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Gaining a Better Understanding of Teacher Absenteeism: How Structural and Organizational Factors Impact a Teacher's Decision to be Absent

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Abstract: This study explores the reasons for chronic teacher absenteeism, which is a growing concern due to the resulting expenses and implications on student learning. Twenty-one elementary teachers from seven different Michigan school districts were interviewed about their experiences with and perceptions of teacher absenteeism. Using interpretive lenses from the management literature on employee absenteeism and education literature on teacher mental health and burnout, chronically absent teachers in this study used paid time off for job-related mental health more often than for personal reasons compared to non-chronically absent teachers. Participants cited working conditions that often drive teacher turnover as common reasons for decisions to be absent such as student behaviors, large class sizes, accountability pressures, lack of building and administrative support, lack of resources, increased workload, performing additional duties above and beyond teaching, and compensation dissatisfaction. Teachers were largely unaware of district attendance and incentive policies. Some felt teacher

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pay was low and inconsistent with the stress of the job, using these views to justify taking more days off as part of their total compensation package. These findings suggest that structural and organizational factors can evoke feelings of teacher burnout and contribute significantly to chronic absenteeism for teachers in this study.
Keywords: teacher absenteeism; job stress; perceived organizational support; mental health; teacher burnout

Comprender mejor el ausentismo docente: Cómo los factores estructurales y organizativos influyen en la decisión de ausentarse

Resumen: Este estudio explora las razones del ausentismo crónico docente, una preocupación creciente debido a los costos asociados y sus implicaciones en el aprendizaje estudiantil. Se entrevistó a veintiún docentes de primaria de siete distritos escolares diferentes en Michigan sobre sus experiencias y percepciones del ausentismo docente. Utilizando marcos interpretativos de la literatura en gestión sobre ausentismo laboral y de la literatura educativa sobre salud mental y agotamiento docente, se encontró que los docentes crónicamente ausentes utilizaron el tiempo libre remunerado con mayor frecuencia por razones de salud mental relacionadas con el trabajo que por motivos personales, en comparación con los docentes no crónicamente ausentes. Los participantes mencionaron condiciones laborales que suelen impulsar la rotación docente como razones comunes para ausentarse: comportamiento de los estudiantes, tamaño excesivo de las clases, presiones por rendición de cuentas, falta de apoyo administrativo y en el edificio, falta de recursos, aumento de la carga laboral, realización de tareas adicionales fuera de la enseñanza y descontento con la compensación. En general, los docentes desconocían las políticas distritales de asistencia e incentivos. Algunos consideraban que el salario docente era bajo e incoherente con el nivel de estrés del trabajo, justificando así el uso de más días de ausencia como parte de su paquete total de compensación. Estos hallazgos sugieren que los factores estructurales y organizativos pueden provocar sentimientos de agotamiento y contribuir significativamente al ausentismo crónico entre los docentes.
Palabras clave: ausentismo docente; estrés laboral; apoyo organizacional percibido; salud mental; agotamiento docente

Compreendendo melhor o absenteísmo docente: Como fatores estruturais e organizacionais influenciam a decisão de faltar ao trabalho

Resumo: Este estudo investiga as razões do absenteísmo crônico entre professores, uma preocupação crescente devido aos custos envolvidos e às implicações para a aprendizagem dos alunos. Foram entrevistados vinte e um professores do ensino fundamental de sete diferentes distritos escolares de Michigan sobre suas experiências e percepções em relação ao absenteísmo docente. Utilizando lentes interpretativas da literatura de gestão sobre absenteísmo de funcionários e da literatura educacional sobre saúde mental e burnout docente, constatou-se que professores cronicamente ausentes usaram dias de licença remunerada por motivos de saúde mental relacionados ao trabalho com mais frequência do que por razões pessoais, em comparação aos que não eram cronicamente ausentes. Os participantes apontaram condições de trabalho frequentemente associadas à rotatividade docente como motivos comuns para a ausência: comportamentos dos alunos, turmas superlotadas, pressões por responsabilidade e resultados, falta de apoio administrativo e da escola, escassez de recursos, aumento da carga de trabalho, realização de funções adicionais além do ensino e insatisfação com a remuneração. A maioria dos professores desconhecia as políticas distritais de frequência e incentivos. Alguns consideravam que o salário docente era baixo e incompatível com o estresse da profissão, utilizando essa percepção para justificar mais ausências como parte de seu pacote total de

compensação. Os resultados indicam que fatores estruturais e organizacionais podem contribuir significativamente para o esgotamento profissional e o absenteísmo crônico dos professores.
Palavras-chave: absenteísmo docente; estresse no trabalho; apoio organizacional percebido; saúde mental; burnout docente

Gaining A Better Understanding of Teacher Absenteeism: How Structural and Organizational Factors Impact a Teacher's Decision to be Absent

Education researchers agree that teachers may be the single most important within-school factor to improving student learning outcomes (e.g., Lankford et al., 2002). If teachers are so important, then learning more about their behaviors that affect student outcomes is vital. One such behavior, teacher attendance, is not well understood in the United States (US) context because teacher attendance policies are often created locally. As such, data on teacher attendance are limited, making it difficult to assess. While state policy has some influence on teacher attendance, whether through setting a minimum number of sick days or incentives for accumulated leave, most of the discretion on leave policies is left up to individual school districts. Similarly, teacher attendance is rarely factored into state or national accountability requirements, leaving the topic largely overlooked. It is problematic for teachers to be absent because teachers need to be present to have an impact on students (e.g., Clotfelter et al., 2009; Miller et al., 2008; Finlayson, 2009; Goldhaber & Hansen, 2010). When teachers are chronically absent[1] students receive instruction from substitutes who are generally far less effective (Herrmann & Rockoff, 2012).

Recent news headlines draw attention to the teacher attendance problems facing schools and districts in the US, with titles such as "Teachers Are Missing More School, and There Are Too Few Substitutes" (Mervosh, 2024) and "Teacher Absences Are Worse Now Than During the Pandemic. It's Costing Schools $4 Billion a Year and Some Students 'Will Never Get Back on Track'" (Bloomberg & Querolo, 2024). Data collected through the Civil Rights Data Collection revealed that on average, a concerning number of U.S. teachers are chronically absent from the classroom in a given school year (e.g., Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2017). For instance, nearly one-third of teachers were considered chronically absent in the 2015-2016 school year (Hansen & Quintero, 2020). Anecdotal evidence in the news, research reports, and academic studies suggest that chronic teacher absenteeism is a salient and recurring problem in U.S. schools (e.g., Finlayson, 2009; Hanover Research, 2012; Hansen & Quintero, 2020; Mervosh, 2024; Miller, 2012; National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014; Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2017).

