



REL Pacific Ask A REL Response

Teacher Workforce
September 2015

Question:

To what degree is teacher absenteeism an issue in the U.S.?

What are some of the reasons for teacher absenteeism in the U.S.?

What is the impact of teacher absenteeism on schools/students in the U.S.?

Response:

The following document is a response to an Ask-a-REL inquiry from a teacher at the Marshall Islands High School. The requestor attended a REL Pacific session on teacher absenteeism at the Pacific Education Conference (PEC) and expressed interest in understanding how absenteeism has affected schools in the mainland U.S. In response to this inquiry, REL Pacific has gathered literature and online resources.

REL Pacific reviewed literature previously collected as part of a 2015 REL Pacific report, Review of international research on factors underlying teacher absenteeism. REL Pacific also reviewed information in the QuestionPoint database—a database of existing Ask-A-REL responses across all ten REL regions—regarding teacher absenteeism. Additional sources were identified through a web-based search. Search terms and selection criteria for the resources are included in Appendix A.

REL Pacific identified four studies that may be of interest to the requestor. The first three studies address questions regarding the reasons for and prevalence and impact of teacher absenteeism in the U.S. The final study describes the impact of a financial incentive program on teacher attendance in Texas.

Descriptions of the resources are quoted from the publication abstract (Abstract) or the publication itself (Introduction or Excerpt). An abstract is always used when available. However, if additional text in the resource provides important information not contained in the author's abstract, the additional information is also provided.

Research References

Clotfelter, C. T., Ladd, H. F., & Vigdor, J. L. (2007). Are teacher absences worth worrying about in the U.S.? NBER working paper no. 13648. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research. Retrieved from <http://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/alfresco/publication-pdfs/1001286-Are-Teacher-Absences-Worth-Worrying-about-in-the-U-S-.PDF>.

From the abstract: Using detailed data from North Carolina, we examine the frequency, incidence, and consequences of teacher absences in public schools, as well as the impact of an absence disincentive policy. The incidence of teacher absences is regressive: schools in the poorest quartile averaged almost one extra sick day per teacher than schools in the highest income quartile, and schools with persistently high rates of teacher absence were much more likely to serve low-income than high-income students. In regression models incorporating teacher fixed effects, absences are associated with lower student achievement in elementary grades. Finally, we present evidence that the demand for discretionary absences is price-elastic. Our estimates suggest that a policy intervention that simultaneously raised teacher base salaries and broadened financial penalties for absences could both raise teachers' expected income and lower districts' expected costs.

From the introduction, p. 1–2: Whatever the importance of strong training, classroom experience, or advanced pedagogical methods for the scholastic development of students, these factors can have scant effect on a day when a teacher is absent from school. Teacher absences are an endemic problem in developing countries (Banerjee and Duflo 2006; Chaudhury et al. 2006). Baseline teacher absence rates in the range of 20 to 44 percent have been reported in studies of policy interventions in Kenya and India (Glewwe, Ilias and Kremer 2003; Duflo and Hanna 2005). Interventions designed to reduce teacher absence, or improve teacher performance generally, have met with mixed success in these settings (Banerjee and Duflo 2006).

The rate of teacher absence in the United States is much smaller than in these developing countries, and the availability of substitute teachers may further lessen the potential harm from teacher absences in this country. Previous studies suggest absence rates for teachers in the U.S. on the order of 5%, or about 9 days per 180-day working year.¹ Perhaps for this reason, there exists surprisingly little research on teacher absences in the United States. Compared to workers in other occupations, however, American school teachers appear to have relatively high rates of absence. By comparison, ostensibly similarly measured rates of absenteeism due to sickness average less than 3% in the U.S.

