

The Alarming Rise in Teacher Absenteeism

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

A survey of schools across the country found that 72 percent of public schools had higher teacher absenteeism rates than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teacher absences can result in significant learning loss and can have negative impacts on nonacademic and behavioral outcomes for students.

State policymakers and school-district officials should address the alarming teacher absences by expanding education choice and consequences for absentee teachers.

Student absenteeism has been a problem for at least a decade in schools around the country. School officials report that student attendance rates worsened during and after the COVID-19 pandemic: The Institute for Education Sciences (IES), the research arm of the U.S. Department of Education, conducted a nationally representative survey of public school officials in May 2022 that found that 72 percent of educators said that chronic student absenteeism has either increased “a little” or “a lot” compared to the years before the pandemic.¹

A lesser-known fact is that teacher absenteeism is also a serious problem—one that has been growing over the past three school years. A recent National Center of Education Statistics representative survey of schools across the country also found that 72 percent of public schools had higher teacher absenteeism

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rates than before the pandemic.² Furthermore, 49 percent of education officials report higher rates of teacher absenteeism in 2022 than in the prior year, while only 31 percent said that teacher absences had stabilized, so the problem continues to grow in the post-pandemic period.³

Rates were slightly higher for teachers in schools that enrolled more minority students. Among schools with ethnic minority enrollment figures that accounted for between 25 percent and 75 percent of the student body, 74 percent of school officials reported increased rates of teacher absenteeism relative to pre-pandemic levels. At schools in which ethnic minorities comprise less than 25 percent of the student body, 71 percent of school officials reported increased rates of teacher absenteeism.

Furthermore, leaders at 61 percent of schools reported that it is “much more difficult” now to find substitute teachers than before the pandemic.⁴

These findings have significant implications for students. Quality teachers have positive effects on student achievement: Research from Eric Hanushek and others finds that a “very effective” teacher can create learning gains equivalent to an entire school year’s worth of learning compared to what students learn from “very ineffective” teachers.⁵ Researchers have also found that teacher quality is the most important factor in improving student academic outcomes.⁶ Not surprisingly, research shows that teacher absences can result in significant learning loss and can have negative impacts on nonacademic and behavioral outcomes.⁷

Pre-Pandemic Research on Teacher Absenteeism

Research using data gathered prior to the pandemic found that teacher absenteeism had decreased in the two decades before the onset of COVID-19.⁸ Other pre-pandemic research using data from schools in Atlanta found that on average, teachers were present for 92 percent to 93 percent of school days, figures that are largely representative of teacher attendance across the research literature.⁹

There is variation, however, among teacher subgroups that suggests that teacher absenteeism is highest among those serving students who are struggling the most. High school teachers and teachers of children with special needs, for example, had higher rates of absenteeism than elementary and middle school teachers or teachers of mainstream students, while teachers with lower levels of experience had lower levels of chronic absenteeism (15 or more total days absent in a school year).¹⁰ Research using data from Virginia school districts and schools in North Carolina found that schools with larger populations of children from low-income families were also more likely to have chronically absent teachers.¹¹

Other research provides insight into the characteristics of teacher absences. A 2008 study in *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis* finds that teachers were significantly more likely to be absent on Mondays and Fridays, effectively giving themselves a four-day weekend.¹²

A National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) report found more concerning results in its research on teacher absences prior to the pandemic, and these results should raise alarm for parents of children in urban areas.¹³ In the study of the 30 largest school districts in the U.S. using data from 2016 to 2017, the average attendance rate *overall* for teachers was strong with teachers attending 95 percent of all school days during that school year. But 25 percent of all teachers were frequently absent (11 to 17 days missed), and 10 percent of teachers were chronically absent (in this study defined as missing 18 days or more), accounting for 35 percent, more than one-third, of all teachers.¹⁴ Three times as many administrative staff (30 percent) were chronically absent, compared to 10 percent of teachers.¹⁵

Policy Recommendations

To protect all students, especially students in disadvantaged areas and assigned to failing schools, district school officials should:

- **Only agree to teacher contracts that reduce the number of teachers' sick and personal days, and move teacher training and meeting times to days when school is not in session.** Teacher contracts typically allow teachers to miss about 10 days of work each year without any loss in pay. Given that students attend school about 180 days per year and teachers have incentives to take every sick or personal day they can, teachers tend to be absent almost 6 percent of the time. District officials should adopt policies that reward teachers who do not use all available sick or personal days and should pursue disciplinary action, including loss of pay, against teachers who are absent more than the contractually permitted number of school days without evidence of long-term medical issues or bereavement.

Many school districts conduct professional development sessions and hold meetings for teachers during regular school hours, causing teachers to be absent from the classroom even more often. Most professionals receive continuing education for their occupation outside of regular work hours rather than when they would be serving clients.

State policymakers should:

- **Expand education choice.** When families have options, they can select schools where teachers are more likely to be present day to day. Because of this competitive pressure, private schools tend to adopt policies and create work cultures that significantly reduce teacher absenteeism. In India, where teacher absenteeism has become a serious problem, offering families school choice allowed families to switch to private schools that, on average, had 15 percentage point lower rates of teacher absenteeism than their public school counterparts.¹⁶

A recent Morning Consult/EdChoice poll found that larger shares of public charter school and private school teachers reported that their school contributed to their personal happiness compared to traditional public school teachers.¹⁷ Ninety-four percent of charter school teachers and 90 percent of private school teachers said that their schools contributed to their happiness, while just 72 percent of traditional public school teachers responded similarly. One can reasonably assume that happier employees are more likely to go to work each day, making policies that increase charter and private school choice options effective ways to improve teacher attendance.

Conclusion

Although they should be concerned about the high rates of student absences, policymakers and parents should also be prepared to address the alarming rates of teacher absences, especially in the school years affected by COVID-19. Teachers are the most important professionals in schools, but they cannot contribute to student learning or character formation if they are absent from the classroom at a high rate

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Endnotes

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