This study aims to provide more context to teacher absenteeism in Michigan, a state with reported high levels of teacher absenteeism, and was conducted in summer 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic. One 2017 study using data from the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) and the U.S. Department of Education found that 24.7% of teachers in Michigan public schools were chronically absent (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2017). Recent studies suggest teacher absenteeism is even worse since the start of the pandemic (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Data like these portray a problem but are limited in answering why so many teachers are chronically absent. This question is vital since teacher absenteeism is both financially costly and negatively impacts student achievement (Clotfelter et al., 2009; Goldhaber & Hansen, 2010; Hansen & Quintero, 2020; Miller et al., 2008; Finlayson, 2009).

[1] Chronic absence in the teacher workforce is defined in the literature as missing 10 or more days in a single academic year. Only absences driven by the teacher are counted in this study. In other words, an absence for a professional development day does not count toward a teacher's absences.

The challenges associated with teacher absences are exacerbated considering Michigan's substitute teacher labor market is severely strained. One 2018 study found that a majority of respondents to a survey of Michigan school district superintendents said they were "unable to find enough substitutes *multiple* times a week" (Burroughs et al., 2019, p. 2), and newer survey data show these same problems are currently even worse (Torres et al., 2023). When teachers are absent and districts struggle to find substitutes, creative solutions are utilized such as pulling school leaders and interventionists to oversee a class or combining classrooms, negatively impacting school climate, staff workload, and teacher morale (Burroughs et al., 2019; Torres et al., 2023).

While reports documenting trends in teacher absenteeism help track quantitative patterns and speculate about why teachers are absent, they do not systematically and empirically discuss the reasons behind teachers' absences. Moreover, mixed empirical results make it unclear whether financial incentives have a positive impact on teacher absenteeism (e.g., Ahn & Vigdor, 2011; Clotfelter et al., 2009; Hanover Research, 2012; National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014). It is also unclear whether and how organizational working conditions play a prominent role in teacher absenteeism as they do for teacher turnover (Ingersoll, 2002). If practitioners and policymakers hope to address teacher absenteeism, it is necessary to understand what drives these behaviors. Qualitative data are ideally suited to identifying and understanding teachers' decision-making processes that can be used to assess the largely speculative claims about the reasons behind teachers' decisions. The current study asks the following research questions:

(1) How do teachers explain their decisions or reasons to be absent?
(2) How do teachers who are chronically absent differ from teachers who are not chronically absent in their explanations of their own absenteeism?

Although Wang (2024) notes that teacher absenteeism rates are no greater than employees in other sectors, mainstream media often negatively highlights the absenteeism of teachers, possibly because the costs of teacher absences are different than employee absences in other sectors. Our goal is not to place blame on teachers or imply that the costs of absenteeism are the fault of teachers. Rather, we aim to understand how teachers experience their jobs and make decisions with the goal of informing leaders and policymakers about how to better support teachers.

Literature Review

There are relatively high rates of teacher absenteeism domestically (Finlayson, 2009; Hanover Research, 2012; Miller, 2012; National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014; Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2017) and internationally (e.g., Rogers & Vegas, 2009; Patrinos, 2013). In a study using national data from the 2009 Civil Rights Data Collection Survey, Miller (2012) found that more than one-third of U.S. teachers were absent 10 or more days during the 2009-10 school year. Teacher chronic absenteeism is typically defined as missing 10 days or more for two reasons. First, multiple research studies found a significant decrease in student achievement when teachers were absent 10 days (e.g., Clotfelter et al., 2009; Herrmann & Rockoff, 2012; Miller et al., 2008; Patrinos, 2013), which suggests that missing 10 days of school is a pivotal point because of the impact on student achievement. Second, most U.S. teachers are allotted 10 days off throughout the approximately 180-day school year as part of their teacher benefits; Miller's (2012) study indicates that many teachers miss more than their allotted 10 days.

Other researchers studying the US found similar results (National Council on Teacher Quality [NCTQ], 2014; Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2017). In the NCTQ (2014) study, teacher attendance data from 40 districts in some of the largest metropolitan areas in the US were collected for the 2012-13 school year. On average, teachers missed 10 or more days throughout the school

year, and 16% of teachers missed 18 or more days (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014). Some estimates suggest that one in four U.S. teachers are absent from the classroom for 10 or more days throughout a typical school year (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2017). More recent research found elevated rates of chronic absenteeism in teachers since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Unlike evidence on teacher mobility and attrition where low-income schools and schools serving students of color are disproportionately affected by problems with teacher turnover and quality (Simon & Johnson, 2015), these studies suggest that the association between school characteristics and teacher absenteeism remains less clear. One study found teacher absences were greater at schools that serve larger populations of African American or Latino students (Miller, 2012). However, another study reported inconclusive findings regarding teacher absenteeism and the proportion of students served from low socioeconomic backgrounds (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014). The mixed findings suggest that teachers' reasons for being absent may not purely be a function of the kinds of schools and students served but may vary depending on the context.

Teacher Absenteeism Negatively Affects Student Achievement and Is Expensive

Teacher absenteeism presents a myriad of complications because it is negatively associated with student achievement. Research focused on the U.S. district and state levels (e.g., Clotfelter et al., 2009; Finlayson, 2009; Goldhaber & Hansen, 2010; Miller et al., 2008; National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014) and at the international level (Patrinos, 2013) all find that increased rates of teacher absenteeism relate to lower student achievement. The National Council on Teacher Quality (2014) found a "significant negative impact on student achievement in classrooms where the teacher is absent for ten days" (p. 14). Another U.S. study used a value-added model to document a similar negative relationship between teacher absenteeism and teacher effectiveness (as measured through student performance; Goldhaber & Hansen, 2010). Miller, Murnane, and Willet (2008) estimated for every 10 days a teacher was absent, students' mathematics performance was reduced by 3.3% of a standard deviation, and this was statistically significant. An international study found that when a teacher was absent for 10 or more days, a primary school student could lose up to one-quarter of a year of learning (Patrinos, 2013).

