



The Hidden Cost of Empty Classrooms: Teacher Absenteeism, Substitute Shortages

And What School Leaders Can Do Now



I. Abstract

Teacher absenteeism management has become one of the most pressing operational challenges facing school leaders in the United States. Up to 10% of teachers are absent on any given school day in some districts, more than double the pre-pandemic rate. When a teacher is absent and no qualified substitute is available, classrooms don't run; they stall. Non-teaching staff cover lessons they weren't trained to deliver. Students lose instruction time they can't recover. And school leaders spend hours on logistics that should have been handled by a functioning coverage system.

The research is unambiguous about the consequences. Ten additional teacher absences in a school year produce a measurable drop in student achievement, equivalent to roughly 1.2% of a standard deviation in math performance. That figure compounds across a school's population. For private schools, independent K-12 founders, and vocational school directors operating without deep administrative infrastructure, the burden of managing teacher absences falls on a very small number of people, often just one.

This article examines the scale of post-pandemic teacher absenteeism, its documented impact on students and school operations, the substitute shortage that removes the traditional safety net, and the practical steps school leaders can take today to manage teacher absences more systematically.

1. The Scale of Teacher Absenteeism Management in U.S. Schools Today

Teacher absenteeism management has moved from a background operational concern to a front-line leadership challenge. The data confirms a trajectory that school administrators have been experiencing firsthand. Teacher absences are significantly more frequent than they were before 2020, and the systems most schools relied on to manage them have not kept pace.

A 2025 analysis from the Brookings Institution found that teacher absences surged in the years following the pandemic. In some districts, up to 10% of teachers were absent on any given school day, compared to a pre-pandemic average closer to 6% [4]. That four-percentage-point increase may sound modest in the abstract sense. But, in a school with 20 teachers, it means that on any given day, there is a meaningful probability that two classrooms are operating without their assigned instructor.

Federal data from the National Center for Education Statistics School Pulse Panel (2022) quantified the national picture at the school level. Nearly three in four public schools reported higher chronic teacher absenteeism in the post-pandemic period. Simultaneously, 77% of schools reported greater difficulty filling substitute positions, and 74% reported relying on non-teaching staff to cover classes when substitutes weren't available [6].

1.1 How Post-Pandemic Conditions Changed the Teacher Absence Baseline

Before 2020, teacher absenteeism was a known but manageable challenge. Most schools had functional substitute pools and administrative protocols that could absorb a predictable number of daily absences without significant disruption. The pandemic disrupted both sides of that equation simultaneously.

On the absence side, extended periods of remote work, pandemic-related illness, and sustained burnout increased the frequency and duration of teacher absences. On the coverage side, the substitute teacher workforce shrank. Many substitute teachers left the profession during school closures and did not return. The result was a coverage gap that persists today, as documented extensively by Brookings and the Learning Policy Institute [4, 8].

The Learning Policy Institute's 2025 national teacher shortage scan found that at least 411,500 teaching positions nationally were either unfilled or





filled by underqualified teachers, representing approximately one in eight positions [8]. While this figure encompasses full-time vacancies, rather than daily absences, it reflects the same underlying workforce condition that makes substitute shortages so persistent. There aren't enough qualified people available to cover the classrooms that need coverage.

2. What Teacher Absenteeism Does to Student Achievement

The causal link between teacher absences and student outcomes is one of the better-established findings in education research. It's not a correlation between generally disorganized schools and low performance. It's a direct, measurable effect that shows more teacher absences produce lower student achievement, controlling for other factors.

The foundational study on this question comes from Miller, Murnane, and Willett, published as a National Bureau of Economic Research working paper. Their longitudinal analysis of one urban school district found that each 10 additional teacher absences in a school year reduced student math performance by approximately 1.2% of a standard deviation. And English Language Arts performance is reduced by approximately 0.6% of a standard deviation [1]. These aren't trivial effects. In a classroom where multiple teachers accumulate absences above typical thresholds, the cumulative impact on instruction is substantial.

10 additional teacher absences per year produce a drop of approximately **1.2% of a standard deviation** in student math performance. The effect on reading is smaller but consistent at **0.6% of a standard deviation**. These figures hold after controlling for school characteristics and prior achievement levels.

