



Empty Classrooms

The Big Picture of Teacher Absenteeism



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Introduction

Teacher absences present a unique challenge for K-12 school districts.

In business, excessive absences lead to a loss of productivity. In education, absenteeism means a loss in student learning, which can't be made up in overtime. Every time teacher absence reports play out in the news, teacher leave turns into a tug-of-war between those who claim that the issue is overblown – or point fingers at any number of causes – and those who are determined that “something must be done about these absences!”

So what does teacher absenteeism look like, and how can you address it? There's no question there are significant costs involved: both student learning and the district's budget take a hit every time a teacher is out of the classroom. In fact, teacher absences cost \$25.2 billion every year.¹ But they are, to some extent, unavoidable. Like employees in any organization, teachers will be absent during the school year – it's only a matter of why they're out, how often and who fills in for them.

1. Addressing teacher absenteeism and attendance. (2012). District Administration Practice.

How Often Teachers Are out of the Classroom

THE AVERAGE
TEACHER MISSES
11 DAYS
every year

Reports consistently show that frequently, teachers are absent for more than ten days per academic year. In 2012, the Center for American Progress published its Teacher Absence as a Leading Indicator of Student Achievement report, which found that 36% of teachers are absent more than ten days a year.²

Two years later, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) put out their own report, Roll Call: The Importance of Teacher Attendance. Its findings? The average teacher missed 11 days, without including serious illness or long-term absences for parental leave. Many of these absences were due to a specific subset of employees. While teachers were in the classroom for an average of 94% of the year, 16% of all teachers were absent 18 days or more – accounting for nearly a third of all absences.³

According to STEDI.org, the current absenteeism rate means substitutes teach each child for a full year of their K-12 education.⁴ And even with highly qualified, well-prepared substitutes, student learning is interrupted every time a teacher is out of the classroom. Studies show that ten teacher absences reduce student achievement in math by 3%.⁵

These reports tend to cast teachers in a negative light, and put pressure on teachers to exhibit “presenteeism.” With such immense pressure on teachers to be constantly present in the classroom, it’s important to remember the reasons behind teacher absences.

1. Addressing teacher absenteeism and attendance. (2012). District Administration Practice.

2. Miller, R. (2012). Teacher absence as a leading indicator of student achievement. Center for American Progress.

3. Joseph, N., Waymack, N., & Zielaski, D. (2014). Roll call: The importance of teacher attendance.

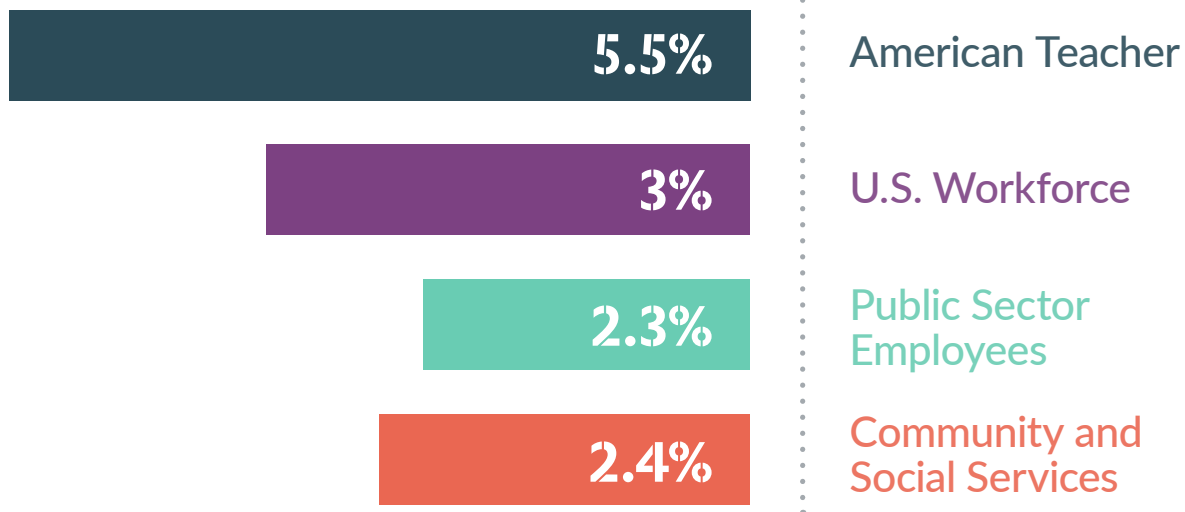
4. Becoming a Substitute Teacher - STEDI.org, Substitute Teaching Division.

