappan Magazine* May 2010: Web. 24.

⁴⁷ Moe, 343

current system of teacher tenure if a new teacher gets acceptable, not excellent, evaluations from the principal for three years, the teacher has a job for life.⁴⁸ Critics claim that students truly lose out when bad teachers remain in the system: kids are, “just collateral damage, a cost of doing business.”⁴⁹ The policy of tenure originally began in reaction to the frequency of teacher firings for non-work related reasons; teachers could be dismissed if a new political party came to power or if a principal wanted to give jobs to his friends.⁵⁰ The NEA and AFT argue that tenure still serves to protect teachers’ freedom of speech, and allows them to engage in unfavorable activities.⁵¹⁵² Teachers are subjected to difficult situations, such as failing students, which require job protection. The job security that tenure provides also works as an effective recruitment tool for the teaching profession.

Proponents of teacher tenure argue that its abolishment would hurt recruitment and

retention of high-quality teachers.⁵³

In most states, new teachers are placed on probation for several years subjecting

them to an up or out tenure review. However, most public schools do not take advantage of this time period to weed out lower-quality teachers.⁵⁴ A report in 2009 found that only 1% of all teachers were rated “unsatisfactory” in their evaluations. With nearly 4 million active

⁴⁸ Crosby, 189

⁴⁹ Moe, 387

⁵⁰ Kersten, Thomas A. "Teacher Tenure: Illinois School Board Presidents' Perspectives and Suggestions for Improvement," *Planning and Changing*, Oct. 1, 2006 Web. Apr. 2012

⁵¹ National Education Association. "NEA Policy: Academic and Intellectual Freedom and Tenure in Higher Education" *NEA.org* Web. Apr. 2012

⁵² American Federation of Teachers. "The Truth About Tenure in Higher Education" Washington DC, 2007: Web.

⁵³ Barron, Joan. "Educators Say Teacher Tenure Bill Would Hurt Recruitment, Retention" *Billings Gazette*. January 21, 2011: Web. Apr. 2012

⁵⁴ Jacob and Ludwig, 277

teachers, this percentage does not make statistical sense.⁵⁵ Therefore, the problem with teacher tenure does not seem to fall on the teachers unions for protecting the rights of teachers, but school administrators for not utilizing their power to evaluate and fire poor-quality teachers. An effective use of teacher tenure could work to attractive highly qualified individuals into the teacher profession, while weeding out current ineffective teachers.

Teacher Compensation

As evidenced throughout this paper, teacher retention particularly in high-poverty schools is an important issue. While unions argue for the seniority rule and teacher tenure as effective means to combat the instability of the teacher labor market, a reform of teacher salary has proven more influential in a teachers decision to enter, and leave the profession.⁵⁶ Under the common, current system of teacher compensation, years of experience act as neutral criteria on which to base payment. The debate surrounding seniority pay versus performance pay for teachers revolves around the conflict between teacher equality, and teacher quality. The unions, National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, who together represent 80% of all public school teachers, view the single salary construct as the fairest way to pay teachers.⁵⁷ Proponents rationalize the single salary system based of its ability to equalize pay and remove religion,

⁵⁵ Rotherham, Andrew. "Fixing Teacher Tenure Without A Pass-Fail Grade" *Time Magazine* January 27, 2011. Web. Apr. 2012

⁵⁶ Brewer, Dominic. "Career Paths and Quit Decisions: Evidence From Teaching" *Journal of Labor Economics* 14. 2 (1996): 314

⁵⁷ Ibid.

gender, and politics from the compensation process while making pay more predictable.⁵⁸ By rewarding educators off of teaching experience, seniority pay excludes the importance of teacher quality in education.

The single-salary system incentivizes attainment of more teacher education by increasing compensation with the completion of a masters or doctoral degree. Reformers argue that advancing degrees do not correlate with improved student performance, and that experience only matters in the first few years of teaching. Reformers also argue against the seniority pay model because it “ensures that good teachers are paid the same as bad teachers, and that the criteria that good teachers get paid—seniority, formal credentials—have nothing to do with how much children actually learn.”⁵⁹ For these reasons, reformers advocate a model in which teacher compensation relates directly with teacher productivity, either through student performance or supervisor evaluation.⁶⁰ Advocates of a performance pay model argue that it could provide motivation for teachers to work harder, and could truly affect the types of teachers attracted to and remaining in the work force. This model assumes that because teachers value the pay increase, they will work more effectively to produce higher achievement among their students.⁶¹ A clear for consideration of teacher quality when determining teacher compensation exists. However, the performance pay model suggested by reformers does not provide a complete answer to the question of teacher salary.

