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Teacher Absences at Portland Public Schools:  
Opportunities for Savings

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A report by the District Performance Auditor  
June 2012

**PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
PORTLAND, OREGON**





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## MEMORANDUM

**To:** Board of Education

**From:** Richard C. Tracy, District Performance Auditor

**Date:** June 2012

**Re:** **Teacher Absences - Performance Audit**

Attached is my audit report entitled *Teacher Absences at Portland Public Schools: Opportunities for Savings*. I performed this audit in response to the 2011-12 Performance Audit Plan approved by the School Board.

I would like to thank the District management and staff for their assistance and cooperation in conducting this audit.

I look forward to meeting with you at upcoming Board and committee meetings to more fully discuss the report's findings and recommendations. Thank you for your ongoing support of performance auditing.

cc:  
Carole Smith  
Zeke Smith  
Jollee Patterson



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# SUMMARY

Over the past two years, teachers in the Portland Public School district (PPS) were absent an average of 15.6 days per year. On any given day, 9 percent of PPS teachers were absent on a regular instructional day. Teacher absences are higher in middle schools, at schools with higher percentages of low income and minority students, and in certain months of the year. There are also significant differences in the number and type of teacher absences at various schools.

Compared to other districts around the country, Portland teachers have higher absence rates but slightly lower rates than teachers working in other districts in Multnomah County. A 2003-04 national survey by the *National Center for Educational Statistics* found that public school teachers in the US averaged 9 to 10 days of absences each year. However, compared to five other districts in Multnomah County, Portland teachers averaged 15.6 absences versus an average of 16.5 days for the other districts.

Teachers are absent for several reasons including teacher and family illnesses, professional development and training, personal emergencies, and school demands that pull teachers from regular classroom duties. Research also points to other factors that influence the rate of teacher absences including leave provisions in teacher contracts, school management and working conditions, and the demographics of teachers and students at individual schools.

High teacher absences have several significant impacts. Financially, the cost of substitute teachers at PPS has increased from \$5.7 million in 2007-08 to over \$6.1 million in 2011-12, a 9.7 percent increase over the past four years. If PPS could reduce teacher absences to the national rate of 10 days per year, the district could save almost \$2.5 million annually. Simply reducing the average days of absence from 15 days to 13 days would result in \$1.1 million in reduced costs. In addition, research shows that teacher absences can adversely affect student achievement. Several studies have shown a statistically significant correlation between high teacher absences and lower student achievement, particularly in math.

To lower teacher absence rates, I make several recommendations on page 37 of this report. In brief, the district should more actively manage teacher leave, seek to revise certain union contract provisions, and improve absence monitoring and reporting.





# INTRODUCTION

**I**n accordance with the provisions of the contract between the Portland Public Schools and Portland Association of Teachers (PAT), teachers may take paid leave from the instructional day for a variety of reasons including employee and family illness, personal leave, professional development, and bereavement. Teachers may also miss classroom duties for various school and district determined needs such as training, planning, and other duties. When regular teachers are not available for normal classroom teaching duties, the district hires substitute teachers to replace them.

This report evaluates the rates of teacher absences over the past two years and the use and costs of substitute teachers, and compares teacher absences at PPS to national and local levels. The report also highlights the potential academic impact of teacher absences on student achievement and assesses the factors that contribute to teacher absences. A detailed description of the report objectives, scope, and methodology is presented on page 7.

## **Union contract provisions for teacher leave**

**T**he contract between the Portland Public School district and the Portland Association of Teachers establishes a 190-day work year for teachers. A portion of the work year includes designated non-instructional days including paid holidays, teacher planning days, and professional development days. Teachers may also take additional paid leave on instructional days for specified purposes such as sick leave. Under certain circumstances, teachers may also take unpaid leave for purposes such as a leave of absence, career development, and child-care. The table below briefly summarizes the various union contract provisions for teacher leave.

**Figure 1 Summary of PPS teacher leave provisions**

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**Paid Non-Instructional Days**

Paid holidays	8 days	Labor Day, Veteran’s Day, Thanksgiving, New Years Day, MLK Day, President’s Day, Memorial Day
Teacher planning days	8 days	Can be used for planning and professional development.
Late opening days	Approximately 16 hours annually	School starts 2 hours late eight times during the year for training and other school administrative duties.

**Paid Leave**

Sick leave	10 days accrued annually	Unused sick days may be accumulated and carried-over to future years.
Family illness	Up to 3 days annually	Illness for immediate family members. Not accumulated. Unused days forfeited at year- end.
Funeral leave	Up to 7 days paid and 9 days partially paid	Various options based on travel requirements and relationship of family members.
Emergency/ Personal leave	Up to 3 days	Except for emergencies, one-week notice required for appointments that cannot be scheduled outside of work hours. Not accumulated. Unused days forfeited at year-end.
Professional leave	Up to 4 days annually	Accrues at the rate of 2 days per year.
Other leave	Various (paid and unpaid)	Jury duty, military leave, union business, workers comp.

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Source: Auditor summary of PAT Contract

## Hiring substitute teachers

**S**chool staff that spend most of their time in classroom instruction, primarily teachers and para-educators, must be replaced with a substitute when absent on an instructional day. Staff may call the district substitute office or use a web-based automated system to request a substitute. School secretaries at some schools arrange for substitutes themselves by requesting a replacement using the automated substitute system. In many cases, teachers and schools may request a specific licensed substitute teacher rather than hire a substitute from the general pool of available substitutes. According to the Substitute Office, the district is able to meet most requests for substitutes and cannot fill less than 1 percent of requests. When the district cannot find a substitute to replace an absent teacher, the school must provide classroom coverage with existing building staff.

Substitute teachers must meet Oregon state rules for certification. Substitute teachers must hold an Oregon teaching license, complete a satisfactory background check, and provide professional references. The Portland Association of Teachers also represents substitute teachers and the substitute teacher contract stipulates work hours, compensation, and other rights and responsibilities. Substitutes that work the equivalent of 70 full days in the preceding year may obtain twelve months of medical insurance from the district. If substitutes work 600 hours or more in a given school year, they are eligible for benefits under the Oregon Public Employee Retirement Plan. About 23 percent of substitutes qualified for retirement benefits in 2010-11.

PPS hires about 100 to 200 new substitute teachers each year. About 800 substitute teachers are available to fill in for teachers who are out of the classroom. As shown below, the typical substitute teacher works an average of 44 days a year in five different district schools. About 22 percent of the substitutes work in a single school and about one-third work in 10 or more schools.

**Figure 2 Substitute teachers employed in 2009-10 and 2010-11**

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	2009-10	2010-11
<b>Number of schools worked/year:</b>		
1	22.4%	22.7%
2-3	18.7%	16.4%
4-5	11.2%	10.5%
6-10	16.2%	17.0%
more than 10	31.5%	33.4%
<b>Average days worked:</b>		
Mean days	42.7	46.1
Number of substitutes	847	793

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Source: Auditor analysis of HR Substitute System data

## Previous audit on teacher absences

In March 2005, the Multnomah County Auditor and the City of Portland Auditor conducted a performance audit of the use of substitute teachers in six school districts in Multnomah County, including the Portland Public Schools. The purpose of the audit entitled *Teacher Leave Audit: Reduce leave and decrease costs*, was to determine whether school districts could save money by reducing spending for substitute teachers. The audit team reviewed spending, staffing, and absences due to sick and family illness leave and personal / emergency leave for the years 2002-03 and 2003-04.

The audit found that the districts could decrease the number of teacher absences, reduce expenditures for substitute teachers, and create more stable learning environments for students. The analysis showed that teachers in the six districts were absent on average from 8.2 days to 12.1 days each year due to illness and personal / emergency leave. Average annual sick leave ranged from an average of 4.5 to 7.0 days.

The audit made several recommendations to improve the management of teacher leave and substitute costs including:

- clarifying expected teacher attendance behavior
- assigning a district manager the responsibility for coordinating teacher absences and substitute use

- placing primary responsibility for management at the school building level
- regularly analyzing teacher absence data at the school and district-wide level
- consider adopting incentive and award systems to manage teacher absences

## Audit objectives, scope, and methods

The objective of the present audit was to evaluate teacher absences and substitute use at Portland Public Schools in 2009-10 and 2010-2011 to determine if opportunities exist to reduce teacher absences and substitute teacher spending.

To address this objective, we interviewed PPS executive management, HR managers and administrators, and PPS Budget and Finance Office staff. We reviewed the union contracts between the Portland School District and the Portland Teachers Association and compared the provisions on teacher leave to other local and national teacher contracts. We also analyzed data on teacher absences and substitute teacher use from the Aesop Substitute System managed by the PPS HR department. We excluded from our audit analysis all special schools except the three alternative schools included in absence reports produced by the PPS Data and Policy Analysis Office. We compared the substitute data to payroll data for the same period maintained by the PPS Payroll department and found the data from the two sources to be reasonably consistent. Our analysis of the impact of teacher demographics on absences was based on payroll data for 2009-10. Because our audit focus was teachers, we excluded from the substitute files records on other instructional staff who may have qualified for substitutes. Absentee rates (days absent per teacher) were calculated using the number of teachers in the substitute files. We also compiled comparable data on teacher absences from reports generated from the Multnomah County Educational Service District's Subfinder System for five other school districts in Multnomah County. To be consistent with our PPS analysis, all non-traditional schools (e.g. Charter schools) in other Districts were excluded from these calculations. Absence rates for these districts were calculated from Teacher FTE reported on the ODE Report Cards for these years.

In addition, we conducted a review of academic literature and other research studies on teacher absences and the financial and academic impact of substitute teachers. We also identified and collected information on teacher absence rates from national surveys and from studies conducted in other districts and states. We reviewed efforts taken in

other states to reduce the level and costs of teacher absences. Finally, we interviewed several principals at PPS schools to obtain their perceptions on teacher absences and methods to better manage teacher leave.

This audit was performed in accordance with the 2011-12 Audit Plan approved by the PPS School Board. I was assisted on this audit by an independent performance audit consultant, Kathryn Nichols. We performed fieldwork from January 2012 through April 2012. We conducted report writing in May and June of 2012. We conducted this audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient and appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for findings and conclusions based on audit objectives. I believe the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for the findings and conclusions based on the audit objectives. I have implemented an internal quality control process to ensure standards are met but have not undergone an external quality review as required by standards.

# AUDIT RESULTS

Over the past two years, Portland teachers were absent an average of 15.6 days during the instructional school year. On any given day, approximately 9 percent of teachers are out of their classrooms. Employee and family illness accounts for about 44 percent of these absences. Teacher absences vary significantly by school, by month, and by school and teacher characteristics. For example, schools with more minority and low-income students have higher teacher absence rates, and absences are higher at the end of the school year. Absence rates are somewhat influenced by the gender, tenure and experience of the teachers. Female teachers with 5 to 10 years of experience have higher rates than other groups.

Portland teachers have slightly higher rates of absences than their peers in other districts in the nation. Although methodologies may not be entirely comparable, studies in other districts show average teacher absences per year ranging from 9 to 14 days. However, compared to five other districts in Multnomah County where teacher absences averaged 16.5 days, Portland teacher absences are slightly lower - 15.6 days. Several factors contribute to teacher absences including occupational exposure to more illnesses, school demographics and culture, school management and oversight, and the leave provisions in union contracts.

Teacher absences have both financial and academic impacts. Substitute teachers at PPS cost the district over \$6 million in 2010-11 and these costs have increased by 9.7 percent the past four years. In addition, several national research studies have demonstrated a statistically significant correlation between teacher absences and lower student academic achievement in math. Reducing teacher absences in Portland through better management, reporting, and other methods could reduce costs and improve achievement, particularly for low-income and minority students. I estimate that possible savings could range from \$1.1 to \$2.5 million annually.

## Teacher absence trends and patterns

The following tables present information on teacher absences during the 2009-10 and 2010-11 school years. Teacher absence data are presented in the following formats:

- by grade level and school type
- by the reason for the absence
- by school characteristics - minority and low-income
- by day of week and month of year
- by teacher characteristics

### Teacher absences - grade level and school type

As shown in the table below, teachers at PPS schools were absent an average of 15.6 days in each of the past two years. Teachers at middle schools were absent at the highest rate, 16.4 days annually, followed by PK/K-5 schools at 15.9 days, PK/K-8 schools at 15.8, and 14.9 days at High schools. Teachers at Alternative schools were absent the fewest number of days during the school year - 12.4 days annually.

**Figure 3 Average teacher absence days at PPS schools: 2009-10 and 2010-11**

	'09-10	'10-11	2-year average
PK/K-5	15.4	16.4	15.9
PK/K-8	15.6	16.0	15.8
Middle schools	16.3	16.5	16.4
High schools	15.7	14.1	14.9
Alternative schools*	12.2	12.6	12.4
<b>ALL SCHOOLS</b>	<b>15.6</b>	<b>15.6</b>	<b>15.6</b>

Source: Auditor analysis of HR Substitute System data

\* This category only includes ACCESS, Alliance, and Metropolitan Learning Center

In addition to the number of days teachers are absent on average each year, we analyzed how many times on average teachers requested a substitute for either a day or



half day over a four year period. As shown in Figure 4 below, teachers made 16.5 percent more substitute requests in 2010-11 than four years ago in 2007-08. The number of “jobs” (substitutes requested) increased from 14.2 per teacher to 16.5 per teacher. Middle school teachers requested more substitutes (18.4 jobs) than teachers at elementary (17.3), high schools (14.6 jobs) or alternative schools (10.9 jobs).

We also analyzed trends in the percent of time teachers were out on leave on any given day. As shown in Figure 5 below, the daily percent of teachers out on leave increased from 8.5 percent in 2007-08 to 9.3 percent in 2010-11, a 9.2 percent increase over the four-year period. Again, a higher percent of middle school teachers are out on leave each day (10.4%) than teachers in elementary, high school, or alternative schools.

**Figure 4 Average number of jobs per teacher at PPS Schools: 2007-08 to 2010-11**

	'07-08	'08-09	'09-10	'10-11	change '07-08 to '10-11
Elementary	15.0	13.9	16.8	17.3	15.5%
Middle	15.1	15.4	17.5	18.4	22.1%
High	12.1	14.4	16.2	14.6	20.8%
Alternative	15.2	14.0	17.3	10.9	-28.2%
<b>ALL SCHOOLS</b>	<b>14.2</b>	<b>14.2</b>	<b>16.7</b>	<b>16.5</b>	<b>16.4%</b>

Source: Auditor compilation from annual reports obtained from the HR Substitute Office. Average number of jobs per individual teacher.

