

The Effect of Teacher Absenteeism on 8th Grade Students' Behavior and Attendance in an
Urban 6-12 Charter School

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of teacher absenteeism on student behavior and attendance rates in an urban charter school that serves students in grades six through twelve. The sample groups consisted of 68 eighth grade students and five (5) teachers. This quasi-experimental design study was conducted over an eight-week time period. The disciplinary reports and attendance records of the student participants were identified and monitored through the online Student Management System (SMS). The attendance of adult participants was identified and monitored through the online Principal Dashboard system and internal paper-based logs. According to this study, there was no significant difference in the number of student discipline referrals made by teachers with high absenteeism and those with low absence rates. Additionally, teacher absence seemed to have little statistical influence on student attendance rates. However, the data did show that teacher tardiness did have a significant effect on student behavior. Teachers with a high rate of tardiness made more referrals than teachers with a low rate of tardiness. Finally, students taught by teachers with a high rate of tardiness also had significant rates of tardiness when compared to their peers taught by teachers with low rates of tardiness. Student absence was the same no matter if the teacher had high or low rates of tardiness. These findings suggest that teachers who are frequently absent do not significantly alter the behaviors and attendance of the students who they teach. However, teachers who are frequently tardy significantly affect the behavior and tardiness of their students. Actions are required to support, develop, or remove teachers who are frequently tardy in order to limit the effect of teacher tardiness on overall school climate and culture. This is particularly important when this negative behavior is concentrated in one grade level or department.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Teacher absenteeism creates financial hardships for schools and school districts across the country. More importantly, teacher nonattendance adversely influences student achievement, and student attendance, in turn, negatively affects school climate/culture (Hess & Copeland, 2001). According to some estimates, students spend an equivalent of one year with a substitute teacher in the course of K-12 education (Glatfelter, 2006). Missing their highly qualified teachers and, instead, trying to learn from unqualified substitutes can directly and negatively influence student learning and the classroom environment.

As it relates to how students behave in the classroom, students see a substitute teacher and believe they have a reason to misbehave. Research cites that classroom management is the biggest challenge facing substitute teachers (Aceto, 1995; Galven-Martin, 1997; Nidds & McGerald, 1994; Ostapczuk, 1994). Other problems include incomplete or missing lesson plans; unfamiliarity of established classroom routines; and the perceptions of students, parents, and colleagues that substitutes are just babysitters. Because school districts place a low priority on the professional development of substitute teachers, substitutes lack the pedagogical and classroom management skills needed to be effective (Ostapczuk, 1994). As Leake and Leake (1995) demonstrate, “Schools with high teacher absence rates were also prone to have high student failures, higher drop-outs, and excessive teacher absenteeism as indicators of deficiencies” (p. 91).

Teacher absenteeism is recognized as a key impediment to effective enhancements of our educational system. Research on this topic has been conducted in the United States and also abroad. Studies show that school districts are spending billions of dollars a year on substitute teachers. Attention to this issue is important for several reasons:

- According to Miller (2012), research has shown that teachers are the most important school-based determinant of students' academic success.
- Excess funds should not be tied up in teacher absenteeism.
- Unqualified substitute teachers directly influence student performance and classroom culture.

Employee absenteeism as an organizational problem is well documented. Most researchers refer to absenteeism as either voluntary or involuntary (Hacket & Guion, 1989). Voluntary is defined as short-term, casual, illegitimate absences that are under the worker's control, and involuntary absences are uncontrollable, like illness or family responsibilities. For the purpose of this study, the general interpretation of 'teacher absence' will mean that, for whatever reason(s), a teacher is not physically present at school when he or she would otherwise be expected to be. As it pertains to education, teacher absences, whether voluntary or involuntary, hinder the organizational structure and culture of a school (Tingle, Wang, Algozzine, & Kerr, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of excessive teacher absenteeism on the behavior and attendance of eighth grade students in an urban 6-12 charter school.

Hypothesis

For this study, the researcher proposes the null hypothesis: Teacher absenteeism will not have an effect on 8th grade student behavior and attendance. The researcher predicts that student behavior and attendance will not be directly affected by teacher attendance. Understanding that research shows a correlation between teacher attendance and student achievement, the investigator believes student behavior and attendance are intrinsically motivated and, therefore, less likely to be affected by something extrinsic like teacher absenteeism.

