

# Improving Teacher Attendance



**T**he PLC conversations at Lewis Central Middle School this school year will focus on three essential questions: What do we want kids to learn? How do we know kids are learning? What do we do when kids do or don't learn? Student learning will be at the core of all of our conversations. Unfortunately, teacher attendance is a constant hurdle to effective PLC collaboration and student learning.

Last year, the school's teachers averaged just over 13 absences each for the year—which is far too many. It does not take a deep dive into research to realize that when teachers are out of the classroom, learning is minimized. As the building leader, one of my biggest “rocks to move” this year is to find ways to improve teacher attendance, and ultimately student learning.

A school leader can take several different roads when addressing teacher attendance. Principals can take a hard stance—for example, requiring a doctor's note for sick leave, mandating that teachers take leave for even the shortest time out of the building, and

constantly meeting with teachers who are missing days.

In the end, would the positives of such an approach outweigh the negatives? I believe building culture would suffer greatly. So instead of taking this harder stance at the school I lead, I have opted to focus on teachers' positive behaviors in an effort to improve their attendance.

## Rewarding Positive Behaviors

During the past two years we have implemented the Positive Behavior & Instructional Supports (PBIS) program in the building, which has effectively decreased student discipline

issues. I concluded that taking a similar approach with our faculty could be successful in addressing teacher attendance. In short, PBIS is a tiered program that uses building data to proactively address behaviors that are causing student discipline issues. A big part of the program is “catching” and rewarding students who demonstrate the desired behaviors.

Thus, this year our focus for improving teacher attendance will be centered on three components: rewarding positive attendance behaviors, creating team attendance competitions among teacher teams, and examining the data more closely to determine root causes for teacher absence.

Put simply, teachers will be rewarded throughout the year for demonstrating positive attendance behaviors. Although the rewards will be small in monetary value, the practice of recognizing teachers for their hard work and dedication is important. A local Horace Mann representative has agreed to support some of our needs and provide small rewards for teachers. Restaurants and businesses in our area also have indicated a willingness to offer discounts and free items for teachers. We have school spirit T-shirts and other apparel from PBIS that will be given to teachers who demonstrate positive attendance trends. The rewards themselves are a small token of appreciation, but being recognized in front of colleagues for professionalism will hopefully be a powerful motivator for staff.

## Team Competition

There are four teacher teams in the building: sixth grade, seventh grade, eighth grade, and exploratory. We want to bring out the competitive fire in teachers by pitting each team against the others in a friendly attendance competition.

Average teacher attendance will be calculated for each group, and winning teams will be rewarded at the end of each trimester. There will be an overall winner at the end of the year as well. Teams will be updated

periodically to keep the competition alive. In the end, we hope that teachers are dedicated to the team and the other individuals on the team. The rewards will be presented to teams and shared by the team members.

### Data Analysis

Establishing a system of rewards for individuals and teams will also create more opportunity to better examine teacher attendance data—something that was lacking previously. Is sick leave excessive? Is family sick leave excessive? Are teachers being pulled out of classrooms too often for district purposes? Are there trends in personal leave? A lot of questions need to be answered to truly identify the core attendance problems.

My goal as principal is to consistently examine teacher attendance data, identify trends in the data, and approach areas proactively to decrease the number of days teachers are away from students. The process has proved successful with the PBIS program, which provides optimism that a similar process can be successful in decreasing our absentee rates.

At the beginning of the year, I introduced a theme of “Good to Great” to drive our year as a staff. The “good” comes from things such as positive trends in student achievement data, more frequent teacher collaboration, the use of effective technology in the classroom, effective interventions for struggling learners, PBIS, and exploratory program development. The question I asked was: How do we go from good to great as a staff and building?

Many solutions were discussed and identified, but one specific area for me is reducing the number of days teachers are not in the classroom. We have data indicating that our teachers are making a difference in the classroom, so my charge is to find ways for teachers to make an even greater difference in student learning by being in the classroom more frequently. 

**Jim Dermody** is principal of Lewis Central Middle School in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

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