**Figure 5 Daily percent of teachers absent at PPS Schools: 2007-08 to 2010-11**

	'07-08	'08-09	'09-10	'10-11	change '07-08 to '10-11
Elementary	8.9%	8.2%	9.6%	9.8%	10.4%
Middle	8.9%	9.0%	10.1%	10.4%	16.6%
High	7.1%	8.5%	9.3%	8.2%	15.6%
Alternative	9.0%	8.2%	9.9%	6.2%	-31.5%
<b>ALL SCHOOLS</b>	<b>8.5%</b>	<b>8.4%</b>	<b>9.6%</b>	<b>9.3%</b>	<b>9.2%</b>

Source: Auditor compilation from annual reports obtained from the HR Substitute Office. Average number of school's teachers out per day. Based on total jobs, work days and number of teachers.

We also found that the two-year average of teacher absences at individual schools varied significantly. As shown in the tables below, the number of teacher absences at PK/K-5 schools ranged from a low of 9.2 days at Chapman to a high of 29.5 days at Kelly. For PK/K-8 schools, Creative Science had only 9.1 days of teacher absences while Cesar Chavez had 26 days of absences. Beaumont and Lincoln had the fewest teacher absence days for middle and high schools at 12.1 and 12.7, respectively. Lane had the highest number of absence days for middle schools at 21.9 and the Marshall Campus had the highest number of teacher absences at high schools at 18.1. Alliance alternative school had the fewest days of teacher absences at 9.0 days.

**Figure 6 Average teacher absence days, 2009-10 and 2010-11:  
PK/K-5, PK/K-8, Middle, High and Alternative schools**

<b>PK/K - 5</b>	<b>'09-10</b>	<b>'10-11</b>	<b>2-year average</b>	<b>PK/K - 8</b>	<b>'09-10</b>	<b>'10-11</b>	<b>2-year average</b>
Kelly	31.5	27.6	29.5	César Chávez	25.2	26.8	26.0
Whitman	19.1	22.5	20.8	Bridger	18.5	21.5	20.0
Chief Joseph	18.7	22.6	20.6	King	25.9	13.9	19.9
Markham	20.9	18.0	19.4	Ockley Green	15.7	22.5	19.1
Sitton	22.1	16.7	19.4	Lee	17.9	18.0	17.9
Grout	17.5	21.0	19.3	Woodlawn	20.1	15.4	17.7
Woodmere	16.0	20.4	18.2	Rigler	17.2	17.8	17.5
Rosa Parks	17.7	18.6	18.2	Peninsula	14.8	19.9	17.4
Glencoe	15.3	19.6	17.4	Scott	14.7	19.9	17.3
Atkinson	14.7	19.4	17.1	Sabin	16.4	18.1	17.2
James John	18.9	14.8	16.9	Vestal	16.0	18.4	17.2
Capitol Hill	13.9	19.0	16.4	Sunnyside Environ.	16.1	16.8	16.4
Lewis	15.3	16.9	16.1	Vernon	17.1	15.1	16.1
Abernethy	13.9	16.8	15.3	Humboldt	13.9	18.2	16.1
Ainsworth	13.3	16.9	15.1	Harrison Park	15.8	15.9	15.9
Richmond	15.4	12.9	14.2	Marysville	16.0	15.4	15.7
Maplewood	11.7	16.2	13.9	Creston	14.7	16.4	15.6
Llewellyn	13.0	14.6	13.8	Skyline	14.8	15.7	15.2
Duniway	14.6	12.6	13.6	Beverly Cleary	15.1	15.2	15.2
Woodstock	13.4	13.4	13.4	Roseway Heights	18.2	12.0	15.1
Bridlemile	12.9	13.5	13.2	Beach	15.0	14.7	14.8
Alameda	12.4	13.5	12.9	Hayhurst	15.3	12.0	13.6
Stephenson	11.9	13.7	12.8	Arleta	13.2	13.9	13.5
Buckman	10.4	11.9	11.1	Lent	11.6	15.3	13.5
Forest Park	9.3	12.0	10.6	Boise-Eliot	13.7	13.1	13.4
Rieke	9.6	10.2	9.9	Laurelhurst	13.4	13.2	13.3
Chapman	8.8	9.5	9.2	Irvington	10.7	15.5	13.1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15.4</b>	<b>16.4</b>	<b>15.9</b>	Faubion	13.1	12.4	12.8
				Astor	12.4	10.8	11.6
				Winterhaven	11.0	10.7	10.9
				Creative Science	10.4	7.8	9.1
				<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15.6</b>	<b>16.0</b>	<b>15.8</b>

<b>Middle schools</b>	<b>'09-10</b>	<b>'10-11</b>	<b>2-year average</b>
Lane	21.1	22.7	21.9
Hosford	21.2	20.9	21.1
George	17.5	17.9	17.7
Jackson	18.5	16.7	17.6
Gray	15.5	18.6	17.1
Sellwood	14.8	15.3	15.0
da Vinci	15.1	14.9	15.0
Mt. Tabor	15.3	13.5	14.4
West Sylvan	11.8	13.7	12.7
Beaumont	11.9	12.4	12.1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>16.3</b>	<b>16.5</b>	<b>16.4</b>

<b>High schools</b>	<b>'09-10</b>	<b>'10-11</b>	<b>2-year average</b>
Benson	18.0	16.6	17.3
Jefferson	18.3	15.9	17.1
Roosevelt	17.2	14.8	16.0
Madison	17.9	12.4	15.1
Franklin	14.9	13.5	14.2
Grant	14.4	13.2	13.8
Wilson	13.1	13.6	13.4
Cleveland	13.5	12.9	13.2
Lincoln	13.2	12.1	12.7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15.7</b>	<b>14.1</b>	<b>14.9</b>

<b>Alternative schools</b>	<b>'09-10</b>	<b>'10-11</b>	<b>2-year average</b>
ACCESS	17.0	13.1	15.0
Alliance	7.5	10.5	9.0
Metro. Learning Center	13.8	14.5	14.1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>12.2</b>	<b>12.6</b>	<b>12.4</b>

Source: Auditor analysis of HR Substitute System data

## Teacher absences - by reason for absence

As discussed in the Introduction, teachers may miss an instructional day for several reasons. The primary absence categories are:

- teacher and family illnesses
- emergencies and personal leave
- professional development and in-service training
- schools needs such as planning, conferences, and administrative tasks
- other leave including bereavement leave, jury duty, military, and leave without pay

As shown in the table below, the primary reason for teacher absences over the past two years is teacher and family illness. Teachers were out of the classroom an average of 7.1 days due to illness, about 44 percent of all the leave taken by teachers. The next most frequent reason for absence is professional development and in-service training at 3.6 days on average per teacher over each of the past two years and accounting for about 25 percent of the days teachers were absent. Teachers were out of the classroom an average of 2.1 days for emergency and personal leave and 1.5 days due to school needs associated with administrative or other school related non-instructional tasks. Other leave such as bereavement leave, jury duty, and unpaid leave accounted for about 1.2 days of absence annually. While the total number of absence days remained the same over the past two years, teacher and family illnesses absences declined by 8.5 percent but emergency and personal leave increased by 15 percent and professional development and in-service training increased 14.9 percent.

**Figure 7 Teacher absences by reason category: 2009-10 and 2010-11**

	'09-10	'10-11	% change	2-year average	% of total
Sick / Family Illness	7.5	6.8	-8.5%	7.1	43.7%
Emergency / Personal	2.0	2.3	15.0%	2.1	14.4%
Prof. Dev. / In-Service	3.4	3.9	14.9%	3.6	24.9%
School Needs	1.6	1.5	-10.7%	1.5	9.3%
Other	1.1	1.2	6.2%	1.2	7.7%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15.6</b>	<b>15.6</b>	<b>0.4%</b>	<b>15.6</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Auditor analysis of HR Substitute Office data

Individual schools vary significantly in the reasons teachers are out of the classroom. For example, as shown Appendix A, the number of days teachers are absent at PK/K-5 schools due to illness ranges from a low of 4 days at Rieke to 10.4 days at Chief Joseph. At PK/K-8 schools, teachers at Winterhaven are absent an average of 3.8 days due to illness compared to 11.1 days at Scott. Hosford middle school teachers took 10.8 days of leave for sick and family illness but Beaumont teachers took only 5.8 days. High schools have much less variation in days of absence due to illness - ranging from a high of 8.9 at Benson to 6.8 days at Wilson.

There are also significant variations between schools for other leave categories. The most pronounced differences are for absences due to professional development and in-service leave, and in the school needs category. For example, Appendix A shows the great variation in the number of days used for professional development and in-service training for PK/K-5, PK/K-8, Middle schools, and High schools. Llewellyn teachers took only 0.7 days of professional development and training while those at Sitton took 6.6 days, Laurelhurst teachers took 2.2 days of professional development and training compared to 10.8 for Cesar Chavez, Gray teachers took 1.2 days of training and Lane took 9.0 days, and Wilson teachers took 1.6 days and Jefferson teachers took 5.1 days.

Teacher absences due to “school needs” also show significant variation among schools. For example, while Chapman teachers were out of the classroom less than 1 day (0.7) for school needs, Kelly teachers averaged 11.1 days during the past two years. Similarly, teachers at Scott were out of their classrooms for only 0.3 days due to school needs but Lee teachers were out 5 days for this reason.

See Appendix A for more detailed results on absences by reason for all schools over the past two years.

## Teacher absences - school characteristics

A common finding in academic research is that teacher absenteeism is higher at schools serving higher percentages of minority and economically disadvantaged students. Consistent with these national studies we found a statistically significant correlation between overall teacher absences at PPS and the characteristics of schools. As shown in Figure 8 below, teachers in PPS schools with the highest percentages of minority students are out of the classroom an average of 3.7 days more annually than teachers in PPS schools with lowest percent of minority students. This difference is due to higher levels of absences due illness as well as leave for professional development and in-service training.

**Figure 8 Teacher absence rates by percent minority in school: 2-year average**

	Sick/ family illness	Personal/ emerg.	Prof. dev./ in- service	School needs	Other	TOTAL
Top quartile schools (68%+ minority)	7.5	2.2	4.6	1.6	1.5	<b>17.5</b>
2nd quartile (42%-67% minority)	7.2	2.1	4.6	2.0	1.3	<b>17.2</b>
3rd quartile (23%-42% minority)	7.0	2.0	2.9	1.4	0.9	<b>14.3</b>
Lowest quartile schools (less than 23% minority)	6.3	2.2	2.9	1.3	1.2	<b>13.8</b>
Differences between quartiles statistically significant at .05 level	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	<b>Yes</b>
Difference between top and lowest	1.2	0.0	1.7	0.3	0.3	<b>3.7</b>

Source: Auditor analysis of HR Substitute System data

Similarly, teacher absence rates are significantly higher at schools with a high percentage of students on free and reduced lunch (a proxy for low-income or poverty), compared to schools with a lower percent of students of low income. As shown below, the difference in this category is primary due to differences in the rate of absences due to professional development and in-service training. According to district officials, these additional professional development and training absences were intended to address lower student achievement rates at these schools.

**Figure 9 Teacher absence rates by percent on Free and Reduced Lunch:  
2-year average**

	Sick/ family illness	Personal/ emerg.	Prof. dev./ in- service	School needs	Other	TOTAL
Top quartile schools (77%+ FRL)	7.2	2.1	4.9	1.5	1.3	17.1
2nd quartile (45-76% FRL)	7.2	2.1	4.0	1.9	1.1	16.3
3rd quartile (24-44% FRL)	7.1	2.1	3.0	1.5	1.1	14.9
Lowest quartile schools (0-24% FRL)	6.5	2.1	3.0	1.6	1.3	14.5
Differences between quartiles statistically significant at .05 level	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Difference between top and lowest	0.7	0.0	1.9	-0.1	0.0	2.6

Source: Auditor analysis of HR Substitute System data

**Teacher absences - by day of week and month**

PPS teachers are more likely to be absent on Fridays than on other days of the week. As shown in Figure 10 below, teachers were absent over 63,000 hours and 3.4 days on Fridays in 2009-10 and 2010-11. Tuesdays and Thursdays are the second most frequent days of absence and Monday has the fewest days of absence. This finding is similar to findings of literature in other districts in the country but Mondays are more commonly higher absence days in other districts but not at PPS.

**Figure 10 All absences by day of week**

	Total hours		Days per/teacher		Percent of total		2-year average	
	'09-10	'10-11	'09-10	'10-11	'09-10	'10-11	Days/ teacher	Percent of total
Monday	50,856	49,076	2.7	2.6	17.5%	16.8%	2.7	17.2%
Tuesday	59,716	62,532	3.2	3.3	20.6%	21.4%	3.3	21.0%
Wednesday	54,156	57,484	2.9	3.1	18.7%	19.7%	3.0	19.2%
Thursday	61,424	59,940	3.3	3.2	21.2%	20.5%	3.3	20.8%
Friday	63,976	63,492	3.4	3.4	22.1%	21.7%	3.4	21.9%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>290,128</b>	<b>292,524</b>	<b>15.6</b>	<b>15.6</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>15.6</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Auditor analysis of HR Substitute System data



More significantly, teacher absences follow a seasonal pattern. As shown in Figure 11 below, teacher absences tend to be lower at the beginning of the school year (Sept, Oct, Nov and Dec) and higher at the end of the school year (April and May).

