No Substitute for Quality:  
A Time Series Quasi-Experimental Study of the Effects of a Pay for Performance Remedy for Teacher Absenteeism  

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Daily across America, children are faced with a stranger in their classroom: a substitute teacher. The financial impact of employee absenteeism is a challenge faced by all types of businesses everywhere. Our nations school districts are not immune to employee absenteeism. The shortage of qualified substitute teachers and declining unemployment rates has compounded this challenge among school administrators. The budgetary cost of paying for both absent teachers and their substitutes increases each year with higher salaries, substitute pay, and incentive plans (Norton, 1998). This study came about due to the growing concerns with teacher absenteeism in the nation (Norton, 1998) specifically Creighton School District in Phoenix, Arizona.  

Creighton School District was experiencing a steadily increasing trend in teacher absenteeism, especially over the three-year period prior to the 2001 school year. The concerns over teacher absenteeism were magnified by a corresponding decrease in the number of qualified substitute teachers available to cover the classes of absentee teachers.  

Adding to the frustration of parents and administrators, the students of the district were performing below the state average on the annual state-mandated, norm-referenced assessments. During this same period of time, the voters of Arizona approved Proposition 301, a referendum with the stated purpose of improving student achievement and increasing teacher salaries (Bayless, 2000). Proposition 301 called for each school district to develop a Pay for Performance (PFP) plan. In response, Creighton School District developed a PFP plan that centered on an incentive intended to decrease teacher absenteeism throughout the district. The purpose of this study was to analyze the effects of the PFP plan on teacher absenteeism and on the distribution of Proposition 301 funding intended for teacher salaries.
The Creighton Pay for Performance Plan

The section of the PFP plan related to teacher attendance set forth guidelines for which individual teachers might be eligible for incentive monies. It showed that 10% of the PFP fund was available to teachers based on their individual staff attendance coded from budget line 001, “earned leave illness,” or budget line 002, “earned leave other.” Teachers who took two or fewer leave days would be paid 100% of the monies, distributed equitably, or $190 per teacher, for the 2001-2002 school year. Those who took three to four days of leave would receive 60% of the monies, or $114 per individual, for the 2001-2002 school year. The plan specified that days counted as leave excluded disability, chronic illness, and FMLA. These exemptions, when added to the plan, created heightened difficulty and confusion when calculating the PFP.

Study Method

This study utilized a Time-Series Quasi-Experimental Method to determine the effects of the PFP plan on teacher absenteeism. An important part of preparation for the analysis included graphing teacher absentee rates for each of the three-years prior to the PFP plan and for one year following the implementation to determine if an abrupt shift in direction or level in the number of leave days taken by teachers occurred as a result of the intervention. Results of using the time-series method included descriptive analyses of the responses to the PFP incentive plan exhibited by various subgroups of the population of teachers (n=462). Additionally, findings described how those teacher populations faired in the distribution of incentive monies to the eligible teachers.

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

Unexpected findings appeared during the analysis and description of the Creighton School District policies and the rules and regulations governing the design, development, and implementation of the PFP incentive plan. The analysis illuminated an obscured association between the policy and practices that govern teacher absenteeism. What emerged was a conclusion that the combined effect of policy and practice may have served as a contributing factor to the high teacher absentee rates in the district. Although these findings did not offer a direct solution to the primary question of the effect of the PFP intervention on teacher absenteeism, such important unintended findings were too poignant to be overlooked, and excluding them
from the report would have restricted a full understanding of the complexity of the issue.

**Findings: Policy Snarls**

When written, the goals of the personnel policy were to attract teachers of the highest quality. In order to meet these policy goals, the district became ensnared in the trap of providing attractive compensation and benefit packages to lure teachers to work for Creighton School District and then getting the most in productivity (days of work) from all teachers. As noted in the review of the literature, Kaiser (1996) illustrated that employers create policies with the intent of attracting the best and brightest by offering work disincentives such as leave packages. As Kaiser noted, there existed a correlation between the number of sick days allotted and the number of days used by employees; that is, the more days offered as part of a benefit package, the higher the absentee rate. This conflict of intended results appeared to be exactly the trap into which Creighton School District fell when adopting the General Leave Policy, which offered a competitive package allowing up to 12 leave days per year.

District policy requires teachers to report absences to their immediate supervisors and, following that, to validate the leave request with a personal call to the automated system. Nonetheless, a common practice in direct violation of the policy gradually developed among teachers. Instead of contacting their immediate supervisors, teachers called only the automated system to report an upcoming absence and the need for a substitute. Pitkoff (1993) noted that schools that did not require teachers to speak personally to their immediate supervisors experienced increased absentee rates. Thus, within Creighton School District, the result of tacit permission for teachers to move from adherence to policy to informal practices that violated policy appeared to have contributed to inflated absentee rates.