2.1 Why Substitute Coverage Doesn't Neutralize the Academic Impact

A reasonable assumption is that a competent substitute teacher largely preserves instructional continuity when a teacher is absent. However, the research doesn't support this assumption. Substitute teachers, particularly those called in on short notice without familiarity with the curriculum or the students, typically deliver lower-quality instruction than the assigned teacher. They manage classroom behavior differently, often spending a disproportionate share of class time on transitions and discipline, rather than content delivery.

The Brookings Institution's analysis of substitute teacher shortages confirmed that disadvantaged schools are hit hardest, both because they face greater difficulty recruiting substitutes and because their students are more vulnerable to instructional disruption [5]. The combination of higher absence rates and lower-quality substitute coverage in under-resourced schools creates a double disadvantage that aggregate performance data understates.

2.2 The Relationship Between Teacher Attendance and Teacher Effectiveness

Research from the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, published in the *Journal of Human Resources*, found that a teacher's contribution to reducing unexcused student absences is nearly as stable a measure of teacher effectiveness as their contribution to student achievement scores [3]. This finding has a direct implication for teacher absenteeism management. Teachers who are consistently present are not only delivering more instruction, they're also reinforcing student attendance habits. Teacher absence and student absenteeism are not independent problems; they're linked through the relational and motivational dynamics of the classroom.

A subsequent study from the National Association of Elementary School Principals confirmed the practitioner intuition behind this finding. School leaders interviewed for the 2024 NAESP report described teacher attendance as one of the clearest signals of school culture health, noting that patterns of teacher absenteeism often cluster by department, grade level, or time of year in ways that reveal underlying engagement or leadership issues [9].





3. The Substitute Teacher Shortage: A Problem That Compounds the Problem

For most of the history of modern schooling, the substitute teacher pool served as the primary buffer against teacher absences. When a teacher called in sick, a substitute covered the class, instruction continued at a reduced, but acceptable level, and the school day proceeded largely as planned. That buffer has eroded significantly since 2020, and in many schools it has effectively disappeared.

The Brookings Institution documented the structural nature of the shortage in an analysis focused specifically on substitute availability and its relationship to student outcomes. Schools in disadvantaged communities face the greatest difficulty filling substitute positions, and the gap between the schools that most need coverage and the schools that can actually obtain it has widened [5].

Coverage without qualified substitutes falls to whoever is available. So, administrators pulled from their offices, paraprofessionals asked to lead instruction they aren't trained to deliver, or teachers given additional classes during what should be their preparation periods. Each of these solutions imposes a cost. That goes to say, administrators lose time they would otherwise spend on leadership and school improvement. Accordingly, paraprofessionals provide supervision rather than instruction. Teachers who lose preparation time arrive at their next class less prepared.

3.1 What the Data Shows About Substitute Availability Post-Pandemic

The NCES School Pulse Panel data from 2022 is among the most comprehensive federal snapshots of the substitute shortage at the school level. Seventy-seven percent of public schools reported increased difficulty finding substitutes, as compared to before the pandemic. And then, 74% reported that non-teaching staff were regularly covering classes, as a result [6]. These figures represent a structural shift, not a temporary disruption. Schools adapted to the shortage by redistributing coverage burden internally, and that redistribution has become the new normal for a large share of U.S. schools.

Reporting from Concordia and Indiana Universities, cited in Journalist's Resource (2023), added practitioner texture to the quantitative picture. School administrators described their substitute recruitment situation as "scraping the bottom of the barrel," with some districts accepting applicants who would not have been considered before the pandemic [10]. Almost three in four public schools in that analysis reported higher chronic teacher absenteeism alongside

the substitute shortage, confirming that both problems are operating simultaneously, rather than alternating.

3.2 The Vocational and Private School Dimension of Substitute Scarcity

The substitute shortage literature focuses primarily on public school districts, but the structural dynamics apply with equal or greater force to private schools and vocational training centers. Private schools and vocational programs often cannot access district-level substitute pools and must recruit their own coverage independently. Vocational school directors face an additional constraint. Finding a substitute who is both willing to cover and qualified to deliver vocational content is considerably harder than finding general-education coverage.

For a vocational school director managing a program in automotive technology, healthcare administration, or culinary arts, an absent instructor without a qualified substitute doesn't just mean lower-quality instruction. It may mean a class that cannot run at all, because the practical, hands-on nature of vocational content requires specific expertise that general substitutes don't have.

