Increasing Teacher Attendance

By Geoffrey G. Smith

Author’s Note: The author drew heavily from the referenced materials with little change in the attempt to provide clarity. Due credit is given, therefore, to the reference authors.

Current teacher absenteeism averages between 8-10% (Staffing Industry Report, 1999; Ramirez, 1996; Warren, 1988). This equates to over one full year of every child’s K-12 education being taught by substitute teachers. One statewide study indicated 71% of personnel directors deemed absenteeism as one of the leading problems in schools (Norton, 1998). Additional research suggests that economically disadvantaged students who desperately need continuity of instruction get it the least (Pitkoff, 1993). In Jackson School District (MS) teacher absenteeism is 12% on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday; while it is 13.5% on Monday and Friday. This amounts to nearly two full years of education being taught by substitute teachers.

As the need for substitute teachers increases, the impact they have on overall student achievement is becoming more widely recognized (Woods & Montagno, 1997; Manlove & Elliot, 1977).

Teacher absenteeism has several costs associated with it. First, teacher absenteeism seriously affects classroom consistency and, as a result, student achievement. Also, there are substantial financial costs associated with teacher absenteeism.

Teacher Absenteeism and Student Achievement

Current teacher absenteeism rates seriously disrupt the consistency of the classroom environment. This problem is exacerbated by a national shortage of substitute teachers. In a recent national study 56.3% of the nation’s school districts identified a shortage of substitute teachers as a “serious problem,” with an additional 12.9% acknowledging it as a “problem” (Dorward, 2000). Other research has also consistently identified critical shortages of substitute teachers nationwide (Schles & Hone-McMahan, 1995; Smith, 1999; Harris, 1996).

The effectiveness of substitute teachers (Ostapczuk, 1994) has been in question for a long time, and was first quantified by a study conducted in 1971 (Olsen). This study statistically summarized the ineffectiveness of substitute teachers and found that permanent teacher effectiveness was substantially higher than substitute teacher effectiveness in both elementary and secondary classrooms.

An especially alarming finding is that teacher absenteeism and substitute teaching may be highest in those school districts that need the consistent attendance of permanent teachers the most. In schools where students are poorest and failing the most academically, teachers tend to be absent more often. In one study, the percentage of students
reading below grade level was found to be the greatest predictor of school employee absenteeism, followed by the percentage of students eligible to receive free lunch (Pitkoff, 1993).

Studies relating to the direct effects of teacher absenteeism on student achievement are limited and tend to differ in their findings. For example, in a study that focused on fourth-grade reading results, it was determined that teacher absenteeism adversely affected student achievement (Summers & Raivetz, 1982). O’Brien, et al (1982) and Woods, et al (1997) also found negative impacts of teacher absenteeism on student learning. Yet, Ziomek and Schoenberger (1983) were unable to establish such an association. Research by Madden, et al (1991) and by Ehrenberg, et al (1991) also failed to support the contention that student academic performance was associated with teacher absence. In view of Pitkoff’s (1993) finding that school employees rated as unsatisfactory tend to be absent significantly more days than those rated satisfactory, a reasonable conclusion might be that absences of a “poor” teacher does not negatively impact learning (Norton, 1995).

Results of a recent doctoral study indicated that there was a weak, but statistically significant relationship (perhaps by the large sample size – N=18,802) between teacher absenteeism and student achievement when the unit of analysis was the student. When the teacher was the unit of measure, there was no correlation (Kirk, 1998). Another doctoral study showed that there was a statistically significant negative relationship between teacher absenteeism and student achievement in secondary schools in South Carolina (Boswell, 1993).

Additional studies have shown that there is a correlation between teacher attendance and student achievement, particularly in those schools ranked with average student achievement. Student achievement is also affected in schools ranked both high and low as well when teacher absenteeism is over 7.5% (Madden, Flanigan, Richardson, 1991).

Many underlying factors may affect the relationship, such as the quality and availability of substitute teachers, specific subject areas in which teacher absences occur, the quality of teachers in a school, and the specific reason for teacher absences.

Teacher absenteeism, therefore, has been and continues to be of major concern in states across the country.

The rate of teacher absenteeism has been found to be highest in elementary schools, schools with lower student achievement, schools composed of economically disadvantaged and minority students, and schools that do not require teachers to speak to their immediate supervisor about pending absence, urban school districts, and districts with enrollments in excess of 257,000 (Pitkoff, 1993, Norton, 1995).