The use of verbiage found in the policy and in everyday practice may be causing confusion, serving as an additional contributing factor to the high rate of absenteeism among district teachers. The policy states that teachers may “accrue” and “earn” up to 12 days per year. Moreover, the automated system categorized and reported leave days as “earned” leave. The use of the word “earned” implies ownership and, ultimately, a sense of availability “at will,” subject only to the discretion of the teacher rather than consideration of the
total context of employee responsibilities, supervisory approval, or contractual obligations to deliver instruction for the academic year. In a previous case study involving Creighton School District, Spiller (2002) found that the term “earned” was defined informally as “whatever the teacher chooses to do with the time,” rather than as an “earned privilege” resulting from conditions of employment that operated on a “good faith” basis by permitting absences. As a result, that definition of policy language had become part of the culture within the district, and served to contribute to the trend of increased teacher absenteeism.

Another powerful contributor to increased teacher absenteeism was identified during the description and analysis of the policy governing termination benefits. Although the language of the policy that defined termination benefits was revised to better serve the teachers of Creighton School District, the actual outcome served to reinforce the use of leave days, especially by teachers approaching retirement payoff eligibility. Teachers approaching retirement understood that the “reward” for saving leave days for payoff at retirement was to be reimbursed for those days (i.e., “paid off”) at a rate lower than the current daily rate. This fact provided powerful support and incentive for the prevalent “use it or lose it” culture demonstrated by teachers in Creighton School District.

**Findings: Communication Confusion**

A thorough review of the correspondence between district administration and teachers revealed that both parties experienced confusion regarding the PFP plan and its implementation guidelines. Because evidence of miscommunication or misunderstanding of the PFP plan permeated the communication among administration and teachers, many hours of work that could have been avoided were instead invested in what the district administration believed was necessary to ensure fairness in PFP implementation.

**Findings: Research Question Responses**

The findings of the Time-Series Quasi-Experimental Method addressed the specific questions asked in the study. They revealed that the PFP plan decreased the number of leave days taken by teachers in Creighton School District by an average of 1.29 days per teacher in the year immediately following the intervention. This decline resulted in savings of over $45,000 to the district. More significant to students and parents than district monetary rewards,
were the nearly 600 additional days of instruction delivered by regular teachers rather than substitute teachers, which added to the continuity of instruction for students of Creighton School District.

When considering patterns of circumstance, or characteristics of teacher subgroups, the data showed that not all subgroups were affected by the PFP in the same way. The data established that women were more likely to respond to the PFP incentive than men. Following the intervention, data showed that teachers between the ages of 31-40 years old were more likely to take fewer leave days than teachers of other ages. Moreover, teachers assigned to primary grades demonstrated the most positive response to the PFP incentive. In another subgroup analysis, data showed that teachers with more than four years experience in the district were more affected by the PFP plan than were teachers new to the district. Surprisingly, however, the analysis revealed no significant difference in effect among teachers of different ethnic subgroups.

In order to address the question regarding the equitable distribution of Proposition 301 monies, the percentage of teachers who qualified for the PFP reward was calculated for each subgroup to determine whether or not the plan established a clearly defined element of fairness for all teachers. The district awarded incentive monies to approximately 40% of the teachers based on improved rates of teacher absenteeism. All subgroups, with the exception of teachers with 10-20 years of experience, received nearly the same percentage of incentive monies.

In an important deviation, only 30% of the teachers who had 10-20 years of experience were able to qualify for the PFP plan. No specific information was available to explain this phenomenon. However, inferential connections between age and normal child-rearing periods of life might permit speculation regarding at least one plausible explanation about why these teachers requested more leave days. For example, they may have children at home who require extra attention or supervision.

**Recommendations**

This study permitted insight into several areas of importance related to pay for performance incentive plans, regardless of the district being studied. Furthermore, the findings indicated the importance of considering policy, rules, and regulations, in combination with attendance behavior, when analyzing the effectiveness of any intervention. The study also identified several
topics that need further investigation. Finally, expanding the data gathering to allow follow-up questions could be important additions to future studies.

Recommendations for Practice

Governing Boards and district leaders may find it in the best interest of the district, the teachers, and the students to carefully review all policies and practices that govern teacher absenteeism. In the development of teacher benefits and compensation packages, policies guiding leave days should contain specific language and clarify operational definitions for terms such as “accrued” and “earned.” As noted in Spiller’s (2002) work, clarity in the communication of benefits associated with saving days for catastrophic illness and emergencies is essential both to absentee reduction and to long-term advantages for teachers.

Another recommendation for change is for principals to enforce policies requiring teachers to call them personally in case of an illness or emergency. District administration should insist that policies approved by the Governing Board are implemented as intended. Although intensive effort and commitment would be required to reverse the “use it or lose it” culture that promotes the use of leave days as they are earned, principals are the “gatekeepers” for adherence to this policy and are responsible for enforcing it effectively.

