Teacher 'chronic absence' rate exceeds students"

By Lauryn Schroeder

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The federal government has begun putting together a regular report on how many students — and how many teachers — are “chronically absent” from school.

It turns out teachers get that label more than their pupils.

According to data from the U.S. Department of Education, nearly one out of every four teachers in San Diego County miss 10 or more school days per year, a threshold that triggers that label. Those absences don’t include professional development time off for training or in-service days.

On the other hand, fewer than one in 10 students were labeled chronically absent in the same data set, which covers the 2013-14 school year.

The teacher’s absences are, for the most part, sick or personal days built into their union contracts and granted by administrators. But after years of focusing on truancy and student absences, more research of late has begun to examine what happens when teachers miss a good chunk of the school year.

The recent federal data marks the first time the matter has been tracked at the nationwide level as well.

According to the data, the range of teacher absenteeism varies greatly by district. More than half of teachers from Santee School District, Alpine Union Elementary and San Ysidro Elementary were absent at least 10 days, while less than 10 percent of teachers from Fallbrook Union Elementary, Carlsbad Unified and Bonsall Unified missed that many days.

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U.S. Department of Education data classifies teachers as chronically absent for 10 or more missed school days per year. For students, the number is 15. Teacher positions are a “full-time equivalent” calculation, sometimes aggregating part-time teachers into their equivalent in full-time positions.

According to the federal data, National Elementary School District had the fourth highest rate of chronic teacher absences, about 43 percent.

Assistant Superintendent Cindy Frazee noted that the federal data includes teachers on extended leave for things like a new baby or serious illness.

“Our goal is always to have our teachers in classrooms as much as possible,” Frazee said. “But we also have to comply with the Education Code and the laws for the leave time we provide our employees.”

California teachers don’t get vacation days — given spring summer and winter breaks — but their contracts grant them a certain amount of sick leave and other personal time each year.

The amount varies, according to the National Council on Teacher Quality, which compiles a database of school contracts from across the country. Most districts in California offer about 10 sick days each year, a portion of which can be used for personal business, depending on the district.
Lindsay Burningham, president of the San Diego Education Association, said the federal data varies because of individual district approaches to classifying leave time.

“I don’t think it’s fair to paint it as teachers taking a ton of vacation on top of school vacations,” Burningham said. “There are more types of leave than there are categories to define them. You don’t always delineate the difference between them all.”

Unused leave time in California carries over to the next year, and there’s no cap on how much teachers can accrue. Unused time off cannot be exchanged for cash payments but teachers can use it as credit toward service in calculating pension benefits.

National Elementary teachers are allowed to use three sick days for personal reasons, which Frazee said are also called “no tell” days.

“They don’t have to tell us why they’re out,” Frazee said. “The rest is for the unexpected: a funeral, car trouble, when someone is truly sick, or if their child is sick. Things like that.”

According to Daniel Zummo, director of human services for the San Ysidro school district, which had the third highest teacher absence rate in the county, teachers are allowed to use all 10 sick days for personal reasons.

Zummo said the district has a much better relationship with the teachers union now than it did during the 2013-14 school year, when the data was collected.

The district is working to improve teacher absence rates and recently increased an annual cash incentive for perfect attendance to $500 from $200, he said.

Most districts said they monitor how employees use their time off. If there's reason to believe sick time is being abused, such as frequent absences on Mondays and Fridays, a district can request a doctor’s note — something that rarely happens.

“I don’t call them every time and ask what they’re sick with,” Frazee said. “We really need to see a pattern, and that’s just being respectful of the professional, like you would in any other industry.”

According to Nithya Joseph, director of state and district policy for the National Council on Teacher Quality, it’s difficult to pinpoint which policy mechanisms worsen or curb teacher absences.

A national council report in 2014, which analyzed data from 40 of the largest school districts in the country, found no correlation between districts that offered rewards for perfect attendance and those with no incentives. The same was found for districts that had disciplinary measures intended to discourage taking time off, and those that had none.

“What we did find is, anecdotally, a lot of teachers feel like this is a school-level issue and the number of absences are more often shaped by the school culture or the principal,” Joseph said.

For example, teachers who are required to report absences directly to their principal are absent less often than teachers who report absences indirectly, to some form of centralized reporting center or a school-based message machine.

Bonsall Unified School District had one of the lowest chronic teacher absence rates in the county, about 7 percent. The district does not have an incentive for perfect attendance, according to Superintendent Justin Cunningham. Teachers want to be there for students and colleagues.

“The No. 1 thing is culture. Your culture is going to trump all of your strategies and tactics every time,” he said. “The teachers also have a great sense of team and don’t want to let that team down.”
Data show at least half of teachers were chronically absent in nearly 60 individual schools in San Diego County. Some schools reported they had more than 80 percent of teachers miss 10 days or more. Another four said their entire staff met the 10-day definition of chronically absent.

It’s a relatively small portion when compared to the more than 700 schools countywide, but experts say each absence comes at a price.

“Just like any other professional needs to take a day off, for any number of reasons, so do teachers. It’s not like they leave all that time for summer, and you can’t plan for the unexpected,” Joseph said. “At the end of the day, when a teacher is out of the classroom, that comes at a cost to the student, as well as a cost to the district.”

Studies show that students whose teachers miss 10 days of school or more have lower math achievement and less engagement in school. Data show students, minority students in particular, are more likely to be chronically absent when their teachers are too. Chronic student absenteeism is defined as 15 or more days a year.

In San Diego County schools, Hispanics represent 48 percent of all students but make up a larger portion of chronically absent students, some 53 percent. This 5 percent disparity increases to 11 percent in schools where more than half of teachers were absent.

Other ethnic groups are affected as well, data show. Black students consistently represent a larger portion of absences than their population size in the districts with a higher rate of teacher absenteeism.

On top of the educational cost of a missed day in class, absences affect schools financially as well. Nearly 5,200 teachers countywide missed at least 10 school days. The daily cost of a substitute teacher in San Diego County can range anywhere from $100 to $160, which means districts likely spent upwards of $5.2 to $7.8 million to fill the absences.

This cost doesn’t include substitutes hired while staff attend professional development or training during school hours.

Kennon Raines, vice president of the National Substitute Teachers Alliance and a current Los Angeles substitute, said even the most well-equipped and trained instructor can run into problems.

“Most substitutes are like having an aunt. Do your children suffer when your sister or brother-in-law babysit? No,” Raines said. “But our success is really dependent on school support and teacher preparation.”

Most of the time, teachers leave behind “beautifully-crafted” lesson plans, Raines said, with meticulous notes on specific student habits and important safety information. But not always.

“One time I didn’t have a key to get into the classroom,” Raines said. “Another time I didn’t even have a list of the students I was supposed to be responsible for, let alone a lesson plan.”

The new federal data was collected by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights. The office says quality and accuracy of the data is dependent on the district or school itself. Officials are required to verify its accuracy on multiple occasions, and approval of the final submission can only come from a district superintendent or the superintendent’s designee.

Santee School District had highest rate of teacher absences in the county, data show, with nearly 70 percent of teachers missing 10 or more days.

Superintendent Cathy Pierce said the district reported incorrect information and the number of absences were not adjusted to exclude administratively-approved leave. She said the district is working to correct the mistake.