Another consequence of teacher absenteeism is the expense to school districts (Ferris et al., 1988; Miller, 2012). While costs vary, individual districts can spend millions of dollars on costs associated with substitute teachers, with higher rates of absenteeism raising costs and depleting funding that could be used for other purposes (Finlayson, 2009). U.S. schools and districts build this cost into their budgets, but their budgets do not account for substitute teacher costs when teachers are absent more than expected.

Complications Related to Collecting Teacher Absenteeism Data

While there is some empirical evidence related to the rates of teacher absenteeism, these data are limited in scope and breadth because teacher absenteeism data are often collected locally with varying levels of oversight and reliability. Many existing studies on understanding teacher absenteeism come from developing countries (e.g., Rogers & Vegas, 2009), and their findings cannot be generalized to the U.S. context. Moreover, domestic studies on understanding teacher absenteeism focus on easy-to-measure characteristics, such as school type (private/public) and teacher experience. For example, multiple studies find that private school teachers are absent less than their traditional public-school counterparts (e.g., Miller, 2012; Patrinos, 2013; Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2017). However, this finding does not speak to the underlying reasons as to why traditional public-school teachers are absent more often than private school teachers.

Teacher attendance policies are also created locally and through a collective bargaining agreement (CBA); therefore, each districts' attendance policy may be unique and include different incentives for teachers. Research on incentivizing teacher attendance yields mixed results. For example, Clotfelter et al. (2009) used regression analysis to study how a financial incentive might impact teacher attendance and found that associating a negative incentive (a $50 penalty per day) with sick days beyond their allotment significantly reduced the additional sick days taken by teachers in North Carolina (see also Ahn & Vigdor, 2011). Ehrenberg et al. (1989) examined how the quantity of sick days impacted absenteeism and found when teachers were given more sick days in their teacher contracts, they were apt to use them, meaning they were absent more. Ehrenberg et al. (1989) also found that when teachers were offered the incentive of receiving a bonus for unused sick days (i.e., a buy-back policy), they were absent less. Other studies find significant reductions in teacher absenteeism when teachers were incentivized with additional retirement contributions (Hanover Research, 2012), and when job security improved (Jacob, 2013).

While a handful of studies find significant relationships between financial incentives and reduced teacher absenteeism, there are also studies that suggest there is no association between incentives and absenteeism (Hanover Research, 2012). For example, the National Council on Teacher Quality's (2014) comprehensive study found that "[a]ttendance rates did not differ among districts with or without formal policies designed to encourage attendance" (p. 11).

These studies are largely quantitative, which limits understanding about teacher absenteeism. Qualitative research about teacher absenteeism in the United States is largely non-existent. Moreover, mixed results suggest that the current literature on reducing teacher absenteeism is not exhaustive. One reason for these mixed results might be that little is understood about why teachers are absent in the first place and how context shapes teacher behaviors. Without a more context-based understanding of teacher absenteeism decisions and behaviors, policies and practices targeting the reduction of teacher absenteeism could be misguided or misinformed. While the above quantitative studies explain "what" is happening related to teacher absenteeism, they fall short in explaining why teachers are absent.

Conceptual Framework: Structural, Organizational, and Psychological Factors

Although the dominant causes of teacher absenteeism remain underexplored, employee absenteeism as a whole is well-researched and regarded as an important topic in organizational management literature (Ferris et al., 1988). Albeit dated, seminal studies in the management literature examine employee absenteeism behaviors from a variety of institutions (e.g., private, public, manufacturing, government, health, financial, education, etc.) and from individuals who work different types of jobs (e.g., clerical, technical, sales, management, medical, professional, etc.; Allen, 1984; Eisenberger et al., 1990; George, 1989; Leigh, 1986; Sagie, 1998). Additionally, the management literature provides strong evidence that women are absent more than men, even when controlling for job characteristics and age (Mastekaasa & Olsen, 1998), which is partially explained by gendered dynamics disadvantaging women, such as increased family responsibilities (Clotfelter et al., 2009). Sociologist Jessica Calarco's recent research echoes that women are far more likely than men to bear the weight of family responsibilities (2024). These discrepancies are relevant because teaching is a female-dominated occupation (NCES, 2023).

One dimension influencing teacher absenteeism is structural, including how teaching as a profession is organized compared to other professions. Teachers are subject to greater demands and fewer supports compared to occupations with similar college-educated workers (Bird & Little, 1986). For example, schools and teachers are subject to pressures from accountability policies and the public and are tasked with meeting numerous (and sometimes conflicting) societal goals and

expectations (Bird & Little, 1986; Lortie, 1975). Moreover, they are often solely responsible for classrooms – both isolated from colleagues in an "egg crate" structure and needing to be physically and emotionally engaged with large numbers of students for long periods of time (Bird & Little, 1986; Lortie, 1975; Mehta, 2015). Although teachers do the work for intrinsic, relational rewards (Lortie, 1975), these pressures to meet varied expectations and increasingly demanding performance goals while still being considered a "semi-profession" with relatively low societal prestige and pay compared to similarly educated workers (Mehta, 2015) can create unique psychological pressures and contribute to burnout (Chang, 2009).

In addition to these broader institutional forces, organizational working conditions also influence teachers' psychological responses and career decisions (Merrill, 2021). The management literature tends to point to factors within the control of organizations that influence absenteeism – for example, organizations, managers, and the structure of jobs lead teachers to be dissatisfied which enhances the likelihood that teachers will decide to take days off (George, 1989). This literature underscores the importance of two related psychological constructs that influence absenteeism: perceived organizational support and job stress. Perceived organizational support is the "extent to which employees perceived that the organization valued their contribution and cared about their well-being" (Eisenberger et al., 1990, p. 52). Empirical findings support that "perceived organizational support reduces absenteeism" (Eisenberger et al., 1986, p. 504). Job stress is a harmful reaction that people have to undue pressures and demands placed on them at work (Bhui et al., 2016). An increase in job stress is associated with an increase in employee absenteeism (Gupta & Beehr, 1979).

