

Public school teacher absenteeism declines when principals have more control

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Public school teachers took less time off when principals had more flexibility to dismiss them without completing elaborate documentation or attending a hearing, one of two new University of Michigan studies shows.

Two papers authored by Brian Jacob, a professor at the U-M Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, examined a policy change in the Chicago Public School system in which principals were given complete autonomy to dismiss probationary teachers.

In the first paper, Jacob found that the reduction of job security for probationary teachers cut annual absences by 10 percent. It also lowered the prevalence of teachers with 15 or more annual absences by 20 percent.

"The findings here have important implications for current education [policy debates](#)," Jacob said. "Specifically, the decline in teacher absenteeism following the introduction of the policy provides the most compelling evidence to date that change in teacher contract provisions can improve student achievement."

In many public school districts nationwide, teacher layoffs and dismissals are highly regulated. Collective bargaining agreements outline procedures in which the least experienced employees get laid off first. These same agreements, however, make it difficult and time consuming for principals to dismiss tenured teachers.

In July 2004, the Chicago Public Schools and Chicago Teachers Union signed a collective bargaining agreement that gave principals the flexibility to dismiss probationary teachers—those with less than five years experience—without the elaborate documentation and hearing process typical in many large, urban school districts. While such flexibility is common in many suburban schools, Chicago is unique among large, urban districts in granting its principals such autonomy.

In this study, Jacob reviewed the teacher absence data using payroll records. Chicago teachers are allotted 10 to 12 paid sick or personal days per year. They can accumulate unused sick days across years, up to a maximum of 315 days. To assess the impact of the new policy, he compared changes in absenteeism before and after the policy for probationary versus tenured teachers. Because they were not affected directly by the new contract provisions, tenured teachers provided a good comparison group.

"Teacher absences impose substantial financial costs on the district, which has to pay for substitute teachers," Jacob said. "But even more importantly, teacher absences are likely a proxy for overall teacher effort and productivity."

In a complementary analysis, Jacob examined whether the policy led to higher student achievement. "We find some evidence that the policy increased achievement in elementary schools," he said. "But because the Chicago data does not allow one to reliably link teachers to students, the achievement results should be considered only suggestive."

The decline in absenteeism was strongest among teachers in elementary schools and in low-achieving, predominantly African-American high schools. Moreover, teachers with typically higher rates of absenteeism—including female teachers and teachers under the age of 35—experienced the largest reductions in absences.

Roughly 10-13 percent of the probationary teachers were dismissed each year under the new policy, although about one-third of schools did not dismiss any teachers. First-year probationary teachers were substantially more likely to be dismissed than others, consistent with the idea that principals learn the most about a new teacher in his or her first year, Jacob said.

Jacob also notes that more than half of the dismissed teachers were rehired the following year by another school in the district. It is not clear why principals rehired teachers who had been dismissed from a different school for performance reasons.

In the second paper, Jacob examined which teachers principals chose to dismiss. Among the findings regarding the relationship between non-renewal and teacher performance measures were:

- Non-renewed teachers had significantly higher rates of absenteeism and lower efficiency ratings (in prior years) than probationary teachers in the same school who were renewed.
- Non-renewed teachers in elementary schools had significantly lower value-added measures than probationary teachers in the same school who were renewed. That is, student achievement gains were substantially lower for non-renewed elementary teachers compared with other probationary teachers in the same school.
- Principals were more likely to dismiss teachers who graduated from less competitive colleges.

Findings involving the relationship between non-renewal and other [teacher](#) characteristics include:

- Male teachers and teachers over the age of 50 were more likely to be

non-renewed than other probationary teachers in the same school, even after controlling for other factors such as absences and student achievement gains.

- Principals were more likely to dismiss first- and second-year probationary teachers relative to third- and fourth-year probationary teachers.

Provided by University of Michigan

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