



Teacher Absence as a Leading Indicator of Student Achievement

New National Data Offer Opportunity to Examine Cost of Teacher Absence Relative to Learning Loss

Raegen Miller November 2012

Introduction and summary

On any given school day, up to 40 percent of teachers in New Jersey’s Camden City Public Schools are absent from their classrooms.¹ Such a high figure probably would not stand out in parts of the developing world,² but it contrasts sharply with the 3 percent national rate of absence for full-time wage and salaried American workers,³ and the 5.3 percent rate of absence for American teachers overall.⁴ Certainly, it isn’t unreasonable for Camden residents to expect lower rates of teacher absence, particularly when the district annually spends top dollar—more than \$22,000 per pupil—to educate its students.⁵ And advocates for students of color, who constitute 99.5 percent of the district’s enrollment,⁶ could potentially use these new data from the Department of Education to support a civil rights complaint.

Beginning in 2009 the Office for Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education included a new item on its biennial Civil Rights Data Collection survey—teacher absences.⁷ Notwithstanding concerns about equity, attention to this issue is appropriate for two reasons:

- First, teachers are the most important school-based determinant of students’ academic success. It’s no surprise researchers find that teacher absence lowers student achievement.⁸
- Second, resources are scarce, and any excess of funds tied up in teacher absence, which costs at least \$4 billion annually,⁹ should be put to better use.

This report uses the Civil Rights Data Collection dataset¹⁰ released in early 2012 to raise questions and drive debate about the subject of teacher absence. This dataset comes from the first national survey to include school-level information on teacher absence. The measure constructed from this information is the percentage of teachers who were absent more than 10 times during the year. The Department of Education calls the measure a “leading indicator,”¹¹ a reasonable label given the documented relationship between absence rates measured at the teacher level and student achievement. Yet very little is known about the properties of this new school-level measure.

On average, 36 percent of teachers nationally were absent more than 10 days during the 2009-10 school year based on the 56,837 schools analyzed in the dataset. The percentages reported by individual schools range from 0 percent to 100 percent, with 62 percent of the variation in the measure occurring between districts and a third occurring within districts. The latter statistic is significant because all schools within a given district operate under the same leave policies, and teacher absence levels well above a district average may be a symptom of a dysfunctional professional culture at the building level.

State averages on the novel Civil Rights Data Collection measure of teacher absence range from a low of 20.9 percent in Utah to a high of 50.2 percent in Rhode Island. A ranking of states on page 8 raises questions about the wisdom of some states' teacher absence policies.

This report also notes that teacher absence is yet another item that can be added to the list of ways in which charter schools differ from traditional public schools. Teachers are absent from traditional public schools more than 10 times per year at a rate that is 15.2 percentage points higher than in charter schools.

A school's grade-level configuration provides some indication of its teachers' absence behavior. An average of 33.3 percent of teachers were absent more than 10 days in high schools. The corresponding figures for elementary and middle schools are 36.7 percent and 37.8 percent, respectively. In this sense, this novel measure tracks conventional rates of absence constructed from teachers' daily absence records.¹²

This report also supplies evidence that students in schools serving high proportions of African American or Latino students are disproportionately exposed to teacher absence. Holding constant the grade-level and whether a school is a charter, a school with its proportion of African American students in the 90th percentile has a teacher absence rate that is 3.5 percentage points higher than a school in the 10th percentile. The corresponding differential based on percentages of Latino students is 3.2 percentage points.

With these and other findings, this report seeks to draw attention to the too long-neglected subject of teacher absence. The costs of teacher absence, both in financial and academic terms, can no longer be borne in silence. The abundance of variation in teacher absence behavior, both between districts and within, means that there is room in many districts and individual schools for teachers to have adequate access to paid leave while being absent less frequently.

Admittedly, more research is needed, especially on within-district factors that shape absence behavior, including school leadership and professional norms. Such inquiry, which requires fine-grained absence data tied carefully to other information, can ride on the coattails of data-intensive efforts currently underway to fold student achievement data into performance evaluations of teachers. The federal government engaged in what is fashionably called “data driven decision making” when it introduced teacher absence to the Civil Rights Data Collection survey. Policymakers at lower levels of government can get on board in the following ways:

- State policymakers should revisit statutes governing employees’ leave privileges. All employees should have access to a minimum standard of at least seven paid sickdays per year,¹³ and most teachers are covered by the federal Family and Medical Leave Act, which provides up to 12 weeks of job-protected leave to care for a new child, a seriously ill family member, or to recover from one’s own serious illness. But teachers’ leave provisions in some states may be too permissive, elevating rates of absence and incurring the financial liability of accumulated, unused leave.
- All states should follow the lead of California and New Jersey to ensure that employees have access to family and medical leave insurance to provide income support when a worker has a new child, needs to care for a seriously ill family member, or needs to recover from one’s own serious illness.¹⁴
- Encourage local policymakers to “right-size” leave privileges and initiate incentive policies designed to reduce levels of teacher absence. Many examples of such policies exist and teachers respond to them. The cost associated with smart incentive plans can be covered by the savings realized from reduced absence rates. Improved student achievement would be a likely and desirable side benefit of such initiatives.

Dealing with teacher absence

As employers, school districts must accommodate some level of teacher absence with a combination of policies and management tools. Prominent policies include some number of days of paid leave for illness or personal reasons, and incentives discouraging frivolous use of paid leave. An electronic absence management system that records absences, assigns substitutes, and produces reports is a commonplace management tool.

