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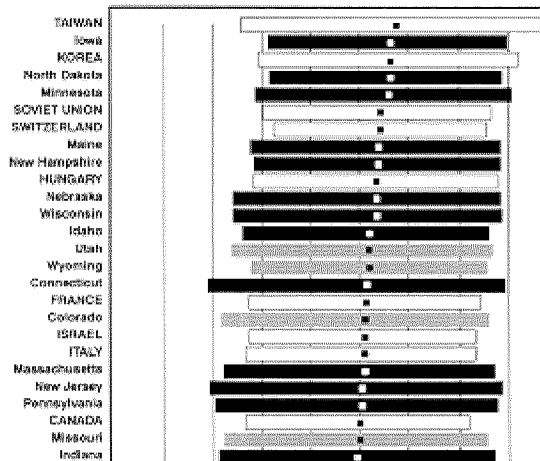
Some Food for Thought

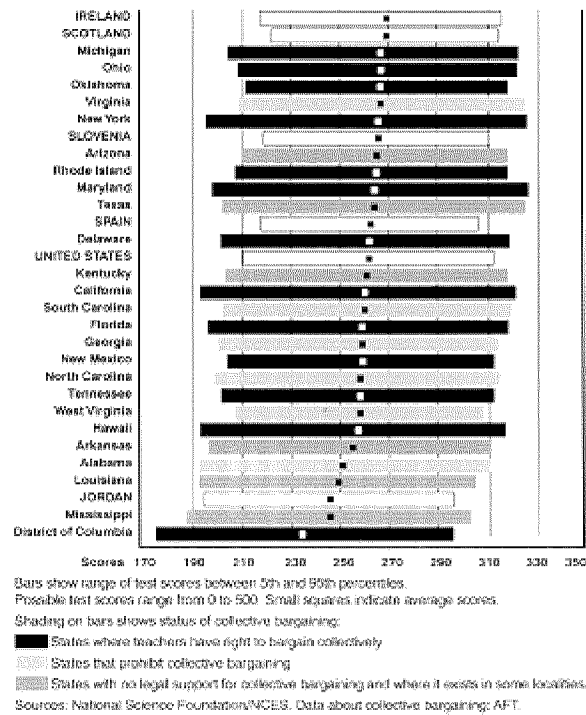
by AFT President Albert Shanker
July 21, 1996

Are teacher unions the cause of poor student achievement? You don't have to look very far these days to find an editorial writer or TV commentator who will answer this question with a resounding yes, and now Bob Dole is getting into the act. The people who make this claim don't explain why most of the countries with successful school systems--like Japan, Germany, and France--also have strong teacher unions. Nor do they offer proof that U.S. students taught by nonunion teachers are more successful than those taught by teachers who are union members. Is there any?

Here's a simple test. If unions pull down student achievement, states where teachers are not allowed to bargain collectively should do much better than states where teachers have a legal right to do so. The chart below ranks the math achievement of 13-year-olds in a number of industrialized countries and 41 states. It also indicates which are collective bargaining states (with black bars), which prohibit collective bargaining (light gray bars), and which give no legal support for collective bargaining but where it exists in some localities (medium gray bars). This chart should give people who connect unions with poor student achievement some food for thought.

Mathematics proficiency scores for 13-year-olds in countries (1991) and public school eighth-grade students (1992), with collective bargaining data for states





At first glance, the chart tells a familiar and dismal story. Average math scores for U.S. eighth-graders are lower than those for youngsters from any other large country. But there is also some extremely encouraging news: Students in some states do as well as youngsters from top-scoring countries. The average scores for Iowa and North Dakota, for example, are the same as Korea's (283). Maine and New Hampshire are slightly higher than Hungary. And, yes, all four of these are collective bargaining states. Furthermore, if you look at the chart as a whole, you see that states where teachers have a right to bargain collectively occupy most of the spots in the top third--and states where collective bargaining enjoys no legal support or where it is prohibited are bunched in the bottom third. Students from states with strong teacher unions are obviously not being held down. The evidence points in the other direction.

Does this prove that collective bargaining leads to higher student achievement? I wouldn't go that far, but it's certainly clear that people who want to make unions the goat in poor student achievement had better rethink their case.

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