



IMPROVING TEACHER ATTENDANCE: STATE AND DISTRICT OPTIONS

Background

Teacher absenteeism costs districts billions of dollars annually. Chronically absent teachers also negatively affect the achievement of their students. While several SREB legislatures have enacted policies to reward effective teaching, teacher attendance is not often considered as a statewide metric to evaluate or compensate educators. In fact, a SREB policy scan found no evidence of state laws providing incentives to reduce teacher absenteeism.

This briefing summarizes available research concerning the impact of teacher absenteeism and features districts in the region that have implemented teacher attendance incentive programs. The briefing explores specific ways that state policymakers can support districts to improve teacher attendance.

What Does the Research Say?

Teacher Absenteeism Is Higher in Large Urban Districts

During 2014, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) examined the specific factors that influence teacher absenteeism by analyzing 2012-13 school year data from 40 large urban school districts. The main finding of the study was that attendance rates were similar across districts, regardless of whether the school board had created formal policies to discourage absenteeism.

NCTQ created a four-point scale from excellent attendance (three or fewer days absent) to chronic absent (18 or more days absent). 56 percent of teachers missed 10 or fewer days of school. Conversely, 16 percent of teachers accounted for nearly one-third of teacher absences. Surprisingly, chronic absenteeism was relatively stable, regardless of relative school poverty as measured by the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch. The brief profiles specific district strategies to improve teacher attendance, including the following:

- Encouraging excellent attendance by paying for unused leave from the substitute teacher budget
- Incorporating teacher attendance into performance evaluations as a metric of professionalism
- Allowing teachers to carry over sick days to the next school year

Brief: *Roll Call: The Importance of Teacher Attendance* ([Link](#))

District Policies Matter, But So Do School-Based Factors

The National Center for Education Statistics collected teacher attendance data for the 2009-10 school year. 36 percent of teachers were absent more than 10 days during the year across the 56,837 schools in the dataset —7 percentage points lower than the urban districts profiled in the NCTQ study. A brief produced by the Center for American Progress (2012) examined the drivers of teacher absence. While district policies and management practices influence how or whether teachers take leave time, about one-third of the variation in absenteeism rates was attributable to factors between schools. Principal leadership and a school's professional norms could explain some of the variations that occur within districts.

Brief: *Teacher Absence as a Leading Indicator of Student Achievement* ([Link](#))

Absenteeism Affects Teacher Productivity

Herrmann and Rockoff (2010) used teacher attendance data from New York City public schools to examine the correlation between absenteeism and labor productivity. They estimate the impact of absences on productivity by comparing similarly situated teachers, especially those in the same school or grade level.

The researchers found that replacing a regular teacher with a temporary substitute is “equivalent to replacing a teacher of average productivity with one at the 10th percentile for math instruction or 20th percentile for English instruction” (4). Decreases in labor productivity appear to level off over time. The researchers hypothesize that this occurs because building administrators search for more highly-qualified substitutes or because substitutes become more effective during a longer job assignment.

Study: *Worker Absence and Productivity: Evidence from Teaching* ([Link](#))

Other Notable Resources

The North Central Comprehensive Center released a [literature review](#) in November 2016 that investigates strategies to address student and teacher absenteeism.

Duke University graduate students produced a [report](#) for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction on how to reduce teacher absenteeism. Options included the modification of current leave policies, creating monetary incentives and incorporating teacher absenteeism as a metric in school report cards.

Stephen Jacobson produced one of the [most-cited research studies](#) on teacher absenteeism in 1989. *The Effects of Pay Incentives on Teacher Absenteeism* revealed that the New York City incentive plan decreased the number of sick leave days taken, but increased the number of personal days used. Similar to other pay incentive studies, Jacobson found that teachers were generally responsive to incentives, but the behavioral dynamics behind their decisions were often hard to quantify.

Which Districts Have Piloted Incentive Structures?

Individual Teacher Incentives

The Lancaster County District (SC) allows teachers to cash out unused sick leave to receive funds to purchase classroom supplies. The [Teacher Attendance Incentive Program](#) also allows teachers to receive \$50 for each unused personal day.

Aldine Independent School District (TX) increases the [401\(a\) retirement contributions](#) for employees who have excellent (one-half day to two days missed) or perfect attendance. Excellent attendance earns employees an extra retirement contribution equivalent to 0.5 percent of their annual gross pay. Perfect attendance earns employees an extra contribution equivalent to 1.5 percent of their annual gross pay.

Ector County Independent School District (TX) offers [stipends](#) for every 30 days of perfect attendance. If a teacher does not miss any school days in the academic year, they could earn up to \$2,550.

How Can State Policymakers Support Improved Attendance?

Prioritize the Issue

State legislatures could request that state education agencies study how teacher absenteeism affects administrative planning, school culture and student achievement.

At the legislatures' urging, state education agencies could collect teacher attendance data to analyze the between-district differences in absenteeism. The data could pinpoint localities that have lower absentee rates. Using a case-study approach, researchers could identify district policies or management decisions correlated with improved teacher attendance.

Authorize Experimentation

State policymakers can permit a subset of local districts to pilot innovative programs to encourage improved attendance. These programs could provide financial incentives, but should also address the school-based norms associated with increased absenteeism.

At the end of the pilot period, a state-level entity or third-party evaluator could assess the effectiveness of these programs. The analysis could contribute to the growing research base about the school-based factors that influence absenteeism. Also, lessons learned from this analysis could inform the large-scale rollout of a state strategy.

Incorporate ‘What Works’ into State Policy

Collecting teacher attendance data, analyzing trends and permitting district pilots could enhance awareness of what works at the district level and for individual teachers. Conversely, thorough inquiry will allow state policymakers to limit strategies based on ineffective practice.

Several factors influence teacher attendance: district personnel policies, school leadership practices, school cultural dynamics and existing behavioral incentives. As such, state and district policy would benefit from a holistic view of teacher absenteeism and how it is related to other challenges, such as teacher attrition and turnover. If state policymakers understand the reasons why teachers leave the profession, they might understand how to reduce absenteeism.

For More Information

SREB is here to serve you! If you have any more questions related to teachers and principals, please contact the Educator Effectiveness team.

<p>Andy Baxter Vice President for Educator Effectiveness andy.baxter@sreb.org (704) 491-4768</p>	<p>Matthew Smith Program Manager, Educator Effectiveness matthew.smith@sreb.org (404) 879-5538</p>
--	--