

FOREWORD & EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By Amber M. Northern and Michael J. Petrilli

Take a look at most state plans for implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and you'll see that a popular choice for the "fifth indicator" of school quality is chronic absenteeism. Of the seventeen jurisdictions that submitted their ESSA plans in spring 2017, a dozen opted for student chronic absenteeism as a measure of school quality, and fourteen included some gauge of pupil attendance.¹ At least thirteen more states are considering making chronic absenteeism part of their forthcoming plans.²

Yet not a single state has opted to use *teacher* chronic absenteeism as an indicator of school quality, despite the fact that most schools already report a version of such data to the federal Office for Civil Rights.

Why would we hold schools to account for the attendance of their students but not of their own teachers? How can anyone expect students to learn when their teachers are absent?

Like everyone else, educators occasionally have to miss work. They get the flu, too. And anyone who has never actually taught would be wise not to underestimate the challenges that teachers face, especially in high-poverty schools and those with many at-risk children. We begrudge no teacher for taking a "mental health day" now and again, or needing to be home to care for a sick child of her own.

Yet we also know that teachers are the single most powerful instrument that schools have to boost student learning. When teachers miss school, students miss out on education.

Understandably, then, teacher absences have become a topic of increased research interest—and we have learned a lot in recent years. Several studies have examined the relationship between teacher absenteeism and pupil achievement and found a strong connection. In fact, there appears to be a one-to-one relationship: a ten-day increase in teacher absence results in at least a ten-day learning loss for students.³

School systems have been generous in supplying teachers with excused absences. On average, teachers get more than twelve sick and personal days per year, though only one-third of US workers are entitled to ten or more sick days, even though the latter have a longer work year (up to 60 days more).⁴ For the most part, these generous leave policies are negotiated by teacher unions and school boards and incorporated into contracts (or sometimes state law).

These policies explain why more than one-quarter of public school teachers in the United States are "chronically absent" as defined by the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights—meaning they miss more than ten days of school per year due to sick or personal leave. In some states, the numbers are truly shocking. For example, three-quarters of teachers in Hawaii are chronically absent.

The extent of and tolerance for teacher absenteeism in traditional public schools made us wonder about a sector of public education that is largely union-free: charter schools. We couldn't find much extant research on their teacher attendance,⁵ so we undertook this study. It asks:

1. How do chronic absenteeism rates for teachers in charter and traditional public schools compare—nationally, state-by-state, and within the nation's ten largest cities?
2. To what degree do collective bargaining laws and teacher contracts shed light on the variation observed at the state level?
3. How do teacher chronic absenteeism rates in unionized and non-unionized charters compare?

Fordham senior research and policy associate David Griffith was keen to tackle these questions. In the past few years, he has deployed his intellectual curiosity and analytic skills on several Fordham studies, including examinations of teacher dismissal policies, whether America's cities are "choice-friendly," and how state accountability plans treat high-achieving students.

Seeking answers to the questions above, he linked information from four sources: the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data, the National Council on Teacher Quality's teacher contract database, and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools' Data Dashboard and "Model Law" rankings. In combination, these data yield a path-breaking look at chronic absenteeism rates for teachers in American public schools.

So what did he find?

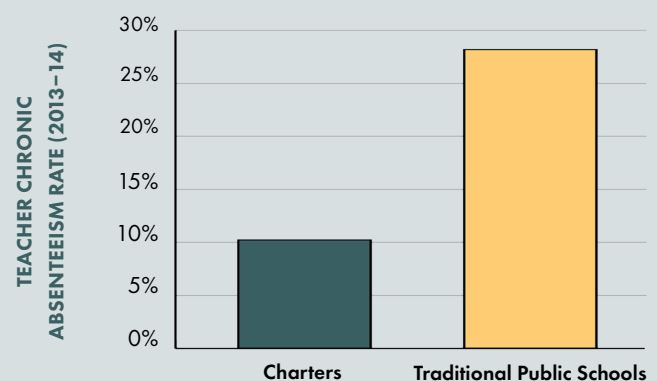
FIRST, TEACHERS IN TRADITIONAL (I.E., DISTRICT-RUN) PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE ALMOST THREE TIMES AS LIKELY TO BE CHRONICALLY ABSENT AS TEACHERS IN CHARTERS.