4. The Financial and Operational Cost of Unplanned Teacher Absences

Teacher absenteeism imposes costs that show up in multiple places on a school's ledger simultaneously, and most schools don't track them in aggregate. Substitute pay is the most visible cost, but it's rarely the largest one. The full cost includes administrative time, instructional quality loss, and the downstream effects on student outcomes that affect both enrollment and retention.

The NAESP's 2024 analysis of teacher absenteeism noted that teacher absences cost school districts billions annually when substitute pay, administrative time, and instructional impact are aggregated [9]. That figure applies primarily to large public school systems with formalized substitute pay structures. For private schools, the cost calculation looks different, but the aggregate burden is no less real. It's simply distributed differently, falling more heavily on administrative bandwidth and instructional continuity than on a substitute payroll line.





4.1 The Administrative Burden Schools Rarely Measure

When a teacher calls in absent, someone has to find coverage. In a large district, that process may be handled by a dedicated substitute coordinator using automated placement software. In a smaller school, it falls to whoever is available at 6:30 in the morning. That's typically the principal or school administrator. The time spent making calls, texting contacts, and reorganizing the day's schedule is real administrative labor that displaces other work.

Schools that track this time consistently report that a single unplanned absence requiring coverage can consume 30 to 60 minutes of administrative time, depending on how quickly coverage is secured. A school managing three to five unplanned absences per week, which is not unusual at current absenteeism rates, may be absorbing two to five hours of senior administrative time weekly on absence coverage logistics alone. That time incurs an opportunity cost that rarely appears in any formal budget analysis.

4.2 How Teacher Absenteeism Affects Staff Morale and Retention

The operational costs of teacher absenteeism extend beyond the immediate logistics of coverage. Teachers who are regularly asked to cover colleagues' classes during their preparation periods report higher levels of burnout and lower job satisfaction. The NAESP analysis of principal strategies for improving teacher attendance noted that chronic teacher absenteeism tends to be self-reinforcing. Thus, a school culture in which absences are frequent and coverage falls inequitably on available staff creates conditions that drive additional absences over time [9].

For schools operating with lean teams, this dynamic is particularly damaging. A school with ten teachers cannot easily distribute coverage burden across a large staff. When two or three teachers carry a disproportionate share of coverage duties, their resentment is visible, their preparation suffers, and their own attendance and retention risk increases. So, managing teacher absences isn't only a logistics problem; it's a culture and retention problem.

5. What Drives Teacher Absenteeism? Patterns and Root Causes

Not all teacher absences have the same cause, and not all causes respond to the same interventions. Schools that treat teacher absenteeism as a monolithic problem, to be addressed with blanket policies, consistently underperform schools that distinguish between absence types and address root causes directly.

Research from the University of Oslo, published in the *European Sociological Review* (2023), examined long-term effects of teacher absence on student outcomes across socioeconomic groups. The study found significant socioeconomic disparities in both the frequency of teacher absences and their impact, with students from lower-income backgrounds, experiencing larger negative effects from the same level of teacher absence than their more advantaged peers [2]. This finding suggests that the downstream cost of teacher absences isn't evenly distributed, reinforcing the importance of absence management as an equity issue, as well as an operational one.

5.1 Illness, Burnout, and Personal Leave: The Absence Type Distribution

The NAESP's analysis of teacher attendance patterns, drawing on a 2023 Annenberg Institute study of sick leave data, found that teacher absences cluster in predictable patterns across the school year [9]. Absence rates spike in the fall semester as seasonal illness peaks, again around high-stakes testing periods when stress is elevated, and toward the end of the year as fatigue accumulates. Schools that understand these patterns can plan coverage resources around them, rather than reacting to each absence as though it were unpredictable.

Burnout-related absences are structurally different from illness-related ones. A teacher taking sick days because of a respiratory infection will likely return to full attendance within a week. A teacher taking frequent personal days because of workload stress, inadequate administrative support, or a poor relationship with school leadership is exhibiting a pattern that will persist or worsen without targeted intervention. Distinguishing between these absence types requires visibility into patterns over time, not just daily headcounts.





5.2 The Role of School Leadership in Teacher Attendance

The NAESP's 2024 analysis described principal behavior as one of the most significant levers available for improving teacher attendance, citing evidence that school leaders who communicate clear attendance expectations, recognize consistent attendance and address problematic patterns directly, see measurably better outcomes than those who treat teacher absence as an HR matter, rather than a leadership one [9].

