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Teacher Absenteeism: An Analysis of Trends and Interventions

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Absenteeism is a prolific and rising problem in schools. But student attendance is only part of the picture. Teacher absenteeism is also an increasingly challenging problem in schools today. This report evaluates current trends, factors, and effects related to teacher absenteeism as well as the evidence base for strategies to reduce it.

Teacher Absenteeism Trends

Rates of teacher absenteeism vary across states and districts and are often measured or reported differently. Recent nationwide data is hard to find, as the Office for Civil Rights dataset has not been updated since 2018, but one report found that up to 10% of teachers are absent on any given day nationwide (Hansen et al., 2025). A summary of various state reports on teacher attendance demonstrates that overall, teacher absenteeism dropped during the pandemic, but surged above pre-pandemic levels in the years following (Hansen et al., 2025). This trend is reflected in Connecticut where teachers were absent an average of 10.4 days before the pandemic, dropping to 7.5 in the 2019-2020 school year, and then rising to 13.0 days per year in the 2023-2024 school year (CSDE, 2026). Teacher absences vary based on school population as well, with greater recent increases in teacher absenteeism in schools with higher concentrations of non-white students, a factor that may lead to overall discrepancies in schools with more diverse student populations (Sparks, 2022).

Effects of Teacher Absenteeism

Teacher absenteeism has a demonstrated negative effect on student performance and on schools overall. One study found that 10 additional days of teacher absence led to a 3.2% of a standard deviation decrease in students' math scores (Miller et al., 2008), though similar effects on reading were not significant. Teacher absenteeism is correlated with student absenteeism as well, which could lead to even less learning time for students. Substitute teachers are often less qualified and less prepared to teach than classroom teachers, which may be a factor in the reduction in student outcomes (Miller, 2018).

Teacher absences are also an economic problem. Nationally, schools' largest expenditure is teacher salary and benefits, a cost that increases when schools are forced to pay for substitute teachers to cover absent teachers (Miller, 2012). Teacher absenteeism also strains school resources and administrative time by requiring administrators to devote time to finding and supervising substitute teachers in their classrooms (Obeng-Denteh et al., 2011).

Teacher Absenteeism and Related Factors

Teacher absenteeism is not a new problem despite recent increasing trends. Many argue that teacher absenteeism is frequently discretionary, as teachers are most often absent on Mondays and Fridays, and studies on payouts for teacher attendance have been found to reduce teacher absenteeism by 50% (Miller et al., 2008). Unfortunately, the empirical research base related to teacher absenteeism in the U.S. is relatively weak and most studies are correlational or survey-based or rely on data collected from other countries. One review of the literature which included international data and examined teacher absenteeism found that at the teacher level, staff who are female, more experienced, or report having health issues are more likely to be absent while those who are older, exhibit healthy behaviors, or have a higher academic degree are less likely to be absent (Carrizosa & Witte, 2024). Psychological factors that correlate with higher rates of teacher absenteeism include higher rates of stress/burnout and reported depression or anxiety. Job satisfaction is negatively correlated with teacher absences.

In terms of working conditions and school characteristics, many studies show that an increased workload, student absenteeism, and the presence of an absence culture (i.e., shared beliefs related to acceptable reasons for absenteeism; Gaziel, 2004) are related to higher teacher absences but recognition at work has a negative correlation (Carrizosa & Witte, 2024). Environmental factors have also been shown to play a role in teacher absenteeism, with low-income schools, longer commutes, rural schools, witnessing violence, and bad weather having a positive correlation with teacher absences and community involvement and parental literacy rate having a negative correlation with teacher absenteeism (Carrizosa & Witte, 2024). Although a particular cutoff commute time that leads to increased absenteeism has not been identified, one small study found that a teacher who drives 40 minutes to school misses 1.5 days more on average than a teacher who has a 10-minute commute (Grissom & Santelli, 2025).

