

# The High Cost of Teacher Absenteeism in Philadelphia

AN EXCELLENT SCHOOLS PA REPORT



**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Introduction .....3

The Financial Cost of Persistent Teacher Absenteeism.....3

The Effects of Rampant Teacher Absenteeism on Student Learning.....5

Solutions for Decreasing Teacher Absenteeism .....7

Conclusion .....8

## INTRODUCTION

With the scandal over the School District of Philadelphia's (SDP) backlog of payouts to retirees for unused sick days and the recent increase to the vendor contract for substitute teacher services, there has been a lot of discussion in Philadelphia about the high cost of teacher absences.

Data released by the SDP shows that it is plagued by high teacher absenteeism rates (200 percent above the national average), despite a generous incentive program that compensates employees for unused personal and sick days. We know teachers are the single most influential factor in a student's academic success but that impact can only be realized if teachers are in the classroom with their students every day.<sup>1</sup> Imagine the widespread consequences on an entire class and/or school when rampant teacher absenteeism becomes a normal part of a district's day-to-day struggles.

The following is a look at the pervasiveness of teacher absenteeism in SDP and the effect that this personnel issue has on the District and its students.

## THE FINANCIAL COST OF PERSISTENT TEACHER ABSENTEEISM

The most obvious effect of systemic teacher absenteeism is the financial burden it has on a school district. When you consider the amount of taxpayer dollars that are spent each day on an educator's salary and benefits, as well as the cost to bring in a substitute teacher when that educator is sick, the costs can be astronomical in a District the size of Philadelphia.

In the 2015-16 school year (the most recent data available), SDP reported the Average Daily Attendance (ADA) rate of educators at 93.9 percent.<sup>2</sup> Based on that rate, approximately 512<sup>3</sup> (or 6.1 percent) of the District's teachers are absent each day of the school year. In comparison, the national average teacher absenteeism rate is 2.8.<sup>4</sup> The District is currently spending an average

---

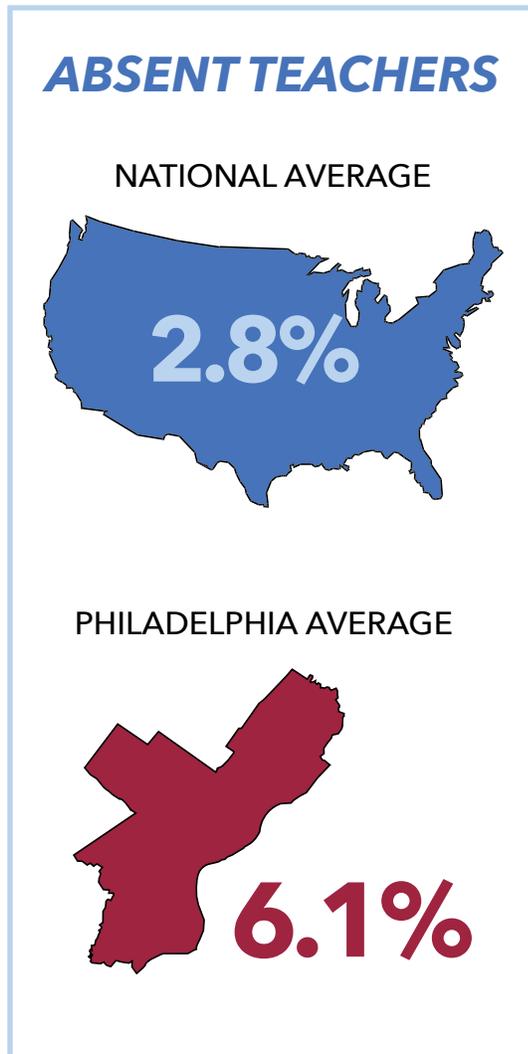
1. Gutierrez, Italo A., Gabriel Weinberger, and John Engberg. *Improving Teaching Effectiveness: Impact on Student Outcomes: The Intensive Partnerships for Effective Teaching Through 2013–2014*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1295z3-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1295z3-1.html). Also available in print form.

2. School District of Philadelphia, "Teacher Attendance," School District of Philadelphia. <https://www.philasd.org/performance/programsservices/open-data/district-information/>

3. SDP reportedly has 8,388 teachers on their payroll for the 2017-18 school year (<https://www.philasd.org/budget/wp-content/uploads/sites/96/2017/07/2017-18-Guide-to-School-Budgets.pdf>). If we apply the ADA rate of 6.1 percent to 8,388, the number of teachers absent from school each day is 512.