Financial Costs of Teacher Absenteeism

The financial costs of teacher absenteeism – costs primarily associated with substitute teacher salaries and expenses required to
maintain a substitute teaching pool – are a major concern (Ehrenberg, Ehrenberg, and Rees, 1991). In a recent analysis of the costs of substitute teacher pay, three individual school districts in northern Indiana were surveyed. The results showed that nearly 1% of the total operating budget for these school districts was consumed by substitute teacher costs (Wood, 1996). It is not uncommon for average size districts to spend millions for substitute teachers. Kanawha County School District in West Virginia spent $6.4 million for substitute teachers last year, with an average teacher absenteeism rate of 8.3%. Kanawha County has 29,000 students, 2,150 instructional staff, and a substitute pool of 275 (Eyre, 2000).

Addressing Teacher Absenteeism

Considering the costs associated with teacher absenteeism, it is critical to actively address this issue. Before any action is taken to address teacher absenteeism, the problem should be carefully assessed. Next a comprehensive plan of action should be taken to lower teacher absenteeism. It is also important to have plans for more specific situations that also directly or indirectly influence absenteeism rates, including: (a) how to act toward returning employees; (b) how to address teacher burn-out; and (c) how to increase teacher morale. Because most current suggestions to address teacher absenteeism have been developed to address personal leave absences, it is also important to specifically create a plan to address teacher absenteeism because of school related absences.

Assessment of Teacher Absenteeism

A district can determine the extent of its teacher absenteeism problem by looking at such factors as:

- Lack of direction from the school board and superintendent.
- Incomplete or conflicting board policy.
- Administration’s failure to recognize the problem.
- Job dissatisfaction.
- Incomplete records.
- Lack of attendance monitoring.
- Failure to recognize good attendance.
- Obsolete leadership.

Comprehensive Plan to Reduce Teacher Absenteeism

Once the problem of teacher absenteeism has been assessed in a particular school or school district, a comprehensive plan of action should be created. To implement a comprehensive and systematic attendance improvement program consider the following:

- Review board policy. Establish innovative policies to encourage attendance, not just reducing absenteeism. Research suggests that there is a correlation between policies and absenteeism.
• Appoint an attendance improvement coordinator. One in every building and one system wide.
• Establish an attendance information data system. Know details of attendance and make summary information available to sites as well.
• Construct attendance guidelines. Provide standards to adhere to. Direction can be set even with collective bargaining.
• Conduct an attendance situation audit. Identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to the system. Surveying teachers and/or comparing standards to actual records to determine their effectiveness.
• Prepare short-term and long-term attendance improvement plans.
• Involve teachers in developing an attendance recognition plan.
• Train administrators to emphasize attendance in a positive way.
• Buyback of unused sick leave should be considered.
• Improve work conditions for employees. Assist in the airing of grievances, student discipline, and feedback on work performance, etc.
• Provide employee assistance programs of personal counseling for personnel who have excessive absences.
• Pay temporary permanent teachers for unused sick leave upon separation from the system.
• Provide an incentive for experienced teachers who volunteer for assignments in failing schools.
• Discuss sick leave use and abuse with employees. Sick leave is a benefit reserved for illness not an entitlement.
• Hold administrators accountable for administering policies and site administrators for any abuse of the policies (Lewis, 1981 and Norton, 1998).

Strategies for Returning Employees

A school may be able to reduce teacher absenteeism by the manner in which it approaches returning absentee teachers. Suggestions in welcoming each returning absentee, regardless of the reason, include the following:
• Welcome the individual back. Make sure the teacher realizes that he or she is recognized to be back on the job.
• Ask how they are feeling. Ask about his or her health, injury, feelings and readiness for work.
• Tell the teacher that he or she was missed, particularly by the other teachers.
• In a positive way, get the message across that someone else had to pick up extra duties to get the job done. Make sure the returning teachers knows the importance of his or her contribution to the success of the school. Recognizing and rewarding attendance will send a clear message to teachers and staff that attendance is important and noticed.
Reducing Burnout

Alleviating teacher burnout can contribute to lowering teacher absenteeism. One of the highest predictors of teacher absenteeism is the percentage of students reading below grade level followed by the percentage of students eligible to receive free or reduced lunch (Pitkoff, 1993). Such circumstances may contribute to teacher burnout. When absenteeism is related to teacher burn out (Leithwood), consider:

- Helping individual teachers identify short-term signposts of progress in meeting their own and the school’s improvement goals.
- Rotating teachers’ classroom assignments so as to ensure that the same teachers do not always have, year after year, especially difficult students.
- Providing adequate financial and material resources.
- Personalize performance expectations.

