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## News Nuggets

Districts "Cutting Down" on Teacher Absences: Will they use an Axe, Weed Trimmer or Bulldozer?

May is the time to maximize student learning. But, May follows a period of maximum, high-stakes-test-related stress and fatigue.

In addition, teachers put off (often under principal-induced duress) appointments with physician, dentists, gynecologists and psychiatrists.

So, immediately following the high-stakes ordeal, teachers begin cashing in their "Sick Days" and "Personal Days" as if these were a "Thanksgiving" bonus. District Cross Currents At the same time that teachers grab their moments of relief, school districts face: Budgets that are running short

"Use it or Lose it" restraints that force squandering money now

The problem of keeping substitute money in reserve, or worse, exceeding the budget allotment for paying substitutes Of course, school district under book and under budget the funds required for paying substitutes. This makes the school district's executive leaderships appear to be incompetent. School district leaders become squeamish about this under budgeting when the "budget deviance" becomes apparent.

So, district executives institute a "program to remedy" the situation. Blame Teachers? Of Course! An initiative to resolve a "problem" must address what the problem is. In this case the argument goes like this:

Students learn better when their teachers are teaching them. Teachers are not teaching their students when they are at a doctor's or dentist's office or recuperating from triple by-pass surgery Therefore: Teachers are the problem.

Solution: Clamp down on teachers that leave the classroom for any reason. Research & Research; Researchers who should know more about the "real world of teaching" come down on the side of school district administrators in seeing teacher absence as a "problem to be addressed." "In the past year, research papers from economists at Harvard University's graduate school of education and Duke University in Durham, N.C., have argued that teacher absences have a small but significant negative effect on student achievement as shown by test results. Both groups point to previous research that suggests ways of reducing such absences. The researchers note, for instance, that the more generous leave provisions are, the more days on average are taken. They also say it is worth considering incentive plans that, typically, reward exceptional attendance or pay teachers for earned leave they don't take. Another promising approach, according to the researchers, is to require teachers to report time off to their principal directly, rather than to the central office or an answering machine." Source: Education Week Published Online: April 28, 2008

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And there are proposed remedies: Some positive, some punitive, some draconian &

And, there is an attempt to twist research to show that students learn more from their teacher than they learn from a substitute. (What else is new?)

But what researchers fail to understand is that much more money was wasted when teachers were paid to be in class and focus upon high-stakes test practice. Bailing out on the curriculum to teach-to-the-test subtracts more student learning than what learning is lost when the teacher is absent because of a sick day or personal day.

And the number of days that students learning is "hijacked" because of test practice (or benchmark testing) exceeds the number of days that most teachers are away from the class for personal reasons.

And, those school districts that run a rigorous "teacher training program" pull teachers out of the classroom far more days than the sick-day, personal-day total time that teachers "enjoy."

Other bits of "real world wisdom" that are missing from the "research equation" include: The number of hours that Special Education and Regular teachers are removed from class to conduct Special Education Planning Meetings

The amount of uncompensated (unpaid) time that teachers spend each day outside the ordinary work day

The fact that teachers initiate contact with sick and unhygienic children places teachers at a higher risk illness

The tendency of school districts to hire younger, inexperienced teachers in lieu of hiring veteran teachers (who earn much more). These teachers will tend to have children, and need to be away from the classroom to take care of family needs.

Perhaps these up-tight, penny-clutching experts would like to see a return to the "one room schoolhouse" days where teachers were unmarried, lived with a local family, and were fired if they became pregnant (or even if they married).

Why, they became more expensive and the community didn't want to pay. Entitlement: The Warped View of Twisted Minds The folks that argue that teachers see sick days and personal days as an "entitlement" are clueless about education.

These pundits view substitute teachers as a budget drain and a cost center lack an understanding of the important role that substitutes play on a campus team. With the tiny amount of money that most substitutes make, school districts are lucky to have any names on the substitute roster. Campus manager that form a supportive mutual relationship with

great substitutes know that they have to keep these folks employed, or they are lost. Community Responsibility Sure, our communities do not want to pay the cost of educating our children, and prefer to operate our school systems "on-the-cheap." But, this is the fault of a "wrong-headed mentality" and bad advice; not the fault of teachers.

But, many folks are jealous of teachers because teachers enjoy one of the most personally rewarding (although not financially so) professions in the world. Teachers receive love and "warm fuzzies" from children, and teachers watch children improve, grow, learn, blossom before their eyes.

So, why begrudge teachers a deserved (earned, needed) sick and personal day benefit when teachers' salaries remain artificially low?

It is time to send the mean-spirited, clueless "researchers" to work at teachers' pay, give them extra work to do at night and demonstrate just how much that teachers work for the meager salary and benefits that they receive.

"Bean counter-experts" (pun intended) produce educational improvement plans that are not "worth a hill of beans." The Real Solution The real solution for these substitute woes is to hire full-time, highly trained substitutes and integrate them into the campus staff. This strategy would...

Ensure that the substitutes kept instruction moving at the same, high level that the regular teacher maintains

Ensure continuity in daily classroom routines since the substitutes would be familiar with each classroom and each teacher's classroom management

Ensure high behavior standards because the substitutes would know the children, and know of individual, special needs.

Allow school budgets to reflect real budget needs, instead of the under budgeting management that causes difficulties at this time in the school year

If we want a quality education for our students, we have to be willing to pay for the components of that education. And, paying for substitute teachers is just one of those costs.

School district executive managers should just get used to the fact that quality education is an investment, not a money drain.

We can invest our money in many ways that produce little payoff, or we can invest in education and harvest long-term social and societal rewards.

If our children and our families benefit from our investment in education, so be it.

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