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**Ensuring Quality Educators in High-Poverty Schools:**

**New Research Says Problem is Real but Unions are Not the Cause:**

NEA’s core values include a belief that “every student in America, regardless of family income or place of residence, deserves a quality education.” And we know that the education, experience, and commitment that educators bring to their jobs are key elements of a great public school. Yet, some policy makers continue to assert that unions are the problem - that teacher contracts result in teachers with less experience or lower credentials being assigned to the schools where students have the greatest need.

Recent research from the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) bolsters what NEA has long said: we need to do better attracting quality educators to all schools, especially those in high poverty locations, but unions are definitely not the cause of the problem.

This research may be useful in legislative, bargaining, and communications work to argue that unions are part of the solution and to highlight the critical need for all children to receive a quality education.

The objective of Emma Garcia and Lawrence Mishel’s[[1]](#footnote-1) paper, “Unions and the Allocation of Teacher Quality in Public Schools,” was to contribute to the debate over: a) whether children in high-poverty schools are taught by less-qualified and less-experienced teachers than other children, and b) whether this 'misallocation' of teachers, if it exists, can be attributed in part to the strength of a state's teachers unions. Garcia and Mishel point out that this argument has been made in many forums, most notably, “the question has been raised as to whether teachers’ unions, through collective bargaining or legislation, could to some extent be responsible for this misallocation (Moe 2011; Vergara v. State of California 2014[[2]](#footnote-2); Whitehurst, West, Chingos, and Dynarski 2015)”

EPI analyzed data from the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and compared it to two measures of union density.[[3]](#footnote-3) **Overall, they find no connection between the density of teacher unions and the misallocation of teachers.** Misallocation problems are found in both low- and high union density states. In addition, the study demonstrates that:

* Almost 48% of U.S. public schools are high-poverty schools, defined as those in which 50% or more of the students enrolled are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch. High-poverty schools represent over 2/3 of all schools in Washington, DC, and eight states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Tennessee.

Overall, teachers in high-poverty schools have lower qualifications and experience than teachers in other schools. Yet, the states with the greatest gaps run the gamut from strong collective bargaining states to ones in which public sector collective bargaining is illegal.

* The gap in teacher **experience (defined as having five or fewer years of teaching experience)** between high-poverty schools and schools overall is greatest in Connecticut, Virginia, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Maryland, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and New York.
* The gap in teacher **educational background** (defined as having a background in the subject taught) is greatest in New Hampshire, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Ohio, and North Dakota.
* The gap in **certification** is largest in Virginia, South Dakota, and Maryland.

In several cases, teachers in high-poverty schools have higher qualifications or experience than teachers in other schools. All of these states have moderate to high union density:

* Five states had more **experienced** teachers in high-poverty schools: New Jersey, Ohio, Rhode Island, Wyoming, and North Dakota.
* Two states, Hawaii and New Jersey, had had more **certified** teachers in high-poverty schools.
* In one state, Iowa, math teachers in high-poverty schools were more likely to have an **educational background** in the subject they taught.

**EPI concludes that the contention that teachers’ unions play a role in misallocating teachers is a distraction** from dealing with the root causes of the achievement gap. .

**What does this research mean for NEA?** This study provides clear evidence that there is no link between whether children in high poverty schools are taught by less qualified or less experienced teachers and the existence of a unionized teaching workforce. Hopefully, this paper can help move the discussion away from targeting unions as the main contributor to quality shortages in hard-to-staff schools.

In reality, NEA and many of its affiliates have collaborated with school districts, both in bargaining and non-bargaining states, to develop and implement policies to help recruit and retain high-quality teachers in all schools. NEA has long advocated for policies that focus on attracting the very best educators to schools that need them the most. However, this research shows that we must do more to ensure equity for all students. NEA’s Collective Bargaining & Member Advocacy department’s factsheet “Solutions for Staffing High-Needs Schools” (attached) contains examples of union-led programs that ensure quality educators for all students. Additional materials or contract language are available by contacting us at collectivebargaining@nea.org

In addition, visit <http://www.nea.org/ESSAbegins> to access information on the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This law is filled with opportunities for educators to work with policy makers, parents, and community stakeholders to ensure our voices are leading the debate on how to provide great public schools for every child.

*April 2016*

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1. Garcia, Emma and Mishel, Lawrence. (2016). Unions and the Allocation of Teacher Quality in Public Schools. Economic Policy Institute. http://www.epi.org/publication/unions-and-the-allocation-of-teacher-quality-in-public-schools/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Vergara trial court ruling of June 2014 was overturned by the appellate court in April 2016. As a result, the trial court ruling has no effect. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Union density is defined as the collective bargaining coverage rate from the Current Population Survey, which measures the proportion of teachers covered by collective bargaining, and the Fordham Institute’s ranking of union strength. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)