

**An Analysis of Teacher and Student Absenteeism in Urban
Schools: What the Research Says and Recommendations for
Educational Leaders**

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses an analysis of current literature on employee and student absenteeism and seeks to provide key recommendations that may yield higher levels of attendance and student achievement in urban school districts. It hones on the idea that educational leaders must be cognizant of the factors relating to absenteeism and its cost to the educational community at large. Additionally, examples of employee incentives and elements of effective student truancy plans are recommended that may aide in curtailing student and teacher absenteeism rate for the district.

Introduction

Where have all the students and teachers gone? Urban schools are often left devoid of a strong learning environment that caters to improving student achievement of its students. Taxpayers within the community and industries are often left to support what is left of the educational system after the demise of expert teacher knowledge and student active participation in their own educational investment. Schools experience absences on an annual basis and this affects the quality of instruction that is given to students or to be provided by teachers within the educational setting.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to provide prospectus to the problem and develop key recommendations that may be utilized by urban districts to reduce its financial costs and to significantly improve staff and student attendance. An analysis of current and past literature regarding students and teacher absenteeism will be garnered in order to better define the problem from a broader scope and to dispel myths and beliefs centered around absenteeism within the educational arena. Additionally, a key focus of this study is to find solutions to aide in encouraging a much stronger presence in schools by all stakeholders.

Definition of Related Terms

Absenteeism, according to Casio (2003), is “any failure of an employee to report for or to remain at work as scheduled, regardless of reason” (pg. 45); Strickland (1998) writes that absenteeism is a period of not attending school.

Truancy, according to Bell et. al (1994), is an “unexcused and unlawful absence from school without parental knowledge and consent.”

Review of Related Literature

The review of related literature will be organized as follows: 1) a section on student absenteeism will be discussed at length; then 2) teacher absenteeism and its causes and effects on the educational system will be analyzed.

Student Absenteeism

Factors that Influence Absenteeism by Students and Recommendations

Woods and Montagno (1997) purport that the teacher attendance rate has a negative effect on student achievement. The study looked at students in grade three in

schools in the states of Indiana and Wyoming. They discovered that in classes where teachers had the greatest number of absences, individual standardized test scores were lowered, student rank in class was lowered, and over all school scores were down as a result of frequent absences.

Bell et. al (1994) writes that truancy is associated with sexual promiscuity, alcohol and drug abuse, and dropping out of school. Teasley (2004) believes that truancy from school may be one of the “first sign in a series of antisocial behaviors that lead to negative personal and developmental outcomes” (p.1). Moreover it is influenced by a “lack of community support, an unsupportive school environment, disorderly family life, inclement weather, transportation problems, personal deficits, and poor health.” Students in urban settings are confronted with many challenges. According to the study, as childhood poverty increases nationally, truancy rates have skyrocketed to new levels. Students who go to urban schools where the majority of the students are minority and have low socioeconomic statuses experience a larger teacher absent rate than their peers in rural or suburban settings. Since many of students in urban schools operate in the affective domain instead of the cognitive domain, these students tend to believe that school and teachers do not care or believe in them and are more apt to skip or be truant to class. As a result, more staff development must be established to better aide teachers and administrators in discovering ways to build relationships with these students.

Solution to Student Absenteeism According to the Research

“To prevent and correct serious attendance problems, schools need to change they way they are structured, improve the quality of the courses, and intensify interpersonal relationships between students and teacher” according to Epstein and Sheldon (2002, p. 309). They further recommend three general strategies that will aide in reducing student absenteeism:

- “taking a comprehensive approach to attendance with activities that involve students, families, and the community;
- using more positive involvement activities than negative or punishing activities;
- and sustaining a focus on improving attendance over time” (p. 316).

Teacher Absenteeism

Theoretical Framework

The most cited absenteeism model that is used in a multitude of studies on teacher absenteeism was the Steers and Rhodes’ (1978) model. They used a multi- variable approach that encompasses psychological as well as personal characteristics of teachers. Based on the ideas of Steer and Rhodes (1978), demographic variables such as personal and family- related characteristics are slated as well as psychological variables such as job satisfaction, motivation to be absent, and the ability to attend work. The model emphasizes that attendance is highly influenced by the practices of the organization, an

absence of school culture, and employee attitudes, values, and goals. The number one factor identified by Steers and Rhodes was job satisfaction.

Cost of Absenteeism to the Educational System

Absenteeism is a complete lost *to the educational system*. According to The District Management Council (2004), “teachers average approximately two weeks out of the classroom per year due to sick days, personal days, and other excused absences” and “districts pay for substitute salaries, recruiting, administrative tasks, and absent teacher salaries.” Nationally, based on findings from the same study using NCES statistics from 2000, the total cost of teacher absenteeism is \$25.2 billion dollars.