⁵⁸ Koppich, 23

⁵⁹ Moe, 343

⁶⁰ Jacob and Ludwig, 279

⁶¹ Kelly, Sean. *Assessing Teacher Quality; Understanding Teacher Effects on Instruction and Achievement* New York, Teachers College Columbia University: 2012. Print. 12

The passage of NCLB and the increased accountability placed on teachers has had some negative effects on students in low SES schools. Critics of NCLB fear that a model of compensation based off standardized assessment scores could exacerbate these problems. One such problem is that of teacher cheating: the stress of the high stakes testing model for teachers has often been connected with the increased the frequency of teacher's changing students answers on standardized tests.⁶² Another criticism of the performance pay model is that teachers may focus their attention more on subjects that "count" more. Students who are too far behind, or ahead, may be neglected for the sake of increased pay.⁶³ Other opponents of the merit pay model argue that teaching is a collaborative effort, and incentive pay for individuals would harm the teamwork necessary for educational achievement.⁶⁴

The most compelling argument against the performance pay model contends that teachers are accountable for bringing students to specific achievement targets without regard for their different starting points. Teachers cannot control many conditions, such as income level of students, resources available, class size, textbooks, and many more, which would allow them to be more effective. Therefore, creating a pay scale off of uncontrollable measures would both be ineffective and unfair for teachers.⁶⁵

Both NEA and AFT oppose incentive pay based on achievement testing for three main reasons. First, they argue that standardized tests only capture a small partition of a teacher's impact on student learning. Second, the unions report that 65% of teachers of

⁶² Resmovits, Joy. "Teacher Cheating Scandals Spur Obama Administration Call To Address Growing Problem" *Huffington Post* February 29, 2012: Web. Apr. 2012

⁶³ Jacob and Ludwig, 279

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Kelly, 204

untested grades and subjects would be left out of the pay system if testing scores are used as a measure of teacher quality and productiveness. Last, this system could discourage cooperation in a profession that requires it.⁶⁶ The current system does not reward high-quality teachers, yet the performance pay model as it presently stands, does not account for the discrepancies of high-stakes testing.

Alternative calculations of teacher compensation have arisen in response to the discrepancies of both the single salary model and the standardized score model. Officially, teachers unions are unsupportive of these alternative means of payment calculation due to the number of unknown determinants and the possible use of subjectivity and favoritism.⁶⁷ Yet in recent years have been collaborating more often with school districts to make an effective system of teacher compensation. The IMPACT *plus* model implemented under the cooperation of the District of Columbia Public School system collaborated and Washington Teachers Union (WTU) serves as an example of a successful alternative model to teacher compensation.

IMPACT *plus*

The IMPACT *plus* compensation system, as employed in 2011, is composed of two parts: an annual bonus, and an increase in base salary. In order to be eligible for the annual bonus a teacher must receive a “highly effective” rating. A “highly effective” rating is based off both student standardized assessments and supervisor evaluations. This rating model negates some of the criticisms against high-stakes testing as the sole factor in

⁶⁶ Koppich, 24

⁶⁷ Koppich, 25

determining teacher compensation, while still creating a sense of objectivity in the compensation calculation. The program states that, “one of the goals of IMPACT *plus* is to help our highest-poverty schools attract and retain outstanding educators.”⁶⁸ Therefore, teachers who receive the “highly effective” rating while working at a school with a 60% or higher population of children eligible for the school lunch program receive a \$10,000 bonus. Teachers who receive the “highly effective” rating while working at schools with 59% of the population or lower eligible receive only a \$5,000.⁶⁹ Thus, the annual bonus works to promote high-quality teachers and, furthermore, high-quality teachers in high poverty schools.