Interventions and Policies to Improve Teacher Attendance

Overall, there is limited experimental research on increasing teacher attendance but anecdotal evidence from districts points to policies that have promising results. Variance in teacher absences occurs at both the district and the school level, pointing to the importance of district policies and school climate (Boren, 2024). Districts that grant teachers more vacation days unsurprisingly have higher rates of teacher absenteeism, but when vacation day buy-back policies are enacted, absenteeism decreases (Gardner & Torres, 2025). In West Virginia, teacher absenteeism rates increased when the state changed its policy from letting teacher accumulate sick days to a "use it or lose it" policy (Boren, 2024). Research also shows that large class sizes correlate with increased teacher absences, indicating that changes in policies related to class size could improve teacher attendance (Carrizosa & Witte, 2024).

Incentives for improved attendance are another measure used by districts. Torrington, CT included an incentive structure for perfect attendance (non-use of sick or personal days) in its 2024-2025 school year budget. After implementing this incentive bonus for attendance, teacher absenteeism decreased 3.5% overall in the following year (Brewster, 2025). A school district in Texas saved money overall and increased teacher's attendance rates by offering increased matching 401K contributions for teachers who hit attendance benchmarks (Knoster, 2016). Anecdotally, it appears that schools have had success with decreasing teacher attendance by offering proximal incentives (i.e. annual or bi-annual payouts) and more distal incentives (i.e. 401K matches).

One important consideration related to teacher absenteeism is the difference between voluntary and involuntary absences. District policies may have more of an effect on voluntary absences, or those within a teacher's control, than on involuntary absences (e.g. illness or family emergencies) which are often unavoidable. Although there is not experimental research in this area, it is likely that incentive policies may support decreasing voluntary absences while larger scale policies may be needed to impact involuntary absences. As previously mentioned, research has indicated a correlation between being female and increased absenteeism. This could be related to the increased responsibilities for women in the home or the higher impact of mental health issues on women than men (Carrizosa & Witte, 2024). More research is needed to determine how school or district policies affect voluntary versus involuntary absences.

In sum, despite the lack of empirical research, there is promising data to support specific policies related to absence procedures and allowances, incentives for reduced absenteeism, and other school environmental factors such as reduced class size.

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Recommendations

School policies should clarify expectations for attendance, clearly indicating when and why teachers can take days off. Schools should also develop clear systems for defining and tracking teacher absenteeism. Policies to reward attendance such as financial and social incentives have promising results and could be used to reinforce reduced rates of staff absenteeism.

It is also critical for schools and districts to address overall school climate and address underlying stressors such as burnout and low rates of job satisfaction that correlate with increased teacher absenteeism. Because these stressors are highly correlated with teacher absenteeism, it would benefit schools to consider policies that have been shown to reduce overall teacher stress. These policies include hiring more staff to decrease workload and class sizes, supporting mentoring or induction programs for new teachers, or implementing preventative multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) which have been shown to improve overall school climate and improve teacher connection and sense of accomplishment (Kini, 2022; Ross et al., 2012).

Conclusion

Overall, there is limited accurate nationwide data and empirical research related to teacher absenteeism, despite the fact that it is an increasing problem in schools. Research has identified individual, school, environmental, and social factors that correlate with absenteeism and these factors should be considered when districts create policies. Prevention frameworks that support overall school climate and teacher wellbeing should be considered and financial incentive programs for decreased absences have shown promise.

It is also critical for districts to address school climate and stressors such as burnout that correlate with teacher absenteeism.

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Author Biography



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Tobey Duble Moore is a recent Ph.D. graduate from the Educational Psychology department at UConn's Neag School of Education. Prior to UConn, she earned her bachelor's degree in psychology from Harvard University, and her master's degree in intellectual disabilities and autism from Teachers College at Columbia University. Tobey has over 15 years of experience in the field of special education, having worked in various settings as a teacher, Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA), and behavioral consultant. In these roles, she worked with students at the Tier 3 level, providing individualized behavior support and school- and district-level technical assistance in classroom management and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). She also worked as an intern at the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) at the Education Department. Her research interests include Tier 3 behavioral systems, implementation of integrated MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Support), and education policy and much of her current research focuses on how federal and state policy and district systems can improve the technical adequacy of function-based supports in schools.