Increase Teacher Morale

Increasing teacher morale is a substantial factor in increasing teacher attendance. There are several factors that contribute to high morale in a work environment. Teachers must feel that they are:

- Treated fairly and equally.
- Valued and appreciated for their work.
- Recognized for their work.
- Paid a fair wage for their work.
- Doing work that is important.

Many site administrators underestimate the power of the work environment. The perceived attitudes of employees toward their supervisors and their work environment substantially affect employee morale.

In a recent study employees were asked to rank-order 10 aspects they wanted from their jobs (Niebrugge, 1992). Their employers were then asked to guess how they thought their employees would rank the same 10 aspects. The results, set out in the table below, were surprising.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employees’ Rank</th>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Employer’s Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Interesting work</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Appreciation and recognition</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Feeling “in on things”</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Job security</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Good wages</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Promotion/growth</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Good working conditions</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Personal loyalty</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Tactful discipline</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Sympathetic help with problems</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results of this study have important implications for school administrators. They should carefully get in touch with the most valued aspects of teachers’ jobs – a task that is challenging based on the results of this study. Once administrators know this, they are equipped with the proper knowledge to effectively implement plans that increase teacher morale.

School related absences

The majority of this article has focused on research and recommendations related to personal leave absences. In addition to personal leave, other absences are due to school related or professional leave absences. Professional leave includes workshops, conferences, committees, and other school related activities – either self-selected or assigned. These types of activities tend to be on the rise and have overtaken personal reasons as the leading causes of absenteeism. In addition to reported school related absences, there are also many absences not reported due to other teachers or administrators covering classes within a school eliminating the need to report to payroll or the substitute office regarding the absence. Since school related absences, therefore, are not considered as an absence on personnel records, accurate absenteeism rates are difficult to determine. It is likely that teacher absenteeism statistics are underestimated.

School administrators are to pay meaningful attention to school related absences. Suggested practices to reduce school related absences include the following:

- Review policies to ensure that limits are placed on when, where, why, and who pays for absences.
- Schedule staff development outside of school hours.
- Ensure that sponsorship of student activities does not increase teacher absenteeism.
- Reduce the number of teachers used as chaperones on school sponsored trips.
- Promote school-wide inservice when students are on campus.
- Regularly review printouts / data on school related absences.

Successful Implementations of Absenteeism Reduction Strategies

In recent years a variety of strategies have been implemented to reduce teacher absenteeism. This article includes several of these implemented strategies that have been measured.

The Merrick School District

The Merrick School District in Long Island, New York, used an awareness program to successfully reduce teacher absenteeism. During the first year of implementation (1973-74) the district was able to reduce teacher absences by 55% from 990 absences to 440. The system used a “total” approach that involved the school board, central office personnel, building administrators, and faculty representatives. The emphasis was a professional approach toward making all employees aware of the
problem. By setting attendance goals and closely monitoring adherence to those goals were being met on an individual basis, the absentee rate was cut in half (Gendler, 1977).

**King William County School District**

The King William County School District in King William, Virginia, used a salary supplement to successfully reduce absenteeism. The district offered a $2,000 salary supplement for teachers missing three or fewer days during the preceding year. The program resulted in an immediate reduction in the rate of absenteeism (Stainback & Winborne, 1984).

**Sugar Hill Central School District**

In Sugar Hill, New York, the Sugar Hill Central School District used a small salary supplement combined with recognition to successfully reduce teacher absenteeism. The district reduced the average rate from 7.24 days in 1985-86 to 5.90 days in 1986-87, a decline of 18.5% per teacher. The salary bonus represented a 1.08% pay increase for perfect attendance (Jacobson, 1989). The union, however, viewed the plan as creating an unhealthy climate of competition and dropped the attendance incentive plan (Jacobson, 1990).