**Figure 11 All absences by month**

	Total hours		Days per teacher		Percent of total		2-year average	
	'09-10	'10-11	'09-10	'10-11	'09-10	'10-11	Days/teacher	Percent of total
September	14,992	18,268	0.8	1.0	5.2%	6.2%	0.9	5.7%
October	36,232	36,764	1.9	2.0	12.5%	12.6%	2.0	12.5%
November	24,412	25,140	1.3	1.3	8.4%	8.6%	1.3	8.5%
December	20,648	20,188	1.1	1.1	7.1%	6.9%	1.1	7.0%
January	29,352	31,312	1.6	1.7	10.1%	10.7%	1.6	10.4%
February	34,468	32,688	1.9	1.7	11.9%	11.2%	1.8	11.5%
March	33,528	31,444	1.8	1.7	11.6%	10.7%	1.7	11.2%
April	41,292	39,608	2.2	2.1	14.2%	13.5%	2.2	13.9%
May	39,436	42,540	2.1	2.3	13.6%	14.5%	2.2	14.1%
June	15,768	14,572	0.8	0.8	5.4%	5.0%	0.8	5.2%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>290,128</b>	<b>292,524</b>	<b>15.6</b>	<b>15.6</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>15.6</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Auditor analysis of HR Substitute data

These daily and seasonal patterns in teacher absences have two potential impacts. First, when unplanned absences cluster on certain days and months, it can create difficulties finding substitutes, particularly finding substitutes that have certification or background that meet the classroom needs. In addition, higher levels of absences at the end of the year can have negative impact on the continuity of instruction at a critical time in the school year when students must prepare for and take final examinations.

There are also patterns in particular types of absence taken and the day of the week and season of the absence. For example, when teachers have more discretion and incentive to use or lose the accrued absence such as for family illness days and personal days, teachers take more leave on Mondays, Fridays, and at the end of the year. For example, teachers take almost 27 percent of all family illness days and over 32 percent

of personal days on Friday. Almost 40 percent of personal days are used during the last three months of the school year. Unlike types of leave that are taken at the discretion of teachers, 54 percent of district mandated leave such as in-service training is taken on Tuesdays and Wednesdays when other teacher absences are the lowest.

### **Teacher absences - teacher demographics**

Based on our analysis of teacher demographics, including gender, marital status, age, tenure, we found the following:

- Female teachers are absent at slightly higher levels than male teachers.
- Marital status does not appear to make a difference in the level of teacher absenteeism.
- Teachers aged 31-35 have the highest absence levels (18 days annually), the youngest teachers are absent the least (12 days), and teachers over 60 have relatively high absence rates (16 days).
- Teachers with little or no tenure have low absenteeism (12.7 days), teachers with 5 to 10 years of experience are absent most (17.5 days), and the teachers with the 30+ years of tenure have relatively low absenteeism (11.9 days).

It is difficult to tell with certainty why there are differences in teacher absenteeism based on certain demographics. For example, it may be that teachers in the 31 - 35 age category are in the prime-child rearing years and require more leave throughout the year than teachers in other age categories. Additionally, teachers over 60 may be absent more due to the health issues of aging but teachers with long tenure may have exceptional commitment to their profession and take little leave as a result.

**Figure 12 Differences in teacher absences by demographics: 2009-10**

	Average days absent
<b>Gender*</b>	
Male	14.0
Female	15.2
<b>Marital status</b>	
Single	15.1
Married	14.3
<b>Age*</b>	
22-25	12.1
26-30	14.4
31-35	18.1
36-40	15.0
40-49	13.7
50-59	14.4
60+	16.5
<b>Tenure*</b>	
0-2 yrs	12.7
3-5 yrs	14.7
5-10	17.5
11-15	15.3
16-20	15.6
20-29	14.3
30+ yrs	11.9

Source: Auditor analysis of PPS Payroll files

\* Differences between groups are statistically significant at the .05 level

## PPS teacher absences compared to national and local rates

Compared to national statistics on teacher absences, PPS teachers take more days of leave. According to data gathered by the *National Center for Education Statistics* for the 2003-04 Schools and Staffing Survey for public school teachers around the country average between 9 and 10 days of absence each year. Several studies at individual school districts and in one state also show absence rates ranging from 11 days to 14.6 days, lower than at PPS:

- 11 days of sick and personal days in Phoenix, Arizona schools in 2006
- 11.3 total days in New York City schools in 2003
- 12.6 total days in Los Angeles schools in 1998
- 10 to 14 total days in North Carolina schools in 2007
- 14.6 total days in Burlington VT schools in 2009

According to a 2008 report from the *Center for American Progress*, 5.3 percent of public school teachers are absent on a given day. In the United Kingdom 3.2 percent of teachers are absent on an average day and in Queensland, Australia, 3.1 percent of teachers are absent on a given day. These rates compare to 9.3 percent at Portland Public Schools.

We also compared PPS teachers to the general working population. The *Bureau of Labor Statistics* reported the following daily absence rates for various labor sectors in 2006: 2.3 percent in the public sector, 1.7 percent in the private sector, 2.4 percent in community and social services, and 2.7 percent in the healthcare support sector. While these rates are significantly lower than the daily absence rate for teachers at PPS (9%), school teachers may be exposed more frequently to contagious infections and other diseases than the normal working population.

However, when we collected absence data from other school districts in Multnomah County we found that PPS teachers had comparable days of absence in 2009-10 and slightly lower days of absence in 2010-11. As shown in the table below, average teacher absence days for Portland teachers in 2009-10 was 15.6 compared to 16.1 at Centennial, 15.7 at David Douglas, 16.0 at Parkrose (Data were not available for Gresham-Barlow or Reynolds). In 2010-11, teachers at all other districts had slightly higher average absence rates compared to teachers at PPS - 18.7 days at Centennial, 16.1 days at David Douglas, 17.0 days at Gresham-Barlow, 16.4 days at Parkrose, and 17.0 days at Reynolds.

**Figure 13 Average teacher absence days by district**

	2009-10	2010-11
Centennial	16.1	18.7
David Douglas	15.7	16.1
Gresham-Barlow	na	17.0
Parkrose	16.0	16.4
PPS	15.6	15.6
Reynolds	na	17.0

Source: Auditor analysis of substitute data from PPS and MESD HR departments. Teacher FTE for districts other than PPS obtained from School Report Cards on ODE website.

We also examined absence levels for four broad categories of leave in 2010-11: personal and family illness, personal/emergency leave, professional development and in-service training, and all other. As shown in the table below, we found that Portland teachers take fewer sick days than other districts but slightly more personal leave than other districts in Multnomah County. Portland teachers take less professional development leave than three districts but more than two others.

**Figure 14 Average teacher absence days by reason and district: 2010-11**

	Sick/ family illness	Personal/emerg.	Prof. dev./ in-service	All other	TOTAL
Centennial	8.5	2.1	6.1	2.0	<b>18.7</b>
David Douglas	8.3	1.1	2.9	3.8	<b>16.1</b>
Gresham-Barlow	9.4	1.5	4.2	1.9	<b>17.0</b>
Parkrose	7.7	1.4	5.6	1.7	<b>16.4</b>
PPS	6.8	2.3	3.9	2.6	<b>15.6</b>
Reynolds	10.5	1.0	2.2	3.3	<b>17.0</b>

Source: Auditor analysis of substitute data from PPS and MESD HR departments. Teacher FTE for districts other than PPS obtained from School Report Cards on ODE website.

## Financial and academic impact of absences and substitute use

Our research indicates that teacher absences have both financial and academic impacts on the school district and its students. The financial impact is additional costs of hiring substitute teachers to replace regular teachers that are absent. The academic impacts are associated with the potential effect on teaching and learning when the regular teacher is not in the classroom. The following sections discuss these impacts.

### Financial impact

Based on data from the PPS Budget Office, the district spent \$6.3 million on substitute teachers in 2010-11. As shown in the table below, over a five-year period, substitute spending increased about 9.7 percent, from \$5.7 million in 2007-08 to \$6.1 in 2011-12. Spending increases for substitutes is occurring at the same time that state funding for education is declining.

**Figure 15 PPS spending for teacher substitutes: 2007-08 to 2011-12**

	Total expenditures, with fringe
'07-08	\$5,712,263
'08-09	\$5,920,756
'09-10	\$6,336,397
'10-11	\$6,263,724
'11-12 (adopted)	\$6,133,676
change '07-08 to '10-11	9.7%

Source: PPS Budget Office

National studies that we reviewed confirm that the costs of teacher absences can be significant. In addition to the costs of hiring substitutes, districts must also pay the full salary and benefits for those teachers on leave. In addition, there are administrative costs associated with managing substitute systems, recruiting substitute teachers, and administering time-keeping and payroll processes. One study estimated that the total cost of teacher absences nationally was in the billions of dollars.

## Academic impact

A number of studies in the U.S. have found evidence that teacher absences can negatively affect student achievement.

- In one urban school district researchers found that 10 additional days of teacher absence reduced student achievement in fourth grade mathematics by 3.3 percent of a standard deviation. (Raegen T. Miller et al. *Do Teacher Absences Impact Student Achievement? Longitudinal Evidence from One Urban School District* National Bureau of Economic Research, August 2007)
- Research conducted in North Carolina found that 10 additional days of teacher absences decreased student achievement by one or two percent of standard deviation. (Clotfleter, C.T., Ladd, H.F., Vigdor, J.L. (2006) *Teacher Absences: Importance, Incidence, and Consequences* Association of Public Policy Analysis and Management)
- A study of third grade classes found that where teachers had the greatest number of absences, individual student standardized test scores were lower, student rank in class was lower, and over all school scores were down. (Dupre, K.J., Kristonis, W.A. (2007) *An Analysis of Teacher Absences in Urban Schools*)
- A Tucson, Arizona study found that students attending classes with high teacher attendance rates scored an average of two to three NCE points higher than students attending classes with low teacher attendance rates. (Tucson Unified School District, *Analysis of the Relationship Between Student and Teacher Attendance on Standardized Measures of Academic Achievement* January 1998)

Teacher absences may reduce student achievement for a number of reasons. For example, some academics find that when a regularly assigned teacher is absent the intensity of instruction is reduced. Student learning may be affected due to the disruption of regular routines and procedures. Even if a substitute delivers effective teaching, they may have difficulty implementing a regular teacher's long-term instructional strategy. Other studies find that students may have difficulty forming relationships with multiple, mobile substitutes and substitutes may lack detailed knowledge of student skill levels inhibiting differentiated instruction to meet individual needs. One author suggested that struggling students "lose the desire to learn when a regular teacher is frequently absent and the delivery of instructional material is by an array of substitute teachers."

Teacher absences may also affect student achievement in less direct ways. Teacher absences could affect attempts by school learning communities to implement consistent instructional practices across classrooms and grades. Common planning time is also disrupted when absences adversely affect the ability of teachers to collaborate on improving instruction.



## Factors contributing to teachers absences

A variety of different factors can contribute to teacher absences. Based on our review of data from the HR Substitute Office and national research on teacher absences, we believe the primary factors are:

- Occupational hazards and teacher demographics
- School demographics and culture
- School management and oversight
- Leave provisions in union agreements

### Occupational hazards and teacher demographics

Some argue that classroom teachers may be exposed to more infectious diseases than similar adults working in different kinds of work environments. Hands-on activities, unhygienic facilities and equipment, and sick students may contribute to higher and more frequent sick leave use than other professions. However, the evidence to support these occupational hazards is largely anecdotal. Consistent with research elsewhere, we found that teacher absences are not high during the flu season, and that absences were highest on Friday when the risk of illness is not any greater.

Teachers may also be prone to other non-infectious health problems associated with the teaching occupation. For example, the complications from voice strain have been identified as a common problem in school environments. In addition, multiple studies have linked teacher absences with job-related stress.

As we identified earlier, female teachers tend to be absent more frequently than male teachers at PPS. One report suggests that this may be due to the historical effects of gender roles, which expects women to be the primary caretakers of sick children and other family members. The fact that females comprise about 72 percent of the teacher population may contribute to higher levels of absences than other professions. In addition, teachers with more experience tend to be absent more than teachers with 0 to 2 years tenure, and teachers ages 31 to 35 have the highest rate of absences. One plausible reason for these conditions is that young teachers have not yet achieved permanent status with the district while more experienced teachers have achieved full permanent status and may feel freer to utilize the leave benefits afforded under their union agreements. In addition, female teachers in the 31-35 range are in prime child-rearing age and may take more time for the birth of a child or for other family demands.

## Student demographics and school performance

Student demographics at individual schools also affect the level of teacher absences. Similar to findings in other studies, we found that teachers in schools with the highest percentages of minority students and students on free and reduced lunch are more frequently absent and out of the classroom. Teachers in Portland schools with over 68 percent of minority students averaged 1.2 more days of absences than school with less than 42 percent of minority students. Similarly, schools with over 77 percent of students in free and reduced lunch programs had .7 more days of teacher absences than schools with less than 24 percent of students in free and reduced lunch program. Nationally, schools serving high populations of low-income students may experience up to 10 percent more teacher absences than schools with lower percentages of low-income students.

There is also some evidence indicating that teacher absences occur more frequently in schools where a higher percentage of students are reading below grade level. While we did not analyze the correlation between student academic achievement and teacher absences, we did find that several schools in Portland with low achievement ratings utilized more days of professional development and in-service training than higher performing schools. While the district may have intended to build stronger teacher skills and learning communities with this additional training, it may also have contributed to significantly more teacher absence days and compounded the effect of regular teacher absences on student achievement.

My discussions with several principals at schools with higher percentages of minority and free and reduced lunch students, and low achievement, indicates that teacher absences associated with professional development and training were high because of efforts to increase the capabilities and effectiveness of teaching staff. In addition, higher personal leave use in these schools might be related to higher work stress from working with student populations that require more differentiated instruction and more individualized interventions.

## School management and working conditions

Research shows that school principals can influence teacher absences by taking proactive actions to manage leave levels and to improve working conditions. Lack of principal attention to teacher absences may create a culture that does not value good attendance and may contribute to more discretionary leave than is necessary. While a certain amount of leave is unavoidable and warranted, studies have shown that principals can reduce teacher absence rates through a variety of different methods at the individual school level. For example, requiring teachers to report their absence directly to their supervisor rather than to an automated substitute request system may help reduce abuse of discretionary sick and personal leave policies. Teachers in one study focus group indicated that they would be less likely to call into their supervisors if they were not actually sick.

In addition, school principals have a direct influence over the teacher leave category termed “school needs”. The principal largely determines when teachers are absent for school needs such as administrative duty, planning or training tasks, or other assigned duty outside of their regular classroom. Classroom absences for “school needs” averaged 1.6 days at PPS and comprised over 9 percent of the total teacher absences. However, some schools significantly exceed the average. Teachers at Kelly Elementary were out of their classrooms for an average of 11 days due to school needs while teachers at Lee were out for 5 days. Principals at these schools have opportunities to reduce overall teacher absences from the classroom by more tightly controlling the school needs leave category.