One potential consequence of adverse structural and organizational conditions in teaching is high job stress and low levels of perceived support, which ultimately lead to burnout. To date, many peer-reviewed studies have documented that teaching is a profession with high rates of burnout (e.g., Chang, 2009; Hakanen et al., 2006). Burnout is defined as "a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job" (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 1). Contributors to burnout include intense job demands, lack of professional support, and insufficient resources, among others (e.g., Maslach et al., 2001; Hakanen et al., 2006; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Burnout and job stress are inextricably linked, with burnout placing "the individual stress experience within a larger organizational context of people's relation to their work" (Maslach & Leiter, 2016, p. 351). Moreover, research demonstrates a strong association between burnout and mental health problems (e.g., Maslach & Leiter, 2016) and could be one mechanism within the control of organizations and policy influencing teachers' absenteeism behaviors.

Burnout has been studied specifically in relation to teachers, and job demands, lack of professional support, lack of resources, and negative student behaviors have all been linked to teacher burnout (Chang, 2009). Similarly, another study linked mental health issues in teachers with high job demand and low support (Borrelli et al., 2014). Yet another study suggested that professional culture contributes to teacher burnout and mental health struggles (Fullan, 2001). Despite ample evidence that teachers have high rates of burnout and face job-related mental health issues, studies have not linked teacher absenteeism to these constructs.

Methods

This study used purposeful sampling – aiming to interview full-time elementary teachers in public school districts with high rates of teacher absenteeism. Given that the goal of this study is to understand and learn about teacher attendance behaviors and not to generalize to a broader population, purposeful sampling is appropriate (e.g., Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Districts with high rates of teacher absenteeism were identified through convenience and snowball sampling, in that the

lead researcher has many connections to Michigan school district leaders through their day-to-day work, and challenges with teacher absenteeism were a recurring theme in many professional interactions.[2] First, administrators were asked for introductions to teachers who were absent 10 or more days in the 2018-2019 school year, but the strategy was adjusted to asking for introductions to full-time teachers who might be interested in participating in a study about teacher absenteeism. Administrators were not informed about who did and did not participate.

Snowball sampling, where the initial, criterion-based participants referred other teachers to interview, facilitated the collection of diverse accounts and experiences around teacher absenteeism (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviewing continued until a wide variety of perspectives and contexts were included in the final sample. The resulting sample consists of 12 full-time elementary teachers who were absent 10 days or more, and nine full-time elementary teachers who were absent less than 10 days. Having variation in the sample also allowed for comparisons between teachers with many absences and those with fewer. For example, both chronically absent teachers and non-chronically absent teachers described using paid time off for job-related mental health, but chronically absent teachers missed work for job-related mental health at least three times more often than non-chronically absent teachers.

There was also variation in additional characteristics of participants and the districts and schools that teachers worked in. For example, teachers varied in terms of contextual factors influencing absenteeism such as years of teaching experience, student demographic served, poverty level, district size, district policies, and geographic locale (Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2019b; see Table 1).

Participants had varied levels of years of teaching experience, education completed, grade levels taught, and ages (see Table 2*).* While both males and females were represented in the sample and the majority were females, this roughly mirrored the gender composition of all teachers in Michigan during the time of the study (Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2019a). However, all participant teachers were White[3], which is a limitation of the study to the extent that race and racialized teacher experiences may influence teacher absenteeism.

Semi-structured interviews (see Appendix for interview protocol) were conducted in-person and over Zoom. The interview instrument was crafted to be central to the research questions and questions were largely open-ended to avoid being leading and to provide a conversation-like space for the participants to tell their experiences with and perceptions of teacher absenteeism.

The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using NVivo. The initial round of coding was largely deductive and based on the conceptual framework, first identifying personal reasons for using paid time off and job-related reasons for using paid time off, as well as organizational concepts from the management literature such as job stress and organizational support. We next used an inductive approach, looking across the deductive codes and identifying new codes that were not captured by the conceptual framework but related to the drivers behind job stress such as burnout, organizational support, student behaviors, class size, accountability, building support, administrative support, and compensation. Finally, themes were identified by grouping similar codes into larger categories such as "job-related reasons for using paid time off," and explaining the nature of those broader categories – for instance, differences in using paid time off for job-related reasons between chronically absent teachers and non-chronically absent teachers (Saldaña, 2015).

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[2] This study was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and deemed exempt.

[3] In 2018-19, 91.1% of all Michigan public school teachers were White (Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2024).

Table 1
District Characteristics

District Code	Number of Teachers (*N*)	Number of Teachers Chronically Absent (*N*)	Total Number of Paid Days Off	Payout Incentive for Unused Accrued Paid Time Off Upon Retirement or Severance	Other Attendance Incentive Included in CBA	Entity Locale Name	2018-19 Student Body		
							Total Student Enrollment (*N*)	% White	% Economically Disadvantaged
District 1	4	1	13	Yes, paid out up to 250 days, sliding pay scale, depending on hire date ($35 to $47/day)	No	Town: Fringe	2,799	87.14	34.73
District 2	4	4	12 to 14, depending on contract duration	No	Yes, $200 per semester if 0 days are missed during the semester	City: Small	4,245	14.98	90.41
District 3	2	1	13	Yes, no limit, $30/day	Yes, maximum incentive is $2,500 annually depending on days missed and FTEs	Suburb: Large	10,898	52.25	53.22
District 4	2	2	10	No	No	City: Small	3,364	36.18	64.48
District 5	2	1	5	Yes, paid out up to 95 days, rate is determined by	Yes, $100 per semester if 0 days	Suburb: Midsize	1,603	70.74	54.15

District Code	Number of Teachers (*N*)	Number of Teachers Chronically Absent (*N*)	Total Number of Paid Days Off	Payout Incentive for Unused Accrued Paid Time Off Upon Retirement or Severance	Other Attendance Incentive Included in CBA	Entity Locale Name	2018-19 Student Body		
							Total Student Enrollment (*N*)	% White	% Economically Disadvantaged
				base pay at severance or retirement, dependent on years of service	are missed during the semester				
District 6	3	2	14	Yes, paid out up to 90 days, rate is determined by base pay at severance or retirement, dependent on years of service	Yes, annual bonus if four or less days are missed during the school year; amount varies by year	City: Small	13,150	51.00	15.37
District 7	4	1	13	Yes, paid out up to 180 days at $60/day	Yes, $400 max incentive annually if 0 days used	Suburb: Large	4,375	75.02	42.35

Source: Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2019a.