Operational Definitions

The independent variable in this study was teacher attendance. Teacher attendance was defined as the number of times 8th grade teachers were either late or absent during the first semester. For the purpose of this study, the general interpretation of ‘teacher absence’ will mean that, for whatever reason(s), a teacher is not physically present at school when he or she would otherwise be expected to be. The dependent variable of this study was the behavior of students in the 8th grade. Student behavior was measured through a tallied number of behavior issues as well as student attendance.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This review discusses teacher absenteeism and the effect it has on student achievement and classroom climate/culture. Section one of this review of the literature provides an overview of how teacher absenteeism adversely affects the school atmosphere. Section two provides an examination of teacher absenteeism on student achievement. Section three takes an in-depth look at the influence or lack thereof that substitute teachers have on student learning and a school's budget. Lastly, section four addresses the impact of teacher truancy on school climate and culture

The Effect of Teacher Absenteeism on Student Achievement

Research has demonstrated that teachers are the most important school-based determinant of students' academic success (Miller, 2012). Teachers who are frequently absent are incapable of delivering quality instruction. Some studies have indicated that teacher absenteeism has no negative effect on student achievement. However, there have been several analyses that show a strong correlation between teacher absenteeism and student learning. Scholars say that every ten absences lower mathematics achievement by the same amount as having a teacher with one year or two years of experience instead of a teacher with three years to five years of experience (Miller, 2012).

There are several means by which teacher absences may negatively influence student learning. Instructional intensity is reduced when a regularly assigned teacher is replaced with an unqualified substitute. Students often do not engage with substitute teachers with the same focus and energy as they do with general educators. With the arrival of Common Core, the days of teachers simply leaving worksheets, crossword puzzles, or movies are in the past. The professional instruction students are missing hinders their future performance.

A second way in which teacher absences may affect student achievement is through the “discontinuities of instruction” (Rundall, 1986, p. 240), the disruption of the regular routines and procedures of the classroom. Students and teachers in urban schools rely on consistency and order to facilitate learning. This does not dismiss their suburban counterparts; however, too often urban students are exposed to enormous instability in their lives away from school. For most of these students, school is the only place where they experience any form of normalcy. Teacher absenteeism threatens the regularity of the classroom that students are accustomed to when their teacher is present.

The Influence of Substitute Teachers

Administrators, students, and schools are adversely affected by teachers who are absent frequently. In any discussion of teacher absenteeism, it is important to bring attention to the impact that teacher truancy has on substitute teachers and to highlight how substitute teachers affect schools and education. Substitute teachers create a financial strain, usually are unqualified, and can be a liability for schools. In 2010 nearly 40 percent of teachers missed more than ten days of school (Gottfried, 2010). This alarming rate of teacher absence forces schools to rely on substitute teachers to deliver instruction.

Schools, in particular those servicing at-risk students, are financially strapped. In 2010 school districts spent a combined \$4 billion hiring substitute teachers (Gottfried, 2010). As stated earlier, teachers in urban education are absent the most. With resources already lacking, schools, particularly urban schools, can ill afford to waste money on substitute teachers. In Baltimore City, school principals have complete autonomy over the school budget. There is immense pressure on principals not only to hire highly qualified teachers and ample support staff, but also to maximize the budget while remaining fiscally responsible. When teachers are absent, schools are paying for two while only receiving the services of one.

Substitute teachers lack the teaching skills, classroom management strategies, and instructional expertise to successfully instruct students. Nationally, standards for substitute teachers are usually below those of regular teachers with very few states requiring substitutes to be certified (Rundall, 1986). In some school districts, the only requirement is a high school diploma or GED. Though not the fault of the substitute teacher, a majority of learning loss comes from disruption to the classroom. On a basic level, substitute teachers simply do not know the children, the classroom routine, or the school culture (Kronholz, 2013). Due to the unpredictability of voluntary absences, teachers more often than not provide the substitute with busy work.

Administrators' primary concern when teachers are absent is with the students' safety and, for better or worse, with placing a warm body in the classroom to supervise students. Operating from this perspective puts substitutes and schools in a compromising position.

