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ABSTRACT Teacher absenteeism is the topic of the 12 ERIC abstracts contained in this leaflet. Research on the topic discusses the causes of the problem, including, among others, job dissatisfaction, the organizational structure of the school, school size, weather conditions, and relaxed teacher responsibility. Strategies for improving teacher attendance are also discussed in the materials abstracted. These include setting up a system that rewards good attendance, requiring teachers to speak to the principal when they call in sick, and special counseling for teachers with high absence rates. (MLF)

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Clearinghouse on Educational Management

Teacher Absenteeism

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational
Management

Teacher Absenteeism

1

Bridges, Edwin M. "Job Satisfaction and Teacher Absenteeism" *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 16, 2 (Spring 1980), pp 41-56 EJ 234 119

The existing research on job satisfaction and absenteeism is based on the idea that dissatisfaction with a work situation will cause employees to be absent from work more frequently. This hypothesis has intuitive appeal, says Bridges, "represents a way of underscoring the centrality of job satisfaction, a favored, but fallen, star in the study of productivity."

But in several studies of absenteeism in the private sector, no statistically significant relationships have been found between job satisfaction and absenteeism. To determine whether a similar pattern exists in education, Bridges surveyed 488 elementary teachers in thirty-six schools.

Data were collected from district records on absences, salaries, sex of respondent, age, and years taught in the district. Questionnaires measured four dimensions of job satisfaction—satisfaction with pay, coworkers, supervision, and the work itself—and characterized the level of work interdependence of the respondent. Work interdependence was defined as the percentage of work-time teachers spent in isolation from other teachers.

In agreement with research in the private sector, no statistically significant correlations were found between absenteeism and job satisfaction. There were, however, some nonstatistically significant differences between teachers with different levels of work interdependence. While there was little or no relationship between job satisfaction and absenteeism in situations of low or moderate work interdependence, "in relatively high interdependent work settings, the job satisfaction of teachers is negatively related to absenteeism." This suggests, Bridges concludes, that job design may have some influence on the relationship between job satisfaction and absenteeism.

2

Bridges, Edwin M., and Hallinan, Maureen T. "Subunit Size, Work System Interdependence, and Employee Absenteeism" *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 14, 2 (Spring 1978), pp 24-42 EJ 190 417

Does the organizational structure of a school influence teacher absenteeism? More specifically, do the degree of interdependence among teachers and the number of teachers in the school affect the rate of absenteeism?

To find out, Bridges and Hallinan studied fifty-seven elementary schools from stratified random samples of schools in Wisconsin and the San Francisco Bay Area. Using questionnaires and school dis-

trict records, they gathered data on teacher absence behavior, school size, "work system interdependence," and personal characteristics of the staff. Using two previously developed instruments, the researchers also collected data on teachers' perceptions of "group cohesion" and "communication" within the school.

In accordance with research in business, the authors found significant relationships between both school size and work system interdependence and the rate of teacher absenteeism. The larger the school, the greater was the absenteeism rate. And the lower the level of interdependence among teachers, the more absenteeism was evidenced.

The authors then attempted to construct various "causal schemes" for teacher absenteeism, they used communication and group cohesion as "intervening variables" between the "exogenous variables" (school size and interdependence) and the dependent variable (teacher absenteeism). No chain of cause and effect was clearly supported by the data, however. The authors conclude that both school size "and work system interdependence have unique direct effects on employee absenteeism that are not mediated by communication and group cohesion."

3

Capitan, James H.; Costanza, James; and Klucher, James. *Teacher Absenteeism. A Study of the Ohio Association of School Personnel Administrators*. Sever, Hills, Ohio: American Association of School Personnel Administrators, 1980. 17 pages. ED 185 699

Most teacher absences appear to have legitimate causes. For example, in a preliminary study of Ohio school personnel directors, the major causes of teacher absenteeism were personal illness, illness in the family, personal leave days, emergencies, and emotional problems.

The rate of teacher absenteeism, however, has been increasing in recent years, and many district administrators are not sure how to respond. To help school administrators understand and cope with the absenteeism problem, the authors here characterize teacher absenteeism, review the limited research on this subject, and suggest several strategies for improving teacher attendance.

The causes of the recent increase in teacher absenteeism are difficult to pinpoint. It is instructive, however, to consider the subjective comments of the personnel directors surveyed by the authors. Some administrators blame the lenient leave policies gained through collective bargaining or the institution of personal leave days. Others see such causes as the increasing pressures of teaching or the increasing employment of younger and less dedicated teachers.

3

Together, these comments "seem to reflect a general feeling among personnel administrators that the criteria used by staff members in determining in their own minds the appropriateness of their absence under the prescribed leave policy is changing." One study reviewed by the authors referred to this as "creeping legitimacy."