4. Absences from work of employed full-time wage and salary workers by occupation and industry. (n.d.). Retrieved February 22, 2018, from <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat47.htm>

of \$116,900 per educator<sup>5</sup> which equates to \$59,852,620<sup>6</sup> being spent in the 2017-18 school year for teachers who are not working.



Unfortunately, the financial costs do not end there because when an educator is absent from work a district must pay for a substitute teacher to cover their classes. At their February 15, 2018 meeting, the School Reform Commission (SRC) approved an amendment to increase the existing vendor contract for substitute teaching services in the 2017-18 school year to \$54.3 million to accommodate for the high rate of teacher absenteeism.<sup>7</sup> When you combine that with the amount the District spends on salaries/benefits for teachers who were absent, pervasive teacher absenteeism is costing SDP and the taxpayers nearly \$114.3 million a year.

**“PERVASIVE TEACHER ABSENTEEISM IS COSTING SDP AND THE TAXPAYERS NEARLY \$114.3 MILLION A YEAR.”**

5. The average teacher salary for the SDP is \$67,700 and the average cost of benefits is \$49,200 (<https://www.philasd.org/budget/wp-content/uploads/sites/96/2017/07/2017-18-Guide-to-School-Budgets.pdf>).

6. The yearly cost of absent teachers was calculated by taking the average spent per educator (\$116,900) divided by 188 (number of days teachers work) then multiplied by the number of absent teachers each day (512), which equals the amount SDP spends each day on absent educators (\$318,365). That daily amount is then multiplied by the number of work days in SDP’s contract (188).

7. SRC approves nearly \$100 million in contracts for online services and substitute teachers. (n.d.). Retrieved February 20, 2018, from <http://thenotebook.org/articles/2018/02/15/src-approves-nearly-100-million-in-contracts-for-online-services-and-substitute-teachers>

## THE EFFECTS OF RAMPANT TEACHER ABSENTEEISM ON STUDENT LEARNING

Perhaps even more harmful than the financial effects that chronic teacher absences have on the District, is the impact on the learning environment. As previously stated, studies have shown that educators have an unparalleled impact on the lives of their students. A highly effective teacher can change the trajectory of a child's life and position them for future success, but this can only happen when teachers are in the classroom. Pervasive teacher absenteeism creates an unstable and inconsistent learning environment in a school, which negatively affects student achievement. How can a student effectively master a skill when their progress is repeatedly interrupted by the presence of a substitute teacher in their classroom?

In Philadelphia, it is clear to see how habitual absenteeism of teachers in the District is negatively affecting students. In looking at the teacher attendance rates by school, you can see that teacher absences are directly related to school quality, as reported in SDP's annual School Progress Report (SPR).

**“...WHEN TEACHERS ARE FREQUENTLY ABSENT FROM THE CLASSROOM EVERY METRIC OF SCHOOL QUALITY IS NEGATIVELY AFFECTED.”**

In the 2015-16 school year, the 20 SDP schools with the lowest Average Daily Attendance (ADA) teacher rates also have some of the lowest Overall quality scores on the SPR. In addition to the Overall SPR score, the ADA rates in the District's schools also correlate to the other school quality metrics within the SPR: Achievement, Progress and Climate.

This correlation indicates that when teachers are frequently absent from the classroom every metric of school quality is negatively affected. This is especially

evident when looking at the SPR's Climate score of the schools with the highest rate of teacher absenteeism. The Climate metric - which factors in student attendance and retention as well as parent and student engagement - was generally very low in SDP schools where teachers are habitually absent from the classroom.

## THE 20 SDP SCHOOLS WITH THE LOWEST TEACHER AVERAGE DAILY ATTENDANCE (ADA) RATE

SCHOOL	GRADES SERVED	AVG DAILY ATTEND RATE	+/- NAT'L AVG RATE	OVERALL SPR SCORE*	SPR CLIMATE SCORE*
<b>NATIONAL ATTENDANCE RATE (AVERAGE) — 97.2%</b>					
John Marshall School	K-5	83.8	-13.4	8.0	15.0
William C. Bryant School	K-8	88.5	-8.7	7.0	12.0
General Louis Wagner School	6-8	88.7	-8.5	7.0	12.0
Warren G. Harding School	6-8	88.8	-8.4	5.0	13.0
Avery D. Harrington School	K-8	89.1	-8.1	10.0	18.0
Samuel Pennypacker School	K-5	89.2	-8.0	15.0	38.0
Anna B. Day School	K-8	89.4	-7.8	23.0	38.0
Henry C. Lea School	K-8	89.5	-7.7	34.0	38.0
William Rowen School	K-5	89.6	-7.6	29.0	42.0
Laura H. Carnell School	K-5	89.8	-7.4	25.0	17.0
Strawberry Mansion High School	9-12	89.8	-7.4	4.0	3.0
Ellwood School	K-5	89.9	-7.3	20.0	39.0
Samuel B. Huey School	K-8	90.0	-7.2	21.0	29.0
Rudolph Blankenburg School	K-8	90.2	-7.0	7.0	10.0
Stephen Girard School	K-4	90.3	-6.9	24.0	64.0
Samuel Gompers School	K-6	90.6	-6.6	10.0	17.0
Thomas M. Peirce School	K-6	90.6	-6.6	8.0	6.0
Add B. Anderson School	K-8	90.7	-6.5	7.0	18.0
John Barry School	K-8	90.7	-6.5	4.0	3.0
Penrose School	K-8	90.8	-6.4	20.0	32.0