Effect on School Climate/Culture

Education leaders are accountable for creating and sustaining schools in which students are engaged and learning. Positive school climate directly affects students' ability and willingness to learn the skills necessary to be successful in life. Teacher absenteeism upsets school climate and culture. It affects classroom climates as well as the professional climate among staff. Studies have concluded that teacher absences are related to the climate and culture that administrators establish. Teachers who perceive their school climate as focused on caring or formal ethics are more likely to attend work than to be absent (Shapira-Lishchinsky & Rosenblatt, 2010).

The processes of teaching and learning are fundamentally relational, so how connected people feel to one another is important and teacher absenteeism places a negative strain on these relationships (Armit Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2012). Colleagues become overwhelmed with having to endure the workload of fellow teachers who are consistently absent.

Trust among coworkers dwindles (Miller, 2012) Students begin to observe the disharmony among the staff and their motivation recedes. Principals are responsible for creating school climates based on caring and formal structures which can be created by introducing and maintaining a stable set of ethical work norms and by working toward the adoption and internalization of these values. (Shapira-Lishchinsky & Rosenblatt, 2010).

School districts serving at risk youth are suffering the most from teacher absenteeism forcing those in charge to examine and revamped attendance policies and procedures. In fact, school districts and schools are taking a proactive approach to reducing the absenteeism rate. School leaders are providing incentives for not taking sick days, limiting professional development to the summer, hiring full-time substitutes, and reviewing and revising sick day policies. It is imperative that all stakeholders keep student achievement at the forefront of teacher attendance initiative.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The study was conducted to determine the effect of teacher absenteeism on student behavior and attendance.

Design

The study utilized a quasi-experimental design using data from Baltimore City Public Schools' Student Management System along with the attendance and reliability aligned with district policies and procedures. The dependent variable in this study was 8th grade students' behavior and attendance. In this analysis, the independent variable was teacher attendance during the first semester of the 2014-2015 school year.

Participants

This study took place at a charter school located in Baltimore which serves students in grades six through twelve. The study school is a Baltimore City Public School and is one out of 191 schools in the district. In the 2014-15 school year, the school had an enrollment of 462 students. The middle school has 218 students, and the high school accommodates the remaining 244 in grades 9 through 12. Students are randomly assigned to the school by district using the middle and high school choice program.

The students and teachers involved in this study were a convenient sample from an 8th grade team at a Baltimore City school. This particular group was selected due to the excessive number of teacher absences. The 8th grade team consisted of five teachers, two male and three female. The student sample was comprised of sixty-eight students ranging in age from 12-15.

Instruments

Baltimore City Schools Student Management System (SMS) was the primary instrument used to collect student attendance and behavior data. There were limitations with the SMS system when it came to tracking minor discipline infractions like office referrals and tardiness to class. This data was collected and tracked manually by the student support team. The attendance and reliability program used by the district was the tool used to collect data related to teacher attendance.

Procedure

Teacher attendance was monitored by office personnel and entered into principal's dashboard by school administrators daily. The researcher had administrative access to employee time cards and was responsible for checking attendance. For investigative purposes, total working hours absent, days absent, and days late were highlighted. Out of the ten teachers who displayed the highest number of absences, three were from the 8th grade team. Collectively this team is responsible for 68 students.

Once the teachers had been identified, student discipline and attendance data of the students they taught was collected using student management system (SMS) coupled with internal records logged by the dean of students. The areas of student attendance that were the primary focus were the number of days absent and number of days tardy. As it relates to student discipline, the data collected for this action research concentrated on the total number of suspensions, detentions, and office referrals. For convenience, included in the total number of suspension was the number of in-school suspensions combined with out-of-school suspensions. The reason for why any particular student received an office referral was not specified in this research.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

