

The Absentee Teacher

When a school has to use a large number of substitutes, student achievement suffers. What can you do to make sure this doesn't happen in your district?

The school board in Florida's Pasco County Schools, a district with nearly 66,000 students in 48 schools, recently confronted a problem with teacher absenteeism. In January, a labor lawyer presented a middle school science teacher's absences to the board: 84.5 school days in 2004-05, followed by 82 days, 44 days, and 31.5 days in successive years.

Before the 2008-09 school year started, Superintendent Heather Fiorentino warned the teacher to improve attendance or face dismissal. In November, after the teacher accrued 14.5 more absences, citing chronic asthma and other health problems, Fiorentino initiated termination proceedings. The board fired the teacher in March. In an interview with the *St. Petersburg Times*, Fiorentino defended the dismissal. School officials, she said, have a responsibility to "ensure that every child in every classroom is getting effective teaching."

The high cost of absences

Many school boards are scrutinizing excessive teacher absences, and for good reason: Steadily increasing teacher absences can translate into runaway costs.

Public schools spend \$4 billion per year on substitute teachers, says Raegen Miller of the Center for

American Progress. His 2008 investigation of teacher absences, conducted with two Harvard researchers, found that, on average, public school teachers miss nine to 10 days per year. Averaged over the school year, 5.3 percent of all public school teachers are absent from their classroom duties on any given day.

Soaring substitute teacher costs recently prompted Massachusetts' Haverhill Public School officials and city council members to examine high school teachers' absentee records. Last year, on average, 20 to 25 of the 139 teachers at the 1,840-student high school were absent on any given day.

Contractually, Haverhill's teachers are entitled to 15 sick days and three personal days each school year. As one city council member pointed out, the contract allows teachers to be absent with pay for one out of every 10 days—or one-tenth of the school year.

Haverhill's school board had allocated \$550,000 in its annual budget to cover all substitute costs. Of that amount, \$425,000 was allotted for substitute teachers, and \$125,000 for substitutes for aides, custodians, and other employees. At the end of the school year, total expenditures for substitutes amounted to \$806,000, with \$544,000 paid to teacher substitutes. The total substitute budget overrun was roughly equivalent to the cost of salaries and

benefits for five new teachers.

Until recently, Ohio's 5,000-student Austintown School District paid substitute teachers \$60 per day, plus an additional 14 percent to Medicare and the state retirement fund. Hoping to contain costs, Austintown's board adopted a new plan. Terms require the district to pay a private firm \$75 for each day a substitute is hired to work in one of the district's seven schools.

Absent teachers, lower achievement

The toll teacher absences takes on student learning has long been suspected, but only recently confirmed.

In 2008, Miller and his research team analyzed four years of teacher absences—dates and "excuse codes" for more than 130,000 absent days taken by 5,189 teachers in 106 schools.

The patterns that emerged include:

- Discretionary absences—personal days and sick days used for minor or avoidable absences—accounted for 56 percent of all teacher absences.

- Those absences occurred mainly on Monday or Friday—adjacent to a weekend and often just before winter and summer vacations. They increased month by month after school started, peaked in December, declined in January and February, and spiked near the end of the school year.

- Nondiscretionary absences, such as absences for jury duty, bereavement leave, and serious illness, remained at consistent levels throughout the school year.

Probing further, Miller found that excessive teacher absenteeism impacts student achievement:

- Students whose teachers were absent 10 days during the school year

tended to have a “significant loss in student achievement.” Additional teacher absences further diminished student achievement.

- Students taught by low-qualified substitutes, and by substitutes stepping into classrooms with no advance help from the teacher they’re replacing, typically have lower achievement.

- Students whose teachers are absent prior to achievement tests tend to have lower scores.

Many teacher absences are legitimate, of course, which is why Miller encourages school leaders to concentrate on reining in questionable discretionary absences. He urges school officials to spread the word that a teacher’s presence is “a fundamental prerequisite of student success” and that, except for good reason, teachers are expected to show up.

Prior to Miller’s study, UCLA researcher James Bruno mapped schools within urban districts according to income level and other variables known to affect achievement. His maps showed that most schools in high-poverty neighborhoods had overcrowded classrooms, inadequate resources, low-achieving students—and the highest numbers of absent teachers. Schools in affluent neighborhoods had low teacher-student ratios, an abundance of resources, high-achieving students—and the lowest numbers of absent teachers.

The maps provide a glaring portrait of injustice. Equality of educational opportunities for low-income students, Bruno says, depends on having good teachers present, day in and day out, in their classrooms.

Some promising solutions

Craig Hubbell, an attorney specializing in employment and labor law, reviewed statewide teacher absenteeism for the Wisconsin Association of School Boards (WASB) in August 2008.

Hubbell, who taught for 10 years before earning a law degree and joining

WASB, reported that the economic consequences of teacher absences are “multiple and immense.” Even slight improvements in teacher attendance could free up funds spent on substitutes for other uses and improve student achievement, he told the board.

To illustrate his point, Hubbell cited examples of teacher absenteeism in a 2007 state report. In one Wisconsin district, teachers, on average, required substitutes on 17 days, a combination of 11 sick days and personal days and six staff development and meeting days.

What can schools do to improve teacher attendance? Hubbell suggested these “promising solutions”:

- Adopt policies that require teachers to contact their principal or other immediate supervisor about both planned and emergency absences.

- Monitor teacher absences. Examine data according to schools, grade levels, vacation schedules, and proximity to weekends.

- Expect high teacher attendance. Discuss the impact of absences on student achievement and school budgets with union officials, teachers, and parents.

- Adopt incentives known to reduce teacher absences. Forego systems that don’t work, such as lotteries that reward just one teacher for perfect attendance.

- Schedule meetings and workshops at times when teachers won’t require substitutes.

Make sure, however, that you don’t discourage teachers and other employees from using sick days when they’re warranted. It’s a wise precaution to give your employees time to recover, and to prevent the flu and other illnesses from spreading throughout your school.

The strongest link

In 2006, a principal recounted his experience with a habitually absent teacher for *Education World*.

Soon after accepting a teacher who’d transferred from a different school, the

principal noticed a pattern of “excessive absences.” (The teacher had poor attendance prior to his transfer, a problem the teacher’s former principal had withheld.) Concerned about the impact of repeated absences on students—and worried that other teachers might copy the teacher’s absentee pattern—the principal counseled the teacher.

At their first meeting, the principal told the teacher that one “weak link in the chain” could lower the school’s efforts to raise student achievement. He also said that absences without medical verification “would not be tolerated.”

Still, the teacher’s absences continued, some excused, some unexcused. At the end of each counseling meeting, the principal and teacher signed and dated a summary of their discussion and the principal’s termination warnings.

The teacher’s erratic attendance pattern prevailed, leading the principal to request a meeting with the district’s personnel supervisor. The teacher signed an agreement that included a promise to use sick leave only for a documented illness, a promise he immediately violated three times.

The principal advanced his complaint against the teacher to a formal hearing. The hearing officers, impressed with the principal’s documented attendance records and counseling summaries, recommended that the teacher be terminated.

Reflecting on this troubling and time-consuming problem, the principal said he repeatedly asked himself: What’s in the best interest of the students? Have I done everything I can to correct the situation?

He concluded, “My answers were clear, so my course was clear.”

I hope you’ll remember this principal and his on-point questions. He did the right thing. He was the strongest link. ■

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