



A Union of Professionals

## The Research on the Union Role in Improving Workplace Performance

### Unions improve workers' economic conditions, helping create a stable and skilled workforce.

- Multiple studies have found that unionization aids in employee retention, either directly or through the better compensation and benefits that unions offer.<sup>1</sup>
- Replacing a teacher can cost as much as \$12,600.<sup>2</sup> In healthcare, more than 5 percent of the costs of operating a hospital or clinic can come from employee turnover.<sup>3</sup> Unions reduce the time, resources and costs associated with employee recruitment and development by lowering turnover and improving retention.<sup>4, 5, 6</sup>
- Lower turnover creates more opportunity for effective training, leads to the benefits associated with building additional skills, and is directly related to higher productivity.<sup>7</sup>
- A Department of Labor study of 50 public sector workplaces that have labor-management cooperation found strong evidence of reduced absenteeism.<sup>8</sup> One of the case studies found a 25 percent reduction in costs for lost time.<sup>9</sup>

### Unions provide safe communications channels that make labor-management cooperation more effective.

- A study in the Human Resource Management Review found that “Unions that have a cooperative relationship with management ... have been linked to organizational competitiveness.”<sup>10</sup> Such unions generate employee cooperation and commitment, and promote stability—all of which support high-performance work practices.<sup>11</sup>
- Union work sites are associated with using more high-performance work practices, with greater effectiveness, than other work sites.<sup>12</sup>
- Research conducted for the Federal Reserve Bank of New York found that efforts to re-engineer workplaces to incorporate technology and employee expertise are more productive in unionized settings.<sup>13</sup>
- The Center for American Progress found that formal partnerships between teachers unions and school management lead to more extensive communication among teachers and between the union and the administration, and that this helps improve student performance.<sup>14</sup>

### Unions play a key role in improving the skills of their members.

- A wide variety of studies have found that workplaces with active unions will have more training opportunities than nonunion workplaces.<sup>15</sup> Companies in countries with a greater union presence are more likely to offer direct training than companies in other countries.<sup>16</sup>
- Unions invest heavily in joint labor-management training programs that can help bring jobs to diverse populations. Local Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committees train roughly 40,000 apprentices in the building and construction trades each year, investing about \$1.5 billion in our economy annually.<sup>17</sup> These types of programs provide necessary craft training to increase safety and strengthen workers' skills; the return on every \$1 invested can produce as much as \$3 in benefits.<sup>18</sup>
- Teachers unions provide professional development that allows members to respond to changes in policies or regulations, especially when the employer has not provided such support.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, unions provide a space where teachers can develop leadership skills and understanding with regard to their role in the larger education system.<sup>20</sup>
- Unions play an integral role in ensuring that workers are continually developing skills not only to meet the needs of their employers, but also to ensure that workers can prosper in new industries and environments.

### Unions improve workplaces.

- The union role in improving workplaces is part of our tradition. As early as the 1920s, union contracts had provisions creating processes for workers to identify cost-efficiencies.<sup>21</sup> During World War II, more than 600 of the factories that made up the “arsenal of democracy” had labor-management committees focused on increasing both quantity and quality of production.<sup>22</sup>
- Collaboration between AFT unions and their management partners has led to better sharing of data on student performance and a more sophisticated response to that data.<sup>23</sup>
- Successful labor-management cooperation to increase performance can be found across the private sector in the United States, including in the auto, airline and healthcare industries.<sup>24</sup>

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of 1.6 million professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

Randi Weingarten  
PRESIDENT

Loretta Johnson  
SECRETARY-TREASURER

Mary Cathryn Ricker  
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO • 555 New Jersey Ave. N.W. • Washington, DC 20001 • 202-879-4400 • [www.aft.org](http://www.aft.org)



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