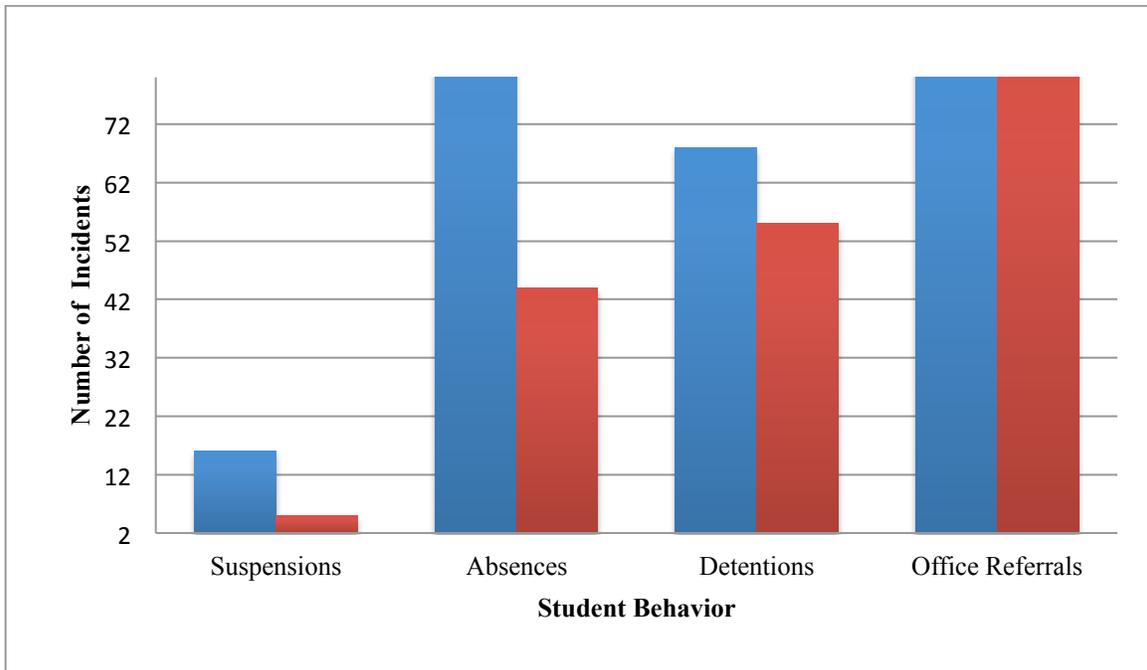
The purpose of this study was to determine whether teacher absenteeism negatively impacted the behavior and attendance of students in the 8th grade. Teacher data was limited to number of days absent and days tardy. Student data focused on number of suspensions, office referrals, and detentions. The data from this study produced partial support for the hypothesis that teacher absenteeism would not affect student attendance and behavior. A t-test was used to determine if there was a statistical influence between teacher attendance and student behavior/attendance.

For the purpose of this study, teachers were classified into two groups, low and high. Low group referred to those teachers having fewer than ten days absent or late, and high group signified those having more than ten occasions of being absent or late. Of the five teachers in this sample as it relates to absences, two teachers were in the low group and three in the high. With regard to lateness, three teachers were in the low group and two in the high group.

As data indicated, there was no significant difference between number of the suspensions of students taught by teachers with low or high rates of absenteeism, $t(3) = -2.87$, $p = .06$. Also revealed was that there was no significant difference in the attendance of students taught by teachers with low or high rates of absences, $t(3) = -.980$, $p = .40$. Figure 1 shows that teacher attendance did not influence the number of office referrals submitted by teachers with low or high rates of absenteeism, $t(3) = -.454$, $p = .68$. Lastly, there was no statistical evidence to support that teacher absenteeism affects the number of detentions issued $t(3) = -.2.856$, $p = .065$.