Table 2
Participant Overview

Demographic Category	Demographic Subcategory	Count (*N*)
Gender	Female	17
	Male	4
Race/Ethnicity	White	21
Years of Teaching Experience	0-5 Years	2
	6-10 Years	8
	10-20 Years	5
	20+ Years	6
Highest Education Level	Bachelor's Degree	6
	Master's Degree	15
Age Range	20-29	5
	30-39	7
	40-49	5
	50-59	2
	60-69	2
Teaching Grade	1	2
	2	4
	3	7
	4	4
	5	4
Union Member	Yes	19
	No	2
Chronically absent		12
Total *N*		21

While this study provides rich and descriptive data about teachers' absenteeism behaviors, it is not without limitations. First, the sample consists of White teachers from a single state, which is not representative of the broader population of teachers. The sensitive nature of this topic of chronic absenteeism coupled with self-report data also poses threats to validity and reliability through the potential for social desirability bias. This study is not an exhaustive examination of teacher attendance behaviors but rather is exploratory in nature and identifies patterns in teacher attendance behaviors that warrant further research. Future studies could address these limitations and better contextualize absenteeism behavior through examining collective bargaining agreements, attendance policies, and incentive policies. In sum, more research on this topic is necessary so that investments in policy and practice are aligned to best support teachers and students.

Findings

In many of the interviews, teachers explained a perceived "problem" with chronic teacher absenteeism in their buildings and districts. As one experienced teacher from an urban district noted:

> In my building they pull us from our planning period. […] But literally last year students would go to a classroom and there would be a sign on the door that said if there is no teacher here don't report to this classroom. They would then report to another classroom and there would be a sign on that door that would say if there is no teacher go to this classroom. So much so that the last place they landed was the auditorium. You could have three or four classes in the auditorium. With one [teacher]. Repeatedly, regularly that will happen.

Similar accounts of dealing with the hardship of teacher absences were echoed by other teachers in the sample, both chronically absent and not, from different schools and districts. Combining classrooms, splitting classes and redistributing students, and having present teachers teach during their prep periods were all strategies mentioned by participants in response to teacher absences. These accounts underscore the frequency of teacher absence and its cascading effects.

All 21 interviewees knew co-workers who had exhausted all their allotted days off in the 2018-19 school year. In total, 12 out of the 21 teachers in the sample missed 10 or more days of school. Five of the 12 chronically absent reported taking all of their allotted days off. These five teachers had varying levels of experience and were from three different districts (three urban, one rural, and one suburban). Three of those five teachers also described having to take days off beyond their allotted days, which were either unpaid, unnoticed, or rollover days. These teachers had between six and 20 years of experience; two from an urban district and one from a suburban district.

All participants said they used paid time off for personal reasons and job-related reasons. In terms of personal reasons, the majority noted either sickness or obligations in the form of care for children or adult family members, which are generally "socially acceptable" reasons for teachers to use their paid time off. One chronically absent teacher from a suburban district explained how a large portion of her paid time off was used for personal and familial medical reasons:

> I work as a teacher obviously and so does my husband, so we get sick a lot around here […] My kids are in daycare, and they are sick constantly and so it was personal illness for them and then for me. My kids are definitely the top [reason] [...] Another example, I'm having an ultrasound and that is a personal day. This is acceptable. I'm not sick but it's a medical thing.

In terms of job-related reasons, interviewees described structural, organizational, and psychological factors that influenced their attendance behaviors. These factors intersect in that structural factors and organizational factors influence psychological responses in various ways. Job-related drivers of absenteeism are organized and discussed below in the context of the conceptual framework.

Accountability Policies and Administrative Demands

Structural factors in the teaching profession, such as accountability pressures and administrative demands, contributed to burnout and absenteeism. Interviewees described how accountability pressures or paperwork influenced their decision to use paid time off. Eleven teachers—both chronically absent and not—from different district types and who took a wide range of days off reported using paid time off to simply catch up on work. Some explained that grading and preparing for teacher evaluations were reasons for needing to catch up on work and using one of their paid days off. For example, a teacher from a suburban district who was chronically absent explained:

> I've used [days off] to catch up with my workload. […] It had to do with report cards. Our district still uses report cards, and you often have a lot of writing samples to grade student work and to grade those are very time consuming on top of then doing the

> grades and then writing the comments. […] And it's quite time consuming. So that's why I've taken [days off]. When there's a lot to score, I'm like, it's okay taking a day off and then… doing grading all day. […] It is really hard to do [report cards] and then also manage all my other students in the classroom.

This teacher and others felt it was appropriate to use days off to manage the added demands and expectations of administrative work.

Teachers also explained that demands related to standardized testing and teacher evaluations increased their workload and contributed to a feeling of constant pressure to perform. One experienced, chronically absent teacher from a different suburban district mentioned she had taken a day off to catch up on grading. When asked if that was something she regularly did, she said, "I used to refuse to do it, but yes, I take days off to catch up [on schoolwork]." When asked what had changed to lead her to take days off for work purposes, she explained:

> Changes to accountability have absolutely impacted my stress. How I teach and how I approach my work. When I look at where I started 20 something years ago to now. I thought I worked hard then. I definitely work a lot harder now. I just feel like there is more stress. There's so much more paperwork. There's so much more out-of-the-classroom responsibilities.

Another less experienced, chronically absent teacher from an urban district explained using all her paid time off in a school year for personal illness, vacation, and "[m]ental health, sometimes I just need a break from work and the kids." When asked why she needed a mental health day, she described experiencing burnout stemming from accountability pressures:

> So, there is a lot of stress just in terms of test scores… Some of our pay is tied to how our kids perform because it is included in our evaluations. So, I feel like there is a lot of job stress in terms of… getting your kids to succeed because it affects our bonuses.

This teacher indicated she missed multiple days of work for mental health because of the unique demands of teaching, including district policies linking student performance to incentive pay.

Two of the seven districts punitively tied teacher attendance to teacher evaluations, as described by participants from these urban and suburban districts. These six teachers were chronically absent and had varying levels of teaching experience. The teachers said that these districts thought a negative incentive would deter teachers from using paid time off. However, one of these teachers from an urban district speculated that the policy had the opposite effect:

> It seems very unfair to me because you're given [paid days off]. I think it's made teacher attendance worse. Teachers seem to really resent that. The factors that were contributing to the attendance are still there and now worse. And so, I don't think that made any difference at all.

All six indicated that the practice of punitively linking attendance to teacher evaluations made them feel more stressed. While these teachers did not directly link the negative incentive policy to their absenteeism, they did link it to increased stress that was often listed as a reason for using a day off. Across the sample, teachers from different types of districts discussed accountability pressures as problematic and influencing their levels of stress and approaches to taking time off.