To help combat illegitimate absences, the authors suggest the use of an employee absence monitoring system, perhaps with the aid of a data processing system, and the institution of an organized program for attendance improvement. Such programs will vary from district to district, but should be comprehensive, should provide some means of recognizing and rewarding regular attendance, and, above all, should involve the teacher's immediate superior.

4

Educational Research Service. *Employee Absenteeism: A Summary of Research. ERS Research Brief.* Arlington, Virginia: 1980. 73 pages. ED 181 575.

The problem of absenteeism has not engendered nearly as much scholarly and popular inquiry in education as it has in business and industry. But what data are available indicate that absenteeism is as big a headache in education as it is in other areas. This comprehensive publication reviews the available literature and research on absenteeism in education, and—to help fill the gaps in educational research—also reviews the abundant literature on employee absenteeism in other sectors, both private and public.

Among the many topics addressed in this research brief are the possible causes of employee absenteeism, measures of absence, patterns and extent of absences, the use of substitute teachers, the cost of employee absenteeism, and the factors influencing absenteeism. Among the influencing factors discussed are personal factors such as age, sex, race, marital status, education, occupation, and tenure; organizational factors such as size, personnel policies, employee participation, salary levels, organizational climate, union activity, group cohesion, level of teaching, type of school, and grade organization, time-place factors such as day of the week, month of the year, and place of residence, and job satisfaction.

A final section discusses some strategies for controlling employee absenteeism. Topics covered here include establishing policies on absenteeism, developing programs to stimulate attendance, defining responsibilities for upper and middle management, and enlisting other agencies to help reduce absenteeism. An extensive bibliography lists over 400 documents dealing with employee absenteeism.

5

Elliott, Peggy G. "Where Are the Students and Teachers? Student and Teacher Absenteeism in Secondary Schools." *Viewpoints in Teaching and Learning*, 55, 2 (Spring 1979), pp 18-29. EJ 211 748

Throughout the country, school administrators are reporting dramatic increases in both student and teacher absenteeism. "Given that education in our schools is based on an interactive model of instruction, the interaction of a student with a teacher," says Elliott, "there is cause for concern." In this article, Elliott examines the extent of student and teacher absenteeism, the various costs of the "absented classroom," and some of the approaches that are being taken to the problem.

Past research has found that teacher absenteeism increased after the onset of collective bargaining and continued to increase despite better pay, smaller classes, and more appropriate assignments. Absenteeism is greatest on Mondays and Fridays, but does not appear to be related to demographic factors such as age, gender, marital status, or salary. High absenteeism occurs in school districts "where there are low levels of faculty agreement toward the goals and policies of the community and school district." Conversely, low absenteeism occurs in districts "with high levels of community support and policy agreement."

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The financial cost of teacher absences is staggering, in New York City, for example, 9 percent of all teacher salaries went to substitutes in 1971-72. But there are other indirect costs of absenteeism as well. Management costs are accrued, for example, when principals must handle the details of finding substitutes.

Elliott concludes by deeply questioning the current instructional model, which centers on the interaction of student and teacher. "Perhaps it is a vehicle that cannot transport twentieth century education," she suggests. If so, the "dysfunctional aspects" of the model will begin to "come apart." "Our attendance data suggests," she concludes, that "some 'coming apart' is underway."

6

Elliott, Peggy G., and Manlove, Donald C. "The Cost of Skyrocketing Teacher Absenteeism." *Phi Delta Kappan*, 59, 4 (December 1977), pp 269-71. EJ 169 792

A recent study of New York City schools confirmed what every student knows: substitute teachers are significantly less effective than regular teachers. In fact, the performance of substitute teachers as measured by classroom observers in this study was "abysmal" compared to the performance of regular teachers.

Particularly worrisome, however, is the fact that teacher absences are increasing dramatically in many United States school systems. These increases coincide with the more generous sick leave policies gained by teacher bargaining units, a finding that leads Elliott and Manlove to ask whether school districts are "bargaining away pupil progress with more and more 'sick days'."

To more fully characterize the teacher attendance problem, the authors surveyed Indiana school districts. They found, in accordance with national trends, that the number of substitute days increased in 86 percent of the districts surveyed, even though the overall number of teachers and students declined. The time allowed for sick leave in teacher contracts also increased and

attained an average of 14.5 days for first-year teachers in 1975-76. Substitutes were often not as qualified as regular teachers and were more often chosen because of their availability, rather than because of their teaching ability.

On the bright side, there has been some improvement in the credentials of substitute teachers since the early 1970s. Also, 96 percent of the Indiana districts reported that some substitutes were employed "so that teachers could engage in professional growth activities." The authors conclude with a discussion of the implications of their findings and provide some general suggestions for improving teacher attendance.