5. Miller, R., Murnane, R., & Willett, J. (2007). Do teacher absences impact student achievement? Longitudinal evidence from one urban school district. National Bureau of Economic Research.

Why Teachers Are Absent

American teachers' absence rate of about 5.5% is much higher than the 3% average found in the U.S. workforce as a whole. This is only partially due to the nature of the work: public sector employees have absence rates of 2.3% and similar careers such as community and social services report an absence rate of 2.4%.⁶

American teachers' absence rate is much higher than the U.S. workforce as a whole.



So what factors influence teacher absenteeism and raise it high above that of other professional occupations — and what challenges do districts face in solving them?

6. Clotfelter, C., Ladd, H., & Vigdor, J. (2007). Are Teacher Absences Worth Worrying About in the U.S.? National Bureau of Economic Research.

There are always two sides of every story:
let's take a look at each.

Contractually-Guaranteed Paid Time Off

Teachers are provided with a set amount of time off – often 12 days or more— guaranteed by their contracts. Having so many days of leave can encourage teachers to be absent often enough to impact student achievement.

If teachers are given a benefit, such as paid time off, it seems counterintuitive to then rebuke them for taking it. Employees in other fields are allowed to use their paid time off so teachers should be able to as well.

Professional Development

Depending on the district, 25-50% of absences are due to professional development during the school day. Moving professional development to evenings or in-service days keeps teachers in the classroom and in front of students.

Holding PD outside of school hours can be prohibitively expensive: a single day can cost up to \$2 million for a large district. And teachers already work long hours – additional demands for their time may be met with resistance.

Job-Related Stress

Some believe that teacher contracts should allow for much less time off in the first place. After all, they claim, teachers have the summer off and many schools are closed during the holiday season.

The average teacher teaches for 8 hours, helps students before or after school for another hour, and spends another 3-5 hours on administrative tasks such as grading, planning and meetings. A large portion of the summer is spent on PD and planning the curriculum.

Close Proximity to Sick Students

Hospital workers spend most of their time around sick and contagious patients, but have an absence rate of only 2.7% compared to teachers' rate of over 5%. If sick students are to blame, why isn't absenteeism a bigger problem in healthcare?

Teachers are often around crowds of students who may be sick, especially in lower grades. But unlike hospital employees, teachers don't wear protective gear like gloves or masks and don't have to take the same precautions.

Maternity Leave and Children

Teaching is a traditionally female occupation and maternity leave can account for many absences. Women are also often the ones to take off from work when their own children are sick and need to stay home.

Maternity leave is protected under federal labor regulations and is bound to cause absences in any occupation. No employees, teachers included, should be expected to put work before their family.

How Districts Can Address Employee Absences

Evaluate Your District Policies

Absence policies will never work if they're not first clearly communicated to teachers.

Every district needs clear, written policies in place to keep teachers in front of students as much as possible. But when it comes to absenteeism policies, the carrot tends to work better than the stick.

Reports have found that the most common punitive policies are not particularly effective and may even encourage absenteeism by breeding bitterness and resentment instead of encouraging a professional, accountable school culture. Instead, consider policies that reward teachers for good attendance.

Here are a few examples:



- Allow teachers to “cash out” their unused paid time off when they retire or leave the district. This policy works best with older teachers who are more likely to be thinking of their impending retirement, but it can get expensive: some larger districts pay upwards of \$10 million per year for these cash-outs.



- Offer a cash bonus (such as the money saved by not hiring substitutes) or a big-ticket item like a car that is raffled off to teachers with excellent attendance at the end of the school year.



- Pay teachers a bonus for unused sick days, possibly out of the funds that would have otherwise been used to pay substitutes.