Principals and the district also have significant control over teacher leave for professional development and in-service training. As discussed on page 15, there is great variation in the number of days used by teachers for professional development and in-service. Some teachers take more than 10 days annually of this leave while others take less than one day. Professional development and in-service leave accounts for about 25 percent of the total absence days taken by teachers, averaging 3.6 days annually. Because management largely controls this leave category, more attention to managing professional development and training time also offers opportunities to reduce overall absenteeism.

Our research also identified some studies that suggest that poor working conditions at schools influence teacher attendance. These conditions can include poor facilities and equipment, bad leadership, and stressful working environments. Facility upgrades and modernization, improved management and supervision, and the creation of collaborative and collegial work teams can lead to reduction in absences due to inadequate working conditions.

## Provisions of union agreements

A 1991 study of New York school districts found that the district leave policies significantly influence the use of leave days by teachers. Specifically, the larger annual number of leave days are permitted by the district, the more days of annual leave are used by teachers. Further, if districts employ a sick leave bank, they average about one more day of leave than districts without sick leave banks.

Our review of twelve comparably sized school districts in the nation found that PPS offers teachers an average number of total sick and personal leave days each year.<sup>1</sup> PPS provides a total of 13 days of sick and personal leave while the average of the other 12 districts is 12.5 days. Portland offers more days of leave than 7 of the districts and fewer days of leave than 4 of the districts. Like Portland, most of the other districts also offer a sick leave bank for teachers who exhaust their available sick leave.

PPS also has common provisions for bereavement leave, military duty, jury duty, and workers compensation leave. However, PPS also provides up to three days of paid leave for family illness which does not appear to be a common provision in other union contracts. While family illness leave cannot be accumulated and must be used in the year it is earned, it may provide a “use it or lose it” incentive for teachers.

PPS teachers also earn two days of professional development leave each year that can be accumulated if not used. Teachers may use up to four days of accumulated professional development leave each year, beyond the professional development days the district provides to teachers before school begins and during the year for various in-service training days. Other than for long-term sabbaticals, I was only able to identify a few districts that provide this level of leave each year for teacher scheduled professional development.

Although the PPS agreement with teachers is comparable in many respects to other large school districts in the nation, there are a few provisions such as family illness leave and professional development leave that appear more generous than other agreements. However, it is difficult to determine with certainty if these leave provisions significantly affect the level of leave taken by PPS teachers.

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<sup>1</sup> Long Beach, CA (10.5), Oakland, CA (15), Sacramento, CA (10), San Francisco, CA (10), Denver, CO (14), Minneapolis, MN (10), St. Paul, MN (12), Kansas City, MO (13), Cincinnati OH (18), Austin, TX (11), Prince William Co, VA (15), Seattle, WA (12)

## Strategies to better manage teacher absences

The literature points to a number of ideas and strategies for reducing teacher absences. Some are untested strategies but other methods offer proven results. The sections that follow briefly describe those strategies that appear to hold that most promise to reduce or mitigate teacher absence rates.

### Incentives and bonus schemes

Studies have also found that in certain cases teacher absences decline when districts implement incentive provisions such as bonuses or buy-back programs. One study of a New York district found that absenteeism declined by an average of two sick days per teacher in the first year of a program that provided monetary incentives for good attendance. In a Georgia district that provided monetary and non-monetary rewards for good attendance, the overall teacher absentee rate declined by 16 percent.

However, other districts have not had success with programs that provide incentives to teachers to reduce absences. A Texas district offered a large reward to the teacher with the lowest number of absences but the program failed to reduce absences in a statistically meaningful way. A Florida district offered financial rewards to all teachers if a certain reduction in total sick days was made district-wide, but reductions did not occur. Other programs have had an uncertain result because reductions may have occurred due to chance rather than because of the incentive program.

Despite mixed results, many researchers believe incentives can improve attendance if implemented properly. Some suggest that immediate end-of-year rewards work better than post-retirement benefits and that rewards should be reasonably attainable by all teachers rather than one large award for a few teachers. In addition, non-monetary awards such as recognition may provide incentives as well as monetary rewards.

### Communication and modification of leave policies

Some districts have taken a more proactive approach to managing teacher leave through better and more frequent communication with staff about attendance expectations and by modifying certain leave provisions of union contracts. For example, the Milwaukee School district included attendance information in new teacher orientation materials, published articles about absenteeism in staff newsletters, and held training sessions with schools with high absentee rates. District management staff worked with union representatives to clarify that the intent was to reduce abuse and discretionary leave

days but not to criticize the legitimate use of sick, personal leave, or allowed leave provisions.

PPS is in the initial phase of developing a new publication for all employees that would provide general guidance for employee use of common leave categories such as sick leave, family illness leave, and personal and emergency leave. For example, the draft memorandum clarifies that personal leave is not allowed for vacation or recreational purposes but only for personal business or emergencies that cannot be addressed outside of the employee's normal work-day.

In addition to clear and frequent explanation of leave provisions, some districts are negotiating changes in existing provisions of union contracts. One common change is to eliminate the "use it or lose it" provisions for some leave categories like personal or family leave. Some believe that because teachers cannot accumulate family or personal leave there is an incentive to use this leave before the end the school year. Negotiating a change so that personal leave can be accumulated as a part of sick leave may reduce the incentive to use the leave. Increasing the amount of saved sick leave amounts would provide additional protection for employees that have unexpected and emergency sick leave, and thereby, reduce or eliminate the use of "sick leave banks" that have been shown to increase the overall use of sick leave.

In our view, it also may be possible to rethink the family illness category of leave offered to teachers. Because federal and state law now allow employees to use sick leave for family purpose such as the birth of a child, the need for an existing category of family illness may not be necessary. Incorporating some of these days into the existing sick leave category may also discourage the "use of lose it" incentive of family leave, increase the accumulated sick leave benefit available for employees, and reduce discretionary absence days.

### **Increased principal involvement**

One of the most common strategies to improve teacher attendance is to involve principals more actively in monitoring, reviewing, and approving leave during the normal school day. As discussed earlier, most researchers agree that attendance improves when districts require teachers to report absences directly to their supervisors. While this strategy holds promise for inhibiting discretionary leave, it may increase the workload of already busy managers, particularly for schools with high absence levels. An experiment with several pilot schools might provide valuable information on the feasibility of this strategy.

Principals can also be more actively involved in creating positive work environments and collegial work-teams that contribute to lower absence rates. Principals that

encourage good health, teamwork, and low stress work places may make a difference in the culture of the school and commitment to students. Principals are also the most knowledgeable managers about individual teacher absence patterns and the potential misuse of sick, personal, or family illness.

Finally, principals have direct responsibility for managing the school instructional day and can make decisions about the level of professional development, in-service training, and “school needs” that pull teachers out of their classrooms. The extreme variation in the amounts of teacher absence due to professional development and school needs at various PPS schools indicates that individual schools have significant discretion to undertake activities that remove regular teachers from classrooms. While professional development, training, and administrative tasks will always be necessary, the amount of this leave appears to be controllable by individual school principals.

### **Enhanced monitoring and reporting**

Research indicates that it is difficult to address potential attendance issues without a full understanding of the nature and extent of the problem. Many believe that attendance patterns and levels need to be recorded, evaluated, and monitored by management at all levels. For example, the new AESOP substitute system recently implemented by PPS provides a wealth of information on teacher attendance that can be disaggregated by reason, grade level, individual school, student and teacher demographics, and by temporal and seasonal characteristics. Monitoring and reporting this data regularly to executive and mid-level managers and to individual principals can provide useful information to address attendance patterns that deviate significantly from average or that show high discretionary use of leave by teachers.

More internal and external reporting of teacher absence rates by school may also provide useful information for managers, parents, and the public taxpayers who support schools. Some advocate including attendance rates in school report cards publicized to the community in the print media or oral presentations at community meetings. While this approach may be effective in increasing public pressure on unusually high absence rates at schools, it may also alienate school staff and inhibit communication between school management and teachers.

The PPS HR Director indicates that the new substitute reporting system implemented this year will provide a wealth of new information on teacher absences and substitute use. HR plans to issue a summary report at the end of this school year to all principals detailing substitute use at their school. Next year HR will provide monthly reports to schools describing teacher absences and the reasons for the absences.

## Opportunities for cost savings

Reducing the average number of teacher absence days each year could yield significant savings for the district. We made two savings estimates. One estimate is based on reducing the average PPS absence days of 15.6 per year to the national average of 10 days. The second more conservative estimate would reduce the current average of 15.6 days to an average of 13 days annually. We used absence rates and associated daily substitute costs for 2010-11, the most current complete year available.

As shown below, reducing the average days of absence from 15.6 days per teacher to 10 days per teacher annually would have resulted in 13,087 fewer substitute days in 2010-11. Using the daily substitute wage rate of \$169.47 plus an estimated 11.35 percent for fringe benefits, we estimate that the district could have spent about \$2.5 million dollars less for substitutes in 2010-11. Reducing the average number of absence days to a more modest 13 days, would result in 6,076 fewer days per year and savings of \$1.1 million.

**Figure 16 Estimated savings by reducing average teacher absence days**

	Total reduction in absence days	Daily substitute wage plus fringe benefits <sup>2</sup>	Total estimated savings annually
Reduce avg # of absence days per teacher from 15.6 to 10	13,087 days	\$188.70	<b>\$2,469,555</b>
Reduce avg # of absence days per teacher from 15.6 to 13	6,076 days	\$188.70	<b>\$1,146,579</b>

Source: Auditor analysis of HR Substitute System and Budget Office data

We also made a savings estimate based on reducing absence rates at all schools to the average number of absence days for school in 2010-11. That is, reducing absences at schools that exceeded 15.6 days to an average of 15.6 days. As shown in the table below, this most conservative estimate produced over \$566,000 in reduced costs in 2010-2011. PK/K-8 schools would have realized the most savings at \$209,928 followed by \$199,097 for PK/K-5 schools, and \$78,952 for high schools.

<sup>2</sup> Source: PPS Budget Office. Daily substitute wage rate is \$169.47 per day. Fringe rate of 11.35% of salary includes worker's compensation insurance and health and dental insurance for eligible substitutes.



**Figure 17 Projected savings from reducing schools with above average absence days to average**

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	<b>Annual savings</b>	<b>Percent of total</b>
PK/K-5	\$199,097	35%
PK/K-8	\$209,929	37%
Middle schools	\$70,669	13%
High schools	\$78,952	14%
Alternative schools	\$8,095	1%
<b>ALL SCHOOLS</b>	<b>\$566,742</b>	<b>100%</b>

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Source: Auditor analysis of HR Substitute System and Budget Office data



# RECOMMENDATIONS

**I**n order to improve the management of employee leave and reduce teacher absences, I recommend that the Superintendent take the following actions:

1. **Finalize and issue General Guidelines for Employees' Use of Common Leave Categories.** The Guidelines should clarify the district policies for requesting and using leave benefits including sick leave, family illnesses, personal/emergency leave, funeral and bereavement leave, and vacation leave. The Guidelines should also clarify the responsibilities of management and employees for requesting and approving leave to ensure leave is appropriate and allowed. The district should also ensure that these Guidelines are distributed to employees in various ways including newsletters, websites, team meetings, and employee performance evaluation sessions.
2. **Prepare and issue regular reports on employee leave and teacher absences.** Using data from the HR Substitute system, the Human Resource department should prepare monthly or quarterly reports on employee leave and teacher absences to district and building level management. The reports should include data on the amount of leave days taken, the reason for the absence, day and seasonal use patterns, and any unusual levels of absences taken by employees. The reports should identify schools with absence levels that are higher than average and the leave categories that exceed the average of other comparable schools.
3. **Specifically assign responsibility for monitoring and managing teacher absences to school building principals.** District management should ensure that school principals have the primary responsibility for managing teacher absences. District administrators should hold principals accountable for managing teacher absences by including employee leave management as a category in the annual performance appraisal. Schools with higher than average teacher absences should develop plans for reducing absences and include these goals in annual school improvement plans.

4. **Principals should develop methods to monitor, review, and control teacher absences.** Using data available from this audit and from the HR Substitute office, each building principal should assess teacher absences at their school and develop specific action plans to manage absences levels. Action plans may include establishing a school team to address working conditions, morale, or leadership issues that may be contributing to absences. Efforts may also include establishing wellness programs, requiring employees to directly report to the principal when absent, counseling individual teachers with higher than normal discretionary absences, and including a discussion of absences in teachers' annual performance appraisals.
5. **Review existing union contracts to determine feasibility of negotiating changes in certain leave provisions.** District management should evaluate the current provisions in the teacher union contract for family illness leave and personal/emergency leave to determine whether the existing provisions should be modified to eliminate the incentive to "use it or lose it". The district should consider allowing accumulation of some portion of unused family illness or personal leave as sick leave rather than losing the days at the end of each year. The district should also review the current levels of professional development leave to determine if they exceed benefit levels at other comparable urban school districts. Changes in existing agreements would require negotiation with the Portland Association of Teachers.
6. **Consider establishing a pilot program to test the efficacy of an incentive program to encourage teachers to reduce absences.** District management should review successful incentive programs in other large urban districts and establish and evaluate the impact of a pilot program in a limited number of schools. The incentive program may include both monetary and non-monetary rewards including end of year cash payments, specific recognition awards, and special perquisites such as attending a professional conference or participating on a district management or administrative task force.

# MANAGEMENT RESPONSE





## PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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**Carole Smith**  
Superintendent

### OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

June 14, 2012

Richard C. Tracy, District Performance Auditor  
Portland Public Schools Board of Education  
501 N. Dixon Street  
Portland, OR 97227

Dear Mr. Tracy,

Thank you for your review of Teacher Absences in Portland Public Schools. This has been an issue that we have had concerns about for some time, as we know that significant teacher absences can contribute to reduced student achievement and increased substitute costs. In these times, when we are so focused on increasing student achievement with fewer resources, we must pay attention to this issue very closely. Your analysis is both timely and valuable as an objective perspective on this issue.