7 **Gendler, Paul H.** "How One School System Cut Its Teacher Absenteeism in Half." *American School Board Journal*, 164, 10 (October 1977), p. 32. EJ 165 895

In one year, the Merrick (New York) school district cut its teacher absences from 990 to 440, a reduction of 55 percent. The approach used by the district was relatively simple, says Gendler, a former administrator in the district, and can be easily duplicated by other school districts. How was it done?

First, the school board, acting on the superintendent's recommendation, changed district policy to include criteria for teacher attendance. Consistent attendance was made an important factor for evaluating both beginning and tenured teachers.

Next, the superintendent explained the new attendance policies to principals and department heads and made clear that the building administrators "were fully accountable for implementing" the new policies. Building administrators were asked to monitor closely the attendance patterns in their schools and to promptly discuss erratic attendance with individual teachers. At the same time, however, "administrators were instructed to exercise caution. Insinuations that a teacher is malingering are not advisable in the absence of proof."

If no improvement in attendance was shown after a teacher had been spoken to, a written note was sent and a copy placed in the teacher's file. A central office administrator met periodically with the principals to review attendance patterns "and to plan appropriate action where needed." The superintendent also met with the president of the teacher association to explain the intent of the new policies, and emphasized that only the abuse of sick leave privileges was being attacked, not its use for legitimate purposes.

Using this "total" approach to the attendance problem, the district found "that attendance improved among those teachers whose absences had been at a satisfactory level, and there was even a dramatic change in several flagrant cases."

8 **Lewis, James, Jr.** "Do You Encourage Teacher Absenteeism?" *American School Board Journal*, 168, 11 (November 1981), pp. 29-30. EJ number not yet assigned

"Teacher absenteeism," Lewis warns, "is a disease approaching epidemic proportions." And who is responsible for this epidemic? Lewis puts the blame squarely on the shoulders of school boards and school administrators. "You have permitted an absentee culture to take over schools," resulting in declining staff morale, strained school budgets, and declining student achievement.

Lewis describes eight "symptoms" of the absentee "disease" and then outlines an "eight-point plan" for implementing a comprehensive and systematic attendance improvement program that leaves nothing to chance. First, board policy should be revised to include a statement of attendance expectations and the details of an attendance improvement program. Second, an "attendance improvement coordinator" should be appointed. The personnel director might be a good choice, Lewis suggests.

Third, an "attendance information data system" should be estab-

lished, possibly using a computer, that will include data on teacher absences, excuses given, and so forth. Next, attendance guidelines should be established that outline such information as how chronically absent teachers will be dealt with and what rewards will be offered for good attendance.

Fifth, an "attendance situation audit" should be conducted to identify the factors that affect attendance, the strengths and weaknesses of each factor, the job satisfaction of teachers, the cost of absenteeism, and so forth. Next, short- and long-term plans for the attendance program should be formulated. One long-term plan, Lewis suggests, should be "to switch from an absentee culture to an attendance culture in five years." Short-term plans are incentives—such as bonus pay, earned privileges, and early dismissal—designed to achieve the long-term plans.

9 **Manlove, Donald C., and Elliott, Peggy.** *Absent Teachers: Another Handicap for Students?* *The Practitioner*, Vol. V, No. 4. Reston, Virginia: National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1979. 13 pages. ED 170 941

"You can't really replace a teacher. You should not expect comparable results. Teacher absences hurt student progress more than is realized." This and similar comments are commonly expressed by school administrators in reference to what Manlove and Elliott call the "new phantom of the classroom, the missing teacher." In this publication, the authors examine the rise of absenteeism, its effects on schools, and some possible remedies.

There are, of course, no easy and obvious solutions to the absenteeism problem, but there are some administrative actions that can ease the impact of "phantom" teachers. As a result of the depressed job market for teachers, there are better qualified substitutes available. Thus, administrators can expect "real instruction" from substitutes instead of "student-sitting services," as long as the substitute receives adequate preparation by the contract teacher. "Perhaps the contract teacher's pay for the absent day could be contingent upon such sufficient preplanning," the authors suggest.

Administrators can also provide inservice programs for potential substitute teachers to familiarize them with building forms, procedures, schedules, and expectations. When these substitutes arrive to replace missing teachers, they can spend their time on instruction and act with some confidence.

Another approach to the problem is to set up a system that rewards good attendance. "One possibility," the authors suggest, "is to return to the regular teaching staff some of the monies saved by good attendance."

Whatever approach is used, the authors conclude, "its ultimate success depends upon the cooperation of responsible teachers." Thus, a good point to start a discussion with a frequently absent teacher is the handicap placed on student learning by that teacher's absences. Included are descriptions of six school and district strategies for dealing with teacher absences.

