

BACKGROUNDER

The Impact of Teachers' Unions on Education Policy

BY RODNEY CLIFTON



Executive Summary

- Teachers' unions were formed for the express purpose of improving working conditions for teachers.
- These unions make substantial contributions to public policy and are actively involved in attempting to influence governments.
- It is important to note that the primary goals of teachers' unions are different from, and often incompatible with, those of effective schools.
- Teachers' unions oppose accountability measures such as standardized testing, and they advocate for collective agreements that restrict the flexibility of school boards to meet the needs of students.
- Teachers' unions support substantial increases in education spending but have not indicated what level of funding is sufficient.
- Class-size limits are a major goal of teachers' unions despite the lack of evidence that they improve student learning.
- Class-size limits are a major goal of teachers' unions despite the lack of evidence before adopting proposals made by teachers' unions, governments need to remember that teachers' unions place the interests of their members first.

Introduction

Canadian teachers' unions were formed to improve working conditions for teachers. There can be little doubt that over the past century significant gains have been made in this area. Public school teachers across the country enjoy reasonable salaries, job security, sick leave benefits and financially stable pension plans. School boards are required to adhere to collective agreements that stipulate the working conditions in which teachers are expected to function.

While teachers' unions have done much to improve working conditions for teachers, they have also made substantial efforts to affect public policy in every province. Teachers' unions frequently involve themselves in provincial elections and will often conduct advertising campaigns that implicitly support or criticize the proposals of the political parties. Due to their relatively large membership and their important role in educating young people, teachers' unions have more influence than many other organizations and are not afraid to make use of it.

This report will provide a brief summary of the public policy positions taken by most teachers' unions and it will evaluate their overall impact on the quality of education in Canada. Since teachers' unions have argued that improving working conditions for teachers makes it easier for school divisions to hire and retain good teachers, one would expect to find significant overlap between the primary goals of teachers' unions and the characteristics of effective schools.

Comparing the Goals of Teachers' Unions with Effective Schools

In every province and territory, public school teachers belong to powerful unions that have as their primary interest the promotion and protection of teachers' welfare. Throughout this country, teachers' unions negotiate collective agreements with school boards and provincial governments, and these agreements determine the welfare of their members, notably, their salaries and working conditions. In his book *The Worm in the Apple*,¹ Peter Brimelow notes that the interests of teachers' unions and the interests of students and parents are often mutually exclusive. Like other unions, teachers' unions have a stake in the following goals:

- Expanding their membership base
- Increasing teachers' salaries, benefits and improving conditions of work
- Restricting the ability of administrators or school boards to effectively evaluate teacher and student progress, to reward success in either and to discipline teachers for less than effective job performances
- Gaining more control over educational policy

Effective schools are defined as schools where significant learning takes place. These schools have a clear mission, and they focus on providing students with the academic skills they need to function as productive

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citizens in a democratic society. Educational research shows that there are several key indicators of effective schools.^{2 3}

- A clear school mission
- High expectations for student success
- Strong instructional leadership
- Frequent monitoring of student progress
- Increased opportunity for students to learn with more time for tasks
- A safe and orderly environment
- Positive home-school relations

It is important to note that not one of the major objectives of teachers' unions is framed in these terms. In fact, teachers' unions often advocate policies — such as salary schemes that do not take into account teacher performance — that actually inhibit the development of effective schools while simultaneously opposing policies — such as the use of standardized testing — that provide opportunities to monitor student progress more effectively.

In fact, teachers' unions have opposed attempts by parents and other groups to identify effective and ineffective teachers and schools. This opposition was evident in the attempts by the Fraser Institute and the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies to publish their "school report cards" so that parents, students and taxpayers could be better informed about the effectiveness of specific schools.^{4 5} While giving lip service to accountability, no Canadian teachers' union has proposed workable policies that enable parents and students to differentiate between effective and ineffective schools or between effective and ineffective teachers.

Similarly, despite the fact that strong instructional leadership is one of the key components of effective schools, collective agreements essentially constrain the exercise of this leadership by school administrators because, in most provinces, principals are the union colleagues of the teachers. Their status as union colleagues is a fundamental conflict of interest that may not serve the public's interest in quality education.