Schools where principals maintain visibility into individual teacher attendance patterns, rather than relying on aggregate absence counts, identify emerging problems earlier. A teacher who has missed five days in October may not trigger concern in a school reviewing only monthly totals. In a school where the principal reviews weekly attendance data by staff member, that pattern is visible at three days and addressable before it becomes chronic.

6. Why Private and Vocational Schools Face Disproportionate Exposure

The research literature on teacher absenteeism focuses almost entirely on public school districts, where data collection is systematic and sample sizes are large and significant enough for statistical analysis. Private schools, independent K-12 founders, and vocational school directors operate in a context that the literature describes only obliquely, but the structural dynamics are clear and the exposure is, if anything, greater than what public school research documents.

In a large public school, the absence of one teacher out of 80 is a logistics problem. In a school with 8 teachers, it's an operational crisis. The ratio of absent staff to available staff changes the severity of the problem by an order of magnitude. Smaller schools have fewer redundancies built into their staffing models, smaller or nonexistent substitute pools to draw from, and less administrative bandwidth to manage coverage logistics.

6.1 The Single-Point-of-Failure Risk in Small School Staffing

Many private schools and vocational programs have staffing structures in which one teacher is the sole qualified instructor for a subject, a program strand, or a student cohort. When that teacher is absent, the course doesn't run with a substitute. It either cancels, consolidates with another class, or runs as supervised independent study with no instructional value. This single-point-of-failure dynamic doesn't exist in large district schools, where subject departments provide internal coverage redundancy.

For vocational school directors, this risk is acute. A welding instructor, a licensed cosmetology trainer, or a certified phlebotomy educator cannot be replaced by a general substitute. Their absences create gaps in program delivery that affect student progress toward certification, not just daily attendance. A student in a competency-based vocational program who misses several instructional sessions due to instructor absence may fall behind on required hours and face delays in completing their program, which carries direct financial and enrollment consequences for the school.

6.2 How Teacher Absenteeism Intersects with Enrollment Stability

For private schools and vocational programs that depend on tuition revenue, teacher absenteeism management has a direct enrollment implication that public schools don't face in the same way. Parents and students choose private and vocational programs partly on the basis of program quality and instructional consistency. A school with a visible pattern of instructor absences, disrupted classes, and inadequate coverage damages its reputation among current families and prospective students.

Word-of-mouth in small school communities moves quickly. A parent who repeatedly hears that their child's class was covered by the front-desk administrator, instead of the assigned teacher, has a datapoint that affects their re-enrollment decision. Unlike a public school, a private or vocational school cannot count on a captive enrollment base to absorb the reputational cost of operational inconsistency.





7. What This Evidence Tells Us: Synthesis and a Practitioner's Perspective

The point's we've made, so far, draw on ten independent sources, spanning peer-reviewed longitudinal research, federal data, institutional policy analysis, and practitioner journalism. Each source addresses a specific dimension of teacher absenteeism. That includes its frequency, its academic consequences, the substitute shortage that removes the traditional safety net, the financial costs it generates, or the root causes that drive it. This section is an attempt to consider what the evidence implies when read as a whole, and what experienced school operators recognize from daily practice that the research does not directly study.

The synthesis below represents editorial conclusions drawn from the cited evidence. The practitioner observations that follow reflect operational realities recognized by school administrators and directors that are mostly part of the broader DreamClass community. They're not drawn from cited research and are presented as such.

7.1 What the Research, Taken Together, Implies

The most important synthesis finding is one that no single source states directly. Teacher absenteeism management has shifted from a reactive administrative task to a proactive leadership function. And schools that haven't made that shift are carrying a risk they haven't fully priced.

The evidence establishes that teacher absences have increased substantially since 2020, that substitutes are harder to find than they were before, that the academic impact of teacher absence is measurable and cumulative, and that small and under-resourced schools absorb a disproportionate share of the operational burden. Taken together, those four findings describe a compounded risk that has no single mitigation. A school cannot solve the problem by hiring more substitutes if none are available. It cannot offset the instructional loss by extending the school day. What it can do is reduce the frequency and duration of absences through earlier intervention, better planning, and more systematic visibility into staff attendance patterns, before those patterns become chronic.

The research also implies, though does not state explicitly, that teacher absenteeism and student absenteeism are more tightly coupled than most school leaders treat them. When teachers are absent frequently, student attendance suffers. And when student attendance suffers, school culture weakens. A school that addresses teacher absenteeism management as an isolated staffing problem is managing symptoms. But a school that addresses it as a culture and systems problem is addressing the root.