**New York State**

In the state of New York, buyback provisions were used to lower teacher absenteeism. Results of a study involving 60% of New York’s districts revealed that a larger number of leave days permitted by the school district resulted in a higher number of leave days that were taken. The existence of buyback provisions of unused sick leave days has been shown to lower the annual usage of leave days. Districts that provide for an exact number of days for professional leave, conferences, and annual visitation days tend to have a lower usage of the actual leave days provided (Ehrenberg, 1991).

**Des Moines, Iowa**

In Des Moines, Iowa, schools recently negotiated the option to convert unused sick leave into retirement benefits, cash, or health insurance benefits. Some other schools have paid out the personal leave days not used in cash if the employee requested it.

**Lincoln, Nebraska**

In Lincoln, Nebraska, a couple of plans have been implemented that permit options for teachers reporting absences that have reduced teacher absenteeism. First, they implemented a leave policy that stopped the need for teachers to “lie” about why they needed to be gone. Instead of having them report an absence as “sick” when they really just needed to attend their child’s play or graduation, needed a “mental health”
Increasing Teacher Attendance

day, or they just wanted to join their spouse on a short trip, the teachers could sign up for either Option A or Option B leave plans. Option A is the old type of leave policy - 10 sick days, 2 emergency leave days (which must be approved), and 2 personal days. Only about 15% of the teachers took this plan and that number decreases every year. Instead 85%+ now sign up for Option B which offers teachers 11 days of “annual leave.” They can choose to be gone for whatever reason they so determine. At first absenteeism went up; it was sort of the “kid in the candy store” syndrome.

Teachers thought they had to use it or lose it. However, since their unused leave all rolls over into unlimited accumulated sick leave, they soon realized that they could and should accumulate those days. Also, they had a difficult time covering all of the initial absences with substitutes. Their colleagues began to “crawl their frames” when they made rather arbitrary decisions to be gone and stick the same colleague with having to cover classes that couldn’t be filled with a substitute. Now, they find teachers making more professional decisions about their absences. They appreciate being able to attend children’s plays or graduations or take short trips with spouses without having to lie and say they are sick. They respond with professionalism and typically don’t abuse the policies. Of course, there will always be some that will abuse any system, but that is to be expected. So punishing an entire body of professional teachers seems unrewarding to highly trained and competent teaching staff. Yes, they had to put up with a rise in absenteeism the first three years, but that has discontinued as the mindset changes. The success of the program has been a benefit to the district and they have had this system in place for 6 years.

Lincoln Public Schools has restructured the school calendar to accommodate several needs, but specifically the need to provide ongoing professional training and staff development that doesn’t take teachers out of their classrooms. They have a 9 week/1-week calendar. Students attend 9 weeks and then have a 1-week break during which they hold staff development classes and new teacher training sessions for the teaching staff on three or four of those days. Teachers have a certain hourly requirement of staff development – district and building – that they must attend which can usually be met in two of the three 1-week “breaks” during the year. So teachers can choose when they will attend staff development and when they wish to truly “take a break.” It is during this time that a Substitute Teacher Conference is provided for all substitutes. They have technology fairs, curriculum conferences, and/or special topic workshops (such as Drug and Gang Awareness). Substitutes get paid to attend these conferences so there is good attendance during those weeks and the substitutes believe that they certainly receive the attention and training that is very critical to retaining good substitutes.
Conclusion

Managing teacher absenteeism can seem extremely difficult and, perhaps, out-of-reach. There are, however, districts and schools that seem to manage teacher absenteeism very well. To improve teacher attendance, coercion is not suggested; but higher expectations of teachers, increased awareness of absenteeism effects, and motivating rewards for outstanding teacher attendance encourage lower teacher absenteeism.

Considering the financial costs and, more significantly, reduction in student performance because of teacher absenteeism, school administrators should actively address this issue. Administrators should carefully assess the current teacher absenteeism problem in their schools; implement a comprehensive plan to reduce teacher absenteeism; and consider how to manage other issues directly or indirectly related to teacher absenteeism, such as teacher morale and burn-out. It is also important to distinguish strategies and action plans for addressing personal leave absences as opposed to school related absences.

The responsibility in managing teacher absenteeism rests with district and site administrators as well as with unions and teachers. Because permanent teachers’ employment is stringently governed by contracts and policies, addressing the issue of teacher absenteeism can be complex and volatile. School boards, district personnel, building administrators, and permanent teacher representatives must all work together in negotiating contracts, establishing policies, and creating a working environment that will encourage teachers to remain in the classroom.

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Increasing Teacher Attendance


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