The second part of IMPACT *plus* is the increase in base salary for teachers receiving a “highly effective” rating for two consecutive years. Under the previous single-salary system, a teacher’s salary was based off academic degrees (bachelors, masters, doctoral), and years of teaching experience. A teacher receiving the “highly effective” ranking for two years in a row is moved from the bachelors pay bracket to the masters pay bracket. Additionally, teachers earning consecutive “highly effective” ratings will earn “service credit,” which equate to additional years of teaching experience. A teacher receiving the “highly effective” rating and working in a high-poverty school receives more “service credits,” thus moving further up the pay scale. For example, a teacher may receive 5 service credits for working in a high-poverty school and a consecutive “highly effective” rating. If this teacher had been teaching for 7 years, he would be paid as if he had been teaching for twelve years. Thus IMPACT *plus* compensation model works off the pay scale

⁶⁸ District of Columbia Public Schools. *IMPACT: The DCPS Effectiveness Assessment System for School-Based Personnel*. D.C.: 2011. Web. 65. Apr. 2012

⁶⁹ Ibid.

as implemented by the single-salary system. However, it offers teachers a greater chance on advancement based off the quality and effectiveness of their teaching.

Under the previous salary system, the starting salary was \$42,369, and it took 21 years for teachers reach the maximum salary of \$87,584. Yet, as a highly effective teacher under the IMPACT *plus* system, teachers have the potential to earn \$76,539 in their first year, and can achieve the maximum salary of \$131,540 in just nine years.⁷⁰ The cooperation between the unions and the DC public school system has created a fair system that highlights the importance of “highly effective” teaching through monetary compensation.

This system not only rewards teachers who work in challenging schools, but also encourages all teachers to stay in the profession. After receiving a highly-effective rating for two consecutive years, Ms. Johnson, a DC special education teacher stated: “Lots of teachers leave the profession, but this has kept me invested to stay, I know they value me.”⁷¹ Ms. Johnson’s testimony counters the argument of Karen Lewis that the seniority rule retains teachers. By increasing the compensation of high-quality teachers, teachers feel valued and encouraged to stay in the profession.

Teacher Working Conditions

While performance pay models provide a partial solution to the problem of teacher retention and attainment in high-poverty schools, data reveals that a reform of teacher

⁷⁰ DCPS, 64-68

⁷¹ Dillon, Sam. “In Washington, Large Rewards in Teacher Pay” *New York Times* December 31, 2011: Web. Apr. 2012

working conditions would be more effective.⁷² The poor conditions of school facilities, particularly in high-poverty schools, cause many adverse effects on teaching and learning. In 2003, a study asked a large number of teachers to rate working conditions in their schools, and how these conditions affect their job performance. On an A-F grading scale, DC teachers rated their school buildings as right below a C- (1.98), and 40% thought that their facilities were unsuitable for effective teaching and learning. In the study, 64% Washington, DC teachers ranked the science labs as inadequate and over a quarter reported teaching in a non-classroom such as a hallway or even a closet. These inadequate structures discourage students from learning opportunities and leave teachers feeling frustrated. Not only do these insufficient structures jeopardize education, but they also create adverse health effects for students and teachers alike. Almost 70% of DC teachers cited bad air quality in their classrooms; uncomfortable room temperature, inoperable and dirty windows, dirty restrooms and lunchrooms were other factors teachers reported as health risks for students and teachers alike. One third of DC teachers suffered health problems rooted in these poor environmental conditions; these teachers also mentioned less teaching time due to health issues created by poor school facilities. Almost three fourths of DC teachers who reported health problems desired to change schools; 40% considered leaving the profession all together.⁷³ In order to hold teachers accountable for educational achievement in their classrooms, we need to significantly improve their working conditions.