Nationally, 28.3 percent of teachers in traditional public schools miss more than ten school days a year for sick or personal leave. (This is apart from all school holidays and summer vacation, as well as professional development days.) In contrast, just 10.3 percent of teachers in charter schools are chronically absent (see Figure ES-1).

Further, in thirty-four of the thirty-five states with sizable charter sectors, teachers in traditional public schools are more likely to be chronically absent than teachers in charter schools. Hawaii and Nevada have the largest gaps: In the former, the chronic absenteeism gap between charter and traditional public school teachers is 56 percentage points (23 percent versus 79 percent).

FIGURE ES-1

Nationally, teachers in traditional public schools are almost three times as likely to be chronically absent as teachers in charters.



In the latter, teachers in traditional public schools are *seven times* as likely to be chronically absent than their charter school counterparts. In eight other states (Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Idaho, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, and Oklahoma), plus the District of Columbia, traditional public school teachers are at least *four times* as likely to be chronically absent.

Keep in mind that in most states, charter schools enroll a more disadvantaged student population than district schools. In other words, many charter school teachers serve more challenging students, yet take far less time off.

SECOND, THE CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM GAP BETWEEN CHARTER AND TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS IS LARGEST IN STATES WHERE DISTRICTS MUST BARGAIN COLLECTIVELY BUT CHARTERS AREN'T REQUIRED TO.

The most obvious difference between charter and district schools is that the latter are typically bound by collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) while the former typically are not. However, there are important exceptions to this rule, and a careful examination of teacher chronic absenteeism rates in these places is revealing. Suffice it to say that, although there is no clear relationship between collective bargaining laws and teacher chronic absenteeism in district schools, the gap between charter and district teachers is smallest in states where collective bargaining is illegal (such as Georgia and Texas), and in states where charters are legally bound to district contracts (such as Alaska).

Conversely, in the thirteen states (plus D.C.) where districts must bargain collectively but charters need not, the gaps between the two sectors are especially large. On average, the chronic absenteeism rate for district teachers in these jurisdictions is *three times* higher than the rate for charter school teachers.

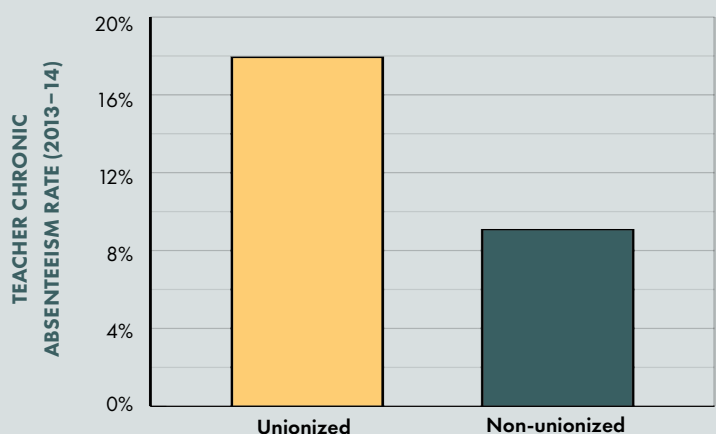
THIRD, TEACHERS IN UNIONIZED CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE TWICE AS LIKELY TO BE CHRONICALLY ABSENT AS TEACHERS IN NON-UNIONIZED CHARTERS.

Nationally, 18 percent of teachers in unionized charter schools are chronically absent, versus 9 percent of teachers in nonunionized charters (see Figure ES-2).

