

NEPC REVIEW: TEACHER ABSENTEEISM IN CHARTER AND TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS (THOMAS B. FORDHAM INSTITUTE, SEPTEMBER 2017)



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November 2017

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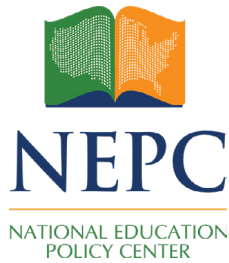
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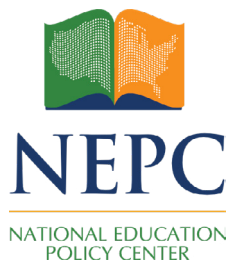
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Summary of Review

This report compares average rates of frequent teacher absence (more than 10 days) for teachers with and without union or union-like contracts in traditional public schools and charter schools. The study's rationale is that such absences substantively harm students and cost taxpayers billions of dollars. It finds that teachers contractually allowed more absences are frequently absent more often than teachers allowed fewer absences. Based on these averages, the report concludes that the contracts result in non-beneficial, or uncalled-for absences, rather than absences for legitimate reasons, and it recommends that contracts be made less generous. However, the report lacks support for its major claims, ignores known discrepancies in data, uses cited resources in highly selective ways, ignores large bodies of contradictory research, and draws unwarranted conclusions. In addition, the report's idiosyncratic use of the term "chronic absenteeism" misrepresents the data and, along with its use of graphics, appears intended to create a national alarmist picture unwarranted either by the data or by other research. Accordingly, the report appears to be an effort to generate numbers and charts useful in discrediting teachers as irresponsible shirkers.



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I. Introduction

The Fordham Foundation report *Teacher Absenteeism in Charter and Traditional Public Schools*, authored by David Griffith, with a Foreword and Executive Summary by Amber M. Northern and Michael J. Petrilli, examines average rates of frequent teacher absence (more than 10 days). The author explores whether charter school teachers working without union or similar contractual agreements are frequently absent less often than traditional public school teachers and the relatively few charter school teachers with such contracts. The report's rationale includes the assertions that frequent teacher absenteeism has harmful effects on student achievement and that it is expensive, making it important to consider all possible contributing factors. Frequent absentee rates for teachers in non-union charter schools, unionized charter schools, and (unionized) public schools are compared at national and state levels as well as within the nation's 10 largest cities.¹

Data for comparisons were drawn from Office of Civil Rights (OCR) 2013-14 reports, and from 2009-10 reports from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools' (NAPCS) Data Dashboard, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core of Data, and the National Council on Teacher Quality's (NCTQ) Teacher Contract Database. Weighted averages for rate of frequent absence for unionized teachers were calculated based on OCR data.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report finds that with the single exception of the state of Alaska, frequent absence rates are lower for charter school teachers working without union or union-like contracts. Despite noting that the posited connection cannot be proved, the report concludes that “generous leave policies and myriad job protections enshrined in state laws and local collective bargaining agreements” (p. 28) are “at least partly” responsible for frequent teacher absence. The policy implication is that contractual benefits common in union contracts should be lessened and unions avoided where possible.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

Because teachers in non-union charter schools are, on average, frequently absent less often than teachers with union or union-like contracts, the report concludes that union contracts are overly generous in negotiating paid sick and personal days. The report suggests that teachers take some days off because contractual provisions allow them to rather than because they have legitimate reason for being absent.

IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

The report’s rationale includes the assertion that “multiple studies” indicate that frequent teacher absenteeism constitutes “an educational disaster from which few [students] are likely to recover” (p. 8). Yet, only three studies are cited to support this claim. Of these, one² found that 10 or more days’ teacher absence reduced standardized math test scores 3.3 percent of a standard deviation. In practical terms, other researchers indicate that this difference equates to a decline of about one-fifth the advantage of having a math teacher with one or two years’ experience rather than a novice.³ A second study,⁴ the only one that appeared in a peer-reviewed journal, found a negative effect on standardized test scores that was particularly strong if a teacher were absent on a test day. However, that effect “faded out” and the authors found that it “likely [did] not reflect real differences in student content knowledge” (p. 776). The third study⁵ also found teacher absences to affect student achievement, but concluded that the absentee rate for teachers is “not wildly out of line” with other sectors and “should probably not be a cause for great concern” (p. 26) except for schools and districts with persistently high rates—most often low-income schools where conditions may be especially stressful (p. 16). Interestingly, this study also found evidence contradictory to the report’s claim that absences harm achievement: students taught by inexperienced math teachers actually showed a gain correlated with teacher absence (p. 20). The Fordham report’s claim that “a ten-day increase in teacher absence results in at least a ten-day learning loss for students” (p. 4) is unexplained and undocumented.