As I reviewed your report, there were two specific issues of which I took particular notice. First, the disturbing fact that teacher absence is much more prevalent in schools serving students of color than those not, a pattern that largely mirrors our student achievement struggles. The fact that teacher absences are 1.2 days higher in schools with over 68% students of color than those with less than 42% jumped out as a significant fact. This is of particular note, when we look at the fact that we have a fairly segregated school system—meaning most of our schools are either above 68% students of color or below 42% students of color. We don't have many schools that occupy the middle, and therefore, this distinction is really relevant in our work. Given our focus on racial equity in this district, this is an issue I want staff to pay much more attention to as we move forward. I understand there are a number of contributing factors, and want to make sure we begin to reduce this gap as we are working to do with so many other gaps for our students of color.

One of these factors is that over the past few years, when faced with budget reductions, we have prioritized instructional time and reduced the number of professional development days without students in school. This factor plus the fact that many of our schools with over 68% students of color have been deeply involved in our equity work and other professional development opportunities (e.g. striving readers, Nike School Innovation Fund), has meant increased teacher leave in these schools. Teachers from our schools with higher percentages of students of color received on average 1.7 more days of professional development than those schools with higher percentages of white students. While this does mean that those teachers are away from their students for more days, they are also involved in invaluable professional development to ensure that we are providing our students of color with highly effective, culturally-relevant instruction.

Second, I appreciated seeing the relative relationship between PPS and comparable districts. I am most interested in the comparison with neighboring districts, as local context (political as well as environmental) seems very important. I was pleased to see that PPS teachers are absent less often than neighboring peers. This is helpful information as we look for ways in which our district has barriers or advantages in addressing this issue.

In general, I believe that we can make a number of systemic improvements which will improve our teacher attendance throughout PPS. You make 6 specific recommendations for us to consider:

- Finalize guidelines for leave usage and distribute to employees,
- Prepare regular reports on employee leave,
- Assign responsibility for monitoring and managing teacher absence to principals,
- Support principals in managing teacher absence,
- Negotiate changes to specific leave provisions in teacher contract; and,
- Consider establishing a pilot program incentivizing reduced teacher absence.

I appreciate these recommendations, and believe we are currently working to address a number of them. For those areas where we do not have a specific response, I am asking staff to look into what we might do to address these issues.

Our academic leadership under incoming Chief Academic Officer Sue Ann Higgins and our Regional Administrators who supervise school leadership, are very committed to increasing student achievement for all students. In particular, they have a strong focus on eliminating the achievement and opportunity gaps for students of color, students with special needs and non-Native English speakers. We will be looking at how teacher absence is contributing to this issue in specific schools with high concentrations of students of color and will build specific supports for schools that are struggling in this area.

There is good work underway which will have a direct impact on the issue of teacher absence. This includes:

- Development of clear guidelines for leave usage: In alignment with your recommendation, Human Resources will be finalizing revisions to guidelines for employee's use of leave by August. These guidelines will be distributed to supervisors and employees via email, posted on the Human Resources website and distributed to all new employees as a part of orientation.
- Regular reporting mechanism for substitute use: The substitute office will create a summary report of teacher, para-educator and secretary absences for the 2011-12 school year to be distributed to Regional Administrators and principals this summer as a baseline and updated throughout the school year.
- Establishment of pilot PPS Wellness Works Collaborative: A new program funded by a grant from the Oregon Education Association that focuses on employee health as a means to reduce absences. This is a partnership between PPS and the Portland Association of Teachers. Initially this program will be offered in 11 schools, but we hope to expand this pilot program in years to come. Initiatives include health awareness, diet and lifestyle changes, and exercise/active lifestyle changes.



Additionally, I will be asking staff to investigate a number of other issues raised by the audit. These include:

- Central supports for principals in managing teacher attendance: Academic leadership will develop programs and practices for supporting principals in effective management of teacher attendance, particularly focused on schools with high concentrations of students of color. Additionally, Human Resources will support this effort by developing monthly reports to benchmark teacher leave usage to support a broader management system for principals beginning in September.
- Ensuring contract supports student achievement: We will identify ways that we can make improvements to our teacher contract that might reduce impediments to consistent teacher attendance, such as your focus on “use it or lose it” provisions. Brock Logan, Director of Labor Negotiations, will work with our academic leadership to identify specific modifications and make a recommendation to be considered for future negotiations.
- Consistent data reporting: Utilizing the new guidelines for employee leave, Human Resources staff will work with Regional Administrators to provide training of principals and secretaries to ensure consistency of coding when substitutes are utilized.

Again, I want to thank you for the depth of your analysis of this issue and your thoughtful recommendations. I am pleased that a number of existing efforts here at PPS can and will have an impact on some of the trends you have identified, and that PPS is not an outlier in our local community with respect to this issue. I also appreciate where the audit has focused attention on issues that I will ask staff to tackle more directly as we move forward.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge that this audit has given me pause to reflect on a larger issue—we recognize that the most important thing we can do to ensure increasing achievement for every student is to maximize the amount of quality instruction occurring between every teacher and student. This statement is about both quality and quantity. In order for our teachers to be most able to meet the needs of our students, they must have solid content knowledge and the culturally-responsive skills to teach every one of our students. We have to provide effective training and professional development to ensure this is possible, and given our current resource constraints this often has to occur during the school year. I will be asking our school and district leadership to reflect on how to continue to systemically increase the frequency of quality instruction, and to develop plans to make this happen. I look forward to sharing these plans and our other progress on the issue of teacher absences with the Board in the coming year.

Sincerely,

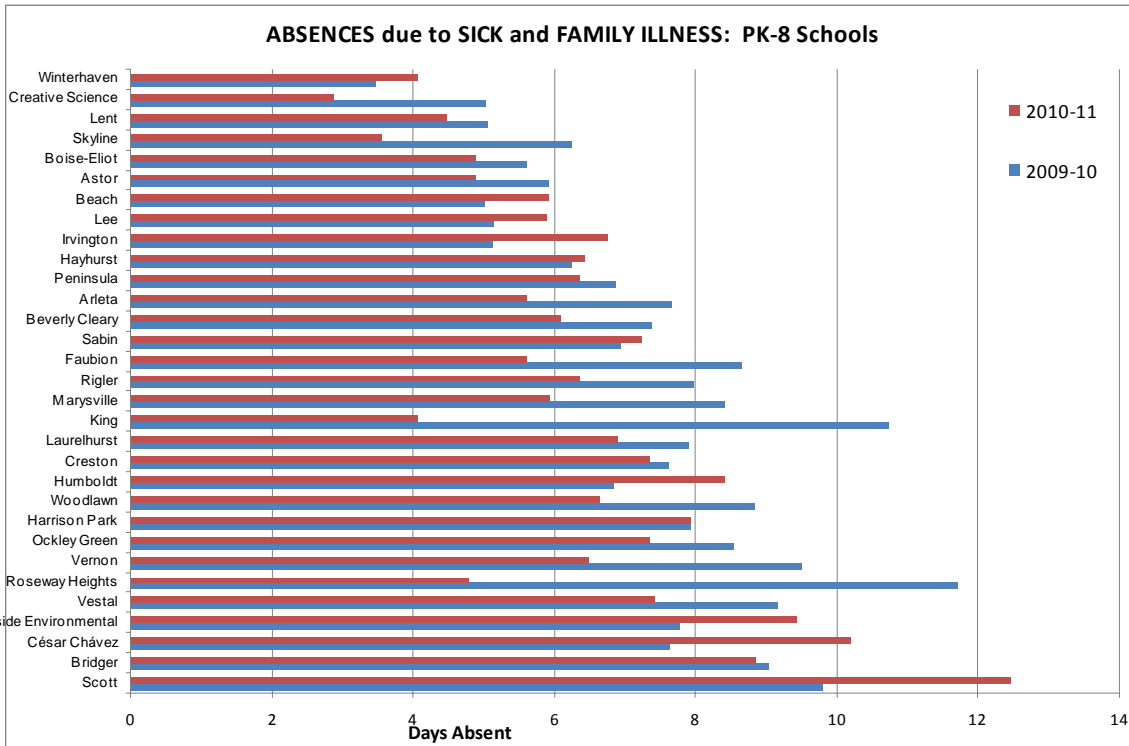
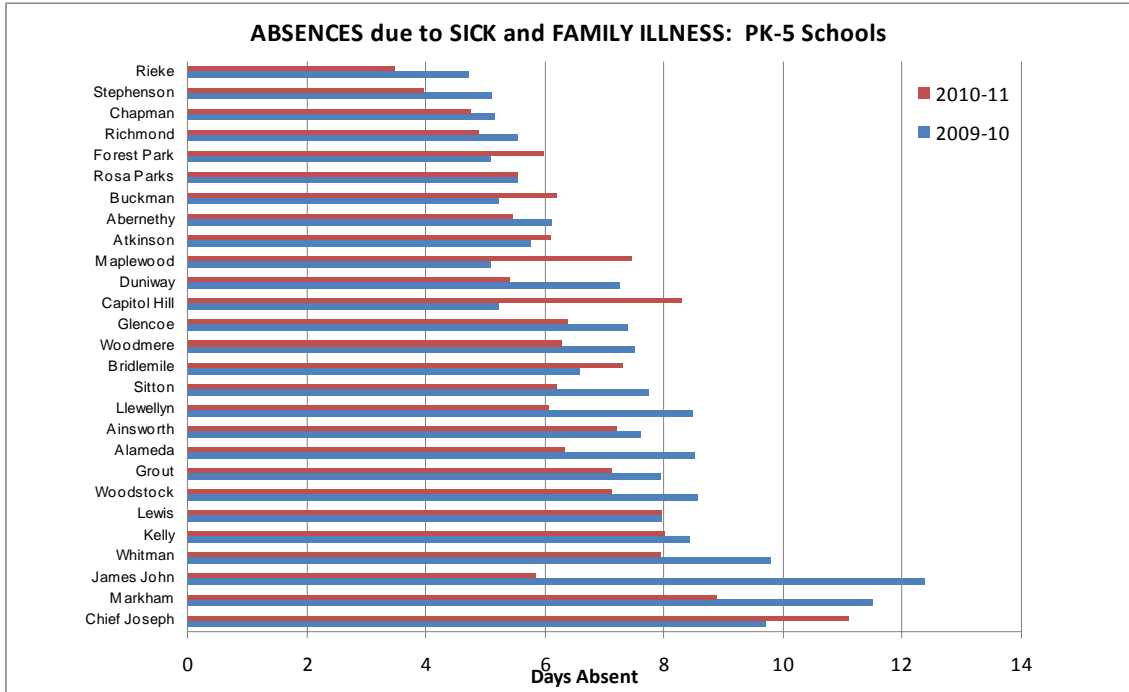
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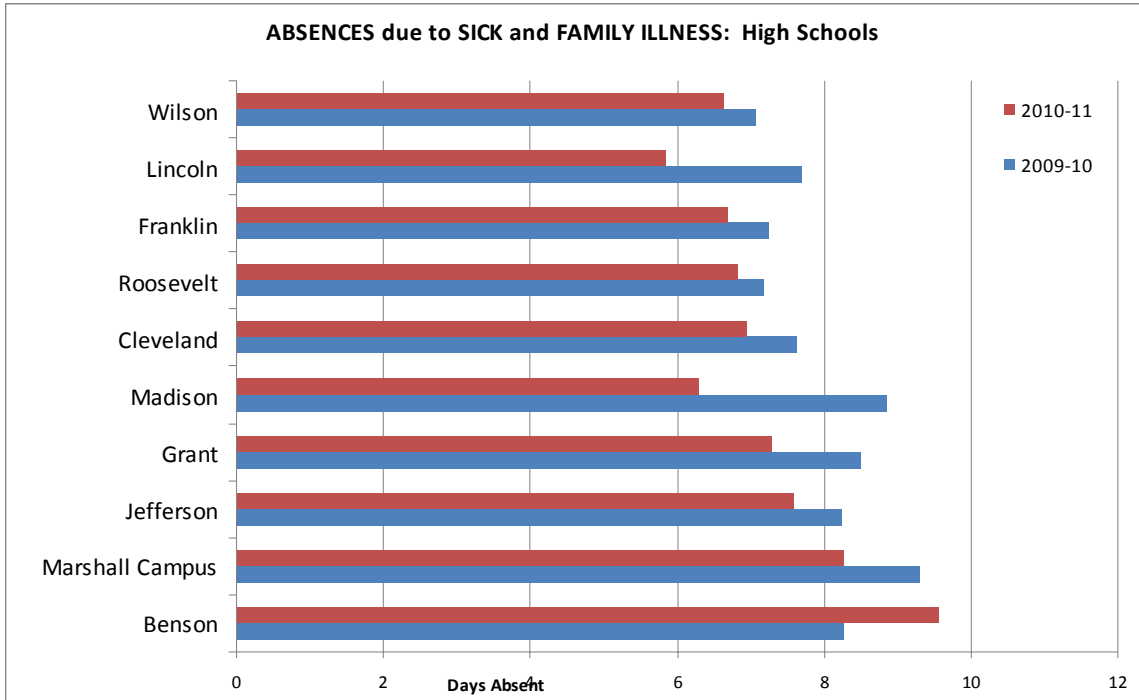
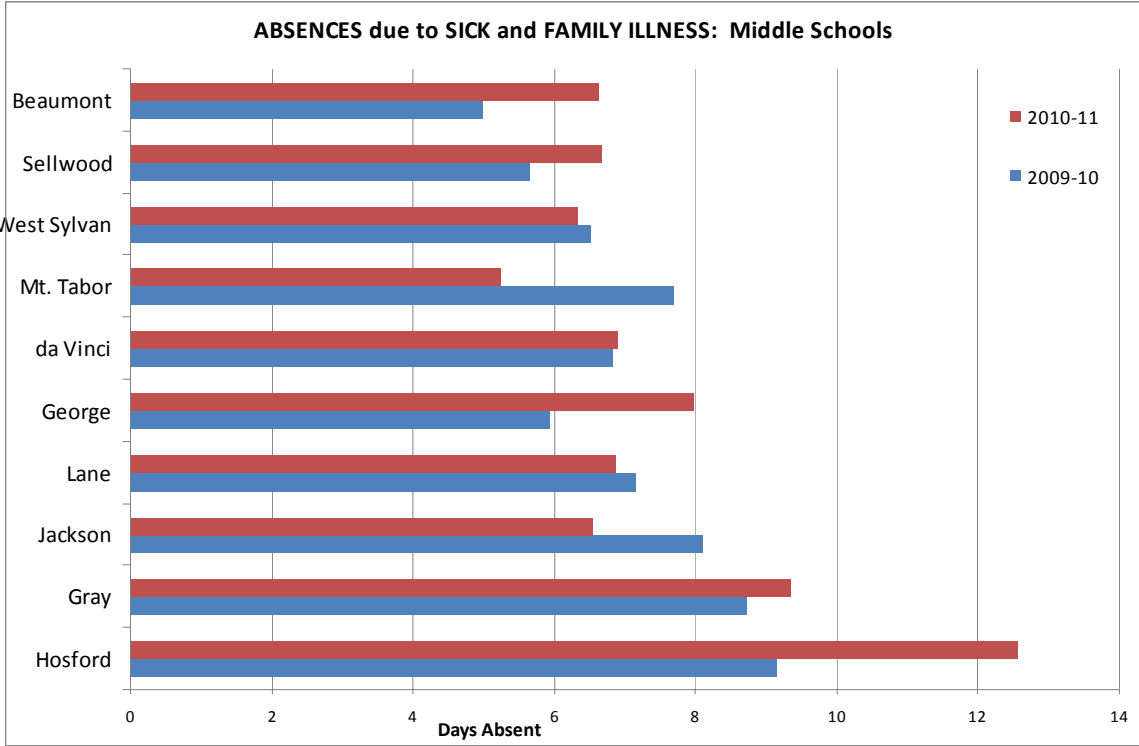
Carole Smith