Perceived Organizational Support

Organizational support, including perceptions of being valued and cared for are related to employee absenteeism (Eisenberger et al., 1990) and was evident in all teachers' responses. This was

especially true when teachers discussed lack of support from administration, which is also centrally related to employee retention (Merrill, 2021). Thirteen participants (12 of whom were chronically absent) representing all districts in the sample explained that support from the school or district administration affected their absenteeism behaviors. Some noted that they felt the administration took away a lot of their planning time, so they sometimes took days off work just to catch up on routine work, such as lesson planning, as described by 11 chronically absent participants. This is distinct from taking days off to respond to accountability demands because administrative actions compromised planning time that is specifically dedicated to their regular work, making it impossible to complete during the time that is supposedly carved out for it. One teacher from an urban district explained:

> Right now, we get 90 minutes a week to do all of our planning. It's short… two of those a month are taken by [professional development]. I had 50 minutes every single day to do my planning in my old district. […] So, I definitely take time off a couple of times per year to catch up on my grading. Even then I'm just barely caught up.

Across all the districts represented in the sample, there also appeared to be a general frustration with school or district administration, especially for chronically absent teachers. When asked how the school or district impacts attendance, a chronically absent teacher from a rural district responded:

> I think it's just [if] the level of support were increased. [O]n a day-to-day basis the administration […] they're not in the classrooms. They're not seeing what's happening. They're in their offices or in meetings. They're on their computer. And so, I think if they were to set aside some time and go into the classroom, you know, give your teachers a random ten-minute break and actually be with the kids and see what it's like […] I [think] that would have a huge impact on how teachers would feel supported.

Along a similar line of questioning, another chronically absent teacher in an urban setting explained that she "…wished [her] administration were to actually come in and observe [her]" so they could better understand the work she did and the diverse challenges she faced on a day-to-day basis. Yet another chronically absent participant in a rural setting felt "overlooked" by her district because she felt like they did not provide her with adequate support and resources, which also led to perceptions of low organizational support. These teachers suggested that the lack of district support negatively influenced perceived organizational support and contributed to taking mental health days.

Other chronically absent teachers from urban, rural, and suburban districts alike expressed dissatisfaction with their districts' support because they felt severely under-resourced. Teachers' descriptions of limited resources ranged from not having access to supplies (e.g., paper, books) to not having adequate support staff. One chronically absent suburban teacher lamented:

> Overall, there needs to be more interventionists for the children that need it and it is difficult. We have one counselor for our four elementary buildings. Four. And you know she works her tail off, but we could easily have one counselor in our building. She tries to support everyone but she's doing more putting out fires with like your highest fliers. So, I just think that there overall needs to be a better support system for classroom teachers. […] You need some realistic support that makes your job easier, not harder. When you ask for support, you walk away from that meeting with ten things that they want you to do that you know you just can't do. Now your stress is higher than before [you asked for support]. So sometimes I think teachers feel like I'm not you know I'm not going there because they're just going to give me more work to do, and I can't do what I have already.

By contrast, some teachers in the sample—both chronically absent and not—felt highly supported by their districts, schools, and leaders. For example, one teacher from a suburban district who was not chronically absent said in response to a question about how leaders influenced teacher attendance: "I feel very supported by my principal. I feel like she really enjoys having me as a teacher in her building, and I think that really helps me feel valued." Alternatively, all eight of the chronically absent interviewees who discussed negative building support connected lack of leadership support to their absenteeism decisions. In sum, evidence of low perceived organizational support was a common pattern among chronically absent teachers from different types of districts in the sample while more engaged teachers cited strong support from leaders as important.

Compensation

Eleven of the 12 chronically absent teachers interviewed were dissatisfied with compensation. Compensation, another organizational factor, shaped absenteeism because either teachers worked another job for additional income, or they felt entitled to use all their paid days off to balance out the perceived compensation inadequacies. For example, one chronically absent teacher from a rural district explained she is a small business owner to supplement her income and that affects her attendance:

> I also run my own business. So sometimes, I would say probably most days, are for me to be able to do, if I need, if I have a really large job that has to be done by certain times. Sometimes I'll take a day for that.

Teachers from all represented districts expressed feelings of dissatisfaction regarding compensation because their teaching circumstances demanded more of them, but some felt their compensation did not recompense for these demands. While we did not ask the participants about compensation, eight chronically absent interviewees independently described their dissatisfaction with their compensation when discussing or providing a rationale for their absenteeism behavior.

One more experienced chronically absent teacher from an urban district compared his current approach to taking time off to when he first started teaching and explained, "I might miss two or three days a year. Something like that." When asked why he missed more days now, he explained, "I think what's happened over time is I haven't felt very valued, and I haven't felt financially compensated for the work I do." As a result, this teacher experienced low morale and low satisfaction, which is why he used most of his paid days off. Alternatively, other chronically absent teachers mentioned they worked another job throughout the year in addition to teaching for additional income, such as one early-career teacher who explained, "in the summer and at night I have a second job because I don't make enough to be able to do what I need to do." This teacher's revelation about a second job came after he was asked what contributed to his stress and he mentioned taking days off work because teaching "is a stressful job."

Eight chronically absent teachers representing urban, suburban, and rural districts also explained they viewed their paid time off as part of their total compensation package, so they tried to maximize their paid time off by using most, if not all of it. This included using all their paid sick time, regardless of whether they were actually ill. One chronically absent urban teacher explained:

> I look at those leave days, which I know are intended for sake of illness or personal use or whatever, as just simply those are my days to use and I'm going to use them because I don't get paid as well as I should.

His account clearly demonstrates that not only was he dissatisfied with his financial compensation, but because of it he viewed his paid time off as part of his total compensation package.

Similarly, after identifying mental health and stress as a reason for being absent, another teacher from an urban setting who exhausted all her paid days off and took additional unpaid days further explained, "Every once in a while, I'll just need a day, and I'll take a personal day, and I'll schedule to call in the morning or the night before. It's just kind of my way of taking a break. I know there are other teachers, too, who feel like I just need a break. I'm okay not getting paid this one day and I'm going to take it."