Together, a close examination of these sources indicates that they provide scant support

for the assertion that frequent teacher absence causes grave educational harm. Moreover, information extracted from these sources is highly selective and skewed toward painting a negative picture. The report also lacks any acknowledgement that an extensive body of research literature challenges the validity and reliability of estimates of student learning based on standardized test scores, which are the basis for mathematical estimates in these and similar studies.⁶

A second rationale for the report is the authors' claim that teacher absenteeism costs taxpayers \$4 billion annually. To support this estimate, the report cites one incompletely documented source—produced by a commercial provider of services to schools: "District Management Council, 'Management Advisory Brief: Reducing Teacher Absenteeism' (District Management Council, 2004)." While an Internet search revealed that this source is frequently cited in the same incomplete format, the specific document itself appears unavailable, even from the District Management website.⁷ Thus, the authors provide no credible support for the claim of \$4 billion cost to taxpayers.

Another important but unsupported assertion is that charter schools enroll "a more disadvantaged population than district schools" (p. 6). Existing research points generally toward the opposite: while there are exceptions, charter schools typically serve fewer students with special needs, fewer English language learners, and fewer students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.⁸

Finally, the premise that fewer days of absence are obviously and reliably always preferable to more days of absence ignores recent research in two important areas. First is the well-documented and damaging problem of high teacher turnover in charter schools, which has been linked to high stress working conditions and has prompted calls for improvements.⁹ Second is a growing nationwide trend across sectors to increase rather than decrease employee access to days off, both to improve work-life balance and to alleviate "presentism"—productivity lost when employees who are ill or otherwise unable to function at capacity nevertheless attend work.¹⁰ Whereas the report's premise is that teachers are eligible for, and take, too many days out compared to charter school teachers and other workers, there is substantive evidence that the opposite may well be the case: too many employees are eligible for too few days out, a situation increasingly being remedied by law and policy across sectors.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The language of the report is idiosyncratic, and it misrepresents the data. The report consistently asserts it is reporting on "chronic absenteeism," and it uses that term multiple times on virtually every page. The data employed report absences of more than 10 days per school year—but there is no rationale for designating those absences "chronic." In the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) reports that provide public school data, the absences are described as "frequent" (as the Fordham report notes parenthetically, once). The term "chronic" injects a pejorative note absent in the source, and the difference between "frequent" and "chronic" is not minor. In a major report on teacher absenteeism,¹¹ for example, the National Council on

Teacher Quality (NCTQ) defined “chronic” teacher absenteeism as 18 or more days absent—nearly twice the number the Fordham report describes as “chronic.”

In addition, despite known discrepancies in how source data was generated,¹² averages and findings are presented as if data were reliably comparable, thus raising doubts about the validity of the conclusions. The limitations segment notes that different entities may have counted absences differently (some include professional development days while other don’t, for example), but there is no indication of caution in reporting the findings. For example, the report makes much of Hawaii having a frequent absence rate of 79%—“three times” the rate reported for non-union charters. In hypothesizing about this figure, the report rapidly defaults to the explanation that policy is too generous and teachers share a culture of shirking: “Unless you think there’s something particularly unhealthy about living in Hawaii, this geographic variation suggests that teacher absenteeism is as much about policy and culture as illness and personal circumstance” (p. 9). However, a simple Internet search quickly yields the information that when that surprising average was first publicized, the state’s Department of Education conducted an investigation. It found that unlike other states, Hawaii included in its reporting the number of days absent for school-funded activities and professional development activities. The report found no abuse, no leave being used inappropriately, and no cause for concern.¹³ This suggests overconfidence in the report’s explanation for any high rate of frequent teacher absence—generous policy and irresponsible teachers.