Teacher Absenteeism in Urban Schools: Personal Characteristics as well as Psychological Variables Explained through Research Findings

Gender

Based on the research of Unicomb et. al (1992), gender and life stage plays an important part in determining the profiles of teachers who are absent from the instructional environment. It was discovered that female teachers tend to be absent more as they increased with age. Male teachers were out more days in their thirties than at any other time in their teaching career.

In another study by Scott and McClellan (1990), male teachers tend to miss fewer days than women by a ratio of 3.39 days to 5.29 days per academic year. Additionally, elementary school teachers missed far more days of work than secondary school teachers by a ratio of 6.63 days to 3.32 days. Secondary school employees tend to remain at work more.

Days of the Week

Unicomb et. al (1992) found that Wednesdays were missed more than any day per week and that Mondays had the fewest number of days missed from work. A common misconception is that employees will miss work on Friday. The research indicates that teachers tend to stay at school in anticipation for the weekend.

Months of the Year

Unicomb et. al (1992) discovered that teachers are more likely to be absent during the months of November, January, and April. This usually resides around holidays or in times of long periods between holidays. More research needs to be addressed here.

Stage of the Teaching Career

Porwoll (1980) believes that novice teachers with two to four years of experience and veteran teachers who have worked within the educational arena between twenty-three to twenty-five years miss the fewest number of days of school. Novice teachers are still in the infant developmental phase of their career and tend to have fewer personal responsibilities, such as child rearing. However, Jacobson (1990) found that teachers who were nearing retirement were absent on a more frequent basis.

Teacher Performance Level in the Classroom

In a study by Pitkoff (1993), teachers who received low performance markings tend to miss a larger number of days than those who did not. Teachers with low marks do not feel a connection to the workplace and believe that they are ineffective in the classroom. This gives an impetus for school administrators to develop teacher growth plans early in the academic year for low performing teachers than later in the year.

Degree Attainment and Academic Level Taught (Elementary vs. Secondary)

Scott and McClellan (1990) write that the school level taught and the level of the teaching license were two primary predictors of teacher absences. Through their investigation, it was discovered that the higher the degree obtained by the teacher, the higher the number of days they were absent from the classroom. Elementary teachers missed the most days.

Teacher Absenteeism and Its Adverse Effects

Teacher Absenteeism and Its Affect on Student Achievement

Bruno (2002) stresses that “students in a classroom eventually lose the desire to learn when the regular teacher is frequently absent and the delivery of the instructional is by an array of substitute teachers” (p.1). As a result of this key finding, substitutes are hard to find to replace absent teachers in urban schools. Regular education teachers who are off during their conference period do not particularly volunteer to substitute (Mckay 1999). Student academic achievement falls and students do not feel connected to the classroom.

Teacher Absenteeism and Its Affect on other Teachers in Urban Schools

Bruno (2002) purports that “when there is a high teacher absence, it tends to lower the morale of remaining teachers resulting in high teacher turnover” (p. 1). Other teachers tend to feel more burdened because they may have to plan for the teacher who is absent. Addition to teacher morale, urban teachers tend to become frustrated with poor resource allocations in their schools and tend to desire to disconnect from the inner city campus with high rates of minority children whose families are labeled as low-income.

Because of this, Bruno (2002) emphasizes that “teaching at low- income area schools increases the propensity of teachers to be absent” (p. 1).

District Incentives to Curtail Teacher Absenteeism

The District Management Council (2004) has discovered that monetary incentives aide in resolving the problem in districts like Aldine ISD and Dallas ISD. Aldine ISD has a program awards employer- matching contributions to 401(a) retirement accounts for good attendance and awards increasing contributions for better attendance. Approximately \$284,000 per year is saved and reallocated to other district resources. Moreover Dallas ISD involved its business community in helping them to increase teacher attendance. The district holds parties for teachers with perfect attendance where various prizes are given away, including brand new cars. As a result Dallas ISD doubled its number of teachers with perfect attendance.

Jacobson (1988) believes that a pay incentive plan helps to decrease teacher absenteeism. Teachers will work remain at work to obtain a pay incentive. Scott, Markham, and Robers (1985) believe that recognition motivates employees to stay at work and that pay incentives can be used if they are designed properly.

Scott, Markham, and Taylor (1987) believe that “a good attendance policy also includes a progressive discipline clause” p. 100. Employees under this guidance must receive increasing levels of punishment for more severe or repeated violations of the organization’s policy. The goal is to shape the employee’s behavior and to give the information they need to understand the consequences of their actions. The policy needs to be procedural and must be ingrained throughout the academic year to staff members.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, many key ideas may be garnered through the review of literature. However, recommendations by urban school districts staff members (administrators and teachers) and students must be considered when developing a strategic plan on how to become better equipped when dealing excessive employee and student absences. It is the role of proactive urban school leaders to implement aggressive plans of action to improve staff morale and student achievement levels.

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