\* OUT OF A POSSIBLE 100 POINTS

## SOLUTIONS FOR DECREASING TEACHER ABSENTEEISM

With so much national and local research showing the negative effects that systemic teacher absenteeism has on a district, school and classroom, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) must do more to address the pervasiveness of this issue.

To be fair, SDP currently provides a generous reimbursement program of unused personal and sick leave to employees to discourage absences. Though the District has several union contracts, most retired employees receive a reimbursement for their unused personal days at a rate of 100 percent and unused sick days at a rate of 25 percent, both of which can be accumulated over the length of an employee's career. It was recently reported that the District owes retired employees \$6.6 million in long-overdue payouts.<sup>8</sup>

Despite this lucrative incentive program, SDP's teachers are taking their personal and sick leave at an alarming frequency (as stated previously, on average 512 teachers are absent every school day). This trend is extremely telling of the District's working environment and the morale of personnel, when educators would rather give up hundreds or thousands of dollars in reimbursements just to avoid going to work.

Philadelphia is not alone in struggling with teacher absenteeism and SDP should look to other states/districts to see how a different financial incentive program may be utilized. For instance, Sapulpa Public Schools, in Oklahoma, established a program where teachers who were absent for five or fewer days a year shared in the District's savings from needing fewer substitute teachers.<sup>9</sup> These were dollars that teachers saw at the end of each year instead of a payout at the end of a career, which is much more tangible for young educators.

In Lincoln, Nebraska, a program to discourage teacher absenteeism was initiated that promoted personal accountability and professionalism. Under the initiative, teachers could choose to continue receiving separate sick and personal days, or they could choose to take all their days as annual leave. This allowed educators the freedom to use their days as they saw fit with the idea being if teachers were treated as professionals they would act professionally and not abuse the leave allowances.<sup>10</sup>

---

8. Graham, K. A. (2018, January 08). A 2-year wait for retirement pay? Philly schools have a backlog of millions. Retrieved February 22, 2018, from <http://www.philly.com/philly/education/termination-pay-philly-schools-backlog-20180107.html>

9. Districts Offer Incentives To Curb Teacher Absences. (n.d.). Retrieved February 22, 2018, from [http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_admin/admin/admin544.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin544.shtml)

10. Smith, G. (n.d.). Increasing Teacher Attendance. Retrieved February 15, 2018, from <http://stedi.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/IncreasingTeacherAttendance.pdf>

In addition to financial incentives, SDP leadership and principals at the school level need to take a hard look at employee morale and take steps toward improving the working environment. If an educator feels valued and respected by their bosses they are less likely to take unnecessary time off because they want to be in the classroom and they are constantly reminded of the important role they play in the school. Instilling a collaborative working environment in a school, where teamwork is highly prized, can also reduce teacher absenteeism. If an educator is considering taking that mental health day but feel like they are part of a team, they are more likely to go to work to avoid burdening their colleagues who may have to cover their class.

## **CONCLUSION**

A school is only as effective as the educators who fill its classrooms and those teachers play a crucial role in determining the success of a school's student population. Unfortunately, in the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), student learning and achievement is being hindered by high rates of teacher absenteeism. Students need high-quality and dependable teachers to thrive but, with 6.1 percent of SDP's educators absent from the classroom each day, the students in Philadelphia are impacted by substitutes and interrupted lesson plans. On top of the toll that rampant teacher absenteeism has on students, SDP is also suffering from the financial impact of educators not showing up for work. It is estimated that the taxpayers will shell out nearly \$114.3 million this school year to cover the cost of Philadelphia's absent teachers. The District needs to take the pervasiveness of this issue seriously, and invest the time and effort to find a way to empower and re-engage their employees. The quality of SDP's schools and the academic success of their students depend on it.