In all of the six states with significant numbers of *both* unionized and non-unionized charter schools (California, Florida, New York, Ohio, Oregon, and Wisconsin), the chronic absenteeism rate is higher for teachers in unionized schools. For example, in California, the rate is 15 percent for unionized charters and 8 percent for non-unionized charters. In New York, the rates are 13 percent and 5 percent.

FIGURE ES-2

Nationally, teachers in unionized charters are twice as likely to be chronically absent as teachers in non-unionized charters.



The gap between the two categories of charter schools is particularly striking in the nation's leading charter networks, only one of which has fully unionized: the Green Dot network in California. Its teacher chronic absenteeism rate is more than *three times* that of the five biggest CMOs in the country (Harmony, IDEA, KIPP, Uncommon Schools, and Responsive Education).

Here's what we make of David's findings.

THE GROUND RULES MATTER.

Though we cannot prove it, it's impossible not to sense that the high chronic absenteeism rates for traditional public school teachers are linked to the generous leave policies and myriad job protections that are enshrined in state law and local collective bargaining agreements. Because they can't easily be fired, district teachers can use all their sick and personal days (and get paid for it) without worrying about what their principal or department head will think. But charter school teachers don't have that luxury.

Given this reality, those who negotiate teacher contracts and write the laws governing them should pay close attention to how teacher attendance practices are structured. For example, teacher absenteeism rates have previously been linked to teachers' ability to "sell back" unused sick days at the end of the school year (or when they retire), whether they are required to notify principals of impending absences, and (most importantly) whether they have achieved tenure.⁶ One obvious question: If you give teachers more paid leave, are they more prone to take it? The current study cannot answer this question, though the broader workplace absenteeism literature does suggest that paid sick leave has some impact on the number of sick days that workers take.

SCHOOL CULTURE AND NORMS CAN CURB—OR EXACERBATE—TEACHER ABSENTEEISM.

Even within districts, different schools can have very different teacher absenteeism rates—and there is variation in the charter sector too.

Many charter schools are founded on the premise that "no excuses" will be tolerated from either students or teachers. And in keeping with that ideal, this study shows that chronic absenteeism is almost nonexistent at some of the nation's leading charter networks.

In other words, there's a cultural component to teacher absenteeism. How school leaders and teaching peers view and deal with teacher absences are key considerations in curbing or worsening their frequency. If I know that my school taps other teachers in my department during their planning period to cover my class when I'm absent, I may be less prone to miss school. If the performance of my students is combined with that of other teachers in my department and we're working together to advance our collective cohort of pupils, I'm also less likely to be out multiple days if I can avoid it.

WORKING CONDITIONS MATTER.

Much has been written about the working conditions in schools—and with good reason. Given the challenges teachers face, we ought to take greater pains to make schools inviting, especially in places that may be very *hard* to work in.

In recent years, some of the more reputable charter networks have taken seriously the task of improving the workplace for their hardworking teachers. For example, as of 2014, roughly one-third of KIPP teachers had access to on-site daycare.⁷ And the network has also offered flexible schedules and shorter hours for new parents.

Needless to say, younger and older teachers face different circumstances, so to the extent that schools can make the work-life balance more tolerable for educators, they should do it.

Closer consideration of teacher attendance policies, school culture, and working conditions could make a real dent in chronic absenteeism rates in every sector. But that doesn't mask the blunt fact that 28.3 percent of district teachers and 10.3 percent of charter teachers are chronically absent. From the students' point of view, that's an educational disaster from which few are likely to recover.

We have the utmost respect for conscientious and dedicated classroom teachers, (one of us used to be one), and we know that they comprise the majority of America's teacher labor force. What riles us are teachers who take more days off than they need to. We suspect that their colleagues feel the same way. Nor do we have much love for union leaders who condemn charter schools while pushing for teacher contracts that put student needs last.

So we'll end where we started: State leaders, why not pay as much attention to *teacher* absenteeism in your ESSA plans as you do to *student* absenteeism? How far can we get by fixing the second problem if we don't fix the first?

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