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C. Kevin Fortner

Georgia State University, cfortner2@gsu.edu

Kate Caton

Georgia State University, kseymour4@student.gsu.edu

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Who's in Front of the Classroom? Teacher Absenteeism in a Metro-Atlanta District

In partnership with a metro-Atlanta school district, we examine the frequency and patterns of teacher absenteeism. We compare multiple definitions of absenteeism and compare groups of teachers based on demographic and employment characteristics, as well as student- and school-level factors. Our findings reveal that overall teacher attendance in the district is strong, substantial variation in attendance occurs across buildings, and few characteristics of teachers or their work settings are strong predictors of absenteeism.

What did we learn?

Overall, teacher attendance in the district is high, but this masks substantial variation across schools. Extended absenteeism of five consecutive days or more has not increased over time.

Few teacher characteristics predict absences. But inexperienced teachers and male teachers have lower discretionary absenteeism rates (sick or personal business absences).

High school teachers have higher absenteeism rates, are more likely to experience extended absenteeism, and are more likely to be identified as chronically absent.

Middle school teachers have the highest rate of discretionary absences. Teachers whose students had lower rates of absences in prior years also had lower rates of discretionary absenteeism.

What are the policy implications?

Understanding absenteeism patterns can guide interventions focused on specific subgroups of teachers. Based on the patterns of absenteeism observed, interventions designed to limit teacher absenteeism among female teachers and those with three or more years of experience may have larger impacts on teacher attendance. Likely due to greater family care responsibilities, female teachers experience higher absenteeism levels than male teachers.

Researchers

C. Kevin Fortner
Kate Caton

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What questions did we answer?

1. What are the patterns of absenteeism among teachers in the district?
2. What characteristics of teachers are associated with absenteeism?

Why is this issue important?

Prior research finds that teacher absenteeism has negative consequences for student achievement and student engagement with school. Clustered teacher absenteeism may signal a challenging work environment. For school districts, teacher turnover and the costs associated with recruiting and replacing departing teachers are significant expenses. Effective interventions where problems are found can increase student achievement and reduce educational costs.

What data did we use?

We used daily teacher absence data for school years 2011–12 through 2018–19. The data include information on the absence type and an explanation for the absence. We combined the absence data with teacher demographic and employment characteristics data as well as student demographic, attendance, and disciplinary data, and school-level information.

What will we study next?

The district is partnering with the Georgia Policy Labs to implement and study employee well-being initiatives across the district. We will examine the effects of the well-being initiatives on teacher attendance patterns. The initiatives are low-cost to the district and do not include financial incentives.

Want to learn more?

A report is available at
gpl.gsu.edu/gpl-publications

The **Metro Atlanta Policy Lab for Education (MAPLE)** is a component of the **Georgia Policy Labs (GPL)**, a research collaboration between Georgia State University and a variety of government agencies committed to leveraging the power of data to drive policy and programmatic decisions that lift children, students, and families—especially those experiencing vulnerabilities.

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