- Include absence rates as a component of teacher evaluations and using the evaluation process to hold teachers accountable for their absenteeism.

Absence policies will never work if they're not first clearly communicated to the teachers. Make sure you document, advertise and clearly communicate every policy and incentive program to all the employees in your district.

Take a Look at Culture

Incentive programs tend to work well for districts looking to reduce absenteeism, but they can get expensive fast. It's in your best interest to first take a look at possible root causes, like school culture, before moving on to costly incentive programs.

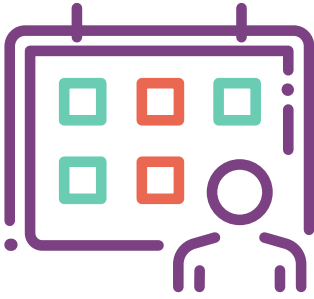
Attendance trends can be a telling sign of morale and engagement. It's worth comparing absence rates between **schools** instead of only looking at district-level trends. A stressful or high-pressure culture, unclean school buildings, overcrowded classrooms or a lack of respect can all lead to excessive absenteeism.

Also, if teachers in one school are often absent, their colleagues are more likely to take time off too. The same holds true for school leadership, who set the example for how absences are viewed. When a principal is often out, their teachers may follow suit. So, it's important for principals to lead by example and only take off when truly necessary.

Trust is also a huge factor. One principal found that trusting teachers to behave professionally and giving them ownership of their absences led to lower absenteeism. Their teachers knew that interacting with students was their top priority, and trusted their administrators not to question their judgment when they did need a day off. Part of this meant encouraging teachers to arrange for a substitute two weeks in advance if they knew they were going to be out, rather than calling off that morning.



Track Absence Trends



For many districts, the easiest way to track and analyze this data is with an absence management system, where teachers can report time off and administrators can track absences and identify addressable trends before they become a problem.

Some districts worry that an automated system makes it easier for teachers to take off because they don't have to speak with a "real" person. But a study by the Substitute Teaching Division of STEDI.org shows that giving principals access to teacher absence monitoring technology lowers absenteeism by nearly 14%. That's because automated systems report on leave balances, absence trends and absence types — information that principals and administrators can use to start conversations with employees and address issues.

This is an obvious step, but it's the only way to address the root of your absenteeism problems — whether that problem is a few individual employees who are chronically absent, or absence rates spike on specific days or in certain months. Maybe you'll find that your teachers aren't absent more than usual, but the problem is finding enough substitutes.

Address the Root of the Problem

As we saw in the research, often high absence rates are due to a few individuals with high absenteeism. Rather than implementing wide policies, first identify those who are chronically absent and have conversations to understand why they are absent.

For many districts, professional development is consistently pulling teachers out of the classroom. Here are a few suggestions:

- Hold trainings over the summer or during in-service days
- Send one teacher to each training and ask them to teach their colleagues when they return
- Leverage technology to have teachers learn at home, instead of pulling them out of class

If absences are mainly due to sick leave, here are a few more ideas:

- Design employee wellness programs to encourage healthy behavior
- Host or promote flu shots for all employees before flu season begins to prevent sick days
- Consider more frequent – but shorter – breaks in the school year to give teachers time to rest



Substitute Programs



While you can't completely avoid teacher absences, you can mitigate the impact on students by having a qualified substitute in the classroom. That's why it's important to develop a healthy substitute pool with plenty of active substitutes with a diverse skill set.

Part of having a strong substitute teacher program is keeping substitutes engaged and properly trained. Offering professional development for substitutes beyond a brief orientation can help them manage their classrooms and teach students more effectively.

Conclusion

Benjamin Franklin said, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes," but maybe absences can be added to that list! Although 16% of teachers are absent fewer than three days every year, absences are inevitable. People get sick, have unavoidable appointments or have something important come up. But that doesn't mean that student achievement has to suffer every time a teacher is out.

Consider ways to encourage your teachers to demonstrate greater attendance, and provide clear guidelines around absenteeism. Most importantly, understand your own data so you can be informed of absence trends before they become an issue.

Learn More

For more information on how our solution can help you address employee absenteeism, please contact us at

866-571-5921

or visit

FrontlineEducation.com

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