⁷² Berry, Barnett and Jon Eckert. "Creating Teacher Incentives for School Excellence and Equity" National Education Policy Center, School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder, January 2012: Web. 1

⁷³ Schneider, Mark. "Linking School Facility Conditions to Teacher Satisfaction and Success" National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, August 2003: Web. 1-4. Apr. 2012

The American Federation of Teachers conducted a study, which found a difference of 5 to 17 percentile points in the achievement of students learning in poor school facilities and those in standard school buildings.⁷⁴ To combat the effects of poor school facilities on teacher retention, health, and effectiveness, the AFT has called for “an appropriate level of federal assistance to help local communities build and modernize their schools.”⁷⁵ They also demand a “learning environment index” requirement under NCLB with the purpose of improving environmental conditions of schools to advance student performance. Such an index would measure factors affecting student achievement such as the state of school buildings, air quality, etc. Schools that fail to meet AYP would be required to improve upon these conditions with the aid of state and district funding.⁷⁶ This policy would create a more fair and equal system of teacher accountability for student learning.

Brian Crosby claims that by, “doing what is best for the teachers, you are doing what is best for students”.⁷⁷ In order to provide all children with an equal and excellent education, a reform of school facilities needs to occur. As Ken Futernick, a writer at the LA times, writes: “we have a high-school dropout problem, in large part because we have a teacher dropout problem.”⁷⁸ In order to give low SES students the best education, schools need to have the best teachers. Recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers will only be possible with a reform of working conditions. The AFT and NEA both lobby and

⁷⁴ American Federation of Teachers. “Building Minds, Minding Buildings: Turning Crumbling Schools into Environments for Learning” Washington, D.C. 2006: Web. 6 Apr. 2012

⁷⁵ AFT, 11

⁷⁶ AFT, 12

⁷⁷ Berry, Eckert 141

⁷⁸ Berry, Eckert 142

bargain for safe working conditions for teachers⁷⁹ By doing so, the unions are lobbying and bargaining for the advancement of student achievement in high-poverty schools.

Conclusion

Getting high-quality teachers into high-poverty classrooms is the answer to reducing and eradicating the educational achievement gap. The two biggest issues facing the education sector today include attracting top caliber individuals into the teaching profession, specifically in low-income communities. The second issue is keeping the highly effective educators in the field, particularly in the low-performing classrooms. Do teachers unions work towards these goals of recruiting and retaining teachers in high poverty schools? The mission statement of the nation's largest teachers union, the NEA, defines their interest as advocating "for the educational professionals and to unite our members and the nation to fulfill the promise of public education."⁸⁰ The NEA also acknowledges their duty to produce the best education for all students:

NEA also believes that every student in America, regardless of family income or place of residence, deserves a quality education. In pursuing this mission, NEA has determined that we will focus the energy and resources of our 3.2 million members on improving the quality of teaching, increasing student achievement and making schools, safer, better places to learn.

However, do the unions put these good intentions into action? Under the current systems of the seniority rule and teacher tenure, unions prevent low SES students from receiving a high-quality education.

⁷⁹ Manning, Rob. "Parkrose, Gresham-Barlow Teachers Unions Vote to Strike" *NPR*. April 12, 2012 Web.

⁸⁰ National Education Association. "NEA's Vision, Mission, and Values" *NEA.org* 2006. Web. Apr. 2012

The seniority rule, as supported by teachers unions, places inexperienced teachers in the most challenging teaching environments, the low performing schools of low-income communities. The abolishment of this ‘rule’ would accomplish two goals: it would allow school districts the ability to place the most experienced teachers in the schools most in need. Thus, low SES students would get the equal education they deserve. An abolishment of the seniority rule would help retain new teachers; by not immediately placing new teachers in the most difficult working conditions, they would not be as discouraged. By upholding the seniority system, unions do not meet their standard of “fulfilling the promise of public education”.

The current tenure system does a poor job of ensuring that low SES students receive a high-quality education. After three years of an “adequate” rating, teachers have a job for life, and many schools and children are stuck with ineffective teachers. A reform of the tenure system would help recruit and retain high quality educators. Such a reform should focus on school administrator’s system of evaluations. Administrators need to improve their ability to recognize and fire ineffective teachers. In most states, the “probation” period for new teachers is only three years, this does not provide administrators with enough time to determine if a teachers in productive or unproductive. However, a complete abolishment of the tenure system would not be productive either. Teachers are often faced with difficult positions such as failing a student, or assigning an unfavorable grade, etc. Therefore, the tenure system is important in retaining teaches who have to make these difficult decisions. Yet through their support of the current system of teacher tenure, teachers unions perpetuate the problem of ineffective teaching. A reform of

this system, including the elongation of the evaluation period and more effective system of firing bad teachers, would aid in the reduction of the income achievement gap.