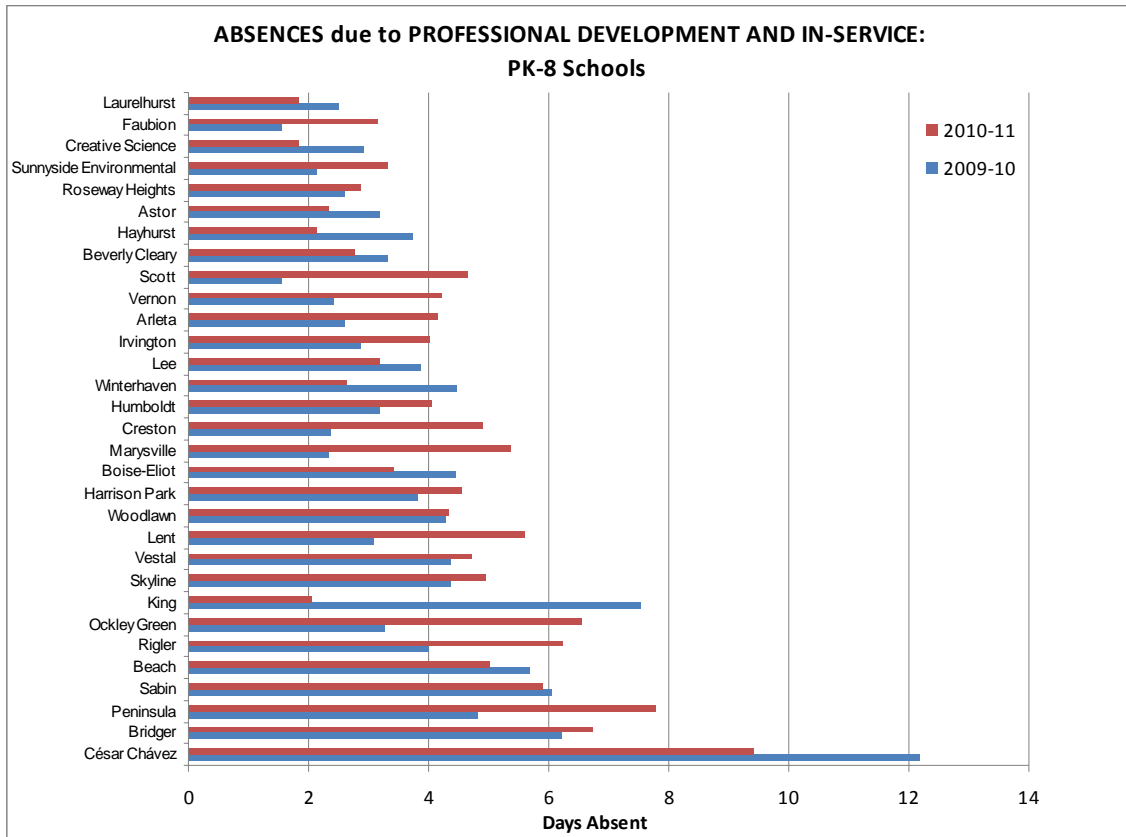
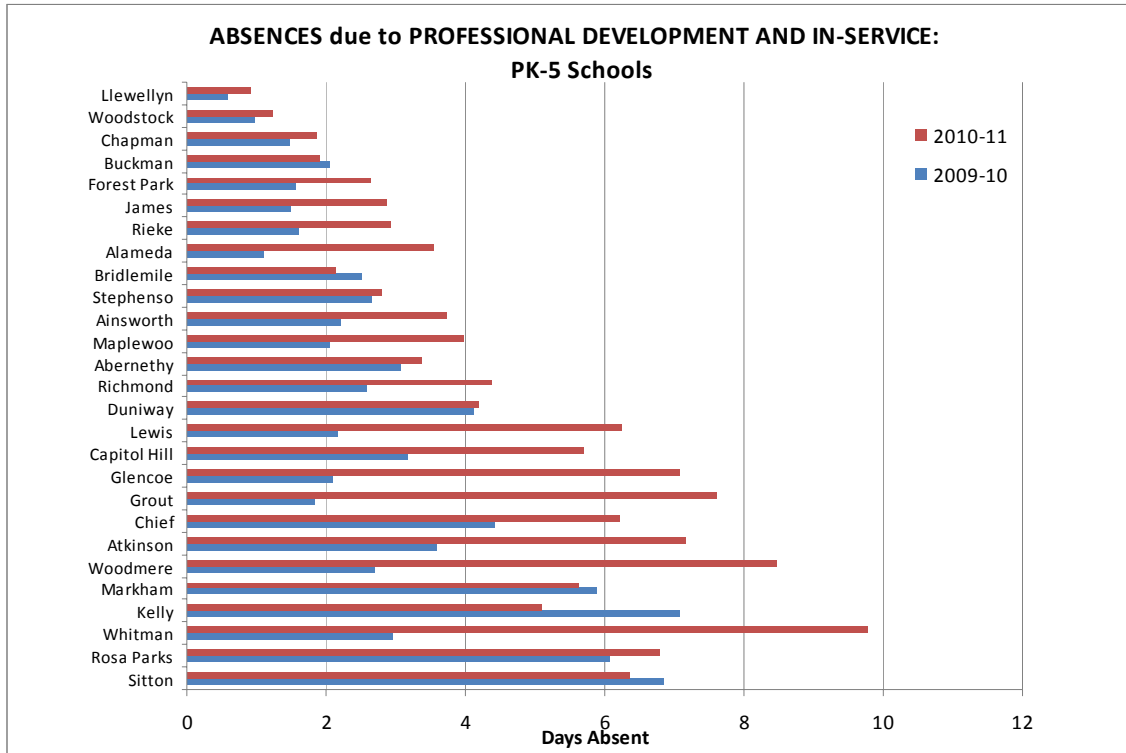
# APPENDIX A

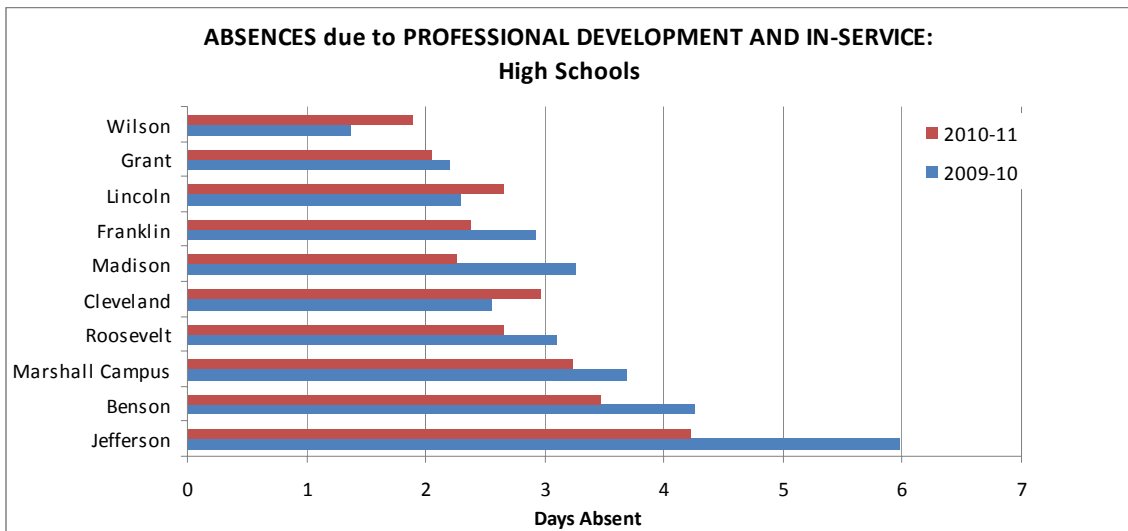
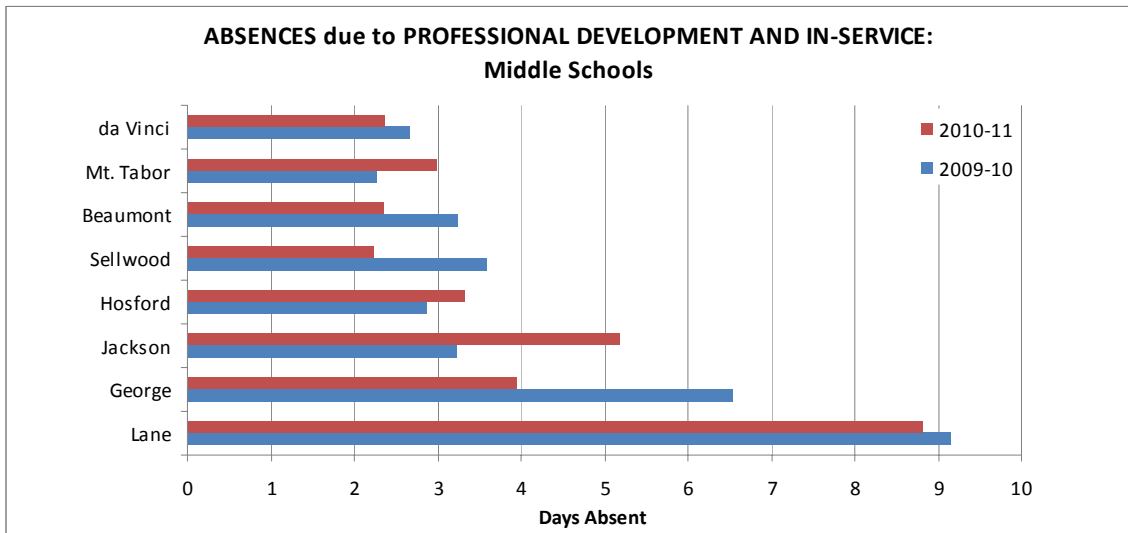
## Absences due to sick/family illness



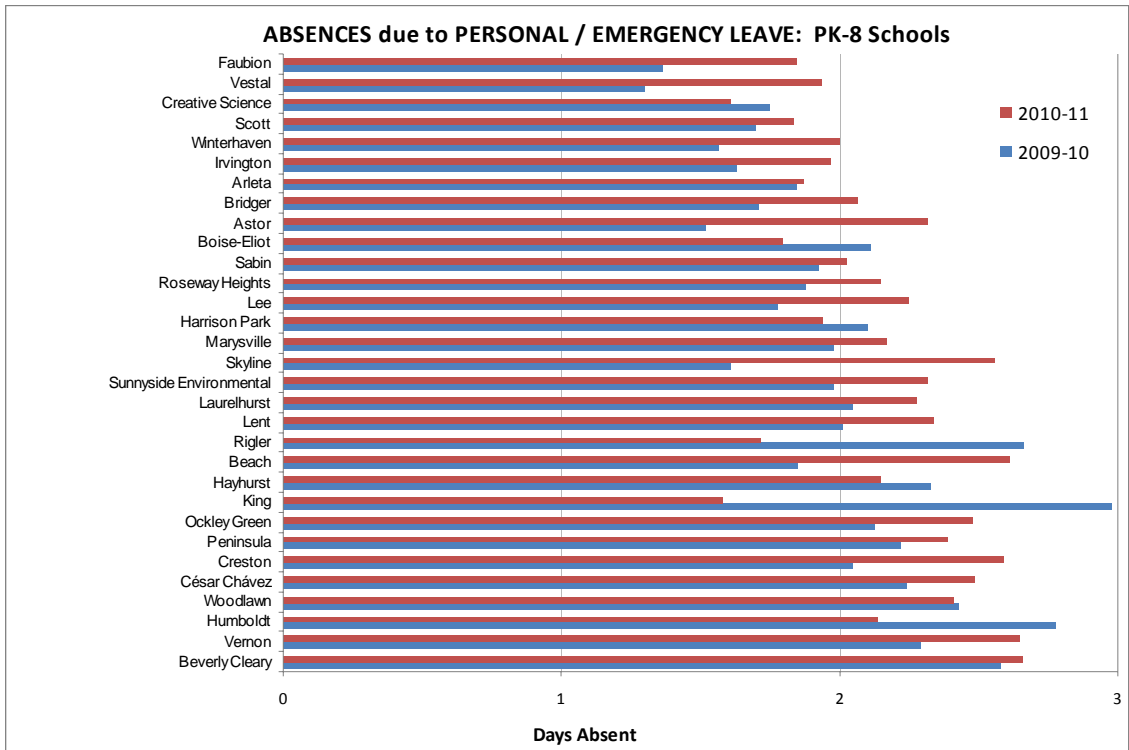
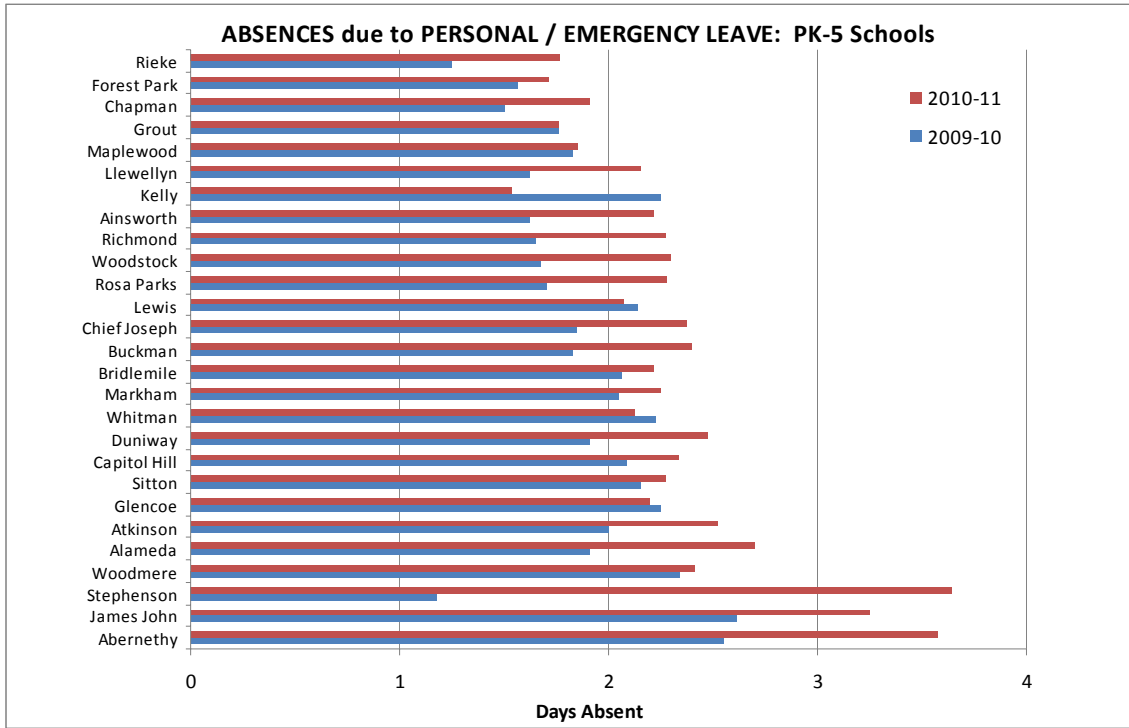