Student Behaviors

Fourteen participants—chronically absent teachers and not—across a wide range of individual, school, and district contexts expressed feelings of burnout being tied to student behavior issues, which profoundly impacted their absenteeism. For example, when asked a probing question about what was contributing to mental health influencing her decision to be absent, an early career, chronically absent teacher from a suburban district said, "There's been years that are more challenging than others and this was one of those years. I had a really tough group of kids. There were some days I just took. I planned ahead and I just needed a day off."

A more experienced, chronically absent teacher from an urban district pointed to job stress as being the leading reason for using time off. When asked to elaborate, she explained:

> Student behaviors are getting significantly worse. I had major behavior issues this year. I'm really having problems. They're really volatile. Students yelling and screaming and behaviors that are just really tough. And I had multiple kids like that in my classroom.

She explained that negative student behaviors have increased over her tenure in the district:

> [S]tudent behaviors have increased. There's been a definite difference in the behaviors of students. […] There's a lot more aggression, a lot more what looks like students who are just not able to handle school without some serious support. So, that's a stressor. And then how leadership deals with that is that just compounds that stress significantly.

Other teachers from a variety of different contexts—urban, rural, and suburban districts—felt that their administrations did not address worsening student behaviors, which led to the staff feeling unsupported, stressed, and needing to take a day off. After listing "mental health" as a reason for using paid time off, one non-chronically absent teacher in a suburban district explained:

> The mental health has more to do with classroom behavior. […] [W]hen you have a very difficult student or, you know, I think that's [when I] just have to take a day off. Just kind of regroup when you've got some really challenging kids.

We followed up with this teacher by asking how she could be better supported with challenging student behavior and the teacher went on to explain:

> There needs to be more immediate relief for difficult to manage students. [R]emove the student from the situation if needed but that's just temporary. […] I just think that there overall needs to be a better support system for classroom teachers and included with that perhaps is more management strategies for teachers within the classroom. Since we don't have that the stress is higher, and I need more of a break.

Although this teacher was not chronically absent, she used some paid time off for mental health issues that she attributed to challenging student behaviors. Participants provided a wide range of examples of negative student behaviors, including general insubordination (e.g., not listening), fighting and physical violence, abusive language, and bullying. A chronically absent teacher from a

rural district mentioned she never took mental health days in the past but had taken them more recently because of increased job stress largely driven by negative student behavior:

> So, I think my stress is coming from the students. And like I said this is the only school I've ever worked in, so I don't know if it's the same for everywhere but the behaviors of the students in our school seem to be worse than behaviors from what I remember going through school. The students have a fairly nonchalant attitude about teachers and their authority and giving them respect. They just kind of, you know, "I don't have to listen to you. You're not my you're not my parent. I'm going to do what I want to do." So, it's like they don't have respect for the teachers. So, it's very hard to manage behaviors from students like that.

The connection between worsening student behaviors, stress, and taking time off was cited by a wide variety of participants but was an especially acute issue for chronically absent teachers.

Class Size

Increased job stress driven by negative student behaviors was exacerbated by large class size, as mentioned by five (all chronically absent) of the 14 teachers who discussed student behaviors. One chronically absent third grade teacher from a suburban district said, "My school has really large classes. I have 32. When you look at class size and if you have difficult to manage students and a large class, that's very stressful." The perceived impact of large classes and negative student behaviors may be more acutely felt if teachers are already tapped out due to other structural and organizational factors inherent to the teaching profession, such as accountability demands, working in isolation, or being poorly compensated. Either way, participants from urban and suburban districts documented class size coupled with student behaviors as attributing to symptoms of burnout.

Four additional chronically absent interviewees from urban and suburban districts mentioned large class size contributed to job stress independent of negative student behaviors. After identifying job stress as a reason for taking a mental health day, one chronically absent teacher from an urban setting pointed to large class sizes as being particularly stressful and explained why large classes made it more difficult for her to be successful in her job. She explained:

> I can't give my students individual attention and address… individual needs. I want to do more for them and want to… personalize what each student needs. I have… 36 kids in my room and it's so, so hard to get to what every kid needs and to hear each of their voices.

Other chronically absent interviewees echoed this sentiment, which may speak to challenges with the teaching profession and public support for it more broadly. Namely, there is a mismatch between the expectations of teachers and structural and organizational supports they are provided to meet the expectations.

General Mental Health and Burnout

All 21 interviewees responded that they used paid days off because of job stress specifically, whether due to challenging student behaviors, dissatisfaction with compensation, feeling unsupported, or for other general reasons. One chronically absent teacher from a suburban district explained her approach to using her days off:

> I always plan on taking all of my days off. I just feel like it's really good for mental health to have a break from the kids. That's nice. I love traveling and going on vacation. So, as much as I can do that. Like during the school year, just to get a day off. I never

> have perfect attendance. I'm not one of those. Truth is, you know, this is my life. You know, I am saying absolutely for me, yeah, I am… I can give more to the kids because I pay attention to myself.

Similar responses about using paid time off for job-related mental health reasons were echoed by all 21 teachers interviewed. These accounts speak to general feelings of mental health challenges and burnout among teachers due to the nature of teaching (e.g., Maslach et al., 2001).

Chronically absent teachers pointed to job stress and burnout as reasons for their absenteeism more readily than those teachers who were not chronically absent. Specifically, interviewees who were not chronically absent reported only taking one to two days of paid time off for job-related mental health, while chronically absent interviewees reported taking six or more days of paid time off for job-related mental health. In response to being asked how she utilizes her paid time off, an urban chronically absent teacher responded:

> It is not sickness, and it usually isn't even my own kids. It is almost always a mental health day. Here's what I'll say. There are cases where it is a doctor's appointment but I'm intentionally scheduling doctor's appointments during the school day so that I can take it off. Because it is so stressful every day going in, I need a day.

This teacher further explained that her job stress resulted from worsening student behaviors and poor school leadership. These stressors, along with others mentioned above, were common among respondents who described missing work due to job stress and mental health. Chronically absent teachers described experiencing multiple and compounded job stressors compared to those who were not chronically absent. For instance, one chronically absent teacher explained her job stress was fueled by negative student behaviors, poor school leadership, *and* inadequate district support.