While the union policies of seniority and tenure prevent education reform, the increase in collaboration of unions and school districts with concern to teacher compensation has been effective in recruiting and retaining effective teachers. The single-salary system only incentivizes teachers to remain in the profession. New models of teacher compensation account for the quality of teaching in the calculation of salary, and even more so teacher quality in high-poverty schools. However too many factors exist outside of a teacher's control to base teacher salary solely off of student test scores. Therefore collaboration between teachers unions and school districts is imperative in determining a fair system of teacher compensation. Models such as the *IMPACT plus* system in D.C., which consider both student assessment scores as well as principal evaluations in determining a teacher's rank, serve as a prime example of the successes of teacher/district cooperation. As a result of the monetary rewards given to "high effective" teachers, specifically "high effective" teachers working in high-poverty schools, more professionals are attracted to the teaching sector and current teachers feel valued and are thus encouraged to remain. Therefore, union participation in the reform of the single-salary system increases the quality of teaching, and thus the educational achievement of low SES students.

Teachers unions' fervent support of a reform of teacher working conditions helps improve the income achievement gap. The teaching educators in low-income schools are able to provide is negatively affected by the bad quality of school facilities. Additionally, teachers cite working conditions as one of the top reasons for leaving a school, and leaving

the profession all together. An increase of federal, state, and local funding for school facilities in low SES communities would benefit the educational achievement of students in many ways: students would be better able to concentrate in classrooms, teachers would have more time to focus on quality teaching, highly effective teachers would remain in challenging schools. Through the bargaining efforts of teachers unions for improved school conditions, unions help to diminish the educational achievement gap.

A reform of the seniority rule, teacher tenure, teacher compensation, and working conditions is imperative for recruiting and retaining high quality teachers in high poverty schools. While teachers unions promote a reform of working conditions, and are beginning to collaborate with school districts on a reform of teacher pay, they stand in the way of educational reform in the cases of seniority and tenure. In order to eliminate the gap in achievement scores for low-income students, and thus to eliminate the educational attainment gap, teachers unions must abolish policies that keep ineffective teachers in the classrooms.

Works Cited

Abramson, Larry. "Pressure Mounts To Ax Teacher Seniority Rule" *NPR*. March 6, 2011: Web.

Alliance for Excellent Education. "Healthier and Wealthier: Decreasing Health Care Costs by Increasing Educational Attainment." Washington DC, August 2006: Web. 4, Apr. 2012.

Alliance for Excellent Education. "Policy Brief: Improving the Distribution of Teachers in Low-Performing High Schools" Washington, DC, 2008: Web. 1, Apr. 2012.

Alliance for Excellent Education. "Teacher Attrition: A Costly Loss to the Nation and to the States" Washington DC, 2006: Web. 2, Apr. 2012.

American Federation of Teachers. "Building Minds, Minding Buildings: Turning Crumbling Schools into Environments for Learning" Washington, D.C. 2006: Web. 6 Apr. 2012

American Federation of Teachers. "The Truth About Tenure in Higher Education" Washington DC, 2007: Web.

Barron, Joan. "Educators Say Teacher Tenure Bill Would Hurt Recruitment, Retention" *Billings Gazette*. January 21, 2011: Web. Apr. 2012

Battin-Pearson, Sara and Michael Newcomb. "Predictors of Early High School Dropout: A Test of Five Theories" *Journal of Educational Psychology* 92. 3 (2000): 569

Books, Sue. *Poverty and Schooling in the U.S.: Contexts and Consequences*. Mahwah, N.J: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2004. Print. 41

Brewer, Dominic. "Career Paths and Quit Decisions: Evidence From Teaching" *Journal of Labor Economics* 14. 2 (1996): 314

Berry, Barnett and Jon Eckert. "Creating Teacher Incentives for School Excellence and Equity" National Education Policy Center, School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder, January 2012: Web. 1

Crosby, Brian. *Smart Kids, Bad Schools: 38 Ways to Save America's Future*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2008. Print. 78

Dillon, Sam. "In Washington, Large Rewards in Teacher Pay" *New York Times* December 31, 2011: Web.