7.2 What School Operators Know from the Field

The academic literature measures outcomes at scale. It does not capture what it feels like to run a small school on a Tuesday morning when two teachers have called in and the substitute list is exhausted. The following observations reflect what practitioners consistently report, and they aren't offered as research findings.

The most damaging absences are rarely the ones that were expected. A planned medical leave gives a school time to arrange coverage, communicate with parents, and maintain instructional continuity. An unplanned absence at 6:00 a.m. on a Thursday does none of those things. Schools that track absence patterns over time, develop an informal ability to anticipate which teachers are likely to be absent and when, but that anticipation is only useful if the school has a coverage system ready to deploy. Most smaller schools don't have that system formalized. They have a list of phone numbers and a hope.

Furthermore, teacher absenteeism problems almost never announce themselves in the aggregate. A school reviewing monthly absence totals sees a number. A school reviewing weekly absence data by individual staff member sees a pattern. Specifically, which teachers are accumulating absences, in which subjects, and on which days of the week. Friday and Monday absences that cluster around particular staff members are a well-recognized signal among experienced school leaders, but only visible to those who are looking at the right level of granularity.

Finally, the schools that manage teacher absenteeism best aren't the ones with the strictest absence policies. They're the ones where staff feel known, supported and accountable, in that order. Visibility is the precondition for accountability. Accountability without support drives additional absences, rather than reducing them. The operational implication is that staff attendance tracking needs to be paired with a leadership approach that uses the data to support teachers, not just to discipline them.

8. Recommendations for School Leaders and Directors

The following recommendations are grounded in the research reviewed in this article and the practitioner observations documented in the synthesis section above. They're ordered to reflect the sequence in which most schools can realistically implement them, starting with visibility and moving toward systemic change.





These recommendations apply equally to private school administrators, independent K-12 founders and vocational school directors. The specific implementation details will differ by school size and structure, but the underlying logic is consistent. Teacher absenteeism management is a leadership function, not an administrative afterthought. And it requires the same level of systematic attention as student achievement or enrollment management.

8.1 Seven Operational Steps for Immediate and Near-Term Implementation

1. **Build individual staff attendance tracking into your weekly review routine.** Aggregate absence counts are insufficient. You need visibility into which teachers are absent, how often and in what patterns. A weekly review of individual staff attendance data, even a simple one, gives you the early-warning signal that monthly totals obscure.
2. **Define your absence threshold for proactive intervention.** Research points to cumulative absence patterns as the key indicator. Set a specific threshold, for example five absences in a semester, at which a conversation with the teacher occurs. The goal of that conversation is to understand the cause and offer support, not to issue a warning. Absence patterns that are addressed early, rarely become chronic ones.
3. **Build and maintain a tiered coverage plan before you need it.** Your coverage plan should have at least three tiers: qualified substitutes, internal staff willing to cover, and emergency consolidation protocols. The time to build this plan isn't the morning of an absence. Schools that have a documented coverage plan in place before absences occur, handle them in significantly less administrative time.
4. **Formalize substitute relationships, rather than relying on cold calls.** Substitutes who have a relationship with your school, know your students and understand your expectations, are meaningfully more effective than strangers recruited at the last minute. Even a small school can cultivate two or three reliable substitutes through early outreach, orientation, and occasional planned placements, before an emergency requires them.
5. **Track the operational cost of teacher absences, not just the frequency.** Know how many hours of administrative time each absence type consumes, what substitute costs run per absence, and how coverage burden is distributed across your staff. That data makes the case for investment in better systems and reveals whether coverage burden is falling inequitably on specific team members.
6. **Address the intersection of teacher attendance and school culture directly.** The research and the practitioner literature both point to school culture as a primary driver of teacher attendance. Schools where teachers feel known,

supported, and purposeful have lower absenteeism rates than schools where those conditions are absent. This is a leadership responsibility, not an HR one.

For vocational programs specifically, develop competency-based contingency plans for instructor absence. Because vocational instructors often cannot be replaced by general substitutes, the absence plan for vocational courses needs to be designed around the curriculum, not around staffing assumptions. Identify which program components can be completed independently, which require direct instruction, and what the minimum continuity threshold is for student progress toward certification. Document that plan before an absence requires it.



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Peer-Reviewed & Institutional Sources

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