¹ Footnote from the original article: Ehrenberg et al. (1991), who conducted a survey of 381 school districts in New York state in the mid-1980s, found that teachers took an average of 8.9 days of leave a year. Podgursky (2003) cites a study of New York City schools in 2000/01 showing an average of 11.3 days a year and a U.S. Department of Education survey concluding that 5.2% of teachers were absent on any given day. Focusing only on sick leave, Bradley, Green and Leeves (2005, Table 1) report rates for Queensland, Australia of about 3% and a similar rate based on another study in the U.K.

workforce as a whole.² This introduces the possibility that policies specific to public education have contributed to the elevated absence rate, and that other policies could be used to reduce it.³ Potential social gains from reduced absenteeism include improved student discipline and achievement, and reduced expenditures on substitute teachers.⁴

Previous literature provides conflicting evidence on whether teacher absences are consequential for student achievement in America, where certified substitute teachers are widespread (Ehrenberg et al. 1991; Miller, Murnane and Willet 2007). Absenteeism may also have a regressive impact, in which case interventions to reduce it could promote equity as well as efficiency.⁵

Joseph, N., Waymack, N., & Zielaski, D. (2014). *Roll call: The importance of teacher attendance*. Washington, DC: National Council on Teacher Quality. Retrieved from http://www.nctq.org/dmsView/RollCall_TeacherAttendance.

From the abstract: While policymakers have been directing considerable attention to teacher effectiveness, one basic aspect of effectiveness has received relatively little attention: teacher attendance. No matter how engaging or talented teachers may be, they can only have an impact on student learning if they are in the classroom. This paper asks a simple question: How often are teachers in the classroom and what factors influence their attendance? Using school district data for 40 of the country's largest metropolitan areas for the 2012–2013 school year, the following was found: (1) On average, public school teachers were in the classroom 94 percent of the school year, missing nearly 11 days out of a 186-day school year (the average school year length). Teachers used slightly less than all of the short-term leave offered by the district, an average of 13 days in the 40 districts; (2) 16 percent of all teachers were classified as chronically absent teachers because they missed 18 days or more in the school year, accounting for almost a third of all absences; (3) In spite of previous research to the contrary, this study did not find a relationship between teacher absence and the poverty levels of the children in the school building; and (4) Districts with formal policies in place to discourage teacher absenteeism did not appear to have better attendance rates than those without such policies, suggesting that the most common policies are not particularly effective. The

² Footnote from the original article: Measured as a percentage of hours missed due to illness, maternity or paternity leave, or child care or other family obligations, the rates of absence in 2005 were 2.3% in the public sector and 1.7% in the private sector. In two similar occupations, it was 2.4% in community and social services and 2.7% in healthcare support (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006, Table 47).

³ Footnote from the original article: In addition to the generosity of leave policies, explanations given for the higher absenteeism of teachers include the high rate of infectious illnesses carried by students, the stress of the job, and the expectation that teachers will stay out of school to care for their own children. Such expectations and leave policies are consistent with the notion that teaching as an occupation has traditionally been made to suit working mothers, with short work days and summers off to accommodate the demands of child-rearing (Podgursky 2003).

⁴ Footnote from the original article: One estimate of the cost of substitutes due to excessive teacher absences is on the order of 0.5% of total per pupil expenditures (Roza 2007, p. 5).

⁵ Footnote from the original article: One of the rare stories in the general readership news media that did touch on teacher absences, published in the Chicago Tribune, illustrates some of the issues lurking beneath the surface. Based on analysis of several years of data for the Chicago Public Schools, the Tribune reported chronic absenteeism concentrated among some teachers in a subset of the district's schools. In 22 elementary schools, most of which served poor and minority students, per teacher absences averaged more than 20 days a year – a rate lower than that observed in developing countries, but quite substantial in a local context. In these schools, substitutes attempted to do little teaching, and discipline deteriorated (Dell'Angela and Little 2006).

following are appended: (1) Districts included; (2) Methodology; and (3) Findings by district. A Technical Appendix is also included.

Miller, R. (2012, November). *Teacher absence as a leading indicator of student achievement: New national data offer opportunity to examine cost of teacher absence relative to learning loss*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/TeacherAbsence-6.pdf>.