To reduce the conflict between intention and outcomes of policies, a review and revision of teacher attendance and absenteeism policies should be completed considering the findings of this study. Also included in the review should be policies that pertain to termination benefits so that all policies related to leave days are meaningful and motivational for teachers to decrease absenteeism. Enlightened approaches to absenteeism reduction efforts, coordinated with other policies affecting teacher attendance and incentives, should prove beneficial to all parties.

Recommendations for the administration of a PFP plan similar to the one developed in Creighton School District may be summed up using Odden’s (2001) work on school-based performance award programs. He addressed six areas essential to the creation of effective school-based performance award programs:

1. Communication,

2. Professional development activities linked to goals,
3. Keep it simple,
4. Make it reachable,
5. Involve all employees, and
6. Refine and modify as needed (Odden, p.1).

For the section in the Creighton School District PFP plan that addresses teacher eligibility, more work needs to be done in the areas of communication, staff development, and keeping it simple. For example, one suggestion is to exclude the “chronic” illness exemption from the plan. Not only did very few people fall into this exemption, but teacher eligibility for the exemption took many hours to calculate. Thus, the cost effectiveness of keeping the exemption is questionable.

In efforts to assist in keeping the eligibility for teachers simple, and the information about the plan easily understood, the district should consider dropping the eligibility criteria to four or fewer days for 100% pay out of the incentive monies. Professional development sessions should outline the framework of the plan and should reinforce the value of teachers in the classroom by highlighting that teacher absences negatively affect students by disrupting not only the continuity of instruction, but also by interrupting the rapport between students and teacher.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study offers many possibilities for future research. First, to determine the long-term effects of a PFP plan on teacher absenteeism, future researchers are encouraged to extend the Time-Series Quasi-Experimental Method over a longer period of time following the initial implementation of the plan. Additional research might discover why a variety of subgroups responded affirmatively to the PFP incentive, while some did not. Another opportunity for research would be to determine whether or not the amount of PFP monies available to eligible teachers is related to the number of leave days taken. Additionally, to extend this research to the matter of improved student achievement, the study of whether or not a relationship exists between a decrease in teacher absenteeism and an increase in student achievement would prove universally valuable.

Implications

The intent of this study was to determine the effects of a Pay for Performance plan on teacher absenteeism. According to Russo’s
(2001) article entitled, *No Substitute for Quality*, “on average, a student is taught by substitutes teachers for 187 days—more than a full year of school—from kindergarten through 12th grade” (p. 6). Findings from this Time Series Quasi-Experimental analysis showed that the Creighton School District PFP plan made a difference by reducing the number of days that teachers requested substitutes.

Russo (2001) also argued that improving the quality of substitute teachers would improve the quality of our children’s education. He described a day when “2,000 teachers in Hillsborough County, Florida, called in sick to take advantage of the beautiful weather and the possibility of a long weekend,” leaving almost 400 classes unfilled by teachers, certified or otherwise (p. 6). Russo’s ideas are good, but they are focused on the symptom, substitute teachers, rather than on the root of the problem, teacher absenteeism.

School leaders should view Russo’s suggestions in light of teacher absenteeism rather than as they relate to substitute teachers. Russo’s *Strategy 5: Look at Systemic Issues* posed the question, “Why are teachers absent?” Russo questioned the perspective by noting that we should “rethink the fundamental assumptions surrounding substitute teachers and making far-reaching changes to the way things are done at a district level” (p. 10). Also, Russo’s *Strategy 4: Bring in Outside Expertise* posed the question, “What do the experts say about teacher absenteeism?” According to Russo, “Given the size and complexity of the challenge, school leaders increasing turn to external expertise for help” (p. 9) rather than searching for creative and innovate ways to address the concerns of all parties. In another section, *Strategy 3: Collaborate Rather than Compete*, Russo challenged the reader in this way, “Why not work with the teachers by asking real questions about how the absentee rate may be reduced?” Continuing in his reasoning, Russo’s *Strategy 2: Increase the Pool of Potential Candidates* queried, “When recruiting teachers why not ask probing questions about work ethic?”

*Strategy 1: Make the Job More Attractive* (Russo, 2001) represents a way to get to the heart of the intent that drives PFP planning because it is one more tool an employer might use to support organizational rhetoric about how important it is for students to have all teachers in their classrooms every day that is scheduled for instruction. If attendance is that important, then school districts, as employers, should be willing to offer bonuses, at least in the short term, to teachers with exemplary attendance in order to reestablish a district culture that endorses teacher commitment to the primary job
responsibility—the instruction of children. Such a commitment on the part of the district would prove to teachers that their presence in their classrooms is both expected and valued, and not just with words, but in the form of something tangible, money.

This study explored one way to assist districts in combating the prevalence of absenteeism in the teaching profession. Plans such as the PFP incentive described in this study may benefit organizations within other professions that are dealing with employee absenteeism. The implementation of a “pay for performance plan” should not be viewed as a panacea for the world’s woes related to absenteeism. However, PFP incentives represent an additional tool available for districts to use to convince teachers that there is no substitute for their qualities.

References


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