The importance of addressing the sources of these job stressors cannot be understated. As one chronically absent teacher explained, "If it wasn't so stressful, I wouldn't get sick as much and have to miss as much." In other words, teachers' mental health can bleed into physical health and lead to increased absenteeism for illness. Notably, non-chronically absent teachers expressed a different orientation to using paid days off; nine of them implied that they tried to minimize their use of paid time off. One teacher, who missed less than five days explained:

> I do not like to be gone. So, I will only be gone if I absolutely have to. […] Just because it's hard being gone. It takes a lot of work to get a sub ready for my job. It takes a lot of work. […] There's work you have to put in ahead of time and when you come back and it's actually much easier being at school than not being at school. So, my strategy is to not be gone. […] I just feel really dedicated and sometimes curriculum is so tight that I worry if I'm gone a day that it's going to put us behind.

This teacher's approach to using her paid time off was to only use paid time off if it was absolutely necessary. This approach was strikingly different from the chronically absent teachers who often sought to maximize their use of paid time off.

Discussion and Implications

This exploratory study takes initial steps in empirically studying the underlying reasons for chronic teacher absenteeism. Literature from the education and management fields related to organizational and structural factors that influence teachers' psychological responses to the demands and culture of the profession and career decision-making offer appropriate lenses to make sense of the teacher absenteeism interview data collected here. In situations of high job stress, low perceived

organizational support, burnout, and/or mental health challenges, self-reported absenteeism tends to be more job related than due to personal circumstance. Furthermore, teachers who were not chronically absent described being very intentional and conservative in their use of paid time off and tried to only use paid time off for personal circumstances, such as illness, whereas this was not the case for chronically absent teachers.

These findings suggest organizational and structural factors, including challenges with school and district culture and climate, elicit a psychological response, such as feelings of burnout and stress, and are prominent sources of chronic teacher absenteeism. With the current dire state of the educator workforce (Kraft & Lyon, 2024), a fresh approach to understanding why teachers are absent is needed so ultimately teachers can be better supported in their profession. In addition, we found that perceptions of inadequate compensation and punitive district policies contributed to teachers' feelings of stress and rationalizing decisions to take more paid time off.

The findings related to chronically absent teachers using paid time off for job-related mental health because of increased job stress and low perceived organizational support were consistent with the findings from the management literature related to employee absenteeism and job stress (e.g. Gupta & Beehr, 1979) employee absenteeism and perceived organizational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Eisenberger et al., 1990), and teacher turnover (Merrill, 2021). The above findings also substantiate previous findings that teachers are subject to increasing demands and work in isolation with few corresponding supports (Bird & Little, 1986; Lortie, 1975; Mehta, 2015). Additionally, the findings here parallel Borelli et al.'s (2014) findings that mental health issues in teachers are linked to high job demand and low support. Our findings are further supported by Chang's (2009) work that linked teacher burnout to lack of professional support and negative student behaviors. These literatures offer insights to understanding teacher absenteeism by connecting structural and organizational factors of the teaching profession to psychological responses such as burnout.

Teachers are subject to greater demands and fewer supports compared to occupations with similar college-educated workers (Bird & Little, 1986), which can create unique psychological pressures and contribute to burnout (Chang, 2009). Many teachers in this study attributed stress and absenteeism to overwhelming accountability pressures. The teaching profession is a high-stakes profession with ever-changing accountability requirements that teachers are often responsible for meeting. Findings from this study suggest that accountability pressures are a detriment to the profession because they contribute to stress and burnout and impact teacher absenteeism. Given student achievement suffers when teachers are absent (e.g., Clotfelter et al., 2009; Finlayson, 2009; Goldhaber & Hansen, 2010; Miller et al., 2008), and teachers are often absent because of stressful accountability requirements, perhaps a reconsideration of the accountability pressures put on teachers is warranted, an assertion that is echoed by recent research on high-stakes accountability in general (Rury, 2023). For example, deemphasizing high-stakes teacher accountability may be a step in the right direction for taking pressure off teachers. This will allow them to educate children rather than worry about whether they are effective or ineffective as measured by a standardized test and subjective markers.

As our conceptual framework highlights, it is common for teachers to be subject to increasing and varying professional demands without accompanying compensation (Mehta, 2015). Findings here indicate that low compensation leads some teachers to take on second jobs, and makes teachers feel undervalued and not supported. These factors all played into teachers using their paid time off, either stemming from burnout from working multiple jobs, negative mental health from feeling unsupported, or viewing paid time off as part of the total compensation package and needing to exhaust it to feel fully compensated. To support teachers in their profession, especially as teaching demands evolve and increase, re-evaluating teacher compensation is crucial. Until then, low

compensation will continue to be a source of dissatisfaction and contribute to teacher burnout, and for some teachers may be manifested through absenteeism.

Similarly, across both groups of teachers there was a common thread of teachers not feeling supported or valued. Teachers also felt they were expected to do more with fewer resources. This was true for most teachers in the sample, but especially for chronically absent teachers. The findings here reflect similar findings from the past that suggest factors within the control of organization influence absenteeism (George, 1989). Teachers in this study explained these feelings were exacerbated when negative student behaviors and class sizes were factored in, leading to burnout and mental health struggles, and ultimately absenteeism. Job demands, lack of professional support, lack of resources, and negative student behaviors have all been linked to teacher burnout (Chang, 2009). More broadly, these findings point to larger issues related to the teaching profession; structural and organizational issues must be addressed to support teachers in their professional roles. For example, policies and practices to support teachers might include securing extra behavioral supports for students and teachers, minimizing extra paperwork and administrative tasks expected of teachers, allocating more prep time and ensuring teachers are able to utilize their allocated time, and softening the pressures of accountability policies. Thoughtful policies and practices that address the structural and organizational issues discussed above could ameliorate teacher absenteeism but gaining support for such policies might be challenging. Larger state investments in education might alleviate some of these challenges. The identification of structural and organizational inputs that deplete teachers is a good starting point for targeted policy.

Until actions are taken to address the drivers behind chronic teacher absenteeism, teachers will continue to experience burnout, negative job-related mental health, and will continue to miss days of work. Investment in future research, policy, and practice is needed around teacher absenteeism. There is more to learn through research about elusive, intangible characteristics that are related to teacher absenteeism, and this learning needs to happen on a larger scale. We need our teachers to be present, engaged, supported, and satisfied to have a positive impact on students. Through intentional education policy designed to improve the conditions within which teachers work, teachers' work experiences and perceptions may improve – for example, formal induction and mentoring programs have strong potential to better support and retain teachers (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017) potentially increasing their job engagement and reducing absenteeism.

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