Figure 1

Effect of Teacher Absences on Student Behavior



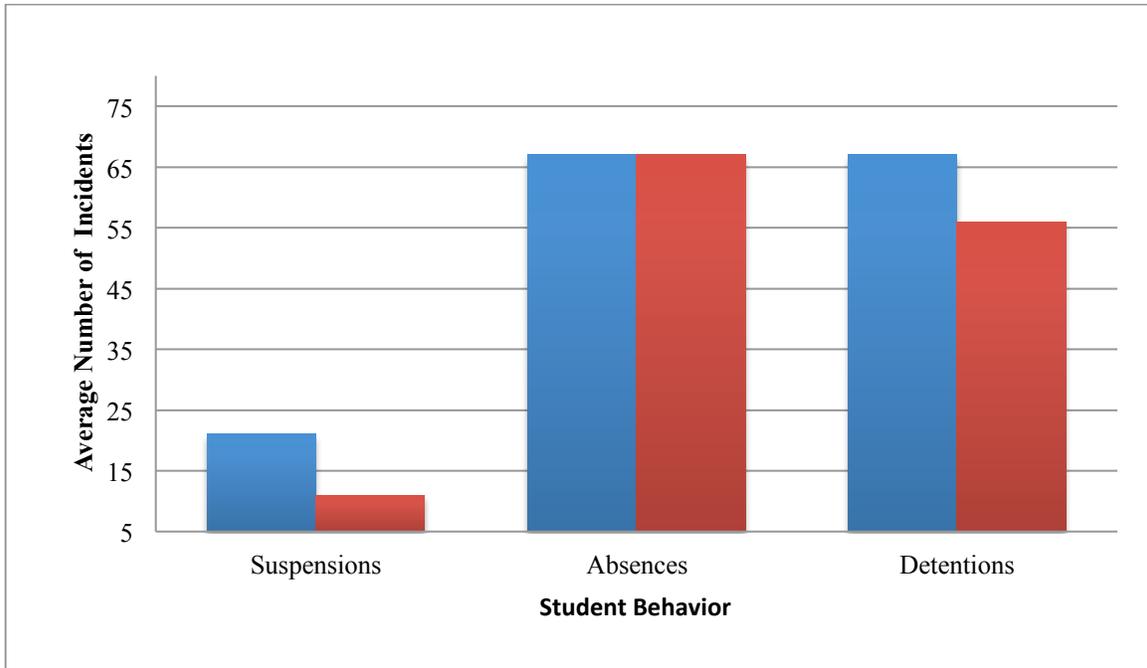
Teacher lateness had more of an influence on student suspensions, attendance, and detentions. The data reflected in Figure 2 indicates that there was a significant difference between the number of suspensions of students taught by teachers with low or high number of days tardy, $t(3) = -3.57$ $p < .05$. Figure 2 shows a mean number of suspensions of 10.00 for students taught by the teachers in the low group and a mean of 15.00 by teachers in the high group. Also affected by teacher lateness was the number of days students were absent. The statistics showed a meaningful difference between the number of days absent of students instructed by teachers with low or high number of days late to work, $t(3) = -4.16$ $p < .05$. According to Figure 2, student absences are represented by a mean of 67.00 for students taught by teachers with a high rate of tardiness, whereas students taught by teachers with low rate of tardiness had a mean of 66.00. Lastly, teachers who had high number of days late to work had more students in detentions than those who were not consistently late to work,

$t(3) = -3.29$ $p < .05$. Figure 2 data reflects the mean number of detentions issued by teachers.

There was no major difference between the number of office referrals of students taught by teachers with either high or low rates of tardiness, $t(3) = -.367$ $p > .05$.

Figure 2

Effect of Teacher Tardiness on Student Behavior



CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The null hypothesis that teacher attendance would not affect student behavior and attendance of 8th grade students was neither supported nor rejected. As indicated in the previous chapter, teacher absenteeism had no significant influence on the attendance and behavior of the students. There was no difference in the attendance or behavior of students taught by teachers with high or low rates of absences.

The data discussed in Chapter IV reflected that teacher tardiness had more of an influence on students than when teachers were not physically present. Students who were taught by the teachers with a high rate of tardiness had a significant number of suspensions, detentions, and days away from school when compared with students who were instructed by teachers with a low number of days tardy.

Implications/Theoretical Consequences

The results of this study indicate that behavior and attendance of 8th grade students were not significantly affected by teacher absences. Students are used to routine. Even when teachers are absent, students are accustomed to the routine of having a substitute. When teachers are absent, the substitute at least is left with a lesson plan, which makes it easier for students to become engaged in instruction because they enter the classroom with some structure and order in place. Presumably, the teachers in this study leave quality lesson plans during their absences; if so, this could account for why the researcher saw no meaningful effect of absence on student behavior and attendance.

In contrast, teacher tardiness did influence the number of detentions, suspensions, and days absent by students. As it relates to teacher tardiness, students are not used to the

unsettledness of teachers coming in after the school day has begun. Too many variables of classroom structure and routine are affected when teachers arrive late. Usually another teacher or support staff serves as a warm body for that particular classroom until the teacher of record arrives. This means that the individual placed in the room may not have a relationship with the students. In some cases, classes have to be combined. In either case, this causes irregularity throughout the team. It is not unreasonable to conclude that the degree of dysfunction caused by teacher tardiness is the reason there was a significant difference in the student behavior and attendance of students taught by teachers with high number of days late when compared with teachers with low number of days tardy.