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What Reforms Do Teachers' Unions Advocate?

While teachers' unions generally oppose policies and reforms that would improve the transparency and accountability of the educational system, they do not oppose all changes. In fact, teachers' unions have encouraged governments to strengthen specific initiatives or to enact reforms that they argue will improve education. In fact, two initiatives — increased spending on education and establishing maximum class-size limits — have been popular causes supported by both teachers and their unions.

Increased Spending on Education

The need to increase spending on public education is a long-standing proposal of teachers' unions in virtually every province.^{6 7} Harvey Weiner⁸ asserted that teachers spending their own money to buy classroom supplies indicates that public education is underfunded. The solutions usually proposed to address this "underfunding" are not that schools should engage in serious program review and become more cost-effective or seek private or corporate funding but simply that public funding should be further increased.⁹

To claim that private fundraising and sponsorship prove schools are inadequately funded is incongruent with the evidence that many schools do, in fact, raise money beyond the public funds provided for legitimate educational purposes. Such evidence hardly proves that schools are underfunded, but it does show that schools can spend as much money as they can collect. The danger is that schools may fail to distinguish between legitimate educational purposes and marginal ones. What should be avoided are inordinately expensive educational offerings and the questionable proliferation of courses and programs.

Whenever provincial governments increase funding for public education, the unions always support them, but then they usually chastise the same government for not investing enough money. A recent example of this occurred when the Ontario government decided to increase education spending by \$600-million in the 2006-2007 budget. The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation praised the government for its spending increase, but tempered its support by asking whether the increase was sufficient.¹⁰ What is not in doubt is that teachers and their unions benefit substantially from increased spending because the largest portion of education spending goes directly to pay teacher salaries and benefits and to sustain or enhance other terms and conditions of employment.

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Establishing Maximum Class-size Limits

For some time, teachers' unions have campaigned for limits on the size of classes, and some collective agreements stipulate maximum class sizes. Generally, teachers' unions assert that smaller classes lead to higher academic performances from students, fewer behaviour problems and more manageable workloads for teachers^{11 12 13} However, research indicates that unless class size is limited to 15 students or fewer per teacher, smaller classes do not result in higher achieving and better behaved students.¹⁴ Nevertheless, there is little doubt that smaller classes result in workloads that are more manageable for teachers and in greater costs for school boards.

Recently, Tennessee and California enacted stringent class-size limits, but there was only a small improvement in student achievement and a considerable increase in cost.¹⁵ In reducing the size of classes, California had to contend with a shortage of qualified teachers and many districts had to hire unqualified teachers.¹⁶ The slight advantage of smaller classes was offset by the substantial cost of hiring additional teachers. While the effectiveness of class-size limits on student performance is decidedly mixed from a cost-benefit analysis, the impact of this policy on teachers' unions is quite clear: smaller classes mean more teachers and more teachers mean higher salary costs and, indirectly, increased union revenue.

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Conclusion

Teachers' unions have as their main goal the improvement of salaries and working conditions for teachers.

For public policy-makers to assume that the uncritical adoption of educational proposals made by teachers' unions will automatically lead to schools that are more effective would be a mistake. Teachers' unions have as their main goal the improvement of salaries and working conditions for teachers. While there is nothing wrong with unions seeking what is best for their members, it is a dubious claim that enacting their proposals is also in the best interest of students.

Teachers' unions advocate vast increases in education spending but oppose accountability measures (such as standardized testing) that logically should accompany it. Similarly, they lobby for strict class-size limits despite the lack of evidence that this will substantially benefit students. While there can be little doubt that smaller classes benefit teachers by reducing their workloads, this does not automatically translate into more effective schools.

Teachers' unions have their place in public education, and it is appropriate for governments to seek out and consider their suggestions. After all, they do represent teachers who work on the front lines of education. However, it is equally important for governments to critically examine the policy proposals made by teachers' unions, as they have the interests of their members, and not students, first on their agenda.

Footnotes

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