From the abstract: This report uses the Civil Rights Data Collection dataset 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," 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. 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. 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. Data are appended.

Shifrer, D., López Turley, R., & Heard, H. (n.d.). Houston Independent School District's ASPIRE program: Estimated effects of receiving financial awards. Retrieved from <http://dl.icdst.org/pdfs/files/4ab306211580db62e8e4016a2c161d53.pdf>.

From the executive summary: The Houston Independent School District (HISD) asked the Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) at Rice University to conduct an independent evaluation of HISD's educator award program, ASPIRE (Accelerating Student Progress: Increasing Results and Expectations), which pays out over \$40 million each year to employees (Zimmerman et al. 2011). Award programs are a policy intervention aimed at increasing student achievement by rewarding educators financially. In order to examine whether ASPIRE

effectively incentivized teachers, we would need to compare teachers who were eligible for ASPIRE to similar teachers who were not eligible. However, ASPIRE was implemented in virtually all HISD schools, and the vast majority of HISD employees were eligible for an award, so it is not possible to examine the effects of eligibility. Nonetheless, it is possible to examine the effects of receiving an award among those who are eligible, which is the scope of this evaluation.

Using data collected by HISD and the Texas Education Agency (TEA), we compared the outcomes of teachers who received awards to similar teachers in comparable schools who did not receive awards. Specifically, this evaluation estimated the effects of receiving an ASPIRE award for the 2009–10 school year (formally announced and paid out in January 2011) on teachers’ retention by August 2011, the change in their attendance rates from 2009-10 to 2010-11, and their mean student test score gains from 2009–10 to 2010–11. . . .

Excerpt, p 35: Net of the effect of other awards received, core teachers who receive a Strand III award are predicted to be present an additional 15 hours in 2010–11 than otherwise similar teachers who did not receive a Strand III award and had comparable attendance rates in 2008–09. To put this finding into perspective, HISD teachers maintain mean attendance rates of 95%, or request to be absent an average of about ten days a year. A difference of 15 hours, or nearly 2 days of work, represents about a 20% improvement in attendance for teachers who receive a Strand III award. Receipt of a Strand II award has a smaller positive estimated effect on teacher attendance than receipt of a Strand III award, and receipt of a Strand I award actually has a negative estimated effect. With the exception of Strand I awards, the attendance of core teachers in higher need schools is improved even more by receipt of an ASPIRE award than that of comparable core teachers in lower need schools. The attendance of secondary level math and special education teachers is improved more by receipt of ASPIRE awards than that of teachers not in hard-to-staff positions, with the exception of Strand II awards for special education teachers. The attendance of secondary level science and bilingual/ESL teachers is improved less by receipt of ASPIRE awards than that of teachers not in hard-to-staff positions.

Methods

Keywords and search terms used in the search

- "teacher attendance" or "teacher absentee" NOT "Dissertations & Theses"
- "teachers" AND "absent" NOT "Dissertations & Theses"
- "teacher" AND "attendance" NOT "Dissertations & Theses"
- "substitute" AND "effect" NOT "Dissertations & Theses"

Databases and websites

Google/Google Scholar, ERIC, ProQuest Education Journals, QuestionPoint

Reference Search and Selection Criteria

The web search sought research studies that were published in peer-reviewed research journals within the last 10 years. REL Pacific searched for documents that are freely available online.¹ Resources included also had to be in English. Resources included in this document were last accessed in September 2015. URLs, descriptions, and content included in this document were current at that time.

⁶ This memorandum is one in a series of quick-turnaround responses to specific questions posed by educational stakeholders in the Pacific Region (American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Guam, Hawai'i, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau), which is served by the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL Pacific) at McREL International. This memorandum was prepared by REL Pacific under a contract with the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES), Contract ED-IES-17-C-0010, administered by McREL International. Its content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.