State policies often set parameters for local policy. Districts in Ohio, for example, must offer teachers at least 15 days of paid sick leave per year.¹⁵ Mississippi, in contrast, sets the floor at seven days.¹⁶ States also set the bar in terms of qualifications for substitute teachers, with some requiring little more than a high school diploma. Others require a baccalaureate degree or even full licensure as a teacher, which is the case in North Dakota.¹⁷

Charter schools, on the other hand, are typically free to operate outside the state parameters, but traditional districts also enjoy latitude around many issues bearing on teachers' absence behavior. Collective bargaining contracts or board policies may specify, for example, the point at which a stretch of absence due to illness requires medical verification, or proscribe the use of personal leave on days adjacent to school holidays.

The drivers of teacher absence

A good deal is known about relationships among teacher absence, relevant policies, and management practices.¹⁸ One would expect, for example, to see higher rates of absence where more paid leave is available and where there's less incentive to take leave frugally.¹⁹ Teachers also tend to be absent less often if they're required to notify their principal of impending absences by telephone.²⁰ Employers and teachers can both benefit from policies that balance paid short-term leave privileges with income insurance for unpaid leave associated with absences covered by the Family and Medical Leave Act.²¹

But policy and management alone don't determine employee behavior. Individual and school-level factors also matter. Female teachers tend to be absent more often than their male counterparts,²² a finding consistent across employment sectors and with links to highly gendered family responsibilities. Teachers who commute long distances—and are therefore more susceptible to bad weather and other obstacles—also tend to be absent more often than teachers with shorter commutes.²³

The costs of teacher absence

Schools spend more on the salary and benefits of teachers than any category of expenditure, so it's not surprising that the financial costs of teacher absence are high. With 5.3 percent of teachers absent on a given day,²⁴ stipends for substitute

teachers and associated administrative costs amount to a minimum of \$4 billion annually. Additional financial costs tied to teacher absence include payouts of accumulated, unused leave and annual awards designed to discourage unnecessary absences. In some states these payout costs come in the form of enhanced lifetime pension benefits.²⁵ A comprehensive cost figure is extremely difficult to calculate, but this does not preclude knowing that the figure is too high.

In addition, districts routinely generate teacher absences themselves by conducting professional development activities during class time. Charter schools are less likely to engage in this practice, but traditional districts tend to see the costs of absence as lower than the costs of lengthening teachers' contract year with a proportional increase in salary. This false dichotomy provides a glimpse of how rigid, traditional compensation systems stifle creative, cost-saving, and strategic thinking.

Likewise, teacher absence has important nonfinancial costs. It negatively affects student achievement, a fact borne out by research that finds that every 10 absences lowers average mathematics achievement equivalent to the difference between having a novice teacher and one with a bit more experience.²⁶ Estimating such effects is challenging, in part, because achievement tends to be measured far less frequently than absence, which is a day-by-day phenomenon. The learning-loss costs of teacher absence, however, have high face validity.

Inequity, seldom out of the picture in U.S. education, rears its head in teacher absence. Students in schools serving predominantly low-income families tend to endure teacher absence at a higher rate than students in more affluent communities.²⁷ Thus, it's plausible that achievement gaps can be attributed, in part, to a teacher attendance gap.

The absence culture

The professional culture of a school—the norms, formal and informal, that guide teachers' behavior—has a facet related to absence. Researchers have studied this facet, the so-called absence culture, along two dimensions.²⁸ The first has to do with how similarly teachers behave to one another.²⁹ One study found, for example, collusive behavior among teachers in one school as an explanation for its consistently high absence rates relative to rates found in neighboring schools.³⁰ Researchers in Australia found that an increase in the average absence rate of a teacher's colleagues increased the teacher's own absence tally.³¹

The second dimension of absence culture focuses on trust among staff.³² Trust can be framed as the degree of professional autonomy enjoyed by teachers.³³ Absences in low-trust settings can represent a “deviant” or “calculative” mindset, depending how much tug the culture has on teachers’ behavior.³⁴ Such behavior in the realm of absence hardly sounds conducive to school improvement, and it underscores broader concern with trust in the research literature on school improvement³⁵ and in practical matters such as states’ applications for competitive federal grants under the Race to the Top program.³⁶

Illness and occupational hazards

The nature of teachers’ work may explain some of their absences. Multiple studies have linked teacher absence with job-related stress,³⁷ and there’s some evidence that absences due to symptoms and complications of vocal strain may be prevented with classroom amplification systems.³⁸ Anecdotal reports suggest that new teachers are particularly susceptible to student-borne illnesses, making the notion that teachers’ immune systems require a period of adjustment appealing.³⁹ Research following this line is difficult to do because new teachers tend to be absent less often than their more experienced colleagues, in part because they lack the privileges and job security, and perhaps in part because they’re better able to power through, engaging in “presenteeism.”⁴⁰ At any rate, school-wide use of hand sanitizer reduces rates of teacher absence.⁴¹

Timing

Researchers consistently find two patterns in the timing of teachers’ absences. First, teachers are absent most frequently on Mondays and Fridays.⁴² Second, a high proportion of absences due to illness occur in blocks of time short enough that no medical certification is required.⁴³ These findings are hardly surprising given that they are consistent with findings from studies of employees in other fields. Information about such patterns is lost in the blunt, school-level measure of absence embraced by the Civil Rights Data Collection survey, but that does not preclude these data from bringing light to a dark corner of education policy and practice.

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just, and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

Center for American Progress

