TEACHER UNIONS INSTITUTIONALIZE FAILURE

The key thing about student achievement in the United States is there isn't much of it.

The Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) publishes comparative education statistics for the OECD's 34 members and selected other countries. The latest was in 2009.

In reading, U.S. students ranked 17th of 70 countries, at about the OECD average.

In mathematics, U.S. students ranked 30th, at a level significantly below the OECD average.

In science, U.S. students ranked 23rd, at about the OECD average.

We cannot maintain our standard of living if our students lag behind our international competitors for a prolonged period. And our kids have been mediocre, at best, for quite some while. In the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (1995), high school seniors in the U.S. ranked 19th out of 21 in math, 16th in science.

This isn't because of a lack of resources. In 2006, per pupil expenditures in the U.S. were 41 percent higher than the OECD average. Measured in dollars per student, only Switzerland spent more.)

The Swiss may be getting their money's worth. Their students outperform ours in reading, math and science.

But we're not. Spending on public K-12 education increased by 44 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars between 1990 and 2008, but test scores have remained essentially flat. (The OECD says our math and science scores improved somewhat between 2003 and 2009, but reading proficiency slipped.)

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, D-NY, noted in 1992 that "the correlation of 8th grade math scores and the distance of state capitals from the Canadian border was .522, a respectable showing. By contrast, the correlation with per pupil expenditures was a derisory .203."

The longer American students are in school, the worse they do compared to students in other countries. In the 1995 TIMSS, American 4th graders were slightly above average in math, 8th graders were slightly below average, and 12th graders were far below average.

These statistics make teacher unions look bad. So a defender has invented one he thinks makes them look better.

"Only five states do not have collective bargaining for educators and have deemed it illegal. Those states and their ranking on ACT/SAT scores are as follows: South Carolina, 50th; North Carolina, 49th; Georgia, 48th; Texas, 47th; Virginia, 44th."

This factoid has jumped from lefty blogs to the Economist, which is usually more careful. Politifact described it as "unreliable." A lesser reason is the data are from 1999. The larger reason is it is garbage.

The proportion of high school seniors who take the tests varies widely from state to state. The larger the number of students who take a test, the lower the average score. Iowa, Wisconsin and Minnesota typically have the highest average SAT scores, because only those few planning to attend Ivy League colleges take it.

To get the combined ACT/SAT ranking, University of Missouri law professor Douglas Linder took each state's ranking on both tests, and added them together.

"It's nonsense," said historian Angus Johnston. "When you compare Wisconsin's SAT average to Georgia's you're comparing the performance of a tiny elite in one state with that of 74 percent of the graduating class of the other. And on top of that, this chart gives Wisconsin's SAT score equal weight with its ACT score in determining which state is 'better.'"

Another problem with the bogus stat is that private and parochial students take college admission tests too. They score better on them than do students in public schools. The proportion of students in private schools varies widely from state to state.

State averages mask the ugly truth Sen. Moynihan hinted at with his Canadian border proxy. The closest correlation with academic achievement is race.

In his legendary Fisking of New York Times columnist Paul Krugman, Dave Burge (Iowahawk) demonstrated that when NAEP scores are broken out by race, students in non-union Texas outperform students in unionized Wisconsin in 17 of 18 categories. (Hispanic students in Wisconsin scored slightly higher in 4th grade science.)

It's no accident minority students do relatively better in non-union states. Many black and Hispanic youngsters who struggled in public school have thrived in private, parochial and charter schools. But teacher unions are the foremost enemies of these lifelines for minority students.