Threats to Validity

There are several factors that pose a threat to the validity of this study. One external source of threats to validity includes differential selection. For this study, the students and teachers were not randomly selected. With the 8th grade students representing only 15% of the population and 8th grade teachers only 7% of the instructional staff, the study is not externally valid.

Internal threats to validity include the history of the subjects included in the study. The researcher did not examine why the teachers may have been absent or late on any given day. There are assumptions throughout this study and in prior research that teachers are irresponsibly missing days when, in fact, they may have legitimate reasons for being absent. The reasons why students are acting out or missing school were not investigated in any manner. In every classroom, there are students who have severe learning and emotional disabilities which contribute to the manifestation of undesirable behaviors.

Using the attendance and reliability program to track teacher attendance proved to be a useful tool; however, the daily documenting by office personnel was inconsistent. On some days teachers claimed that the sign in and late book were unavailable or some teachers just refused to sign in on any particular day, thus producing inaccurate data. For example, the teacher with highest number of absences had no documented number of days tardy. The chance of a teacher who was out for more than sixty days having no occurrences of being late seems questionable.

Connections to Previous Studies

Teacher nonattendance adversely influences student achievement and student attendance, consequently also negatively affecting school climate and culture (Hess & Copeland, 2001). Teacher attendance and the impact it has on student achievement is a topic that has been researched over the past decade. The effect of teacher attendance on student behavior has not been specifically researched or intensely investigated. Notwithstanding, this researcher found marginal similarities to previous studies. Most current research has focused on the effect of teacher attendance on student achievement in urban schools. There has been very little attention paid to the effect of teacher attendance on student behavior. This could be due to the assumption that student achievement and student behavior are one in the same. It is not unreasonable to believe that many educators and proponents of educational research understand that acceptable student behavior is a prerequisite for academic accomplishment.

Implications for Future Research

Future investigations into teacher attendance and the influence it has on student behavior would be beneficial to education. Teachers are the most important school-based determinant of student academic success (Miller, 2012). Educators can agree that if student behavior is not up to par, then the idea of being successful academically is impossible. There are a few components

that can be taken from the current study to be considered for future examination. For one, the population should be randomly selected. Secondly, the duration of the study should be taken into consideration. Lastly, how the data is collected and about whom should be closely monitored.

The researcher chose a convenient sample for this study. As a result, the data collected was somewhat biased. In the future it would be prudent to perform the study across a whole school and not just with any particular grade level or content area. This is important for a variety of reasons. The study school has students in grades six to twelve, and eighth graders are at a different stage of adolescent development than upperclassmen. That being said, students at this stage of development will display certain negative behaviors, and it has nothing to do with whether or not a teacher is absent or tardy.

Duration of any particular research project is instrumental to the validity of the study. For the purpose of future studies, it is crucial to conduct research related to this topic over an extended period of time. In this case, the data on the teachers and students covered a period of seven months. It would be beneficial to examine the results after a complete school year at least. There would be so many other variables that could come into consideration during that period of time, variables that could have an effect on teacher attendance and student behavior. For instance, something as simple as weather-related issues, illness, and testing can contribute to teacher and student absences. The more time allowed, the more likely situations would present themselves.

Human imperfection, coupled with flawed system processes, contributed to inconsistent and abnormal data collected for this study. For example, the teacher with the highest number of absences, 74 to be exact, had zero days tardy according to sign-in sheets. In the future, the

researcher suggests restructuring the monitoring of teacher attendance. That may involve finding a school or school system that requires teachers to actually use a time clock or time stamp to oversee attendance. That same adjustment should apply to how the student behavior records are tracked.

Conclusion

This study was an attempt to investigate the impact of teacher attendance on student behavior and attendance of 8th grade students in an urban 6-12 charter school. It has been concluded that teacher absences did not negatively influence student behavior or attendance. Teacher lateness did adversely impact student suspensions, detentions, and attendance. It is still the researcher's belief that while urban school districts across the country struggle to improve student achievement and discipline, they may be overlooking one of the most important aspects of teacher effectiveness: every teacher being regularly on the job, teaching kids.

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