District of Columbia Public Schools. *IMPACT: The DCPS Effectiveness Assessment System for School-Based Personnel*. D.C.: 2011. Web. Apr. 2012

Education Week. "Achievement Gap." July, 2007: Web. 3 Apr. 2012.

Hamilton, Linda, and Alan Vannerman. "Achievement Gaps; How Black and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress" National Center for Education Statistics. U.S. Department of Education, Washington DC: 2007: Web. Apr. 2012

Hemphill, F. Cadelle, and Alan Vannerman. "Achievement Gaps; How Hispanic and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress" National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. Washington DC: 2011. Web.

Howard, Tish. *Poverty is Not a Learning Disability: Equalizing Opportunities for Low SES Students* Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin, 2009. Print. 31

Jacob, Brian, and Jens Ludwig. "Improving Educational Outcomes for Poor Children." *Changing Policies, Changing Poverty*. Ed. Maria Cancian and Ed. Sheldon Danziger. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009. Print. 267

Kelly, Sean. *Assessing Teacher Quality; Understanding Teacher Effects on Instruction and Achievement* New York, Teachers College Columbia University: 2012. Print. 12

Kersten, Thomas A. "Teacher Tenure: Illinois School Board Presidents' Perspectives and Suggestions for Improvement," *Planning and Changing*, Oct. 1, 2006 Web. Apr. 2012

Koppich, Julia. "Teacher Unions and New Forms of Teacher Compensation" *Kappan Magazine* May 2010: Web. 24.

Magnuson, Katherine, and Elizabeth Votruba-Drzal. "Mobility and Its Consequences" *Changing Policies, Changing Poverty*. Ed. Maria Cancian and Ed. Sheldon Danziger. Ann Arbor: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009. Print. 156

Manning, Rob. "Parkrose, Gresham-Barlow Teachers Unions Vote to Strike" *NPR*. April 12, 2012 Web.

Moe, Terry M. *Special Interest: Teachers Unions and America's Public Schools*. Washington, D.C. Brookings Institution Press 2011: Print. 192

The National Center for Education Statistics. "Achievement Gaps" Washington, DC: 2011. Web. Apr. 2012

National Education Association. "NEA Policy: Academic and Intellectual Freedom and Tenure in Higher Education" *NEA.org* Web. Apr. 2012

National Education Association. "NEA's Vision, Mission, and Values" *NEA.org* 2006. Web. Apr. 2012

Pettit, Becky, and Bruce Western. "Mass Imprisonment and the Life Course: Race and Class Inequality in U.S. Incarceration." *American Sociological Review*. 69. (2004): 151-169. Web. 4 Apr. 2012

Reardon, Sean. "The Widening Academic Achievement Gap Between the Rich and the Poor: New Evidence and Possible Explanations." *Stanford University*. 2011. Web. 3 Apr. 2012. 8

Resmovits, Joy. "Teacher Cheating Scandals Spur Obama Administration Call To Address Growing Problem" *Huffington Post* February 29, 2012: Web. Apr. 2012

Rotherham, Andrew. "Fixing Teacher Tenure Without A Pass-Fail Grade" *Time Magazine* January 27, 2011. Web. Apr. 2012

Schneider, Mark. "Linking School Facility Conditions to Teacher Satisfaction and Success" National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, August 2003: Web. 1-4. Apr. 2012

U.S. Census Bureau. *Table 715. Families Below Poverty Level and Below 125 Percent of Poverty by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1980 to 2009*. Web. Apr. 2012

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. "The Condition of Education 2006", Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006: Web. Apr. 2012

U.S. Census Bureau. *Table 712. Children Below Poverty Level by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1980 to 2009*. 2010. Web. Apr. 2012

U.S. Census Bureau. *Table 270. Public High School Graduates by State: 1980 to 2009*. 2010. Web. Apr. 2012

U.S. Census Bureau. *Table 231. Educational Attainment by Selected Characteristics 2010*. 2010. Web. Apr. 2012