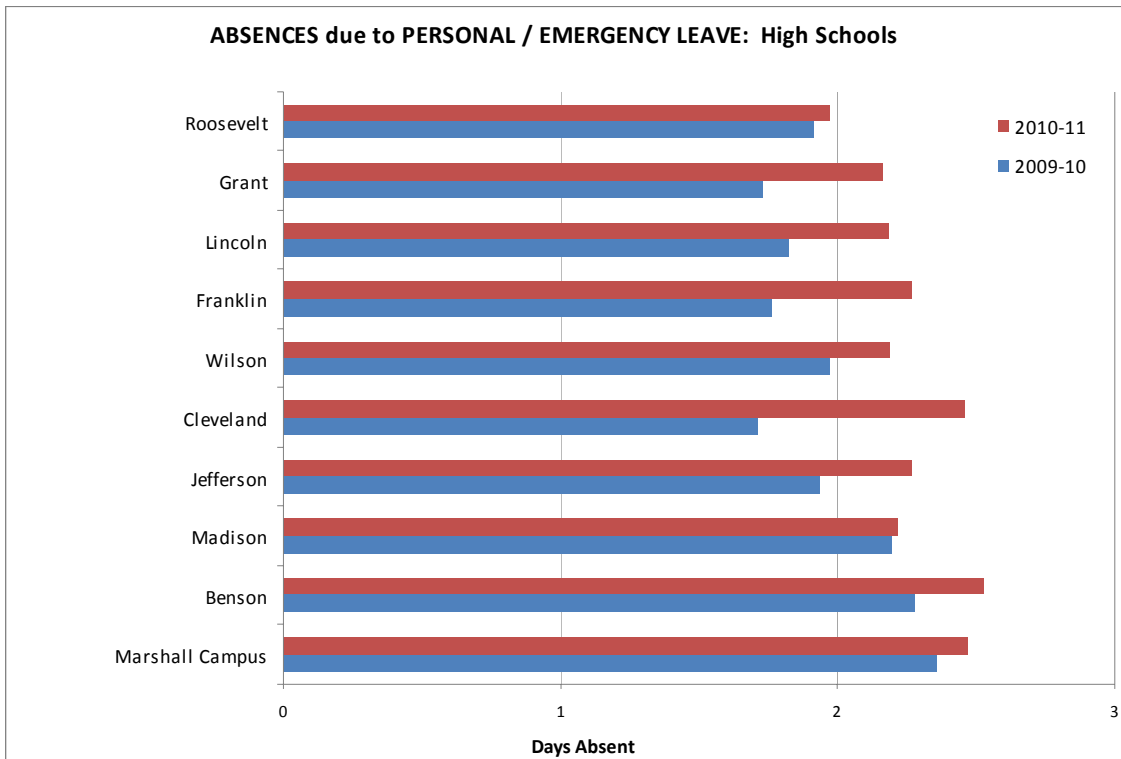
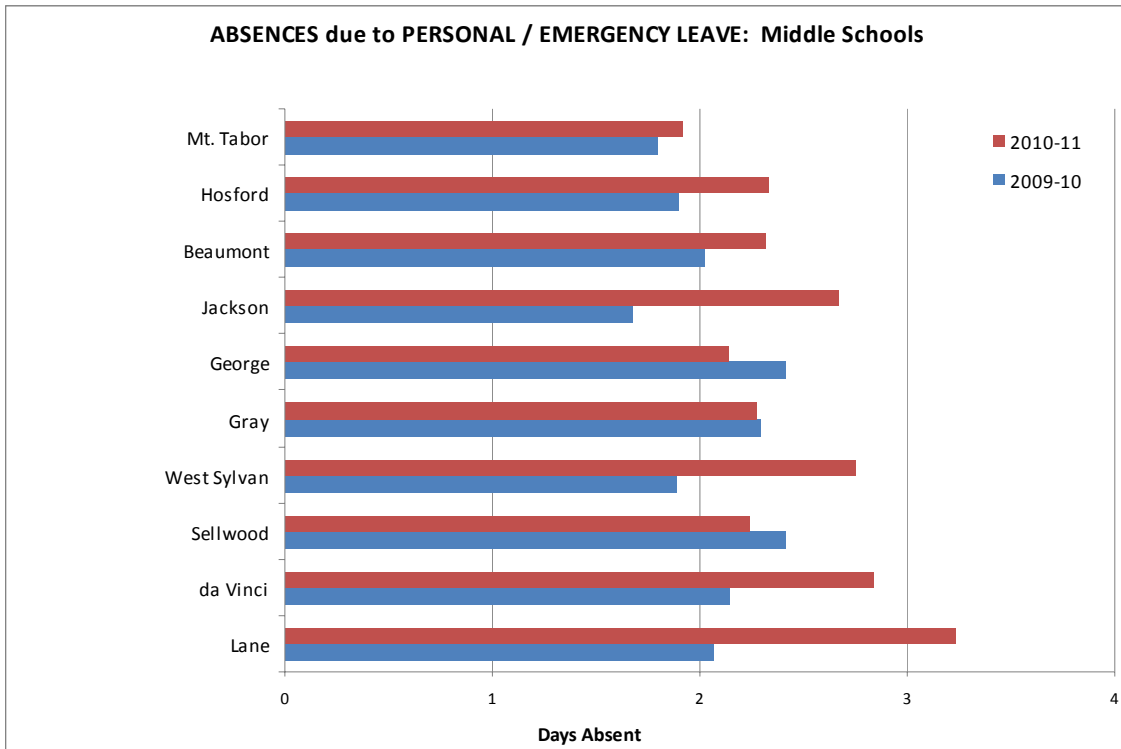
## Absences due to professional development/in-service





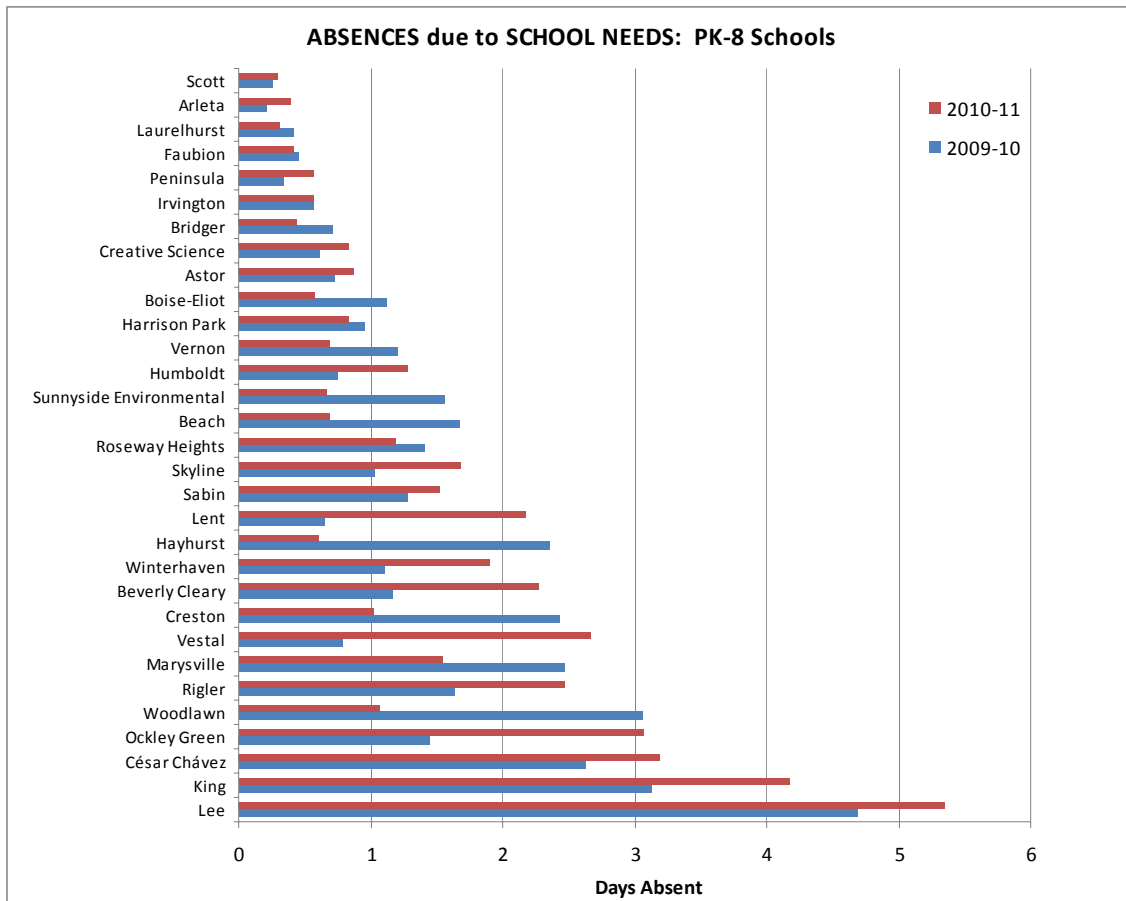
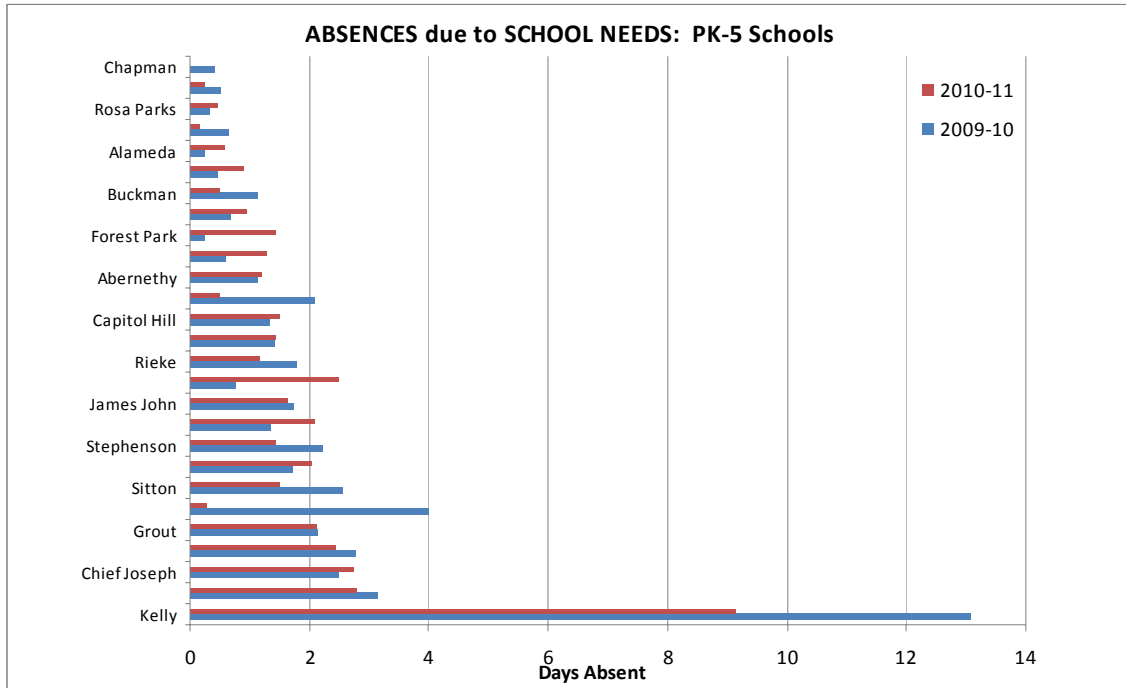
## Absences due to personal/emergency leave