Use of graphics also raises questions about the report’s objectivity. Findings are presented not only in terms of the gap between teachers with union and union-like contracts and those without them, but each comparison is also presented in a graphic that visually emphasizes the gap. Of 15 figures in the report, 12 use bar or column graphs to repeatedly make the same uncomplicated point: teachers working under union or union-like contracts are frequently absent more often than teachers without such contracts. Even the state of Hawaii receives its own chart emphasizing its (already vindicated) rate of frequent absence. Since the central point is straightforward and easily grasped, repetitious graphics serve to stress that a gap exists rather than to facilitate understanding of the data.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

It appears likely that on average teachers with union or union-like contracts are frequently absent more often than teachers without them (28.3% v. 10.3 %). However, the report provides no evidence for the inference that the gap is explained by teachers taking unnecessary days off simply because they will be paid for them. In fact, evidence points in the opposite direction: working conditions for charter school teachers need improvement. And, it is important to note that the report’s designation of “chronic absenteeism” is idiosyncratic: the Office of Civil Rights describes 10+ days’ absence as “frequent,” and the National Council on Teacher Quality minimum standard for “chronic” absence—18 days—is nearly double that of this Fordham report (10+). The use of the term “chronic” imposes negative connotations on the data unique to this report.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

This report offers little new information, and what it does offer is of no use in determining policy. It lacks support for several claims, ignores known discrepancies in data sources, uses cited resources in highly selective ways, ignores large bodies of contradictory research, and draws unwarranted conclusions. In addition, the report's terminology and use of graphics suggest an intention to discredit teachers and unions rather than to provide a disinterested analysis of data.

Notes and Resources

- 1 Griffith, D. (2017). *Teacher Absenteeism in Charter and Traditional Public Schools*. Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. Retrieved October 30, 2017, from <https://edexcellence.net/publications/teacher-absenteeism>
- 2 Miller, R.T., Murnane, R.J., & Willett, J.B. (2007). *Do teacher absences impact student achievement? Longitudinal evidence from one urban school district*. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 13356.
- 3 Clotfelter, C.T. & Ladd, H.F. (2007). *Are teacher absences worth worrying about in the U.S.?* National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 13648.
- 4 Herrmann, M.A. & Rockoff, J.E. (2012). Worker absence and productivity: Evidence from teaching. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 30(4), pp. 749-782.
- 5 Clotfelter, C.T. & Ladd, H.F. (2007). *Are teacher absences worth worrying about in the U.S.?* National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 13648.
- 6 In addition to arguments that standardized test scores provide too narrow a measure for the complex process of learning, many researchers have questioned the validity and reliability of existing formulas. See, for example, Perry, T. (2016), English value-added measures: Examining the limitations of school performance measurement. *British Educational Research Journal*, doi:10.1002/berj.3247;
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- 7 A search of the District Management website (<https://www.dmgrouppk12.com>) did not locate the document. One document referring to the estimate did cite a URL, but the link is broken: Shapira-Lishchinsky, O. & Ishan, G. (2013) Teachers' acceptance of absenteeism: towards developing a specific scale, *Journal of Educational Administration* 51(5), 594-617, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-12-2011-01>
- 8 See, for example: Welner, K.G. (April 2013). The Dirty Dozen: How Charter Schools Influence Student Enrollment. *Teachers College Record*. [online], <http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 17104.
- 9 See, for example: Stuit, D.A & Smith, T.M. (2012). Explaining the gap in charter and traditional public school teacher turnover rates. *Economics of Education Review*, 31(2), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2011.09.007>;
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- 10 See, for example: Paid family leave and sick days in the U.S. (2017). *Medical Benefits*, 34(3), 6, 8. Retrieved October 30, 2017, from <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/docview/1873381925?accountid=13158>;
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- 11 Joseph, N., Waymack, N. & Zielaski, D. (2014). *Roll call: The importance of teacher attendance*. Washington, D.C.: National Council on Teacher Quality. Retrieved October 31, 2017, from http://www.nctq.org/dmsView/RollCall_TeacherAttendance
- 12 See, for example: Hansen, N. (2017). Errors make federal education data hard to use. *La Crosse Tribune*. Retrieved October 30, 2017, from http://lacrossetribune.com/news/local/errors-make-federal-education-data-hard-to-use/article_4aa689d0-fc0f-59d9-8763-12d75550117b.html