10 **New York State Education Department.** *Teacher Attendance Patterns: Technical Report No. 7 of a Study of School Calendars*. Albany: Division of Research, 1978. 11 pages. ED 172 325

How do teacher attendance patterns vary during the school year? Is teacher attendance related to temperature or community type? Is it possible that the school calendar might have some influence on teacher attendance?

These questions provided the motivation for a study of 7,000 teachers in fourteen New York school districts, reported in this document. Districts were selected to represent the four major "heating degree zones" in the state, and three community types—rural, suburban, and city.

5 Teacher attendance, it was found, did not vary in the same way

that student attendance did. Student attendance in New York State has traditionally been high in September, slowly decreases to a low in February, and then increases somewhat into June. This pattern parallels temperature patterns.

Teacher attendance in the districts studied was also at its highest in September, but reached its low point in December, rebounded somewhat in January, and then stayed fairly stable through June. This pattern was contrary to the expectations of some superintendents, who assumed that teacher attendance would show a drop in June as teachers rushed to take advantage of remaining leave time.

Teacher attendance in rural areas closely paralleled student attendance, but city and suburban districts showed little correlation between the two. Degree zone data showed no clear patterns. The authors conclude that "since teacher attendance seems to be so little related to time of year and to yearly temperature patterns, it would appear that school calendar changes would have little effect upon teacher attendance."

11

New York State Office of Education Performance Review. *Teacher Absenteeism in New York City and the Cost-Effectiveness of Substitute Teachers* Albany 1974. 41 pages. ED 085 868

Teacher absenteeism is financially costly and necessitates the use of substitute teachers, who more often than not cannot maintain the instructional continuity needed for an effective educational program. Thus, it behooves the school administrator to find ways of reducing absenteeism and investigate alternatives to the hiring of substitutes.

"Strong administrative actions can, and do, substantially affect teacher attendance," the authors insist. Warning letters to problem teachers from the superintendent or principal are one approach that can be used. The authors also suggest that one top school officer in the district be held responsible for engendering good attendance, that comparative attendance data be distributed to all schools to highlight excessive absenteeism, and that important meetings be scheduled on Mondays and Fridays to combat high absenteeism on those days.

When teacher absences do occur, the cost of hiring substitutes can be reduced significantly by establishing a permanent "substitute enrichment program" at the district level. A variety of resource people—from government, local and national health organizations, community service organizations, and so forth—can

be scheduled to give presentations at a school on a particular day. If a teacher is absent, the presentation can help fill the void and provide an enriching educational experience as well. Other options include the use of older honor students to substitute for absent teachers, and the use of cable television and films to reduce the cost of substitutes.

12

Pennsylvania School Boards Association, Inc. *Teacher Absenteeism Professional Staff Absence Study* Harrisburg 1978. 60 pages. ED 166 816

In response to increasing levels of teacher absenteeism, the Pennsylvania School Boards Association commissioned a special study of absenteeism in Pennsylvania schools. This study—reported in this excellent publication—was designed to characterize patterns of staff absences in the state, assess the economic impact of these absences, and develop alternative staffing practices to benefit the total educational program.

During the year of 1977-78, 135 of the state's 504 operating school districts recorded attendance data on forms provided by the researchers. Using numerous tables to illustrate their findings, the authors analyze these data, clearly explain their meaning and implications, and then outline several practical recommendations for school administrators.

The average work absence rate in Pennsylvania increased steadily throughout the study year, and averaged out at 4.8 percent. The "average" teacher was absent 8.2 days out of the year, with elementary teachers being absent slightly more frequently than secondary teachers. Female teachers were absent significantly more than male teachers, and more absences occurred on Friday than on any other day. Small districts (under 200 professional employees) tended to have lower absence rates than larger districts.

The most effective policy for reducing absenteeism was found to be requiring teachers to speak to the principal when they call in sick. The authors also recommend that principals maintain personal contact with an absent teacher while he or she is absent, and speak personally to the teacher upon return to work. Impersonal methods for reporting in sick, such as answering machines, should be avoided because they appear to enhance absences.

The authors suggest several other approaches to the absenteeism problem, such as the development of a comprehensive attendance record system, appropriate orientation and inservice training for both regular and substitute teachers, and special counseling for teachers with high absence rates.



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Besides processing documents and journal articles, the Clearinghouse prepares bibliographies, literature reviews, monographs, and other interpretive research studies on topics in its educational area.

Prior to publication, this manuscript was submitted to the Association of California School Administrators for critical review and determination of professional competence. The publication has met such standards. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of the Association of California School Administrators.



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