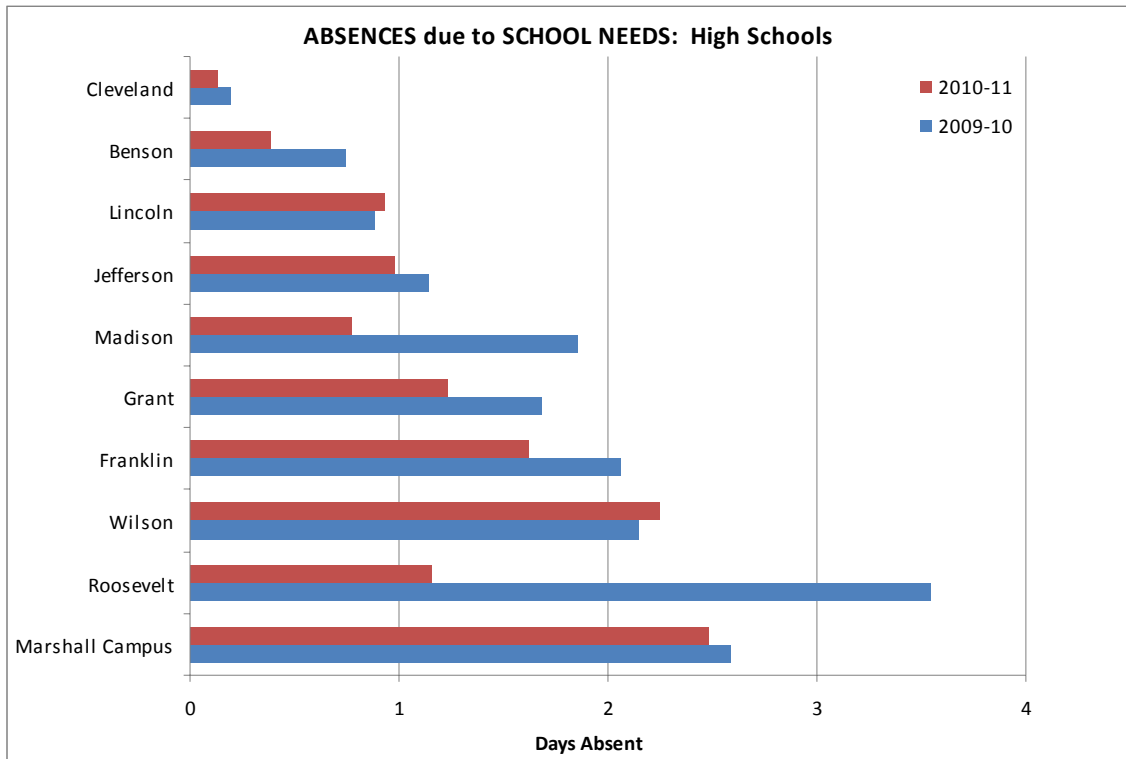
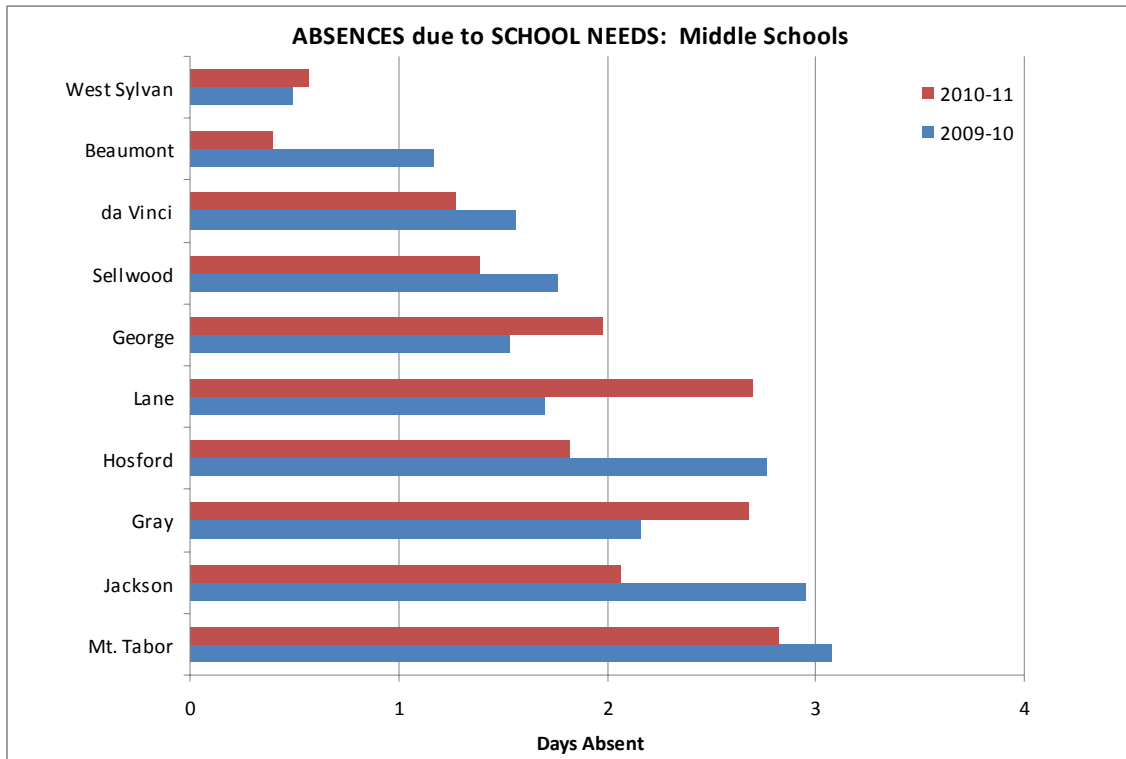






## Absences due to school needs





# APPENDIX B

## Percent of teacher absences by school and day of week

		Mon	Tues	Weds	Thurs	Fri	Total	
PK/K-5	Abernethy	15.7%	16.9%	17.6%	23.0%	26.8%	100%	
	Ainsworth	20.3%	18.4%	17.1%	22.3%	21.9%	100%	
	Alameda	18.2%	18.7%	19.9%	23.1%	20.1%	100%	
	Atkinson	17.5%	20.3%	18.7%	27.4%	16.0%	100%	
	Bridlemile	18.5%	23.0%	18.7%	20.5%	19.2%	100%	
	Buckman	15.4%	14.3%	18.5%	27.2%	24.6%	100%	
	Capitol Hill	16.5%	19.2%	17.8%	23.7%	22.8%	100%	
	Chapman	15.3%	17.3%	18.7%	24.7%	24.0%	100%	
	Chief Joseph	16.2%	24.9%	18.4%	21.8%	18.7%	100%	
	Duniway	15.1%	14.6%	21.4%	24.7%	24.2%	100%	
	Forest Park	15.9%	23.6%	18.4%	22.4%	19.7%	100%	
	Glencoe	16.3%	17.8%	22.9%	22.4%	20.7%	100%	
	Grout	19.4%	21.3%	19.1%	21.0%	19.1%	100%	
	James John	16.9%	19.1%	18.5%	20.5%	25.1%	100%	
	Kelly	10.8%	20.9%	24.3%	23.3%	20.7%	100%	
	Lewis	19.3%	18.5%	19.3%	17.1%	25.7%	100%	
	Llewellyn	18.2%	16.4%	17.1%	21.7%	26.6%	100%	
	Maplewood	15.3%	22.8%	19.6%	21.7%	20.6%	100%	
	Markham	14.6%	21.0%	22.4%	21.6%	20.4%	100%	
	Richmond	18.3%	27.4%	20.0%	16.0%	18.3%	100%	
	Rieke	11.0%	23.9%	20.4%	23.9%	20.8%	100%	
	Rosa Parks	17.1%	19.6%	23.7%	23.1%	16.4%	100%	
	Sitton	18.4%	22.6%	22.2%	20.7%	16.0%	100%	
	Stephenson	15.6%	16.0%	21.5%	22.7%	24.2%	100%	
	Whitman	13.4%	17.4%	21.1%	26.7%	21.5%	100%	
	Woodmere	20.1%	17.3%	19.1%	20.3%	23.2%	100%	
	Woodstock	18.3%	19.2%	19.8%	24.4%	18.3%	100%	
	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>16.7%</b>	<b>19.8%</b>	<b>20.2%</b>	<b>22.4%</b>	<b>21.0%</b>	<b>100%</b>

		Mon	Tues	Weds	Thurs	Fri	Total
<b>PK/K-8</b>	Arleta	15.6%	23.6%	20.2%	20.8%	19.9%	100%
	Astor	21.8%	20.1%	21.3%	16.2%	20.6%	100%
	Beach	14.4%	19.8%	21.7%	19.5%	24.6%	100%
	Beverly Cleary	18.1%	20.3%	21.0%	19.7%	21.0%	100%
	Boise-Eliot	18.8%	22.9%	19.5%	22.1%	16.6%	100%
	Bridger	18.5%	21.0%	19.4%	22.3%	18.8%	100%
	César Chávez	14.2%	21.3%	21.4%	23.7%	19.3%	100%
	Creative Science	18.0%	21.5%	16.4%	22.6%	21.5%	100%
	Creston	14.9%	21.4%	13.8%	27.7%	22.1%	100%
	Faubion	16.0%	22.7%	18.8%	21.9%	20.5%	100%
	Harrison Park	15.9%	19.7%	16.4%	24.2%	23.8%	100%
	Hayhurst	14.8%	19.4%	22.8%	20.2%	22.8%	100%
	Humboldt	19.6%	20.5%	17.0%	15.0%	27.9%	100%
	Irvington	15.5%	21.4%	18.8%	20.0%	24.3%	100%
	King	16.2%	26.8%	16.5%	20.8%	19.7%	100%
	Laurelhurst	16.9%	18.5%	18.6%	22.5%	23.5%	100%
	Lee	14.5%	22.4%	24.0%	22.8%	16.5%	100%
	Lent	17.6%	21.3%	17.9%	21.7%	21.6%	100%
	Marysville	19.0%	20.1%	21.0%	18.9%	21.0%	100%
	Ockley Green	17.8%	25.1%	17.3%	22.3%	17.5%	100%
	Peninsula	17.3%	22.7%	20.0%	17.3%	22.7%	100%
	Rigler	17.9%	18.9%	20.2%	20.3%	22.6%	100%
	Roseway Heights	15.5%	20.8%	17.9%	21.7%	24.1%	100%
	Sabin	14.9%	24.3%	16.6%	21.4%	22.8%	100%
	Scott	19.0%	18.9%	19.3%	20.5%	22.2%	100%
	Skyline	16.0%	21.3%	19.3%	24.1%	19.3%	100%
	Sunnyside Environ.	17.9%	23.4%	16.6%	17.9%	24.2%	100%
	Vernon	22.5%	15.0%	17.8%	18.9%	25.8%	100%
	Vestal	17.6%	20.3%	21.4%	20.9%	19.8%	100%
	Winterhaven	13.8%	25.6%	15.7%	19.0%	25.9%	100%
	Woodlawn	16.7%	18.1%	22.6%	20.5%	22.1%	100%
	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>17.0%</b>	<b>21.0%</b>	<b>19.2%</b>	<b>21.0%</b>	<b>21.8%</b>

		Mon	Tues	Weds	Thurs	Fri	Total
<b>Middle</b>	Beaumont	16.9%	18.8%	21.4%	16.8%	26.2%	100%
	da Vinci	20.3%	19.0%	23.1%	14.2%	23.3%	100%
	George	18.3%	21.7%	18.1%	23.6%	18.4%	100%
	Gray	19.4%	19.5%	18.5%	21.7%	21.0%	100%
	Hosford	19.5%	19.8%	20.5%	20.1%	20.1%	100%
	Jackson	19.9%	20.4%	17.6%	21.6%	20.4%	100%
	Lane	14.1%	21.6%	20.2%	23.4%	20.6%	100%
	Mt. Tabor	19.7%	24.3%	16.6%	15.6%	23.7%	100%
	Sellwood	16.8%	17.6%	21.2%	18.9%	25.4%	100%
	West Sylvan	22.4%	19.0%	14.1%	19.4%	25.2%	100%
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>18.7%</b>	<b>20.3%</b>	<b>19.0%</b>	<b>19.9%</b>	<b>22.0%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>High</b>	Benson	15.7%	20.3%	19.2%	21.1%	23.7%	100%
	Cleveland	19.1%	20.5%	14.6%	20.1%	25.8%	100%
	Franklin	19.0%	22.3%	14.5%	18.7%	25.4%	100%
	Grant	17.6%	18.5%	14.8%	20.9%	28.2%	100%
	Jefferson	21.4%	20.2%	17.8%	19.1%	21.4%	100%
	Lincoln	21.8%	21.0%	13.7%	18.8%	24.8%	100%
	Madison	19.3%	20.8%	15.3%	20.1%	24.5%	100%
	Marshall Campus	16.5%	22.2%	15.7%	21.5%	24.1%	100%
	Roosevelt	18.5%	21.7%	15.6%	22.0%	22.2%	100%
	Wilson	19.1%	20.4%	16.6%	18.5%	25.4%	100%
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>18.7%</b>	<b>20.7%</b>	<b>15.8%</b>	<b>20.1%</b>	<b>24.6%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Alternative</b>	ACCESS	20.3%	17.0%	16.8%	18.4%	27.6%	100%
	Alliance	16.3%	16.7%	23.2%	25.5%	18.3%	100%
	MLC	24.3%	20.2%	20.2%	24.3%	10.9%	100%
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>21.2%</b>	<b>18.4%</b>	<b>19.8%</b>	<b>22.7%</b>	<b>17.8%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Auditor analysis of HR Substitute System data



# APPENDIX C

## Literature and Research on Teacher Absences

National Center for Education Statistics, School and Staffing Survey, 2003-04 (Public Schools)

Kossan, P. "School districts paying price for teacher absences", Arizona Republic, 2006

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Clotfleter, C.T., Ladde, H.F., and Vigdor, J.L. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 13648, 2007

Walsh, M. "Absentee rates rise for teachers in Burlington", The Burlington Free Press, 2009

Miller, R "Tales of teacher Absence", Center for American Progress, October 2008

Scott, L., Vaughn C., Wolfe, M. Wyant, C. "Reducing Teacher Absences in North Carolina", Duke University, Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy, May 2007

Speas, C. "Teacher Absences: Types, Frequency, and Impact on Student Achievement", Wake County Public School System, 2007-08

Delisio, E. "School Districts Offer Incentives to Curb Teacher Absences", Education World, November 2008

Ehrenber, R.G. et al, "School District Leave Policies, Teacher Absenteeism, and Student Achievement", The Journal of Human Resources 26 (1)