

Districts Experiment With Cutting Down on Teacher Absence

By [Bess Keller](#)

Despite new evidence that teacher absences harm student achievement, expert advice on ways to reduce unnecessary leave far outstrips what education leaders have so far ventured to do about the problem.

Still, some districts are experimenting with attempts to cut down on the absences. There's little research to go on, and teachers' unions typically frown on approaches other than improving working conditions.

They and other teacher advocates often argue that abuse of leave is rare, and that the relatively generous benefits available to most public school teachers are needed to attract and keep good educators.

Without necessarily denying those points, economists studying education say more could be done. Some education leaders have been prompted to action by examples from the business world and their own sense that absences are rising.

"We have had a fairly substantial increase in the number of leave days used by the teaching staff," said Van V. Ludy, the director of labor relations for the 160,000-student Palm Beach County district in Florida. "We have terrible attendance, especially on Friday."

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In the past year, research papers from economists at Harvard University's graduate school of education and Duke University in Durham, N.C., have argued that teacher absences have a small but significant negative effect on student achievement as shown by test results. Both groups point to previous research that suggests ways of reducing such absences.

The researchers note, for instance, that the more generous leave provisions are, the more days on average are taken.



Substitute teacher Amon Carter teaches a math class at Baltimore Polytechnic Institute in Maryland. New research says teacher absences cause a reduction in student achievement.

—Rob Carr/AP - File

They also say it is worth considering incentive plans that, typically, reward exceptional attendance or pay teachers for earned leave they don't take.

Another promising approach, according to the researchers, is to require teachers to report time off to their principal directly, rather than to the central office or an answering machine.

Obligation vs. Entitlement

Other experts say while holding out carrots for good attendance is worthwhile, wielding the stick against those with bad attendance is also important.

"It seems to be that this, like so many other things, boils down to problems with the lack of penalties in K-12," wrote Michael J. Podgursky, an education economist at the University of Missouri-Columbia in an e-mail.

Indeed, a number of education agencies have stepped up their efforts to monitor teacher attendance. Chicago, for instance, has been tracking average rates of teacher absence for the past few years as part of each school's "score card," though suspected data problems prevented publication of the information this year.

High rates flag a school for further attention, said Michael P. Vaughn, a spokesman for the 409,000-student district. "If there's a high rate, questions should be asked about morale, leadership, and support," he said.

Principals are also expected to keep an eye on the absence patterns of individual teachers to curb unnecessary use of sick, "personal," or "emergency" days, he said.

Experts of all kinds agree that it is hard to underestimate the effect of school culture on teacher absences. Shared feelings of obligation can be the best pushback to widespread views that days designated for sickness or some unavoidable personal circumstance are in fact entitlements, they note.

"When the principal is gone from the building a lot, it sort of gives everyone that casual feeling that being present in the operation doesn't have that much value," said Mary Cadez, the director of human resources for the 40,300-student Salem-Keizer district in Oregon and a former principal herself. The more-respected teachers in a school also set the tone and enforce expectations, she said.

While the district relies on principals to pay attention to teachers' attendance and the school culture that influences it, its teacher contract—like many others—forbids taking any of the three allowed personal days before or after a holiday or vacation, she said.

In a five-year period ending in 2006, the local *Statesman Journal* newspaper tracked just one firing and three reprimands for misuse of leave among teachers in the district. In those five years, Salem-Keizer teachers took an average of 8.4 sick or personal days.

"In my experience of schools, they fail—and I know unions and contracts make it difficult—to invoke disciplinary action for a person abusing sick time," said Susan M. Heathfield, a Michigan-based consultant specializing in human-resource issues who started her career as a teacher.

Nonetheless, she said, the first recommendation she makes to schools is to require teachers to call principals when they are going to be out and to train principals in their response, which includes telling the teacher how the school will be affected by

the absence. "I do think attendance can be improved, starting with attendance management by the direct supervisor," she contended.

Rewards for Unused Days

A number of districts have followed the lead of other organizations and instituted short- and long-run incentives for going in to work. The short-term bonuses, which typically reward teachers when they limit their absences to, say, three or fewer, have not proved very successful so far in reducing leave days, reports from around the nation suggest.

The 6,200-student Lancaster district south of Dallas, for instance, plans to reward a teacher missing two or fewer days this year with a three-year lease on a Cadillac.

"While it was a great and noble effort, we're not getting the bang for the buck we were looking for" in terms of improved attendance or money saved on substitutes, said Superintendent Larry D. Lewis. His plan was inspired by one in a nearby district, which has since abandoned it.

In the Palm Beach County district, two attendance-bonus pilot programs were tried in roughly two dozen schools in the 2006-07 school year, but the pilots are not being repeated this year.

"A couple of schools decreased their absences slightly, but our statisticians said it was not a significant decrease," said Mr. Ludy, the labor-relations director. Other schools saw a rise in absences. Under one of the plans, teachers were given about \$50 for each of the first three sick days they did not use. Under the second, they were paid a similar amount if the entire teaching staff saw a certain reduction in sick days.

"We're in our infancy in working at incentives for teachers along this line," said Mr. Ludy, who also noted that the plan got a late start. He and others say that such programs often seem to reward those who would not have used the leave anyway, rather than induce change among others.

Another incentive in wide play pays teachers for some or all of their unused sick days when they retire—either with cash or by cutting short the days actually worked. That

can work well with a longtime teacher, but do nothing about those far from retirement.

David Schutten, the president of the [Organization of DeKalb Educators](#) in the Atlanta suburbs, pointed to a teacher whose contract was not renewed and who is now absent every Monday and Friday. Georgia provides up to six months retirement credit for unused sick leave.

“People respond to incentives, but the details matter,” said Raegan T. Miller, a researcher at the [Center on Reinventing Education](#) at the University of Washington in Seattle who led the Harvard study. And nobody has a grip on the details, in part because there is virtually no research about what level or kind of incentive teachers in all their variety would respond to.

In a similar vein, research doesn’t yet help administrators decide whether it would be more cost-effective to concentrate on firing repeat offenders or dangling carrots in front of those who could improve their attendance modestly.

The Duke University researchers like the more positive approach. Building on a system in North Carolina that allows teachers to “buy” sick days beyond the 10 and more they get free, the research group proposed eliminating the free days. Under the plan, the savings from not having to hire substitutes would go to teachers as an across-the-board salary increase of about \$400 each, but teachers would have to buy their sick days for \$50 apiece.

Another way of describing the system is to say that teachers would be given a \$400 bonus for perfect attendance that would be reduced by \$50 for each sick day taken. The researchers estimate that the number of average sick days used would drop from about seven to just under six.

“It’s a horrible idea,” snapped Michelle Wise Capen, a nationally certified teacher at Whitnel Elementary School in Lenoir, N.C. Her response suggests how much teachers prize their current benefits.

“It strikes me as rather sexist and then demeaning,” she added, saying that women take more sick days than men because they remain the chief family caregivers.

"The majority of teachers don't like to take a sick day because it's a whole lot of work—something always happens that you have to deal with when you get back."